

German defence minister praises German deployment to Afghanistan

Peter Schwarz
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“Kunduz, this is the place where the German army (Bundeswehr) fought for the first time and had to learn how to fight,” Defence Minister Thomas de Maiziere declared last Sunday, as the German encampment in Kunduz was handed over to Afghan security forces.

His remark summed up the significance for the German ruling class of the ten-year Bundeswehr mission in the northern Afghan province. The German army and in particular the German public, which harbours a deep aversion to militarism following the horrors of two world wars, must re-acustom themselves to soldiers killing and being killed in the interests of German imperialism.

De Maizière referred to Kunduz as “a turning point—not only for the army, but also for German society... Kunduz has marked the Bundeswehr like no other place. A place which was built up and fought over, where tears were shed and comfort given, where soldiers killed and fell in battle,” he said.

General Jörg Vollmer, who commanded the German troops in northern Afghanistan since the beginning of this year, told *Tagesschau* that after eleven years, a different army was returning to Germany. “It was the first time that soldiers had to kill, but also experienced fallen comrades and the wounded.”

Another officer, who was twice deployed in Kunduz, boasted that the combat operations in Kunduz had rid the German armed forces of its reputation as an “army of quitters... The image of fat, cake-eating Germans who play football in the afternoon was gone after the first death in combat,” he told the *Tagesschau*. “In Kunduz, in almost every patrol I was in a situation of asking myself: do you have to shoot the motorcyclist over there just because he is sitting alone on his machine and could possibly be an assassin?”

The Bundeswehr mission in Kunduz began in fall

2003, under the Social Democrat (SPD) - Green coalition government, with the take over of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) from the United States. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) said at that time that the army would “secure construction efforts in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz” with a force of 250 soldiers. He claimed the intervention had a civilian character. German soldiers would protect construction workers, repair roads, schools and hospitals, and train police officers.

In the event, German forces were soon embroiled in fierce battles. At times over 1,400 soldiers were stationed in the camp. Of the 54 German soldiers who lost their lives in Afghanistan, 20 died in the Kunduz region.

The Bundeswehr proceeded ever more brutally against the civilian population. This reached a bloody climax on September 4, 2009, when Colonel Georg Klein ordered the bombing of a hijacked fuel tanker, killing around 140 civilians. Although Klein had clearly violated rules of engagement, he was later promoted to brigadier general. All disciplinary and criminal proceedings against him were terminated. (See: “A murderous decision”)

The Bundeswehr is now turning over the camp in Kunduz, including equipment worth around 25 million euros, to the Afghan army and police. By the end of the month, all 900 remaining Bundeswehr soldiers are due to leave Kunduz.

This does not mean, however, the end of the German mission in Afghanistan. The German headquarters in Mazar-e-Sharif, 200 km away, and an office in the capital, Kabul, will remain. The Bundeswehr in Kunduz retains a sealed-off area as a base, holding up to 300 soldiers, to provide support to Afghan security forces.

NATO is currently negotiating with the Afghan government on a successor mission called “Resolute Support”, involving up to 800 German soldiers.

The handover of the German camp in Kunduz was presented as a great success. Both Defence Minister de Maizière and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle attended a grotesque ceremony, during which the pair handed over two huge wooden keys, painted in the colours of the German flag, to the Defence and the Interior Ministers of Afghanistan.

There are serious doubts, however, whether the Afghan government will be able to control the region after the withdrawal of the German troops. Due to a complete lack of trust in their Afghan “allies”, Afghan soldiers and police officers were required to unload their weapons before attending the handover ceremony.

Shortly before the handover, fighting took place between the Taliban and police and several prominent politicians were killed by Taliban fighters in the region in recent weeks.

The occupation of Afghanistan by the United States-led military alliance was originally justified on the basis of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, and that the Afghan Taliban was providing shelter to Al Qaeda. In fact the conquest of the country had been prepared long before and served US geopolitical objectives. Afghanistan occupies a key location as a bridge between the Gulf region and Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent with Persia.

Germany participated in the war to secure its own interests in Central Asia, as Former Defence Minister Peter Struck (SPD) implied when he said that Germany would “be defended in the Hindu Kush.” The imperialist aims of the intervention also determined the form of the war. Despite propaganda about construction aid, the Bundeswehr intervened as an occupying army, rapidly coming into conflict with the local population, which it suppressed ever more brutally.

While the German population welcomes the partial withdrawal from Afghanistan, ruling circles regard it as an important role model for future military interventions. A commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* criticises the German government for failing to develop a sufficiently aggressive military policy.

“Merkel and Westerwelle have made it easy for themselves and drawn the consequence from the difficult case of Afghanistan just to keep out of

everywhere,” Nico Fried writes in the paper on October 6. “The Bundeswehr is being converted to an army of intervention but in the meantime, the criteria, objectives and aims of such interventions are a foreign policy black hole.”

The Berlin editor of the *Süddeutsche* then expressed his hope that a future social democratic or Green foreign minister “will force the Chancellor into a discussion of Germany's role.” This hope seems likely to be fulfilled. The SPD and the Greens, which paved the way for Germany's military interventions in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, are amongst the most aggressive advocates of a militaristic German foreign policy.

De Maizière's appearance in Kunduz and Fried's comments make clear that the ruling class expects the next federal government to return to the tradition of German Great Power politics. In his own speech commemorating German reunification, President Joachim Gauck had also demanded that Germany once again play a role “in Europe and the world” as befitting its size and influence.



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