

The war in Libya and the crisis of the European Union

Part 1

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The following article is based on a report given by Peter Schwarz, secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International, at a seminar of the German section of the Socialist Equality Party during the Easter holidays in 2011. We are publishing it in three parts.

The war in Libya marks a turning point in world politics.

The decision to bomb the country was taken virtually overnight—just weeks after the outbreak of revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, and just days after the start of the so-called rebellion against Muammar Gaddafi. In contrast to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the initiative for the attack was taken, not by the US, but the former European colonial powers of France and Great Britain (and now also Italy), whom the US then joined. France and Britain have once again launched a war in the Arab region for the first time since they were forced to abort the Suez War in 1956.

Officially, the war is being characterised as a “humanitarian” intervention—a move supported by the pseudo-left, from the Pabloites to the social democrats to the Greens. But it is quite obviously an imperialist enterprise. It is about the desert state’s vast oil and gas reserves: access to Africa’s raw materials and markets, around which rages a battle between the old imperialist powers and the ascendant power, China; and the suppression of the revolution in North Africa and the Middle East, which threatens imperialist interests in the region.

The vehemence with which the war has developed is a result of both the bitter conflict between the leading imperialist powers, and the exacerbated class antagonisms within these countries themselves. Like most wars, the war in Libya is partly determined by domestic political motives. It serves to divert attention from social conflicts and create the conditions necessary for their violent suppression. Both Sarkozy and Berlusconi are in the process of imposing enormously unpopular austerity measures on the working class. Opinion polls show that both have been extremely unpopular for months.

Posted on April 19, the WSWs Perspective article “The Libyan war and the intensification of inter-imperialist conflicts” drew attention to “the increasingly bitter dispute between France, Britain and the United States on one hand and Germany on the other”, which became evident with the outbreak of the war in Libya. For the first time, Germany made a common front in the United Nations Security Council with Russia, China, India and Brazil against its traditional allies France, Britain and the US. It abstained from voting on the Libya resolution and has not taken part in the war, while France, Britain and the US voted for the resolution and went on to dominate the conflict.

This dispute is not an accident but the result of profound economic and political differences between Germany and France, and an advanced state of crisis in the European Union. The Franco-German axis has been the backbone of the European Community and the EU since the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The two countries have played the leading role in shaping the political situation in post-war Europe and are the largest economies adopting the euro as a common European currency. This axis is now showing clear fault lines.

Having pursued for decades a policy of maintaining the political and military unity of Europe, the US has virtually scrapped this course by participating in a war officially opposed by Berlin.

A heated debate over the vote on Libya in the United Nations (UN) Security Council has broken out in Germany itself. Leading politicians from all parties, as well as numerous media commentaries, are of the opinion that Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle committed a “serious mistake” by abstaining in the vote. They insist that Germany should by no means have made common cause with the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) against its traditional allies, even if it was resolved not to participate in the war.

A commentary on *Spiegel Online* summarised this criticism with the following words: “Until now it was the rule for Germany to line up with America and France. That was not always easy to do. Sometimes, like before the Iraq war, it was impossible. At that time, the German Federal Republic had to choose between one of the two main partners. However, the firm belief was that under no circumstance could it simultaneously oppose both. The government has now departed from this basic tenet of German politics”.

A look back at history

In order to understand the alarm caused by the German vote in the Security Council, one needs to cast a glance back into history. Fear of becoming politically isolated already dominated the foreign policy of Germany’s Nineteenth Century chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, who spoke of a “nightmare of alliances”.

The founding of the German Empire in 1871 fundamentally changed the balance of power on the European continent. “The balance of power is completely destroyed”, commented Benjamin Disraeli, leader of the Tories in the lower house of the British parliament at the time of the German Empire’s inauguration. Until then, Britain had been the undisputed leading world power. It ruled the seas, while the major powers of France, Russia and Austria retained the balance of power on the European continent. With the unification of Germany under Prussian hegemony, a new major power emerged at the centre of the continent, threatening the position of the old Great Powers.

Bismarck’s foreign policy was designed to prevent an alignment of these major powers against Germany. To this end, he developed a complicated system of alliances, unscrupulously exploiting the dispute over the legacy of the Turkish Empire in the Balkans to pit other powers against each other and thus retain a balance of power.

However, Bismarck’s system could only work as long as Germany was primarily concerned with internal economic consolidation and not pursuing its own imperialist aims. This was no longer the case from 1890 onwards. Around that time, Wilhelm I died and was replaced after a short stint by his grandson Wilhelm II, whose conflict with Bismarck led to the chancellor’s resignation. The collapse of Bismarck’s system and the changes in German foreign policy are therefore often explained by the changes at the very top of the country’s leadership. This was only part of the picture, however.

The decisive factor was Germany’s remarkable economic rise, necessitating access to raw materials and world markets, as well as new investment opportunities for its accumulating capital. This resulted in the construction of a fleet that would contest Britain’s command of the sea, the Baghdad railway project that would pave the way for German capital investment in the East, and the pursuit of colonies that would expand the German empire. Trotsky later summarised Germany’s situation in the formula: “As the productive forces of Germany become more and more highly geared, the more dynamic power they gather, the more they are strangled within the state system of Europe—a system that is akin to the ‘system’ of cages within an impoverished provincial zoo”.

The situation then developed that Bismarck had sought to prevent. The other major powers joined forces against Germany, largely isolating it by 1902. Germany was left with only Austria-Hungary as an ally, opposing a coordinated front comprising Britain, France and Russia. The alliances and power blocs that were to clash in the first and second world wars were thus mostly determined at this stage.

After the Second World War, the “German question” was defused through the integration of the West German state into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Community. This was facilitated by the fact that the Federal Republic was only about half the size of the German Empire. Active political and economic cooperation developed between Germany and France. France is still Germany’s most important trading partner and vice-versa.

The return of the “German question”

With German unification in 1990, however, the “German question”

became acute once again. Europe’s equilibrium was disrupted by the unification of Germany and the collapse of the Iron Curtain. It is well known that the British, French and Italian governments opposed German reunification at the time, but they were unable to prevent it.

It was finally agreed that Germany should be contained by introducing a common European currency and creating the EU. France hoped thereby to secure control over its more economically advanced neighbour. Chancellor Helmut Kohl renounced the initial German demand for European political union to precede monetary union. Instead, Europe was to gradually grow closer together based on the logic of the common market and the single currency.

In the following years, it was widely believed that the economic dynamism of the euro would lead harmoniously to the expansion and consolidation of Europe. In 2000, the then German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) delivered a well-received speech at the Humboldt University, in which he proclaimed the goal of a federal Europe. The EU itself was enlarged to 27 members by 2007, the euro having been introduced for bookkeeping purposes in 1999 and in notes and coins in 2002. Since then, it has become the official currency of 17 EU member states.

However, the political integration process increasingly faltered.

Already in the 1990s, the European powers were unable to agree on a common approach to the Yugoslav crisis. While Germany pressed for a rapid dismembering of the country, France and England opposed such a course. This opened the door to intervention on the part of the US, which went on to dominate the ensuing war.

In 2003, the Iraq War delivered a further blow to the plans for a common European foreign policy, rendering Europe deeply divided. While England and Poland backed the war, Germany and France refused to participate.

In 2005, a draft European constitution was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands. The alternative introduced at the end of 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon, proved to be a poor substitute. The appointment of the largely unknown Catherine Ashton as EU foreign representative was ample proof that no European government was prepared to subordinate its foreign policy interests to a common European line.

With the joint action taken by France, Britain and the US in Libya the divisions within Europe have reached a new stage. France and Britain are acting outside the existing EU structures both politically and militarily. Unlike the power play in the Iraq War, the division is no longer between the “old” and “new” Europe, but between France, Britain and a few western European states on the one hand, and Germany and the eastern European countries on the other.

German interests in North Africa

Germany’s abstention in the UN Security Council vote can no more be attributed to individual inclination on the part of Foreign Minister Westerwelle, than the policy of the German Empire can be reduced to the subjective intentions of Wilhelm II and his chancellor, Bernhard von

Bülöw, 120 years ago. Both are results of long-term trends and developments. Westerwelle's abstention is the logical consequence of foreign policy and economic differences between Germany and France that have developed over time.

Germany is pursuing its own interests in North Africa and the Middle East, and these interests clash with those of France. Two years before the Libyan War, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs published a study on "German Middle East and North Africa Policy". It states, "Well into the 1990s the Maghreb still occupied a marginal position in German foreign policy, with no sign of a clear formulation of German interests. However, in the past decade the region's importance for German foreign policy has grown steadily, for three reasons: the crucial question of energy security, efforts to stem migration, and the fight against terrorism and organised crime".

Energy supply is the top priority. According to the study, "Oil and gas from these states is of growing importance for Germany's energy supply. Libya is today Germany's fourth most important oil supplier, Algeria the eighth".

The conflicting interests of Germany and France in the Arab world surfaced during the dispute over the so-called Mediterranean Union three years ago. Sarkozy had determined to establish a Mediterranean Union since taking office in 2007. It was intended to unite all the Mediterranean countries under French leadership, forming a counterbalance to the growing economic and political influence of Germany in Eastern Europe. Sarkozy's plans were met with fierce resistance in Berlin. It was feared that a revival of French colonial ambitions could challenge Germany's leading role in the EU. German interests in North Africa were also believed to be under threat.

The previously cited security study comments, "The French proposal for a Mediterranean Union, which was originally only to include countries actually bordering the Mediterranean, was clearly conceived as an instrument for securing and expanding French influence in the region. France's special role has negative consequences especially for German businesses. German products may be regarded as reliable and German companies as absolutely competent, and Maghreb government officials are always calling for greater German involvement. But when it comes to contracts it is more often a French business that closes the deal".

Nor is Germany the only country interested in North Africa: "Competition has long been heating up, and involving an ever growing number of international actors: the United States, Russia, Spain, Italy, Britain, and increasingly also China, India and Latin American states are looking for energy and security cooperation (including arms sales), involvement in the expansion of regional transport infrastructure and contracts in the construction sector in general".

The extent of China's involvement was shown at the outbreak of war in Libya, when 75 Chinese companies and 36,000 Chinese workers had to leave the country. Libya is, notably, the only North African country that opposed the Mediterranean Union.

The Mediterranean Union was finally established in the summer of 2008, and began operations in May 2010. But Germany had been widely successful in securing its position. All EU members states—not merely the Mediterranean countries—are partners in the Mediterranean Union, making it much more difficult for France to impose its own line in the region.

Sarkozy has now exploited the events in Libya in order to regain the

offensive. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were a major blow to France, which had maintained particularly close relations with the deposed rulers, Ben Ali and Mubarak. Mubarak, jointly with Sarkozy, had chaired the Mediterranean Union. For its part, Germany believed it had a good chance of doing business with the successors of the deposed rulers.

Libya offered Sarkozy a chance to exploit the rebellion against Gaddafi in his own interest. To the surprise of even his foreign minister, Sarkozy was the first to formally recognise the Transitional Council in Benghazi and push for military intervention. His venture was supported by British Prime Minister Cameron and US President Obama.

To be continued



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