

Know your enemy? Reflections on studying military presence in Afghanistan.

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Introduction

My presentation today is part of my PhD thesis on Afghanistan. In this thesis, I deal with the current situation of the Tajik people in the country and the impact of the military on the lives of these people. This anthropological research leads to an ethical dilemma, because I am interested in the military, its structures and, foremost, its challenges to achieving the political aims stated in various resolutions. At the same time, stories about suffering and violence caused by international soldiers – and I am not talking about other armed groups in Afghanistan, like the Taliban – are an important topic in my research. They are prevalent, since more and more counter-insurgencies are taking place and are an important part of the operations in Afghanistan. The victims are the civilians.

In this context I will deal with the following questions:

Is it ethically justifiable to screen not only the victims but also the victimizers?

Are soldiers primarily to be considered the victimizers?

How will my research of (alleged) perpetrators affect my attitude towards the victims?

Asking these questions is particularly relevant in the context of Afghanistan, where hostile images of (foreign) armed forces have a long history. Armed forces are likely to be perceived as an “enemy” – not only by the Afghan population, but also by critical anthropologists.

I would like to discuss the ethical problem mentioned above and place it into an anthropological context. The dilemma partly stems from what Bourdieu calls the “*collective history of our discipline*” (Bourdieu 1993:366). At one point¹ he reflects on the importance of scientific reflexivity and comes to the conclusion that we have to reflect on the unconscious “pre-judices” that can be found in theories, or in the scientific questions themselves. Anthropology has been the science of the underprivileged, of minorities and, of those oppressed by dictatorships, etc. I do not intend to say that this has to be changed, but when I

¹ I do not want to start now with a narcissistic reflexivity, as this would only end up in an egoistic navel-gazing and has nothing to do with the scientific reflexivity, as discussed by Bourdieu. I do not intend to talk about my biographical background and my personal reasons for choosing a topic about war, violence, suffering and the military – and my personal concerns.

mentioned my studies in the military presence in Afghanistan at a workshop recently, the participants’ reactions made it obvious that showing an interest in the military and its organisation is considered somewhat suspicious in our field. It is not exotic anymore, but it implies that you are kind of weird, as you are not focussing on the underprivileged. Besides this general suspicion, working with the military, is to be considered as a “*moral challenge*” (Lucas 2009:1).²

With these reflections, I just want to cast a kind of critical light upon our discipline regarding its relation to the military, as I see this mutual misperception³ could be considered one reason of my ethical dilemma.

The second reason of this dilemma could be found in the two main tools for ethnographic research. Antonius Robben states in his article about *Politics of Truth and Emotion among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence*:

And I quote:

“Ethnographic understanding through empathy and detachment has been generally accepted as a common dialectic in fieldwork. We must establish a good rapport with our interlocutors to grasp the world from their perspective, while simultaneous reflective detachment as observers must objectify our perceptions and enhance our analytical insight.” (Robben 1995:84)

Bearing in mind that I do research on Afghanistan at the Distance – to rephrase the title of the new book of Antonius Robben (Iraq at the Distance) – these two tools are challenged every day. My research is situated on multiple sites – geographically but also via the internet – and

²As Lucas stresses in the introduction to his book – *Anthropologists in Arms*: “*The result of such study (IK: about the military and its subcultures) might simply satisfy scientific curiosity, help the military services better understand (and perhaps improve) their own organizations, or even help societies better understand the nature and role of the military organisations with whom the co-exist* (Lucas 2009:6).” With this he clearly distinguishes between the Anthropology of the Military and the Anthropology for the Military, and absolves the first from any accusation. Still, I think that this line of difference of both braches is very thin in certain research areas and that also the historical perception of the military by anthropology is a negative one.

³ “...Military personnel are described by some NGOs as ‘boys with toys’, rigid, authoritarian, conservative, impatient, arrogant, civilian phobic, homophobic, ‘excessively’ security conscious and so on. In contrast, battalion commanders have referred to NGOs as ‘non-guided organizations’”. Winslow (Winslow, 2000, p. 401 (quoted from Winslow, Kammhuber, Soeter, 2004, pp. 395-415) also found further stereotypes, such as “...’children of the 60’s’, ‘flaky do-gooders’, ‘permissive’, ‘unpunctual’, ‘obstructionist’, ‘anarchic’, ‘undisciplined’, ‘self-righteous or antimilitary’”.

is an everyday duty. Thus, my abilities for empathy and detachment are challenged each time I talk with refugees from Afghanistan, but also when I read civilian or military blogs, newspapers, or human rights reports on Afghanistan.⁴ What I want to stress is, that the balance between these two ethnographic tools is indispensable, but difficult to maintain – especially when *ethnographic seduction* comes into play.

In the following I will show why this is the case.

I will briefly outline the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and will then proceed to the military presence, by taking the German Armed Forces as an example; in this context I will try to illustrate the interplay of empathy and detachment.

Afghans’ suffering

Afghans’ suffering has not only its origins in the present war. As we all know, Afghanistan’s population has been living in a state of war for more than 30 years. A whole generation has grown up in situations where a general lack of food and health care was accompanied by illnesses, death threats and kidnappings.⁵ A man in his thirties told me that all throughout his life he has never experienced peace consciously, has never known a life without fear or misery and has spent the previous years in constant fear of his children being kidnapped. With the conflict still going strong, life-stories like this are the norm.

1. Afghanistan is the most mined country worldwide – around 10 million mines of different kinds are supposed to still exist in Afghanistan. Mines can have crucial effects on the lives of their victims.⁶

⁴ See Blogs and Vlogs – Afghanistan (Appendix)

⁵ Recently I have been to Dushanbe/Tajikistan where I did my field research on Afghan refugees. Most of them stated that the last 30 years have been nothing else than war for them. Some even preferred the time of the Soviet occupation because during this time could they at least tell friend from foe. People I talked to often told me: When you are older than 10 years, then you have already survived everything in Afghanistan. You survived everything that is unimaginable. Recently stated by UNICEF, Afghanistan is the worst place for children to be raised. This is due to the last 30 years of war and due to the bad security situation in Afghanistan.

⁶ Up to 12 mines explode in Afghanistan every day. Not only do they kill people, the worst and most harming effects on society are the long-term impacts mines might have. Imagine a young girl finding an anti-personnel mine disguised as a doll or a ball-pen and losing her arm or her leg. Who would marry a woman that is not able to fulfil her female duties at home? Who marries a man with one leg who hardly earns enough money to support a family? How should he provide food and shelter for a whole family? These questions have to be considered

2. Due to reports from different organisations such as the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch and others, around 30 000 widows are living in Kabul alone. Most of these women have children, lack any education and have no profession or no job qualification. They are more or less forced to starve, to beg or to sell their body.⁷
3. Considering all Afghan refugees around 7, 5 Million Afghans are scattered all around the world.⁸ That is around 40% of Afghanistan’s inhabitants. I recently did research among Afghan refugees in Tajikistan; their stories and their actual situation in Tajikistan were heart breaking. Especially, when they asked me: “What can you do for us?” “Could you help me get to Austria?” “Will you tell them the truth about our lives?” These questions were difficult to answer and difficult to deal with and definitely provoked strong feelings of empathy. The life stories of the refugees – families and single women - I interviewed so far in Tajikistan, Austria and Germany unveil the circumstances of these people’s lives and the reasons for their flight. These stories are mostly stories about death, violence and suffering. Although they did not directly blamed their misery to the presence of the international forces – some even stressed that they should stay – they were also aware that violence is taking place *because* of the presence of the international forces.

These three insights give a short overview to the continuous suffering caused due to conflict in general, but I briefly want to outline the suffering caused by soldiers since the fall of the

when talking about mines which are not placed with the intention to kill but to injure people in order to do destroy their future. (<http://www.kinderhilfe-afghanistan.de/afghanistan3.html/> 23.04.2010)

⁷ Few reports exist on forced prostitution in Afghanistan, but still some of them can be found on the internet or are topics of popular literature. Due to cultural restraints it is not possible for women or families to talk about these happenings open-heartedly. (<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2010/s2824501.htm> - forced prostitution young boys)

⁸ During the 80s, according to UNHCR reports, around three million Afghans flew to Pakistan and one million to Iran, but only a few Afghans found an opportunity to take refuge in Europe, North America or Australia. At the end of 2002, five million Afghans were living in Pakistan, including the just mentioned three million those that were already born in Pakistan and those that took refuge in 2001.

Taliban regime. As I mentioned I will focus my reflections on North Afghanistan – and thus on German Armed Forces, although there would be numerous examples from other national armies.⁹

The incident I want to discuss dates back to the 4th September 2009 and could be seen as the most striking example for the perpetrator-role of the German Armed Forces in North Afghanistan. The media refers to this as the “Kunduz-Affaire”. An air strike, carried out by an American fighter jet and ordered by a German commander killed several civilians. The day after the attack, a NATO fact finding team estimated that about 125 people (civilians!) were killed in this air strike. These people surrounded two fuel tankers and were assumed to be Taliban militants or other insurgents, but as investigations later showed they gathered simply around the tankers to collect fuel. Of course, the tankers were supposed of been stolen by the Taliban – but civilians used the opportunity to get fuel.

Knowing about this incident and about others show that ISAF-soldiers are perpetrators of violence and spread the atmosphere of insecurity. My empathy for Afghan people grew when reading these stories and when talking with people engaging to build girls’ schools in Afghanistan without obtaining serious help from the German Armed Forces.¹⁰ After most of these interviews, I was convinced by my interlocutors that these soldiers have no positive impact on the conflict and that their presence cannot help at all.¹¹ Because of this it was hard to stay detached.

⁹ Another story about the GAF dates back in the year 2003 but was revealed in the beginning of 2010. In a very popular German newspaper, BILD, pictures were published that show German soldiers with human skulls: The soldiers put the skulls like trophies on their military vehicles and posed with them in front of the cars. Several pictures were taken. The German Government promptly reacted by investigating and bringing those responsible to justice. The media was astonished as German soldiers are not supposed to be in war like situations and thus an overreaction of their experiences was excluded.

There have been also allegations by Murat Kurnaz that he was tortured by German soldiers – soldiers of the *Special Forces Command (Kommando Spezialkräfte)* – after his arrest 2001. From 2002 to 2006 he was then in detention in Guantanamo.

¹⁰ All of them insisted that all the money spend for military forces should be given to projects building up schools, other educational/professional training centres, or health care centre.

¹¹ Besides, most of them are Afghan people who fled years ago and now try to help their country from the safe distance. One special organisation, trying to give information about Afghanistan in German, even asked for an immediate withdrawal of the International Forces (07.2009).

In the course of my interviews there were some Afghans that supported the presence of the German soldiers which made me curious. The situation was quite clear for me if I wanted a better understanding I had to investigate how these soldiers worked and who they really were.

Although there is an evident difference between conflict and the victimizers in Argentina and in Afghanistan; I will follow Robben’s view about the need to study the sentiments among the victimizers¹².

And I quote:

“Much has been written about state terror and cultures of fear in Latin America, but next to nothing has appeared about the fears and anxieties of the protagonists of violence themselves. These fears and anxieties, however, are dwarfed in comparison to the immeasurably greater suffering of the civilian victims of state terror. Nevertheless, such sentiments among the victimizers deserve to be studied, because an analysis of the complex and ambiguous relation between combating forces and civilian population will add another dimension to our understanding of Latin American societies of fear.” (Robben 2007:200)

Robben speaks of Latin American societies of fear, I would speak of the Afghan society of suffering¹³ – which increases the empathy in my research towards Afghans and makes detachment and the research on soldiers even more complicated.

Armed Forces in Afghanistan – and effects

The armed conflict in Afghanistan started in October 2001 with the declaration of war on Afghanistan by the United States of America under the umbrella of the *Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)*. It was part of the *Global War on Terrorism* as Afghanistan was considered

¹² I will now give you a short overview to the organisation of the International Forces in Afghanistan and will precede stories of soldiers that stayed untold and especially unheard in the last years. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to do any interviews with soldiers of the German Armed Forces. Although I have good contacts to them, I did not get any opportunity – besides informal talks – to do qualitative interviews. Still the Armed Forces are distinguished by very impermeable and closed character. Especially, with the worsening of the war in Afghanistan, it got more and more difficult to find soldiers for interviews. (It must be even more difficult after the publishing of secret documents on wikileaks.)

¹³ – which increases the empathy in my research towards the Afghans and makes detachment even more complicated.

the home country of Osama bin Laden who, together with Al-Qaeda, was held responsible for 9/11¹⁴.

Shortly after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) was implemented in Afghanistan. ISAF is a NATO lead operation with an UN Mandate¹⁵. From the political and military point of view it is very important to consider that this operation is not a typical “blue helmet mission” but has to be considered as a peace enforcement mission¹⁶ with the mandate of the United Nations. The mandate of the operation has crucial effects on the roles and actions soldiers are allowed to undertake. ISAF therefore has, to a certain extent, the approbation to use force of arms in order to enforce peace. (The question whether peace could be enforced by using arms is debatable.) In the words of the ISAF website this operation could be described as such:

“ISAF, in support of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, conducts operations in Afghanistan to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development, in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population.”
(<http://www.isaf.nato.int/en/our-mission/> 24.03.2010)

As just stated, these Armed Forces are on the ground in order to provide the Afghan population with help, to assist the government in the reconstruction process – thus training Afghan National Security Forces and to establish security. Due to this fact, it was possible for the German Armed Forces to engage in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Since 2002 the German Armed Forces are deployed in the North of Afghanistan, in the so called Regional Command North (RC

¹⁴ There are still American soldiers deployed within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom.

¹⁵ (UN Resolution 1386)

¹⁶ Peace enforcement as the name already includes differs from peace keeping and peace making. Within the framework of a peace enforcement mission soldiers are allowed to use force, negotiations only are not considered as sufficient.

¹⁷ Since World War II no German soldier was fighting officially in a war, but deploying soldiers in order to provide the Afghan government and the Afghan population with help could not be considered as war. Due to this it was possible for the German government to deploy troops to Afghanistan. After World War II it was unimaginable for German soldiers to take part in a war or an armed conflict.

North) and are mainly based in camps in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif.¹⁸ From different camps they conduct small operations, but are primarily responsible for the just mentioned main duties, the maintenance of the airbase in Mazar-i-Sharif and military reconnaissance. Besides these tasks two of totally five Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are under the command of the German Armed Forces.¹⁹ Since 2003, PRTs try to enforce civil and military cooperation and are mainly deployed in remote areas of the country. Besides this civil and military cooperation, PRTs are also working very closely with the civilian population in order to gain a better understanding of the peoples’ needs.²⁰

Currently there are 5,350 German soldiers deployed in Afghanistan.²¹ They are all responsible for assessing the security situation in their area of operation, to improve security, to provide people with help, and to maintain civil and military cooperation. However – as interlocutors told me –, a lot of them do not leave the camp as the security situation does not allow them to move freely around the country anymore. Soldiers have become the main target for insurgents. Consequently, one can conclude that most of the soldiers are in Afghanistan for the maintenance of the Camp, for supplying support for those in the PRTs or for those who are on patrol.

Anyway, there is a need to investigate the concrete situation and feelings of soldiers on the ground. The following reflexions do not only stress the soldiers’ situation on the ground in Afghanistan but also the consequences of their experience.

First of all, we can stress basic difficulties for the soldiers that they face when they are on mission. All soldiers have their accommodation in the camp, where they stay for the whole time of their deployment. Most of the soldiers state that in these camps they do not have real

¹⁸ The other Regional Commands of ISAF are RC South (Canada, Britain, and the Netherlands rotate command of RC South), RC East (US-Command), RC West (Italian Command) and RC Capital – thus Kabul itself. (<http://www.understandingwar.org>)

¹⁹ Totally 26 PRTs are deployed in Afghanistan – they are under command of different nations.

²⁰ The concepts of PRTs differ from one nation to another (e.g. German, British or US concepts). I do not want to go into detail regarding concepts as this would go beyond the scope of my presentation. PRTs are completely different from the Human Terrain System (HTS) of the US Army which is also recruiting anthropologists. (This as well would go beyond the scope of my presentation as it would lead us to a different discussion on the role of anthropology in the military.) (Feichtinger 2008; Gauster 2006)

²¹ Currently, around 119.000 soldiers are deployed in Afghanistan – out of 46 nations. There are also non-NATO states engaging in Afghanistan, such as Australia and New Zealand.

privacy as most of them have to share their rooms with a buddy. Some soldiers refer to the rooms in the camp, or the camp itself, as bunker²². The bathrooms are also “community showers” and due to water shortage they only have up to 5 min for taking a shower. Another important impact on the “camp-life” is that they cannot leave the camp. Furthermore, these soldiers have family at home and thus, their “normal” life goes on without them. For some soldiers this forms a big problem and therefore there are psychologists in each camp to help them in this regard.²³ This might not sound very challenging, especially for anthropologists who are used to be on field research, but military psychologists often state, that these circumstances are special stress factors particularly in combination with their duties on the ground.²⁴

Secondly, there are specific challenges for soldiers in Afghanistan that have their origins in their work outside of the camp. Due to the combination of the “camp life” and their experiences, a lot of soldiers are suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In 2009 418 soldiers were admitted to the hospital of the German Armed Forces in Berlin²⁵. The senior psychologist of this hospital stated in an interview that all these soldiers have been deployed as ISAF soldiers in Afghanistan. In the first years of the German operation in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Defence has not made public any number of PTSD patients. There was silence on this issue. In 2006, they “admitted” that around 1550 soldiers return from their deployments in other countries with mental disorders, 640 have to be treated because of PTSD – and most of them have been to Afghanistan. Soldiers are afraid to say that they are suffering from this illness, as this could mean exclusion from the army or at least could cause problems in climbing the carrier ladder. In informal talks – within the Austrian Army – it was often stated, that soldiers would not go to a psychologist because of these problems – “real soldiers” are not supposed to suffer from mental disorders.²⁶

²² (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1.11.2006)

²³ Sometimes even the families cannot go along with their decision, and end contact with them. Therefore, the German Armed Forces sometimes provide even families at home with mental support.

²⁴ <http://www.angriff-auf-die-seele.de/ptbs/grundlagen/einsatz/47-belastungen-bei-auslandseinsaetzen.html> (last access - 11.08.2010)

²⁵ (BPtK-Newsletter 1/2010:3)

²⁶ This certainly has to do with the military culture and institutionalized masculinity (Eva Kreisky – public lecture).

Apart from the fear of losing his or her job, post traumatic stress disorder has harsh effects on the everyday life – on family life. One soldier, Frank Dornseif, has made his story public. On 8th June 2003, a bus was heading to Kabul, in order to take German soldiers to the airport. They were supposed to fly back after four months of mission in Afghanistan. A suicide taxi equipped with 150kg explosive crashed into the bus and exploded. Four of the soldiers were got killed immediately and a lot of them were heavily injured.²⁷ Dornseif survived the attack but even three years later the memories of what he experienced hunt him, as he states²⁸. In a television interview in February 2010 he states that things have not improved a lot since his last interview in 2006: he still uses pain killer, hypnotics and antidepressants. But he also states that it was not just the attack itself that is still hunting him, but also the bad experiences in Afghanistan – the bad looks from the people on the street, the feeling of unease in general and the tensions between the soldiers.

Soldiers are trained practically before their mission, but they are not trained for terror attacks – one cannot simulate a terror attack, one cannot simulate a cultural shock and each one of us knows these days of uneasiness. What impact is there when the uneasiness is combined with the anxiety of losing one’s life?

Other informal talks or conversations with German soldiers showed me another aspect. A lot of them were really eager to change something to the better, but were faced with organisational restraints or restraints that have their main roots in the structure of the military itself. This dissatisfaction leads to depression and lack of motivation. One soldier told me that he has already been in Afghanistan four times because he really wants to help the Afghan population. He is aware of and regrets that all his efforts are only one drop in the ocean. From his individual point of view he has not a lot of options, but he can still change something in a small way.²⁹

²⁷ This was the first time that German soldiers got killed in a conflict after World War II and therefore trigger a lot of sympathy in the country.

²⁸ Süddeutsche Zeitung, 01.11.2006 – online-paper

²⁹ I also heard a lot of stories of good relations with the civilian population, or with civilian organisations. Some of my interlocutors told me that they really had good experiences of soldiers in North Afghanistan. They often pointed out that there is a difference between German and American soldiers. Whereas American soldiers tend to point with their weapon at civilians, German soldiers are said to always put the weapon down and first talk with their counterpart. Other interlocutors and also reports on the US Army state that US soldiers often rushed into

Concluding Remarks - coming back to Robben

These stories and personal reflections show that soldiers are not only the perpetrators, but also individuals who can be victims and who want to change something for the better. Soldiers differ, although their uniforms suggest something else. These ethnographic insights into the military presence in Afghanistan helped me understand the soldiers – or at least develop a kind of empathy for them and their lives. These lives of soldiers present new dimensions for understanding a conflict, but also help us to realize the social impact a conflict has on different societies – in our case, the Afghan and the German societies.

By studying the perpetrators of violence in Afghanistan, I gained insight into the people who are considered to be the enemies of some of my interlocutors, of the world press, of leftist-NGOs, of the Afghan population and also of some anthropologists. Knowing the enemy means also knowing also his or her weaknesses and anxieties – as mentioned above in Robben’s quote – and creates empathy towards them. Talking with soldiers and showing interest in their situation sometimes made them feel better and of course, some of them were/are interested that their point of view is made public as well. However, they are convinced that this will not change anything in the general perceptions of their profession³⁰.

My ethical dilemma began when I did research on soldiers and when I started to feel sympathetic towards them, because the moral duality of victim and perpetrator in conflict got blurred³¹.

Each side in a violent conflict tries to seduce recipients by morally justifying their actions through narratives and especially counter-narratives. This *ethnographic seduction* – to quote Robben – *crosscuts the interplay with empathy and detachment*³². I wanted to focus on empathy more than detachment, as empathy is more likely to lead to an ethical dilemma. Detachment would be more important in getting rid of the ethical dilemma in research. Still,

family houses without taking care of entering the private female part of the house, whereas German soldiers are said to knock at doors and again first try to talk with their counterpart.

³⁰ The public discourse rarely takes the side of soldiers – as they are supposed to earn a lot of money, as their job also means that they might get killed, and as all the deployments in foreign countries are by choice. (Thus it is considered as their own will.)

³¹ The conflict in Afghanistan takes also place in the media. The media as the battleground?

³² Robben 1995:99

there is seduction – and I use the term of this *ethnographic seduction* as neutrally as Robben is using it, as there are no implications of allurements and entrapment³³. As stated by Robben it is “to be led astray by an intended course” and can be compared to the ability of filmmakers to trap us in another universe.³⁴ This seduction is dangerous for the objectification of our fieldwork as well as for our understanding of the conflict, but it plays a crucial role.

And I quote Robben again:

“If, on the one hand, seduction disarms our critical detachment and thus debilitates the gathering of cultural knowledge, then, on the other our empathy in research on violent conflict may be hindered by our awareness of the protagonism of our interlocutor.”(Robben 1995:86)

The ethical **and** epistemological dilemma stems, therefore, from the difficulty in consciously using seduction and being aware of it, without getting trapped by it. Furthermore, seduction is very tempting as it pretends to provide truth on a moral duality. Truth, for perpetrators as well as for victims, is the main source to rely on, but for conflict analysis it is not attainable.

The central issue to consider is that this trinity of seduction, empathy and detachment, is always present in the research of a conflict. The anthropologist’s role in this case is a hybrid one. He or she has to reposition him or herself again and again.

Talking about these insights into the military often might lead anthropologists into the position of defending themselves, or putting them into an ethical dilemma, as they are perceived to be defending the soldiers. I would not say that I am defending soldiers, but rather I would ask people to look at this chapter of anthropology from another point of view, an epistemological point of view that opens new horizons on the research into war and conflict.

³³ Robben 1995:83

³⁴ Robben 1995:83.

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