

Das Boot ist kaputt! Germany has the world's best submarines... but none of them work

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The U33, U34 and U36 submarines are seen at the Eckerfoerde German Navy base. © Morris MacMatzen / Getty Images

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Germany is effectively without its entire submarine fleet, and won't have one vessel operational for months to come. Each one

of the navy's vaunted U-boats is either on maintenance or in desperate need of repairs.

The German navy once boasted that its cutting-edge Type 212A submarines equipped with hydrogen fuel cells allow them to navigate submerged for over two weeks before resurfacing, thus giving them an edge over most diesel submarines that can stay submerged for only a few days. Each such vessel costs the German budget some €400 million (\$469.9 million), according to the German ARD broadcasting corporation. However, the German military have recently admitted that all of their six precious vessels are out of action.

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Berlin lost the last of its submarines this October when the Type 212A vessel named U-35 suffered serious damage to its rudder after hitting a rock during a diving maneuver off the Norwegian coast. The damage was so severe that the submarine had to be escorted to the German port of Kiel by testing ship the Helmsand. The rest of the submarine fleet, it turned out, was already out of service by that point.

Two of the Type 212A vessels are undergoing scheduled maintenance and will be ready for deployment no sooner than in the second half of 2018, while another two suffered some damage and are in an urgent need of repairs, with no estimated time of completion available. The sixth vessel was commissioned just in October and will become fully operational only after passing all the relevant trials no sooner than in May 2018.

“This a real disaster for the navy,” the German parliament’s Defense Commissioner Hans-Peter Bartels told ARD and another German broadcaster, NDR, in early December, adding that submarine operations were once Germany’s *“top capabilities.”* He went on to say that *“it is the first time in history that none [of the U-boats] would be operational for months.”*

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Bartels then blamed major deficiencies in spare parts for the submarines as well as the government’s cuts of the defense

budget for this unfortunate turn of events. He explained that after the end of the Cold War the German authorities decided to give up on stockpiling spare parts for the military equipment due to its high costs and instead opted for ordering them upon occurrence.

The commissioner, however, said that this trend “*has been reversed*” and the government is once again ready to spend money on the military needs. He added though that “*it will take years*” before one can see the real results of the new policy. In the meantime, even if Germany manages to put all its submarines back into action, it still will not be able to operate them all at the same time. According to the ARD, the navy now has only three submarine crews while more are still in training.

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