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## Germany's 'Deep Regret' in Afghanistan

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"We deeply regret" are words that almost always end with something terrible. They were [uttered](#) by German Defense Minister Franz Joseph Jung in the wake of a September 4 airstrike that left upwards of 100 Afghans dead. He followed it with a boilerplate phrase that invariably makes such apologies suspect: "We had reliable intelligence that our soldiers were in danger."

Jung had nothing of the sort. But the minister's deception had less to do with the military's standard instinct to lie than with the arithmetic of Germany's federal elections.

The Afghans, most of them farmers from a local village, were incinerated to make sure that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's Social Democratic Party (SDP) did not overly suffer for their support of the war.

The tale is a chilling one.

### Bombing the Fuel Trucks

According to *Der Spiegel*, at 8 p.m. on the night of September 4 a German intelligence officer in the northern province of Kunduz took a call from Afghan security forces with information that the local Taliban had hijacked two fuel tankers. His commander, Col. Georg Klein, asked for air reconnaissance, and a U.S. B-1B long-range bomber spotted the trucks stuck in the sand of the Kunduz River. The B-1B sent pictures, but apparently they were grainy, dark, and hard to read.

At 10 p.m. a local Afghan informant told Klein there were no civilians around the vehicles, but lots of Taliban, including four leaders. At a little past 1 a.m., two F-15 fighters showed up.

Under the General Rules of Engagement and Standard Operations Procedures — the military loves to wrap mayhem in the language of maintenance manuals — the trucks could not be attacked. One, there were no NATO troops on the scene. Two, a single informant is not enough to initiate an attack. And three, it was not a "time sensitive" target; that is, one that was going somewhere. The trucks had been stuck for four hours.

But Klein called for an airstrike anyway, even after the F-15 pilots asked him to confirm that German forces were involved and that the tankers posed an "imminent threat." Assured on both points, the planes released two GBU-38 radar guided bombs, each with a 500-pound warhead. The target dissolved in an enormous fireball.

From all accounts, Bundeswehr Col. Klein is no gung-ho heir of the Wehrmacht. He drinks tea, goes to the opera, and worries about his men. When a local Afghan boy was shot at a roadblock, he personally apologized to the family.

So what made him launch an attack that violated every rule of engagement?

### **Political Considerations**

"Klein knew that in a past incident the insurgents had detonated a tanker truck in Kandahar, killing dozens of civilians," [wrote Der Spiegel](#). "He had also received visits from a number of leading politicians, from Merkel and Steinmeier as well as Defense Minister Franz Joseph Jung (CDU) and his predecessor Peter Struck (SDP). Klein knows that they fear nothing more than an attack on German troops shortly before the upcoming parliamentary elections."

According to the German paper, Afghan informants told Klein back in August that the Taliban were planning an assault on the German camp using trucks. But Klein should have known that it was unlikely that such an attack would be tried with huge, slow-moving fuel tankers.

Indeed, Mullah Shamsuddin, the commander of the Taliban forces who seized the trucks, had no intention of using the trucks as suicide bombs. "Fuel tankers are far too impractical in terrain like this," he told *Der Spiegel* in a phone interview. "We simply planned to drive them to Chahar Dara and unload the fuel there. We can always use supplies."

Instead the trucks got bogged down, and the Taliban recruited local farmers — many at gunpoint — to try to pull them out of the sand. The locals also brought fuel cans to fill. "We knew the fuel was stolen, but we were forced to go there," says a young farmer, Mohammed Nur. When the bombs hit, he was badly wounded. His two brothers died.

When the story broke, the Germans went into full spin mode. Defense ministry flak Captain Christian Dienst told the media, "According to our knowledge at present, no civilians were

present," and then scolded the press for speculating while sitting "in their warm chairs in Berlin." The ministry also leaked a false story that Klein had used reconnaissance drones and that there was a second intelligence source.

But as the evidence piled up, the ministry's denials began to unravel. Interviews by the group Afghan Rights Monitor [found](#) that the dead included 12 Taliban members and 79 villagers. Soon the defense ministry found itself under assault not just from its own media, but also from its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Almost before the fires went out on banks of the Kunduz River, out came the long knives.

### **Allied Arguments**

The United States struck first. U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal arrived at Kunduz with a *Washington Post* reporter. When the Germans objected, McChrystal said the journalist was just collecting background material for a book. But on September 6 the *Post* printed a story blaming the whole thing on the Germans and using quotes from the meeting.

German commanders [angrily accused](#) the United States of "deliberately leaking misinformation."

The French and the British piled on next. The bombing was "a big mistake," said French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, and British Foreign Minister David Miliband called for an "urgent investigation."

Afghan President Harmid Karzai blasted the attack as a "major error," adding that McChrystal had apologized and said that he had not "given the order to attack."

The underlying resentment among the NATO allies is beginning to surface. When Labor MP Eric Joyce [recently resigned](#) his position as parliamentary aide to the British defense minister because he could no longer support the war, he leveled a broadside at other NATO countries. "For many, Britain fights, Germany pays, France calculates, Italy avoids."

Even some in the United States have begun to rail at what they see as a lack of commitment by NATO. While the "American people are supporting this [the war]," U.S. Rep. John Murtha, the powerful Democratic chair of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, [told \*The Cable\*](#), "The Europeans are not doing a damn thing." As of September 17, the United States had lost 830 soldiers in Afghanistan, Britain 216, Canada 130, Germany 38, France 31, Denmark 27, Spain 25, Italy 21, and the Netherlands 21. The [overall allied losses](#) in the war are 1,403. Deaths among Afghan civilians, [according the United Nations](#), have risen 24% over last year, one-third of them from airstrikes.

The allied gang-up was a shock to the Germans, who have long touted their expertise in Afghanistan and sharply criticized other NATO nations for being indifferent to civilian casualties. "German bashing" was suddenly in vogue. As one diplomat told *Der Spiegel*, it was "Schadenfreude against the eternal know-it-alls."

## War Comes Home

The massacre at Kunduz has suddenly brought the war home to the Germans. The parties that collaborated in sending the troops — the Green Party, the CDU, and the SPD — have long tried to keep Afghanistan off the radar screen. Jung won't use the word *krieg* (war), Merkel has yet to attend a soldier's funeral, and Steinmeier has suddenly embraced a "10-step program for Afghanistan," as if a solution in that war-torn country was akin to drying out at a health spa.

Following the attack, the Left Party, the only party that opposes the war, called for a major anti-war protest at the Brandenburg Gate. In the recent elections, the Left Party increased its share of the votes by 3.7% and the Greens by 2%, while the Social Democrats took a shellacking, dropping 11.1%. The only winner on the right was the Free Democratic Party that increased its vote total by 4.9%. Merkel's CDU went down 1.4%.

In the end, Kunduz may be the tipping point for NATO, the incident that shattered the myth that the Afghan campaign was about digging wells, building schools, and bringing peace.

"Simple villagers were killed. They were not Taliban," Dr. Saft Sidique of Kunduz Hospital said. "The German airstrike has changed everything. The sympathy for the Germans is gone. Would it be any different for you if your homeland was bombed?"

According to the old saying, there is no better recruiting sergeant than an airstrike. This was a truism on display at a meeting of the Kunduz provincial government shortly after the attack. A number of people there praised the airstrike. But at the end of the gathering Maulawi Ebadullah Ahadi of Chahar Dara, a town where the Taliban rule, raised his hand: "Brothers, each of those killed has a hundred relatives who will then fight against the government. Bombs sow the seeds of hate."