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## Schlagfertigkeit. A soldier skill

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### ABSTRACT

Are soldiers funny? On the face of it, fun is antithetical to the serious trade of the military profession, models of the decent and responsible soldier, and the strains of military life. However, military scholars acknowledge that humour forms an integral part of soldier culture. Still, these works largely highlight the psychological and social functions that humour serves in other social contexts as well. Instead, the paper examines the cultural peculiarities of soldier humour. The argument is that the German notion *Schlagfertigkeit* captures the humour style that prevails in the military because it encapsulates several soldierly virtues. Through exploring the semantics and performance of *Schlagfertigkeit* the article thus demonstrates how humour practices produce the soldier subject.

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## Humour and military life

Are soldiers funny? On the face of it, fun is antithetical to the serious trade of the military profession: building, managing, and applying organized violence on behalf of the state (Tomforde and Eyal 2021, 2). Accordingly, official models and public representations depict the soldier as a responsible, virtuous, and emotionless figure (Shim and Stengel 2017, 338–41). In contradiction with this image, several military scholars acknowledge that humour forms an integral part of military culture (Ben-Ari and Sion 2005; Godfrey 2016; Hockey 2006 (1986), 56–57, 72, 172–175 (Sløk-Andersen 2019).;

Military culture is an orientation system that shapes the sociocultural practices within the armed forces consciously and unconsciously since soldiers incorporate it in the course of their military socialization (Vom Hagen and Maren 2012, 287–289, 291). It consists of norms, values, and virtues, formal and informal military strategies and tactics as well as techniques for body control and the handling of weapons and machines. Military culture is stabilized by being passed on from soldiers to soldiers in basic training, courses and everyday soldier life but also adapts to changed conditions of the institution, the social environment, and to new technologies or soldier practices. The characteristics of military culture are its hierarchical organization, the strong esprit de corps and the readiness to both apply and experience violence (299–303).

Apart from these distinct features, the military shares with other organizations, professions, and social milieus that it breeds its own humour culture. Part of humour

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culture is the joking repertoire that groups build up through the recurring use of jocular themes (Fine and de Soucey 2005). Joking is interactive and referential: it depends on the involvement of an audience and is only successful if a shared interpretative system enables the audience to decode the ambiguous or figurative meaning of a jocular remark. Moreover, joking fulfils key regulatory and constitutive functions: Groups negotiate proper behaviour through the reactions to humorous attempts. Jokers who violate group expectations are reprimanded by the absence of laughter and amusement. Joking thus increases social cohesion as it entails either recognition as group member or exclusion as an outsider ignorant of the group's humour tradition and moral boundaries.

However, humour goes beyond joking and encompasses verbal and nonverbal communications which cause positive cognitive or affective responses (Romero and Cruthirds 2006, 59). The military humour culture is thus not limited to speech acts but includes also other practices which soldiers deem funny, such as caricatures, pranks, tests of courage or rites de passage.

In line with the theory of 'joking culture' (Fine and de Soucey 2005), humour has several productive effects in military institutions<sup>1</sup>: First, humour functions as a 'controlled form of resistance' which articulates anger and frustration about the hardship and constraints of military life in a way that does not destabilize the institution or undermine military performance (Godfrey 2016, 164, 170–171). Second, humour strengthens group cohesion through creating 'a shared universe of meaning' and through drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Ben-Ari and Sion 2005, 669) (Godfrey 2016, 164, 172–175; Nilsson 2018). Third, humour serves as a means for formal and informal disciplining and a test ground for negotiating power relations between subordinates and superiors (Godfrey 2016, 164, 175–177; Hockey 2006 (1986), 56–57). On the individual level, the possibilities of expression and communication that the humorous mode offers are considered as a coping mechanism and stress relief for everyday life in a total institution and in situations of acute danger (Bjerke and Rones 2017, 1) (Tomforde 2016, 7; 2018, 204, 209). The advantage of humour for dealing with unpleasant conditions echoes the so-called relief theory that the Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain already proposed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Billig 2005, 97). However, this article takes a perspective on humour that transcends the described psychological and social functions that military institutions and their leaders intentionally or unintentionally capitalize on. Instead, it treats humour as a 'conceptual and methodological tool for gaining insights into cultural systems' (Apte 1985, 16–17). Following this logic, the article examines the cultural peculiarities of soldier humour to arrive at insights about the 'mechanisms in the becoming [of] good soldiers' (Sløk-Andersen 2019, 31). It argues that the special humour skill called *Schlagfertigkeit* is cultivated in the military because it contains several soldierly virtues and hence playfully supports military socialization. The first section specifies the humour style of soldiers with reference to the semantics of *Schlagfertigkeit* and emphasis on its gendered nature. The following section shows that the German armed forces (Bundeswehr) appreciate the military humour culture and that soldiers consider *Schlagfertigkeit* as a special asset. The main part of the article will then fan out the soldier qualities that *Schlagfertigkeit* combines: being able to fight, being able to take it, being a loyal comrade and being male. The

conclusion suggests that humour provides a possibility to live with incongruity and juggle the contrasting requirements that proper soldiers are supposed to meet.

### The peculiarity of soldier humour

A typology of humour styles classifies humorous acts according to target – self or others – and effect (Romero and Cruthirds 2006, 59–60). On the one hand, self-enhancing humour increases resilience in face of difficult conditions, whereas self-defeating humour promotes group integration by appearing more personable and approachable. On the other hand, when humour targets others, it can smooth interaction, communicate norms and hierarchies, or manipulate and threaten depending on the degree of affection or aggression in tone.

Regarding the humour style of soldiers, British servicemen during the First World War depicted their front-line life in comic dialogues, songs and cartoons that appeared in the troops' public communications as funny and absurd (Madigan 2013). By practising a sarcastic, self-deprecating humour style, soldiers expressed an understanding of heroism that reflected the philosophy of 'sticking it' instead of the public's conception of martial heroism that envisioned soldiers as fearlessly enjoying battle and being willing to die. The soldiers' alternative model of heroism established 'a basic standard of soldierly conduct' that emphasized the power of endurance despite fear in face of the terror of enemy artillery fire (Madigan 2013, 94).

When it comes to present-day British soldiers, ethnographic fieldwork (Basham 2013, 117–19) as well as the analysis of soldier obituaries (Tidy 2021) has equally discerned a particular sense of 'service humour'. This humour style does not neatly match the mentioned humour categories because it requires the capacity to 'give as good as you get' (Tidy 2021, 139). Soldier humour is a social play in which all players can attack – making fun of comrades – and get attacked – becoming the butt of the joke. Moreover, these practices of teasing and testing each other range across the spectrum of affectionate to aggressive tone and are – depending on that – either called banter or hazing. Whereas banter is considered conducive to – especially male – bonding, hazing is dismissed as transgressive conduct that puts the institution's reputation at risk (141–42).

According to national stereotypes, Germans lack any sense of humour (McPherson 2022). In contrast to this expectation, German soldiers in fact use humour to ease tense situations and humour is an integral mechanism for constituting a shared frame of interpretation (Tomforde 2015, 215, 224–225; 2016, 2, 7; 2018, 204, 209). More than that, current and former members of the Bundeswehr described the same humour skill that pervades British soldier life during research that the author carried out in 2022. The research entailed in-depth interviews and group discussions with thirty-five current or former soldiers and observations at social events of veteran associations, during visits at Bundeswehr facilities and at the Bundeswehr Day 2022 in Warendorf. German soldiers captured the special humour skill to succeed in soldier life with the notion '*Schlagfertigkeit*'. Therefore, the article focuses on the notion *Schlagfertigkeit*/being *schlagfertig* to illuminate how humour practices produce the soldier subject.

*Schlagfertigkeit* mirrors the Aristotelean virtue *eutrapelia* (εὐτραπεία) and translates into quick-wittedness, or quickness of repartee (Hettiger 2007, 486). The idiosyncrasy of the German word for this skill is that it originally denoted the fighting capacity of

a soldier or army. *Schlagfertigkeit* consists of ‘Fertigkeit’ which means skill and ‘Schlag’ which means strike or punch. In addition to its original meaning, it has acquired the figurative sense of a ‘verbal preparedness and performative capability’ (487). This article will show that being *schlagfertig* in its extended meaning constitutes a soldier skill as well. It claims that this special humour skill is not an additional asset to ‘those attributes that more typically spring to mind when one thinks of military models of masculinity – fitness, bravery, tenacity and so on’ (Tidy 2021, 144). Rather, *Schlagfertigkeit* is valued within the military because it encapsulates these very soldierly virtues and its exercise is hence conducive to military socialization.

As strategy of the *ars rhetorica*, *Schlagfertigkeit* refers to the ability to perform speech acts (seemingly) spontaneously that are brief, pointed, and situation-specific (Hettiger 2007, 486). The speaker employs a *schlagfertige* utterance to compete with a counterpart or to gain the applause of an audience. *Schlagfertige* utterances derive their effect from countering expectations and taking the rhetorical opponent by surprise. Moreover, acting *schlagfertig* requires the capacity *ex tempore dicendi*; that is to speak according to the circumstances. The speaker demonstrates knowledge of the issue at hand and the social context by exaggerating or even breaking common conventions.

There are different opinions regarding the question whether *Schlagfertigkeit* is an innate talent or a skill that can be learnt (Hettiger 2007, 487). In any case, it is a capacity that benefits from thorough preparation and training and can only be performed in situ if the speaker has well thought through the topic (487, 490).

*Schlagfertigkeit* in a military setting thus requires that the joker is or is becoming familiar with military culture and prepared to reproduce or redefine it in verbal duels. ‘Verbal duelling’ is the ritualized pattern of humorous attacks that is predominantly practised by men and boys (Kotthoff 2022, 65–66). In male groups like sports teams this competitive humour style is openly acted out and considered as a catalyst for cohesion and good performance. In contrast, women refrain from verbal duelling in public to avoid social punishment for violating gender expectations even if they practice similar forms of teasing among themselves (Evans 2023, 2).

Regarding the entrenchment of gender roles, the military has been a bastion of masculinity since the establishment of professional armies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dittmer 2009, 55–56). Like other bureaucratic organizations, the military was defined as an asexual, male-only institution that derives its self-understanding in juxtaposition with feminine qualities and social tasks (174). The outcome of this institutional conception in conjunction with wider social processes and assumptions about gender and war is the privileged status of military masculinities (Basham 2013, 103). Military masculinities are multiple, dynamic, and contradictory as they reflect formal and informal status hierarchies, interact with other facets of identity, and are shaped by national political cultures and military traditions (Duncanson 2020). Despite this variation, there is a hegemonic model of military masculinity that emphasizes the warrior qualities of courage, steadfastness and self-sacrifice (Vom Hagen and Maren 2012, 295, 307). From the structure of military organizations and the nature of military tasks derive secondary soldierly virtues including discipline and obedience, rigour and authority, cohesion and loyalty. However, the German armed forces seem to deviate from the hegemonic model. The long-standing promotion of an antimilitarist culture in German society and the soldier model of the ‘citizen in uniform’

created a reluctant version of military masculinity (Johais 2024; Stengel and Shim 2022). At least in public representations, the Bundeswehr avoids the ‘peculiar masculine eroticism of technology’ (Hacker 1989, 46, cited in (Sasson-Levy 2008, 312)) and refrains from invoking the capacity to kill as a proof of masculinity (Stengel and Shim 2022, 618, 620–621). Even if the warrior is not the hegemonic model, the German military values humorous skills in general and German soldiers appreciated the value of *Schlagfertigkeit* as the following section will demonstrate. And this special humour skill is a gendered practice for the two reasons just described: gender stereotypes about humour skills and the prevalent conception of war-making and life-taking as male competence (Evans 2023; Basham 2013, 86–87).

### The value of humour skills in the military

Humour contributes to healthy social relations in the workplace (Romero and Cruthirds 2006). Adequate humour styles boost creativity and reduce stress, improve communication and collaboration among staff members, and foster a unique organizational culture. In line with this management theory, superiors in the Bundeswehr appreciate humour as ‘character trait and competence’ (Interview, 17 October 2022). The appreciation of humour skills goes so far that it is mentioned in official assessments. Furthermore, superiors encourage certain humour practices deliberately and tolerate others tacitly even if they are not officially permitted. For instance, soldiers were – the interlocutor referred to an earlier era – allowed to use their paid office hours for organizing fun events like informal rituals or Christmas parties (Interview, 17 October 2022).

Another self-declared joker recounted that a commander drew on his humour skills in a critical situation (Interview, 8 July 2022). In 2012, increasing tensions between Albanians and Serbs surrounded the elections in the Republic of Serbia. Therefore, NATO decided to enhance its presence in Northern Kosovo and the Bundeswehr added soldiers to its contingent. In fact, the joker’s company had just returned from its mission but was now ordered to redeploy to Kosovo after only three weeks at home. Troop morale was at rock bottom when the marching orders were given at a general lineup. Afterwards, the commander asked my interlocutor to come to his office. His comrades placed bets on the reason for being summoned: was he about to be reprimanded, punished, or promoted? It turned out that they all missed the point: The commander called him in because he had recognized that the soldier was ‘responsible for the company’s morale’ because he guaranteed that ‘we had always fun and never hung our heads’. At an earlier occasion, the joker had himself claimed this responsibility towards the commander and made him laugh: ‘You know what? In fact, I am not with this company to serve my duty but because I am the funniest. The federal government has charged me with raising the troop’s morale’.

Apparently, the commander had registered the soldier’s humour proficiency and now exploited it for his own ends.

Furthermore, the institutional recognition of the value of humour skills shows itself during formal and informal practices of forming soldier subjects. Sløk-Andersen observed during her fieldwork among Danish soldiers that humour was developed and trained like other professional skills:

Humour was so essential to the everyday life that we even had one week where the company commander, called ‘Boss’, decided that the focus for the entire company should be on creating ‘a good mood and attitude’ which resulted in daily competitions of who could tell the best joke. (Sløk-Andersen 2019, 31)

Equally, a German soldier recounted how he was once tasked – he said ‘forced’ – to tell a joke (Interview, 20 October 2022). This happened to him two weeks after he had returned to military flight training that had been interrupted by a period of studies. About twenty soldiers sat together for the debriefing of a night flight exercise, having a beer. Suddenly, his new superior requested: ‘As the newcomer who just passed his first night flight you have to tell us a joke!’

The butt of the joke he shared was the catholic church and the alleged homosexual and paedophile inclinations of catholic priests. He emphasized that he thereby took a high risk because his boss was a strict Catholic. Overall, it became clear that he experienced the moment as a very delicate situation facing not only new comrades but, more importantly, his superior, a commander and other people who were supposed to assess his soldier performance later on. Luckily, he passed the test and proved his humour skill: After a moment of silence, everybody burst into laughter. And he added en passant: ‘My next evaluation also turned out very well’.

The purposeful use and encouragement of humour that these examples illustrate still not distinguish the military from other organizations that intend to improve working atmosphere and employee performance. Instead, it is the special humour skill *Schlagfertigkeit* that characterizes military culture. Understanding *Schlagfertigkeit* as a cultural element means to explain its prevalence not only with the psychological and social functions of humour like stress relief or cohesion. *Schlagfertigkeit* is the military humour skill par excellence because it embodies several soldierly virtues and its practice therefore contributes to military socialization. In support of this, several soldiers explicitly highlighted the capacity to react *schlagfertig* and that this skill is acquired through professional experience (Interview, 22.07.22). One among them described his own humour skill in accordance with the definition of *Schlagfertigkeit* (Interview, 18.10.22):

I am a very humorous person. I am very spontaneous. Sometimes I tend toward exaggerations. I also think – secretly – that I am a little intelligent. And this has to do with the type of humour. I am very *schlagfertig*.

On his understanding of being *schlagfertig*, he explained: ‘*Schlagfertigkeit* comes from “schlagen” [to beat]. Being spontaneous and quick at thinking. You react so quickly that you take the other one by surprise’.

He valued this capacity as a secondary virtue during his professional career. Remembering a former peer soldier, he points out that his *Schlagfertigkeit* offered him a comparative advantage:

We had the same rank and were always in competition. And he was really strong in terms of his professional competence. But I was *schlagfertig*. And he was not. You can exploit that – which I did every now and then. Because he was stupid – not stupid in the sense of a low IQ but in handling situations. He always wanted to prove that he is better.

But he was not. And he presented points of attack time and again. And then you throw out a [joke], of course.

Thus, he benefitted from his humour skill in the competition with a soldier who equalled him in rank and other soldier skills.

### **The soldier subject**

The soldier accounts attest the value of being *schlagfertig* as professional skill. The argument is that the appreciation derives from the fact that *Schlagfertigkeit* is more than a complementary asset. It is a constitutive element of soldier humour culture as it entails several traits that constitute the proper soldier subject. In doing so, *Schlagfertigkeit* is examined as a social practice that is not limited to a rhetorical skill that wins verbal duels but encompasses the capacity to master other humorous attacks, and challenges as well. With this focus on practice, the study sheds light on the role of humour for military socialization: Humour practices produce soldier subjects by imitating soldiering in a playful mode. The following section uncovers what kind of soldier subject it is that the skill of being *schlagfertig* cultivates.

### **Being able to fight**

The hegemonic model of military masculinity glorifies attributes which indicate that soldiers are prepared to fight. Soldiers are *schlagfertig* - literally prepared to fight - when they are sufficiently courageous and aggressive to attack, battle and defeat adversaries. Being *schlagfertig* is thus a key asset in informal competitions in which soldiers playfully imitate fighting and nurture their fighting spirit. Informal competitions might certainly consist of verbal duelling that aim at excelling each other with ever sharper, more absurd, obscene, or extreme punchlines. Yet, soldiers also try to surpass their comrades in very physical competitions like playing pranks and mastering tests of courage that are funny and often painful or disgusting at once.

All these attributes apply to the activities of the informal fun group that formed as a sub-group of about twenty people within a platoon (Interview, 8 July 2022). The group's common cause was to regularly test others' courage. Participation in the group was voluntary and involved only those who enjoyed mastering or watching the challenges. The incentive for performing a delicate task was raised through the prospect of an amount of money. The money pot was donated by the group members and its volume reflected the game level. Over time, the challenges became more and more extreme, and the money pot grew accordingly. The group activities started with easy tasks like drinking two litres of beer in one go or eating half a kilo of ground pork which only brought a few euros. Letting your testicles hit with a shovel handle was a mid-level challenge worth about fifty euros. The biggest pot ever amounted to 2500 euros and was offered for hoisting a German flag on the miniature Eiffel tower in front of a French troop's camp entrance.

My interlocutor explained the motivation to join in the group activities by what you gained apart from the money:



Some of the things were disgusting. But I am not ashamed of it. The recognition you gained for doing that was like receiving a crone. You became a legend.

The prize that the group members strove for when accepting the challenges were thus not five, fifty, or hundred euros but the reputation as a fearless and tough fellow.

Another example of how soldiers playfully train *Schlagfertigkeit* happened during a mission abroad where the German troops lived in a camp under French command (Interview, 8 July 2022). Although the Élysée Treaty sealed the Franco-German cooperation sixty years ago, concepts of the enemy apparently have a long life within the armed forces. The German soldiers received several signals that they interpreted as animosity of the French supposedly NATO allies: German soldiers had to be content with a single croissant for breakfast, whereas soldiers from other nations could get as many as they wanted. Their clothes were washed too hot, or items disappeared in the laundry. In addition to the banal inconveniences, some of the acts perceived as discriminating were unmistakably relics from the past such as performing the Hitler salute or suggesting the so-called Hitler beard by putting two fingers above the upper lip.

But the Germans proved their *Schlagfertigkeit* and stroke back with the means of humour. Namely, they invented sayings or modified common jokes to make fun of their French adversaries. And the ridicule was not just meant for own amusement. To make sure that the jokes hit their target, they were translated into French or English and written down at places frequented by all troops like toilets, watchtowers, and the dining hall. The other side retaliated with jokes translated into German which further incited the soldiers' ambition: 'We got really creative because we had the incentive to top what we read'. Hence, a veritable joke battle ensued, reminiscent of old antagonisms.

The joking battle in the military camp and the fun group competitions incited the fighting spirit of the participants in the course of a longer-term group dynamic process. But soldiers must also prove their *Schlagfertigkeit* in playful tests of courage that come up unexpectedly. A soldier faced such a situational challenge during a deployment abroad (Interview, 18 October 2022). When the unit he commanded crossed the marketplace in an Afghan city – consisting of a few containers riddled with bullet holes used as stores – a comrade provoked him with a 'funny proposal': 'There's a barber over there. Why don't you get your beard cut?' The commanding soldier did not feel comfortable at all:

That is a borderline experience: getting shaved by a scowling talib with a razor while the others are standing behind shotgun in hand. Console yourself, if he does a wrong move, he'll get shot as well. That was a test of courage. Everyone thought it was very funny – except for me. But I played along.

The situations and practices that interlocutors found funny reveal the first facet of *Schlagfertigkeit*. The soldiers involved demonstrate their courage: They are willing to take risk, go beyond their personal limits, and develop fighting spirit from competition with peers or aggression against adversaries.

### ***Being able to take it***

The capacity to fight is the quality that represents the soldier as a warrior. Indeed, the number of German soldiers with operational experience has increased since the end of the Cold War. However, the proportion of soldiers with combat experience is much

lower and what type of violence soldiers applied, witnessed, or suffered from depended on troop type, tasks, and situation in the operation context (Seiffert 2012, 82–87). Even during a high-risk phase of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan, only about one quarter was actively involved in battles against insurgents and a half experienced enemy fire (82–87). In contrast, every single soldier must submit him/herself to the hierarchy of the rank system, the discipline of military conduct and ultimately to the authority of the state s/he serves. Status in the military is thus not characterized by being ruthless and dominant as may first spring to mind but ‘for being compliant, skilled, and pro-actively obedient’ (Crane-Seeber 2016, 9). Accordingly, military socialization is successful when it turns recruits into proud soldiers who derive a masochistic pleasure from the surrender to state authority.

*Schlagfertigkeit* embodies these complementary soldierly virtues: the capacity to fight as well as the capacity to take it. A soldier captured this complementarity with the reciprocity principle ‘do ut des’ (Interview, 18 October 2022): ‘You must be able to bear yourself what you do to others’.

This formula is more than an empty phrase as the present that an instructor received at the end of a basic training course illustrates (Interview, 20 October 2022). ‘Thanking’ instructors with presents is a common custom as I learned throughout conversations and from glimpses of office shelves and walls. These presents often allow for insightful conclusions on how recruits perceive their superiors. For an outsider, this particular gift looked not very flattering: The recruits had handcrafted a grotesque sculpture that depicted the instructor in the pose of taking a soldier from behind beating him with a whip. There was no mistake about whom the figure represented because the instructor was hit very well, and the recruits designated their piece of work with his name and rank badge. Obviously, a notorious instructor here got his just deserts for an extremely hard training method. While the present alluded to the model of a violent and dominating military masculinity, only the instructor’s reaction fully revealed his soldierly virtues: ‘He could live with being made an idiot. He had the taker qualities to bear the payback’. The instructor thus displayed both the sadistic and masochistic ‘pleasures’ of proper soldiers in exemplary manner (Crane-Seeber 2016).

A humour practice that likewise exemplifies both the capacity to strike and to take it is the prevalent usage of nicknames. Nicknames allot social positions and roles and can become as appropriate as a given name (Fine and de Soucey 2005, 7). In the Bundeswehr, nicknames are so widely used and accepted that soldiers sometimes did not even know the real names of comrades. In addition to their role in ‘status talk’ (5), nicknames also serve tactical reasons in the military.<sup>2</sup> While tactical nicknames are assigned pragmatically, the humour practice pertains to nicknames that highlight an individual characteristic, such as external appearance, a habit or extraordinary performance. The definitory game of nicknaming leaves it in principle up to the prospective nickname bearer to accept, challenge, or ignore the new identifier (Fine and de Soucey 2005, 7). But even if nicknames are not favourable, soldiers rarely take the latter options. They neither resist, nor do they just passively tolerate nicknames but rather fully identify with the assigned role.

For instance, one soldier had a comrade who was called ‘Schnulli’ (Interview, 6 April 2022). ‘Schnulli’ is a belittling of ‘Schnuller’, the German word for soother. The comrade got the nickname because ‘he was a young boy and also looked like 15’. It can be

assumed that the soldier was all but proud of his juvenile appearance. But nonetheless he himself ordered and wore a patch with the nickname he had been given.

Another interlocutor described how he performed the role of ‘Mr. Disinfection’ during his first deployment to Afghanistan (Interview, 5 April 2022). The background for this nickname was that soldiers had been instructed about hygiene measures to prevent gastro-intestinal infections in preparation courses for the mission. Apparently, he took the instruction very seriously and used the disinfectant excessively.

They teased me, of course. Because I bathed in the disinfectant officially provided whenever I could grab it. And if it was necessary ten times, I disinfected my hands twenty times for sure. ‘Ah, there’s Mr. Disinfection coming!’ And of course, I acted it out – this ‘Mr. Disinfection’. Everybody is already waiting for it. ‘Look, I am doing my hands again!’ *\*he claps his hands and rubs them ostentatiously against each other\** ‘And in fact, I can pour that all over my body as well!’ *\*imitates pouring something out over his head\** ‘You want it, right? You get it!’ When they are all amused by it, then I certainly play this role.

A further indication of the importance of nicknames was an interlocutor who adopted a nickname that he initially outrightly rejected (Interview, 18 October 2022). Someone ‘dared’ to abbreviate his first name in the way a German pop singer used to be called as well. And he did not want to be associated with this public figure at all. Therefore, he refused by saying ‘Dude, I can’t stand that’. But his objection was in vain: he has been *only* called by the nickname since that day. Even more remarkable, he uses an icon himself that symbolizes the nickname as a signature in pers. comm.

Apart from taking ownership of nicknames, I often sensed regret and disappointment when soldiers answered the question on whether they had received a nickname in the negative. An interpretation of the strong identification with – even unfavourable – nicknames is that receiving a personalizing nickname equals an act of recognition by peers. The soldier who was called ‘Mr. Disinfection’ supported this interpretation when he elucidated what it means when soldiers receive nicknames (Interview, 5 April 2022):

Who sees soldiers, sees a grey mass – when not an expert. The soldier has a different view. He perceives the smallest differences, the smallest individual liberties. And the soldier likes to exaggerate. Since soldiers know each other so well, he also naturally pinpoints any quirk. One always prays before driving off for patrol. One checks 15 times whether his gun is really loaded. Another goes 20 times to the toilet before leaving. And the soldier brings it up. In a way, it is a kind of distinction: *We recognize you that well. You are our Mr. Disinfection. You are this or that. That is a recognition of the personality. In general terms, we are all equal. But no! We are individuals.*

By accepting nicknames, soldiers strive for recognition in a double sense: On the one hand, they seek the described recognition as individual with specific talents, manners, stories. On the other hand, the identification with a peer-given nickname distinguishes the proper soldier who is approved of as a member of the collective. For nicknaming is a social practice that involves both fighting and submissive qualities: The nickname-giver uses the intimate knowledge gained from close living conditions to attack and pinpoint a comrade’s quirk. The nickname-receiver proves the willingness to bear that a trait, habit, or past action is put on show that one would usually try to sweep under the carpet. It is this consistency with soldierly virtues that accounts for the striking prevalence of nicknames in the military.

### ***Being a loyal comrade***

A key social factor for effective military performance is a high level of group cohesion. In situations of acute stress and danger, soldiers must be able to rely on the loyalty of comrades and the joint commitment to the task. Comradeship goes so far that soldiers worry more about the injury or death of comrades than about risks for their own life and limb (Tomforde 2018, 209). The exceptionally strong bonds between soldiers are forged through the fellow suffering of the formal drill training as well as through informal rituals and personal intimacy (King 2006). Hence, the challenges of the informal fun group described above presented not only opportunities to prove courage and fighting spirit. At the same time, the members of the informal fun group strengthened their ‘band of brothers’: They proved their value as *loyal comrades* by mutually exposing themselves in embarrassing postures and through the complicity in transgressing official norms. Additionally, loyalty was sealed by the pledge of secrecy that illegality and shame imposed on the persons involved (Interview, 8 July 2022).

Likewise, the soldier who ‘risked’ his life under the blade of an Afghan barber demonstrated more than his courage (Interview, 18 October 2022). In talking through what motivated him to go against his instincts, he first admitted that he was always triggered to convince someone of the opposite who said: ‘I bet you don’t dare to do that’. But suddenly he realized a second reason: ‘After all, that’s a mega sign of confidence in them!’

With the wet shave on the battered Afghan marketplace, my interlocutor thus passed two tests for soldierly virtues: At first sight, he performed the fearless soldier who faced the blade of a grim, allegedly hostile barber without batting an eyelid. However, he was able to endure the delicate situation because his discomfort was calmed by the presence of his armed comrades. By accepting the funny, but thorny challenge, he therefore also showed the soldierly quality of being a loyal comrade as he signalled to be willing to entrust his life to these comrades.

Even if playful, the training of *Schlagfertigkeit* is – as the examples show – uncomfortable, painful, and stressful. Yet, men are rewarded with the recognition as proper soldiers. For women, this recognition is much more difficult to achieve. The reason is that all attributes of *Schlagfertigkeit* – the capacity to fight, to take it and to be a loyal comrade – are commonly associated with masculinity. By implication, the practice of *Schlagfertigkeit* reinforces gender stereotypes and reproduces the soldier subject as *being male*.

This male identity of the soldier is expressed in the language used to describe the skill of *Schlagfertigkeit* (Interview, 8 July 2022): ‘You proved you had balls. If you cracked a joke and took [the reprimand] as a guy, you got the stamp: This fellow has real balls’.

Likewise illustrative of this conception is that the fun group member characterized the group’s competitive character as typically male (Interview, 8 July 2022):

That’s the bad thing about men. You didn’t come forward by saying: ‘Ah, I know something embarrassing about you’. But the other way around: When you told what you did, someone would come around the corner saying: ‘Oh, that’s easy-peasy. I did this and that’. You bragged about it. You competed.

In face of the hegemonic model of military masculinity, female soldiers across the board shared the feeling that ‘it was never good enough, long enough, strong enough’ (Interviews, 22.07., 26.10. and 7 November 2022). Therefore, women seem to try even harder to show their *Schlagfertigkeit* to assert themselves among their male fellows and get accepted as soldiers. For instance, a male soldier cited an incident with a female comrade called Püppi. Püppi had earned her innocent nickname that belittles the German word for puppet from her very small size. In an approving manner, the male soldier recounted how he once suffered a counterstrike from Püppi when he teased her with a sexual joke (Interview, 18 October 2022): ‘We talked about close combat, and I said: ‘From you, I won’t get laid’. Yet, she immediately put the joke into practice. ‘And bang – I lay on the floor. I don’t know how but it went very quick’.

In a conversation with two female soldiers, one explicitly highlighted the value of being *schlagfertig* when we talked about the special demands for women to be recognized as soldiers (Interview, 22 July 2022). She described it as a way to achieve that ‘comrades finally accepted it’ to react skilfully to the constant testing of the aptitude as soldier:

They would ask: ‘Do you have your period?’ And then you must reply *schlagfertig*. I turned it around and asked as well: ‘No, I don’t have my period. Do you?’ But you have to say it loud so that the others start hooting.

It is difficult to answer in hindsight whether soldiers acquire this skill of repartee through military socialization or because the armed forces attract natural talents. According to the definition of *Schlagfertigkeit*, it strengthens in any case through training and preparation. And the female soldier learnt from the start of her military career that *Schlagfertigkeit* was the adequate reaction to pass the tests of male comrades. She vividly remembered how she discovered the value of this skill for winning the respect of recruits when serving as sergeant at a basic education company. During a nocturnal inspection round, a recruit put her to a special test:

He slept naked and signaled this with his ass peeking out of the blanket. And there I discovered my humour. Namely, I ordered them all to get up. And he: ‘What?’ And I said: ‘I don’t give a fuck how you sleep! But you get up now like everyone else! If you decide to sleep naked you must be aware that this can happen. And now you go fetch a bucket of water and clean over there’. And he doesn’t say ‘no’. I turned it around and he made himself a laughing stock. That’s how they learn it!

‘Do you think he did that on purpose?’, I asked. Her response came outright: ‘Of course! To provoke the sergeant on duty because that was a girl. He hated me for sure. But word got around.

And I signalled to the group: Uhm – no. I stayed calm. Not an ,ugh!’ Not an ,aah!’. No screaming’.

In both stories about her *Schlagfertigkeit*, it was not just important to react quickly and tough on the spot. Moreover, the female soldier instructed me ‘to say it loud’ and make sure that it becomes generally known how well you mastered the soldier aptitude test. Every ‘certificate’ is an investment in the reputation that eventually leads to the acceptance as proper soldier.

Women struggle harder to gain recognition because their mere presence threatens the operating principles of the military. The admission of women to the Bundeswehr had to be imposed by a decision of the European Court in Justice in 2000 because it ruined the

institutional exclusion of sexuality (Dittmer 2009, 41, 174). The presence of women confronts the military institution ‘with that which is, normally’excluded’ (Pin-Fat and Stern 2005, 30). In particular, it is feared that their presence prevents the blossoming of the comradeship that is considered so essential for military performance. On the one hand, this fear is nourished by gender stereotypes that the military reproduces. Namely, the possibility of female comradeship is denied due to ascribed different ways of dealing with conflicts (Dittmer 2009, 195–198): Men tackle conflicts straightforward and solve conflicts through verbal or physical fight. In contrast, women intrigue methodically and covertly to defeat an opponent in a slow and insidious manner. In other words, women are incapable to settle conflicts quickly and openly and thereby protract conflicts unnecessarily. This stereotype leads to the logical conclusion that women ultimately lack the capacity of being loyal comrades. On the other hand, the presence of women disturbs homoerotic rituals that play an important role in male-bonding practices in the military (Basham 2013, 90–91, 107–108). Women – as well as gay men – prevent heterosexual soldiers from fulfilling homoerotic desires because they spoil the ‘innocence’ of acts to express affection for one another which involve nudity and sexuality.

The activities of the informal fun group regularly entailed such practices in which men’s sexual organs and bodily fluids were hit, spread, manipulated (Interview 8 July 2022). Among others, the fun group member talked openly about joint masturbation. By all accounts: that was normal male behaviour. In contrast, the performance with which the only woman in the group impressed her comrades stood out:

That was the most extreme I’ve ever experienced in my life. I really fell away from the faith. We had one woman among us. We were all quite drunk – including the woman. And she had her period. Then we offered her 150 euros if she pulls out her tampon, sucks away at it, and makes herself a cup of tea with the used tampon. And she did it. \*giggling\* She did that! Thereby - she is a legend.

He affirmed that all those present found the action funny and that the woman was not ashamed which he concluded from the fact that she herself told it to the whole world. We do not know how the woman felt about the performance but even if she was embarrassed – that was precisely part of the game. With regard to the value of *Schlagfertigkeit*, the presumed social aspects of her behaviour are, however, more relevant than personal feelings: By spreading the word about her legendary performance, she made sure that her action yielded the possible maximum effect in gaining recognition. What supports the interpretation that the woman was not beaming with pride but establishing her status in the fun group is: The tampon-tea challenge was the first and last time that she proved her courage.

The case of the woman who became a legend in the fun group demonstrates that women can get approved as loyal comrades if they behave *like men* and display full commitment at vulgar, officially prohibited collective practices. At the same time, it reconfirms the difficulty of women’s participation in the armed forces because of ingrained gender stereotypes. From a comparative perspective, imbibing own menstruation blood is not more disgusting than licking sperm from a comrade’s face. Indeed, the bet was similar: Whereas the woman won 150 euros, the soldier who accepted the sperm to be squirted in his face and the one who licked it off received 100 euros each (Interview 8 July 2022). However, the reverberation of the woman’s

performance was different: ‘The woman left a mark on the whole thing. Because you expect so much primitiveness only from men. But she really joined in’. The female soldier thus did not become legendary for ‘the most extreme’ challenge but for violating gender expectations. Her tampon-tea performance virtually ‘rupture[d] “normality”’ (Pin-Fat and Stern 2005, 30). The interlocutor’s expressed fascination about this rupture reflects the male anxiety pleasure in view of the ‘weak and leaky’ female body (Basham 2013, 86–87). As with other gender aspects, uneasiness in dealing with menstruation is not restricted to the military but it is justified in a special way from a military perspective. In this logic, the menstruating body turns into a security risk because the enemy can exploit its humiliating potential when interrogating abducted female soldiers (Interview, 14 June 2022; (78). The tampon-tea performance is thus a self-presentation that is both emancipatory and submissive: By (re)incorporating her menstruation blood, the woman refutes the disgust and shame associated with menstruating and thereby revolts against the unsuitability of the female body for the military profession. With this courageous move, she however also subjects herself to the fun group’s rules of the game and strives for recognition as loyal comrade.

## Conclusion

This article has challenged the assumption that fun and soldiering are incompatible. It thereby contributes to the scholarship that highlights the various psychological and social functions of humour in the military. But in contrast to instrumentalist perspectives, it has explored the peculiarity of soldier humour as a manifestation of soldier models and military culture. In doing so, the notion *Schlagfertigkeit* turned into the object of inquiry and contained the argument at once. *Schlagfertigkeit* captures a humorous skill that entails several soldierly virtues. In the literal sense, the *schlagfertige* soldier is just ready to fight. Yet, this capacity is – along with secondary soldierly virtues – cultivated in the figurative sense of *Schlagfertigkeit*. Fighting with words, and wit or proving oneself in funny competitions and tests of courage imitates soldiering in a mode of play. Following from that, the widespread practice of *Schlagfertigkeit* contributes to military socialization. The proper soldier formed this way is both able to fight and to take it, is a loyal comrade, and actually all of this requires that he is a man.

In view of the masculine soldier model that *Schlagfertigkeit* produces, it is particularly insightful how female soldiers appropriate this skill. The reason is that women by all accounts must still work much harder to gain respect as soldiers by their male fellows. As a case in point, the women who carried out the tea-tampon performance gained recognition as member of the fun group by competing – and winning – in the ‘typically male’ contest. Female soldiers deliberately discover, train, and employ their *Schlagfertigkeit* and their male comrades are surprised at first but appreciate it in the end. It is thus a strategy to challenge gender expectations and insist on women’s suitability to become a proper soldier and succeed in a military career.

The focus on soldier humour highlights once more the complexity of military masculinities. Military masculinities do not only differ according to class, rank, and task but soldier models combine ostensible contradictory features from the start. The proper soldier requires the dominance of the warrior and the submissiveness of the disciplined

subject. Likewise, the model promotes ‘male’ skills like fighting and stamina just as it reevaluates ‘female’ tasks like tidiness and good appearance (Basham 2013, 105; Duncanson 2020). Thus, the incongruity theory provides another clue to understand the significance of soldier humour (Üngör and Amandine Verkerke 2015, 83). Yet, humour does here not fill the gap between ‘what is expected and what is happening’ but bridges the in-built contradiction between soldierly virtues.

## Notes

1. Another function than described in the following section is the use of humorous narrative strategies or humorous stylistic elements in military recruitment campaigns (Beck and Spencer 2020; Stengel and Shim 2022). This cannot be equally considered as expression of soldier culture as the target audience are non-soldiers, respectively not-yet-soldiers.
2. For instance, in the British Army nicknames were used in lieu of ranks in order that the enemy could not identify superiors. Likewise, German soldiers mentioned that they addressed each other with nicknames during missions abroad when they left the camp or in front of locals to protect anonymity.

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