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Military bases: the footprint of war ...

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Europe is at war. The bombs are not falling in Europe, but several thousand kilometers away in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless war is waged from Europe. From a whole range of military bases in Europe planes take off and supplies are shipped or air lifted to fight those wars.

The Iraq war made this very visible, when the US waged war from its European bases together with British military forces. In 2003, 54,000 US military based in Europe were deployed, or were active in direct support of the war, against Iraq. There was 320,000 tons of military material shipped from Europe to the war zone in the Persian Gulf.

The US Army had 26,000 European-based soldiers deployed, mainly from bases in Germany and Italy. Bombing flights over Iraq by the US and UK air forces were continually taking off from British bases like Fairford, while 3000 combat sorties were flown from the aircraft carriers of the US 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean. Marines were inserted into northern Iraq from Souda Bay marine base in Crete.

And this is still going on. In 2006, two-thirds of the US Army personnel in Europe were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, preparing to deploy, or just returned; 75% of the military equipment used by the US military in these wars passes through Europe.

Meanwhile, through NATO, other European countries are also heavily engaged in the Afghanistan war. About 25,000 European military participate in the so-called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), making up nearly 50% of this force. Through the EU these countries set up their own interventions, like in Congo or Chad. During the last 10 years they have transformed their forces into intervention armies. They have developed the capacity to deploy their forces far from their own territory. Local military bases now house military units trained in military occupations elsewhere, and all European countries have individually or collectively developed their own infrastructure for long-distance deployment and command.

Both NATO and EU operations are led from military headquarters in Europe. The NATO operation in Afghanistan is led by the NATO operational headquarters in Brunssum (Netherlands). EU operations have been led from national headquarters: the EUFOR operation in Congo was led from the headquarter in Potsdam (Germany) while both the earlier Artemis operation in Congo and the recent intervention in Chad were led from the French headquarters in Mont Valérien near Paris. And the US has its own military command in Europe: EUCOM in Stuttgart (Germany). While the US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are run through another command, CENTCOM, EUCOM co-ordinates the supporting role and the deployments from the European US bases. Although all these headquarters look from outside just like ordinary office buildings, inside them fighting military forces are co-ordinated and sustained.

Transport infrastructure

Very important for military intervention is the sea- and airlift infrastructure. Military bases function as hubs in a wide transport network in order to move troops and material into the combat zones.

An important example is the biggest air base in Europe: Ramstein (Germany). More than 10,000 US military personnel work on this base. Once an important fighter airbase, it is now a central hub for airlift towards Asia, Africa and the Middle East, for US and NATO forces. This base is operated by the US 86th Airlift Wing and also hosts both the EUCOM air component command as well as one of NATO's. More than 10,000 tons of cargo and about 25,000 passengers pass through Ramstein each month.

European countries operate their own airlift assets at a national level (UK: Brize Norton and Lyneham; Netherlands: Eindhoven; Belgium: Melsbroek; ...) but are also investing in pooled airlift. Through the SALIS project they lease for collective military use 6 Antonov An-124 transport planes, which are based at the civil airport of Leipzig (Germany). Another project is the purchase of three C-17 aircraft, which will be based at the military airport of Papa (Hungary) from November 2008.

For sealift, civil capacities are often used. Most European countries have or no " or insufficient " means of military sea transport, so civil shipping is hired. Also, civil ports are used. The US Army uses the ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam and Bremen for its sea transports from and towards its bases in Germany.

Combat forces

The next building block for military interventions are the combat forces, nowadays fewer and with lighter material in order to be more easily deployed to the battle zone. These are spread across a lot of bases all over Europe. NATO aims to have 40% of its land forces ready for deployment and 8% of them continuously in operation, which results in a lot of bases being involved. So we have to limit ourselves to some examples.

Vicenza in northern Italy houses the main part of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade in the Ederle barracks; 2900 military. There are plans to concentrate the whole brigade in Vicenza and to build a new base on the Dal Molin civilian airfield. This would raise the US military presence to 5000 soldiers. The 173rd AB is one of the three main US combat brigades destined to remain based in Europe. In 2003, 1000 soldiers from this brigade did a parachute jump into northern Iraq, taking off from Aviano military airport (Italy). Later this brigade deployed to Afghanistan as well. The new base enlargement would make Vicenza one of the main military intervention bases in Europe, a prospect which provoked demonstrations of more than 100,000 people.

But this US base is not the only intervention force in Vicenza. It also houses the headquarters of the European Gendarmerie Force. This is a European intervention force consisting of militarised police and specialised in crisis management. It was started by France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Operations will be led from this headquarters in Vicenza.

An example of European combat forces is the Eurocorps based in Strasbourg. This is a headquarters for land forces, originally formed by France and Germany and later joined by Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg and Poland. It permanently has about 1000 personnel, and national forces are earmarked for operations under this command. The Eurocorps can be used for EU and NATO operations, and it was used in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

One brigade is permanently earmarked for this headquarters: the French-German Brigade. This brigade is a major army unit with about 5000 soldiers coming from both countries. It is based at several places in the German region of Baden-Württemberg. This brigade was deployed together with the Eurocorps HQ to Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Not only land forces are involved in interventions. Fighter planes based in Europe are often deployed to Afghanistan to give close air support for the land troops, in other words bombing. And sometimes the bombing flights take off directly from European bases: during the last Iraq war from Fairford (Britain), in 1991 also from Rota (Spain), in the Kosovo war from Italian bases.

These are just a few examples of the footprint of war in Europe, as 1000 military bases are impossible to describe in 1000 words.

Hans Lammerant

War Starts from Europe

14-15 November 2008: European day of action against military infrastructure

In the previous ...articles we have looked at how Europe is part of the war machinery, by looking at the various infrastructures and military bodies used for military interventions. So as we are now clear how these interventions are implemented, we can start to do what we can to disrupt them! Groups all around Europe are campaigning against militarism, each group choosing their own way of acting depending on their own context and their own group principles and strategies. Within the groups involved in the call for the day of action, the common starting point is undertaking nonviolent direct action against militarism.

A European antimilitarist network

There are many experiences, through the years, of regional antimilitarist actions so this latest effort is nothing new, but it's an important effort in keeping alive the antimilitarist movement in Europe – re-energising it and expanding it, getting to new countries and movements.

The process of co-operating regionally has always been an aim of antimilitarists in Europe, but these more concrete plans started at the WRI 2006 Triennial Conference in Germany 2006, "Globalising Nonviolence", where some of the groups participated in a working group on nonviolent citizen interventions facilitated by Vredesactie (WRI's affiliate in Belgium). After the conference, Vredesactie held a meeting in Brussels, to continue the process of working together regionally – it was here where a more concrete plan was designed, with, the idea of supporting each other's actions, creating a common space on the web for sharing resources on military infrastructure and the transport of weaponry and to share action strategies and reports from actions done by the different groups. The website www.mcmilitary.org was created, a Wiki which makes it possible for different groups to post on it. Groups present were from Belgium, the UK, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands and France.

Campaign examples

These are examples of campaigns carried out by the network

* Faslane 365: This was organised by Trident Ploughshares and others in Scotland, with the aim of blockading the base at Faslane, where UK's Trident submarines are based every day for one year. During the year of blockades, the campaign managed to bring activists from all over the UK and also from many other countries in Europe to do their own blockades. Each group had its own style, showing the diversity of the movement.

* Bombspotting: This Belgian campaign started as a local campaign of mass nonviolent action against nuclear weapons. In March 2008 the campaign organised the NATO Game Over action, a nonviolent action at the headquarters of NATO, involving around 300 internationals in a total of around 1000 people taking part. There were 500 arrests and 50 activists managed to climb over the fence of the NATO headquarters. This was an important occasion for the network to come together in an active way.

* Reclaim the base (State of Spain): For a number of years the groups around Alternativa Antimilitarista MOC in the State of Spain have been active following the WRI initiative on reclaiming the bases. Every May in what they call Mayo Caliente (Hot May), they carry out nonviolent direct actions at military bases around the country, with a special focus on bases which are part of the NATO structure.

* Disarm: The Swedish antimilitarist group ofog organises a Disarm Camp during the summer in Sweden, during which they carry out nonviolent action against Swedish weapons manufacturers.

Call for a decentralised day of action

As result of NATO Game Over, there is a proposal for a joint decentralised day of action, focusing on the role that Europe plays in military interventions. The dates set for the action are 14-15 November 2008. Each group should choose their own target for their action – it can be a military base, the facilities of weapons manufacturers, defence institutions, etc. The character of the action should be decided by each group, the only requirement being that it has to be nonviolent. But we encourage groups to do actions that can directly disrupt the normal functioning of military-related activities.

There is a website at <http://europeanpeaceaction.org/> which will provide the space for groups to say what actions they are planning and for reports from the actions themselves. Also on this website you can read the call for the day of action. There is also a list-serve for discussing and sharing information about the actions – if you want to join the list, just contact the WRI office at info at wri-irg.org

If we want to stop militarism we need to act at a local and global scale – for this join the European day of action against military infrastructure!

For more information contact the WRI office.

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