

The Kosovo refugee crisis and the Holocaust: How the German government defends its military policy

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Three weeks of permanent air attacks by NATO have been insufficient to bring Serbia to heel. The commanders of the Alliance forces have reacted with intensified air strikes and preparations for the intervention of ground troops. Increasingly it is civilian targets which are being identified and hit in the strikes. The NATO war is rapidly developing into a form of general terror against the Serb population.

At the same time the doubts and questions regarding the purpose of the war have grown. The original propaganda, which claimed that the offensive was being waged for humanitarian purposes, has long since been overtaken by reality. The editor of Germany's major news magazine *Der Spiegel* has posed the question: "What are we doing in the Balkans?" The co-editor of the weekly *Die Zeit* newspaper, Theo Sommer, asks: "Is there the danger of a fiasco?" and hesitatingly but clearly answers his own question in the affirmative. Former SPD (Social Democratic Party) chancellor Helmut Schmidt has delivered his own devastating judgement: "International law has been broken at the behest of the Americans. This war is a mistake." Even the ultra-patriotic *Bild* newspaper has expressed doubts: "Is the war correct?"

Under these conditions the ruling German coalition government of the SPD and the Greens have pulled out all the stops and begun a propaganda campaign which, in terms of demagoguery and manipulation, puts all previous efforts in the shade.

Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping (SPD), up until now a colourless political technocrat with sleep-inducing rhetoric and the charisma of an office manager, suddenly functions as the principal demagogue for the military brass.

At the first press conference, immediately following the beginning of the war, Scharping delivered a warning to journalists, demanding that they openly exercise self-censorship. Every word critical of the NATO offensive must be avoided, he argued, because it would strengthen the enemy, prolong the war and therefore lead to increasing

numbers of victims amongst the NATO and German troops. However, this attempt to revive the infamous "Dolchstoß" Legend* showed little signs of working. Critical voices became louder.

Over the past few days the government has stepped up the war of words. Now, according to Defence Minister Scharping and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, the behaviour of Slobodan Milosevic must be compared to the "inhuman activities of Adolf Hitler". Fischer declared to journalists that the actions of the Serb militias against the drained and exhausted refugees reminded him of the worst pictures of the burning down of the Warsaw ghetto. "For the first time in this century Germany is on the right side," Fischer added. And at every available opportunity Scharping has repeated his formula that the "unimaginable cruelty in Kosovo recalls the twisted face of Germany's past".

With increasing clarity they draw a parallel with the National Socialist holocaust. Every press statement by the foreign and defence ministries is loaded with the appropriate vocabulary: "massacres, slaughterhouses, selection, concentration camp, mountains of bodies".

Der Spiegel reported a week ago on a "media offensive" by the defence ministry aimed at defusing the growing criticism. "Air reconnaissance photos must prove the existence of concentration camps in Kosovo. Scharping and the chancellor's office have ordered the urgent acquisition of such items of evidence.... Since last Monday the German army sends out unmanned reconnaissance planes stationed in Macedonia, Tornados are also taking part in the search.... As soon as the photographic evidence has been acquired the government intends to use it to justify its war effort. In this way the Russians will also be publicly put under pressure. The search continued until the middle of the week without success. A German reconnaissance plane took photos of the sports stadium in Pristina--an alleged concentration camp--but the stadium was empty."

The daily press conferences by the defence ministry are

aimed exclusively at issuing instructions, not providing information. Any critical questions are sharply rebuffed. *Die Zeit* questioned: "What lay behind the furious eruptions--on one occasion by Fischer, another time by Scharping--merely because the media were not willing to clearly distinguish between perpetrator and victim, were not prepared to accept as fact the 'cynicism', the 'mountains of bodies', the 'concentration camps' or 'the slaughter house'?"

Any comparison between Milosevic's soldiers and the bunch of murderers organised in the SA and the SS, or the drawing of parallels between the present refugee camps and the destruction chambers of the Nazis, involves a massive distortion of history.

Six million Jews were systematically and brutally murdered in the concentration camps. Whoever then draws a parallel with the present repression of the Kosovars in fact derides the victims of the Holocaust. Such a belittling of the crimes of the Nazis comes close to a denial of the Holocaust itself.

In Yugoslavia the crimes of the Nazis during the Second World War assumed monstrous proportions. In Croatia, under the supervision of the Nazis, the Ustasha carried out a systematic massacre of the Serb people. In the biggest of the 20 concentration camps 800,000 people were murdered. In Serbia the German army sought to break the resistance by shooting first 50 and later 100 civilians selected at random for every one dead German soldier. In October 1941 the commanding German army general for Serbia, Franz Böhme, reported that for the 21 German soldiers killed in exchanges with the partisans, 21,000 Serbs--men, women and children--had been shot.

In light of this history it is no surprise that the Serb people have little inclination to believe that the NATO bombs being dropped on their heads today are for their own good.

What is taking place at present in Kosovo has roots which differ from those of the Nazi terror. Leaving aside the issue that many totally unsubstantiated rumours and accusations of mass terror are treated as facts by the media, nevertheless it is clear that a systematic and violent expulsion is being carried out by the government in Belgrade. These violent actions by Milosevic must be condemned, but unfortunately they correspond to a pattern which has been repeated in many countries in the post-war period. The response of the German government with regard to such developments is, however, highly selective.

Fifty years ago the state of Israel was established through the brutal expulsion and suppression of the Palestinians. In Turkey the government has refused to acknowledge the right of existence of the Kurdish minority and has destroyed 3,000 Kurdish villages. In this regard, it is in no respect any better than the Milosevic government in Belgrade, but nevertheless

enjoys membership in NATO and financial and military assistance from the German government.

The government is also equally one-sided and arbitrary with regard to the expulsions in the Balkans--its policy varying according to its own immediate interests. The April 8 edition of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* drew attention to this point in an article by Pierre Simonitsch titled: "A History of Expulsions".

Simonitsch wrote that the history of the Balkans was "always a history of expulsions and mass murders", the only exception being the years of the Tito government. At the beginning of the nineties the German government played a key role in re-igniting national conflicts when it insisted on the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as independent states. Simonitsch wrote: "The situation is dramatic. But not exactly new for the Balkans. One had forgotten the 600,000 Serbs, who since 1991 had fled Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. With NATO logistical support the Croat army drove 200,000 Serbs from Krajina where they had lived for 250 years. Many of them were lodged in army barracks, where they can become unintentional targets for NATO bombers."

In light of these considerations Simonitsch poses the justified question of whether the German government was really so surprised by the events in Kosovo as it claims to be today: "Did the Western governments consciously take into account the expulsion of the Kosovar Albanians when they ordered the air attacks against the rest of Yugoslavia? It is difficult to believe that the NATO strategists overlooked the possible consequences of their plans. Instead of preventing a human tragedy the bombings have had the opposite affect."

That the German government adopts an increasingly grotesque demagoguery and falsification of history results from the fact that it is attempting to defend a war which is indefensible. At the start it was: "For humanity!", but the bombing brought destruction and waste. Then came the slogan: "Stop the expulsions!" under conditions where the air strikes became the cover for the biggest expulsions in recent history. Now they just say: "For or against fascism!" What a declaration of political bankruptcy!

*After the First World War reactionary, nationalist forces claimed that Germany lost the war not because it was militarily defeated at the front, but because it was stabbed in the back ("Dolchstoß") by socialist and communist minded workers at home.



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