60 years since the end of World War II

Editorial of Gleichheit, magazine of the Socialist Equality Party (Germany)

Peter Schwarz
11 May 2005

The following is the editorial of the May-June edition of the Gleichheit, *the magazine of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (the Socialist Equality Party) of Germany. The periodical contains a selection in printed form of articles posted on the* World Socialist Web Site.

Sixty years ago, Berlin, the capital of Hitler's "thousand-year Reich" lay in ruins. On April 30, the dictator committed suicide, and on May 8, the heads of the German general staff submitted to an unconditional surrender. This put an end to the most brutal and criminal regime in the history of mankind, a regime that started a war of aggression that cost roughly 70 million lives, suppressed the whole of Europe and systematically murdered 6 million Jews and Roma (Gypsies).

The anniversary of the end of the war has generated wide public interest and has been accompanied by a great number of television documentaries, films, books and public events. The hitherto prevailing certainty that such events would never again be repeated has been strongly shaken in the recent period.

During the postwar period, there was a widely held conviction that fascism, war and what had preceded them—economical collapse, mass unemployment and mass poverty—belonged, at least in the industrialised world, to a foregone era. This is no longer the case. Mass unemployment has already returned, the world economy is increasingly unstable and, at least since the Iraq war, it has become clear that the great powers, and the US in particular, once again consider military force as a legitimate means to impose their economic and political interests. A third world war has therefore become a real danger.

The political level of the commentaries on the end of the war is generally low. They consist to a great extent of detailed descriptions of individual events and episodes, of personal memories of contemporary witnesses or of biographies of various Nazi leaders. What is missing is a historical understanding of Nazism and the Second World War, an understanding of their political and ideological roots, their social foundations and their historical function, from which it would be possible to draw lessons and conclusions.

The superficiality of the debate is not just to be explained by the influence of recent philosophical trends and fashions, like post-modernism, which rejects any possibility of an objective and systematic understanding of events. It is above all a consequence of a general perplexity resulting from the shipwreck of the official political conceptions of the postwar period.

The historical function of Nazism was to mobilise downtrodden petty-bourgeois and lumpen elements as a battering ram against the organised working class and to put them at the service of German imperialism. The war objectives of Hitler—the reorganisation of Europe under German domination and Germany's expansion to the East—were essentially the same as those pursued by Kaiser Wilhelm in the First World War. And, like these, they corresponded to the expansionist appetites of German big business.

In the immediate aftermath of the war there was a widespread understanding of the connection between capitalism and Nazism. Industrial leaders were sent to jail. The call for an overcoming of the capitalist order was so overwhelming that it even found an echo in the Ahlen Programme of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). In order to rescue the bourgeois order a different interpretation of Nazism was required. It could be found in the writings of, amongst others, Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School.

Hannah Arendt did not explain Nazism out of the international contradictions and class conflicts that dominated the social life of the Weimar Republic, but out of the contradistinction of two abstract principles—totalitarianism and democracy. The Frankfurt School tried to give its critique of Nazism a Marxist veneer, but firmly rejected the revolutionary role attributed by Marx to the working class. "The impotence of workers is not only a feint of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrialised society"—this is one of the key passages in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the key work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.

The struggle against war, fascism and reaction was, according to this conception, not a class question. It was not a question of mobilising the working class to overthrow the capitalist order. Rather, the defence of "democracy" was a task to be fulfilled by the state. It had to ensure that the social contradictions did not spill over and endanger "social peace." It had to defend "democracy," if need be also by means of repression against threats from the right—and above all from the left. This conception provided the foundation for the official West German political ideology of the postwar period, equally defended by the Social Democrats and the CDU: social market economy, social partnership and fortified

democracy.

As long as international relations remained stable, the economy grew and Germany could look after its global interests under the wings of the US; this seemed to work and to offer a guarantee for more or less democratic conditions. But with the globalisation of production and of financial markets, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, and finally the turn by the United States to a violent, unilateral foreign policy, the international and national context has fundamentally changed. A profound political crisis dominates all political camps.

In its foreign policy, Germany strives to play the role of a world power again, including through military means. Under the rule of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the Greens, the German army, whose tasks were, until reunification, strictly limited to defence, has returned to many locations of world strategic importance. It defends, to use the words of Peter Struck, the minister of defence, "German liberty in the Hindu Kush." But what strategy should Germany adopt, which direction should it take? There is no agreement over these fiercely debated questions.

In his new book about Germany's foreign policy, the conservative contemporary historian Hans-Peter Schwarz reaches the conclusion that "to merely put the blame for the present erratic state of Berlin's foreign policy on the coalition government of SPD and Greens" would not be correct. In reality, all parties are disoriented, he says. He then draws a list of the "decisive questions" that require an answer: "How dangerous is America? How indispensable is it? Is it possible that a community of defence arises out of the European Union? Or should we quickly aim for a 'core Europe'? Is not France a problematic case similar to the US? Should the EU, as has been the case up till now, expand beyond limits—and include Turkey as well? Does Germany really have to be pushed into the complicated crisis zone of the Middle East, with its many powder kegs, similar to the Balkans of the decades preceding 1914?... And generally speaking, how should Germany define in future its well-understood interests—in national, European or in global terms?"

Within Germany, the consequences of globalisation, of the expansion of the European Union to the East and the intensified international competition have undermined the policies of social equilibrium. The Schröder-Fischer government carried out an unprecedented social demolition over the last six years and drastically reduced taxes for business. Businesses have for their part and with the help of the trade unions imposed painful cuts in wages and increases in working hours.

These measures had an effect. Production costs grew more slowly over the last eight years than in the United States. With 10 percent of world trade, Germany ranks first in terms of exports. And yet, there is no upward trend in the economic conjuncture. The government's Hartz reforms proved to be ineffective despite the drastic social consequences of the imposed measures. The representatives of big business demand additional and more drastic reforms, which cannot be imposed with the present forms of rule.

Thus, economic consultant Roland Berger demands that non-wage labour costs be lowered to 30 percent from the present 42 percent, that the overall tax burden of businesses and the wealthy be reduced from 40 percent to a maximum of 25 percent, and that public infrastructure be widely privatised. For that purpose he proposes a temporary lifting of democracy: "At the beginning, this will not be possible without a Grand Coalition," he says. To that effect, politicians should agree on a programme "which they will implement within two years, following which they should again contest an election separately."

The concepts of the social market economy, social partnership and fortified democracy, which official ideologues have until now declared to be the lessons from the catastrophe of the Third Reich, have clearly failed. Therefore, the speechlessness in the debate over the end of the war. Therefore, as well, the grotesque farce presently performed by SPD chairman Klaus Müntefering, who has embarked on a "critique of capitalism." With the accusation that capital does not attend to its social responsibilities, he tries to conjure up the spirits of the past and to massage the egos of the beleaguered party functionaries who for years have been feeling the anger of the population. But "social partnership" cannot be revived again. Müntefering's reproaches stand in sharp contrast to everything the SPD has done over the last six years and that it will continue to do. After all, the Red-Green coalition has passed all the laws whose consequences are now being bitterly bemoaned by the SPD chairman. Müntefering's statements are the expression of the enormous crisis that has gripped the SPD as well as the whole of bourgeois politics.

How can the working class, faced with this crisis, defend its social and democratic rights and prevent a descent into war and barbarism?

There is a widely shared outrage at and opposition to the policies being presently implemented. But it would be wrong to believe that spontaneous upsurge produced by this anger and pressure on the ruling elite can resolve the social and political problems. An offensive of the working class has to be prepared theoretically and politically. Workers need an independent political orientation. This requires an understanding of the international situation and of the lessons of history. A revival of the internationalist and socialist traditions of the Marxist workers' movement, as they were defended by the Fourth International and its International Committee, is a precondition for this. This task is at the centre of the work of the Socialist Equality Party and its international organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*.