Between 1945 and 1955, no German arms industry existed. The allies had forbidden arms production by law after World War II, and German politicians had no objections. Indeed, when the German constitution (Grundgesetz) was negotiated in 1948/49, representatives of the political parties present were united in the view that Germany would probably never again produce heavy weaponry. In 1972, however, German industry supplied the majority of arms for a military of almost 500,000 and had started an export drive that would make Germany one of the major global suppliers of arms.

What drove this remarkable growth in capacity and technical capability? Creswell and Kollmer identify three possible explanations, building on three ‘grand theories” of international relations: neorealism with its emphasis on the perception of a need to survive in a hostile world; liberalism with its focus on economic motives for political action; and constructivism which emphasizes ideas.

Creswell and Kollmer provide a detailed and thorough analysis of decisions both on weapon procurements – timing, source, type of weapons – as well as on arms-industrial issues – location, technology investments, competition policies. The analysis neatly summarizes earlier research including that of the two authors. This is useful, but the main contribution of the text is its use of the three grand theories in explaining phases and shifts in German armaments policy.

With neorealism we would expect the rise of German arms production to occur in a close alliance, particularly with the United States as the main power pole of the West (57-58). And indeed, the authors demonstrate the influence of NATO and the U.S. at various
points of their narrative, shaping a more or less U.S.-oriented approach in arms procurement.

The aspect of German aspirations for nuclear weapons, which is treated briefly in the text under review\(^1\), is particularly interesting. These were present early on but attained a major push in 1956/7 with discussions in the U.S. on reducing the number of U.S. troops in Europe (the ‘Radcliffe-Plan’) and the announcement of MC 14/2, NATO’s doctrine of ‘massive retaliation’. This put more emphasis on nuclear weapons, so the question arose as to why West Germany, which was generally perceived to be in the center of any major conflict, should forego these weapons. The most important proponent of this view was Franz Josef Strauss, West German Defense Minister from 1956 to 1962 (77-78). But there was much domestic opposition and the U.S. also objected. This did not, however, satisfy proponents like Strauss. It took a shift in government, excluding Strauss’s party, before Germany officially renounced nuclear weapons by ratifying the Nonproliferation Treaty in 1969.

German-U.S. relations were also conflictual in conventional weapons procurement. U.S. companies wanted to sell and the U.S. government sometimes exerted political and economic pressure on Germany to buy U.S. products. The 1960s were a period of particularly strong tension, when the U.S. demanded compensation for stationing troops in Germany through German arms imports (84). Germany also was not always happy with shifts in NATO and U.S. defense policy, which Germany had to implement despite earlier investments into other priorities [84-85].

Liberal international relations theory interprets West Germany’s armaments strategy primarily in the light of domestic economic imperatives (58). And indeed, Creswell and Kollmer find economic interests driving procurement decisions after the initial phase of German rearmament. They argue that during the first years of rearmament both the government and industry had other, civilian priorities. German civilian industry became so successful that arms imports were a useful tool to reduce Germany’s export surplus – something its allies, particularly France, were quite keen on (72-73). Correspondingly, the first set of weapons for the German Bundeswehr therefore predominantly came from allies, resulting in quite an international mix of old and new (66). While the authors’ arguments are generally convincing on this early phase of German rearmament, they underplay the importance of continuity. True, German engineers and arms companies could not continue in Germany. But when it became possible again, German experts returned and companies took up production. The list of the names of major arms producers in the late 1950s looks rather similar to the one twenty years earlier.\(^2\)


\(^2\) On broader lines of continuity see Michael Geyer, Deutsche Rüstungspolitik 1860-1980 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984). Interesting information on links with a number of countries serving as preservers of
to procure and produce domestically existed early on, even though this was limited to particular companies and focused on some sectors, such as small arms and tanks.

Again, Defense Minister Strauss was crucial in directing more procurement towards production in Germany, and particularly towards aircraft production in Bavaria. Creswell and Kollmer convincingly write that his main motivation was “that Germany could achieve equality within the Atlantic alliance and so that Bavaria’s aerospace industry would prosper” (78). Neither goal was quickly achieved, but a lot of money was spent, particularly in Bavaria. German industry had to learn to be able to compete. Industry in Bavaria was lagging behind even further, requiring additional amounts of investment. In the long-run, however, state industrial policy worked – Bavaria turned from an economically backward to a leading industrial state. In addition to what Creswell and Kollmer argue, this success was also based on a particular approach to arms production which emphasized ‘dual-use’ technologies which could be used for civilian as well as military good. Strauss promoted not only arms production but also civilian aircraft production; civilian nuclear industry as well as nuclear weapons.3

The economic importance grew with the size of the German arms industry. The argument that German taxpayers’ money should be spend in Germany gained in importance. Slower growth in the civilian economy, culminating in an economic recession in 1967, provided further support for it. Within a Keynesian policy to counter the economic crisis, directing more spending towards the domestic industry made sense (88).

Constructivism is used in this text to catch memories of Germany’s past. Germany had to be careful to give no indication that it would want to become an independent power again, particularly towards its European neighbors. On this premise, armaments policies had to favor a (West-)European approach, buying from European NATO-partners and collaborating with them in production, with the goal of creating a (West-)European arms industry (59). The authors again successfully demonstrate the changing importance of such considerations in interplay with security and economic issues.


Initial procurement for the Bundeswehr was in line with the idea of Europeanization – arms predominantly came from European countries. Also, a number of joint ventures were set up with producers in other European countries. However, increasingly West German industry chose to cooperate only when forced to do so, not as a preference. This became more pronounced after a number of planned projects, such as that of a European major battle tank, fell through. These projects were left to the ministry by Strauss, who had supported a close link with France, at least partly, “to help Bavarian industry” (85). The interests of industry and those responsible for government policy in this area changed again, however, with the growing maturity of German arms production. The authors end their historical study with analyzing the major expansion of industry into exports, which began in the late 1960s. Encouraged by growing global arms markets, fueled by oil incomes in the Middle East and elsewhere, companies and the government saw new markets. Selling German guns and tanks all over the world, however, had the danger of damaging West Germany’s still shaky reputation as a peaceful state. It became useful, therefore, to join with partners in Europe and shift export decisions to their governments. The authors give a brief but useful account of the early controversies over the expansion of German arms exports (98-99) and point to additional literature.

In the end, the authors convincingly show the usefulness of the three interpretative lenses. They provide a helpful analytical framework to explain the vicissitudes of arms procurement and arms production in West Germany. There are no major disagreements in their analysis with earlier research focusing more on industrial and technological issues. They also conclude that while ideas and external security concerns did play a role, economic concerns won out (103). Compared with these texts, the one under review provides a wider scope, adding in particular the importance of relations between West Germany and its allies. With their theoretical framework, Creswell and Kollmer succeed in a novel and creative presentation of what has been written about German armaments policy in earlier works.

Michael Brzoska is Professor of Political Science and director of the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Germany. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on German arms export policy between 1969 and 1982 and has since the early 1980s published widely on issues related to German and European arms production and procurement.

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4 In addition to literature mentioned in note 2, see for instance Bontrup, Heinz-Josef, and Norbert Zdrowomyslaw, Die deutsche Rüstungsindustrie vom Kaiserreich bis zur Bundesrepublik: ein Handbuch (Distel-Verlag, 1988); Peter Schlotter, Rüstungspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: die Beispiele Starfighter und Phantom (Campus Verlag, 1975).
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