The Kosovo war, German "national interests" and the rightward turn of the SPD

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21 September 1999

The following article was written as the editorial of the September/October issue of Gleichheit, *the magazine published by the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.*

History records the passage of time, but its rhythm does not correspond to the regular change of the weeks, months and years. After the rather settled period of the Kohl era (with the exception of the eventful year of German unification 1989-90), events are now coming thick and fast since the change in government last November, when the Social Democratic Party (SPD) entered office with the Greens. Even most members of the "red-green" coalition would have been astonished if they had known then where they would be nine months later: The confidence of the voters completely frittered away, hopes for a reduction in unemployment and an improvement in social conditions vanished. Instead, an all-consuming drive to implement cuts at the expense of the weakest; in place of environmental protection, infinite subservience to the large employers' associations; instead of a peace-promoting foreign policy, a war that has transformed the Balkans into a political and physical ruin.

The reason for the speed of these changes can only partially be attributed to a government that entered office sworn to "modernity". It did not determine events, but was driven by them. Political farsightedness and an awareness of social processes are not among Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's strengths, and are certainly foreign to his Green party coalition partners. The tectonic shifts beneath the superstructure of society, which now make themselves felt on the surface, creating one shock after another, developed over many years. The Kosovo war marks a turning point, but it has only made visible something that began a long time before.

Since unification and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, Germany's position in the world has fundamentally changed, and this has also had a dramatic impact on domestic affairs. From its earlier location at the edge of the Western sphere of influence, the Federal Republic has moved into the centre of Europe. Far more so than in the past, it has become the outstanding power to the west of Russia. Despite its long duration of over four decades, the post-war period proves, under these circumstances, to have been a historical exception.

During this interval, two closely connected political illusions prevailed, which also shaped the conceptions of the SPD. First was that armed conflicts between imperialist great powers, as had been unleashed in the two bloody world wars, finally belonged to the past. The undisputed hegemony of the United States and the confrontation with the Soviet Union lent a stability which seemed to exclude any future breakdown in the Atlantic alliance. The process of European integration proceeded slowly but inevitably, without this being felt as a threat on the other side of the Atlantic. Germany did not need an independent foreign policy under these circumstances—unless one regards the effort to secure good business relations with every regime in the world as such. In the wake of the US, it once again developed into an economic great power, without having to devote any special force to insuring its national interests.

With the end of the Soviet Union all this changed. The necessity to close ranks against the eastern superpower does not exist any more. NATO lost its raison d'être. In foreign policy circles, the view has become generally accepted that Germany must pursue its national interests more aggressively and, if necessary, lend them military force. This is dubbed a "return to normality". Foreign policy journals are repeating the language of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Foreign policy is again expressed in terms like "strategic targets" and "vital interests".

A typical contribution was that made by Christian Hacke, professor at the *Bundeswehrhochschule* (Federal Armed Forces University) in Hamburg, for the weekly paper *Das Parlament*. He provocatively asks the question, if the "re-nationalisation tendencies in Europe and the world, and the obvious lack and crises of a jointly oriented foreign policy in the face of the war on the Balkans" means that "a united Germany can still maintain the demonisation of a policy of national interest and the idealisation of a common interest". He arrives at the conclusion that a "new perception of Germany's national interests" is urgently required.

Questions which have been discussed among experts for a long time have suddenly been brought into the political consciousness by the Kosovo war. Behind the demonstrative

façade of unity, the smouldering clash of interests between Germany and the US has become clear. This is one of the most important reasons for the abrupt break of the SPD and the Greens with their earlier pacifist standpoints. If the national interest is disturbed, they will not “leave the fatherland in need”, as their political forerunners declared in 1914.

The second illusion of the post-war period was that the class contradictions in capitalist society could be subdued over the long term. By means of the welfare state, policies of social equilibrium and partnership, the rifts in society were bridged and cemented together. In the language of the SPD, which did not live badly on it, this was called “social justice”.

An end to peaceful foreign policy also means the end of peace at home. To be able to act aggressively abroad means the domestic situation must be brought to order. The welfare state and policies of social balance thereby prove an unnecessary ballast—as disadvantages in promoting the national economy and as obstacles to the necessary increase in defence expenditure.

It is no accident that Minister of Finance Hans Eichel's cuts package was decided at the highpoint of the Kosovo war. Budget consolidation suddenly became the outstanding necessity. Eichel even went as far as to say this was “socially fair”, because it was the only way the state could regain its capacity to act. As if social expenditure would ever be increased again! In the United States, where the budget is now in the black, cuts continue; the wealthy enjoy tax cuts and military expenditure rises astronomically.

The abrupt rightward turn of the SPD has unleashed loud calls for “social justice” inside the party from a circle of social reformers and trade union leaders—the specialists in questions of social partnership. But that is only a reflex from the past, a nostalgic look back at the 1960s and 1970s. The realisation of social justice under conditions of globalisation requires a quite different orientation than that of social democracy, which is used to thinking in national categories and fears nothing as much as open class warfare.

The opponents of the cuts package in the SPD quickly got cold feet, when it turned out that their appeal to social justice found some resonance. Their protest was quickly followed by a declaration of bankruptcy. The opposition SPD parliamentary deputies explained that they would subordinate themselves to party discipline and vote in the *Bundestag* (parliament) for the cuts. Four days after the SPD lost the state elections in the Saarland, Oskar Lafontaine's friend Reinhard Klimmt took up a ministerial post in the federal government, thus accepting cabinet discipline, removing another potential source of opposition.

In the meantime, in the wake of the SPD, the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor to the Stalinist SED in East Germany) are eagerly striving to gather those who were lost overboard in the SPD's abrupt about-turn. They are following the social democrats, at a respectful distance, on their way to the right. Blair and Schröder had hardly announced their program of “modern” social democracy, than PDS leader Gregor Gysi countered with talk of “modern” socialism. The content of the inconspicuous little word “modern” is always the same: the re-evaluation of all values and the departure from everything that even distantly recalls social justice.

After the collapse of East Germany, the PDS had to say goodbye to many aspects of Stalinism, but they preserved one: its national orientation, which the Stalinist bureaucracy has shared with social democracy for many decades. As long as war was being directed against Belgrade and Milosevic, the PDS could act as pacifists. If it comes to implementing German interests against the “hegemony of the USA”, then Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer will be able to count on them. After all, haven't the PDS's French comrades been competing for a long time with the Gaullists in all things anti-American? Where the PDS bears the responsibility of office—as in the state administrations in Mecklenburg-Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt—they have long since accepted “national responsibility” and carried through welfare cuts.

Above all, the absence of any serious opposition to the government's course presently benefits the extreme-right-wing. Disorientation and despair amongst the mass of voters is reflected in gains for the DVU (German Peoples Union) and in the growth of right-wing youth gangs. The great majority remains passive, as the high number of abstentions shows. Rage and indignation against the cuts are not lacking; what is missing is a political orientation.

In the age of globalisation such an orientation can only derive from an international point of view. It must unite the mass of working people over and beyond all national, ethnic and other boundaries. Only in this way is it possible to oppose the powerful financial and economic interests that control political life at present. Such an orientation cannot be expected from the SPD, which is organically bound with the national state and the national interest.