

Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century

Atomic Zeitenwende?

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6 German Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons

Before and After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Michal Onderco

Introduction¹

To say that Germans dislike nuclear weapons would be an understatement. In every single public opinion survey conducted between 2000 and 2021, an overwhelming majority expressed that they want the U.S.-deployed nuclear weapons to be withdrawn from Germany; that they do not want Germany to develop its own nuclear weapons; and that they support the development of international norms to ban nuclear weapons. Such views have, if anything, only become stronger over time.

German public opinion is, as a matter of fact, at odds with German policy. Although never formally acknowledged, Germany hosts American nuclear weapons on its territory and would be—in case of these weapons' use—involved in the nuclear strike mission, as *Luftwaffe* fighter jets would deliver the nuclear weapons (Kristensen and Korda 2022). These nuclear sharing arrangements are seen by German politicians as fundamental to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and its deterrence policies. For instance, the 2020 NATO Reflection Group, co-chaired by the former German Minister of Defense Thomas de Maizière, recalled that “nuclear sharing arrangements play a vital role in the interconnection of the Alliance and should remain one of the main components of security guarantees and the indivisibility of security of the whole Euro-Atlantic area” (de Maizière et al. 2020). The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept officially underlines the importance of this arrangement (NATO 2022). This makes Germany an important player in the alliance's nuclear deterrence setup.

At the same time, however, Germany has been challenged by the “humanitarian turn” in nuclear disarmament (Gibbons 2018). Germany has not participated in the negotiations leading to the conclusion of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Although it did attend the TPNW's first and second Meeting of States Parties as an observer, it was one of the most hawkish contributors to the debate and its contributions showed how far the German position was apart from the rest of the 'TPNW crowd' (Onderco and Vignoli 2022). Until 2022, this pattern has placed German public opinion at odds with official German foreign policy.

In this chapter, my goal is twofold. Firstly, I am to map the assessments of German public opinion since 2000. I do this by reviewing existing public opinion surveys as well as presenting my new, original data. The latter is related to panel surveys, which I conducted (in cooperation with a number of collaborators)

between 2020 and 2023, and which are the only surveys of their kind looking at public attitudes towards nuclear weapons over time. Secondly, I wish to make sense of this data in two ways. On the one hand, by looking at whether the changes in public opinion, which we have seen in the wake of the Russian war in Ukraine, are likely to persist; and on the other hand, by looking at the tension between “responsiveness” and “responsibility” when it comes to German participation in NATO’s nuclear-sharing arrangements.

Beyond the immediate audience of nuclear weapons scholars, the findings in this chapter might be relevant also for scholars of German foreign policy as well as for experts on public opinion. As this chapter is one of the first ones to study the impact of the war in Ukraine on European public opinion related to foreign policy, scholars studying the future impact of the war on European security might also find the results presented here useful for their work.

The chapter continues as follows: in the first section, I look at public opinions on nuclear weapons in Germany between 2000 and 2021. Drawing on secondary sources and existing surveys, I outline the image of an anti-nuclear public opinion in Germany. In the second section, I look at the shift in German public opinion on nuclear weapons in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, using original panel data that tracks German views of nuclear weapons since 2020. Using three waves of this unique data from September 2020, June 2022, and May 2023, I show how the Russian invasion shifted German public opinion towards more hawkish positions. In the final section, I reflect on these findings, discussing how to square the continuation of current nuclear policies with the demands of democratic legitimacy in foreign policy.

German Views of Nuclear Weapons Through 2021

German public opinion has been rather anti-nuclear between 2000 and 2021. As I will show in this section, Germans have been skeptical about nuclear sharing, supportive of nuclear disarmament, and opposed to Germany developing its own nuclear weapons.

This pattern does not surprise. Scholars of German foreign policy have, for a long time, argued that German public opinion has been opposed to a muscular foreign policy, of which nuclear weapons are quite likely the ultimate expression. The idea of equipping the *Bundeswehr* with nuclear weapons was a contested issue amongst West German elites (Deutsch 1966) and subject to strong public opposition and multiple rounds of protests throughout the Cold War (Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987; Risse-Kappen 1983). These protests matched a broader image of West Germany as a civilian power (*Zivilmacht*), and the public aversion to the use of force is part of the reason why also the reunified Germany emerged as a civilian power (Maull 1990). Scholars have argued that a normative aversion to the use of force has been an important element in explaining German foreign policy (Boekle, Rittberger, and Wagner 2001).

At the same time, German political elites understood nuclear deterrence as a key element of ensuring the security of their country. Successive German leaders

have been essential in persuading American leaders (or leveraging their country's peculiar position) to extend and strengthen nuclear deterrence in Europe—including stationing nuclear weapons on German soil (Colbourn 2022; Hunt 2022).

In this section, I outline German views on nuclear weapons until 2021 along three lines: views on nuclear sharing; on the use of nuclear weapons; and on Germany's role in global nuclear disarmament. All of these three areas are essential for Germany's role in NATO's nuclear deterrence arrangements. As was argued above, nuclear sharing is often perceived as a key practice for the current alliance's nuclear posture. A key element of nuclear deterrence is the willingness to use nuclear weapons. If a weapon can never be used, then it does not deter. Accordingly, more muscular support for nuclear disarmament—including supporting the banning of nuclear weapons—would make Germany's participation in NATO nuclear deterrence impossible. In the following, I look at public opinion polls on nuclear weapons policy, conducted in Germany since 2000.

Public Opinion on Nuclear Sharing

Nuclear sharing has been unpopular among Germans. While there is significant variation in the wording of the questions asked—some of them were more leading than others—the uniform pattern which emerges from these surveys is nonetheless clear: regardless of how the questions were asked, a majority of Germans has consistently opposed nuclear sharing.

The first survey which I was able to find was conducted in April 2005 by TFN Infratest. In this survey, 76 percent of the respondents felt that nuclear weapons should be withdrawn from Germany (Der Spiegel 2005). Two years later, 60 percent of respondents answered, in a survey fielded by the Simons Foundation, that Germany should not participate in nuclear sharing (The Simons Foundation 2007). These views persisted, and gained strength, over time. In 2015, in response to a YouGov poll, 66 percent of Germans indicated that they would support withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Germany “and thus the end of the nuclear sharing” (Schmidt 2015). One year later, in a survey commissioned by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), 85 percent of respondents indicated that nuclear weapons should be withdrawn from Germany (IPPNW 2016). In 2018 and 2019, in surveys commissioned by the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), 70 percent and 67 percent of respondents (respectively) answered that the weapons kept at the Büchel Air Base should be withdrawn (ICAN 2018; 2019b). An even higher share (84 percent) indicated in 2019 in a Greenpeace-commissioned study that nuclear weapons should “completely vanish” from Germany (Greenpeace 2019). A very similar share (83 percent in 2020 and 82 percent in 2021) preferred the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons in the two subsequent years (Greenpeace 2020, 2021). In an academic survey (Egeland and Pelopidas 2020), only ten percent of the respondents in Germany stated that countries without nuclear weapons should seek nuclear allies, and 75 percent of the respondents stated that non-nuclear countries should seek nuclear abolition.

However, in 2019, in a Körber-Stiftung-commissioned poll, only 31 percent of the respondents indicated that Germany should “abandon nuclear protection,” while 22 percent preferred to continue the “protection by the U.S. nuclear umbrella” (Kantar 2019). In 2020, two-thirds of respondents in a survey commissioned by the Munich Security Conference answered that Germany should not continue to rely on nuclear deterrence in the future (Bunde et al. 2020), and over half of respondents (57 percent) again opposed a nuclear deterrent, based in their own country, one year later (Bunde et al. 2021).

While a majority of the surveys were commissioned by anti-nuclear NGOs (non-governmental organizations), there is overwhelming evidence pointing to the unpopularity of the nuclear sharing arrangement among German respondents. The only exception to this pattern was the 2019 survey conducted by the Körber-Stiftung, which, however, used an unusual term—“nuclear protection”—and therefore should be taken with a grain of salt.

Public Opinion on Nuclear Use

Similarly, Germans have been historically opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, although only a handful of surveys addressing the issue directly are available. These figures indicate that public opinion is at odds with nuclear deterrence postures in a fundamental way.

In the Simons Foundation survey, 77 percent of participants responded that nuclear weapons-use by NATO would not be justified (The Simons Foundation 2007). Similar findings were made in a survey conducted by myself and my co-researchers more than a decade later. In different surveys conducted in 2020, we found a majority of respondents disagreeing with nuclear weapons-use. In our September 2020 survey, 82 percent of Germans stated that even a demonstrative use in response to a Russian demonstration strike could not be justified (Onderco, Etienne, and Smetana 2022). Only three percent of the respondents agreed with a first-strike scenario against Russian military units. In 2020, we also conducted a unique survey in which we fielded the same questions we had asked the German public to members of the *Bundestag*. We found that the nuclear taboo—the non-codified norm against the use of nuclear weapons—was even stronger among members of the *Bundestag* (Onderco and Smetana 2021; Smetana and Onderco 2022). These findings confirmed the argument advanced by Nina Tannenwald (2021) that the nuclear taboo is stronger at the elite level, though our results also indicated that support for the nuclear taboo at the public level is not as brittle as Tannenwald feared.

As mentioned earlier, scenarios of nuclear weapons-use involving German forces would most likely involve German fighter jets. The renewal of the aging fleet was a major policy issue in Germany.² Were the fleet not modernized, nuclear sharing and, implicitly, also nuclear use involving German armed forces, would be put into question. Hence, Germans’ views on the modernization or replacement of the *Tornado* fighter jets mattered for nuclear use. Were the *Tornado* jets not replaced, Germany would technically drop out of the nuclear sharing arrangement,

and hence an essential element of the alliance's current deterrent posture would disappear.

Surveys demonstrated that Germans thought that the government should not invest further in the renewal of the nuclear-capable aircraft fleet. In surveys fielded by nuclear disarmament proponents, well over half of the respondents were opposed to such investments—55 percent in 2018, 61 percent in 2019 (ICAN 2018, 2019b), and 71 percent in 2021 (Greenpeace 2021). Similarly, 86 percent of Germans opposed the theoretical future stationing of potential intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Germany (Greenpeace 2019).

While the number of questions on nuclear use has been lower than those on nuclear sharing, there has also been a rather clear pattern indicating strong anti-nuclear views on the use of nuclear weapons and also on the renewal of the fighter jet fleet for such use.

Public Opinion on Nuclear Disarmament Norms

Last but not least, Germans have been consistently supportive of nuclear disarmament norms, including the development of specific international legal instruments to that effect. In 2006, 70.5 percent of respondents stated that they wanted Europe “to be free of nuclear weapons” (Greenpeace 2006). In 2007, 81 percent of respondents stated that the German government's goal should be “eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide” (The Simons Foundation 2007). In 2016, 93 percent stated that nuclear weapons should be prohibited by international law (IPPNW 2016). In 2019, 82 percent of respondents indicated that “existing international nuclear arsenals should be destroyed” (Greenpeace 2019). The 'abolitionist' share of the population remained fairly consistent in subsequent years (84 percent in 2020 and 79 percent in 2021) in two surveys commissioned by Greenpeace (2020, 2021).

Similarly, large majorities of Germans were in favor of international treaties as instruments of nuclear disarmament. In 2007, 95 percent of Germans supported “eliminating all nuclear weapons in the world through an enforceable agreement” (The Simons Foundation 2007). Once the TPNW had entered the picture, Germans consistently supported their country becoming a party to the treaty, even if the TPNW lacked an enforcement mechanism. In the August 2017 ICAN survey, 71 percent were in favor of Germany joining the treaty, with large majorities across all political parties (ICAN 2017). That share remained almost constant in the subsequent year (ICAN 2018). Even larger majorities in favor of signing the TPNW (91 percent in 2019 and 80 percent in 2021) were found in surveys commissioned by Greenpeace (2019, 2021).

Again, while the individual wording of questions in different surveys varied, the evidence is sufficiently consistent to conclude that a majority of Germans was in favor of signing the TPNW and other treaties promoting nuclear disarmament and arms control.³ Hence, public opinion is again at odds with NATO nuclear deterrence policies and even the alliance's views on nuclear disarmament. While NATO is on paper supportive of arms control (NATO 2023), it has been rejecting the

TPNW ever since. If German official policy had followed public preferences, it would have had a profound impact on the alliance's nuclear posture.

German Views of Nuclear Weapons Since 2022

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine brought some changes to how Germans view nuclear weapons. That is not entirely shocking. Public opinion scholars have for a long time recognized that major shocks trigger changes to public opinion (Lambert et al. 2010; Lambert, Schott, and Scherer 2011). This shift in German public opinion was picked up in other surveys as well. An *Allgemeine Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands* Panorama-commissioned survey in June 2022 showed that 40 percent of the population felt that U.S. nuclear weapons should remain in Germany, and an additional 12 percent felt that they should be modernized and their number increased (Infratest Dimap 2022). This shift did not translate to a stated desire to acquire nuclear weapons. In the same survey, 71 percent of respondents said that Germany should not get access to its own nuclear weapons; and in October 2022, 91 percent of respondents stated that Germany does not need its own nuclear weapons to guarantee its security (Körber-Stiftung 2022). However, the surveys documented a shift away from earlier anti-nuclear views.

A more scientifically sound method to track shifts in public views is a panel survey. A panel survey allows us to study how individual views of the public move over time. While it is not possible to isolate a causal effect (since views could have moved due to other factors), it is possible to track rather precisely how views move over time, and thereby approximate them to other events that happen.

In a survey, which I conducted with colleagues (Onderco, Smetana, and Etienne 2023), we found that public views have shifted towards more favorable views of nuclear deterrence. The first wave of that survey was conducted in September 2020, the second wave in June 2022, and the third one in May 2023. Between the first and second wave, the Russian invasion of Ukraine started. Between the second and third wave, Russia attempted nuclear coercion a number of times (Horowitz and Arndt 2023). One could argue that there have been enough events that could be associated with shifts in public views. In this chapter, I look at the third wave of that survey data to study further how the Russian war in Ukraine affected public views.⁴

Deterrent Effect of Nuclear Weapons

Let us first look at public views on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. In the survey, we asked whether the respondents agreed with the statement that the nuclear weapons stationed in Germany deterred nuclear attacks against NATO countries, and whether the respondents thought that the nuclear weapons stationed in Germany deterred non-nuclear attacks against NATO countries. The respondents could express their (dis)agreement on a scale from one to six, which was then dichotomized.

The results, shown in Figure 6.1, demonstrate that the public now sees much more strongly a deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in Germany.

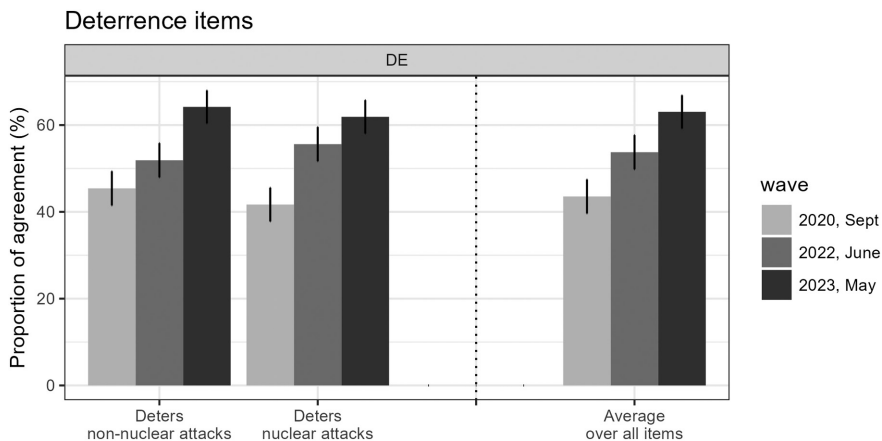


Figure 6.1 Public opinion on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons stationed in Germany

Source: Author's creation

Whereas in 2020, 45 percent of the public thought that stationing U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany deterred non-nuclear attacks and 42 percent thought that their stationing deterred nuclear attacks; in 2023, the share of the public expressing these views increased to 64 and 62 percent respectively. This is an increase by about 20 percentage points—a rather significant increase in the population's view of the deterrence effect of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear attacks. The increase is particularly strong among respondents above the age of 35. In the age group between 35 and 49 years, the increase amounts to 32 percentage points, and in the group between 50 and 64 years, the increase is 25 percentage points. When it comes to the deterrence effect against nuclear attacks, the increase is most pronounced in the age group of those older than 65 years (plus 30 percentage points), followed by the age group between 18 and 34 years (plus 22 percentage points) and the age group between 35 and 49 years (plus 19 percentage points). Whereas in 2020, we recorded major gender differences, in 2023, there is almost no gender difference as regards the belief in a deterrence effect against nuclear attacks (both around 62 percent). The gender gap, however, persists when it comes to a deterrence effect against non-nuclear attacks (52 percent of women, compared to 73 percent of men, believe that nuclear weapons deter non-nuclear attacks).

These results indicate that after the start of the war in Ukraine, belief in the deterrence function of nuclear weapons among the German public increased. Whereas in the past, Germans did not attach great value to the U.S. nuclear weapons deployed on their territory, and hence favored their removal, this changed with the war.

Use of Nuclear Weapons

An important element of nuclear deterrence is the willingness to use nuclear weapons. We asked respondents whether they would agree to use nuclear weapons in

the context of an armed conflict between NATO and Russia over the Baltics in four scenarios: (a) as a demonstrative explosion over an unpopulated area to de-escalate with the aim of stopping an ongoing Russian invasion of the Baltic countries; (b) to target Russian military units and thereby gain a military advantage over Russia in the conflict; (c) as a demonstrative explosion over an unpopulated area to respond to a similar demonstrative nuclear explosion previously conducted by Russia; and (d) to target Kaliningrad in response to a Russian nuclear strike against NATO troops, with the aim of stopping an ongoing Russian invasion of the Baltic countries. These scenarios vary over two important axes. They represent first-strike (a, b) and second-strike (c, d) scenarios, as well as purely demonstrative use scenarios without human casualties (a, c) and with human casualties (b, d). In constructing these scenarios, different expert writings (including Kühn 2018) were consulted. Again, the respondents could express their (dis)agreement on a six-point Likert scale, which was then dichotomized.

The results, shown in Figure 6.2, indicate that while the willingness to consider the use of nuclear weapons increased slightly since 2020, the increase is nowhere near as large as when it comes to the increasingly positive views of nuclear deterrence. Compared to 2022, the figures did either not change or even declined. Overall, in comparison to 2020, we see either no change (option a) or a maximum increase by six percentage points (option d). In option c, there has been a four-percentage point decline since 2022 (from 30 percent approval down to 26 percent approval).

When looking at patterns across different age groups, we notice that in the first scenario (demonstrative explosion to deescalate) there is an increase in approving views among the older respondents between 2020 and 2023. This increase is visible particularly in the group of respondents older than 65 years (by 17 percentage points, from ten to 27 percent). By contrast, the support among younger groups for use in this scenario is stable or declines. In the age group between 18 and 34 years, support remains almost exactly the same as in 2020, and in the age group between 35 and 49 years, it declined by 13 percentage points (from 18 to five percent). By contrast, in the second scenario (targeting Russian military units), the support increases across almost all age groups, and most strongly in the age group between 18 and 24 years. In the third scenario, there are only small changes across all age groups except for the respondents above 65 years, amongst whom support increased by almost ten percentage points. In the fourth scenario (targeting Kaliningrad in a retaliatory strike), we see an increase in the younger group of respondents (from six to 19 percent in the age group between 18 and 34 years) as well as among the older respondents (from 13 to 29 percent among respondents older than 65 years). In all of the scenarios, a gender difference between men and women persists. Men are consistently more likely to support the use of nuclear weapons.

In these use-scenarios, we see that important differences exist between different age groups, which become visible once we apply different scenarios. The German youth is among the age groups that have become more hawkish over time. That finding might correspond with the shifting foreign political strategies of those German parties, which they generally tend to support (such as the Greens).

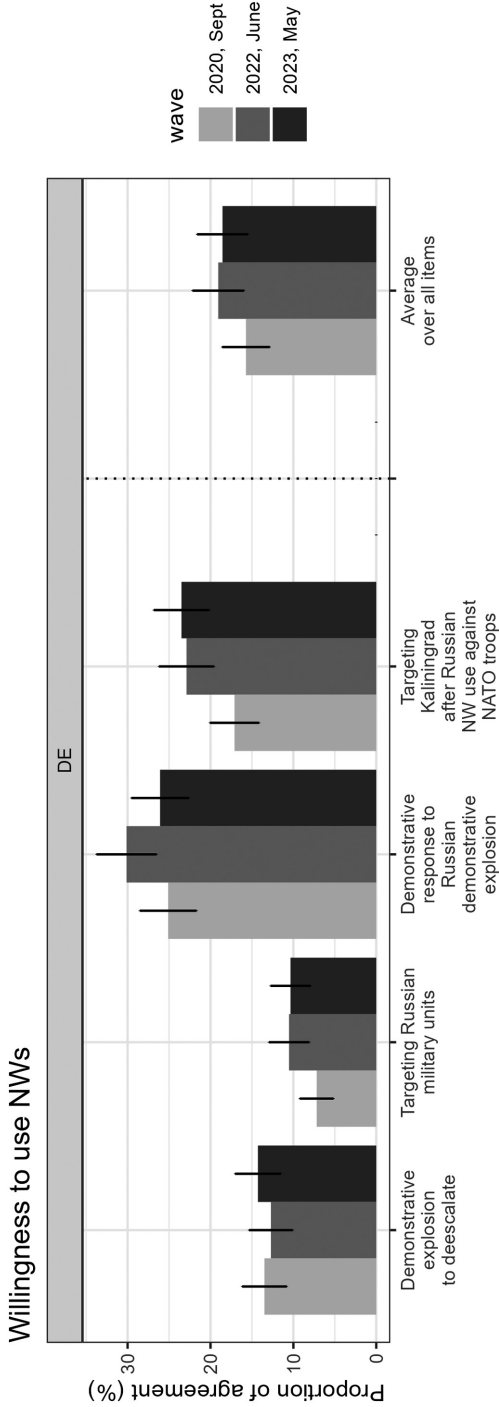


Figure 6.2 Public opinion on the use of nuclear weapons stationed in Germany

Source: Author's creation

Support for Withdrawal

Last but not least, we asked respondents about their support for withdrawing U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany. We asked them to express their (dis)agreement with five withdrawal scenarios: unconditional withdrawal, withdrawal in exchange for U.S. conventional reinforcements, withdrawal in conjunction with conventional reinforcements by European NATO allies (including Germany's own forces), withdrawal in a negotiated U.S.-Russian arms control framework, and no withdrawal "under any circumstances." These scenarios represent different logics of the potential purpose of nuclear weapons—as a sign of U.S. commitment (which could be replaced by conventional reinforcements), as a compensation for conventional weakness (which could be compensated by conventional reinforcements by European allies and Germany bolstering its conventional forces), or as a bargaining chip in arms control negotiations. Again, the respondents could indicate their (dis)agreement on a Likert scale from one to six, which was then further dichotomized. The results can be seen in Figure 6.3.

While after the start of the war support for withdrawing nuclear weapons dipped, it recovered as the war progressed. The most popular option remains withdrawal in the framework of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control. This option gets supported by 63 percent of respondents, with very little difference since 2020 (a decline of four percentage points). Support for unconditional withdrawal declined by ten percentage points since 2020, but increased by nine percentage points since 2022. Support for withdrawal in the other scenarios also increased, certainly since 2022. While general support for withdrawal has thus decreased since 2020 on average (as can be also seen in Figure 6.3's right-most panel), it has decreased less than one might expect given the strong increase in support for the deterrence function of nuclear weapons. This might suggest that public views are not necessarily always fully consistent.

When looking at support by age groups, two findings spring up. Support for withdrawal decreases across almost all scenarios and almost all age groups, with some exceptions and quite a bit of variation. The decline in support for unconditional withdrawal decreases between 2020 and 2023 across all age groups, and most among those older than 65 years (from 60 to 39 percent). Yet in other scenarios, the patterns vary. In the scenario of withdrawal in the framework of U.S.-Russian arms control, support remains high (above 50 percent, and above 70 percent for the youngest and the oldest age groups). Female respondents are consistently more supportive of withdrawal, with the difference compared to male respondents often being rather stark. For instance, the difference in support for withdrawal with conventional reinforcements is as high as 19 percentage points (36 percent among men and 55 percent among women).

These results indicate that while appetite for additional arms control and disarmament steps in Germany declined during the war, it also somewhat sprang back after the initial shock. Support for withdrawal is now only somewhat lower than it was before the start of the war, and support for withdrawal in a negotiated arms control framework has virtually remained stable, despite the war. Germans seem to remain fans of treaty-based instruments to address nuclear risks.

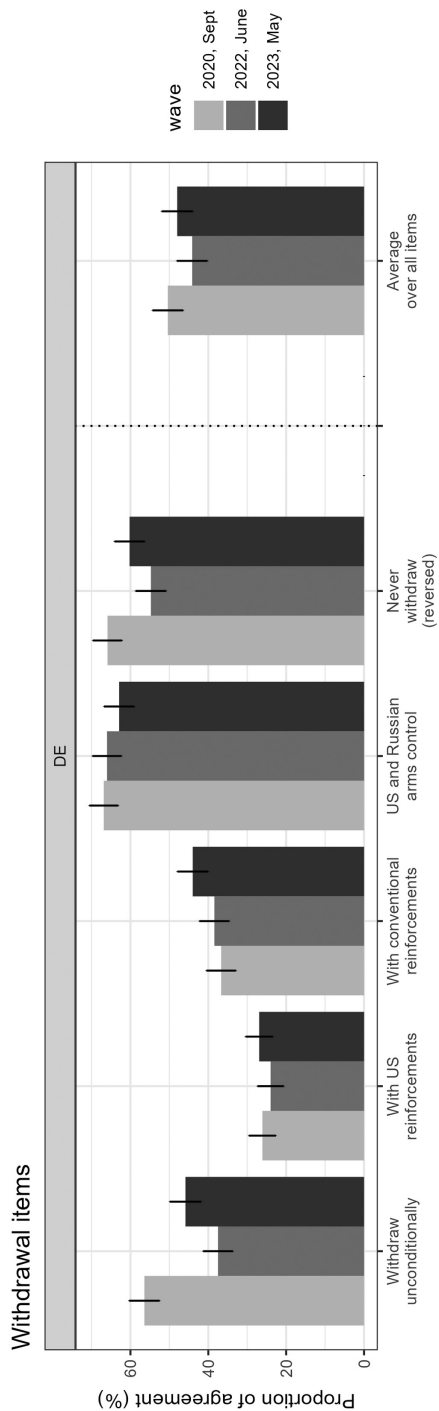


Figure 6.3 Public opinion on the withdrawal of nuclear weapons stationed in Germany

Source: Author's creation

Changing Patterns?

Our data reveals some interesting patterns. Before the war, it was clear that the majority of the German public would have historically preferred to have their country's security ensured without nuclear weapons playing any role. Since the start of the war, however, Germans increasingly seem to believe in the deterrence function of nuclear weapons. At the same time, their willingness to consider their use does not increase correspondingly (and declines somewhat after the start of the war). And while support for withdrawal decreased somewhat, it has subsequently bounced back.

A major question is whether the growing support for the existing nuclear deterrence arrangements will remain. Of course, a major factor in trying to predict the future is how the war in Ukraine will continue to develop. Any new nuclear threats from Russia could lead to further shifts in public opinion. Indeed, it is not uncommon for wars to lead to major shifts in public opinion (Onderco, Smetana, and Etienne 2023). It is also not uncommon for public moods to swing back to old patterns once wars are over. There is at least some evidence that seems to indicate that such a swing is already happening, with German public opinion on withdrawal swinging slowly back to pre-war levels. In addition, our results indicate that Germans continue to appreciate arms control and disarmament. And while they might not be *pushing* for arms control policies, if the German government were to go in that direction, it would find a rather strong support base among the public.

Responsiveness and Responsibility in Nuclear Policy

Instead of offering a conclusion—which would inherently be rather intuitive—I wish to address the dilemma that emerges from our data. As I have outlined in the previous two sections, there have been two main trends in the German public's views on nuclear weapons. The first one is that the public has been consistently at odds with German foreign policy, which has, also consistently, underlined the importance of and commitment to the existing NATO arrangements, including nuclear sharing. Secondly, in the wake of the war in Ukraine, the German public has increasingly started to view U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany more favorably.

These two findings require some additional discussion on how we should understand the apparent contradiction between the negative public views of nuclear weapons and the continuation of the existing NATO nuclear posture in Europe, which sees nuclear sharing as one of its key elements.

It is a frequent argument from supporters of nuclear disarmament that the lack of public support for nuclear sharing and nuclear deterrence creates a valid reason for the withdrawal of such weapons (ICAN 2019a). Academics studying nuclear weapons similarly point to the perceived lack of democratic legitimacy for the continuation of nuclear deterrence policies (Egeland and Pelopidas 2020; Pelopidas 2019; Pelopidas and Egeland 2023). Some have criticized the so-called “nuclear guardianship” (Pelopidas 2020). According to that critique, nuclear weapons are apparently

excluded from the democratic control over foreign policy and policies of nuclear deterrence frequently contradict popular sentiment. This line of argumentation has been previously advanced within the United States, with Dahl (1985) articulating it almost four decades ago and Scarry (2014) providing a more contemporary perspective. More recently, it has been transported to the European setting.

This argument is not particularly innovative or unique to nuclear weapons—the lack of democratic legitimacy has been broadly criticized when it comes to foreign and security policy in general. Foreign policy is a policy area where the executive enjoys dominance, and public views are often not fully reflected in the executed policy (Raunio and Wagner 2017). Scholars have also found that elite views on foreign and security policy are often strongly aligned—regardless of ideological proclivities (Kreps 2010).

However, to make sense of the gap between public opinion and official policy, we need to look at democratic governance more broadly. The starting point for such exploration is rather simple. In democratic polities, governments are expected to reflect public preferences (Dahl 2020). Political science research demonstrates that on major issues of public policy, policy often trails public opinion (Page and Shapiro 1983), and public opinion often drives policy (Caughey and Warshaw 2022). While such a link between public opinion and foreign policy has been traditionally weaker, nowadays quite some evidence exists that, at least tentatively, public opinion matters even when it comes to foreign policy (Everts and Isernia 2015; Holsti 2004). Theorists have made arguments about the need for such a link, based on the argument that the public would ultimately pay for foreign policy, either in blood or treasure (Lord 2011). This is what scholars often call “policy responsiveness.”

However, as Mair (2009) remarked about 15 years ago, democratic policy-making is in fact caught between two forms of control: “responsiveness” and “responsibility.” Responsiveness refers to a “[sympathetic response] to the short-term demands of voters, public opinion, interest groups, and the media” (Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel 2014, 237). Responsibility refers to the

necessity [...] to take into account (a) the long-term needs of their people and countries, which [...] underlie and go beyond the short-term demands of those same people; [and] (b) the claims of audiences other than the national electoral audience, including [...] the international commitments and organizations that are the root of their international credibility.

(*ibid.*)

As Laffan (2014) argues, involvement of supranational institutions, and particularly the pooling of sovereignty and taking on commitments on behalf of others, is highly conducive to placing more weight on “responsibility” at the expense of “responsiveness.”

The responsibility-responsiveness dilemma might help us understand why the German public’s dislike of nuclear weapons does not affect the continuation of Berlin’s existing nuclear policies. Nuclear sharing seems to be a perfect example of a policy which stimulates “responsibility.” It is undertaken within a framework

of international commitment in a formal alliance on behalf of others and deals with a policy which extends beyond short-term goals.

Two further facts render democratic pressures weaker when it comes to the continuation of nuclear deterrence. Firstly, the prominence of nuclear weapons in the public discourse has declined since the end of the Cold War. Hence, while the public appears to have certain preferences, these views on nuclear weapons are not terribly prominent for the direction in which citizens cast their votes. In other words, nuclear weapons neither win nor lose elections. Also, European governments have adopted practices that create a semblance of responsiveness without accepting the core demands, such as parliamentary debates where nuclear topics are being discussed, the inclusion of members of parliament in official delegations to major conferences, or participating in multilateral nuclear negotiations. Such “symbolic adjustment” allows for the prominence of these issues to decrease (Risse-Kappen 1991, 502). To illustrate: arguably, the German government’s decision to participate in the two TPNW Meetings of States Parties allowed it to remain committed to nuclear deterrence, because it “symbolically adjusted.”

Secondly, nuclear deterrence as a policy is traditionally decided by technocrats. These technocrats sit in the Chancellery, in the Ministry of Defense, the Federal Foreign Affairs, as well as in Washington (and to a degree in Brussels at NATO). Technocracy sets itself apart from democratic policymaking by basing its source of legitimacy in superior knowledge, independence from and unresponsiveness to the public mood, representation of the good of the whole society, and rationally-justifiable goals (criteria based on Caramani 2020, 2–3). Especially when it comes to nuclear deterrence, the rational justification of the goal—e.g., the military purpose of the weapons—can be seemingly questioned. However, the point is not that such rational justification should be unquestionable, but that it should be defensible. And nuclear deterrence is a defensible policy, even if better alternatives might exist.

The critics’ charge that European technocrats—whether at the NATO International Staff or in the national ministries—show too little responsiveness to public opinion mistakes a feature of the system for a bug. Technocrats derive their stature from the ‘air of neutrality’ and expertise that they are supposed to have. However, insulated from direct public pressure, they are generally at arm’s length from majoritarian institutions.

Hence, we might understand that in the case of nuclear sharing, the balance tips in favor of “responsibility” rather than “responsiveness.” Supranational elements and the issue area of national security (where policies are difficult to produce and/or overturn overnight) strengthen the side of “responsibility.” Symbolic adjustment and technocratic practice weaken the hand of “responsiveness.” This is not a defense of the practice, but an explanation of why we need to broaden the aperture on the democratic legitimacy of nuclear policies.

This argument does not imply that alternative deterrence postures (whether nuclear or not; for both Germany and as a German contribution to European security) do not exist, nor does it assert the superiority of the present one or dismiss public opinion. For the current German nuclear policy to remain feasible in the long run, the four key elements of responsibility and responsiveness (supranational

element, symbolic adjustments, low prominence, technocratic decision-making) must remain in balance. Conversely, if German policymakers were to violate the symbolic adjustments or the supranational element, the whole edifice of NATO nuclear deterrence might crumble.

Having said this, the latest public opinion trend in Germany can be interpreted as some indication of public support for the current NATO nuclear posture, especially when looking at public views about the deterrence effect of nuclear weapons. The charge against nuclear deterrence based on the lack of public legitimacy has received a dent as a result of the war in Ukraine. As discussed above, it is not clear whether such patterns will persist, and there are indications that public opinion might be swinging back. But the idea that it makes sense not to abolish a particular policy, especially if it becomes popular in times of crisis, even if the effects of that policy are hard to prove, is very strong. In other words, even if temporary, the growing popular support for nuclear weapons in moments of crisis will undoubtedly come back as an argument for not changing nuclear postures when the mood swings again.

Notes

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- 2 For the leading argument against the renewal of the Tornado, see Monath (2020); for a response from a prominent proponent, see Brauss (2020).
- 3 As a side note, Germans seem to be particularly attracted to the idea of treaty-based instruments—a large majority supported Germany's ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty in 1998 (The Simons Foundation 2007), and 56 percent expressed worries about the collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Greenpeace 2019).
- 4 In total, 640 participants responded to all three waves of the survey, which was conducted by Kieskompas, a leading Dutch polling institution. Our prior experience with the second wave of the survey indicates that respondents are not all equally likely to answer the questions. In particular, some demographic groups seem to be more likely to answer the questionnaire while others are less likely to answer. This is not a problem of this survey alone, but of all surveys. While in one-off surveys this is relatively easy to address through additional recruitment of respondents, in panel surveys the differential attrition becomes more complex to resolve. To correct for potential biases in sampling and response strategies, the data was weighted using post-stratification and an iterative proportional fitting weighting procedure (Mercer et al. 2018).

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