The German media and Fallujah: accomplices to a war crime

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13 November 2004

The reaction by the German media to the current US offensive against the 300,000 inhabitants of the city of Fallujah is nothing less than a political scandal. The overwhelming destruction of a large city has been relegated to minor reports by most of the German television channels and the majority of daily papers, which have largely adopted the phraseology of US war propaganda and say nothing about the civilian costs resulting from the brutal offensive.

If one were to follow events through the filter of the German media one would be led to believe that what is taking place in Fallujah is a routine police operation against "terrorists," rather than the escalation of a war of occupation which is ever more openly taking the form of naked terror against the civilian population.

If one compares current reports to the sort of reporting that took place at the start of the Iraq war in spring 2003, the difference is particularly glaring. As the war broke out, all of the major television channels changed their normal programme schedules and broadcast hour-long specials on the invasion. For weeks, the first public television channel, ARD, broadcast a special programme lasting 15 to 45 minutes after their main news report. This extensive coverage provided an opportunity for the public to make their own judgement about the war, and was undoubtedly a factor in the large turnout at the massive antiwar demonstrations that took place in Germany and other parts of Europe. Although the latest attack on Fallujah represents the biggest military offensive carried out since the downfall of Baghdad, and exceeds in brutality any operation carried out up until now by the American military, there has been no corresponding reportage in Germany of the events.

On Tuesday, the second day of the offensive, all of the news channels concentrated their reports on the 15th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. "Heute-journal", the main news magazine of the second public channel, the ZDF, featured a long and tiresome report on a grotesque debate on a government proposal to move the October 3rd national holiday to a Sunday. Only later was a cursory mention made of the attack on Fallujah—once again adopting the phraseology of the US government.

The situation was no better the following day in the half-hour ARD "Tagesthemen"—although the fall of the wall was no longer prominent. The news, read by anchorman Uli Wickert, began with a 10-minute report on the reelection of Georg Milbradt as the prime minister of the German state of Saxony. There was no separate report on the war in Iraq—not to speak of an editorial comment. Only in a rapid review of international developments was a brief mention made of the fighting taking place.

It was necessary to resort to other media sources, such as the British BBC, in order to obtain some impression of the extent and merciless nature of the offensive. Although the BBC largely adopted the official government version of events, the minute-long video clips sent by their "embedded" journalists at least gave some indication of the hell being unleashed by occupation troops in Fallujah. They show the uninterrupted bombardment of residential areas and mosques together with a number of interviews with combat commanders on the ground, whose bloodthirsty commentaries made the blood run cold. They bellowed the words, "Kill, kill, kill" repeatedly into the cameras.

Most of the important German daily papers have been equally muted in their coverage. Most of them refrained from giving the attack on Fallujah a headline or commentary. In most cases they merely relied on a brief résumé of press agency news pages reports which also uncritically adopted the official form of presentation.

The only exception amongst the national papers was the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which provided a relatively extensive and critical report of the offensive. The weekly paper *Die Zeit* featured a background article which described the US offensive as a revenge action and rejected the claim that the operation was directed against foreign terrorists and not against the resistance of the local population. But such articles remained the exception. Most of the newspapers that did print editorial comments greeted the offensive and resorted to giving advice to the US government on how it could rapidly and effectively bring its operations to an end.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, advised the US military to take over the city as quickly as possible. A commentary by Peter Münch in the paper stated: "The rebels of Fallujah are just as unresponsive to offers of negotiation as they are to promises of financial help for recovery.... Following the misdirected development of the last 18 months the only possibility to break the resistance is through military means. That carries with it many risks and only one hope: it has to take place quickly. A rapid victory for US troops in alliance with the new Iraqi army could have a positive effect for the entire country."

The *taz* newspaper, which has rarely reported on Fallujah, gave US troops the friendly advice that they would be ill-advised to murder too many civilians. Karim el-Gawhary commented: "In the first place, the challenge is to conquer the city, without too many civilians losing their lives.... Should that fail then the US must wrestle in the short or long term with Fallujah, creating at the same time many new Fallujahs across the country. The rebels know this. For this reason they will attempt to ensure heavy losses for the US army—in the hope that the Americans will respond by shooting wildly around them."

Here *taz* is pursuing a line of propaganda which is as old as the struggle by colonial and occupation powers against partisans. According to this version it is not the attacker who bombards a

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densely populated city with the most modern weaponry who is responsible for the huge toll of casualties, but rather the resistance, which attempts to defend itself with antiquated bazookas and Kalashnikovs, thereby causing the US army to "shoot wildly around them." The next logical step would be for *taz* to assert that the Iraqi resistance is using the civilian population as "human shields."

"Even if this feat of a relatively unbloody conquest succeeds," *taz* continues, "a second major task remains: The city must be pacified.... The success or failure of military action can only be finally assessed on election day, which is currently planned for the end of January."

The *taz* is evidently in the camp of those who hope for the "success of the military action"—although, with a nod towards the sensitivities of their readership, they pray that the patient should not suffer too much during the course of the operation. *Taz* was founded 25 years ago as an alternative to official bourgeois media outlets. Since then—in a development resembling that of the Green Party, to which the paper has close links—the newspaper has shifted continuously to the right. Following the takeover of the German Foreign Ministry by Green Party leader Joschka Fischer, the *taz* shifted completely to take up the official line of German foreign policy.

The indifference on the part of the German media to the slaughter taking place in Fallujah is so striking and widespread that one cannot conclude that it represents merely an oversight or the standpoint of individual editorial boards. There is no lack of information indicating that the war crimes currently taking place in Fallujah can quite justifiably be compared with atrocities committed by the German army in the Second World War.

The numbers speak for themselves. In excess of 10,000 US soldiers, armed to the teeth and supported by aerial bombardment and tanks, confront a force of 3,000 primitively armed rebels.

While American infantry waited a safe distance away, jets, helicopters, tanks and other armoured vehicles pounded the buildings ahead of them with rockets, shells and heavy-calibre machineguns to clear them of any defenders. Artillery bombarded residential areas with phosphorous rounds, which explode into a fireball that cannot be put out with water.

Iraqi journalist Fadil al-Badrani, reporting for Reuters from Fallujah, recounted on Tuesday from the beleaguered city: "Every minute, hundreds of bombs and shells are exploding.... The north of the city is in flames. I can see fire and smoke. Fallujah has become like hell." On the following day the same journalist reported that nearly half of the city's 120 mosques "had been destroyed after being targeted by US air and tank strikes."

Even the censored reports of the "embedded" journalists leave no doubt that no attempt has been made by the US military to avoid civilian casualties.

By ignoring, suppressing or playing down the significance of such information the German media are making themselves accomplices to a war crime. The basis for their stance is a mixture of political cowardice and adaptation. Since it became clear that George W. Bush had been reelected for a further four years the German government has outdone itself in declarations of loyalty and efforts to curry favour with the Washington administration. As far as they are concerned the election result of November 2 is sufficient to legitimise all of Washington's past and future crimes.

This position is reflected in the media. In contrast to America—where the press and television is largely controlled by a handful of media concerns enjoying close links to the government—the German government cannot simply dictate its line to the German press. But the reaction by a large majority of journalists and members of editorial boards expresses a reflex developed over generations by German intellectuals and the middle class—respect before every source of power and authority. Following Bush's reelection any criticism of the American conduct of the war in Iraq has broadly dissipated. Large sections of the German intelligentsia and middle class adopted a similar attitude when they admired Bismarck, bowed down to Wilhelm II, voted in favour of Hindenburg, and subordinated themselves to the rule of Hitler.

Silence over the crimes committed by the US in Iraq does not mean that the political and media establishment rules out future conflicts and disputes with the transatlantic super power. Quite the opposite. But they do not want to prepare for such conflicts by arousing and appealing to a sense of justice within the population as a whole. In light of popular discontent with the social situation in Germany this would be too risky and dangerous. Instead they emphasise the necessity of military rearmament in order to be able to measure up to America in future "at eye level."

In this respect the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which has close links to Germany's ruling German Social Democratic Party (SPD), shares common ground with these circles. In a commentary on the reelection of George W. Bush, Martin Winter commented that "America's election forces Europe to get up on its own feet.... Only a strong Europe, which takes up responsibility, will be respected by the US."

On the other side of the Rhine this standpoint is expressed more clearly. In a lead article, the French daily *Le Monde* writes that the reelection of Bush will wake up Europe. The conclusion reads: "Europe must become stronger. It cannot afford to lose time." In this respect, two points are important: "First Europe must have the strength, and not just be treated as a 'pygmy,' as the American neo-conservatives maintain with some justification. One must therefore establish the defence of Europe at an accelerated speed, and in this respect a European defence industry. Secondly, Europe must overcome its economic weaknesses."

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