

# German writer Ralph Giordano attacks the antiwar movement

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The vicious reactions to the antiwar demonstrations of February 15 by the right-wing press and conservative politicians in Germany come as no real surprise.

For the first time in recent history, the growing gulf between the broad masses of the population and official politics was not expressed passively in the form of electoral abstention or political disinterest, but rather actively in the protest of many millions. In cities across the world, protesters gathered in mile-long demonstrations and exuded a sense of confidence and optimism. From every level of society, people turned out to express their disgust with the warmongers in Washington and give voice to their determination to secure a future free from war and violence.

Suddenly the powerful propaganda machine of the big media concerns was no longer able to achieve the desired affect. The lies that have accompanied the preparations for war against Iraq were simply no longer seen as credible.

It is no wonder, then, that these protests unleashed frustration and concern in various editorial departments. Unable to deny the overwhelming nature of the opposition to war, some newspapers urged the politicians to have the “courage” to make unpopular decisions.

The flagship of the conservative press in Germany, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, warned of “a too literal translation of the Greek term democracy into German.” Quoting the philosopher Karl Popper, the paper declared: “democracy was never rule by the people, it cannot and should not be so ... wherever a leader comes to power in more or less democratic fashion pledged to execute the will of the people, there soon rules a dictatorship.”

While it comes as no surprise to hear such language from the conservative camp, it is politically significant when similar sentiments are expressed by erstwhile liberal circles. With the title “Against Political Naivety,” an organisation calling itself the Alliance Against Anti-Semitism has published an open letter signed by over 100 people. Amongst the most prominent signatories are the German writer Ralph Giordano, the publicist Lea Rosh, Professor Andrei S. Markovits (US) and the independent European Parliament deputy, Ilka Schröder, who broke with the German Green Party following the latter’s support for the war in Kosovo.

The letter claims that the mass demonstrations of February 15 were characterised by a “dangerous mixture of anti-Americanism and political naivety.” The central demand for “peace,” the letter declares in derogatory fashion, merely “served as a cover for political innocence.” The letter continues: “It was therefore possible for all those present to feel themselves to be part of a great family under the banners and chants for peace—the community of good people who

want nothing more than to live in peace.”

This letter is noteworthy not only for its spiteful tone, but also for its extreme intellectual dishonesty. It characterizes as “anti-American antipathy” the following accusations made by demonstrators against the US government: “The will for world dominance, the penchant of the American establishment for bloodthirsty warmongering, the identification of the US with money and naked interests...”

Here opposition to the policies of the Bush government is simply equated with anti-Americanism. In the process, the authors studiously ignore the fact that leading American politicians openly acknowledge their country’s striving for hegemony—beginning with such strategic documents as Zbigniew Brzezinski’s “The Only World Power,” including the new military doctrine of the Bush administration, which legitimises “preventive” wars and a nuclear first strike, and ending with ultimatums to the United Nations by the US, which threatens the organisation with “irrelevance” should it not submit to the will of the American government.

In fact, anti-Americanism begins when the entire American population is identified with the Bush government and made responsible for its policies. This is exactly the stance taken by the authors of this letter. They ignore the broad movement against a war with Iraq that has developed inside America itself.

The open letter goes to slanderous extremes when it accuses the demonstrators of ideas that “without great difficulty are compatible with extreme right-wing and anti-Semitic thinking.” As proof of such a position, the letter cites the previously mentioned “warning of world dominance on the part of the US,” which leads supposedly to the “renunciation of any serious analysis and criticism of the conditions in Iraq” and an “uncritical stance towards Islamist and other extremist currents in the Arabic world.”

This is pure demagoguery. The overwhelming majority of those taking part in the demonstrations were entirely capable of making a distinction between the Iraqi people and the Iraqi government, and did not indicate the slightest sympathy for any fundamentalist movements, whether of the Islamic, Christian or Jewish variety. But they also refused to accept the propaganda claims that the aim of a war is to establish democracy in Iraq. That this is not the case is demonstrated by the allies of the US government—brutal dictatorships such as that of Saudi Arabia, and Israel, which has defied UN resolutions for decades and indisputably possesses weapons of mass destruction. It is also confirmed by American support for the Iraqi regime in its war during the 1980s against Iran.

Even more absurd is the claim that appeals to fears “which one knows from one’s own experience in the bombing of Dresden” resembles the thinking of the extreme right. The authors of the open

letter should themselves be fully aware that the extreme right in Germany concentrates its energies on glorifying the Second World War and the crimes of the German army.

The aim of the letter is apparently to encourage a “peace movement” that supports the arguments and war plans of the US.

What underlies this shift by former left-liberal intellectuals to the camp of the right wing on the eve of an Iraq war?

Many of the signatories are of Jewish origin, have personally experienced the Nazi terror, and have devoted a large part of their lives to exploring the horrors of the Holocaust.

Lea Rosh was born in Berlin in 1936. She worked as a television journalist for the German channels NDR and ZDF. Together with the historian Eberhard Jäckel she produced a series of documentaries on the Holocaust entitled, “Death is a Master out of Germany.” She has dedicated her life to ensuring that a Holocaust memorial be established in Berlin, and is the chair of the “Sponsor Circle for a Memorial for Murdered European Jews.”

Ralph Giordano was born in Hamburg in 1923. He survived the Hitler dictatorship only by concealing himself in a German hideout. His best-known novel, *Die Bertinis*, is based on this experience, and he has written many other works dealing with similar themes. In 1945 he joined the German Communist Party (KPD), until breaking with the party in 1957, when he felt obliged to articulate his “anger at every form of violation of human rights ... irrespective of the nature of the system that undertakes such violations.”

The intensification of the Israel-Palestine conflict following the collapse of the Oslo peace talks presented Giordano with a dilemma. Like other signatories of the open letter, he supports the standpoint that the state of Israel is the guarantor of a future for the Jews. Although he is not a supporter of Ariel Sharon, and in the past has expressed a certain sympathy for the plight of Palestinians, he has drawn closer and closer to the Israeli government with the sharpening of the conflict over the occupied territories.

His dilemma was evident in an interview he gave to the *taz* newspaper in April of last year. He stated that he regarded the operations of the Israeli army to be “disproportionate,” but went on to add, “But it is this lack of proportion that points to a profound desperation behind it.... Naturally, Sharon is a disaster for the peace process ... but we have to ask ourselves what it takes to persuade a majority of Israelis to vote for a man as prime minister who everybody knew was no angel of peace.”

On the question of his perspective for Israel, Giordano answered: “I am more baffled than ever.” Israel has its back to the wall, he said. “It is not the Palestinians, the Syrians, Jordanians or Egyptians—it is the Israelis who are fundamentally threatened in their biological and state existence.... What will become of Israel? This is the question that continually concerns me.”

Giordano reacted angrily to the activities of racist and anti-Semitic groups in Germany—and went on to call for a stronger state. Two years ago, in the course of awarding the Bertini prize (named after his novel and awarded for courageous engagement against injustice, discrimination and violence), he declared: “The liberties that have been extended to the enemies of the democratic republic in the name of their freedom are no longer acceptable. The legislature, the executive, the whole range of security forces and civilian society itself must act far more emphatically than has been the case until now.”

Following verbal attacks on the deputy chairman of the Central Council of Jews, Michel Friedman, by the leading Free Democratic (FDP) politician Jürgen Möllemann, Giordano went so far as to

threaten to emigrate. Writing to the chairman of the FDP, Guido Westerwelle, Giordano posed the question: “This time for many of us, the question is do we stay or do we go? After holding out for so long, I never thought I would be confronted with this question.”

The violent aggression by US imperialism against Iraq, which threatens to destabilise the entire Middle East and which has brought into being a broad international oppositional movement, poses an alternative to Giordano that he cannot avoid. Either he subordinates the fate of the Jewish community to the strongest and most aggressive of imperialist powers, or he joins forces with the international movement against war and repression.

This question is not new. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, very many Jewish intellectuals saw the resolution of the Jewish question as bound up with the overcoming of all forms of social repression and the emancipation of the working class. Many Jews were active in prominent positions, first in German social democracy and then in the German Communist Party. The Zionist movement, aimed at the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine with all its consequences, represented a small minority.

It took the Holocaust and the decapitation of the Marxist movement by Stalin to create conditions where Zionism could gain the upper hand. After Auschwitz and in light of the crimes of Stalinism, Israel appeared to many to be the only realistic answer to the Jewish problem. The violent eruption of American imperialism now once again brings this issue to the fore—as it does many others.

Up to now Giordano has decided in favour of the first option—the subordination of the fate of the Jews to the strongest imperialist power. Such a standpoint has its own inexorable logic, as is shown by Giordano’s vicious attacks on the movement against war. Such comments contradict what he has written and stood for up to the present.

He should be under no illusion. The identification of the state of Israel with bloody wars and crimes against the Arab population undermines its own legitimacy. In addition, the alliance struck by the right-wing forces around Bush with Israel is of a purely tactical and temporary nature. Many of the Christian fundamentalists backing Bush are by no means opposed in principle to anti-Semitism.

Giordano’s rightward intellectual and political evolution is an expression of the tragic consequences of failing to come to grips with the historical causes of the Holocaust.



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