

What happened in Kunduz?

The German army steps up its deployment in Afghanistan

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Two weeks after the bloodiest military action in the history of the post-war German army, questions are mounting over what exactly happened in Kunduz on September 4.

The commander of the Province Reconstruction Team in Kunduz, Colonel Georg Klein, ordered an air strike in the early hours of the morning against a hijacked truck filled with gasoline. According to official Afghan sources, 119 people died in the attack. The report by a commission of inquiry set up by President Hamid Karzai listed among the victims 69 Taliban and 30 civilians dead, with 11 Taliban and 9 civilians wounded. A physician, who treated the victims in a nearby hospital, confirmed that children were among the victims.

The German government reacted to this massacre with a systematic campaign of disinformation. Along with broad sections of the German media the government defended the air strike and continues to defend it up to the present. The spokesmen for the German Defence Ministry issued a string of unmitigated lies. What has been described by some as an “information disaster” on the part of defence secretary, Franz Josef Jung, is in fact a deliberate campaign to hoodwink the public.

Although the first details of the attack emerged after just a few hours, with high-ranking NATO representatives admitting there had been civilian victims, Jung repeatedly maintained for days that this was not the case. Jung kept to his story even after a statement by the ISAF commander, US General Stanley McChrystal, who personally visited the scene two days after the attack in the company of a journalist in *Washington Post*, who published numerous details of what had taken place.

For no less than four days the Ministry of Defence denied the content of an interim NATO report, which arrived in Berlin on September 7 and strongly implicated the German army in the massacre. Even after the publication of the official Afghan report, which confirmed the deaths of 30 civilians, Jung communicated in offhand fashion through a spokesman last Monday: “This attack was necessary from a military point of view,” and his ministry rejects any “premature judgments.” The federal government wanted to wait until further investigations by NATO, the UN and the Red Cross were completed.

On September 8, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) delivered a government declaration in the German parliament, the Bundestag, giving her backing to the Defence Secretary. She also rejected any “pre-judgments” of the German army and publicly threatened: “I will not tolerate such (judgments) at home or from abroad.”

Merkel, who usually likes to play the role of the conciliatory

politician ready to listen to the other side, allowed her mask to drop for a moment. Following what the British *Guardian* described as the “deadliest military operation by Germany since the end of the Second World War,” Merkel refused to tolerate any criticism! In so doing she not only sought to blame her NATO allies, which had publicly criticized the air strike, but also sought to intimidate any critical reportage and opposition inside Germany. Merkel’s aggressive stance, together with the shameless campaign of disinformation by the Defence Ministry, smacks of censorship.

Two weeks after the massacre the German government has barricaded itself behind a wall of the silence. Numerous details of the attack have emerged in the meantime, but questions remain unanswered about who is ultimately responsible, who ordered the attack and on what basis the order was given. The information given so far in response to these questions stands in glaring contrast to the known details.

Incompatible with the facts is the much repeated statement that Colonel Klein gave the order for the destruction of the two tankers without consulting his superiors because he feared a suicide attack on the German field camp in Kunduz and was under time pressure.

In its latest edition the German magazine *Der Spiegel* published a map of the region and an exact time plan, which makes clear that the tankers had been hijacked just a few hundred meters away from the German camp, but then drove six kilometres away until becoming bogged down on a sand bank in the river Kunduz.

They were discovered at this location at 21:14 by a US bomber equipped with night sights, which transferred live video recordings back to the German field camp. It continued to observe the hijackers until midnight and was then replaced by two F-15 fighters at around 1:08 a.m. The F-15s continued to send live pictures until beginning their bombing run at 1:50 a.m.

This means that Klein had the hijackers under observation for over four-and-a-half hours before the air strike took place. Known to be a temperate and experienced officer, it is very unlikely that the colonel did not consult his superiors during this time. He must also have known that his instruction to bomb violated ISAF engagement regulations, which only permit such offensive strikes when soldiers are in combat or in direct danger. Neither case applied in Kunduz.

If the hijackers had really planned an attack they would have had to free the two tankers from the sand and then drive back the six kilometres they had already travelled. This was sufficient time for the German army to prepare an appropriate reaction. The fact that the tankers drove away from the German camp, before becoming bogged

down, indicates that the rebels never planned such an attack.

It is also evident that based on the intensive aerial observation the German commanders must have known that civilians were in the immediate vicinity of the tankers. This is underlined by the presence of a tractor, which is known to have been destroyed in the attack.

The question then arises: has Colonel Klein been made a scapegoat under conditions where the order for the attack was given at a higher level, in an attempt to set a precedent? Despite the serious violation of engagement regulations Klein remains on duty and has not been suspended. He also has the support of prominent politicians plus inspector general Wolfgang Schneiderhan, the highest-ranking officer in the German army, who travelled to Kunduz in order to back Klein's version of events.

For some considerable time there has been a chorus of opinion from military and right-wing political circles that it is time the German army pulled off its kid gloves and conducted a "proper" war in Afghanistan. There are also intense conflicts between the different national contingents of troops inside Afghanistan. German soldiers have been ridiculed as "cowards" because the German army does not participate in the violent fighting in the south of the country. For their part German sources have repeatedly criticised the actions conducted by American forces against the civilian population. When General McChrystal along with a reporter from the *Washington Post* then appeared in Kunduz and publicly criticized the latest air strike, German political and military circles spoke of a "tit for tat" action.

According to reports from the front line of the war there has also been a marked change of mood amongst German soldiers. The massacre at Kunduz destroyed the myth that the role of the German army in Afghanistan is to support reconstruction and establish democracy. Instead there is open talk of combat and retaliatory measures. According to *Der Spiegel*, whose reporter visited the field camp in Kunduz shortly after the air strike, one NCO commented, "Today I thought it was absolutely right to bombard those tankers. We cannot bomb enough of these bastards."

In Afghanistan, as is the case in all colonial wars, the content of the war determines its form and not the reverse. Contrary to all official propaganda the military occupation of the country serves imperialist purposes. At stake is control of a country that lies at heart of a region with the world's richest energy deposits. The roots of the present war lie way back before the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. The US and its allies have interfered into the country's affairs for years and temporarily backed both their current opponents (Al Qaeda and the Taliban) and their current allies (the warlords and drug barons).

The imperialist occupation of the country inevitably brings the foreign troops into increasing conflict with the population. "The stream of insurgents is infinite," writes *Der Spiegel*, "and each new death produces dozens, perhaps even hundreds of new enemies; brothers, sons, cousins, who want revenge."

The US has reacted to this situation by stocking up its troops and expanding the war to Pakistan. The German government is determined not to be left out and does not want the US to monopolize the field. In this regard the massacre of Kunduz represents a turning point. Now there are calls from all sides that the German contingent be increased and its combat mandate extended with the argument that it is necessary to give the support needed for German soldiers risking their lives in Afghanistan.

In this respect a commentary last Saturday in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* is typical. Peter Blechschmidt writes that political circles and the media finally have to publicly acknowledge that Germany is at

war: "German soldiers are being attacked and are dying, German soldiers shoot back and extinguish human lives.... There has to be an end to all the attempts to sugar-coat the situation."

If one maintains the deployment, "one has to finally do it properly..." and "fundamentally change the conditions for the deployment." Blechschmidt demands: "The current stand of 4,500 soldiers is insufficient to successfully fight the ever stronger Taliban." Germany can "no longer refrain from the delicate task of providing air support" and its soldiers need "more legal security." Or to put it clearly, Blechschmidt demands more German troops, the deployment of German bombers and exemption from punishment for soldiers in Afghanistan.

All of the parties in the Bundestag have reacted to the Kunduz massacre in similar fashion.

Ruprecht Polenz (CDU), the chairman of the foreign committee of the Bundestag, said on Monday, "If it is necessary to increase our troop levels in order to assure the security of the northern region for which we have responsibility, then we will have to discuss it."

In the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, the spokesman for the Greens on security issues, Winfried Nachtwei, expressed his support for Colonel Klein and stated that the bombardment had to be seen in the context of "the development of the overall situation in the last few months.... Every day of ambushes, each day of engagements. Against this background something like this becomes plausible...." Besides, one cannot easily differentiate in the Hindukusch between the Taliban and civilians. Nachtwei reported that he had personally experienced in June how Colonel Klein had been criticized by the local secret services chief because of the restraint employed by the German military. The only way to proceed, however, was by striking back hard.

The chancellor candidate of the Social Democratic Party and foreign minister, Frank Walter-Steinmeier, reacted to the massacre of Kunduz with a 10-point program, which involves a substantial increase in the numbers of German security forces. Among other demands, Steinmeier wants to double the number of police trainers in the German sphere of responsibility, strengthen the Afghan army and concentrate military forces in "regions with a critical security situation"—i.e., intensified combat operations in such regions. These measures should then form the basis "for the withdrawal of the German Armed Forces from Afghanistan" in the next legislative period, according to the Steinmeier plan.

When some newspapers then reported that Steinmeier was calling for a withdrawal of German forces by the end of the legislative period in 2013, he rushed to explain that this was not in fact his position.

This was not enough to prevent Oskar Lafontaine, the chairman of the Left Party, from praising Steinmeier in the highest tones. "It is evident that the message is slowly reaching other parties, i.e., that there must be an end to the German Armed Forces mission in Afghanistan," he stated. In fact, Lafontaine's support for Steinmeier's plan makes clear that the Left Party is quite prepared to reconcile itself to the German military mission in Afghanistan.



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