Severin Pleyer (1987-2025)

An Obituary

(held as a eulogy at the memorial ceremony at Helmut-Schmidt-University, 13 November 2025)

Even two weeks after his sudden death, it still seems unreal to me that I, as a much older colleague, would be giving a eulogy for my friend Severin. Every death is painful. But when it takes someone so abruptly from our midst, it makes us all realise, suddenly and shockingly, the damnable fragility of life. The consternation, speechlessness, emotional emptiness and endless grief that follow are best dealt with in community. In this respect, we can only look back with great gratitude on the response to today's memorial service. On behalf of the staff, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Oberstabsfeldwebel Labuhn and Father Peter, who were responsible for the preparations with confident leadership and impressive commitment. Above all, however, I am grateful to you, Anne, for coming to Hamburg especially to join us in remembering Severin.

We mourn together for our comrade, colleague and friend Hauptmann Severin Pleyer. The news of his sudden death has deeply affected us. Our thoughts are with you, dear Anne, and with his mother.

Severin was washed up at Helmut-Schmidt-University, so to speak, a good six years ago. Burkhard Meißner had arranged the contact at the time and, with his usual instinctive flair, immediately brought him into the still relatively young German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies (GIDS). The reward could hardly have been greater. Since 2020, he had been working as a research assistant at the GIDS and at Gary Schaal's chair, elegantly complementing the latter's expertise in security policy with his own research interests and areas of focus. Severin also greatly appreciated the chair as a refuge, which you, dear Gary, and your staff offered him. His slightly hybrid position between the academic world and military involvement on the ground was not understood by everyone. With great self-confidence, he came up with the rather appealing job title of 'science officer' (*Wissenschaftsoffizier*) for himself, which the media adopted with some enthusiasm.

Nuclear deterrence and its strategic implications were among Severin's favoured subjects, alongside a plethora other interests. Academically, he pursued this specialism by undertaking doctoral research at the University of Turku, which I had the privilege of supervising along with Louis Clerc. In May this year, he organised an ambitious workshop for young researchers on issues of nuclear deterrence at CHIOS, our Centre for History, Strategy and International Order, bringing together colleagues from all over Europe. No sooner had it ended than Severin was already working on its sequel in Paris next year. It was to become his format and, at the same time, a forum for exchange that institutionally complemented his enthusiastic participation in existing networks such as the Young Nuclear Network around the Hertie School. He brought people and connections with him from all over, interested parties who wanted to deepen their collaboration with him, discussion partners who quickly became colleagues and friends, who appreciated his intellect, his clever yet always pointed comments, and not least his sociable nature. Essentially, he was a walking network. I remember well when you, dear Klaus Beckmann, met him in Vienna and later reported that you were impressed not only by his conference contribution, but also by the fact that he seemed to know every conference participant (and vice versa). Almost everywhere in Europe, such gatherings were like home turf for Severin, on which he played with his characteristic ease, confidence and a charming touch of social exuberance.

In Germany, he was undoubtedly one of the few experts in a field that had long, far too long, been taboo. Nuclear policy, and indeed the question of how Germany should deal with nuclear weapons, had been considered contaminated since the 1990s, at the latest, when a completely misunderstood peace dividend was reaped. The problem was hardly ever discussed in public. Severin's passionate mission was to change this. His influence on the public debate was considerable. As his argumentative second, one even made it into the feuilleton pages of the Frankfurter Allgemeine and, as happened to both of us at the beginning of the year, earned the dubious privilege of being called a "warmonger" in DER SPIEGEL. What drove Severin, however, was his passionately held conviction that an intellectually confident, mature engagement with nuclear issues also, and indeed especially, contributes to peacekeeping. A society which simply declares itself incompetent and disinterested in the face of new technological, operational and strategic developments in the nuclear field risks, according to his mantra, conventional war in an even more negligent manner. For him, the nuclear dimension of

defence could only be conceived as an integral component of a comprehensive defence policy. This was where he saw the real discursive void that had degenerated into a monstrosity in the German public sphere. With stubborn consistency, he fought against this lack of strategic literacy, this self-inflicted and collectively desired and not least very German immaturity. To make it particularly vivid, he borrowed the old NATO motto of the Cold War: Be able to fight so you don't have to fight. He had a knack for cutting through the thicket, which made him a fascinating conversational partner, especially for non-military people, who regularly said the allegedly unspeakable, but then gently explained why such a taboo actually had the opposite effect to what was intended.

He also had a significant impact on discourse within the German Armed Forces. Condolences from the Ministry that I have received in recent days make it clear how much Severin, with his 'exceptionally consistent approach [...] clearly articulated and represented his knowledge and positions, even in the face of strong military resistance.' I quote a particularly moving memory in which a close friend of Severin's tells me that he knew of 'no other officer who could (or had to?) engage in a strategic dialogue with the Inspector General (*Generalinspekteur*).' The relevant decisions on equipment in recent months are also likely to have been influenced by him and his work, mind you, a captain in our – with all due affection – Jenfeld periphery. 'Even if his name cannot be found in the Federal Archives in this regard,' a sympathiser from the ministry tells me, 'it was his intellectual background that significantly shaped the rational foundation for these decisions.'

This influence is evident not least in a large number of publications and media contributions, and even more extensively in military journals and academic essays, which he churned out on an incredibly broad range of topics in the field of security and defence policy. Next spring, a comprehensive book on nuclear deterrence was due to be published by one of the country's major publishing houses – Droemer Knaur. It is impossible to imagine where this could have catapulted him – and it sends a shiver down one's spine to think that this – his – voice has now fallen silent.

His clear, forward-looking analyses were based on his profound knowledge not only of German research, but above all of the relevant international debates on the subject. He moved effortlessly between languages and research landscapes, which opened up an extensive European and American network of colleagues and friends for him far beyond Germany and the Bundeswehr. In

fact, Severin's professional career reflected his cosmopolitan character. After graduating from high school in Tasmania, he studied at the Department of International Politics of the University of Aberystwyth in Wales, the world's oldest institute for International Politics. There he earned his bachelor's degree in International Politics and Strategic Studies in 2011. This was followed by a diploma course in defence and international security studies (*Défénse et Sécurité internationales*) at the equally established Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratègiques (IRIS) in Paris. He worked for the German Armed Forces since 2013, after completing his voluntary military service at the age of 17. As an analyst and intercultural deployment advisor, he completed several missions abroad and also spent time at NATO headquarters in Brussels, where his more recent nuclear policy activities have taken him back to time and again.

As a military practitioner with operational experience and, at the same time, pronounced, indeed omnivorous academic interests in the field of Strategic Studies and International Politics, Severin embodied the best of both worlds. With some justification, he can be seen as the epitome of the intellectual and self-reflective officer, thereby representing the ideal of the German Federal Armed Forces' officer training.

His colleagues at HSU, the GIDS, the Command and Staff College and the Bundeswehr as a whole have lost an exceptionally intelligent mind, an inspiring and empathetic conversation partner and, last but not least, a good friend. He will be sorely missed.

Michael Jonas, Hamburg