

"It Began With a Lie": German TV report refutes government propaganda in Balkan War

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Germany's Social Democratic (SPD)-Green party coalition government employed fabrications and manipulated facts to overcome popular opposition to the participation of the German armed forces in NATO's war against Yugoslavia two years ago. A German TV report by journalists Jo Angerer and Mathias Werth entitled "It Began With a Lie" provides proof of this.

The report, which was first broadcast on the nationwide ARD public channel on February 8, set off a large-scale public discussion in Germany. It was the subject of a parliamentary debate in the Bundestag [the German federal parliament] on February 16. On the same day, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper published the script of the report in a slightly abridged version, and on February 19 the report was rebroadcast on WDR (one of the ARD channel's affiliated stations, which can be viewed nationwide via cable), followed by a live discussion featuring politicians, journalists, generals and one of the makers of the documentary, Mathias Werth.

In the TV report, the authors juxtapose step by step the results of their own meticulous research to the statements made at the time by Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Minister of Defence Rudolf Scharping (both SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens).

"NATO says it dropped the bombs to save the lives of the Kosovar Albanians—from the Serbs," states the report. That was the main argument used by the government to justify the first combat deployment of German troops since the Second World War, 50-plus years after Hitler's armies devastated the Balkans.

Rudolf Scharping stated on March 27, 1999: "We never would have taken military action if there weren't this humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo, with 250,000 refugees within Kosovo and far more than 400,000 refugees in total, and with a death toll we are not even able to count yet."

The report contrasts this statement with the findings of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) at the time. The OSCE's "results for March 1999" reported "39 deaths in all of Kosovo—before the NATO bombers came".

Heinz Loquai, a former general attached to the OSCE who has already published a book refuting some of the German Ministry of Defence's lies, particularly the fictitious "Operation Horseshoe" (which will be dealt with later in this article), states: "the kind of humanitarian catastrophe that, as a category of international law, would have justified going to war did not exist in Kosovo prior to the war". And Norma Brown, a US diplomat in Kosovo, says: "There was no humanitarian crisis up to the beginning of the NATO bombing raids."

The authors' conclusion: "An unambiguous verdict! On the question of violence in Kosovo—in none of the OSCE reports is there even the slightest indication of an impending humanitarian catastrophe. What was observed by the international experts were situations where rebels of the

so-called Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) were fighting against regular Yugoslav troops. A civil war, says the OSCE. The village dwellers fled from these battles. Later, they usually returned to their houses, most of which had been completely destroyed."

This is substantiated by a quote from the secret reports of the German Ministry of Defence: "There were no major armed conflicts between the Serb-Yugoslav forces and the KLA over the past few days.... In the recent period the Serbian security forces have restricted their activities to routine operations such as security checks, patrols, searches for weapons caches and the monitoring of important connecting roads."

To convince the population of Germany that there was indeed a humanitarian catastrophe, and that the Serbs really were committing atrocities on a massive scale against the Kosovars, the German government utilised every conceivable propaganda ploy. But the TV reporters have pulled the carpet out from under Scharping's crudest inventions.

First they investigated the claim that the Serbs had two years previously installed a Nazi-style concentration camp for Kosovar Albanians in the soccer stadium of Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. Rudolf Scharping repeatedly made this claim in public in April 1999.

Even later, in his war diaries about the NATO mission in Kosovo, Scharping continued to claim that several thousand persons were held captive in this alleged concentration camp. The TV report notes: "And Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister, repeatedly compared the Serbs to the Nazis, calling for military intervention with the words: 'There must never be another Auschwitz!' To this very day, Joschka Fischer and Rudolf Scharping have stuck to this version of events."

Asked by the reporters about the source of his information, Scharping qualifies his statements slightly, but still insists that there was a concentration camp in the Pristina stadium. "We had clear testimony from witnesses." Scharping and his Ministry of Defence were not prepared to reveal who these witnesses were—either in the interview featured in the TV report or elsewhere. The Ministry of Defence refuses to publish any of the secret reports it claims were the basis for its decisions. Scharping, Schröder and Fischer have all hid from public view on this matter.

Only 47 members of parliament took part in the Bundestag debate on the TV report, including 20 from the opposition PDS (the "democratic socialist" successor to the former East German Stalinist state party, Socialist Unity—SED), and not one government minister was present. Spokespersons from the Defence and Foreign ministries were forbidden to take part in the live TV discussion.

The TV journalists asked witnesses from Pristina about the accusation that there was a concentration camp there. Shaban Kelmendi, an eyewitness and (non-Serbian) Kosovar politician whose house is situated next to the stadium, said in front of the camera: "There was not one single

prisoner or hostage held there at that time. The stadium was always used only as a landing field for helicopters.”

Next, the TV report dealt with Rugovo, a small farming village in the south of Kosovo. On January 29, 1999 Serb special police allegedly carried out a massacre of innocent civilians there—the kind of massacre which, according to Scharping's outraged statements at the time, were “later not only committed by the special police, but also by gangs of released convicts and others”.

Two months after the alleged massacre, Scharping presented photographs at a press conference showing a red van that had been riddled with bullets, as well as numerous corpses, allegedly of Kosovar-Albanian civilians, lying in a row as after a mass execution. “This Is Why We Are at War” screamed the tabloid headlines the next day, April 28, 1999, above Scharping's photographs prominently displayed on the front page.

The TV report then quotes from a secret report of the Defence Ministry: “Confidential—for official use only. Twenty-four Kosovar Albanians and one Serb policeman were killed in Rugovo on January 29, 1999 during a battle.”

Television footage shot by a Western camera team immediately after the events in Rugovo shows that the men killed there were in all probability KLA soldiers. KLA identification cards were found on them; most of them were wearing uniforms and combat boots; submachine guns were lying on the ground.

Today, Scharping claims he based his statements at the time on information supplied by “OSCE observers who were the first on the scene”. But the TV journalists interviewed the very first OSCE observer to arrive on the scene, German police officer Henning Hensch, who states that on the day he saw Scharping's claims first broadcast on *Deutsche Welle* (the German world broadcasting service), he informed the defence minister that “the version presented in that broadcast did not correspond to what happened”. In actual fact, what had occurred was a battle.

Hensch goes on to say, “apart from that, the corpses the defence minister presented had been placed there in that way by the Serbian security forces, myself and my two Russian colleagues, because we had collected them from the various locations or scenes of crimes.”

These trumped-up atrocities were still not enough to stifle protests against the bombing of Yugoslavia, particularly when images of what NATO described as “collateral damage” appeared on TV screens throughout the world. Jamie Shea, the NATO spokesman during the war, recognised this fact. As he told the TV journalists: “After the attack on the refugee convoy near Djakovica, the first ‘accident’ of the war, public support dropped in many countries, including Germany, by 20 to 25 percent. We had to work hard for six weeks to win back public opinion.”

Milosevic's mistake, added Shea, was to drive the refugees from Kosovo into Albania and Macedonia. “There were TV camera teams filming all the misery at the borders. That was why public opinion swung around to support NATO again.”

In Germany, these manipulations and distortions were carried to even greater lengths. The version circulated there was that the Serbs had been systematically planning the forced expulsion of these people and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Kosovo for a long time. Murders and expulsions in Kosovo were now given a name: “Operation Horseshoe”.

Rudolf Scharping revealed this alleged plan on April 7, 1999, stating: “In clearly discernible phases from October [1998] to the Rambouillet negotiations, the Yugoslav Army and the Yugoslav State Police not only began to prepare for the expulsion of the population, but had already started this mass expulsion. This shows very clearly the systematic, brutal and murderous way in which this plan was instigated in October 1998 and put into effect as of January 1999.”

According to this version, Serb troops had surrounded Albanian civilians “like a horseshoe” to drive them out of Kosovo. To provide evidence of the planned way the Serbs were proceeding, the Defence

Ministry published a photograph in a brochure specially printed for this purpose. Scharping claimed the village shown in the photograph had already been attacked and set on fire by the Serbs prior to the NATO bombing raids, and that the civilian population had been driven out of the region “as part of the plan”.

Jo Angerer and Mathias Werth comment: “But the data inscription on the photograph raises doubts. It lists the date the photograph was taken as April 1999—after the NATO bombing raids had begun. That alone shows that what happened in Randubrava, the village on the photograph, provides no evidence of Operation Horseshoe.”

Eyewitnesses from Randubrava describe what actually happened in the village. Shaip Rexhepi reports: “The inhabitants left the village on March 25, after the NATO bombing raids. At around 8 o'clock in the evening we were given the order by the KLA to evacuate the population. There were no village inhabitants left here on March 26. We had taken all of them to the village of Mamush. It was only then that the Serbs started firing grenades at us. We were KLA soldiers. We defended ourselves, but it was just impossible. We were powerless against the tanks and cannons. But we held out as long as we could. There were 85 KLA soldiers from my village here, but there were others from outside as well. All in all, we comprised 120 soldiers from Company D of the 129th Brigade of the KLA.”

Another alleged piece of evidence for “Operation Horseshoe” was the “crimes committed by the Serbs” in a village called Sanhovic. But as the report clearly shows: “This photograph was also taken at a later date: April 1999, also after the war had started.”

The TV journalists visited the village shown in the Defence Ministry's brochure—which, however, is called Petershtica, not Sanhovic. According to the Defence Ministry brochure, the Serbs destroyed the houses there in a particularly perfidious way: “First they [the Serbs] place a burning candle in the attic, then they open the gas tap in the cellar.”

Nobody recalls this happening in Petershtica. Fatmir Zymeri, an eyewitness, states that the destruction shown in the photograph had already taken place in June 1998, half a year before “Operation Horseshoe” was allegedly put into effect.

What of the candles in the attics and gas taps in the cellars cited by Scharping? Fatmir Zymeri states: “No, that is not how the houses in our village caught fire. This happened in many ways, but not like that. The houses were set on fire in a different way. The houses caught fire when they were hit by grenades, yes. That happened when the grenades exploded in the hay, on fences and things like that. But never through a method like this thing with the candles.”

That this story about candles igniting gas is not only a lie, but a ridiculous invention, is amply demonstrated in the interview the TV journalists held with Scharping. This interview is worth quoting at length:

Reporter: About that last village—there is a caption under the photograph that says the Serbs come into the villages, open the gas taps in the cellars and place a burning candle in the attic. There are doubts as to whether that method could work at all.

Scharping: What doubts are those?

Reporter: If you open the gas tap in the cellars and place a burning candle up on top, it just doesn't work!

Scharping: Oh?

Reporter: No, it doesn't work at all technically—neither chemically, nor physically nor in any other way. So it must be either incorrect information passed on by witnesses or information that was not checked.

Scharping: Then I suggest you carry out the test again. But this time not with a gas tap in a cellar, but with a gas cylinder.

Reporter: Same thing—neither method works.

Scharping: Oh...?

Reporter: Yes, you see, gas is heavier than air.

In a new edition of the brochure originally printed in May of 1999, the

photo caption and data inscription under the photograph of Petershtica has been removed.

Heinz Loquai, the former OSCE general, confirmed the TV journalists' research. Loquai recalled a discussion he had in the Defence Ministry in November of 1998: "But there was no 'Operation Horseshoe'—at least, that is what the experts in the Defence Ministry said."

The TV report does not explain why the bombs fell on Belgrade, even though the two journalists claim to provide such an explanation at the beginning of their feature. In reality, the war was about geopolitical interests, about global political power, oil and gold.

Willy Wimmer, a Defence policy spokesman of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), confirmed this during the live discussion following the rebroadcast of the report on WDR, when he mentioned a defence policy conference he attended in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, along with high-ranking representatives from Western Europe, the US and Eastern European countries "from the Baltic Sea to Macedonia". According to Wimmer, an American defence spokesman said: "We waged that war because we have to undo the strategic mistake Eisenhower made in 1943-44."

Nevertheless, the strength of the report is that it unequivocally shows how the German government, which includes the Green party that was once at the fore of the pacifist movement in Germany, pushed through the first combat deployment of German troops since the demise of the Nazi regime. To achieve this aim, the government employed a propaganda apparatus that has also not seen its like since 1945.

NATO spokesman Jamie Shea, who is featured repeatedly in the report, was and is fully aware of the role of propaganda in whipping up support for the war. "The political leaders played the decisive role with regard to public opinion," said Shea with a self-satisfied grin.

Shea continued: "They are the democratically elected representatives. They knew which news was important for public opinion in their country. Rudolf Scharping did a really good job. It's not easy, particularly in Germany, whose population for 50 years had known only military defence, meaning the protection of their own country, to send German soldiers hundreds of miles away. Psychologically, this new definition of security policy is not easy. Not only Minister Scharping, but also Chancellor Schröder and Minister Fischer provided an outstanding example of political leaders who don't just run behind public opinion, but know how to shape it.

"It makes me optimistic to see that the Germans have understood that. And despite the very unpleasant side effects, the collateral damage, and the long duration of the air raids, they stayed on course. If we had lost public support in Germany, we would have lost it throughout the alliance."



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