

SPIEGEL ONLINE

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Last of the July 20 Plotters

'There Will Be Another Hitler Some Day'

Ewald von Kleist, 88, a former officer in the German Wehrmacht and the last surviving member of the July 20, 1944 plot against Hitler, discusses Germany's elimination of conscription, why German soldiers need to toughen up and his failed attempt to kill Adolf Hitler.

SPIEGEL: Mr. von Kleist, for decades, conscription has been seen as a guarantee that the Bundeswehr, Germany's armed forces, wouldn't develop into a sort of state within a state. Now conscription has **effectively been abolished**. Do you agree with the decision?

Ewald von Kleist: Armed forces should be organized so they can achieve what they're supposed to. During the Cold War, we had large armies so we could repel an attack from the East. It's different today. Soon, wars involving lots of artillery, tanks and all those old-fashioned things won't exist anymore. The Bundeswehr has to adapt to this new reality.

SPIEGEL: Many fear that the inner character of the army will change when there aren't any more conscripts.

Kleist: That's probably true, but we have to accept it. I don't believe that the Bundeswehr will pose a threat to democracy if conscription is abolished.

SPIEGEL: This could change the military's socioeconomic mix. Certain societal strata that conscription exposed to military service will no longer be affected.

Kleist: That could surely happen. But I believe we just have to accept certain problems. What's more important is how the Bundeswehr is deployed. It's apparently moving strongly toward becoming an expeditionary corps modeled on the mission in Afghanistan. I have grave concerns about this.

SPIEGEL: Do you believe that Germany's freedom is being defended in Afghanistan, as former German Defense Minister Peter Struck famously said once?

Kleist: You are intelligent enough (to know the answer to that).

SPIEGEL: You don't believe it, do you?

Kleist: No, I really don't. I've never heard about our having protectorates there or about large numbers of Germans vacationing in the country.

SPIEGEL: The 9/11 attacks triggered Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that NATO members are required to assist other members if they come under attack. According to this logic, the Bundeswehr was obligated to support the United States in its war against Islamist terrorism and in Afghanistan, in particular, because that is where the people behind the attacks were.

Kleist: It's true that, after Sept. 11, 2001, the United States declared war on global terrorism. But against which country? Why is this a war? And who is the enemy?

SPIEGEL: The enemy is the Taliban in Afghanistan and the al-Qaida terror network.

Kleist: Al-Qaida is a chimera. There's no organization, and there's no country you can wage a war against. Instead, we're waging war against an idea. At the time, we should have asked whether this actually was a war within the meaning of Article 5 of the NATO treaty.

SPIEGEL: Should Germany pull out of Afghanistan and stop showing solidarity with the United States?

Kleist: Other countries have done it and survived, and a majority of our population opposes the war. Nevertheless, I do believe that alliance commitments must be taken seriously.

SPIEGEL: So, in other words, you think Germany should go on fighting?

Kleist: At any rate, we can't withdraw overnight. But an endpoint for the mission should have been discussed with the Americans at an earlier point.

SPIEGEL: The Bundeswehr is defending universal values -- that is, human rights -- in Afghanistan. Isn't that an honorable goal?

Kleist: The real question is whether it's right for our people to have to die so that girls can go to school in Asia. The answer to that doesn't seem very clear to me.

SPIEGEL: So, what is worth dying for?

Kleist: Risking the lives of German soldiers is only justified when our vital interests are threatened. Exactly what those vital interests are has to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Then, we have to determine whether we have the means to achieve our goals. And, finally, I have to ask myself how I can get back out. A military mission is only justified when we have a convincing answer to these questions.

SPIEGEL: Looking back at the Bundeswehr's military missions over the last 20 years, has any of them met your criteria?

Kleist: My memory is no longer what it used to be. I can't think of anything at the moment that I was very enthusiastic about. Let's take Somalia, for example. The Bundeswehr was sent there to build bridges and roads. That sort of stuff is really just silly.

'Obama's Idea of a World without Nuclear Weapons Is Nonsense'

SPIEGEL: Why do we need an intervention force in the first place?

Kleist: Because you can never totally rule out the possibility that you'll have to take military action. But the real danger lies elsewhere.

SPIEGEL: Where?

Kleist: In nuclear war. Unfortunately, we can't rule out that it will happen.

SPIEGEL: Who would wage such a war? The United States and Russia are making mutual efforts at disarmament. US President Barack Obama has even announced a goal he calls "Global Zero," or the elimination of all nuclear weapons across the entire world.

Kleist: Obama's idea of a world without nuclear weapons is nonsense. No one who can count to five believes it can happen. But the nuclear weapons of Russia and the United States are not the problem.

SPIEGEL: Then which weapons are?

Kleist: The fact that we're sitting here having this conversation is because, in the past, the major nuclear powers -- namely, America and Russia -- thought the same way about life and death. Both said that life is good and that death should be prevented. But not all countries feel this way anymore.

SPIEGEL: To whom exactly are you referring?

Kleist: We can all recall the images of Iranian children with green headbands running straight into Iraqi machine-gun fire. Their parents allowed this to happen because they believed their children were fulfilling the will of Allah.

SPIEGEL: At the time, nuclear weapons weren't as much of an issue as they are now.

Kleist: No, but the change in the attitude toward life and death reveals a very important issue. Some time ago, (al-Qaida leader Osama) bin Laden said: "The difference between us is that you love life and we love death." I'm afraid he's right.

SPIEGEL: Countries generally act more rationally than terrorist organizations.

Kleist: One of the last things Hitler said was: "We will slam the door shut behind us with a loud bang." He wasn't able to do it at the time, but who can say whether an Iranian leader won't feel the same way some day? Or look at Pakistan: What happens if there is regime change and the Islamists get their hands on nuclear bombs? There will be another Hitler some day.

SPIEGEL: How can we stop that from happening?

Kleist: It's very difficult. A stop would have to be put to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. We can't allow still more countries to obtain these horrific weapons. But to achieve this, we would have to impose truly massive sanctions on countries like Iran.

SPIEGEL: That's what is being attempted.

Kleist: No, not seriously. A real economic boycott would be very bad for the Iranian people. On the other hand, something terrible will happen if we don't succeed.

Germany's 'Softy' Citizen-Soldiers

SPIEGEL: The Bundeswehr is still involved in a war that uses conventional weapons. Do you think German soldiers are mentally prepared for this? Do they have to learn how to kill again?

Kleist: You obviously have to kill when you go to war. But if you have a machine gun and I have a club, and you, being a softy, say that you don't want to hurt me, I'm the superior one because I just want to smash your skull in.

SPIEGEL: One gets the impression that the Bundeswehr is having a harder time of it than other armies.

Kleist: I agree. Given our past, we are especially cautious and, as a result, we're also training our soldiers with a great deal of gentleness.

SPIEGEL: With too much gentleness?

Kleist: I would almost say yes, we are. Things are more difficult for them when push comes to shove. If possible, a soldier should be placed in a situation where he can handle the horrible things he's likely to experience.

SPIEGEL: The Bundeswehr is based on the ideal of the citizen-soldier, that is, a citizen wearing a uniform.

Kleist: We want the thinking soldier, which is in principle OK. But if you rely too heavily on thinking soldiers, the soldiers end up having problems. When he approaches his evil enemy and is thinking too much, he'll say: "Okay, the closer I get, the more dangerous it gets!" This isn't necessarily helpful.

SPIEGEL: Do we need to rehabilitate terms like "heroism" and "bravery"?

Kleist: Certainly not heroism. I never understood the saying "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." Is it really honorable and sweet to die for one's fatherland? This sort of thing is bloody idiotic, and we really don't need it. As a soldier, you do have to be brave so you can overcome your fear.

SPIEGEL: You are the last surviving member of the July 20 plot. Were you afraid when you decided to take part in an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler?

Kleist: I think fear is very reasonable; fear extends life. But sometimes, when it's absolutely necessary, you have to overcome fear.

SPIEGEL: And was that one of those situations?

Kleist: When you encounter a situation like that and it was a voluntary decision, you've already answered that question in the affirmative.

SPIEGEL: You asked your father whether he agreed.

Kleist: He said: "You have to do it. A person who fails at a moment like this will never be happy again in his life."

SPIEGEL: Can you describe the circumstances? How did you plan to kill Hitler?

Kleist: We were supposed to show Hitler new uniforms that had been tried out on the front. I was the company leader. I wanted to take along a mine or plastic explosives in my briefcase, which I planned to detonate when I was standing next to Hitler.

SPIEGEL: And then the presentation was cancelled. Did you expect to die during the assassination attempt?

Kleist: If you know what you're doing, you might be able to stay alive when a briefcase explodes in your hand. But you really have to know what you're doing.

SPIEGEL: You could have put the briefcase down. When **Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg** was meeting with Hitler and other officers on July 20, 1944, he put the briefcase down under the conference table and excused himself from the room.

Kleist: Stauffenberg always wanted to stay there and sacrifice himself; he was adamant about it. But General Ludwig Beck forbade him from doing it -- with good reason, in my opinion. Stauffenberg was the one who controlled everything in Berlin. He was the key figure.

The Horror of War

SPIEGEL: Do you believe the motive for becoming a soldier back then were different than they are today?

Kleist: Of course. Soldiers were highly respected in those days, and many walked around in public in their uniforms. You hardly see that today. Because of our past, we have a completely different attitude toward soldiers. In some cases, this goes too far in the other direction.

SPIEGEL: Do you think today's society has too little respect for soldiers?

Kleist: I believe that society in general does not sufficiently support the Bundeswehr, which also happens to be *their* Bundeswehr and is partially responsible for our peace and prosperity. In this respect, society isn't behaving very well at the moment.

SPIEGEL: Where were you on the front as a young company commander?

Kleist: At Lake Ladoga, that accursed lake in Russia.

SPIEGEL: It must have been a formative experience.

Kleist: It certainly is. You have real responsibility. There's that stupid saying: "The officer is a master over life and death." That's obviously nonsense because he isn't. But he is responsible for the lives of those under his command. If it isn't correct or necessary, every command he issues can have catastrophic consequences for these poor people. That's the way it is.

SPIEGEL: But it is about life and death.

Kleist: If only the people who talk about war today and make the decisions had experienced what it's really like. A father-son relationship develops between the commanding officer and the soldier, even if the officer is much younger. And then those things happen that happen in war. Someone gets hit and is lying there, and you have to go to him and watch him die, watch one of your own children die. And he had believed he was sacrificing his life for something just and necessary. It's horrible, you know.

SPIEGEL: Do you get inured to it after a while?

Kleist: Many people got used to it, but I never did. I still feel that way today, which is why security policy interests me. And that's why I'm worried that we sometimes treat these issues very recklessly.

SPIEGEL: Do you think that's because many people today haven't been through the life-and-death experiences you're describing?

Kleist: That's a good thing. But the job of a politician who specializes in security issues is to protect the blood and lives of those entrusted to his care. Nothing is more valuable than the blood of the people you are responsible for. People should be made to understand this.

SPIEGEL: How?

Kleist: I believe that the media should report a lot more on these issues. Then people would understand.

SPIEGEL: Isn't it true that people today are far better informed about the war in Afghanistan than was the case in earlier wars? We sometimes get the impression that readers have only a limited attention span.

Kleist: Goebbels once told me that, when it comes to propaganda, you just have to keep repeating the same thing over and over again until people can't bear to hear it anymore -- and then you say it again.

SPIEGEL: That's what politicians running for office today say. You don't even have to quote Goebbels for that.

Kleist: Yes, but he was very clever, diabolically clever.

SPIEGEL: Mr. von Kleist, thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Ralf Neukirch and Martin Doerry.

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