

Grisly photos expose real nature of Germany's "peace mission" in Afghanistan

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On October 25, the German tabloid *Bild* published photographs showing German soldiers in Afghanistan desecrating a human skull. The photos, taken in 2003, show members of a military unit from Bavaria on patrol outside the Afghan capital Kabul posing with a human skull and attaching the skull to the hood of a military vehicle. In one case an unidentified soldier is shown holding the skull next to his exposed penis.

The authenticity of the photos is confirmed by the vehicles depicted, which have German markings and also those of ISAF, the NATO-led "peacekeeping" force. As part of the ISAF mission, Germany currently has some 2,800 soldiers in Afghanistan, based in Kabul and in the north of the country.

The publication of the *Bild* photos was followed on Thursday by fresh photos released by a German television station. These were taken in May 2004 and show similar scenes featuring German soldiers and a skull.

The photos recall the infamous snapshots showing US military forces at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison sexually humiliating and torturing detainees. Their publication has sparked a torrent of statements from German political and military circles anxious to contain popular revulsion and head off popular opposition to Germany's role in suppressing Afghan resistance to foreign occupation. The grand coalition government of the conservative parties and the Social Democrats (SPD) has embarked on an ambitious program to expand Germany's military presence around the world.

The connection between the German photos and those of US atrocities in Iraq was immediately drawn by Volker Perthes, director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, who commented: "Our guys are supposed to be in Afghanistan to help stabilize things, not to kick around prisoners.... This embarrasses us and qualifies a bit our discussion about what American soldiers are doing in Abu Ghraib."

Prominent German politicians were quick to condemn the pictures. Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) said the photos were "disgusting" and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) declared that the soldiers' "inexcusable behaviour damages the image of the army and our country." The defence minister, Franz Josef Jung (CDU), has ordered an investigation of seven army (Bundeswehr) soldiers alleged to appear in the photos.

While German politicians have criticised the obscene behaviour of the soldiers, military leaders have been quick to claim that the incident concerns a "few rotten apples" who are not representative of the Bundeswehr as a whole, and argue that it should not be allowed to impair the activities of the German army. Ex-general Klaus Reinhardt, former head of the international peace force in Kosovo, declared that

the photos were "absolutely distasteful ... but we should not throw out the baby with the bath water." He warned against any criticism of Germany's role in Afghanistan.

The scandal has come at an awkward time for Defence Minister Jung, who on the same day as the release of the photos presented a new strategy paper ("White Book") for the Bundeswehr aimed at cementing its role as an "international intervention force." Such a role, the paper asserts, is "vital in redefining Germany's security priorities."

Also on the same day the German cabinet agreed to extend the activities of the German elite unit (KSK) in Afghanistan.

The claim that the *Bild* photos are a mere aberration is not born out by the recent history of the Bundeswehr. In June of this year press reports surfaced of degrading and obscene "initiation practices" carried out within an elite paratroop regiment based in Zweibrücken. The allegations were so serious that the planned dispatch of the unit to Congo was cancelled.

In 2004, the state attorney's office commenced proceedings against 18 army training officers based at the Freiherr-vom-Stein barracks who were alleged to have employed torture methods, including the application of electric cables, on young recruits. And in 1996, police confiscated a video made by German troops preparing for deployment to Bosnia. The video featured young troops rehearsing torture scenes and acting out a scene involving the rape of a woman.

Despite the disclaimers of an "isolated incident" and "rotten apples," the *Bild* photos give a true indication of the nature of the German deployment in Afghanistan and other countries. The brutalisation of young recruits is becoming an accepted practice in an army which is increasingly been used for imperialist interventions around the world.

The pictures published in *Bild* undermine the campaign, so carefully cultivated by virtually all of Germany's established parties, to depict Bundeswehr interventions abroad as peace missions that do not involve direct military engagements. Germany is, in fact, reemerging in the twenty-first century as a potent imperialist power prepared to use all means to defend and extend its interests.

For a long period after the Second World War, a consensus in favour of pacifism prevailed in Germany. In reaction to the horrors of fascism and the barbaric war of aggression waged by Hitler's troops, the West German constitution stipulated an exclusively defensive role for German troops, who were designated "citizens in uniform" in the postwar parlance. The principal architects of the shift towards a revival of German militarism were the SPD and the Green Party, who ruled in a coalition government for seven years. They opened the way for the first international military intervention by German troops since World War Two.

The open breach of the “defence-only” principle was set in motion with the election of the SPD-Green coalition government in 1998. In late 1998, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) gave the order to send German troops to the former Yugoslavia. The ideological justification for such an unprecedented reversal of policy—the first officially sanctioned intervention by German troops on foreign soil since the end of World War Two—was delivered by Defence Minister Rudolph Scharping (SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens), who both cynically justified German participation in the NATO air war against Serbia, portrayed as a humanitarian defence of Kosovo Albanians against genocide, by referring to the Nazi holocaust against the Jews.

Taking their cue from the media, which vastly exaggerated the extent of Serbian attacks on Albanian Kosovars, both men declared that the behaviour of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was comparable to that of Adolf Hitler. Fischer said of the German role in the air war, “For the first time this century Germany is on the right side.”

German participation in the imperialist intervention in Kosovo represented a break with the country’s strictly defensive postwar policy, and since then the German government has done everything in its power to further undermine longstanding fears among the German people of a return to German militarism.

Germany initially sent a few hundred troops in 2001 to take part in the US-led “war against terror” in Afghanistan, but German involvement grew as America was increasingly forced to concentrate on its main battlefield—Iraq.

In 2003, the year in which the *Bild* photographs were taken, both Chancellor Schröder and Foreign Minister Fischer sought to justify increasing the size of the German contingent in Afghanistan by stressing the peaceful character of the intervention. They declared that the deployment of German troops to the conflict-torn north of the country was for the purpose of giving assistance in Konduz for the reconstruction of roads, schools and hospitals, as well as for training police. The job of the German army, they said, would be to protect civilian aid workers. The German chancellor referred to a “reconstruction dividend” for the people of Afghanistan.

Just a few weeks previously, the American president had praised the “great work of the German army in Afghanistan,” and the head of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar, had echoed Bush’s favourable comments. Following approval from Washington, Schröder pressed ahead with his plans for an expanded intervention in Afghanistan and brought together his “security cabinet” to make his intentions public.

Since then, Germany has become a leading military player in Afghanistan and has spread its troops across the globe. The historic role of the Schröder government in ditching the country’s pacifist consensus was acknowledged by Constanze Stelzenmüller of the Berlin office of the German Marshall Fund: “If there is a historic achievement of the Schröder government, it was overcoming this taboo, while preserving the policy emphasis on civilian power.”

The initiative began by Schröder and Fischer has been continued and intensified by their successors in the grand coalition government led by Angela Merkel. An estimated 8,000 German troops are currently deployed abroad and are taking part in 10 international military missions in regions as diverse as Kosovo, Bosnia, the Horn of Africa, Sudan and Georgia. A total of 200,000 German soldiers have served in international missions since 1998.

In addition to renewing this week the participation of its special

forces in Afghanistan, the Merkel government recently gave the green light for the dispatch of German troops to war-torn Congo, and also agreed to the single largest foreign deployment by the German military, which is set to command a naval force patrolling the coast of Lebanon on behalf of the European Union military force in the region. The increasingly aggressive foreign policy of the German government since the early 1990s has thus far cost the lives of 63 German soldiers.

The photos published this week are one more piece in a puzzle that reveals the thoroughly imperialist methods and operations of the German state and its military. At the start of this year it was revealed the German intelligence service had cooperated with the US secret services in intelligence gathering prior to and following the US invasion of Iraq. Despite the official “no” from Berlin on direct participation in the Iraq war, the German secret service and selected military units continued to work closely with the American military and CIA behind the scenes and outside of any parliamentary control.

Just this week it was revealed that elite KSK units were involved in guarding secret CIA detention centres in Afghanistan at least since 2002, and took part in the interrogation of the German-born Turkish citizen, Murat Kurnaz.

Irrespective of the hypocritical cries of horror from official political and military circles in Germany regarding the *Bild* photos, everything points to an increase in the carnage and brutality in Afghanistan. July 2006 was the bloodiest month in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of the country in October 2001. Between January and August it is estimated that at least 1,700 people were killed in fighting across the country, and the death toll has soared within recent days. According to Afghan sources, 90 civilians were slaughtered in an ISAF air bombardment in Kandahar at the start of this week.

With imperialist forces increasingly losing control of Afghanistan, the German government has made clear its determination to intensify its involvement. Its new “White Book” is aimed at providing the necessary cover for its operations abroad. Germany is also expected to come under increasing pressure from other countries to extend its military involvements at the start of 2007, when it is due to take over the presidencies of both the European Union and the G-8.

The path of militarism and rearmament, which was given such a decisive impulse by the SPD-Green government less than a decade ago, has its own iron logic. It requires that the high command instil the most primitive, debased and degenerate instincts in its young soldiers. The *Bild* pictures reveal the extent to which this process has advanced within the German army. In treading the path of militarism, the German government and its political allies are reawakening political and military forces and traditions which just over a half-century ago led to a global catastrophe.



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