

# The German Military Response to National Disasters and Emergencies

## A Case Study of the Flooding in the Summer of 2021

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**Abstract:** In the summer of 2021, a flood of unprecedented intensity occurred in Western Europe. This article describes the German crisis response mechanism to natural disasters with a focus on the deployment and tasks of the German Armed Forces and analyzes challenges and controversies connected with the internal use of the military in Germany after the flood.

**Keywords:** Germany, *Bundeswehr*, flood, natural disaster, disaster response

### Introduction

In mid-July 2021, severe storms with very heavy rainfall hit Western and Central Europe. Germany and Belgium were particularly affected. In 2 of the 16 German states, the effects of the severe rainfall event were most extreme and a total of 180 people died in Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia.<sup>1</sup> This is the highest number of victims of a natural disaster in Germany for almost 60 years and many times higher than the number of victims of the so-called flood of the century in Germany in 2002. The insurance group Aon estimates that the provisional economic loss in Germany will be around \$20 billion USD and that the event in all of Europe would cost around \$25 billion USD. This would make the natural disaster the most expensive in European history.<sup>2</sup> The German Insurance Association estimates the insurance losses at about \$8 billion USD.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of satellite data shows that in the worst-hit valley in Germany, more than 70 percent of all buildings were damaged by the flood; more than 450 buildings were almost completely destroyed. About 110 miles of traffic routes were damaged and power, water, and communications

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*Journal of Advanced Military Studies* vol. 13, no. 1

Spring 2022

[www.usmcu.edu/mcupress](http://www.usmcu.edu/mcupress)

<https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.20221301010>

were disrupted over large areas.<sup>4</sup> Experts attribute the unprecedented event in Germany's recent history to local factors in the regions that were particularly hard hit, as well as to the influence of global anthropogenic climate change.<sup>5</sup>

When the extent of the damage, which was tremendous compared to prior disasters in Germany, became apparent on 14 July 2021, the first requests for assistance from the German Armed Forces (*Bundeswehr*), were received.<sup>6</sup> Their helicopters, trucks, combat engineering vehicles, and auxiliary bridges could subsequently be seen in many press pictures and live coverage.<sup>7</sup>

The following article describes in more detail how Bundeswehr operations in the interior of Germany are regulated, how they are conducted, and what the Bundeswehr did as a response to the 2021 flood disaster. The article is written with primarily descriptive intent to introduce readers unfamiliar with the German military disaster relief response system to the important mechanisms and its elements. In addition, the text is interesting for readers who want to compare the German system with that of other countries or work out how a country's armed forces could develop better disaster-relief operations. As a guiding research question, toward the end of the text, it is discussed how the German domestic military disaster relief system presents challenges and causes controversies. Throughout the text, reference is made to the flood disaster of 2021 as a consistent example.

## **Important Systemic Fundamentals of Germany**

To understand how the German Armed Forces respond to environmental disasters, it is necessary to provide a brief insight into the organizational structure of the German state.

### **Federalism**

Foundationally, Germany is federally organized. The city of Berlin is the capital of the federal republic. The federal parliament in Berlin is called the *Bundestag*. Also, each of the 16 federal states has its own parliament, as well as its own government. The states are each organized into smaller districts. Germany has a total of 401 county districts and city districts, of which the county of Ahrweiler in the far west of Germany was the hardest hit by the flood. The German constitution grants significant autonomy to the states and their parliaments. Since the elections at the federal level in September 2021, six major factions are represented in the German parliament, of which three form the new government. The new federal chancellor is Olaf Scholz. All 16 states hold their own elections and form their own governing coalitions. For the representation of the 16 states at the federal level, there is the *Bundesrat* in Berlin.<sup>8</sup>

### **German Armed Forces**

The important role of the federal parliament if the German military is to be used is also reflected in the fact that the Bundeswehr, founded in 1955, are a so-called parliamentary army. For example, a simple majority in parliament is

needed for missions outside the state's borders. To declare a state of tension or a state of defense, a minimum of a two-thirds majority is needed. For the declaration of a national state of defense, the additional consent of the Bundesrat is also required. In peacetime, the federal minister of defense does command the Bundeswehr; in the event that Germany is directly attacked with armed forces or such an attack is imminent, command is transferred to the chancellor of Germany. The responsibilities of the police for internal security and the Bundeswehr for external security are strictly separated in Germany. This, as well as the comprehensive control of the military by the federal government and the federal parliament, are lessons from the terrible period of National Socialism in Germany. The army may only operate within Germany in three cases, while only two of them apply in relation to disaster relief. The first option is called administrative assistance and is governed by Article 35 of the constitution.<sup>9</sup> This article states that, if necessary, all federal and state authorities shall assist each other. However, no weapons of war or other equipment perceived to be potentially threatening may be used in the procedure.<sup>10</sup> Counties, cities, and states can submit requests for assistance from the Bundeswehr and other authorities, but not all requests are always accepted. Requests can be rejected, for example, if the effort is disproportionate, no capacities are available, or the assistance would violate the law.

This first path can be taken without major hurdles and, for example, unarmed soldiers were deployed to help register refugees in 2015 and 2016, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and during minor flooding or heavy snowfall because the Bundeswehr can provide flexible personnel assistance and heavy equipment. In locally overburdened areas, both are often not sufficiently available. The second legal option is also relevant to the subject of this article. This is disaster response under Article 35, sentence 2, of the German Constitution.<sup>11</sup> This situation only arises if there is a recent disaster on a large scale that requires all available resources. In the Ahr valley, action had to be taken as quickly as possible to find missing persons and the normal procedure of requesting assistance would have taken too long. Since 2012, the Bundeswehr has theoretically also been allowed to use lethal force as a last resort in Germany during a disaster operation, but this has very high hurdles and has never been used so far.<sup>12</sup> An irregular disaster operation is not intended to be continuous, which is why the normal procedure of requesting administrative assistance is to be implemented as soon as the situation allows it. In general, Bundeswehr operations in the interior are to have a short duration and serve only to bypass civilian shortfalls.

## **Important Military Entities and Their Responsibilities**

### **German Armed Forces**

The German Armed Forces and their role during disaster relief are the main subject of this article. In the following, the elements within the Bundeswehr that are relevant for disaster relief are outlined.

## Facts and Figures

The Bundeswehr has a total of 182,000 active soldiers and 83,000 civilian employees.<sup>13</sup> The share of active soldiers in the total population of 83.1 million is 0.22 percent, which is rather small in Europe as a whole. There is a reserve of about 30,000 former members of the armed forces. There has been no compulsory military service since 2011. At times during the flood disaster, 2,327 soldiers were deployed.<sup>14</sup>

The Bundeswehr has the following vehicles and helicopters that are important in the event of natural disasters. It operates 30 amphibious floating bridges, about 600 earthmovers, 50 heavy towing vehicles, 2,000 armored transport vehicles and protected transporters, 70 armored recovery vehicles, 7,000 unprotected transporters, and 500 mobile cranes. The Bundeswehr also operates around 100 medium-lift helicopters and 37 light helicopters.<sup>15</sup> The land vehicles and most of the helicopters are subordinate to the German Army. In addition, there is the German Navy, the German Air Force, the Joint Support Service branch, the Joint Medical Service branch, and the Cyber and Information Space branch. During the flood disaster, more than 300 standard vehicles, 167 special-purpose vehicles, 13 helicopters, 12 boats, and 47 fire engines and ambulances of the German Armed Forces were deployed in the affected areas.<sup>16</sup>

## Federal Ministry of Defense (*Bundesministerium der Verteidigung*)

The supreme military authority in Germany is the Federal Ministry of Defense, which is based in Berlin and Bonn. In the event of a crisis, the ministry takes only limited action; rather, it serves as the overarching administrative structure for the relevant subdivisions and organizational units. It is on the same level as the Ministry of the Interior, which coordinates civil defense. The two ministries work closely together on civil-military coordination and division of tasks.<sup>17</sup>

## Reserve Force

In Germany, it is relatively common for some of the 30 regional homeland defense companies to be activated in the event of disasters. These companies consist of reservists, led by experts, and support the Bundeswehr or civilian agencies in dealing with exceptional situations or in securing military installations. Theoretically, every reservist can volunteer to be part of an activated homeland defense company, if their actual job duties allow it. Reservists from several local companies were also called up during the floods in summer 2021.<sup>18</sup> In the future, the Bundeswehr plans to massively increase its reserve to 100,000 soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

## State Command (*Landeskommando*)

The state commands mentioned above are the points of contact for requests for support services from the respective state government. There is one in each of the 16 states. The command is responsible for regional planning of active military forces and reservists, as well as for coordination with the civilian crisis staff.

But even before a potential disaster strikes, the state command plans, practices, and prepares for seamless cooperation with civilian partners. There were 185 requests for emergency aid submitted in connection with the summer floods.<sup>20</sup> The responsible state commands review and bundle the requests before issuing an order to the troops.

### **Liaison Commands (*Verbindungskommando*)**

A liaison command has the explicit mission of establishing and maintaining communication between military entities and civil-military cooperation. Such a command can also be formed in the event of a disaster, for example. Each state command has a liaison command to each German district and county. In the event of a local emergency, contact and initial communication usually proceeds through the liaison officer in charge.

### **Homeland Defense Service (*Freiwilliger Wehrdienst im Heimatschutz*)**

Since 2020, there has been a pilot project in Germany regarding disaster response. Since 2011, there has no longer been compulsory military service, but voluntary military service can still be completed. With the voluntary military service in homeland defense since 2020, there is also the possibility of undergoing three months of basic training close to home and then four months of special training and subsequent integration into the regional homeland defense company. The main task of the soldiers trained in this program is to provide support in the event of disasters of all kinds; there is no provision for deployment abroad.<sup>21</sup> Part of the seven months of special training include, among others, firefighting, operating pumps, object protection, setting up checkpoints, paramedic training, and chemical/biological/radiological and nuclear-defense training.<sup>22</sup>

### **Territorial Tasks Command (*Kommando Territoriale Aufgaben*)**

Furthermore, there is the Territorial Tasks Command, which is subordinate to the Joint Support Service branch. Since its establishment in 2013, it has been responsible for grouping possible Bundeswehr tasks within Germany and for maintaining and practicing Bundeswehr capabilities in disaster relief.<sup>23</sup>

### **Other Relevant Commands and Units**

In the event of natural disasters, the Medical Command (*Zentraler Sanitätsdienst der Bundeswehr*) is also involved. Together with the civilian medical response teams, it tries to get to the scene of the disaster as quickly as possible. The Bundeswehr is not usually one of the first responders, but it does have the ability to set up large field hospitals and mobilize a large number of rescue helicopters. The Logistics Command (*Logistikkommando der Bundeswehr*) is important for supplying the soldiers and civilian population involved. In the aftermath of the 2021 flood, for example, the command distributed 331,500 bottles

of water, 58,000 meals ready to eat, and 3,058 tons of other supplies.<sup>24</sup> The pioneer battalion (*Pioniertruppe*) is responsible for building temporary bridges and ferries and repairing transportation routes and energy systems, which proved very important in the Ahr valley, where dozens of bridges were destroyed. Also important is the Central Search and Rescue Unit of the Bundeswehr (*Such- und Rettungsdienst der Bundeswehr*). The control center for the whole of Germany is located in Münster and accepts requests for assistance in emergency situations at any time. The requests can range from flying out an accident victim to major natural disasters such as the one in the summer of 2021.<sup>25</sup>

## **Military Response to the 2021 Flood Disaster in Germany**

In Germany, massive amounts of rain had been falling since around 12 July 2021, and it was already apparent on 14 July that there would be severe flooding in some regions. Also on 14 July, most emergency mechanisms were activated and requests for official assistance were issued. The magnitude of the disaster quickly became apparent, leading the then-acting defense minister to sound the military disaster alert on 16 July to send additional response forces and vehicles.<sup>26</sup> Important for the entire operation was the Bundeswehr's unique ability to deploy temporary bridges and clear logistic routes in a short time, as well as the large-scale use of Bundeswehr helicopters for air transport and rescue. Within three days, seven Bundeswehr temporary bridges had already been built in the hard-hit Ahr valley. In the days following the disaster, the Bundeswehr was also able to restore communications networks by means of satellite communications and installed three mobile drinking water treatment plants. Of the more than 2,000 soldiers originally deployed, only 86 were still on site at the end of August, and the inland deployment was officially over on 31 August 2021.<sup>27</sup>

The remaining tasks were handed over to the civilian organizations and forces on the ground. Now, the familiar scheme of individual, local, and selective applications for official assistance, which are submitted and examined via the system described earlier in the text, applies again.

## **Challenges and Controversies**

The procedures during and after the disaster were described as satisfactory by most stakeholders. Only the lack of unbureaucratic and rapid financial aid and the lack of heavy equipment for civilian protection forces were criticized. In some places, civilian rescue forces had to wait for the Bundeswehr to clear roads.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, in crisis situations, there are sometimes confusions of responsibility, since the civilian Federal Agency for Technical Relief (*Technisches Hilfswerk*), in particular, also has heavier equipment at its disposal and often pursues similar tasks to those of the Bundeswehr, which is called in to provide assistance. In the case of the Ahr valley, the destruction was so great that both

the Bundeswehr and the Federal Agency for Technical Relief had similar areas of operation, and the superior civil-military coordination worked well.<sup>29</sup>

However, particularly against the backdrop of the massive increase in symmetrical threats to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, Bundeswehr representatives frequently point out that the core task of the Bundeswehr is still national and alliance defense and not the continuous fight against disasters.<sup>30</sup>

It also made headlines that German right-wing extremist and conspiracy theory groups and actors were distributing disaster-related misinformation and were operating on the scene. There was a fake deployment order for reservists to support the “support center” of the radical actors. In this respect, the German Armed Forces investigated a retired Bundeswehr colonel.<sup>31</sup>

Another major aspect of the public debate is the reputation of the Bundeswehr in Germany in general, as well as the public debate about domestic deployments of the Bundeswehr. As described earlier, responsibilities for armed operations within Germany are clearly assigned to the police. However, especially since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, there have been debates about the possibility of using the armed forces to support domestic operations as a last resort, as is now enshrined in law.<sup>32</sup> Currently, there are debates about being able to deploy an armed Bundeswehr more domestically, which is drawing a lot of criticism.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, about four out of five Germans surveyed in 2020 have a positive attitude toward the Bundeswehr. The increase of around 6 percentage points compared with the previous year is attributed, among other things, to administrative assistance in the COVID-19 pandemic. The assistance provided during the floods is also expected to have a positive impact on the image of the Bundeswehr. According to their own statements, 85 percent of Germans trust the Bundeswehr in 2020. This represents a new high.<sup>34</sup> Another study from the first half of 2021 indicates that 70 percent tend to trust the Bundeswehr and 21 percent tend not to trust it. Compared with previous years, this figure is around average.<sup>35</sup> In general, the relationship of the German population to the Bundeswehr can be described as rather distant. Military patriotism is only widespread in a few population groups, and then not tendentially among young people. This ambiguous trust of society in the Bundeswehr is evident not only in the debate about possible armed operations within the borders but also in unarmed support of the Bundeswehr in the interior. For example, in the summer of 2020, there was a situation in which two elected regional governments of Berlin districts did not want to accept soldiers to support the overburdened local health department during the COVID-19 pandemic. The left-leaning local governments refused to cooperate with the Bundeswehr, despite the fact that the soldiers were merely supposed to carry out testing and track infections.<sup>36</sup>

## **Outlook and Implications**

It can be said that the floods in the summer of 2021, especially in Germa-

ny, were an unprecedented event that had a profound effect on the structures responsible for disaster management. Almost half a year after the flood, the clean-up and reconstruction work is still in full swing; many houses had to be completely demolished. In particular, often ineffective early warnings and the lack of evacuations in many places have been used as an opportunity to improve and rethink existing systems and procedures.

The deployment of the German Armed Forces in the affected areas was of fundamental importance. With regard to climate change, the disaster gave further impetus to the debate on strengthening the disaster response capabilities of the Bundeswehr, which has been going on for more than 20 years. It is unclear whether the Bundeswehr will focus more on disaster management in the future or whether it will increasingly return to its core task of defending the country and its alliances. At the same time, the role of the Bundeswehr in German society remains vague and more ambivalent than in other countries. This reservedness at the domestic level also has a not insignificant influence on further possible deployments for domestic military assistance.

Further research could focus on the conclusions that can be drawn from the challenges of the Ahr valley and the controversies surrounding the use of the military within Germany. Furthermore, it makes sense to compare the individual military disaster response systems of selected countries for multinational disaster relief.

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