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# “We’re against it!”

## Children in Germany and their perception of the war in Iraq

**Children in Germany opposed the war in Iraq. They had expected to receive more information from the media, particularly on the plight of people in Iraq. Questioning on their understanding of the war revealed that some of them would have liked to have supported Saddam Hussein and saw the Americans as the aggressors who used underhanded tricks and enjoyed shooting children.**

War, accidents, terror attacks and natural catastrophes are part of media coverage and thus also part of daily life for children. It is inevitable that they will encounter events such as the September 11 attacks and coverage of the war in Iraq. The question is how these events affect children, what emotions are associated with media coverage of warfare and what lasting memories children retain.

### Children and media coverage – Previous research

A great deal of research has been carried out into the meaning of the media coverage of war and terror for children. Many studies have focussed on the effects of media coverage and have investigated reactions of fear and stress. They show that many children find media coverage to be “sometimes terrifying” (Schuster et al., 2001), as it is the case with news programmes in general (cf. Smith et

al., 2002, Cantor et al., 1996). Although only a small number of the children and parents who took part in surveys found television coverage of the 1991 Gulf War extremely frightening (van der Voort et al., 1992, Cantor et al., 1993, Morrison and MacGregor, 1993), reports on the September 11 attacks caused children to show symptoms of stress (Pfefferbaum et al., 2003). Existing research shows that media coverage of war and terror causes children to feel a range of emotions (Wober and Young, 1993), including fear, although children react with fear less often than could be expected.

Children want to inform themselves about events, as shown by a Finnish study (Toivonen et al., 1997). The events of the last Gulf War were a relevant topic for children and teenagers; they wanted to know more about them and were concerned about their consequences. Although 26 % of the American children interviewed in the study cited a desire for information as their reason for watching the news, 32 % acknowledged that they had watched in search of excitement. One in five children hoped to find explicit confirmation of its own position, that is media reports of successful action which underlined the exceptional abilities of the allied forces. Children who are generally of a sensitive disposition often avoid media coverage of war action (Hoffner et al., 1994).

Children remember specific scenarios from war reports. They remember personalised events far better than abstract ideologies. Moreover, they are

more likely to remember bad news than good news (Toivonen et al., 1997). An Australian qualitative study on the last Gulf War (Gillard et al., 1993) indicates that in 60 % of the cases children clearly assigned the roles of good and evil, with Bush and the Allies as forces for the good and Hussein and Iraq as the evil-doers.

### The study: “Children’s stories and pictures of the war”

In the study “Children’s stories and pictures of the war”, IZI collaborated with international researchers to explore how children perceived the war in Iraq and its coverage in the media. The goal of the study was to gain an insight into how much children knew about the events and what subjective significance the events had for them, and to ascertain how children perceive media coverage and what they want from it. Thus, for the purposes of the research we interviewed children in the first week of the war in Iraq (March 20 to 27, 2003). In open interviews the children spoke about their knowledge of the contexts, of how they felt about and fantasised the war in Iraq and how they perceived the media coverage. The children were also asked to draw pictures of how they imagined the war and what they wanted to see on television. It is a qualitative study with a particular focus on multinational comparison, thus the same interview guideline was used in Germany, Austria, the USA and Israel,

making it possible to discern how children's perceptions of the war were influenced by the different regional and national situations and by public discussion on the subject. Each of the selected countries held a particular position as regards the war in Iraq. The USA was the power which had declared war. The interviews were held in San Diego, California, a city which has a large military base and where the military action is thus very relevant (see Seiter and Pincus in this issue). In Israel people anticipated potential long-range missile attacks on their country, an explosive situation in a country where violence and terror are already part of daily life (see Lemish in this issue).

The Federal Republic of Germany emphatically opposed the war. In Austria there was less clarity concerning the stance of the government and the public.<sup>1</sup> In order to do justice to the specific positions of these countries, we have decided to reveal the initial results in three separate articles, with this article revealing the results of the study in Germany. In contrast to the similarities revealed in the study of "Our greatest daydreams" and the role played in these by the media (cf. Götz, Lemish, Aidman and Moon, 2002), the results of this study were compared and showed some similarities between the countries, but rather more differences. This indicates how deeply children's perceptions are affected by the events and discussions which take place in their immediate surroundings.

### **Germany was against the war**

The war in Iraq was the subject of media interest in Germany long before the military action began. "The war-in-waiting" (cover story of the 37/2002 issue of the current affairs magazine *Der Spiegel*) became an issue in the Bundestag (lower house) elections and took on a significance

of its own (*Der Spiegel*, 36/2002). The majority of the press reported critically on the "immoral war" (*Die Zeit*, 2.1.2003), and initial press analyses show that when the war started, most media coverage reflected opposition (COMDAT, 2003, p. 29 ff.). According to Christiane Eilders, the media assumed "an almost moralising tone" (Eilders, 2003, p. 3) of strong opposition.

The majority of the German population were against the war. In a FORSA<sup>2</sup> poll conducted in January 2003 81 % of citizens said they opposed military action (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17.1.2003), in February the newspaper *Die Welt* quoted a study according to which only 9 % of Germans supported military action by the USA (*Die Welt*, 4.2.2003), and according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* "Politbarometer" (political barometer) in March the overwhelming majority (84 %) were opposed to military action in Iraq (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 29.3.2003). The media coverage reflected this consensus of government and population (Eilders, 2003, p. 4).

Due to continual media coverage, the war in Iraq became relevant to children, they became aware of it and it became part of their "reality" (Bergner and Luckmann, 1965). The media was their only source of information; either they found out about the war "directly" – from reports on television, on the radio or in newspapers, or they received information by talking to others about what they had found out from the media.

In order to discover how children deal with this topic, what emotions and images they link with the topic and what information they would like media reports to provide, we interviewed 87 children, 46 girls and 41 boys, between the ages of 6 and 11 years. The interviews were conducted throughout Germany at the children's homes, usually in the children's bedrooms. This was a qualitative survey which aimed to understand, report and explain trends.

### **German children knew about the war in Iraq – television was their main source of information**

Most of the children we interviewed knew that there was a war; when we conducted the interviews just after the war had begun only two had not yet heard about it. The children knew that bombs were being dropped and houses destroyed and that people were dying. Some of them connected these events with Saddam Hussein, but few linked them with the events of September 11.

The media was the main source of the children's information, primarily the television, followed by the radio and newspapers. Concerning television, most of this information came from news programmes they had watched, sometimes together with their parents. The channel most often cited as the first point of contact with the news was ZDF<sup>3</sup>, followed by ARD<sup>4</sup> and RTL<sup>5</sup>. Some children had specifically chosen to watch children's news programmes and special reports on the subject.

### **The war was a topic of discussion at school and at home**

Many of the children had also found out about the war from the world around them. It was a topic within their peer group and at school; at least half of them had already discussed the subject with their teachers, and there had been special events at both class and school level. The children had, for example, drawn pictures or said prayers during lessons or had been on demonstrations together. According to the children, their reason for participating in such events was to demonstrate to others that they were against the war.

"Yeah, like we made flowers and we stuck them on the windows at school and then I drew a battleship and I drew a big red cross over it. And then I wrote a big sign on top." (Manuel, 7)

"Yeah, at school we wrote letters to Bush like 'No war', or 'We think war is rubbish', and our teacher's going to translate



Fig. 1: In the news Ludwig (9) seeks answers to his questions on the war.

them into English and send them off.” (Jakob, 8)

The war was also discussed at home. Some two thirds of the children interviewed said they had talked about the war with their parents. Parents simply explained the situation to their children or discussed it with them when the subject arose, on the way to school or during dinner, sometimes with a view to real understanding, sometimes superficially.

### Children’s knowledge about the war

The depth of the children’s knowledge about the war varied. Some described how they had picked up fragments of information from the media or from discussions, but could not quite place them, while others proved to have a highly detailed knowledge of the current situation and the context and were able to discuss the subject in great complexity during the interview.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Reasons for war: Iraq has weapons it should not have and Bush just wants the oil*

The majority of the children (37) believed that both sides, the USA and Iraq, were the warring parties. However, a large minority (26) believed that the war was the “fault” of the USA, that is George Bush and his allies.

“Well, the ones who are attacking, that’s America and Britain, and the ones who have to defend themselves, that’s Iraq.” (Oliver, 10)

“I know that the war is George Bush’s fault.” (Kerem, 9)

The children were far more familiar with the name George Bush than with the name Saddam Hussein. When

asked why this war was taking place, the children cited two principal reasons: Iraq’s possession of weapons, and the fact that the Americans and the British wanted access to oil.

“Well, Bush, yeah, he says it’s because of Saddam Hussein, because they want to free the country. But I don’t think that’s what it’s about at all. I think there are lots of reasons, maybe it’s a bit because of that, but it’s because of the oil, too. Because America hasn’t got many oil-wells and Iraq has quite a lot.” (Jan, 9)

“Maybe it’s because in Iraq the oil’s so cheap. And maybe the British haven’t got much money any more and so because it’s so cheap, they want to have it.” (Katinka, 9)

A number of children (13) linked the war with the events of September 11. It was rarer for German children to blame Saddam Hussein for the war, and some of the children confused Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden.

#### *Children’s perceptions of international public opinion: The whole world is protesting*

Two thirds of the children were sure that most of the world was against the war. They believed they had seen evidence of this in coverage of demonstrations and protest actions. According to the children, people in general, but above all the Iraqis, simply could not be for the war because they had to bear the consequences and

because people were being injured; they believed that no-one except Mr. Bush could accept that. Some of the children believed that Bush actively desired the war, and that those who agreed with him were content to see the people suffer.

“I think the President of the USA, he really wants there to be a war. Because they’ve got all the weapons and I think they want to try them out, really properly.” (Kathrin, 11)

One third of the children thought that there might be a difference of opinion about the war. Most, however, constructed an “us” and “them” scenario, with “us” (those who opposed the war) firmly occupying the moral high ground.

### Children’s emotional reactions to the war in Iraq

The news that the war had started provoked an emotional reaction from the children. They spoke about fears that they themselves would be affected by the war, and conjured up scenarios of a third World War. The initial reaction of many was categorical opposition and a total lack of comprehension as to why the war was happening. Many of the children told the interviewers that they often thought about the war, and even those who did not really want to consider the issue reported that they “simply had to” think about it.

The children’s thoughts focussed on the fate and suffering of the Iraqi people.

“Yeah, the poor people, their dads are being killed, or their husbands. They’re sad.” (Fabian, 7)

The children put themselves in the position of the children in Iraq and imagined their suffering from a child’s perspective. They also contemplated their own positions and desired a rapid finish to the war. Some also mentioned that they had thought



Fig. 2: Kathrin (11): The father is dead, the mother flees with her children.

about the current military action and considered the basic question of why there was a war.

Approximately 50 % of the children had noticed that their daily lives had changed. Some of them had found that they had become sadder and quieter and had noticed how their attitudes to and concepts of the war had changed. Others explained that war had become an omnipresent topic, that it was discussed in class, there was constant media coverage about it, and that where they lived posters and demonstrations constantly reminded them of the topic. Some of the children also talked about their fears and unease:

“Yeah, I’m a bit scared, too, that there might be a world war, because they’re all so stupid. And then I’d have to escape with my pets.” (Monique, 8)

Like Monique, children consider what a war would mean for them. In doing so, they think about their own circumstances. Monique, for example, has three mice and two cats, which she looks after, and it is easy to comprehend the problems from her point of view. Yet Monique’s idea of the problems she would face if she had to flee due to war hardly corresponds to reality.

### Dreams about war

In the interviews, conducted just after the war had begun, only a small number of children said that they had dreamt about the war. The dreams related were of war scenarios and their own involvement in fighting, with them as victims, either because a family member had died or because they themselves had been killed.

“Once I dreamed my family got shot. That’s why I sometimes think about the war and I get really worried about Germany getting involved in the war.” (Sandra, 10)



Fig. 3: Kathrin (11): A mother talks on the news about her family’s suffering.

In two cases, however, boys had dreamt that they were the aggressors.

“Yeah, sometimes I’ve dreamt about the war, that I was there wearing a uniform and that I had to shoot someone. I didn’t like that.” (David, 10)

Although it is difficult to interpret these statements from the children, it is nonetheless obvious that the scenarios seem threatening and expose a number of different fears.

### What children liked about the media coverage

The majority of the children (70%) had watched programmes on the Iraq War on television. A number of them had been searching specifically for information, while others had watched with their parents or had simply picked up some details by chance. They did not always understand all the information.

However, the majority of children interviewed agreed that children should not be “protected” from the subject of war.

“Yeah, because it does affect children, because it’s important for people in other countries to know about it. And even if it’s sometimes scary, you should know what’s happening in other countries and I think it’s quite important that we know about the war, even if it’s quite a long way away.” (Anastasia, 9)

The children interviewed liked the fact that the media used pictures to help them to imagine the situation. They praised the comprehensive reporting and were impressed that the reporters were risking their own lives to provide us with information. They also enjoyed anti-war reports and coverage of protesters calling for action:



Fig 4: Monique (8) wants Bush and Hussein to shake hands. The other presidents applaud.

"I really liked the fact that some people went on demonstrations and they were shouting: 'No war!'" (Charly, 9)

The children felt that the media coverage had helped them to understand the real significance of war:

Alexandra: "Cos now I understand, cos at first I just thought they were fighting a bit, but now I've seen that there is fire." (Alexandra, 8)

Yet Alexandra's concept of the war has little in common with the cruel reality of the situation. If anything helped the children gain an insight into the reality of the war then it was the pictures. From a child's perspective they are extremely important for comprehension and can provoke an emotional reaction:

"No, it (the report) didn't help me much, and the radio didn't either, but the pictures did. The pictures really made me think about it and realise they've really got something wrong." (Ivett, 8)

Ivett describes how it was the pictures which "made" her decide to oppose the war. Presumably, she means that the pictures led to an emotional reaction which then led her to think about the war. For her, the most important realisation was that "they", presumably those in the world who hold the balance of power, had really "got something wrong". This realisation, a step towards political emancipation,

is an important milestone in terms of political education.

As already mentioned, children's first exposure to the topic was usually through media coverage designed for adults. However, a quarter of the children said that they regularly watched *logo!*, the news programme on the children's channel KI.KA run jointly by the two German public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF. Although at the time of the interviews only a few of the children had seen special reports on the topic on children's news programmes or on *Kikania*<sup>7</sup>, they praised these programmes highly:

"On KI.KA there's a thing called *logo!*, and they always explain everything really well so children understand and so they don't get frightened (...) What I liked about the children's programmes was that they talked really openly with the children about things and that they tried to explain them to the children with words the children understood, and so I understood it better than when I watched the grown-ups' news with mum and dad." (Anastasia, 9)

### What children would have liked to have seen

#### *Information and explanations with comprehensible words and pictures which were not frightening*

Most of the children considered the news very important, even if they did not watch it regularly themselves. Some of the children wanted to find out very specific information and had fundamental questions such as how nuclear warheads and chemical weapons work. They also had questions about the specific division of power, such as "Who has the best weapons?"

and about the current situation (see Fig. 1).

"I want to know: Who is fighting against who? Who else is involved? Who's got the best chance of winning? What do the soldiers look like? How many of them are there and what weapons have they got? What does it look like in Iraq, have lots of things been destroyed? Have people been injured? How many?" (Ludwig, 9)

The children's questions were, however, sometimes very basic. Take for example Johannes (7), who wanted to know how an atomic bomb works. The children thought that experts should have explained the situation. Nina, for example, believed that reporters should have interviewed someone from the army:

"If you've been in the army a long time, then you know what's going to happen when there's a war. Because you spend your whole time preparing for a war, you know what's going to happen to you." (Nina, 10)

The children wanted coverage which showed "honest" pictures of the war which did not shun the realities of war.

"I would show the bombs dropping, so that people know how awful it is, what's happening there. So people see pictures of it and how everyone's getting shot and stuff." (Pepe, 10)

On the other hand, it was important to them that the information was not too frightening.

"I would explain it to children using words they could understand and try to do it so they weren't frightened and didn't just turn off the TV and run away and hide." (Anastasia, 9)

Many of the children criticised the lengthy reports on the Iraq war which contained jargon they did not understand. Others, however, criticised reports for not being exciting enough or not containing enough information. It seems a balance must be achieved



Fig. 5: Angela (10): A child and Chancellor Schröder talking on television about the senselessness of war.

whereby coverage is honest, not too frightening, and contains comprehensible and interesting information, without overstepping the mark in terms of pedagogical ethics.

#### *More reports from the perspective of those involved*

If they were planning programmes, the children said they would include not only information on the status quo, but would also report on the situation in Iraq and people's daily lives there. They wanted specific information on how the war affected those involved.

Katinka: "Yeah, what it's like for the people, they never show that anywhere."

Interviewer: "So what do they show instead?"

Katinka: "Just war, war, war, where they're shooting." (Katinka, 9)

In Katinka's eyes the coverage concentrated on showing clashes between the opposing forces, yet she would rather have found out more about the circumstances of the people involved. Kathrin (11) told us about how she imagined a war scenario in which a mother and her children were forced to flee their home. The father had been shot and was lying on the grass and the houses were burning. The mother was urging her children to hurry and there was no time to pick up the teddy bear which had fallen on the ground (see Fig. 2).

Kathrin then said that if she could design her own programme, she would interview this mother or another mother, so that she could tell of her suffering (see Fig. 3).

The children were also particularly interested in the lives of children in Iraq, sometimes really identifying themselves with those children. They tried to imagine how they would feel in

that situation and asked questions about how the injured and the war orphans were being cared for. Their desire for there to be some hope and their relief when they saw that the children were still able to laugh despite all that was happening was palpable.

#### *Show alternatives to war*

The children not only desired information on specific situations, but they would also have liked to have seen alternatives to the war. Firstly, there was the desire for the war to reach a swift conclusion. George Bush and Saddam Hussein would shake hands and the other presidents would applaud (see Fig. 4).

The children had a very strong desire for peace and not all of them were interested in further information on the war in Iraq. Some of them would have liked to have been given more information on why people begin wars in the first place and how the war could have been avoided.

In their programmes children would have shown opposition to the war. Angela (10), for example, would have invited the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and a child onto her programme and both would have emphasised the senselessness of a war in which people die unnecessarily (see Fig. 5).

In theorising about programmes they might have created, the children

showed no desire to preserve the neutrality which journalism as a rule at least attempts to observe. Janine (10) had hoped that the *logo!* presenters would explicitly give their own opinions. Others would have liked to have discovered more about demonstrations and to have been given more ideas of what they themselves could do to show their objections. These ideas and suggestions from the children strongly indicate that children desire media coverage to reflect their own opinions.

#### **The children's drawings of the war**

In the interview we asked the children to draw on a piece of paper the first thing that came into their minds when they thought about the war. In these drawings and in the stories the children told the interviewers about them, the children articulated their concept of the events.

#### *Scenes of close combat, war devoid of humans, or suffering and destruction*

In many of the pictures battle scenes dominated, slightly more often in the boys' pictures than in those of the girls.

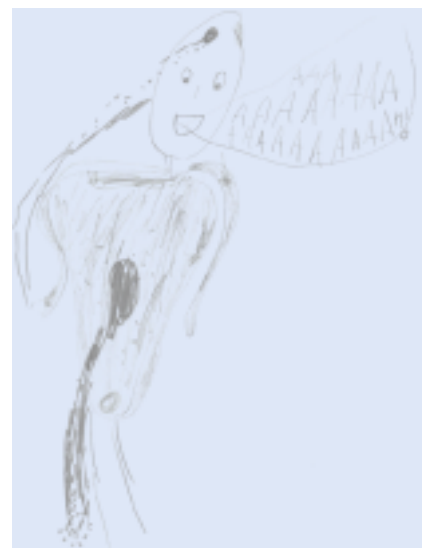


Fig. 6: Sonja (7): People suffering in war, illustrated by a victim spouting blood.



Fig. 7: Linda (10): A mother alight in a burning house throws a teddy down to her daughter, saying her final goodbye.

Arrows characterised the actions of shooting, fleeing, being injured (wounds spurting blood) and suffering. Where battle scenes were the main focus of the picture, the pictures mostly showed two warring parties, often man against man or group against group. They were images of close combat in which people with drawn pistols were shooting at each other. The children's images of war were probably based on fictional television scenes which had been adapted to the current situation, for example by adding green combat uniforms. Battle scenes were, however, also depicted as a scenario devoid of humans. Planes dropped bombs on houses or, as in three pictures, flew into high-rise buildings. Images of night attacks seemed to be mixed with definite relics of the media coverage of the events of September 11. In terms of appearance and size, the skyscrapers and planes resembled the pictures from New York more than the reality in Baghdad. Bombs were drawn either as very round, like cannon balls, or as longer objects labelled "guided missiles". Other weapons were depicted in the drawings, for instance that of Steven (10) contained a square box with a round symbol on it being dropped from an aeroplane, which he explained was a "nuclear warhead". This is another example of how the

children combined current and past media events.

While some children drew battle scenes, weapons and the destruction of houses, others focussed on the suffering of people, drawing the dying or already dead, grieving relatives and frightened people. They drew people crying and attempted to represent the suffering of the injured in their pictures. Sonja (7), for example, drew a person bleeding to death (see Fig. 6).

In some of the pictures families are sitting in air-raid shelters, safe but anxious. The events drawn by the children also reflect emotional suffering. For example, Linda (10) drew a scene in which a mother is throwing a teddy bear out of a burning window to her daughter with the words "Bye-bye my little daughter" (see Fig. 7). In the children's pictures information from diverse current sources is combined with the mental pictures they already have; these pre-existing images themselves are a combination of fiction and images from previous media reports. The children do not always have a clear concept of the dimensions of a war, thus it would be of clear pedagogical use to expand their knowledge of how a military strike takes place and what consequences it has.

### The roles of those involved

In the episodes illustrated and described by the children, recurring concepts of

who played what role in this war could be identified. Although they are individual concepts (cf. Bachmair, 1996), the origins of which can only be speculated about, it is nevertheless extremely useful to explore some of them.<sup>8</sup>

### Monique's image of war: *The Americans and their underhanded tricks*

Monique (8) explained what she thought about the current events (see Fig. 8):

Monique: "They're in the middle of fighting and there's a bunker. And you can see someone's sticking out a white flag. Then they say 'OK, we're coming in now'. But the ones in the bunker are going to carry on shooting, one of them's got a gun ready and there's a whole load of bombs behind them. (...) the people in the bunker are from the USA and the others, on the hill, are from Iraq. They (the Americans) want all the people to come inside the bunker so they can shoot them easier and so they don't have to run around outside looking for them, because that's more dangerous. The Americans want to get the Iraqis inside so they can kill them better, so that Saddam's shield isn't so big. So they can find him better."

In her picture she drew a stone tower which she described as a bunker. There are bars on the windows so that no bombs can enter. The attackers are standing on a hill, although two



Fig. 8: Monique's (8) picture of the Iraq War: the Americans set a lethal trap.

people have already “fallen down the hill and been shot with pistols”. In this episode she imagined the US soldiers trying to entice the Iraqis into a trap in order to shoot of them as many as possible with as few own losses as possible. The question arose as to how an eight-year-old could come up with such a fantasy.

The idea of the bunker and the hill probably comes from other (media) stories, in which some type of fort is stormed or besieged. Monique took the word bunker, which was very topical in the media coverage in the first few days of the Iraq war, and she added in details such as the barred windows as protection against bombs.

In her picture she gave the Americans a motive: to kill as many Iraqis as possible so that Saddam’s shield was no longer so large. This would make it easier to find him. The image of a shield was used by George Bush among others in his speech at the outset of war.

Additionally, there were reports, for example in the *Financial Times* (20.3.2003), which warned of the danger that Saddam Hussein might use people as human shields to protect military establishments. Monique adopted this picture and pictured almost all Iraqis as a huge shield concealing Saddam Hussein.<sup>9</sup> The death of as many Iraqis as possible would of course make it easier to find him. In decimating this shield, the Americans wanted to put as few of their own soldiers as possible in danger, a goal often cited by the media. To achieve this, the Americans were using an underhanded trick, that is they were waving a white flag, but intended to continue firing. It is, of course, impossible to discover exactly how Monique came to construct this image, but she might have seen pictures such as the front cover of the current affairs magazine *Focus* (24.3.2003) which was accompanied by the headline “War of deadly tricks”. However, the trick which the Americans play in her picture is far removed

from the realities of war and is once again reminiscent of war scenes in historical films.

Thus, Monique was building on her own pre-existing picture of war, which had in part been constructed with reference to previous media coverage. She added to it, for example by using words from current discourse such as “bunker”, metaphors such as “Iraqis as a human shield for Saddam Hussein”, and information such as the fact that the goal of the Americans was to endanger the lives of as few of their soldiers as possible. She constructed an episode (Klemm, 2002) in which she presented the Iraqis as dehumanised and the Americans as promise-breakers. This picture was based on a combination of her knowledge of the current situation and her imagination, and she interpreted it for herself (and the interviewer). The American soldiers were in no way shown in a positive or heroic role. This anti-American attitude discernible to a varying degree dominated the accounts of the German children.

#### *The desire to support the weak and attack George Bush*

Several of the children expressed a desire to support Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Ines (8) hoped “(...) that the Iraqi soldiers will be stronger”. Ines had presumably gathered information which was often the subject of discussion at the time, namely the American’s clear military supremacy (e. g. on *logo!* on 20.3.2003), and with a typical child’s understanding she was on the side of the weak and wanted to support Iraq. She hoped “that they win the war”. She also hoped that the Americans would be imprisoned, which she illustrated in her picture.

Thomas (6) fantasised about an attack on George Bush. “Because Bush, he’s big and powerful and he’s destroying another, smaller country. They haven’t got a chance.” He imagined a scenario in which Bush himself would be shot. He would be hit in the arm, but not

necessarily killed because then, Thomas believed, the Americans would immediately cease military action and elect a new President. That would take “a few days”, said Thomas, but then the war would be over. Simon (9) also imagined scenarios in which George Bush was personally attacked. He imagined a guided missile being “dropped” by an Iraqi plane and heading directly for Bush. Not until at the last minute Bush shouted, “Stop, no more war!” would the missile be called off.

The aim of the children was to end the war. In imagining how it might be ended, the two boys used specific terms they had heard in the media such as “guided missile” and “elect” and combined these with their understanding of war. Both boys believed that threats would force an end to the war. Since in their minds, due to media influence, George W. Bush personified the war, they believed that it was necessary to attack him.

#### *Saddam Hussein as “somehow” not good either*

Only a few of the children interviewed were critical of Saddam Hussein. Their perceptions were totally different to those of children in the USA or Israel, where Hussein is quite definitely seen as an opponent or a troublesome politician. Some, however, believed that the dictator had only himself to blame for what was happening. Robert (9) explained the war like this:

“See, Bush found out that Saddam Hussé [sic] was treating the Iraqis badly and that he was holding on to all the donations that people had sent to the Iraqis.”

Elly (10) assumed that Saddam Hussein “hadn’t behaved very well towards the other countries and they had also done some things which maybe weren’t so good.”

Thomas (6, see above) also knew some details about Saddam Hussein: “Saddam, see, he attacked another country with chemical weapons.



Really he's bad, too". He told the interviewer that "Paul's teacher thinks Saddam is worse than Bush. And well, he is. But at the moment Bush is stronger." Thus, his desire was clear: he wanted to attack Bush.

The children were basically aware that Saddam Hussein was an awkward character, but they had no tangible idea of what this meant. In their pictures and stories of how they imagined the war, there was no mention of Saddam Hussein himself.

Although adults are generally aware of the fact that the dictator posed a real problem, partly due to the last Gulf War, at the time of the interviews there was little public discussion of this in Germany, so the children were much less aware of the fact. Most of the children interviewed were not even born at the time of the last Gulf War. Thus, although they were aware of the potential significance of the people involved, they did not really understand it. Background information, specially designed to be comprehensible and interesting for children, would have been important here.

### *Americans who like killing*

Several of the pictures and stories feature Americans enjoying the war and delightedly shooting the Iraqis. The drawing by Julia (9) was particularly potent on this point; she drew three American soldiers with smiles on their faces shooting at Iraqi children (see Fig. 9).

The adults are extremely large and two of them are aiming at a child who is screaming "Mummy". When asked by the interviewer if she had intended to draw the soldiers with smiles on their faces, Julia answered "Of course! They want to shoot the chil-

dren!" Once again the question arises as to how a nine-year-old can create such an image.

A source of these fantasies could be pictures of American soldiers who are laughing or even cheering. Various media sources showed pictures of American soldiers speaking confidently about the action and at least smiling, if not celebrating. Another source is presumably the death of children in Iraq. Quite rightly, the

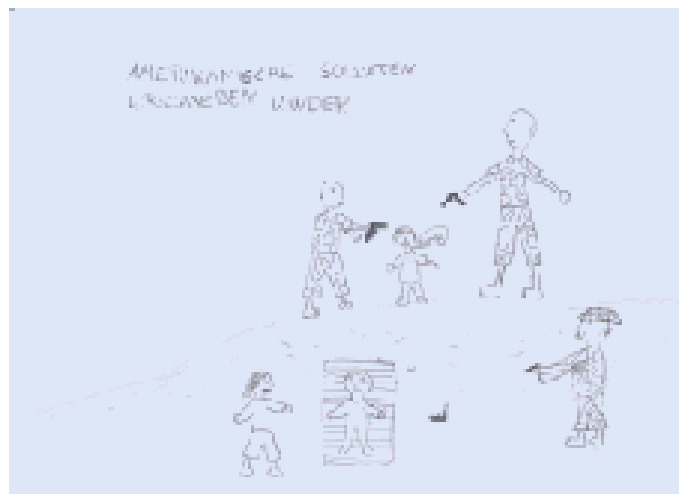


Fig. 9: Julia (9): US soldiers shooting at Iraqi children.

reports did not show exactly how they died. It is likely that Julia combined the two information sources and imagined how the children had died. Thus, she created a scene, probably influenced by fictional scenes from other media, in which the soldiers were smiling because they had been overjoyed about going to war, and were shooting at the defenceless children just as a firing squad would do.

### Misconceptions

Julia's picture in particular clearly shows to what extent children become involved with the topic of the war. They absorb specific pictures, action episodes and connotations from the media coverage. The current events are then combined with what they

know from previous events such as in this case the September 11 terror attacks and fictional stories. In trying to understand and integrate these current images and information they have obtained from general discussion of the war, the children make links between the individual pieces of information and impressions. In doing so, they create misconceptions, which from their point of view are extremely plausible, but which in reality

are problematic, for example the desire to provide Saddam Hussein with more weapons or to bomb George Bush, or the pictures of American soldiers using underhanded tricks or smilingly executing children.

Many things which are obvious to adults such as the fact that, like other soldiers, American soldiers do not enjoy killing, were not clear to the children interviewed, some of whom were confronted with a tangible war and its significance for

the first time. Consequently, targeted support of the children through child-oriented, considered reporting was needed. In fact, programmes such as *logo!* provided a great deal of such information. Ideally reports should have included more of this kind of material as background information on Saddam Hussein and should have been open to basic questions such as "Why do wars happen?", or "Do soldiers like killing people?"

### Hegemonic discourse is an opportunity and a problem

The quantitative and qualitative results of the survey clearly show how children combine media images and public discourse with their own issues and patterns of interpretation. In Germany the majority of discussions

about the war in Iraq, whether in the media or at school, was clearly against the war. This allowed children space for speculation on the topic, for rarely had their opinions and actions on global political topics corresponded so well with those of adults. No matter how childlike their comments on the topic, they coincided with the views of the adults. Comments such as "(...) if Bush keeps on like this, he'll become a dictator, too" (Jan, 9) and "The first thing I thought was how stupid Bush is" (Pepe, 10), or even vulgar observations such as "Bush is a wanker" (Thomas, 6) were probably received with an indulgent smile by the adults, since the children were actually expressing something which some of the adults had already thought to themselves. This increased the children's confidence and encouraged them to become more active in expressing their views. Whether at school or at home, they realised that it was worth them becoming politically active, if only on a small scale. This is a very important experience which can encourage children to learn about and become involved in politics. Yet the danger of this hegemonic discourse was that it led children to develop a simplistic idea of good and evil which decreed that Saddam Hussein was 100 % good and George Bush was 100 % bad. This personalisation and development of a simple idea of good and evil is not untypical in children's understanding of media coverage of war (Gillard et al., 1993). In this study, individual examples showed how children take chunks of information from media coverage and public discourse. When they have no concrete knowledge, they imagine contexts and details, following the predominant discourses. Thus, they develop their own patterns of interpretation and fantasies. In terms of a sustainable peace pedagogy and to ensure high-quality media coverage, it is necessary to go into more detail here.

Translated by John Malcolm King

## NOTES

- 1 The findings of this substudy will be published at a later date.
- 2 FORSA Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analyse mbH (Society for Social Research and Statistical Analysis Ltd.), Berlin.
- 3 Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (German Television ZDF).
- 4 Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands ARD (Association of Public Law Broadcasting Corporations of the Federal Republic of Germany).
- 5 RTL is a private broadcaster in Germany.
- 6 This complexity is not always reflected in the quotes published here, as it was necessary to select excerpts of prototypical statements.
- 7 Kikania is a daily programme on the children's channel KI.KA which consists of talk show, game show, and other entertaining elements.
- 8 For the method refer to Neuss 1999, Götz/Lemish/Aidmann/Moon 2001.
- 9 A further factor may be the discourse about the doubles published in the first week of the war, for example in Focus.

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