

Die Zeit editor condemns “German pacifism”

Peter Schwarz
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In an article published November 4 by the *New York Times*, Jochen Bittner, editor of *Die Zeit*, complains bitterly about the lack of enthusiasm for war in Germany.

Under the headline, “Rethinking German Pacifism,” he writes acidly that nothing will get “Europe’s unrivalled superpower, its largest economy and its most powerful political force... to consider military intervention.” A “convenient and holier-than-thou attitude foreign policy, one the Germans have cultivated over the past 70 years,” and a “too deeply ingrained pacifism” have led Germany to refuse to support war missions in Libya, Mali and Syria.

“The re-education efforts worked far too well on the Germans after 1945,” Bittner declares. “Pacifism, sometimes in a self-righteous manner, has become part of the German DNA.”

He continues: “Our teachers, led through the horrors of the concentration camps liberated by American soldiers” were “leading us into a world view where war would never, ever be the solution.” This, writes Bittner, is wrong.

He praises former foreign minister Joschka Fischer for convincing Germany to bomb Serbia and send troops to Afghanistan, under the slogan “Never again Auschwitz!”

“In hindsight,” Bittner writes, “I’m pretty sure it took the credibility of Mr. Fischer himself, a foreign minister from the leftist Green Party, to convince the Germans that military action was needed. No one else could have broken the taboo.”

Today, Bittner complains, there is “no such mental battering ram.” He bemoans the fact that President Joachim Gauck, who recently said he could not conceive of a Germany “that makes itself so small as to avoid risk and solidarity,” remains “a soft, lone voice, without formal power.”

Bittner is not the only one who wants to send more German soldiers on combat missions. The demand for a military commitment that corresponds to the “significance of our country” as the “fourth largest economic power in the world” (Gauck), is a constant theme in the German media, from the conservative daily *Die Welt*, to the pro-Social Democratic Party (SPD) *Die Zeit*, to the liberal *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the pro-Green *taz*. (See: “Foaming at the mouth

”)

Die Zeit plays the leading role in this war-mongering. Its editor, Josef Joffe, has for a long time been calling for a massive war in the Middle East. Bittner’s contribution in the *New York Times* is an abridged version of a much longer article that appeared in *Die Zeit* on March 21 under the headline “We Aren’t Doing Anything.” The article was co-authored by Bittner and four other writers, including deputy chief editor Bernd Ulrich.

The authors praise the willingness to intervene shown by Germany in the Kosovo and Afghanistan wars and complain that this is now “unwinding.” Since then, they note, no new Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) mission has been agreed that involves live fire. “For ten years, the venues change, the reasons vary, but the outcome is always predetermined: No German soldiers should go where they could kill or be killed.” The authors conclude that “no one wants to live” in a country that behaves in such a way.

It may surprise some that it is *Die Zeit* that is beating the drum so aggressively for a revival of German militarism. The weekly newspaper is close to the SPD (94-year-old former SPD chancellor Helmut Schmidt is a co-editor), and is aimed primarily at academics and the educated upper-middle classes. It is regarded as a kind of central organ of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, i.e., the educated middle classes.

But this is no contradiction. Traditions are reappearing that have a long history. German militarism has found enthusiastic support among these layers before.

A notorious example is the “Appeal to the Civilized World,” which appeared in all major newspapers in Germany in October 1914, shortly after the beginning of the First World War. It was signed by 93 prominent scientists and artists and defended the crimes of the German army, which had invaded neutral Belgium, abused its civilian population, and destroyed the ancient university city of Leuven.

The statement begins with the sentence: “As representatives of German science and nature, we hereby protest to the civilized world against the lies and calumnies with which our enemies are endeavouring to stain the honour

of Germany in her hard struggle for existence—a struggle that has been forced on her.”

It ends with the vow to continue the bloody slaughter in the name of German culture: “Have faith in us! Believe that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven and a Kant is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes. For this we pledge you our names and our honour!”

Among the most famous signatories were the professors Emil von Behring (Medicine), Lujo Brentano (Economics), Rudolph Eucken (Economics), Max Planck (Physics) and Ernst Haeckel (Zoology). The list also included the theologian and liberal politician Friedrich Naumann, composer Engelbert Humperdinck, painter Max Liebermann, writer Gerhart Hauptmann and theatre director Max Reinhardt.

The “Appeal to the Civilized World” was followed by a “Declaration of Professors of the German Reich,” bearing more than 3,000 signatures. It was signed by almost all the lecturers at Germany’s 53 universities and technical colleges. They complained “that the enemies of Germany want... to fabricate a conflict between the spirit of German scholarship and what they call Prussian militarism.” But in the German army “there is no other spirit than in the German people, for both are one.”

The statement ends with an explicit commitment to militarism: “Our belief is that salvation for the very culture of Europe depends on the victory that German ‘militarism’ will gain: manly virtue, faithfulness, the will to sacrifice found in the united, free German people.”

Hitler’s militarism found broad support as well in the milieu of the affluent, educated petty-bourgeoisie, which, during the Weimar Republic, had long been reluctant to support the Nazis. “The Fascist Dictatorship took the doubts of Faust and the vacillations of Hamlet out of the university lecture halls,” Leon Trotsky aptly commented in his 1933 article, “A Portrait of National Socialism.”

Notwithstanding Bittner’s claims, neither pacifism nor democracy “have become part of German DNA”—at least not that of the political elite and affluent upper-middle classes for whom he speaks. The military abstinence to which Germany was compelled after 1945 because of its war crimes, like the commitment to democracy, always remained skin deep for them. Under conditions of the most profound economic crisis since the 1930s, sharpening social tensions, and increasing international conflicts, militarism and authoritarian tendencies are once more raising their heads.

Joschka Fischer and his party have taken on the role of pioneers. The Greens, with their base in the urban, academic petty-bourgeoisie, have turned from being a predominantly pacifist party to one that energetically advocates

“humanitarian” military operations.

The Left Party is currently undergoing the same shift. In a collection of essays under the title “Left Foreign Policy: Reform Prospects,” their leaders plead openly for German militarism.

The same turn is taking place in the editorial offices of formerly liberal papers such as the *Süddeutsche*, the *taz* and *Die Zeit*, as Bittner himself clearly demonstrates.

The tendency of the affluent German petty-bourgeois towards militarism has both social and historical roots. Socially, he senses the growth of class tensions as a threat to his prosperity, and so clings closely to the state. Historically, there is no significant bourgeois-democratic tradition in Germany.

The democratic revolution of 1848 failed because, as Friedrich Engels wrote, its middle class leaders “were more afraid of a popular movement than of all the reactionary plots undertaken by all German governments.” All the more enthusiastically did the petty-bourgeoisie support the unification of Germany by means of “blood and iron.” Otto von Bismarck, who forged the empire and ruled it with an iron fist, was their hero. At the end of the 19th century, no bourgeois home was without his bust.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the veneration of Bismarck merged with an enthusiasm for imperialism. The German Navy League, which at its peak counted over a million members, campaigned for the construction of a German war fleet equal to that of the British.

The “pacifism” about which Bittner complains in the *New York Times* comes from a different tradition—the tradition of the workers’ movement. Until just before the First World War, the SPD opposed imperialism, nationalism and war. Then, on 4 August 1914, it capitulated to bourgeois pressure, betrayed its own programme and supported the war.

Today too there is deep-seated popular aversion to war. The war missions in Libya and Mali supported by Bittner, like the war plans against Syria, were, according to all opinion polls, opposed by large majorities. Bittner’s complaints about “German pacifism” must therefore be understood as a threat. In order to force through the next war mission, a “mental battering ram” such as Joschka Fischer will not suffice. It will have to be supplemented by the suppression of political and social dissent.



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