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Not Calling Afghanistan a War Is a 'Semantic Farce'

The World From Berlin

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Germany's military presence in Afghanistan is deeply unpopular at home. But even after spending seven years there and losing 35 soldiers, many German politicians still refuse to call it a "war." German commentators argue Thursday that the government is afraid to tell the truth.

When it comes to military engagements, calling something a 'war' can be a tricky proposition. The United States, for example, spent over a decade fighting -- and lost more than 58,000 lives -- in Vietnam, but it never formerly declared itself at war.

When it comes to Afghanistan, the issue has become a hot -- and highly sensitive -- topic in Germany, especially following the death of three soldiers with the Bundeswehr, Germany's armed forces, on Tuesday. The soldiers died in heavy fighting with Taliban insurgents in northern Afghanistan, when their armored personnel carrier plunged into a deep ditch full of water.

German military forces have been part of the International Assistance Force for Afghanistan (ISAF) since 2002 and are in charge of the northern part of the country. For years, things were more peaceful in that part of the country, and the soldiers spent most of their time involved in humanitarian and reconstruction efforts. For a number of months now, though, the almost 4,000 soldiers have had to deal with increased attacks from a resurgent Taliban.

Tuesday's casualties brought the total number of German deaths in Afghanistan to 35. **Germany's mission there has never been popular** and, according to the most recent survey of the Infratest Dimap polling company, two-thirds of Germans want their soldiers out of

Afghanistan -- and as soon as possible. For many of them, though, the fact that politicians have avoided using the term 'war' to describe the situation is upsetting.

"That is no war," Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung told the "Tagesschau" prime time television news show on Wednesday. "In a war, you don't build schools, you don't take care of the water and energy supply, you don't build kindergartens and hospitals. And you don't train the military and the police."

But for the German parliament's military commissioner, Reinhold Robbe, things look different on the ground. "I was just in Afghanistan," Robbe told SPIEGEL ONLINE after Tuesday's deaths. "In what was sometimes a very emotional way, the soldiers there made things clear to me. They said: 'Mr. Robbe, there aren't any wells being built here at the moment, and no schools are being opened. It's war here now.' ... It's clear that the soldiers there perceive themselves as being in war-like situations. And I can completely understand that. I'm not a big fan of semantic exercises."

In Thursday's newspapers, German commentators at all points on the political spectrum tended to side with Robbe.

The center-left **Süddeutsche Zeitung** writes:

"The ministers in Berlin won't officially speak about war. Instead, they like to use all sorts of synonyms, such as conflict, armed defensive action and military engagement. Sure, German soldiers have also been put in places like Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. When you compare these with the deployments and maneuvers of earlier decades, even these stabilization and peacekeeping missions were dangerous. But Afghanistan is the Bundeswehr's first wartime deployment. Even if they're doing so in self defense, infantrymen and paratroopers are firing their weapons -- to wound or to kill. That is war."



"It took a long time before the Defense Ministry was willing to call soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan 'fallen ones.' Occasionally you got the impression that politicians viewed using such words to be like some kind of evil oracle. But, over time, the linguistic usage of

that phrase has swung to the other extreme, and speaking of 'fallen ones' has almost become an act of political correctness."

"When some people use the phrase, they want to signal that they recognize the gravity of the situation and that they don't want to camouflage Germany's participation in a war. But others -- including Defense Minister Jung, who always seems so unpleasantly bureaucratic and overburdened -- use the phrase because they believe that doing so honors the soldiers who have died for their country. But even though Jung will now talk about 'fallen ones,' he still refuses to use the word 'war.' That is a semantic farce -- and an irksome one at that."

"For years now, people have been able to use all sorts of arguments for and against having Germans in Afghanistan. But the number of people who think that this is an important part of Germany's foreign policy is growing smaller and smaller. ... But the issue isn't that people don't know enough about realpolitik. Instead, the real issue is that there has already been too much realpolitik. And too many 'fallen ones,' too."

The conservative **Die Welt** writes:

"There can be no doubt that the Bundeswehr has gotten involved in acts of open warfare in Afghanistan -- with all the frightening consequences that these can have for the soldiers who are fighting there. ... But it is misleading to call this a war for the sole purpose of discrediting NATO's mission to Afghanistan in a wholesale way. Some people like to use this word because it fosters the impression that our country is in a state of war against another nation -- that is, that we are waging war against Afghanistan. ... But the fact is that the Bundeswehr is defending the constitutional order and the country's elected government against terrorist insurgents, who think that deliberately killing civilians is a legitimate means of waging war."

"The real danger -- and one that is making more and more people question NATO's mission - is the fact that this political order, which was established with Western help, is starting to crumble. But the answer isn't running away from the problem. Rather, what we should really do is provide massive reinforcement to both the military and civilian forces and efforts. Despite all the talk -- from the German side as well -- the fact is that, to date, these efforts have only been half-hearted."

The **Financial Times Deutschland** writes:

"In political terms, what could possibly be gained by using more glowing terms (than war) to discuss the situation in the Hindu Kush and to keep on pretending that the Bundeswehr is there to participate in a humanitarian mission?"

"There is no doubt that the number of people in Germany who disapprove of the mission in Afghanistan is very high. And it's also certainly the case that support on the domestic front isn't going to get any stronger if politicians finally start calling the mission what it really is: a combat deployment under a UN mandate. On the other hand, the mission isn't going to win

more acceptance if citizens start to get the feeling that the government is trying to pull a fast one on them. When the Bundeswehr is getting into firefights with Taliban militants on an almost daily basis, and when soldiers are dying in these exchanges, then that is war."

"The fact that the government still refuses to acknowledge this isn't merely disrespectful to the soldiers putting their lives on the line in the Hindu Kush to defend Germany. It's also completely useless in terms of political strategy."

The left-leaning **Berliner Zeitung** writes:

"It would help if the Defense Ministry would just say whether it plans to clearly specify the risks of the mission and to be clear for once about why it is so adamant about not using the term 'war.' There might even be reasons for doing so that have to do with international laws. But the government's insistence on using vague terminology makes it sound like it's afraid of the truth."