

The Libyan war and “Germany’s disgrace”

By Ulrich Rippert
1 September 2011

Die Zeit, the prominent German weekly newspaper, posted an article August 26 headlined, “A German disgrace”, in its online edition. Commenting on the events in Libya, the article declared, “The Germans have kept out militarily and left the allies in the lurch. It was all a big mistake and is a disgrace”.

Until now, the phrase “German disgrace” has always been linked with the Nazis coming to power and the craven capitulation of many intellectuals during the years of Hitlerite terror and aggression. *Die Zeit* now reverses the argument. For them, it is not participation in war and terror that is a disgrace, but rather “abstention”.

The two authors, Jörg Lau and Bernd Ulrich, experienced and thoughtful journalists, have previously taken a more humanitarian and reflective view of things. In the face of the NATO offensive against Tripoli, they seem to have entirely lost their political bearings. They glorify the military action taken by the major imperialist powers—France, UK, US, Italy—and attack the German government for adapting to anti-war sentiments in the population.

They write, “Sarkozy, Cameron and Obama have risked their soldiers’ lives, betting their political support on helping the Libyan rebels against the tyrant [Muammar Gaddafi]. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, however, have risked nothing, they have given in to domestic political sentiments, rather than encouraging war-weary Germans to fight for freedom in Arabia”.

Imagine a trial in which several rapists had to answer for their brutal behaviour. A friend of the defendants had been present at the crime, but was not actively involved. What would one think of a media representative who jumped up in court accusing the non-participant of cowardice because he had not participated in the atrocity?

In order to justify their bizarre defence of the imperialist rape of Libya, Ulrich and Lau begin their article with a grotesque distortion, or omission, of the facts. They write that a “quick glance at the historical reality” is necessary; but then say nothing about that history, arguing merely: “Success speaks for itself”.

The article states, “None of the fears of the federal

government were realised, the mission was not impossible, it is not stuck in the desert sands, no ground troops had to be sent in, the military intervention has revived the Arab rebellion, rather than destroying it, collateral damage was kept within limits”.

But the reality is very different.

For over a hundred years, Libya has played a critical role in the scramble for Africa by the colonial powers. In 1911, the country was annexed by Italy. In the face of fierce opposition from several Bedouin tribes, poison gas and military aircraft were used for the first time in history, with devastating consequences for the population.

During the Second World War, Italian occupation troops sought the aid of Hitler’s Wehrmacht [army] to assist them against the advancing British and French forces. The Allies first halted the offensive by the German Afrika Korps (DAK) in the Battle of El Alamein in 1942.

In 1952, under the auspices of the UN, colonial Libya—British-administered Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and the French territory of Fezzan—achieved independence. The discovery of large oil deposits in Libya in the late 1950s aroused the imperialist interests of the major powers and exacerbated social tensions in the country.

In September 1969, a group of officers led by Col. Gaddafi came to power and proclaimed the “Libyan Arab Republic”, meeting little resistance. The nationalization of all foreign banks, insurance companies and the oil industry found wide support among the population, together with the closure of US and British air bases.

Gaddafi based himself on the theories of pan-Arabism of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, and attempted to manoeuvre between the Soviet Union and various imperialist powers. Under growing pressure from the US, however, and the abject failure of Nasser’s project of Arab bourgeois national unity, his regime became increasingly despotic.

When the Soviet Union was dissolved 20 years ago, Washington intensified its pressure on Tripoli. In 1993 the CIA supported a military coup, which, however, was defeated by Gaddafi. At the same time, Libya strengthened its ties to what have become known as the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China, and since last

year, South Africa.

China was involved in many large-scale building projects and obtained extensive, long-term energy contracts. As of last year, 36,000 Chinese construction workers were working in Libya. The Russian energy giant Gazprom had agreed far-reaching cooperation deals with companies in the Libyan oil industry.

These developments were a thorn in the side for the powers that be in Washington, London and Paris. For some time, they had been seeking ways to reduce the influence of China and Russia in Libya. Soon after Nicolas Sarkozy's election victory in 2007, France took advantage of its close relationship with the Gaddafi regime and launched an effort to form a Mediterranean Union, with the aim of strengthening French influence in North Africa. Sarkozy wanted to pre-empt the US, which had seen to it that several important positions in the Libyan regime and opposition were filled with its own trusted people. But Gaddafi rejected the Mediterranean offensive.

Earlier this year, when the radicalization of the population led to the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, and then some time later also forced the resignation of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Washington began to support and direct the opposition movement in Benghazi. France responded with an intensive campaign for a military intervention by NATO, under its leadership. Initially, the Obama government was reluctant to embark on a military offensive, but did not want to cede the initiative to France and Britain.

At the end of April, an international conference was held in London, which discussed the division of Libya and its oil reserves—the largest in Africa and the ninth largest in the world—among the big powers after Gaddafi's fall. Participating on behalf of the Libyan National Transitional Council (TNC) was the putative prime minister, Mahmoud Jibril, who taught for many years in the US, after receiving his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh. From 2007, he had led Gaddafi's National Economic Development Authority (NEDB), which maintained close links with corporations in the US and Britain, as well as a partnership with the London School of Economics.

This institution played a key role in the pursuit of American and British economic interests in Libya. Ali Tarhouni, an economist at the University of Washington, who has lived in the US since 1973, was appointed finance minister by the TNC.

This history and the events of recent weeks make clear that the war in Libya has nothing to do with humanitarian considerations and human rights. It involves the violent and brutal suppression of a former colonial country. It is also a warning. For imperialism, the Libyan intervention is only

the first stage in a new division of the entire Middle East.

But the authors of the article in *Die Zeit* ignore all of this.

They point a finger at the government and foreign minister because Germany was not originally involved in the terror bombing and now has fewer opportunities in the distribution of the loot.

But Westerwelle and Chancellor Merkel took their decision not on humanitarian grounds or out of moral scruples. They were concerned about the energy supply for German industry and had no desire to jeopardize good economic relations with China and Russia. They are trapped in a foreign policy dilemma: with the decline of the US, the traditional trans-Atlantic orientation becomes increasingly problematic, while closer cooperation with China and Russia poses other problems and is threatened with being torpedoed by the American government.

The question remains why a newspaper such as *Die Zeit*, which sees itself as the voice of the educated middle class and proclaims its adherence to humanity and culture, suddenly becomes a warmonger and glorifies a brazen neo-colonial intervention?

The answer is not overly complicated. The international economic crisis, the fluctuation of stock prices and currencies, the breaking apart of trusted alliances, the growth of social tensions, the radicalization of large segments of the population in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt—all this fills sections of the educated petty bourgeois with anxiety and terror.

They crave stability and strength. What impresses them is a tough, consistent state and military crackdown in the national interest. The brutality with which the NATO forces have bombed the way clear for the new rulers in recent weeks has made a big impression on them.

It is this cowardice, toadying and spinelessness before the powers that be, which has resulted in disaster several times in German history. Therein lies the true "German disgrace".

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>