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'If I could turn back time': Temporal security narratives, ontological disruption, and Germany's *Zeitenwende*

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Abstract
The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, described by Chancellor Olaf Scholz as a *Zeitenwende* (turning point) triggered a fundamental rethinking of German foreign, security, and defence policy. This article conceptualises the invasion as a temporal shock to Germany's ontological security. Building on the 'temporal turn' in International Relations, we argue that the war not only violated Ukraine's national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but it also disrupted a broader sense of chronological continuity in European security, long defined by reduced defence spending and the assumption that interstate war was obsolete. Where previous studies have focused on the interrelationship of ontological security and temporality built around the concepts of biographical continuity, collective memory, and mnemonical security, this paper focuses instead on narrative disruption and the retiming of national security and identity via the perception of external shocks. We contend that the *Zeitenwende* narrative challenged historical concepts of German ontological security, such as *Ostpolitik* and *Wandel durch Handel*, that were deeply embedded in a strategic culture of military reticence by calling for the revitalisation of German military power. Yet this retiming remains constrained by incremental policy implementation and historical associations with Germany's militaristic past, creating ongoing ontological insecurity about Germany's role in European security.

Keywords: Germany; ontological security; temporal security; Ukraine war; Zeitenwende

Three days after the beginning of the Russian 'special military operation' in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a speech in the German parliament that described the Russian invasion of its neighbour as a historic turning point or *Zeitenwende* for European security, which necessitated a fundamental change in foreign, security, and defence policy in response.[1] Subsequently, the term *Zeitenwende* would enter the lexicon of German and international politics and media as shorthand for transformative change of national security and strategic culture, or at least the aspiration for such change. To analyse its effects, scholars have investigated the *Zeitenwende* from multiple perspectives and theoretical framings, in particular focused on the linkage between external threat perception and security policy change.[2] This article contributes to

[1]Olaf Scholz, 'Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, (27 February 2022), in Berlin', available at: {https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378}.

[2]For an overview of the recent debate on Germany's *Zeitenwende* in International Relations, see Bernhard Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention? *Zeitenwende* and the traditional pillars of German foreign policy', *International Affairs,* 98:6 (2022), pp. 895–913; Patrick A. Mello, '*Zeitenwende*: German foreign policy change in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine', *Politic and Governance*, 12 (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7346}; Tobias Bunde, 'Lessons (to be) learned?

this evolving research agenda by putting its analytical focus on *Zeitenwende*'s effects on Germany's ontological security – its ability to maintain a coherent and continuous self-perception amid the uncertainties unleashed by the Russo-Ukrainian war. At the core of this analysis lies the recognition that states, like individuals, rely on narrative and biographical continuity to make sense of who they are and where they are going.[3]

The politics of temporality is therefore a vital resource in considering a state's ontological security and how narratives of continuity and change are embedded within a national framework of reference, its strategic culture, and its collective memory.[4] However, a majority of the research on temporality and ontological security is focused on the continuity of biographical narratives and how temporal security is maintained in the collective memory of the nation against its own historical Other.[5] In case of the Federal Republic of Germany, this historical Other has been defined by the militarism, territorial expansionism, and genocidal racism of the 'Third Reich', which legitimated a strategic culture of military reticence and civilian power while embedding Germany in a system of collective security and institutionalised multilateralism.[6] This structural continuity in the post-war and post–Cold War era anchored German ontological security temporally, constituting a historically stable sense of the national Self in collective memory. The analytical focus of this paper, however, lies on how the perception of external shocks and geopolitical ruptures results in a narrative retiming of ontological security, embedding its examination of Germany's *Zeitenwende* within the wider context of the 'temporal turn' in International Relations (IR).[7] In this we follow Hom's observation that by 'exploring how identity emerges "in time", to be secured "over" or "through" it, we can explore how *identity itself constitutes a timing project*, an effort to synthesize oneself *out of* or *with* a variety of experiences, environmental changes, and other timing agents'.[8] Hence, rather than viewing identity as merely unfolding in time, we can understand it as a timing project – an ongoing effort to '(re)produce not only a coherent sense of self but also a stable sense of time, allowing individuals to feel that the dynamic world is unfolding in a manageable way'.[9] Framed in this way, the temporal challenges posed by events such as Germany's *Zeitenwende* become central not simply as historical disruptions, but as moments that demand a retiming of self and world. As such, we place emphasis on temporal ruptures as opposed to historical continuity.

Germany's *Zeitenwende* and European security after the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43:3 (2022), pp. 516–30; Bastian Giegerich and Ben Schreer, '*Zeitenwende* one year on', *Survival*, 65:2 (2023), pp. 37–42; Sebastian Biba, 'Germany's triangular relations with the United States and China in the era of the *Zeitenwende*', *German Politics*, 33:3 (2024), pp. 435–62; Ian Klinke, 'Dead or dormant? German *Ostpolitik* after Ukraine', *European Journal of International Security* (2025), pp. 1–17, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.58}; John R. Deni, Marina E. Henke, Aylin Matlé, et al., *Assessing the Zeitenwende: Implications for Germany, the United States, and Transatlantic Security* (n.p.: United States Army War College Press, 2025).

[3]Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2009), pp. 519–40.

[4]Maria Mälksoo, '"Memory must be defended": Beyond the politics of mnemonical security', *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 221–37.

[5]Kathrin Bachleitner, 'Ontological security as temporal security? The role of "significant historical others" in world politics', *International Relations*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 25–47.

[6]Ibid.

[7]See e.g. Andrew Hom, 'Timing is everything: Toward a better understanding of time and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:1 (2018), pp. 69–79; Andrew Hom and Ryan Beasley, 'Constructing time in foreign policymaking: Brexit's timing entrepreneurs, malcontemps and apparatchiks', *International Affairs*, 97:2 (2021), pp. 267–85; Kimberly Hutchings, 'Happy anniversary! Time and critique in International Relations theory', *Review of International Studies*, 33:S1 (2007), pp. 71–89; Bachleitner, 'Ontological security as temporal security?'; Andrew Hom and Brent J. Steele, 'Anxiety, time, and ontological security's third-image potential', *International Relations*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 25–47 ; Ryan K. Beasley and Ameneh Mehvar, 'Timing bombs and the temporal dynamics of Iranian nuclear security', *European Journal of International Security*, 10:2 (2025), pp. 171–189.

[8]Hom, 'Timing is everything', p. 76.

[9]Ibid.

And here, the Russo-Ukrainian War provides fertile ground for analysis as Russia's invasion and occupation of its neighbour fundamentally disrupted a sense of historical progress and chronological continuity in European security, characterised by an end of geopolitical division, a 'peace dividend' of substantial defence cuts and reduction of force sizes, and the strategic assumption that interstate war and territorial conquest were relics of the past. The Russo-Ukrainian war disrupted German ontological security in particular, unsettling a stable post-war and post–Cold war national sense of Self that had defined the Federal Republic primarily as an economic and civilian, but not a military, power.[10] This rupture of German ontological security and the displacement of a prevailing sense of German foreign policy continuity and stability would manifest in the *Zeitenwende* narrative of a temporal reordering of German national security, calling for the revitalisation of German military power in defence of European security, freedom, and democratic values. This narrative retiming of national security also redefined the identity of key actors – casting Russia no longer as a 'partner' but as a strategic threat – and shifted the broader setting in which Germany perceived itself, from a geoeconomic power existing within a benign European security order marked by stability and continuity towards a geopolitical actor facing a new era of strategic uncertainty.

Our argument unfolds in three steps. First, we engage with the growing efforts to conceptually bridge the 'temporal turn' in IR with scholarship in Ontological Security Studies, centring our approach on the narrative construction of ontological security and the impact of historical ruptures that result in the 'retiming' of hegemonic concepts of national identity and international politics. We evidence the importance of these dimensions by showing how the Russo-Ukrainian war has forced a temporal disruption of German identity on the ontological level, which necessitated a narrative reordering that challenged long-held beliefs and common-sense assumptions about national identity, military power, and international order.

Second, we examine Germany's historical approach to national security and defence policy, in particular the pairing of a post–Cold war 'peace dividend' with an established strategic culture of military reticence and restraint, its disruption by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the practical policy implications initiated by the narrative reordering of German temporal security as part of the *Zeitenwende* turnaround. Third, we analyse the back-and-forth between strategic paradigm shifts, initial policy adjustments, and counter-narratives that challenge the *Zeitenwende* narrative and the temporal reordering of onthological security. Here, we zoom in on contemporary political and societal debates over Germany's 'war readiness' and issues of military history and identity that have emerged as discursive focal points within the *Zeitenwende* context, where competing temporal security narratives clash over the meaning of the past and the demands of the present.

Our findings make three principal contributions. First, they expand the concept of temporal security narratives beyond constituting national collective memories and biographical continuity by showing how security narratives can be disrupted by geopolitical events and external threats in the present, and crucially the anticipation of further hostility in the future resulting in turn in the temporal reordering of national security. Second, this article contributes to the growing research literature on German national security, foreign, and defence policy and the implications of the *Zeitenwende* paradigm shift by adding an ontological security perspective to these conversations that demonstrates how the *Zeitenwende*'s temporal reordering of national security goes beyond policy adjustments and issues of defence spending, military recruitment, or national security strategy, and also addresses questions of national identity, collective memory, and historical change and continuity. Third, our investigation furthers the developing research agenda in IR on the role of

[10]Sebastian Harnisch and Hanns Maull, *Germany as a Civilian Power? The Foreign Policy of the Berlin Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Hans Kundnani, 'Germany's liberal geo-economics: Using markets for strategic objectives', in *Geo-Economics and Power Politics in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 61–74; Stephen F. Szabo, *Germany, Russia, and the Rise of Geo-Economics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

ontological security and temporality in international politics, in particular the role of temporal security narratives for the legitimation of national security planning and defence policymaking.[11]

We conclude that German ontological security was fundamentally destabilised by the resurgence of direct threats to European security, because its own militarist and genocidal past reemerged as a contemporary and existential threat to European security and the liberal international order at large in the form of Russian neo-imperialism and territorial expansionism. Temporally, a response to this threat could no longer be reconciled with an established post–Cold War strategic culture and associated narratives such as strategic energy partnership with Russia (*Ostpolitik*), economic engagement with authoritarian powers (*Wandel durch Handel*), and military reticence. In its place, the *Zeitenwende* narrative emerged, advocating for a revitalised German military and a leadership role in European security. Yet this narrative of a temporal reordering of national security also remains constrained by an incremental policy implementation and historical associations with Germany's own militaristic past, creating enduring political and societal tensions and ontological insecurities about Germany's role in European security and the remaking of military identity.

Zeitenwende, ontological security, and temporality

Existing research on the *Zeitenwende* paradigm shift has concentrated in particular on its policy impact,[12] the publication of Germany's first-ever National Security Strategy,[13] Germany's relationships with key allies and adversaries,[14] and debates as to whether the *Zeitenwende* prompted a re-evaluation of Germany's approach to nuclear deterrence.[15] Researchers have questioned whether the proclaimed transformation has fully materialised, pointing to delays in policy implementation, domestic political constraints, and external geopolitical challenges, and have asked whether *Zeitenwende* represents a structural shift in German foreign and defence policy or whether it is solely a discursive tool for justifying policy adaptations within existing frameworks.[16] Most recently, scholars have turned to questions of identity and culture, analysing whether *Zeitenwende* has reshaped German foreign policy identity.[17] Some argue that the policy shift signals a break from Germany's post–Cold War reluctance to engage in military affairs, while others suggest that deep-seated cultural and historical factors continue to constrain meaningful change in Germany's strategic orientation.[18] Frank Stengel, for example, points out that Germany's 'out of area' operations in the 1990s and 2000s already represented a break with prior notions of military restraint

[11]Hugo von Essen and August Danielson, 'A typology of ontological insecurity mechanisms: Russia's military engagement in Syria', *International Studies Review*, 25:2 (2023), pp. 1–25; Maria Mälksoo, 'Countering hybrid warfare as ontological security management: The emerging practices of the EU and NATO', *Ontological Insecurity in the European Union*, 27:3 (2020), pp. 126–144, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olac015}; Malte Riemann and Norma Rossi, 'Remote warfare as "security of being": Reading security force assistance as an ontological security routine', *Defence Studies*, 21:4 (2021), pp. 489–507; Mirko Palestrino, 'Inking wartime: Military tattoos and the temporalities of the war experience', *International Political Sociology*, 16:3 (2022).

[12]Heiko Borchert, Torben Schütz, and Joseph Verbovszky, '"Unchain my heart": A defense industrial policy agenda for Germany's *Zeitenwende*', *Zeitschrift für Aussen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, 15:4 (2022), pp. 429–51; Rafał.Ulatowski, 'The illusion of Germany's *Zeitenwende*', *The Washington Quarterly*, 47:3 (2024), pp. 59–76; Mello, '*Zeitenwende*'.

[13]Karl-Heinz Kamp, 'The *Zeitenwende* at work: Germany's national security strategy', *Survival*, 65:3 (2023), pp. 73–80.

[14]Vladimír Handl, Tomáš Nigrin, and Martin Mejstřík, 'Turnabout or continuity? The German *Zeitenwende* and the reaction of the V4 countries to it', *Journal of European Integration*, 45:3 (2023), pp. 503–19; Sebastian Biba, 'Germany's triangular relations with the United States and China in the era of the *Zeitenwende*', *German Politics*, 33:3 (2023), pp. 435–62.

[15]Ulrich Kühn, *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century: Atomic Zeitenwende?* (Routledge, 2024).

[16]Giegerich and Schreer, '*Zeitenwende* one year on'; D. Nabers and F. A. Stengel, 'Crisis and change in post-*Zeitenwende* German security policy', *Polit Vierteljahresschr, 66:1* (2025), pp. 19–44.

[17]Tobias Bunde, 'Zeitenwende as a foreign policy identity crisis: Germany and the travails of adaptation after Russias invasion of Ukraine', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2025), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241311568}.

[18]Molly O'Neal, '*Zeitenwende*, Europe and Germany's culture of restraint', *The International Spectator*, 59:2 (2024), pp. 1–17; Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?'.

and Germany as a civilian power.[19] What has received limited attention so far, however, are *Zeitenwende*'s effects on Germany's ontological security and self-identity.[20] This is surprising because, as Tobias Bunde writes, 'Germany's particular response to the war is hard to grasp without paying attention to identities and ideas on the domestic level'.[21] As this paper argues, investigations of the content and impact of Germany's *Zeitenwende* need to consider how states construct and maintain a stable sense of self, making it an ideal case for analysis through the lens of Ontological Security Studies (OSS) with its focus on how actors seek a continuous identity in the face of existential uncertainty. Since its introduction into IR, OSS has grown into a vibrant and diverse field. Scholars have explored the links between identity and foreign and security policy,[22] how disruptions to narrative continuity create ontological insecurity,[23] and how crises prompt narrative adjustments.[24] OSS has also been expanded beyond the state to consider non-state actors and institutions as subjects of ontological security,[25] opening space for analysing NGOs, and international organisations as identity-seeking actors in their own right. This broadening of the field has been accompanied by theoretical refinement, such as calls for greater conceptual clarity and methodological rigour,[26] further engagement with core concepts such as anxiety and sovereignty,[27] and connecting OSS conceptually to other 'turns', specifically the historical turn in IR.[28] The rise of populism, nationalism, and ideological contestation[29] has further sharpened OSS's analytical edge, as seen in Steele and Homolar's work connecting ontological (in)security to populist narratives.[30]

At the heart of this literature is the recognition that narratives are the primary vehicle through which ontological security is constructed. These narratives position the state within a broader historical trajectory, delineate the boundary between Self and Other, and offer a sense of purpose and coherence. Importantly, they do not just describe reality but *constitute* it, shaping what is perceived as possible, necessary, or legitimate. However, a significant theoretical blind spot persists in this growing body of work: the temporal dimension of narrative identity. While OSS acknowledges the importance of continuity over time, it often treats temporality as a background assumption rather

[19]Frank A. Stengel, 'German 'pacifism' and the *Zeitenwende*', forthcoming in *Defense & Security Analysis*.

[20]Bunde, 'Zeitenwende as a foreign policy identity crisis'.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Faye Donnelly and Brent J. Steele, 'Critical security history: (De)securitisation, ontological security, and insecure memories', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 209–26; Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, 'The ontological security of special relationships: The case of Germany's relations with Israel', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:1 (2019), pp. 79–100.

[23]Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (Routledge, 2015); Ayşe Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23.

[24]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67.

[25]Brent J. Steele and Jelena Subotić, 'Icons and ontological (in)security', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:2 (2024), pp. 143–59; Marco A. Vieira, 'Understanding resilience in international relations: The Non-Aligned Movement and ontological security', *International Studies Review*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 290–311; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxious community: EU as (in)security community', *European Security*, 27:3 (2004), pp. 393–413.

[26]Rita Floyd, 'Ontological vs. societal security: Same difference or distinct concepts?', *International Politics* (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00581-w}; Lucy Gehring, 'The autopoetics of the self: A "demonic" approach to Ontological Security Studies', *European Journal of International Security*, 8:4 (2023), pp. 413–30.

[27]Nina C. Krickel-Choi and Ching-Chang Chen, 'Defending the islands, defending the self: Taiwan, sovereignty and the origin of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute as ontological security-seeking', *The Pacific Review*, 37:2 (2023), pp. 301–27; Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'State personhood and ontological security as a framework of existence: Moving beyond identity, discovering sovereignty', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 3–21.

[28]Oliver Kesslerand Halvard Leira, 'The future is just another past', *Review of International Studies*, 50:3 (2024), pp. 425–40; Malte Riemann, 'The mercenary concepts conditions of possibility: Effeminacy, modernity and the international', *European Journal of International Relations*, 31:2 (2025), pp. 387–410.

[29]Georg Löfflmann, *The Politics of Antagonism: Populist Security Narratives and the Remaking of Political Identity* (Routledge, 2024).

[30]Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, 'Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 214–21.

than a site of political contestation. This is where Bachleitner's engagement with 'temporal security' begins to fill a critical gap as it aims to connect OSS to the temporal turn in IR.[31] Bachleitner shows that ontological security is grounded not just in spatial relationships (i.e. with significant Others) but also in temporal relations, particularly in relation to a state's past. Temporal security places an analytical emphasis on the national historical context of collective memory that guides state behaviour in international politics by seeking to maintain integrity of the national story against its own historical Other.[32] In aiming to maintain temporal security, political decision-making in international relations is thus primarily motivated by the traumas of the past and the desire not to repeat the historical mistakes of the nation, such as past military aggression and defeat in war. This work, however, focuses primarily on one layer of identity construction – historic continuity and ontological security's relationship with collective memory, i.e. maintaining the integrity of biographical narratives and state identity.[33] As Steele points out, divergence between a state's biographical narrative and its actions can produce anxiety and as such result in ontological insecurity.[34] In the words of Mälksoo, 'memory thus emerges as a vital self-identity need as it is invoked to constitute the central narrative of a state about its past in order to form a core part of its consistent sense of the self in the present'.[35] However, this focus on historical continuity leaves other intersubjective and international dimensions of temporal security underexplored, in particular, how ontological security can be maintained when biographical narratives are disrupted, forcing an adjustment of the nation's story of itself and its mnemonical security. Where biographical narrative highlights the role of coherent storytelling in maintaining identity, it does not fully capture the ways in which disruptions in the perceived flow of time – such as sudden shifts in historical self-perception or ruptures in the geopolitical 'flow' of time – can both generate ontological insecurity and also redefine established security narratives. Similarly, mnemonical security, while focusing on collective memory struggles and the securitisation of historical narratives, does not necessarily engage with how temporal restructuring itself can be a source of ontological (in)security. As we argue in this paper, ontological security can be retimed via the narrative reordering of identities – Self, Other, and international order – shifting the analytical focus of temporal security away from a prevalent concern with biographical continuity and mnemonical security towards the significance of narrative ruptures and discontinuities.

Temporal security narratives and the retiming of ontological security

The 'temporal turn' in IR seeks to examine and challenge the hegemonic foundations of the discipline and notions of the 'timelessness' of theoretical foundations and axiomatic assumptions as well as the linearity of historical processes.[36] Political constructs of time are inherently contested and, as such, can be subjected to revisionist challenges, while the timing of events and the imposing of chronological order in international relations, such as the 'unipolar moment', the 'end of history', the 'peace of Westphalia', or the 'rise of China', are in themselves a political act.[37] As Hom

[31] Bachleitner, 'Ontological security as temporal security?'.

[32] Bachleitner, 'Ontological security as temporal security?'.

[33] Steele B.J 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of international studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–540.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Mälksoo, '"Memory must be defended"', p. 224.

[36] Paulo Chamon, 'Turning temporal: A discourse of time in IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 396–420; Hom, 'Timing is everything'; Andrew Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Tom Lundborg, *Politics of the Event: Time, Movement, Becoming* (Routledge, 2012); Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and World Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

[37] Andrew Hom, 'Silent order: The temporal turn in Critical International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 303–30; Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*; Tom Lundborg, 'The limits of historical sociology: Temporal borders and the reproduction of the "modern" political present', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:1 (2016), pp. 99–121; Norma Rossi, 'A true crime story: The role of space, time, and identity in narrating criminal authority', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:2 (2024), pp. 180–98.

and Campbell note, the 'language and logic of time' are a key resource in the ideational repertoire of political elites in legitimating war and sustaining the use of force.'[38] The event of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, for example, would be translated by the George W. Bush administration into the intergenerational continuum of the 'War on Terror' and provide legitimation of its underlying strategic assumptions, ideological dispositions, and national security agenda – a temporal security narrative whose open-endedness would ultimately be reframed as an unwinnable 'forever war' and outright strategic failure.[39]

Security narratives are normative constructions that establish a cultural framework of interpretation, which creates audience expectations for political behaviour and communication, thus both enabling and constraining policy choices.[40] As Ronald Krebs put it, 'policies at odds with underlying narratives strike audiences as illegitimate: they have few public advocates, and their few advocates are ignored or treated as beyond the pale'.[41] Temporally then, security narratives perform the function of creating and sustaining the meanings of national security and identity by linking the past, present, and future, thus imposing a structured order of events and providing a sense of logical coherence and ontological security in the story of the Self.[42] As humans are fundamentally 'storytelling animals', we strive to impose a logical interpretation of our external environment to make sense of our surroundings and our very own sense of self through the narrative construction of social reality.[43] Routinised everyday practices and trusted social interactions – such as those with recognised authorities, institutions, and experts – along with commonly shared intersubjective meanings and stable identities that define the Self and Other collectively construct a sense of the 'real' and 'natural' world. This fosters continuity in biographical narratives and establishes a sense of personal agency, making individuals feel ontologically secure within their social environment.[44] As a result, individuals are able to 'continually integrate events from the external world and weave them into the ongoing "story" of the self'.[45] As ideational categories, concepts of individual and group identity, common-sense status, and the 'natural' order of things are socially constructed – stories that we tell ourselves and infuse with meaning – and are thus not permanently fixed and unassailable. They can be subject to potential challenges and revisions: 'What makes a given response "appropriate" or "acceptable" necessitates a shared – but unproven and unproveable – framework of reality.'[46] In international politics, ontological security is analogously constituted and maintained through widely shared and deep-seated narratives that position the nation state vis-à-vis its external spatial and temporal Other, providing a sense of ordered reality and chronological continuity as a result.[47] This narrative ordering of reality constitutes a sense of national belonging and historical groundedness as ontological security. As Annick

[38] Andrew R. Hom and Luke Campbell, 'Wartime in the 21st century', *International Relations*, 36:4 (2022), pp. 525–46 (p. 527).

[39] Georg Löfflmann, 'The Bush Doctrine redux: Changes and continuities in American grand strategy since "9/11"', *International Politics*, 61:3 (2024), pp. 501–22.

[40] Alexandra Homolar, 'Rebels without a conscience: The evolution of the rogue states narrative in US security policy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:4 (2011), pp. 705–27.

[41] Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[42] Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*; Hidemi Suganami, 'Narrative explanation and international relations: Back to basics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:2 (2008), pp. 327–56. Ontological security expresses a 'confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity'; see Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 375.

[43] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

[44] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 36–7.

[45] Ibid., p. 53.

[46] Ibid., p. 36.

[47] Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12 (2016), pp. 610–27; Alexandra Homolar, *The Uncertainty Doctrine: Narrative Politics and US Hard Power after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*; Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Routledge, 2010).

Wibben has pointed out in her work on feminist security narratives: 'Narratives are inherently political; they always mark/mask a political moment, and they simultaneously invest and invent an order.'[48]

These are not just abstract stories but structured frameworks that provide order, continuity, and meaning. These identity narratives are composed of key elements: plots, which provide temporal and causal sequencing; actors, who serve as protagonists and antagonists; and settings, which anchor the narrative within a specific spatial and normative environment.[49]

Narrative constructs of temporality and the timing of events in international politics reproduced in political rhetoric, media representations, and expert discourse constitute a 'regime of truth', in the Foucauldian sense, that seeks to legitimate political outcomes and establish dominant interpretive frameworks of meaning.[50] Narrative continuity is the ontological foundation of temporal security, which, however, can be disrupted, forcing an adjustment of the prevailing sense of the national Self. In IR, research on ontological security has explored how states maintain a stable identity and are motivated to act based on their self-perception, affecting their political decision-making.[51] As with individuals, crisis moments and critical situations can render a state ontologically insecure, forcing a revision of self-identity. This occurs 'when a state realizes that its narratived actions no longer reflect or are reflected by how it sees itself'.[52] As Hom notes, one of the most significant aspects of the temporality of international politics is the notion of ruptures, 'shocking and unprecedented moments of radical discontinuity', which unsettle the status quo and present possibilities for political and social transformation by resetting an established timeline.[53] A general sense of historical disruption and chronological discontinuity can unsettle ontological security by challenging the hegemonic narratives that underpin it and thus affecting the nation's collective memory, the 'biographical self-narrative of a state'.[54] We argue, however, that temporal security narratives can be successful in retiming ontological security, when the narrative shock and disruption caused by a change in perception of the national Self, hostile Others, and the international system ultimately maintain integrity with the temporal Other in the nation's collective memory. In the case of Germany's *Zeitenwende*, the narrative displacement of post–Cold War security narratives such as *Ostpolitik, Wandel durch Handel*, and 'peace dividend' could still be framed and legitimated via a temporal security framework that represented Germany's revitalised military power role and commitment to European security as antithetical to military aggression and expansionism. At the same time, as Germany shows, different temporalities can be experienced simultaneously, resulting, in the German case, in a fracturing of security narratives between supporters and opponents of the retiming of national security and structural policy adjustments.

Timing German ontological security: From '*Stunde Null*' through *Wendezeit* to *Zeitenwende*

Germany's post-war identity has long been shaped by the foundational narrative of *Zivilmacht* or 'civilian power', grounded in a normative commitment to multilateralism, anti-militarism, and the promotion of democracy and human rights. These principles, as Eberle and Handl observe, were 'articulated much more vocally toward the Kremlin', particularly as tensions with Russia

[48]Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, p. 85.

[49]Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*.

[50]Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time*.

[51]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2008); Subotic, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change'.

[52]Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p. 3.

[53]Hom, 'Silent order', p. 320.

[54]Mälksoo, '"Memory must be defended"', p. 222; Lundborg, 'The limits of historical sociology'; Riemann and Rossi, 'Remote warfare as "security of being"'.

increased.[55] This identity narrative, however, cannot be understood in isolation from its temporal dimension. As Forsberg points out, the evolution of Germany's foreign policy has always been embedded in a specific historical consciousness – one that seeks stability through continuity, moral redemption, and a firm anchoring in the liberal international order.[56] As with any identity narrative, Germany's self-conception as a civilian power is deeply intertwined with the politics of time. Temporal narratives serve not only to situate the state within a broader historical arc but also to secure ontological stability by providing coherence and purpose in relation to its past. The roots of Germany's contemporary temporal identity can be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the surrender of the German Wehrmacht on 8 May 1945 and the complete political, military, economic, and moral collapse of Germany in the Second World War. This event, referred to in German as '*Stunde Null*' or 'Zero Hour', indicates a temporal disruption of German identity on the ontological level that was so fundamental as to literally reset the clock of the nation's historical narrative of itself. The Federal Republic of Germany, which assumed the historical continuity of the German Empire (1871–1945), would subsequently institutionalise a temporal narrative of a rebirth of Germany as a liberal and democratic entity anchored in the West. For the Federal Republic, the 'Third Reich' therefore represented the 'significant historical other' against which its own identity and sense of ontological security was constructed and maintained in the post-war era.[57] German 'mnemonical security' had established a stable and secure self-identity by demilitarising the historical narrative of the Federal Republic as an antithesis to Nazi Germany, resulting in a dominant strategic culture of military reticence and restraint.[58] This temporal narrative of democratic, liberal, and anti-militarist rehabilitation of West Germany within the community of nations would ultimately be transferred into the collective memory of the German nation as a whole following reunification in 1990, which not only absorbed the territory of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic but also established the chronological continuity of the historical narrative of West Germany and its institutions as enduring hegemonic knowledge and the dominant timeline, subsuming the history of East Germany as secondary and finite – a temporal aberration in the collective memory of the German nation. The *Wendezeit*, or time of change, of 1989/1990 therefore did not constitute an ontological shock to (West) German temporal security and identity; quite to the contrary, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the negotiated settlement that ended the Cold War, which culminated in the 2 + 4 Treaty and the reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990, provided a powerful confirmation of Germany's post-war identity as a peaceful and democratic status quo power, structurally embedded in the institutional architecture of the liberal international order.[59] German temporal security, i.e. the ontological integrity of the collective memory vis-à-vis its historic Other, Nazi Germany, had been maintained. In foreign policy and national security terms, Germany saw itself 'encircled by friends' within a Europe 'whole and free' after the end of the Cold War, with Berlin articulating a strategic vision that saw Germany assume a role

[55] Jakub Eberle and Vladimír Handl, 'Ontological security, civilian power, and German foreign policy toward Russia', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16:1 (2020), pp. 41–58 (p. 54).

[56] Forsberg Tuomas, 'From Ostpolitik to 'frostpolitik'? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia', *International Affairs, 92:1* (2016), pp. 21–42.

[57] Bachleitner, 'Ontological security as temporal security?', p. 27.

[58] Mälksoo, '"Memory must be defended"'; John Duffield, *World Power Forsaken: Political Culture, International Institutions, and German Security Policy after Unification* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Thomas Biggs, 'The strategic culture of the Federal Republic of Germany', in *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 237–50; Sebastian Harnisch and Kerry Longhurst, '3. Understanding Germany: The limits of "normalization" and the prevalence of strategic culture', in Taberner S and Cooke P (eds), *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization* (Boydell and Brewer, 2006), pp. 49–60.

[59] Helga Haftendorn, *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy since 1945* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Thomas Banchoff, *The German Problem Transformed: Institutions, Politics, and Foreign Policy, 1945–1995* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Lily Gardner Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

as a primarily civilian and geo-economic power in European and international affairs.[60] German ontological security manifested in a broad political and societal consensus from 1990 onwards that emphasised strategic continuity, including reliance on the United States of America for defence and security via NATO, paired with a 'peace dividend' of significantly reduced defence budgets and continued cuts to the combat strength and troop numbers of the Bundeswehr (the German armed forces), strategic economic engagement with Russia, primarily in the energy sector – a continuation of the *Ostpolitik* rapprochement of the 1970s and 1980s – as well as a *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) paradigm of geo-economic engagement and commercial interdependence with non-Western emerging powers, especially China.[61] This sense of German post-war and post–Cold War ontological security would be disrupted by the Russo-Ukrainian War, as it challenged German strategic assumptions about the nature of international politics in the 21st century, such as the primacy of geo-economics over geopolitics, the negligent significance of military power, and the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy and the unchallenged status of European security.

Zeitenwende as narrative disruption and the retiming of national security

In the *Zeitenwende* speech of 27 February 2022, Chancellor Scholz used the temporal security narrative of a historic rupture in Europe's post-Cold War trajectory to legitimate a strategic reorientation of German national security and the outlook of foreign and defence policy. As Hom notes, the timing of events in periods of upheaval 'may involve re-timing, or re-establishing useful relationships and processes; or more laborious attempts to time anew, to create novel timing modes in the face of unsettling events'.[62] For Germany, re-timing meant a narrative reordering of national security, questioning long-held beliefs and common-sense assumptions about national identity, military power, and international politics with significant practical policy implications. The *Zeitenwende* narrative disrupted German ontological security by reorienting it temporally from a post–Cold War strategic culture of military reticence towards contemporary leadership responsibilities for the strategic deterrence of Russia via NATO and the continued military support of Ukraine.[63] Germany's ontological security was challenged because the necessity of supplying Ukraine with weapons in defence of its national sovereignty and territorial integrity and strategically reorienting NATO towards conventional deterrence of Russia could no longer be reconciled with temporal security narratives of post-war *Ostpolitik* and a post–Cold War 'peace dividend' that had guided German national security and foreign policy thinking until this point.[64] In his speech, Scholz emphasised the urgent need for a substantial modernisation and rearmament of Germany's armed forces, the Bundeswehr, in all areas, including its continued capability to deploy US tactical nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement.[65] Among the most significant announcements in the *Zeitenwende* speech were the creation of a 100 billion EUR special fund for an immediate increase in defence spending, as well as the promise to invest 'from now on – year by year – more than two percent of gross domestic product in our defence', thereby indicating that Germany would not only be meeting, but regularly exceeding, NATO's 2 per cent target for

[60]Timothy Garton Ash, 'Europe whole and free', *The New York Review of Books* (2 November 2023), available at: {https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/11/02/europe-whole-and-free-timothy-garton-ash/}; Harnisch and Maull, *Germany as a Civilian Power?*; Kundnani, 'Germany's liberal geo-economics'.

[61]On the continued impact of *Ostpolitik* and geo-economics on German foreign policy and German–Russian relations after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, see also Forsberg (2016); Tom Dyson, 'Energy security and Germany's response to Russian revisionism: The dangers of civilian power', *German Politics*, 25:4 (2016), pp. 500–18; Marco Siddi, 'German foreign policy towards Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis: A new *Ostpolitik*?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:4 (2016), pp. 665–77.

[62]Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time*, p. 12.

[63]Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?'; Maria Mälksoo, 'NATO's new front: Deterrence moves eastward', *International Affairs*, 100:2 (2024), pp. 531–47; Malte Riemann and Georg Löfflmann (eds), *Deutschlands Verteidigungspolitik: Nationale Sicherheit nach der Zeitenwende* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2023).

[64]See, for example, Riemann and Löfflmann, *Deutschlands Verteidigungspolitik*.

[65]See Scholz, 'Policy statement by Olaf Scholz'.

defence expenditure by 2024. In an extraordinarily martial rhetoric for a German head of government, Scholz warned the Russian president not to underestimate German resolve 'together with our allies, to defend every square meter of alliance territory'.[66] With the announcement to procure armaments for Heron TP drones from Israel and US-American F-35 fighter jets as successor to the ageing fleet of Tornado fighter bombers in the nuclear sharing role, contentious defence policy issues that had been discussed fruitlessly for years were summarily concluded. Germany would also abandon its previous military restraint and approve substantial arms deliveries to Ukraine, a policy shift that would ultimately result in Germany emerging as the second-largest provider of military aid to Ukraine behind the United States (with 64.6 billion EUR), committing arms, ammunition, and other military supplies worth 12.6 billion EUR up to the end of February 2025.[67] The sustained supply of the Ukrainian armed forces with artillery, ammunition, air defence systems, infantry fighting vehicles, and modern main battle tanks from German manufacturers had overturned a hitherto-existing taboo of German foreign policy not to send war materials into an active conflict zone.[68] On the material level, the Bundeswehr had to recapitalise after more than 20 years of structural underfunding, which some studies suggested had cut as much as 500 billion EUR from subsequent defence budgets as a result of the 'peace dividend' after 1990.[69] All NATO countries had cut back the size of their armed forces after the end of the Cold War, but the reduction in combat strength of the Bundeswehr had been the most dramatic among them, with some categories, such as artillery, being reduced by 96 per cent compared to Cold War levels, and other capabilities, such as short-range air defence systems (SHORAD), for example, having been eliminated completely.[70] Only two days after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the chief of the German army, General Alfons Mais, had garnered widespread media attention with an embittered public acknowledgement that the troops under his command were more or less 'bare' in terms of their ability to provide for the conventional deterrence of a peer rival such as Russia.[71] The dramatic statement underscored how low military readiness in Germany had fallen as a result of the decades-long 'peace dividend'. The Bundeswehr only had ammunition reserves for two or three days of high-intensity combat, while the number of available tanks, helicopters, submarines, and fighter jets had fallen so low that the government's annual report on the readiness status of major weapons systems had been classified in 2019, apparently to save the defence minister in Berlin from public embarrassment.[72]

Following German participation in NATO-led peacekeeping operations in the Balkans in the 1990s (IFOR, KFOR) and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the German armed forces

[66]Ibid.

[67]Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), 'Ukraine Support Tracker: A Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine' (2024), available at: {https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/}.

[68]The only exception to this rule had been Germany's supply of small arms and ammunition to the Kurdish Peshmerga in the fight against Islamic State, but both qualitatively and quantitatively in terms of the amount and the types of weapons and ammunitions provided, German military support of Ukraine was unprecedented in the history of the Federal Republic.

[69]Rich Miller and Alexander Weber, '"Peace dividend" dwindles as nations boost defense spending', *Bloomberg* (25 April 2022), available at: {https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-25/-peace-dividend-dwindles-as-governments-boost-security-spending}.

[70]According to a 2024 report by the Kiel Institute, in 1992, the Bundeswehr had in its inventory over 4,000 modern Leopard 1 and Leopard 2 main battle tanks (MBTs), with 2,400 MBTs remaining in 2004. This number had dwindled to 339 Leopard 2s in 2021. A similar picture emerged in categories such as artillery (from 978 howitzers in 2004 to 120 in 2021), infantry fighting vehicles (from 2,122 in 2004 to 674 in 2021), and combat aircraft (from 423 in 2004 to 221 in 2021), underlining the dramatic decline in conventional military capacity; see Guntram B. Wolff GB, Burilkov A and Bushnell K, *Fit for War in Decades: Europe's and Germany's Slow Rearmament vis-à-vis Russia* (No. 1). Kiel Report (IfW, 2024), pp. 2–93, 8–9.

[71]Reuters, 'German army chief "fed up" with neglect of country's military' (24 February 2022), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-army-chief-fed-up-with-neglect-countrys-military-2022-02-24/}.

[72]Matthias Gebauer and Konstantin von Hammerstein, 'The bad news *Bundeswehr*: An examination of the truly dire state of Germany's military', *Der Spiegel* (17 January 2023), available at: {https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-bad-news-bundeswehr-an-examination-of-the-truly-dire-state-of-germany-s-military-a-df92eaaf-e3f9-464d-99a3-ef0c27dcc797}.

had been recalibrated from a large, relatively static, and heavily armoured territorial defence force to providing medium-sized expeditionary contingents for international crisis management operations in the context of United Nations, NATO, and European Union missions. As Nabers and Stengel note, post–Cold War German security narratives had emphasised the emergence of 'new threats', a set of 'loosely connected phenomena ranging from armed conflict within states and state failure to environmental destruction to mass migration to organized crime, piracy, and terrorism' necessitating a 'networked security' approach combining civilian and military resources and state and non-state actors.[73] In line with this understanding of the post–Cold War security environment, the annexation of Crimea and occupation of territory by Russian forces and separatists in 2014 had initially been viewed as limited conflict that did not fundamentally alter strategic perceptions of the European security environment. Against this prevailing sense of strategic continuity, the *Zeitenwende* narrative reoriented the Bundeswehr's operational focus from peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and counter-insurgency towards conventional deterrence of Russia with quickly deployable and sustainable land, air, and naval forces, using state-of-the-art equipment.[74]

Temporally, security narratives that stressed the Bundeswehr's war-fighting capabilities and military readiness against a peer adversary indicated a return of Germany's Cold War role as the conventional backbone of NATO, albeit now territorially forwardly deployed on NATO's eastern flank.[75] This strategic and geopolitical turnaround the *Zeitenwende* speech by Scholz had originated was reconfirmed by the publication of Germany's first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS) in June 2023 and a new set of defence policy guidelines in November of that same year that both identified Russia as the biggest threat to Euro-Atlantic security 'for the foreseeable future' and the main operational focus of the Bundeswehr.[76] Both documents made specific references to the *Zeitenwende* narrative, with the NSS declaring that 'Germany's security environment is undergoing profound change and we are living through a watershed era'.[77] According to defence minister Boris Pistorius and chief of defence General Carsten Breuer, the military implications of this change was a collective rethinking of the role of the armed forces for national security, framed as deliberate temporal disruption of past security narratives and strategic assumptions:

> As a nation and as a society, we have neglected the Bundeswehr for decades. For too long, we were unable to imagine the scenario of a war on European soil and a direct threat to our country. The Bundeswehr was geared towards international crisis management operations abroad. Common structures and capabilities necessary for national and collective defence were abandoned.[78]

On the narrative level, the *Zeitenwende* represented the greatest strategic shift in German foreign, defence, and security policy since the end of the Cold War. Scholz himself would subsequently reaffirm the *Zeitenwende* narrative on multiple occasions, for example, in repeatedly vowing to transform the Bundeswehr into Europe's most modern and most capable conventional armed forces, and in calling for an increase in defence industrial production in Germany of weapons and ammunitions both for the continued military support of Ukraine and the modernisation of

[73]Dirk Nabers and Frank A. Stengel, 'Crisis and change in post-*Zeitenwende* German security policy', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift,* 66:1 (2025), pp. 19–44.

[74]In December 2023, Boris Pistorius and Arvydas Anušauskas, the defence ministers of Germany and Lithuania, signed a memorandum for the permanent deployment of a German armoured brigade (c. 5,000 troops) in Lithuania, expected to be fully operational by the end of 2027, the first time German soldiers would be stationed permanently abroad, including with their families. The 'Brigade Lithuania' was considered the German defence ministry's flagship project in the context of *Zeitenwende.*

[75]Ben Schreer, 'Germany's new defence-policy guidelines', IISS (2023), available at: {https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/11/germanys-new-defence-policy-guidelines/}.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Federal Government, National Security Strategy, 2023, p. 11. Available at: {https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf}.

[78]Federal Ministry of Defence, Defence Policy Guidelines, 2023.

the Bundeswehr.[79] Leading German media outlets, such as the *Spiegel* news magazine, would comment on how images of Scholz at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new Rheinmetall ammunitions factory in northern Germany or riding together with the Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda in a German Boxer armoured personnel carrier (APC) during an inspection of Bundeswehr troops stationed in Lithuania as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence were quite literally 'unthinkable' only a few years before. Leading news media that frequently utilised and reproduced the *Zeitenwende* framing reinforced the sense of a marked temporal disruption of German national security, including its political prioritisation and public visibility in the everyday.[80] The material consequence of this narrative shift was maybe most obvious on the issue of NATO's 2 per cent target of defence expenditures, which Germany had agreed to in principle at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales but never actually reached in practice, a persistent source of tensions and irritations in transatlantic relations under the Trump presidency in particular. Germany would reach the NATO quota for the first time in 2024 with reported defence expenditures of 71.8 billion EUR (76.8 billion US$), resulting from the combination of the regular defence budget (c. 52 billion EUR) and the special fund inaugurated by Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech (19.8 billion EUR), plus assorted defence-related expenditures from other ministries.[81] Given the size of the German economy, with a GDP of 4.2 trillion EUR in 2023, future defence expenditures of 2 or 3+ per cent of GDP would result in Germany having the fourth-largest defence budget in the world (behind the United States, Russia, and China) and by far the largest in NATO Europe, ahead of the United Kingdom and France. Before the narrative intervention of the *Zeitenwende*, the various Merkel and Scholz coalition governments had rejected such defence expenditures as strategically unnecessary, fiscally impossible, and politically ill advised. A German military leadership role for European security that was associated with such a substantial budget increase had also been rejected by mobilising temporal security narratives of German military preponderance on the continent as potentially politically destabilising and ignoring the historical sensitives of Germany's neighbours.[82] German defence expenditures had accordingly remained relatively constant throughout the 2000s, with only moderate budget increases following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, resulting in defence expenditures rising from 1.1% (2014) to 1.4% (2022) of GDP.[83] In the pre-*Zeitenwende* context, German temporal security narratives had still been constructed primarily against the historical Other of Germany's own militarist and expansionist past and as continuation of the post–Cold War era 'peace dividend'. Through the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this emphasis on biographical continuity and temporal security would be displaced as a legitimation device for German structural inaction and passivity on security and defence matters. Rather than Germany's historic responsibility for threatening European security in the past, its ability to defend it in the future became a primary concern, initially fuelling a new dynamic of policy activism in the present. Discursively, this reordering of German temporal security produced a profound change in the way issues of defence, military power, and armaments were approached politically and prioritised strategically, as well as how these issues were represented to the public. Both domestically and abroad, the *Zeitenwende* narrative of historic disruption and strategic reordering was subsequently perceived as a significant shift in German post-War and post–Cold War policy, a deliberate and conscious

[79] *Deutsche Welle*, 'Germany: Armed forces must become "best-equipped in Europe"', DW (16 September 2022), available at: {https://www.dw.com/en/germany-armed-forces-must-be-best-equipped-in-europe-scholz-says/a-63146510}.

[80] Christoph Hickmann, 'Kanzler Olaf Scholz im Baltikum: Alles an diesem Tag schreit: Zeitenwende!', *Der Spiegel* (6 May 2024), available at: {https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/kanzler-olaf-scholz-im-baltikum-deutschland-will-litauen-vor-russischem-angriff-schuetzen-a-db2f7429-407c-433f-84b9-a132b7b5a558}.

[81] Alexander Ratz, 'Germany hits 2% NATO spending target for first time since end of Cold War', Reuters (14 February 2024), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-hits-2-nato-target-first-time-since-1992-reports-dpa-2024-02-14/}.

[82] Stefan Kornelius, 'Das 2-Prozent-Ziel', *Internationale Politik* (April 2018), pp. 54–9.

[83] 'Military Expenditure (% of GDP) Germany', World Bank Group, available at: {https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?name_desc=false&locations=DE} .

break with established paradigms of Germany's world political role and self-identity.[84] Narratively, Scholz and high-ranking members of his cabinet, such as defence minister Pistorius, positioned the *Zeitenwende* deliberately against past strategic assumptions and associated temporal security constructs, including the post–Cold War era 'peace dividend' of structural underinvestment in the armed forces. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Scholz, for example, invoked the narrative of 'an epochal tectonic shift' to underline Germany's willingness to become 'the guarantor of European security', drawing a clear historical distinction between the bygone post–Cold War era and a new, contemporary multipolar world.[85] According to Scholz:

> The crucial role for Germany at this moment is to step up as one of the main providers of security in Europe by investing in our military, strengthening the European defense industry, being up our military presence on NATO's eastern flank, and training and equipping Ukraine's armed forces.[86]

Yet Scholz also insisted that this era should not result in a 'new Cold War' paradigm of competing spheres of influence and opposing blocs, instead stressing the value of alliances and partnerships in maintaining the established liberal international order and opposing Russian aggression and imperialism. Scholz thus reaffirmed the *Zeitenwende* as a temporal security narrative to reorient German foreign, security, defence, and energy policy for a new era, but, at the same time, he rejected the proposition that this era was to be defined by the geopolitical antagonism between democracies and autocratic powers, in particular the political, economic, and military competition between the United States and China, on which Germany remained economically dependent. As the next section will demonstrate, while the *Zeitenwende* rhetoric had indeed initiated a reordering of German temporal security narratives, challenging and partially displacing post–Cold War paradigms of Germany's anti-militarist re-emergence as a primarily economic and civilian power, this process was both an ongoing and unfinished structural adjustment in policy terms. The strategic necessity established by the *Zeitenwende* narrative of responding to contemporary security challenges in Europe in the form of Russian aggression and imperialism with the growth of German military power continued to compete with temporal security narratives that identified a German leadership role in European security and defence as an ontological antithesis to Germany's historic rehabilitation after the Holocaust and the Second World War. The latter was a rallying cry and voter mobilisation device of both left-wing and right-wing populist parties and politicians in particular. This oscillating quality to Germany's *Zeitenwende* between strategic reorientation, unfinished policy adjustment, and narrative contestation was underscored by the fraught political and societal debate over Germany's military identity and 'war readiness'. These issues had emerged as discursive focal points within the *Zeitenwende* context, where competing temporal security narratives clashed over the meaning of the past and the demands of the present.

Temporal reordering and the contestation of the *Zeitenwende* narrative

The Russo-Ukrainian War constituted an ideational challenge to German ontological security because it posited the question to what extent a country alternatively categorised as either 'pacifist', 'post-heroic', or 'anti-militarist' had to be made ready for war again, not just materially, but intellectually and even culturally.[87] A historically constituted strategic culture of military reticence

[84] See also esp. Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?'; Mello, '*Zeitenwende*'; Bunde, 'Lessons (to be) learned'.

[85] Olaf Scholz, 'The global *Zeitenwende*: How to avoid a new Cold War in a multipolar era', *Foreign Affairs*, 102:1 (2023), pp. 22–38.

[86] Ibid., p. 28.

[87] See e.g. Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, 'The test of strategic culture: Germany, pacifism and pre-emptive strikes', *Security Dialogue*, 36:3 (2005), pp. 339–59; Herfried Münkler, 'Heroische und postheroische Gesellschaften', *Merkur* (September 2007), available at: {https://www.merkur-zeitschrift.de/herfried-muenkler-heroische-und-postheroische-gesellschaften/}; Frank A. Stengel, 'Bundeswehr und Deutsche Gesellschaft: Die Berliner Republik zwischen Militarisierung und Normalisierung', in

and the associated socio-political notions about the utility of the use of force in international politics in the post–Cold War era were directly contested by the *Zeitenwende* narrative of a transformed European security environment. The narrative reordering and retiming of national security therefore manifested primarily in the reframing of German military power on the ideational level. This conceptual reconfiguration was exemplified by the issue of 'war readiness'. As a result of the *Zeitenwende* shift announced by Scholz in 2022, defence minister Pistorius had demanded repeatedly that the Bundeswehr under his command had to become '*kriegstüchtig*', i.e. ready for war.[88] Subsequently, 'war readiness' was made the overarching goal of German defence policy under Pistorius, with German strategic assessments stating that a reconstituted Russia could launch a full-scale assault on a NATO member state by 2029, with Poland and the Baltic states seen as potential targets of Russian aggression.[89] Constitutionally, the Bundeswehr, established on 12 November 1955, the 200th birthday of the Prussian military reformer, General Gerhard von Scharnhorst, could only ever be used for defensive purposes and sent into combat alongside Germany's allies as part of system of collective security, such as NATO or the European Union; by definition, any war Germany fought could only be one fought in response to an outside attack.[90] The differences between war readiness and more common expressions in German political discourse like *Verteidigungsbereitschaft* (readiness for defence) were thus semantic rather than systemic. However, their different framing and tonality directly touched on issues of *Zeitenwende*'s impact on political and societal attitudes towards the armed forces, in particular Clausewitzean notions of war and the use of force as a political instrument in service of strategic objectives rather than merely an unwanted relic of the past and political taboo. The narrative reordering and structural transformation of national security thereby remained both politically and socially contentious. The German strategic community, for example, had welcomed Pistorius' statement about a 'war-ready' Bundeswehr as a long overdue injection of realism and acknowledgement of strategic and geopolitical facts into the debate over German national security and defence policy. Political opposition against the reframing, however, had manifested also from within the SPD, the party of Scholz and Pistorius, with some members of parliament criticising the term as unhelpful as it was likely to produce a fear response in the German population, in particular by invoking collective historical memories of the devastation of the Second World War.[91] A similar dynamic of moderate policy adjustment rather than systemic change emerged on the issue of military conscription, which had been phased out in Germany in 2011 and whose return would be debated as a consequence of the *Zeitenwende* paradigm shift. The Bundeswehr, which was set to grow from around 180,000 soldiers to about 203,000 by 2032 according to official plans, had struggled for years to meet its recruitment targets given Germany's changing demographics, with an ageing and shrinking native-born population and the need to compete for a limited pool of applicants with better paying and less demanding and dangerous career options offered by the private sector. In June 2024, a plan for a new selective military service module was introduced on the cabinet level (but not implemented), which consisted of a new mandatory questionnaire to be filled out by all 18-year-old German males about their interest in the Bundeswehr and their willingness to serve. Recruitment

Malte Riemann and Georg Löfflmann (eds), *Deutschlands Verteidigunspolitik: Nationale Sicherheit nach der Zeitenwende* (Kohlhammer, 2023), pp. 139–53.

[88] Caleb Larson, 'Germany aims for a "war-ready" military', *Politico* (10 November 2023), available at: {https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-war-military-bundeswehr-defense-nato/}.

[89] This resulted, for example, in the reorganisation of the command structure of the Bundeswehr with a newly established Joint Operations Command (*Operatives Führungskommando*), the establishment of the cyber-warfare domain (*Cyber- und Informationsraum – CIR*) as the fourth branch of the military, and the merger of the hitherto-independent medical service and logistics base into a new support command.

[90] Felix Lange, 'A constitutional framework for Bundeswehr operations abroad based on international law', *Verfassungsblog* (1 April 2022).

[91] Marina Kormbaki. 'Bundeswehr: Boris Pistorius im Modus der Selbstverteidigung', *Der Spiegel* (10 November 2023), available at: {https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundeswehr-boris-pistorius-im-modus-der-selbstverteidigung-a-1663b8c5-a7ae-4479-803e-15cab7024f11}.

itself remained reliant on volunteers. The aim for the measure was to provide 200,000 new reservists within 10 years, which would enable Germany to expand its total troop strength to around 460,000 in the event of war, nearly twice the number of soldiers available in 2024. Critics, however, doubted the effectiveness of the measure. A return of mandatory conscription, however, which had underwritten an active troop strength of around 500,000 in the Cold War–era Bundeswehr, had been vehemently opposed by all three parties in the governing 'traffic light' coalition of SPD, Greens, and the FDP and was also not introduced as part of the CDU/CSU–SPD agreement concluded in April 2025 about forming a new government coalition.

Beyond political and societal debates over the appropriate adjustments of defence policy, however, the issue of military identity, history, and tradition also remained contested within the armed forces themselves. The political prioritisation of 'combat readiness' in the context of the *Zeitenwende* shift challenged established historical narratives about the Bundeswehr and an institutional sense of temporal security constituted primarily against its historic Other, the Wehrmacht.[92] In this context, a staff officer working in the German Ministry of Defence (BMvg) released a revised statement on the official guidelines on military tradition (*Traditionserlass*) in August 2024, highlighting the successful combat record of several Wehrmacht officers, who would later join the Bundeswehr, including Luftwaffe pilot Erich Hartmann, the most successful fighter pilot of the Second World War.[93] The wartime achievements by members of the Bundeswehr's founding generation, despite having fought for Nazi Germany, were presented as favourable historical examples of 'combat readiness' to be emulated by soldiers in today's Bundeswehr without problematising or contextualising under which political and ideological conditions these military feats had been performed, i.e. Nazi Germany's war of genocidal conquest. After critical media coverage, the defence ministry was forced to officially rescind the amendment, clarifying that the original *Traditionserlass* remained unchanged and that combat effectiveness alone was not a criterion that could justify military tradition, but that the values of liberal and democratic Germany had to be considered as well and be represented in the actions of military leaders.[94] While German temporal security narratives were increasingly defined by historic change and discontinuity with past strategic assumptions of the post–Cold War era, this episode illustrated how a profound ontological uncertainty remained in the armed forces about how exactly this strategic reorientation was to be reconciled against a German military identity whose collective memory remained dominated by the Wehrmacht and the Second World War. The uncertainty over the interpretation and utility of German military history for orienting German soldiers in a changed security environment demonstrated how the historic rupture of the Russian invasion of Ukraine had not fully displaced the 'temporal Other' of Germany's own expansionist, militarist, and genocidal past but in fact recontextualised it.[95] As Karl Gustafsson has pointed out in his work on Japanese security policy, the temporal Other of a nation's militarist and expansionist past can become desecuritised in official discourse in order to facilitate policy change.[96] In case of Germany, the temporal reordering of the *Zeitenwende* narrative did not displace the temporal Other of the 'Third Reich', but it linked German national security no longer to a historically constituted strategic culture of military reticence that had developed in response to the Nazi past. Instead of past military reticence, Germany's new role was defined as providing security leadership in defence of European freedom and democratic values. Pistorius invoked precisely this temporal security narrative in his speech in the outgoing Bundestag on 18 March 2025 before the historic vote to amend the German Basic Law

[92]Officially, the only accepted lines of historical tradition for the Bundeswehr are the military resistance around Colonel Claus Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg and the plotters of 20 July 1944, the Prussian military reforms of the 19th century spearheaded by Scharnhorst and Gneisenau after the defeat against Napoleon, and the Bundeswehr's own history since 1955.

[93]Dirk Eckert, 'Wehrmacht und Bundeswehr: Historische Kontinuitäten', *taz* (16 August 2024).

[94]Dirk Eckert, 'Erweiterter Traditionserlass gekippt: Lieber weniger Wehrmacht wagen', *taz* (14 August 2024).

[95]Karl Gustafsson, 'Temporal othering, de-securitisation and apologies: Understanding Japanese security policy change', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23:3 (2020), pp. 511–34.

[96]Ibid.

and exempt security related expenditures (above 1 per cent of GDP) from the constitutional debt break:

> we face one of the greatest, if not the greatest, security policy challenges in the history of our country – a challenge that we cannot overcome alone. We need a strong Europe that is capable of defending our prosperity, our freedom, and our security: for ourselves, but above all for future generations.[97]

According to General Breuer, the highest-ranking German soldier and principal military advisor of the federal government, the *Zeitenwende* was first and foremost a change of mindset, both in the armed forces and in German society at large: 'The change of times is a change of thoughts.'[98] Beyond issues of personnel recruitment, organisational structure, and equipment needs of the armed forces, the temporal reordering and recontextualising of German security narratives problematised what mentality a new historical and geopolitical era required, both in terms of a combat mindset (or lack thereof) in Germany's military and the resilience of German society as a whole, faced with the prospect of war and national defence against external threats, including the protection of physical and digital infrastructure from Russian sabotage and subversion. According to public opinion polls, a clear majority of Germans supported this change of mindset, including the continued military support of Ukraine and substantially increased defence expenditures, while identifying Russia as a direct threat to German national security.[99] The disruption and temporal reordering of national security the *Zeitenwende* narrative had initiated was shifting the boundaries of accepted political and societal discourse towards greater acceptance of military necessities and requirements and public awareness of the existence of geopolitical threats to national security.

The strategic reorientation of Germany, including the rearmament of the Bundeswehr, the assumption of a military leadership role in European security, and the displacement of hitherto-dominant temporal security narratives with the *Zeitenwende* paradigm was, however, rejected in both its ideational and material dimension by a heterogeneous coalition of critics whose political stance combined anti-militarism, anti-NATO sentiment, anti-Americanism, populism, and pro-Russian attitudes to varying degrees. Following the outbreak of the war and the decision by Chancellor Scholz to supply weapons to Ukraine, a series of open letters written by an assortment of German artists, academics, and intellectuals had publicly opposed weapons deliveries to Ukraine as irresponsible escalation, demanding German efforts for 'diplomatic solutions' instead.[100] Others, like the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a stalwart of the intelligentsia of the old Federal Republic, had supported Scholz's decision, but simultaneously criticised the 'emotionalisation' and 'militarisation' of public discourse in Germany as a result of the war and the *Zeitenwende* shift.[101] At the polar ends of this spectrum existed the nationalist populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

[97]Rede des Bundesministers der Verteidigung, Boris Pistorius, zur Änderung des Grundgesetzes (Artikel 109, 115 und 143 h) vor dem Deutschen Bundestag am 18. März 2025 in Berlin, available at: {https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-des-bundesministers-der-verteidigung-boris-pistorius–2338178}.

[98]Carsten Breuer, 'Grundsatzrede Generalinspekteur: Gewinnen wollen. Weil wir gewinnen müssen' (18 July 2023), available at: {https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/generalinspekteur-beschreibt-bundeswehr-der-zukunft-5652978}.

[99]Timo Graf, 'Zeitenwende in den Köpfen', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (16 February 2024), available at: {https://www.kas.de/de/web/die-politische-meinung/artikel/detail/-/content/zeitenwende-in-den-koepfen} According to annual polls commissioned by the Bundeswehr's Centre for Military History and Social Sciences, for example, more than 65 per cent of respondents identified Russia as a threat to German national security in 2022, compared to less than 30 per cent in 2018 (see ibid.). The *Berlin Puls* survey released by the Körber Foundation showed that in 2023, 46 per cent of Germans supported the NATO target of 2 per cent of GDP, while 25 per cent supported spending even more on defence. Available at: {https://koerber-stiftung.de/projekte/the-berlin-pulse/}.

[100]Axel Heck. 'Ready, steady, no? The contested legitimacy of weapon deliveries to Ukraine in German foreign policy discourse'. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* (16 July 2024).

[101]Jürgen Habermas, 'Ein Plädoyer für Verhandlungen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (14 February 2023), available at: {https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/kultur/juergen-habermas-ukraine-sz-verhandlungen-e159105/}.

party, the far-left Die Linke party, and the left-wing populist politician Sarah Wagenknecht, who would form a new party named after her, the BSW, in January 2024. The public mobilisation strategy of this anti-*Zeitenwende* coalition revolved around actively stoking fears in the population about military and nuclear escalation and the potential unleashing of a Third World War through the continued military support of Ukraine.[102] The mantra of 'security with Russia, never security against Russia' that was commonplace among the left-wing and right-wing populist parties that rejected the *Zeitenwende* paradigm had cultural roots both in the West German peace and nuclear disarmament movement of the 1980s, and in enduring pro-Russian sentiment following German reunification, especially prevalent among voters in East Germany, where both the AfD and Die Linke/BSW had regional strongholds.[103] The rejection of weapons aid for Ukraine by these anti-*Zeitenwende* parties was justified primarily via a temporal security narrative that emphasised Germany's historic guilt for the devastation and loss of life suffered by the Soviet Union in the Second World War, which according to them morally ruled out any German support for the use of force against today's Russia. This anti-*Zeitenwende* narrative not only equated the Soviet Union with Russia, ignoring the Nazi occupation of Ukrainian territory in the Second World War – where Ukraine had suffered disproportionally greater losses of life and physical destruction than the Russian Soviet Republic – but it negated the national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political freedom of Ukraine as liberal and democratic values worth fighting for with military means in the present. As such, any systemic change to German foreign and security policy in response to the Russo-Ukrainian war was rejected as an unnecessary and dangerous aberration in German post-war history and identity, while projections of further Russian aggression and territorial expansionism were decried as unwarranted fearmongering. The ontological disruption of the Russo-Ukrainian War to German identity therefore also manifested in a fracturing of temporal security narratives among detractors and supporters of the *Zeitenwende* shift, where opposing timelines were competing for political and societal legitimacy about the 'lessons of history', future threats, and the validity of both for informing policy outcomes in the present.

Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian War constituted a profound rupture in German ontological security, undermining long-standing assumptions about the efficacy of multilateral diplomacy, the pacifying potential of economic interdependence, the limited relevance of military force, and the presumed structural stability of the European security order. Specifically, it marked a decisive break with hitherto-hegemonic temporal security narratives of the post-war and post–Cold War era – such as the 'peace dividend', *Ostpolitik*, and *Wandel durch Handel* – that had ontologically anchored Germany's self-perception as a civilian power within a predictable and stable European order. In response to this ontological shock, the *Zeitenwende* narrative emerged as an attempt at reordering and retiming Germany's national identity within a rapidly shifting geopolitical context. For Germany, this has meant a gradual but unresolved attempt to reconfigure national identity and military power in terms that move beyond the historical Other of Nazism, while confronting a contemporary Other in the form of Russian neo-imperialism. *Zeitenwende* thus represents an unfinished and contested temporal reordering – one that reveals how the politics of ontological security are fundamentally entangled with shifting and contested narratives of time.

[102] Jana Puglierin and Angela Mehrer, 'War, peace, and populism: How Germany's extremist parties are shaping its foreign policy debate', ECFR (10 September 2024), available at: {https://ecfr.eu/article/war-peace-and-populism-how-germanys-extremist-parties-are-shaping-its-foreign-policy-debate/}.

[103] In state elections in September 2024, the anti-*Zeitenwende* parties AfD and BSW scored impressive results. The AfD won came in first in Thuringia with 32.8% of the vote share and in second place behind the CDU in Saxony with 30.6%. The BSW came in third in both states with 15.8% (Thuringia) and 11.8% (Saxony) respectively; see Deutsche Welle, 'Germany: Thuringia and Saxony elections propel far-right AfD', DW (2 September 2024), available at: {https://www.dw.com/en/germany-thuringia-and-saxony-elections-propel-far-right-afd/a-70106147}.

As this article has demonstrated, ontological security is maintained not only through sustaining historical continuity and collective memory, but also through the capacity of states to retime national identity and security in response to external shocks and geopolitical transformations. When existing temporal security narratives become untenable, the result is a condition of ontological insecurity that necessitates narrative innovation and retiming. Yet, as the German case illustrates, these narrative projects are never uncontested. Competing actors mobilise alternate temporalities – whether nostalgic, revisionist, or populist – to challenge new security narratives and propose alternative futures and imaginary pasts. The fractures in German society over the ontological shock of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the narrative disruption of *Zeitenwende* are not merely about policy, but about time and identity itself: how history is remembered, how the present is framed, and which future actions are deemed legitimate and necessary.

Germany's *Zeitenwende* thus reveals the temporal dynamics of narrative ruptures and adjustment at the intersection of collective memory, national security, and identity politics. Existing work on OSS tends to emphasise historical continuity and biographical integrity as key to maintaining state identity. Our intervention shows how discontinuities – in time, narrative, and memory – can also become productive sites of ontological realignment. When the coherence of the post–Cold War German self – as a civilian power – was rendered untenable, it was not simply abandoned but retimed, meaning the narrative link of ontological security and temporality was reinterpreted through a new narrative structure that positioned assertive security policy as consistent with, rather than a break from, the lessons of the past.

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