

German military to engage more offensively in Afghanistan

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The poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht once spoke of “the necessity of propaganda” to convince people “That the creation of an army is an act of peace / Every new tank is a dove of peace / And each new regiment further evidence / Of the love of peace”. But according to Brecht, propaganda reaches the limit of its effectiveness when it appears too blatantly opposed to reality and the experience of its victims.

The German military’s “peace mission” in Afghanistan has reached such a limit. The recent deaths of three German soldiers has renewed controversy about how much longer it can be kept silent that the German army in the Hindu Kush is waging a war. On July 23, three soldiers lost their lives in an exchange of fire with insurgents in the Kunduz region of northern Afghanistan. This brought to 35 the number of losses suffered by the German army during the Afghanistan deployment.

Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung reacted by announcing that, in future, German soldiers would be allowed to employ their weapons more offensively: “Whoever attacks us will face a fight and the German army knows how to respond.” According to army sources, German soldiers have so far been restrained from reacting defensively in dangerous situations. However, they will now be expected to actively pursue combat with the enemies of the occupation troops. Rainer Arnold, defence spokesman for the SPD (Social Democratic Party), has called for the soldiers’ official code of conduct to be extended to allow for the preventative use of force against potential terrorists.

While Jung avoids using the word “war,” despite adhering to the expression “combat mission,” other politicians have demanded that the rhetoric should conform to conditions on the ground. Michael Wolffsohn from the National Army University in Munich said on MDR Radio that the government was afraid to declare, “that a high price has to be paid for peace, freedom and security. The population hasn’t yet got used to this fact and that seems to be why politicians behave as they do.”

Ulrich Kirsch, head of the Military Veterans Association,

is adamant about the nature of the Afghanistan deployment. He told SW Radio: “When you consider that they’re in an operation where they face death and injury, where they themselves have to kill people, then you can only conclude that they are already in a war.” Peter Struck, leader of the SPD parliamentary fraction, also spoke of a “war against the Taliban.” At the same time, he criticised Chancellor Angela Merkel for not doing enough to encourage support for the war among the German people.

Due to widespread opposition—recent polls reveal that over two thirds of the population reject the engagement of the German army in Afghanistan—an attempt was made for a long time to sell the deployment of troops as “a peace mission” or “a stabilisation operation.” It was stressed that the operation of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force, to which German troops are mostly assigned) is not committed to “fighting opposing military forces” as is the American OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom), but principally to “maintaining security.” Significant sections of the political establishment now want to put an end to this restrictive provision.

In reality, it is no longer possible to distinguish between these military operations in Afghanistan. The Foundation for Science and Politics, which counsels the federal parliament, stated last year: “Since 2006, the ISAF mission has changed from a purely stabilising operation to one whose main aim is to combat rebellion throughout Afghanistan.”

Between the years 2004 and 2006, the scope of the ISAF operation was systematically expanded. At first restricted to the capital city of Kabul, it now covers the whole country. Moreover, the claim that the ISAF mandate, in contrast to the OEF mandate, prohibits engaging “terrorists” in combat does not hold up upon closer inspection. ISAF soldiers are also deployed to fight “insurgents” and can request the support of OEF troops to do so.

When the area of deployment was extended, troop strength was also greatly increased. Over the years, the ISAF quota rose from 5,600 soldiers (2003) to 10,000 (2005) and 30,000 (2007), and finally to more than 50,000 combat troops in

2008. The focus of the military operation in Afghanistan has thus changed significantly, because only about 10,000 OEF troops are supporting the 50,000 ISAF soldiers.

In view of this change in the composition of troops, the ISAF deployment is reflecting with increasing transparency the true character of the war in Afghanistan. Despite all propaganda to the contrary, it has been a war in pursuit of imperialist objectives from the very beginning. Because of its geographical location, the country bordering the Hindu Kush is of great strategic significance. It lies between the Indian Ocean and the oil and gas rich region of Central Asia, as well as being near or directly adjacent to a number of rapidly advancing powers: China, India, Pakistan and Iran.

For a long time, the United States has therefore regarded domination of Afghanistan as essential for the preservation of its world power status. War plans were already drawn up by the time the attacks of September 11, 2001 provided the official reason for launching the invasion. For years previously, the US had armed and financed the Afghan revolt against the Soviet army. For its part, the German army is in Afghanistan because Germany refuses to be left out of the new imperialist drive to carve up the world. This is what former defence minister Peter Struck meant when he said that Germany is being defended in the Hindu Kush.

The enormous increase in the number of troops has been due to the growth of resistance to the occupation and has, itself, contributed to an escalation of the conflict. According to the Militarization Information Post (IMI), suicide attacks rose from 5 (2001-2004) to 17 (2005), and then to 123 (2006) and finally 131 (2007). Armed encounters increased from 1,755 (2005) to 3,589 (2006) and 6,000 (2007) to around 8,000 in 2008. The number of casualties rose correspondingly. In 2007 about 8,000 Afghans died, of whom more than 1,500 were civilians (although the number of unrecorded cases is much higher). Experts believe that more civilians have been killed by ISAF soldiers than by OEF troops.

The German army is fully supporting NATO's change of strategy by engaging more aggressively with the enemy. It contributes 3,600 troops to the ISAF, the third largest quota after the US and Britain.

The troops' presence can no longer be sold to the soldiers in Afghanistan or to the population in Germany as a humanitarian operation. Reinhold Robbe, the ombudsman for the armed forces in the federal parliament, summed up the mood of the troops. The soldiers had told him: "We're not building bridges or sinking wells here. We're waging war." Hardly a day passes without army patrols coming under attack from Kalashnikovs and bazookas.

War has its own logic. If German soldiers are to kill local Afghans who are defending themselves against the

occupation—and if they have to see every civilian as a potential terrorist—they have to be psychologically prepared. They cannot be urged into an "offensive against an insurgency" if they are simultaneously told they are on a "peace mission."

Similarly, the German public will no longer be horrified by accusations of torture, carried out by the German KSK (Special Commando Forces) in Afghanistan, as it was by the charges of the former Guantánamo prisoner, Murat Kurnaz. The macabre treatment of victims, meted out by German soldiers, can no longer be allowed to arouse scandal, as happened in the autumn of 2006. Nor can investigations any longer be permitted to drag on month after month in order to establish the innocence or guilt of German soldiers, charged with shooting civilians, as was the case last August. The public must be made to accustom itself to the brutality of war.

This is the aim of both the discussion about a new code of conduct for German soldiers, which takes account of "the changed situation in Afghanistan," and the demand made by Defence Minister Jung for the establishment of at least one public prosecutor's office, concentrating on ISAF soldiers and sensitive to their special standing. In practice this will amount to a get-out-of-jail-free pass for the military.

To the extent that rhetoric concerning a peace mission is to be discarded, another kind of propaganda will have to take its place. This is the reason behind the revival of the German army's cult of heroes. Last October, the defence minister referred to soldiers killed in service as "the fallen." Around this time, a foundation stone for the first "memorial to the German army" was laid. This will serve to commemorate members of the national army, who "lost their lives in the course of fulfilling their duties for the Federal Republic of Germany."



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