

Hands off Syria: Address by Peter Schwarz to SEP (Germany) election meeting

Peter Schwarz
14 September 2013

Peter Schwarz gave the following report September 1 in Frankfurt as part of the federal election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG).

Today's meeting takes place on an historic date. On September 1, 1939, exactly 74 years ago, the German army invaded its militarily inferior neighbour Poland, ushering in the most destructive war in history. In the course of the next five-and-a-half years, 80 million people were killed on the battlefields of World War II, through the bombing of entire cities, and in the gas chambers of Nazi concentration camps. Europe was turned into a field of rubble.

Now the US is planning a similar crime in alliance with France, Germany and other countries. Soon, cruise missiles and bombs may be raining down on Damascus and other Syrian cities. The attack on relatively defenceless Syrians threatens to transform the entire Middle East into an inferno. It can easily develop into a military confrontation with Russia and China and trigger a third world war.

Hitler justified the attack on Poland with a brazen lie. A Nazi commando group faked a Polish attack on the Gleiwitz radio station near the Polish border. This served as a pretext for the invasion. Prior to the attack, Hitler told his generals: "The triggering of the conflict will be done by suitable propaganda. Its credibility is immaterial. Victory proves who is right."

The justification for the attack on Syria is no less brazen and dishonest. The declaration made by US Secretary of State John Kerry on August 30 was a tissue of lies and distortions.

"I do not ask that you take my word for it," Kerry assured his listeners. "Read for yourself the evidence from thousands of sources." But all he had to offer were unproven allegations. He uttered the words "we know" 24 times in his short speech, without him producing a shred of verifiable evidence.

In 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell made a similar speech to the UN Security Council. For two hours he presented photographs, images and tape recordings that supposedly proved that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. All of his evidence turned out to be lies and forgeries. Their sole purpose was to construct a pretext for a war that had been prepared and decided on long before.

Unlike Powell, Kerry has not even made an effort to produce documents. He demands simply that people believe everything he and the US intelligence agencies say. He declared, for example, without any substantiation: "We have come to the conclusion that the opposition has not used chemical weapons."

In fact, the opposition has been proven to possess chemical weapons. Last May, Carla del Ponte, member of a UN commission on Syria, declared there was strong evidence that the so-called "rebels" had used chemical weapons. In Turkey, members of the Syrian opposition were arrested while in possession of chemical weapons.

These opposition militias—financed, armed and trained by the imperialist powers and the reactionary Gulf monarchies—are despised by the Syrian

people because of their brutality. They have suffered numerous military defeats in recent months. They had every reason to seek to provoke imperialist intervention by using poison gas, while the Syrian government, which had just allowed UN inspectors into the country, had no reason to do so.

The most influential of the opposition forces is the Al Nusra front. It is affiliated to Al Qaeda and has been proven to have been involved in numerous massacres of Syrian civilians.

The reasons for the war

In any event, the alleged poison gas attack is only the pretext, not the reason, for war against Syria. No one has explained how the bombardment of the country would protect civilians from further atrocities. On the contrary, a war would claim the lives of countless civilians, intensify the civil war, and draw neighbouring countries into the conflict.

In probing the causes of a war, one must always distinguish between the alleged reasons and the real reasons. To understand the real reasons, it is necessary to study the historical, economic and social context. Wars are never the result of accidents or the moods of "evil" individuals. They result from insoluble social contradictions and the pursuit of definite social interests.

Thus, in the Second World War, Hitler pursued largely the same goals that had been pursued by Kaiser Wilhelm in the First. The German bourgeoisie emerged on the world scene relatively late. The world had already been divided among its rivals. But it required markets, raw materials and "Lebensraum." As Leon Trotsky once formulated, German capitalism was "the most advanced capitalist system in the conditions of the European impasse."

Hitler established a dictatorship that was able to subordinate all of the country's resources to the preparation of a war for supremacy. He also commanded a fascist movement that was used to destroy the organised workers movement, which had stood in the way of war. For these reasons he received support from broad sections of the ruling elite—big business, the military and the state bureaucracy—which had installed him as head of government in 1933.

With regard to Syria, the media and the political parties are all suffering from a sort of conscious amnesia or deliberate forgetfulness. They are acting as though the only issue was if, when and by whom poison gas was used. They ignore the fact that after Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, this is now the fourth war in the Middle East within twelve years.

Each of these wars was justified with similar lies and propaganda: at stake were the overthrow of a brutal dictator, the defence of human rights and democracy. The war in Afghanistan was supposedly launched to destroy the terrorist Al Qaeda network, but in Syria this terrorist

organisation is fighting on the side of the imperialists and is the leading force within the “rebels.”

In all of these wars, hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions forced to flee their homes. The occupation troops have employed torture and terror tactics to intimidate the population. The words Abu Ghraib, Fallujah and Kunduz have become synonyms for unspeakable war crimes. As a consequence of these wars, life in the countries affected is hellish. Terrorist attacks and permanent civil war are the reality.

No one can seriously claim after such experiences that the bombardment of Syria will protect the civilian population or serve humanitarian goals.

In the preparation of this speech, I read through some of the articles and statements the WSWS published on the Iraq war ten years ago. They underscore the importance of understanding the Syrian war in the context of the previous wars in the Middle East. At that time, we predicted that Syria would be one of Washington’s next targets.

On January 7, 2003, two-and-a-half months before the beginning of the Iraq war, we warned: “Washington’s aim is not the ‘disarming’ of Iraq or even the removal of Saddam Hussein, but rather the occupation of the country and the seizure of its oilfields... The same rationale that underlies the war against Iraq will inevitably lead to wars against Iran, Syria and other countries in the region. The US drive to dominate the world’s oil supplies will lead to increasingly fierce conflicts with more powerful nations... A US conquest of Iraq will initiate a process whose ultimate outcome will be a third world war.”

The crisis of American capitalism

In order to understand the reason for the attempt of the United States to dominate the world’s oil supplies, one must return to the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The United States emerged from World War II as the strongest world power. However, the existence of the Soviet Union, the Chinese revolution, and the struggle for independence in the colonial countries limited its room for action to a certain degree. The dissolution of the Soviet Union removed this constraint.

As the WSWS stated: “The collapse of the Soviet Union was interpreted by the American ruling elite as an opportunity to implement a sweeping imperialist agenda that had been impossible in the aftermath of World War II and during nearly a half-century of Cold War. Proclaiming the arrival of a ‘unipolar moment,’ the United States set out to prevent, as a principal strategic objective, the emergence of another power—whether a newly-unified Europe, Japan, or, potentially, China—that might challenge its dominant international position.”

Although the United States was still the greatest economic power at the time, its industry was in decline. Strong competitors had developed in Europe and Asia. Once the industrial centre of the world, the United States was now running a chronic trade deficit.

In addition, social tensions within the United States grew increasingly sharp. Until the mid-1970s, American governments combined a relatively liberal foreign policy based on multi-lateralism with social reforms in domestic policy that led to rising wages and to some extent held social tensions in check. This changed at the beginning of the 1980s with the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan combined tax cuts for the rich with the destruction of social services and massive attacks on workers. This has continued to the present, with the result that the United States ranks as one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. While the richest 1 percent of the population controls more than one third of all wealth and the richest 10 percent almost two thirds, the bottom half of the population controls only

5 percent.

The numerous wars carried out by the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union have served two purposes. First, the US has sought to employ its military supremacy to compensate for its economic decline and reorganise the world in its interests, with the aim of achieving global dominance. Second, militarism has been used to distract attention away from growing social tensions at home and supply the pretext for the construction of a massive police state apparatus.

On the second point, we wrote in 2003: “When Germany went to war in 1914 and 1939, it did so not only to conquer new sources of raw materials, new markets and more ‘living space’. War was also a means to escape its domestic crisis. In 1939, Hitler had no option left but war. The German currency and economy were about to collapse, producing a shock that his regime would hardly have been able to survive. The US is in a similar situation today. The unanimity displayed by the ruling elite, including leading Democrats, in uniting behind Bush is an expression of their political desperation. They need a war because they have no answer to the economic and social problems tearing American society apart.”

The strategic significance of the Middle East

The Middle East is of central significance in the struggle for global dominance because it possesses 50 percent of proven natural oil reserves, upon which China and Washington’s other Asian competitors depend. The region is also geo-strategically critical for the control of Central Asia, which is also of high strategic importance to Russia and China.

Recently, in a WSWS perspective, we pointed to the theories of the imperialist geo-strategist Sir Halford Mackinder, dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He viewed control over the Eurasian land mass as the key to global dominance. These theories still have an influence today. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article last summer by historian Hans Christof Kraus that referred to Mackinder.

Under the headline “And You Think It’s About a Dictator?” Kraus wrote, “The aim of the Americans and the Western camp is not, or is not primarily, to help the unfortunate Syrian population, but to influence the reorganisation of the country after the foreseeable downfall of the present regime, even though they have collaborated with it quite well in the past. At stake are several long-planned oil and gas pipelines that are important for the West. They will connect Saudi Arabia and Qatar with the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey and lead partially through Syrian territory...”

“The Russians and Chinese adopt the opposite perspective. The Russian Mediterranean navy base, at the Syrian port of Tartuz, is at stake, as well as the general geopolitical standing of Russia and China in the near and Middle East. The sight of a possible conflict between Israel and Iran makes it vital for the two Asian great powers to have a presence there.”

Thus, already last summer it was beyond doubt for Kraus that the issue in Syria was predominance throughout the whole of the Middle East and, ultimately, the Eurasian continent. The conflict with Syria is only the prelude to a clash with Iran and finally with Russia and China.

As far back as February 1991, i.e., prior to the final dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States led the first war against Iraq under President George Bush the elder. However at that time, the senior Bush held back from marching into Baghdad.

The war against Afghanistan followed in 2001. It was justified with the claim that the Taliban government was protecting Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, who were responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11. In fact, the plans for war against Afghanistan were ready long before September 11. The attacks on New York and Washington merely served as a welcome pretext to take action. There is substantial evidence that the

American security authorities at least knew of the plans of Al Qaeda and allowed them to go ahead.

Since then, the “war on terror” has served as a justification for an uninterrupted attack on basic democratic rights and an escalation of militarism. US intelligence services kidnap, torture and detain suspects arbitrarily across the globe. At the command of the president, and without any trial or conviction, supposed terrorists are regularly executed by drones, including American citizens.

Under the Department of Homeland Security, the framework for a police state has emerged in the United States that makes Orwell’s 1984 look like a fairy-tale for children. Intelligence agencies like the NSA spy on billions of communications around the world. Whistle-blowers like Edward Snowden, Bradley Manning and Julian Assange, who have exposed the criminal machinations of the state apparatus, are pursued as traitors.

The global economic crisis and the Egyptian revolution

Two events above all have changed the world situation since the Iraq war ten years ago: the financial crisis of 2008 and the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

The financial crisis brought the putrefaction of global capitalism into the open. Years of criminal speculation had brought about the emergence of a financial bubble that pushed the global economy over the precipice when it burst. Governments responded by pledging entire state budgets to the banks. Bailout programmes worth trillions saw the wealth of the super-rich increase, while spending on social services was decimated, unemployment rose, and the living standards of broad sections of the population declined. For five years, the world economy has been in its worst crisis since the Great Depression. No solution is in sight.

Here lies one of the most important reasons for the preparations for war against Syria. As the WSWS explained on August 29, “The Great Depression of the 1930s led to World War II, as the imperialist powers sought to find in war a solution to the maladies of capitalism. The Great Recession that began in 2008, which shows no signs of abating, is leading to World War III. The forms of economic parasitism associated with the processes of global financialization—in which the enrichment of a small stratum of society is achieved through swindling on a massive scale—finds its natural complement in a foreign policy that realizes its objectives through criminal violence.”

With the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, the working class made itself heard once again as the strongest revolutionary force in history. The mass uprisings, which forced out Tunisian President Ben Ali and his Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak, deeply shocked the ruling elite around the world.

They could bring the uprisings under control only with the help of pseudo-left representatives of the privileged middle class. Although these forces had initially shown sympathy for the revolution, they placed themselves behind the military as soon as they recognised that the working class was serious about its social demands and their own privileges were threatened. This led to the military coup in Egypt, which was directed far less against the Muslim Brotherhood than against a renewed eruption of the revolution.

However, the bloody repression by the military in no way signifies the end of the revolution. And Egypt is only the prelude to similar social explosions that will emerge across the globe, including in Europe and America.

Obama’s “retreat”

The explosive social tensions in their own countries, the widespread opposition to war, and the explosive situation in the Middle East have provoked a crisis in the American and British bourgeoisie. A few days ago it seemed certain that a “coalition of the willing” would immediately launch an attack on Syria. But the British Parliament, in the face of massive popular opposition, stopped Prime Minister David Cameron.

Obama surprisingly announced that he would allow Congress to decide on military intervention. A majority for war is by no means certain. A defeat could produce a deep crisis in the US government, as in Britain.

The ruling elites are sharply divided because they fear being drawn into a conflict that could get completely out of control. They fear above all a strong reaction in their own country. In Britain, only between 6 and 11 percent support a military attack on Syria, according to polls. After Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair took Britain to war against Iraq based on lies, there is deep mistrust of the war plans of every government. Another war is also deeply unpopular in the United States.

However, it would be a serious mistake to believe that this proves the vitality of bourgeois democracy, and that the imperialist powers will pull back from their plans for war. The opposite is the case. They are drawing back in order to consolidate their ranks and prepare better for the future conflicts with Iran, Russia and China.

The *New York Times* wrote the following about Obama’s motives in granting Congress a vote on war: “In a two-hour meeting of passionate, sharp debate in the Oval Office, Obama told them that after a frantic week in which he seemed to be rushing toward a military attack on Syria, he wanted to pull back and seek congressional approval first. He had several reasons, he told them, including a sense of isolation after the terrible setback in the British Parliament. But the most compelling one may have been that acting alone would undercut him if in the next three years he needed congressional authority for his next military confrontation in the Middle East, perhaps with Iran. If he made the decision to strike Syria without Congress now, he said, would he get Congress when he really needed it?”

The ruling class is in a deep crisis, but this does not make it less aggressive. Rather, they are driven to pursue their plans for war and dictatorship with even more energy. All factions of the ruling elite have turned sharply to the right since the outbreak of the financial crisis. That also applies to Europe.

Hollande, Merkel, Steinbrück, Cohn-Bendit and the Left Party

Ten years ago, the French government of Jacques Chirac opposed the Iraq war. They did this not out of a love for peace, but because they hoped to defend French interests independently of the United States. Today, Socialist Party President François Hollande is one of the most loyal supporters of the United States. The day after the British Parliament voted against military intervention, he announced his continued support for a military strike in the daily newspaper *Le Monde*.

For Germany, which opposed the Iraq war in 2003 and abstained in the vote on the Libyan war in 2011, Chancellor Merkel has declared her political support for Obama. However, she has avoided committing herself to military intervention due to concerns that this would affect the current election campaign.

The Social Democratic (SPD) candidate for chancellor, Peer Steinbrück, immediately agreed with Merkel. He told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, “The German government says that such a crime against humanity as a poison

gas attack must have consequences. I agree.”

The Greens also demanded “sharp criticism and real consequences” and did not rule out a military attack. The former leader of the 1968 student movement and Green representative in the European parliament, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, expressly called for German participation in the preparation of a military strike. He stated to *Spiegel Online*: “The West must mobilize its military as a condition for either a military attack or enforcing a truce and stopping the bloodletting. The German government must participate in the preparation of military action together with other EU countries.”

The sharpest expression of this rightward shift is to be found in the ranks of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left. Imperialism has here its most consistent support. The Left Party, and above all the pseudo-left groups Marx21 and Socialist Alternative, which are active inside the Left Party, have played a key role in strengthening the pro-imperialist Syrian opposition.

Last December, the Left Party signed a joint statement with leading representatives of the Merkel government, the SPD and the Greens under the headline “Syria: Freedom Requires Support.” The statement called for intervention in Syria. Among the signatories were Left Party Chairwoman Katja Kipping, Deputy Chairman Jan van Aken, SPD General Secretary Andrea Nahles, Green Party Chairwoman Claudia Roth and the chair of the foreign affairs committee in parliament, Ruprecht Polenz of the right-wing Christian Democratic Union.

The Left Party functions as an extension of the German Foreign Ministry, using their close contacts with the Syrian opposition to make it receptive to the interests of German imperialism. Over recent months, the Left Party has repeatedly held conferences and discussions where, under cover of a “peace initiative” and a “political solution,” they have given a platform to elements in the Syrian opposition who call for arming the “rebels” and a military intervention.

The sections of the Syrian opposition with which the Left Party is working form the leadership of the Syrian National Coalition, which is described by the imperialist powers and their regional allies as the “legitimate representative of Syria.” Their leader, Ahmed Jarba, is a member of a group led by Michel Kilo.

Kilo is a former Stalinist and Syrian “dissident” who has been systematically built up and supported by the Left Party over the past two years. Kilo spoke several times last year at meetings of the Left Party and its Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. He writes regularly in the party’s newspapers *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt*.

Now the Left Party is acting as if they are against the war. They are seeking to cover their tracks and prevent the emergence of a genuine anti-war movement that would endanger the interests of the ruling elite. They are playing the same cynical role on the question of war that they play on social issues: in election campaigns they oppose the Hartz IV welfare reforms that have slashed social benefits, but when they participate in local and state governments, they implement these measures.

Demonstrations were held yesterday in several cities against the Syrian war. In many of them, the Left Party was represented by high ranking officials, but they did not mobilise their own supporters. They want to maintain control over the opposition to war while at the same time ensuring that it does not assume a mass character.

The PSG’s answer

The determined support of all parliamentary parties for a criminal war against Syria is a warning. They will move with the same brutality and determination to impose new attacks on working people after the federal election, which they consider unavoidable in the face of the capitalist

crisis. The social destruction that has taken place in Greece with the support of all political parties will be the order of the day in Germany.

The struggle against war is inseparable from the fight against its cause: the capitalist system. The only force that can stop the war mongers is the working class, the vast majority of the population. The defence of past social gains and democratic rights and the struggle against war are inseparably connected. The only way out of the dead end of capitalism and imperialism is the united struggle of the working class for the victory of the world socialist revolution.

The Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for this perspective. All who want to prevent another criminal war are invited to support the federal election campaign of the PSG, read the *World Socialist Web Site* daily and follow the PSG’s online meetings.



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