

Germany: parliamentary panel to probe intelligence service's role in Iraq war

Peter Schwarz
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Germany's Free Democratic Party (FDP) joined on Monday, March 6, with the Left Party and Green Party in calling for a parliamentary committee of inquiry into the role played by the German Intelligence Service (BND) in the Iraq war.

Together, these three opposition parties have a sufficient number of deputies in the German parliament (Bundestag) to force the convening of such a committee against the wishes of the grand coalition government of Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Social Union, (CSU). The opposition parties still must draft an agenda for such an investigation, and failure to reach an agreement could still block the inquiry.

Even if the inquiry does take place, it would be wrong to expect much from such an investigation. The government has already made clear that it is determined not to release further information. According to Olaf Scholz, the secretary of the SPD parliamentary fraction, "A committee of inquiry brings nothing, clarifies nothing further and will not lead to new information." For their part, the FDP, the Greens and the Left Party have little interest in any exposure of the activities of the BND. They only decided in favor of an inquiry when their role as an opposition came increasingly under scrutiny following new revelations regarding the BND over past weeks.

Speakers for the SPD and Union parties warned of a danger to national security if the committee looked too closely into the affairs of the intelligence service. The SPD expert on domestic affairs, Dieter Wiefelspütz, claimed in the *Berliner Zeitung* that never before "has there been such a public airing of the activities of the Germany secret service." If this process was deepened by a committee of inquiry, Wiefelspütz warned, it could endanger the "operability of our intelligence services." And the vice chairman of the Union parliamentary group, Wolfgang Bosbach, said he hoped, "the international cooperation of the (intelligence) services would not be damaged by the way the committee carries out its work".

Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) is categorically opposed to a parliamentary investigation. Fearing damage to the reputation of Fischer, who was jointly responsible for the activities of the intelligence service in the last government, the Green parliamentary fraction resisted calls for an inquiry for quite some time. Consensus for such an inquiry did not exist, for example, in January because of opposition by the Greens, although it was clear at the time that BND agents stationed in Baghdad had passed on information to the US crucial to the conduct of the war. Only after the government entangled itself in a web of lies and contradictions, and was finally forced to admit that the BND had passed on strategic information about military targets, did the Greens change their attitude.

In contrast to the Greens, the FDP was neither part of the last government, nor is part of the current one, and therefore has nothing to fear from such an inquiry. At the same time, however, FDP members occupied the post of Foreign Minister and head of the secret services in a

number of German postwar governments, and the party still maintains close links with the BND. Consequently, it was the last opposition party to decide in favor of a committee of inquiry, and only after the *New York Times* recently published new exposures involving the handing over by the BND to US forces of a plan for the defense of Baghdad.

Up until now, the Left Party has been the most consistent advocate of a parliamentary inquiry, but it has its own reasons for not wanting to tread on the toes of the BND. The avowed aim of the Left Party is the formation of a coalition with the SPD, should the grand coalition collapse. Such coalitions already exist on a state level in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The leaders of the Left Party parliamentary fraction, Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, know that they will never be accepted as partners for such a coalition with the SPD on a federal basis if their "reliability with regard to security policy," i.e., their loyalty to the army and secret services, is called into question. In 1999, the Greens had already sacrificed their own pacifist policies and agreed to the Kosovo war as the price for entry into a national coalition with the SPD.

One can assume, therefore, that the committee will abide by the government's demand that it do nothing to endanger "the international cooperation of the secret services" limiting itself to damage control. Everything which has so far been exposed about the role of the BND in the Iraq war has come from exposures made by the German and American media rather than any eagerness on the part of the opposition for clarification.

In addition, such a parliamentary committee of inquiry is not as public as is generally presented. According to a law passed in 2001, the government can no longer withhold documents or statements from such a committee of inquiry; if there is any dispute over issues regarding secrecy then the final decision falls to the Federal Constitutional Court. At the same time, the new law threatens committee members who leak information of the proceedings with prison sentences of up to five years.

Facts which have emerged over the past few weeks make it clear that the repudiation of the Iraq war by Germany's former SPD-Green government amounted to a deception of the electorate and a major fraud.

The SPD and the Greens were able to overcome declining support and win the federal election in the autumn of 2002 on the basis of their clear rejection of the imminent Iraq war. Then, when the US actually attacked Iraq in violation of international law, the SPD-Green government not only put German air space and US bases in Germany at the disposal of the aggressor, it also stationed two BND agents in Baghdad who supplied the US with information crucial for the conduct of the war.

After initial denials, the German government eventually confirmed that one month before the outbreak of the war, the BND stationed two agents in Baghdad and a contact man in the US headquarters in Qatar, who supplied the American military secret service (DIA) with information via the BND headquarters in Germany. In at least seven cases, such information included coordinates of Iraqi military units, i.e., the identification of war targets.

According to one of the confidential reports of the American supreme command quoted by the *New York Times*, the BND is alleged to have handed over to the US command a defense plan of Baghdad drawn up by Saddam's officers. The German government has repeatedly denied this claim. In any event, the US Army regarded the contribution made by the BND to the war effort to be so important that three BND agents were awarded the *Meritorious Service Medal*. The justification for the award was that the German agents supplied "information to the US central command crucial for the support of combat operations in Iraq."

Up until now, the German government has only acknowledged those facts which could not possibly be denied, and in this respect the SPD and the Union parties have formed a common front. The SPD has no interest in the truth coming out because it fears losing its reputation as an antiwar party, and also because members of the current government could be endangered. In the middle of the dispute is the current German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who as head of chancellery under former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) was responsible for the secret services. Any further exposures could threaten the loss of his current post. The Union is opposed to lifting the veil of secrecy because it favors intensified links between the German and US secret services, particularly with regard to future wars—for example against Iran.

Numerous questions remain to be answered, such as, to what extent were high ranking government members and agencies informed about the details of the work of the BND agents in Baghdad. There is much to indicate that what has come out so far is merely the tip of the iceberg. In ritualistic fashion, the government, opposition and press have repeated that the secret services can only carry out their work when they remain secret—an indication that there is much more that could be uncovered.

Murkiness still surrounds the role of the German state in the kidnapping of the German citizen Khaled el-Masri, who was transported by the CIA to Afghanistan and then held and tortured for five months. Also still to be clarified is the role of German officials in the interrogation of prisoners held in torture prisons in Damascus and Guantánamo Bay. Both issues are due to be dealt with by the committee of inquiry.

Against a background of continuous new revelations, some SPD politicians have sought to go on the offensive.

On March 3, Erhard Eppler published a commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The 79-year-old is a stalwart of the SPD and regarded as somewhat of a moral authority in the party. A party member for 50, he was active as minister in no less than three governments (Georg Kiesinger, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt) and was a member of the SPD's party executive for 21 years. He has assumed leading posts within the Evangelist church and has been long regarded as a pacifist in the party.

Eppler's contribution is titled: "Wrong standards are being used in the BND affair." He admits that from the start the Iraq war was illegal. "When the US government gave orders for its squadrons...to attack Iraq, respectable legal sources regarded this as a clear violation of international law," he writes, adding, "Today this is hardly disputed."

Nevertheless, the Schröder/Fischer government persistently refrained from referring to the war as illegal. The reason was "not legal, but rather political...If the German government, which regarded this war as unnecessary, stupid and counter productive, had publicly declared it to be illegal then it would have been forced to ban the US Air Force from flying over German territory, withdraw German pilots from AWACS reconnaissance aircraft over Turkey and instruct German soldiers to refrain from guarding American barracks in Germany."

This is a remarkable confession. The Schröder/Fischer government refused to call the war illegal because it would have had to draw conclusions which, according to Eppler, "would have irreparably damaged our relations with our most important NATO partner." In other words, good relations with the Bush administration were more important than the prevention of a criminal war, which has since cost the lives of

hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians and nearly 3,000 American soldiers.

What a thoroughly hypocritical stance! Publicly, Schröder and Fischer argued against the war and encouraged hopes amongst broad layers of the population which decisively rejected the war, while secretly, they worried about maintaining good relations with Washington and—as we now know—did everything in order to appease the Bush government and prove their value as "partners."

In so doing, the SPD-Green government adopted the same relation to US imperialism as it did to the powerful business lobbies in Germany. Publicly, it posed as an advocate on behalf of the underprivileged and occasionally grumbled about financial "locusts," while at the time it followed to the letter the dictates of Germany's big business circles. Finally, under pressure from the latter, Schröder even agreed to prematurely dissolve parliament in order to make way for an even more right-wing government under Angela Merkel (CDU).

Later on in his article, Eppler writes: "The task of the Schröder/Fischer government in 2003 did not consist in bluntly saying to the Americans what it thought about this war, but saving the relationship with the US beyond the war." This, he maintains, was "in agreement with the wishes of all Germans" including "the majority who deplored the war at that time."

Here Eppler is totally distorting the truth. The millions who voted Schröder and Fischer into a second term of office and demonstrated against the Iraq war did not do so to "save the relationship with the US beyond the war," but because they rejected the Bush administration, its illegal war, its attacks on democratic rights and its economic policies in the interests of the super-rich. If the German government had banned the use of American bases on German soil, then it would have created a substantial obstacle to the pursuit of the war and possibly even prevented it.

The newspaper *Die Zeit*, which includes amongst its editors the 87-year-old veteran Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt, takes a similar line as Eppler.

Writing in the paper's online edition, Robert Leicht called the "alleged BND Iraq scandal one of the most amazing illusory affairs which I have ever come across." His reason: The Schröder government refused to send German troops to assist in the Iraq war but made no grand "promises," including "the promise to do all in his power to prevent such a war deployment by the US-led coalition.....nor obstruct it by refusing in any manner whatsoever direct or indirect support."

For its part, the Federal Republic of Germany supported the Americans at that time in a much more thorough and open way than the two BND agents: "American troops were allowed to continue to use their bases on German soil, also for war deployment in the Middle East. Their airplanes were allowed to fly over Germany. German soldiers guarded American institutions, freeing up American forces for the war. The Federal Republic also shifted ABC chemical warfare tanks to Kuwait as a precautionary measure. German soldiers flew in AWACS airplanes and remained on duty on the ground in the event of protecting Turkey against an attack from Iraq."

What are you getting excited about, Leicht is saying, you should have expected to be deceived by your government. At the same time, he also fully acknowledges that the "war was illegal; according to all classical criteria."

The cynicism with which Eppler and Leicht oppose a committee of inquiry has less to do with the past than with the future. Their message is that German public opinion should become accustomed to the fact that the government acts differently from its declared public positions, and supports wars through secret diplomacy.



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