

Der Spiegel defends the Afghan war

Alex Lantier
14 July 2010

In 1857, after the First Anglo-Afghan War, the great Marxist Friedrich Engels wrote: “The geographical position of Afghanistan, and the peculiar character of the people, invest the country with a political importance that can scarcely be overestimated in the affairs of Central Asia.”

Today, the bloody and unpopular NATO occupation of Afghanistan raises questions of immense significance throughout the world. What is this apparently endless war, which recently became the longest war in US history, and why is it continuing in defiance of public opinion in both Afghanistan and the nominally democratic NATO countries?

The German magazine *Der Spiegel* recently carried an article by essayist Dirk Kurbjuweit that addresses these questions, entitled “Afghanistan and the West: The Difficult Relationship Between Democracy and War.” It notes that two thirds of the German population oppose the war, especially after the Kunduz bombing incident, in which German Colonel Georg Klein called in an air raid that killed 142 Afghans.

The article’s profoundly reactionary conclusions are shared by all of the European ruling classes participating in the NATO occupation.

It is essentially a manifesto for war linked to a fatalistic type of jingoism. Stripped of its cynical ambiguities, *Der Spiegel*’s argument is that the Afghan war is so essential to German capitalism’s strategic interests that it must continue in violation of the will of the people. The main obstacle facing such a policy—popular opposition to war arising from the experiences of Nazism and World War II—must be overcome. In *Der Spiegel*’s words, such sentiment has been “overtaken by reality.”

Aware that its position is highly unpopular, *Der Spiegel* begins with various false excuses for the Afghan war. It describes the war as “justified, at the beginning at least.” It writes, “Economic reasons played no role at the time. The war was not launched because of the country’s reported large lithium reserves. Instead, it was a war against terror.”

Characteristically, *Der Spiegel* is recycling old lies that it no longer itself believes.

In fact, it later says that claims the Afghan occupation is part of a “war on terror” have “begun to crumble.” It notes that “No one knows whether Osama bin Laden can still be apprehended.” And even if he were, and Afghanistan completely emptied of his supporters, *Der Spiegel* writes, “Militant Islamism is sufficiently mobile to create bases elsewhere, in places like Pakistan and Yemen.”

That is to say, occupying Afghanistan has done nothing to protect the world from Al Qaeda. If this is the case, why peddle

claims that the invasion was part of a “war on terror”?

Der Spiegel mentions lithium to set up a straw man—no one claims that the Afghan war was about only that chemical element. *Der Spiegel* cites lithium to imply that “economic reasons” and the pursuit of strategic advantage in Asia played no role in the war.

This is simply absurd: Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, its potential to host energy pipelines, and its strategic location for military bases were well known to Washington when it invaded.

Der Spiegel does not even explain why it mentions lithium, an element widely used in batteries for laptops and other electronic equipment. However, lithium was recently listed in a *New York Times* article that revealed that the US military will auction off \$1 trillion in Afghan mineral wealth to select mining firms. The US aims to prevent these resources from falling into the hands of firms from China, one of the world’s main electronics manufacturers.

Der Spiegel then tries to make a humanitarian appeal for war: the NATO occupation is the only way to safely get Afghan workers to their jobs and Afghan girls to school. Speaking of the German-occupied zone in Afghanistan, it writes: “In Kunduz, Mazar-i-Sharif and elsewhere people are able to live normal lives without violence. They work and girls can go to school. The news of dead soldiers covers up the fact that this ordinary life exists. This normal life, too, is a success of the Bundeswehr [the German army].”

This is an attempt to fashion a more emotionally manipulative lie. People in Kunduz do not lead “normal lives without violence.” After all, as *Der Spiegel* acknowledged only a few paragraphs before, Colonel Klein’s air raid killed 142 residents of the area.

The claim that NATO is fighting for girls’ education is belied by any serious recounting of NATO’s record in Afghanistan—its support for traditionalist anti-Soviet *mujahedin* during the 1980s, for the Taliban when they were operating with US and Pakistani backing in the 1990s, and for various warlords in occupied Afghanistan today.

Der Spiegel next turns to the sacrifices it wants the German population to make for this war. Germans need to get used to dying for their country, it asserts, writing: “The death of a young person is always a catastrophe. The question is whether Germany can consider it reasonable to expect some of its citizens to face such a catastrophe. The answer is yes.”

Der Spiegel sees the 43 German soldiers killed so far as a small payment in blood for the type of policy that Berlin must carry out: “This is a horribly high number, but also an unexpectedly low number. What nation has been embroiled in a war for eight years without having to mourn thousands or hundreds of thousands of deaths? It always seems cynical to treat the dead as a statistic, and

yet one can honestly say that this war has not claimed a terrible high death toll.”

The article poses the following problem: if the state embarks on large-scale killing, mass anti-war sentiment risks making it impossible to secure majority support for state policy. *Der Spiegel* writes that “the majority of Germans still have no passionate relationship with democracy and the nation.” But such passion “is necessary to make death halfway bearable. And when a young person dies, in particular, we need a higher purpose to give us comfort.”

Der Spiegel concludes that “pacifism has betrayed democracy.”

This remarkable formula demands explanation. It is hardly that democratic rule has been overthrown by a pacifist-led coup, which is suppressing popular demands for war. Rather, the formula is an assertion that since that the population opposes the war that the state is determined to wage, the pretense of democratic rule is increasingly difficult to maintain.

Der Spiegel does not spell out the inescapable conclusion of its arguments—that if the people have “betrayed” the state by opposing its wars, the devil with democracy!

The magazine makes several arguments supporting this position. First, it advances the absurd claim that democracy signifies the functioning of the state machine as it ignores popular opinion.

It writes: “The war in Afghanistan supposedly lacks legitimacy because two-thirds of German citizens are opposed to it. But that is the biggest fallacy in this debate. Germany has a representative democracy, in which politicians stand for elections once every four years. In the interim, however, they have free rein within the confines of Germany’s constitution and laws.”

Such a formulation testifies to the absence of democratic consciousness in the leading organs of the German and European press. This view turns elections into a sort of Enabling Act—a legal formality that, once accomplished, gives the state the right to do whatever it pleases.

As is well known, Germany’s traditional parties of government, the ruling conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the former coalition partners—the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens (who launched German participation in the war when Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was in power in 2001)—support the war, despite popular opposition. In the absence of a mass working class party, the ruling class has “free rein” to impose its unpopular war policy, elections or no.

Even more sinister is *Der Spiegel*’s argument that the German public must learn to rethink its attitude to the Nazis. The magazine laments that “should one comment that it is justifiable for German soldiers to risk their lives for their country, unease is likely to be the response.” The magazine notes that this sentiment “has something to do with Germany’s past. The Nazis sent millions of Germans to a death that was then celebrated as martyrdom.”

It sees such anti-militarist sentiment as outdated: “The phrase ‘no more wars,’ one of the guiding principles of modern-day Germany, is an obvious consequence of the country’s history. But this phrase has been overtaken by reality, now that Germany has been embroiled in a war for the last eight years.”

Der Spiegel’s position is that, as state policy will require many citizens to kill or be killed, popular opposition to mass killing must

be overcome. For *Der Spiegel*, the new word on Nazism is: Get over it.

Suddenly, at the end of the article, a new and important justification for the Afghan war emerges. For German Chancellor Angela Merkel, *Der Spiegel* writes, “Protecting her citizens is one of her most important duties.” It continues: “But she must also take into account the global situation, German interests, and the relationship with allies—mainly the United States, in this case. Only then can she conclude that 43 dead Germans are the price the country must pay, or possibly even 100 or 200.”

The magazine does not explain what it means by “German interests.” However, it cannot be a coincidence that *Der Spiegel*’s promotion of militarism comes as the financial crisis threatens to undermine German exports, the European currency, and international relations in Europe, as well as the Merkel government.

As the German ruling class is confronted with problems for which it has no good solutions, military force is coming to the fore in the minds of media and state personnel.

In one of the few frank passages of the article, *Der Spiegel* explains that it wants Germany to control eastern Europe, one of German industry’s main sources of cheap labor. It writes that Bosnia and Kosovo are “part of Europe, and Europe cannot allow civilization and civility to deteriorate along its periphery.” It adds: “This is where moral and geopolitical arguments come together. And if there is no other option, the Bundeswehr will remain in the region for another 100 years.”

This formula is the new motto of German imperialism: morality plus geopolitics equals 100-year military occupations. That such a policy can be proposed by a leading publication, only 65 years after the end of the Nazi occupation of large parts of Europe, is a devastating indictment of the political and moral state of European capitalism.

This is the language of a ruling class that has lost its head and is trying to erase memories of its past crimes as it prepares to commit new ones.

Certain questions must be posed if officials are weighing “the global situation” and deciding how many “dead Germans” the country must offer up. How many dead Germans (and dead Afghans, Serbs, Albanians, Americans, Canadians, Frenchmen and Britons) do politicians think the occupations of Afghanistan and Kosovo are worth? What price might they decide to pay for the North Stream gas pipeline, or for that matter the NATO alliance?

The working class, which is being told to make a sacrifice in lives for a war to which it is overwhelmingly opposed, has a right to know.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact