

On the death of German SPD leader Peter Struck (1943-2012)

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On December 19, 2012, Peter Struck, the former German defence minister and longtime parliamentary leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), died in Berlin of a heart attack at the age of 69.

His declaration that the “freedom of Germany” would “also be defended in the Hindu Kush” [the mountain range that stretches between central Afghanistan and northern Pakistan], summed up the new aggressive nature of German foreign policy under the SPD-Green Party government of Gerhard Schröder. As defence minister he not only continued the military participation of the *Bundeswehr* (German armed forces) in Afghanistan, he also promoted the transformation of the *Bundeswehr* into a flexible and global reaction force of German imperialism.

Struck was born in 1943, the son of a soldier and a kiosk owner in Göttingen. His father, who worked his way up to be a factory manager after the war, did not want to have anything to do with politics after the experience of the Third Reich. His son, by contrast, joined the SPD in 1964. After high school he studied law, eventually graduating with a PhD.

Struck initially made a career in public administration. In the early 1970s he was a senior civil servant in Hamburg, and a personal assistant to the president of the University of Hamburg. From 1973, Struck was chief executive of the city administration in Uelzen in Lower Saxony.

Struck was an SPD member for nearly 50 years. He sat in the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) from 1980 to 2009. Not infrequently, he was described as a “party loyalist”, i.e., the right-wing SPD officialdom could count on his loyalty. In 1990, he became general manager of the SPD parliamentary faction.

From 1998 to 2002 and again from 2005 to 2009, Struck was chair of the SPD faction in the *Bundestag*.

During this time his main task was to bolster the SPD government and ensure it the necessary majority for its increasingly anti-working class policies. In his second term as party leader, the retirement age was raised to 67, a measure that met with objections from some SPD deputies.

Struck’s greatest claim to fame, however, came during his period as defence minister in the second SPD-Green Party government of Schröder and Joschka Fischer from 2002 to 2005.

Appropriately enough, the *Bundeswehr* mounted a large honour guard at Struck’s funeral service in Uelzen. Among the guests present were the former Social Democratic chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Schröder, as well as senior SPD politicians such as Peer Steinbrück, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Kurt Beck, and Bundestag President Norbert Lammert (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

In his eulogy, acting Defence Minister Thomas de Maiziere (CDU) placed special emphasis on Struck’s role in transforming the *Bundeswehr*. “Like no other, Peter Struck embodied the change in the defence policy of our country”. And: “Peter Struck paved the way for the army to become one deployed in active combat”.

When Struck took up his cabinet post in 2002, German soldiers had been stationed in Afghanistan for six months. During his term in office, the number of troops deployed rose sharply. In December 2001, the upper limit of German troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was 1,200; a year later, this had been more than doubled to 2,500. When Struck left his post as defence minister, up to 3,000 German soldiers were stationed in the Hindu Kush.

But the involvement of German troops abroad not only reached quantitatively unprecedented levels. With the elaboration of a new defence policy in 2003, Struck

played a central role in the transformation of the *Bundeswehr* into a military force capable of global intervention.

Since its formation in 1955, the *Bundeswehr* officially had always served as a national defence force. According to the German constitution, this remains the case. In order to more effectively represent the interests of German imperialism, however, the armed forces required not only a military makeover, but also new political and juridical legitimisation. The concept of “national defence” remains, but is now expressed in an extremely aggressive form.

This is clear from the defence policy guidelines published by Struck on March 21, 2003, which read: “According to Article 87a of the Constitution, the armed forces are for national defence. Today, defence includes more than the conventional defence of borders against a conventional attack. It includes the prevention of conflicts and crises; joint crisis management and post-crisis follow-up. Accordingly, defence can no longer be limited geographically, but contributes to safeguarding our security, wherever it is threatened”.

As a result, financing through the defence budget should prioritise those areas of the armed forces directed toward intervention: “The preservation and improvement of core military capacities has priority. The military facilities and services that do not serve this aim immediately will be subject to critical scrutiny.”

This makes clear that the armed forces reforms carried through by Struck’s successors Franz-Josef Jung (CDU), Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (Christian Social Union, CSU) and de Maizière (CDU) were a continuation of the offensive policy begun under the SPD-Green Party coalition.

This orientation was formulated even more clearly in the “Fundamental conceptions of the *Bundeswehr*”, published by Struck in 2004. In this document, he concretised what he had outlined in the guidelines the year before: “a strictly mission-oriented reorganisation”. This would include a total of 35,000 troops being made available as an “intervention force” worldwide, at up to five different locations.

Struck’s defence policy guidelines also opened the way for the deployment of the armed forces within Germany, which was finally approved by the Supreme Court in 2012. Their ruling reads: “To defend the people and the country’s vital infrastructure from

terrorist and asymmetrical threats, the *Bundeswehr* will be provided with the forces and means required to meet the risks. Although this is primarily a task for the internal security forces, under the existing laws the armed forces are always available when they have the necessary skills or when the protection of citizens and critical infrastructure can only be ensured by the *Bundeswehr*”.

Today, more than seven years after the end of the SPD-Green Party government, the objectives of the changes are clear: the offensive orientation of the *Bundeswehr* as an instrument of German imperialism was an essential precondition for the escalation of the conflicts between the great powers and a new division of the world. It makes a military intervention (for example, in Syria) possible in order to uphold the interests of the German bourgeoisie against its rivals.

At the same time, under conditions of intensified social contradictions the deployment of the *Bundeswehr* domestically has become a real option for the ruling class to quell possible popular uprisings.

In this respect, SPD “party stalwart” Peter Struck proved exemplary in fulfilling his political tasks in the interests of the German bourgeoisie.



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