The fall of Kunduz: A debacle for German imperialism

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About two thousand Taliban fighters stormed and retook the city of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan in a surprise attack from multiple directions on Monday. Kunduz is the fifth largest city in the country with a population of about 300,000. After the Islamists routed the government troops of the pro-Western regime, they freed more than 600 prisoners from the provincial prison, including 144 fighters, according to a government press release. After that, they hoisted the white flag of the Taliban in the city center and announced the introduction of Islamic law into the city.

Since then, government troops and their Western allied troops have been trying without success to reconquer Kunduz. Special NATO units and Afghan security forces have skirmished with insurgents. However, Taliban troops have been able to strike back, according to the news agency AFP. “The Taliban has planted land mines and booby mines around Kunduz,” said a spokesperson of the security forces. The military convoys sent as reinforcements for the government troops had been held back by mines, he said.

The taking of Kunduz by the Taliban is a major blow for the US-led alliance, which invaded Afghanistan after the terror attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, occupied the country for years and stationed thousands of soldiers there long after the official withdrawal of combat troops. Kunduz is the first provincial capital to be retaken by the Taliban since the fall of Mullah Omar's government in December 2001.

The fall of Kunduz, however, is above all a debacle for German imperialism. The city and the entire province of Kunduz were held by the northern regional command of the NATO mission “International Security Assistance Force” (ISAF), which had been under German control for many years. German armed forces maintained a military camp in Kunduz. Up to 5,350 soldiers at a time were stationed in Afghanistan over a period of many years, amounting to about 130,000 soldiers all together. The military deployment that officially ended in 2014 ate up almost 9 billion euros. In addition, 460 million euros were spent annually, supposedly on the civil infrastructure of the county. When German troops first arrived in Kunduz on December 25, 2003, their official purpose was “establishing security for the rebuilding of the country.”

The fall of Kunduz has revealed the real character of the German role in Afghanistan and refuted the entire official propaganda campaign used to justify it. The German army has not brought “stability” and “security” to the north of the country, let alone “democracy” and “human rights.” Instead, it has brought terror and chaos. The fact that only a few thousand Taliban fighters were in a position to retake Kunduz in a blitz operation reveals not only how weak the pro-Western regime in Kabul is, but also how much Western troops are hated by the Afghan population after years of occupation.

In reality, the German “peace” troops carried out an aggressive combat mission against insurgents side by side with US forces. The battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 marked the beginning of the intervention, in which German soldiers took part in a special forces operation. The first large scale military campaign took place in the Harekate Yolo operation in October and November 2007. This was also the first offensive military operation to take place under German command since the Second World War.

The battles in the strategically important north had fatal consequences not only for the German soldiers (of whom 54 were killed), but also for the native civilian

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population. In Operation Halmazag ("Blitz") alone, in autumn 2010, up to 27 civilians were killed, according to the German magazine *Monitor*.

The terrible climax of the German campaign was, without a doubt, the air attack on two tankers that took place on September 4, 2009. This event has gone down in history as the "massacre of Kunduz." The attack was carried out under the orders of German General Georg Klein. At the time of the bombardment, there were hundreds of people, including women and children, near the trucks. According to an official NATO report, upwards of 142 people were killed or injured. This is by far the largest number of victims of a single attack in the history of both the German Armed Forces and the ISAF.

However, this horrendous act did not end the official propaganda campaign, according to which German soldiers were in Afghanistan in order to rebuild the country and fight for human rights and democracy. When the camp at Kunduz was handed over to the self-educated Afghan security forces on October 6, 2013, the German foreign minister at that time, Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party/FDP), praised the "progress" that had been made and boasted about the building of schools. He called the handing over of the camp a "milestone in the process of withdrawing German combat troops" and the sovereign development of the country.

Only now has a section of the German media felt the need to tone down this propaganda. The Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* published a report on Monday under the title "Country without peace," in which it despairingly posed the question: "Was the Afghanistan campaign for nothing?" The article refers to a study by the Zurich think tank, Center for Security Studies (CSS), which compared the current situation in Afghanistan with the period after the withdrawal of Soviet troops at the end of 1989. Afghanistan is once again sliding into chaos and possibly into a new civil war, according to the study.

The initial reaction within the political establishment to the retaking of Kunduz by the Taliban was a mixture of shock and despair, but calls for a longer and even more aggressive intervention in Afghanistan are now growing louder. Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union/CDU), for example, has called for an official press conference on Tuesday in order to reevaluate NATO's plans for withdrawal. She has warned against a decision oriented "to rigid deadlines." Kunduz "has a special meaning for the soldiers of the armed forces," she said. Up until now the official plan had been to withdraw all remaining NATO troops from Afghanistan, including the remaining 850 German soldiers in Masa-i-Sharif and Kabul.

Other politicians in the government are already going a step further. Wolfgang Hellmich (Social Democratic Party/SPD), president of the defense committee, pleaded for the remaining German troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2016. "The Afghans are not yet at the point where we can leave them alone," he declared in true imperialist fashion.

Not surprisingly the Greens have taken the most aggressive stance in reaction to the retaking of Kunduz by the Taliban. As part of the former coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Green Party), which was in power at the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, this party bears responsibility for the crimes of German imperialism there. Green Party politician Omid Nouripour told *Tagesspiegel* at the beginning of the week that Germany now has to ask itself two concrete questions: "Is Afghanistan relevant?" and "Have we finished the job?" While the first question could only be answered with "yes," he said, the answer to the second question was "just as clearly" a "no."

With this aggressive stance, the German elite is pursuing the same ends as at the beginning of the campaign in Afghanistan: the defense of the geo-strategic and economic interests of German imperialism by military means. There is, however, one difference. After fourteen years of war in Afghanistan, it is no longer possible for German imperialism to present itself as pacifist. Another deployment of thousands of German soldiers to Afghanistan in order to "finish the job" will prompt massive opposition in the German population.

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