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The war and the media — Double standards for Mosul, Iraq, and Aleppo, Syria



The Pentagon made its largest bombing attack inside Syria since last April on Feb. 6, striking pro-Syrian government forces at the same time as an attack from Israel on Syria. Thus, once again imperialist powers threaten to reignite their campaign to overthrow the legitimate Syrian government. All the more timely is it that Workers World publish this article by anti-war analyst Joachim Guilliard, published Jan. 22 in the German daily newspaper Junge Welt, and translated by WW managing editor John Catalinotto. The article exposes the double standards of the corporate media in Germany — the same would apply to the U.S. corporate media — handling the earlier offensives to drive the

Islamic State forces out of Eastern Aleppo in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, respectively. These double standards are used to justify the U.S. and NATO offensives over the past decades, which have brought misery to the populations of both countries.

— WW editors

Fake news is on everyone's lips. This term usually refers only to fictitious or highly falsified messages that are politically motivated and specifically designed to deceive. In addition, they are only suspect if they appear on "social media" and on news portals of enemy states. According to the political and mainstream media, "fake news" means false reports that are not spread by the established media.

There is no question that "social media" provides a particularly fertile ground for the easy and rapid dissemination of false reports. But looking back in history, we find that the false reports that did the worst damage came from mainstream politicians and media. A notorious example of this concerns the "incubator lies" invented by an advertising agency about Iraqi soldiers who allegedly tore babies from incubators in 1990 in Kuwait. This story was then widely circulated by most media and was instrumental in influencing public opinion in the U.S. in favor of the first U.S. war against Iraq.

However, far more frequently than with mere false reports, unilateral or greatly exaggerated contributions attempt to create a desired mood. Even if it is not so valued by the mainstream, the omission of essential parts of a story — which are necessary for understanding and how the story is presented — ultimately also spreads disinformation.

The extent to which such disinformation is used to enforce prevailing politics can be seen very well in the way politicians and the media deal with the battles over Mosul and Aleppo. These are not only drastic examples of the brutality of the wars in Iraq and Syria, but also of an extreme double standard of evaluation and reporting that is far more geared to promoting the strategic interests of the ruling circles in their own countries rather than to describing actual warfare.

A second Rwanda

The initial situation was similar in the two major cities. Both East Aleppo and Mosul were under the control of Islamist forces. Both cities were besieged, bombed and eventually stormed by government forces with foreign support. However, the portrayal by politicians and the media could hardly have been more different. During the Battle of Mosul, 7,000 to 10,000 reactionary fighters in the Islamic State (IS) had placed themselves in among

approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. According to Western intelligence estimates, this battle was consistently greeted favorably.

On the other hand, the Syrian government's offensive to liberate East Aleppo from the hands of some 8,000 reactionary Islamist militants was condemned as a cruel and criminal attack on the "opposition," the "rebels" or even the population of the city. What the character of this "opposition" was — as well as its actual relationship to the population (at that time 150,000 to 200,000 people) — was blanked out. This gave the false impression that the "rebels" in East Aleppo were progressive forces and were in neighborhoods that the majority of residents considered "liberated."

Behind this distortion of the facts was the enormous strategic importance of the struggle for Aleppo. Had the reactionary militias actually succeeded in bringing the entire metropolis under their control, the regime-change alliance would have been well placed to intensify the war against the Assad government. Aleppo and the surrounding area as far as the Turkish border would have been a sufficiently large and important "liberated zone" to serve as the basis for a serious alternative government.

On the other hand, the defeat of the local militias actually meant the end of this campaign — and with it a shattering defeat for the NATO countries and their allies. With the start of the government offensive in September 2016, the coverage in the West almost unanimously expressed only one opinion: Government troops and the Russian Air Force sent the city to hell.

These were the headlines for the storming of Mosul: "The offensive is progressing rapidly" or "The liberation is imminent." Another was, "In northern Iraq, people celebrate: the IS is pushed back."

For the Syrian offensive, one headline was: "Blood in gray dust of Aleppo" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Sept. 26, 2016). Another was, "Foreign Minister Steinmeier: 'The images of Aleppo are hard to beat for cruelty'" (*Spiegel* online, Aug. 9, 2016), and yet another was "Green leader Özdemir: Assad and Putin bomb Syria back to the Stone Age" (*Spiegel* online, Oct. 15, 2016).

Samantha Power, then the United States ambassador to the United Nations, even compared the events in East Aleppo with Rwanda and Srebrenica, almost one-to-one with the propaganda of the reactionary group, Ahrar Al-Sham. Frequently, it was not even mentioned that the offensive was concentrated only on the eastern part of Syria's second-largest city, where no more than 15 percent of the city's population lived. This gave the false impression that all of Aleppo was about to collapse.

Reactionary militias seen as ‘last hope’

It was no secret that the defenders of East Aleppo, cast as heroes, were predominantly reactionary militias. Among them, the dominant forces were the Syrian al-Qaida offshoot, the Nusra Front, renamed Jabha Fatah Al-Shamm, and Ahrar Al-Sham. These groups are barely more acceptable to the population than the Islamic State in terms of reactionary ideology and brutality.

Western media, however, did not shy away from publicly backing these forces, despite their well-known backgrounds. For example, in an Aug. 2, 2016 post, Spiegel online openly admitted that the most powerful militias “are fighting for a Syrian state in which their fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, the Shariah,” should apply, but still describes them as “Aleppo’s last hope.”

In contrast to the German mainstream media, only a few inhabitants of Aleppo would say that the areas controlled by reactionaries had been liberated. The enclave had not come into being as a result of an uprising in the city itself. In Aleppo, there were no significant protests against the government in 2011. The metropolis was considered a stronghold of government supporters and was spared over a year of unrest. Its fate was determined by its proximity to Turkey. Reactionary militias were established in the border region, and from there conquered the eastern part of the city. The majority of the population fled, most of them to neighborhoods that the Syrian army held in the western part of the city.

According to reports of those affected who do not sympathize with the reactionary Islamists, the militias established a terror regime, which required compulsory wearing of veils and Sharia courts. They used East Aleppo as a base from which to push into the other neighborhoods, using car bombs and suicide squads. So the majority of residents considered the expulsion of terrorists as liberation.

The romanticized portrayal of these religious reactionaries as “Defenders of Freedom” led to sources from these circles gaining tremendous credibility in Western media and among human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW). Both groups carried out extensive campaigns to delegitimize the Assad government, based almost entirely on information from the opposition groups.

As a result, HRW repeatedly showed pictures of destroyed buildings and streets that allegedly demonstrated the effects of barrel bombing — but which actually had been recorded elsewhere — i.e., in the Kurdish Kobani or even in Gaza. Whether it was reports of alleged barrel bombings, attacks on hospitals or other similar allegations, the primary sources in most cases were exclusively opposition groups, such as the Aleppo Media

Center, which were more or less closely tied to the militias. On the other hand, independent journalists could rarely enter the areas controlled by opponents of the Syrian government.

Professional PR work

However, it would be naïve to assume that the thoroughly professional and successful public relations work was solely the work of the militias and allied “civil society groups.” Arab and Western governments have been fairly open about playing a crucial role in funding and training anti-government media initiatives from the outset. Often, what appeared to be the spontaneous establishment of an independent media bureau by local activists was, in reality, a news source built by Syrian exile opposition groups and Western nongovernmental organizations in close cooperation with Western government agencies.

For example, the radio project Syria Radio Network (Syrnet) was developed by the Berlin organization “Media in Cooperation and Transition” (MICT), supported by the Federal Foreign Office, and co-financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Belgian and French Foreign Ministry and the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, affiliated with the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In the case of Aleppo, the media aimed to create opinion mainly directed against the actions of the Syrian and Russian armed forces. This was done with extreme one-sidedness and omission of essential facts. The first step was the media giving large coverage to the offensive — in relation to other war events in the world. Then, the media compounded this by playing up the consequences of the offensive with incessant repetition of the reports, images and videos of opposition groups.

The attacks by the “rebels” on the people of West Aleppo remained unmentioned, and often, also omitted was the presence of armed militias in general. This inevitably gave the impression that the attacks by government forces and their Russian allies were consistently directed at civilian targets. Almost all the casualties and war damage were blamed on Syria and Russia, as if they were the only ones using weapons.

Many reports disseminated by the “opposition” could also be directly exposed as falsified or misleading. When looking over the media coverage of Aleppo, it becomes apparent that a significant part was published purely for its emotional impact, with particular emphasis on reports involving children. For example, in December 2016, a picture of a little girl lying among corpses in Aleppo’s ruins was circulated on “social media.” However, that “recent” photo was taken in 2014 in Lebanon and comes from a staged video clip by the Lebanese singer Hiba Tawadschi about the “Arab Spring.”

A similarly instructive example is the story of the touching image of Omran, the “boy of Aleppo.” It became an icon of the battle for the city in August 2016. There was hardly a newspaper that did not publish the picture. According to the photographer, Omran was injured by a Syrian or Russian air raid and was rescued from the rubble by the “White Helmets.” The boy’s father, Mohammed Daknisch, immediately denied the story. He adamantly said his son had been only slightly injured and not during an air raid. He accused the “White Helmets” and the international media of misusing his son for propaganda purposes.

Later, little was reported about an interesting aspect of this story: Photographer Mahmud Raslan had posted a “selfie” shortly before posting this photo. It showed him grinning with members of the infamous reactionary militia Harka Nur Al-Din Al-Senki. Raslan worked in the “Aleppo Media Center” (AMC), which was one of the most important sources of information for the Western media. In the West, it is treated as an “independent network” of so-called citizen journalists, but it is firmly in the camp of the regime’s opponents and is closely networked with the reactionary Islamists. It was founded with the help of the Syrian Expatriates Organization (SEO), which is headquartered in Washington and probably receives substantial sums from U.S. government agencies,

The ‘White Helmets’

Even better equipped and much more prominent than the AMC is the already mentioned second organization, which contributed to staging Omran as a bomb victim, the “White Helmets.” This group diligently supplied the media with reports and footage from the war zones.

Contrary to their self-portrayal, however, the “White Helmets” are not a home-grown Syrian organization. It was founded by a former British military officer and is headquartered in Britain. The funds came first from the Gulf States, and then mostly from Washington and London; each contributed more than \$30 million. By the end of 2016, the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany had already transferred 12 million euros. While state support for established aid organizations declined in the past four years, this strange civil defense force has received more than 100 million euros in total.

Of course, the “White Helmets” also claim to help wounded people. According to their own publicity, they have saved the lives of tens of thousands. By the end of 2017, its count reached 99,200, they said. This number, however, is unverifiable. But it is clear that they are only active in areas under the control of anti-government militias, and even there, obviously do not feel responsible for the entire population.

Bassam Hajak is a doctor in the Aleppo Medical Association, who was responsible for the care of refugees who had reached the city's western part via the Syrian army's humanitarian corridors. He says that neither his family members who remained in East Aleppo nor anyone else he spoke with got any help from the "White Helmets." Jan Oberg, a Swedish conflict researcher, found no trace of them on the ground immediately after the liberation. They did not provide care for those who urgently needed help after the fighting ended. Instead, they made sure they were evacuated along with the anti-government fighters.

On the other hand, these ethereal civilian activists are very familiar with the local reactionary groups, with whom they are closely intertwined. In numerous pictures and videos, they are seen with Al-Nusra flags, as they celebrate success with Islamist fighters or are posing over Syrian soldiers who had been fatally shot.

In addition, some of their activists can be seen in videos wearing their white uniforms, and in other photos they can be recognized as armed fighters. However, all of this did little to detract from their reputation in the West. The "White Helmets" received the Alternative Nobel Prize, and a short documentary about them received an Oscar. In December 2016, then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) presented their head, Raed Al-Saleh, with the "Franco-German Prize for Human Rights and the Rule of Law."

Considering the verified knowledge about the war in Aleppo, the offensive with air raids on the eastern part of the city, artillery shelling and street fighting for the remaining population, it was a horror, which caused widespread devastation and killed thousands. But this also applies to the "rebels'" nonstop rocket and mortar attacks on the western part of the city. According to UNESCO, after the four-year fighting ended, 60 percent of the Old Town, through which the front ran, was badly damaged and up to 30 percent completely destroyed.

However, it is deliberately misleading to exclusively blame the Syrian and Russian forces for the destruction. In many pictures of the destruction used to charge them, it was completely concealed that a significant portion of the damage had been caused in the summer of 2012 by the reactionary Islamist militias' invasion. Parts of the old city were already devastated by fire, and the reactionaries had plundered and pillaged the famous souk, the world's largest covered market district.

According to Oberg's observations, most of the recent damage occurred during the street fighting. Contrary to the impression conveyed by the media, he estimates that, at most, 10 percent of the destruction can be attributed to air raids.

The Iraqi city of Mosul was even more severely destroyed. Up to 80 percent was destroyed in the storming of the city. The United Nations Organization says that the extent of the damage overshadows all previous war damage in Iraq. Of the 54 residential districts of West Mosul, 15 were completely razed to the ground, destroying nearly 32,000 houses. In the 23 partially destroyed districts and 16 slightly damaged districts, another 16,000 buildings were totally destroyed. It is likely that the homes of over half a million people were demolished.

No compassion shown after U.S./NATO bombings

Most of the destruction in Mosul is reportedly due to the Iraqi forces' artillery bombardment. The rest here — as in Aleppo — is the responsibility of the reactionaries. However, as the photos show, aerial bombardment destroyed a significant part of the affected buildings. In the final weeks, the U.S.-led alliance of NATO countries and Australia, Jordan and Morocco literally bombed the ground troops, clearing the way meter by meter, with no regard for the hundreds of thousands of inhabitants trapped there.

In total, more than a million people fled the city over the nearly nine-month attack. The number of victims is difficult to estimate. Iraqi Kurdish intelligence agencies estimate at least 40,000 civilians died. A U.N. Human Rights Commission investigation reports that at least one in four civilians who died in the fighting was killed by the U.S.-led coalition's airstrikes.

Reports of the Mosul bombing show a complete lack of compassion for the trapped people, with estimates given of low numbers of casualties. There were almost no photos of Mosul, including of dead or wounded children, and no reports of the devastation caused by the bombing or stories of the suffering of those affected. The Western media mainly showed celebrating soldiers and Shiite or Kurdish militiamen. Hardly any mention was made of conflicts with the Sunni population. It was only because of their background and the resulting dislike of the Shiites and Kurds that it was possible for the reactionary Islamists to establish themselves in the big city and other areas.

The media were absolutely uncritical, portraying the battle for Mosul as the struggle of a democratically elected government against the Islamic State. There was no controversy in media or political reports about the fact that sectarian Shiite forces led this struggle, that they dominated the Iraqi government, provided the bulk of the troops, or that the battle was largely carried out as one against the insubordinate Sunnis. Also largely ignored were the expulsions of Sunnis from ethnically and religiously mixed areas carried out in the wake of the reconquest.

Reality turned on its head

If one compares the struggles of Aleppo and Mosul, one finds that in the different characterizations of the warfare, the actual conditions were reversed. While the Syrian and Russian forces were certainly not particularly cautious — and it's noted that not all allegations of the destruction of civilian facilities are propaganda — they have been, as the extent of the devastation shows, much less extensive than those of the U.S.-led alliance and its Iraqi ground forces.

In reconquering Syrian cities, the Russians and Syrian troops tried to avoid waging decisive battles in urban centers. Fighters who willingly gave up their weapons were offered impunity. Those who did not were offered safe escort out of the area. In Aleppo, too, the Damascus government allowed thousands of reactionary militia fighters with their light weapons and their families to leave the contested neighborhoods unmolested. In Iraq, on the other hand, there was no effort to use negotiations to avoid devastating battles to the end.

In Aleppo, the takeover of control did not lead to major government retaliation. Members of two militias, not the army, murdered 85 government opponents. These incidents were prosecuted in the courts. In Iraq, on the other hand, the recapture of each city was followed by revenge actions on the remaining population. The infamous Shiite militias were the perpetrators there. However, accusations by locals and human rights organizations are also directed against regular Iraqi military units and Kurdish fighters. In many denominationally mixed areas, the deportations and executions of Sunnis often took on the character of ethnic cleansing — with total impunity.