

The crisis in Ukraine and the sea change in German foreign policy

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The following article is based on a report given by Peter Schwarz, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to a meeting of the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG) in Berlin on March 22.

The crisis in Ukraine marks a fundamental turning point in international politics. The US, Germany and other European powers have exploited the crisis which they provoked to further extend imperialist influence in Eastern Europe, and place NATO on a permanent war footing against Russia. Their provocative actions have brought humanity closer to a nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis 52 years ago. And the danger has in no way been averted.

The sharpest expression of this political change is in Germany. For two decades after the end of World War II, German foreign policy was oriented to the West and the government in Bonn did not even maintain diplomatic relations with Eastern European states. The German bourgeoisie then responded to the global economic crisis of the late 1960s by returning to their traditional direction of expansion, the East. This was the significance of the policy of détente of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) chancellor Willy Brandt.

Trade with and investment in the Soviet Union and Russia have increased continuously ever since. Today, with an annual volume of over \$80 billion, Germany is Russia's second largest trading partner after China. There have been crises in the past—for example, in the 1980s when the US stationed nuclear Pershing II rockets in Germany—but generally this policy proceeded in close collaboration with the respective rulers in the Kremlin. The personal friendships between Brandt and Brezhnev, between Kohl and Gorbachev, between Kohl and Yeltsin and between Schröder and Putin were proverbial.

Now, German foreign policy has shifted toward confrontation with Russia. Berlin is pursuing a course of aggressive imperialist expansion along the same lines as in 1914 and 1941. In doing so, it is basing itself on right-wing and fascistic forces who are referring to the tradition of movements that collaborated with the Nazis in the Second World War.

The “Euromaidan” in Kiev, celebrated by German political parties and the media as “democratic revolution”, was controlled by the West from the beginning. Initially, only a few tens of thousands of people took part. Only after the first brutal police attacks did the number of participants swell above 100,000, but soon declined again. Of the three spokesmen of the Euromaidan movement, one, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, enjoys close relations with the US government and was a leading figure in the 2004 “Orange Revolution”. The second, Vitali Klitschko, is a product of the Christian Democratic Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Germany. The third, Oleh Tyahnybok, is a fascist.

The idea of organising a pro-German (or pro-European) uprising in Kiev was not especially original. One hundred years ago, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg already had the same idea. On August 11, 1914, a few days after the outbreak of the First World War, he instructed the German Ambassador in Vienna in a decree:

“Encouraging a [pro-German] uprising not only in Poland but also in the Ukraine seems very important to us: 1) as a weapon against Russia; 2) because in the eventuality of a propitious conclusion to the war, the creation of several buffer states between Russia and Germany, or Austria-Hungary, would be necessary in order to lighten the pressure of the Russian colossus on Western Europe, and to force Russia back eastwards...”

The German government had to wait four years until the peace diktat of Brest-Litovsk before it could implement its plans; but then it went single-mindedly to work. First, it supported a puppet regime of the Ukrainian Rada, in order to reorganise agriculture, the railways and the banks in the interests of German imperialism. When differences arose with the Rada, the Reichswehr (German Army) organized a coup and installed the former Tsarist Guards officer and landowner Pavlo Skoropadskyi as the “hetman” of Ukraine. Only the German defeat on the Western Front and the November Revolution in Germany put an end to this spectre.

The Nazis' policy of conquest in the Second World War dovetailed with the German war aims in the First World War. Once again, Ukraine, now part of the Soviet Union, served as a staging area against the Russian heartland; once again, Germany sought to harness the vast acreage of farmland and natural resources of Ukraine to its war economy; and again it relied upon the support of local collaborators.

A central role was played by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) of Stepan Bandera, who today is revered by Svoboda and also by Yatsenyuk's Fatherland Party as a role model and hero. The collaboration between Bandera and the Nazis was not merely of a tactical nature, but also extended to the Holocaust. For example, on 30 June 1941, before the invasion by regular German troops, the wing of the OUN led by Bandera carried out a massacre in the city of Lviv in which about 7,000 communists and Jews were killed.

The causes of the change in foreign policy

The fact that after 45 years of a policy of more or less close cooperation with Russia, Germany today has set upon a confrontation course must have deep economic, social and political roots, reflecting significant changes in international and class relations. How is this change of course to be explained?

It cannot be explained on the basis of the short-term interests of German big business. With a German-Russian trade volume of \$80 billion, and 6,200 German firms active in Russia, the main business associations fear considerable damage should the confrontation intensify and result in economic sanctions.

In the business daily *Handelsblatt*, Eckhard Cordes, chairman of the Eastern Committee of German Business, strongly warned against imposing sanctions on Russia. “Harsh economic sanctions would result in a sanctions spiral, from which I see no way out”, he said. It would be a great mistake to ostracise the country, he added: “Russia is the eighth largest economy in the world. It needs a large amount of investment, and thus poses a great potential”.

The change in foreign policy must be seen in a larger historical and international context. In my opinion, three factors are decisive: first, the crisis of world imperialism and the intensified global struggle for strategic influence, raw materials and markets; second, the euro crisis and the centrifugal tendencies inside the European Union, which is to be welded together again under German leadership by means of the confrontation course against Russia; and third, the sharpening of class contradictions in Germany and throughout Europe.

The first factor, the geo-strategic significance of the imperialist offensive in Ukraine, has been analyzed by the *World Socialist Web Site* in several perspectives. On March 8, under the headline “The crisis in Ukraine and the historical consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union” we wrote:

“The position in which Russia finds itself fully confirms the catastrophic consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. ... The bellicose propaganda in the Western media about Russian ‘expansionism’ is absurd. Since the breakup of the USSR, vast portions of the former Soviet Union and all of its East Bloc allies have been brought into the orbit of US and European imperialism. The fate of Russia has confirmed the warnings of the Trotskyist movement that the dissolution of the Soviet Union would result in the transformation of post-Soviet Russia into an impoverished and despotic semi-colony of Western imperialism.

“Imperialism is not a fiction. It is a brutal reality, and its geopolitical and economic interests rule out peaceful coexistence with Russia. The opposition of the United States to the Soviet Union was based not only on the non-capitalist structure of the USSR. The United States could never reconcile itself to the fact that the Soviet Union, the creation of the October Revolution, deprived American imperialism of direct control over the vast natural and human resources of such an immense country. Even though the USSR no longer exists, the appetites of US and European imperialism remain”.

The second reason for the change of course in foreign policy, the euro crisis and the crisis in the European Union, is closely connected to the international financial and economic crisis of 2008. This crisis put an end once and for all to the plan of developing Europe, on the basis of its economic strength, into a great power equal to the US. This concept formed the basis of the Maastricht Treaties and the transformation of the European Community into the European Union in the 1990s.

Although the financial crisis originated in the US, Europe was affected far more strongly. The US could rely on the role of the dollar as a world currency, and on the fact that the United States is controlled by a central government, able to restructure and refinance the banks at the expense of the working class and by means of printing money (quantitative easing).

The European Union and the members of the euro zone were not able to act in the same way. The lack of a unified economic and financial policy, the enormous structural and economic differences between the individual member states and their divergent interests prevented a united response.

The German government strictly refused to take responsibility for the economically weaker countries. Berlin insisted on a course of strict austerity measures, which not only had terrible consequences for the working class but also intensified the financial and economic crisis, undermined the euro and heightened the centrifugal forces, tensions and contradictions in the EU.

We have repeatedly analysed this over the past year. At the European workers’ conference of the PSG on 22 September 2013 in Berlin, I said:

“Whilst the German and European banks and corporations have profited from austerity in the short-term, in the long-term they have destroyed the foundation on which the relative stability of European capitalism has rested since the end of the Second World War. The cuts have not resolved the debt crisis but deepened it. ... The disputes over the austerity measures and the shrinking markets lead to growing tensions inside the European Union. ... In many European states, right wing parties are growing who

call for the dissolution of the EU and a return to strong nation states—UKIP in Britain, Fidesz in Hungary, the National Front in France, etc”.

Already then there were voices calling for a more aggressive foreign policy to weld the EU together again—at that time it was not focused on Ukraine but at a military intervention in Syria. In the same report, I said:

“Here in Germany, newspapers from the *taz* to the *Süddeutsche*, *Die Zeit* and *Die Welt* have conducted an intensive pro-war propaganda campaign following the threats by President Obama to bomb Syria. Such war-mongering has not been seen in Germany since the time of the Third Reich ...”

The question of an aggressive, militarily-based foreign policy also stood at the heart of the negotiations over a new coalition government in Berlin, which dragged on for two months following the federal elections. However, this was hardly reported in public. We published two commentaries on this theme at the time.

In one, we wrote: “If Merkel, who needs a new coalition partner following the departure of the FDP, agrees to a coalition government with the SPD, this would be a clear sign of a more aggressive German military stance”.

And in the other we stated: “The real reason for the conflicts and tensions over the formation of the future government, however, is not the alleged fears of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens that they could be outgunned in a coalition with the CDU-CSU. Rather, all the parties are trying to establish a ruling coalition that is stable enough to push through unpopular measures on behalf of the ruling class against growing opposition. Foreign policy issues are high on the agenda”.

In February 2012, 18 months before the federal elections, President Christian Wulff was forced to resign in a manufactured scandal and was replaced by Joachim Gauck. A leading role in this affair was played by the tabloid *Bild*, which has also had a central role in the latest events in Ukraine. Vitali Klitschko has published a regular column in the paper.

After the federal election, it became clear why Wulff was replaced by Gauck. On October 3, in the midst of the negotiations to form a new coalition government, Gauck spoke at the celebrations on the Day of German Unity, vehemently advocating Germany adopt a stronger foreign policy stance and a concomitant military role.

The focus of his speech was the demand that Germany once more play a role “in Europe and the world” that actually corresponds to its size and its influence.

“The question is really posed: Does our engagement match the importance of our country”? asked Gauck. “Our country is not an island. We should not be deluded into thinking that we can be spared from the political and economic and military conflicts if we do not participate in their solution”. It was therefore right to ask: “Is Germany sufficiently measuring up to its responsibilities to neighbours in the East, in the Middle East and in the Southern Mediterranean”?

As soon as the new government took office, Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced at the beginning of February the “end of military restraint”.

The Ukraine crisis has since been considered by many newspapers as a test of whether the government was prepared to abandon “military restraint”. *Spiegel Online* wrote: “The government and the president have announced a more decisive foreign policy. Now it is to be seen: Is Berlin really ready to impose expensive trade sanctions”? The “actions against Russia” will have a “signal effect. They show the Kremlin and the rest of the world how serious Berlin is about its new foreign policy”.

Political parties and the media see the new, aggressive foreign policy explicitly as a means of welding together the EU, and of cementing Germany’s leading role. For example, Norbert Röttgen, one of the CDU’s leading foreign policy figures, wrote in the *Financial Times*, under the headline “Germany should be a leader on the world stage”:

“Yes, the situation might force us to take tough and unpopular decisions. ... But this conflict is not merely about Crimea or Ukraine. ... While we often struggled to speak with one voice in the past, the conflict with Russia is forcing Europeans to close ranks. It might become a catalyst for a common foreign and security policy. We have to be ready to position ourselves as Europeans and to live up to our responsibility—beyond the realm of monetary and economic policy”.

Spiegel Online sees the crisis in Ukraine as “Europe’s great chance”, as the title of a comment on Thursday read. “Will Putin’s power politics split Europe”? *Spiegel Online* asks. “On the contrary. The Europeans agree as they have seldom done before. Now a big opportunity is offered to them: They can finally develop a common strategic foreign policy. As sad as the Crimea crisis may be in many of its aspects, it also offers a historic opportunity: to unite Europe more strongly”.

The social division of Europe

When the media and politicians talk of “uniting” Europe via an aggressive, belligerent foreign policy, they are aiming not only to dispel tensions between various European governments, but also (and above all) to suppress the class struggle. The blatant social inequality, the extreme social contradictions in every European country and in the European Union as a whole are the most important factors propelling German foreign policy on an aggressive course towards war.

The hysterical campaign against Russia and its president Putin serves the same purpose: to divert domestic tensions into foreign issues. At the same time, it presages a new round of violent attacks on the working class throughout Europe, which the bourgeoisie will pursue with brutal methods similar to those adopted in Kiev: backing fascist thugs and shamelessly indulging in provocation, intimidation and lies.

The social situation is particularly disastrous in the countries of Eastern Europe 25 years after the introduction of capitalism. Now, social discontent is to be smothered by fomenting fears of a Russian invasion. This tactic will find very little resonance in the working class, but could find a response in the middle and upper classes, who expect from the EU better career opportunities and protection of their wealth.

This has been demonstrated by the events in Ukraine. It is significant that the Maidan protesters were demanding incorporation into the EU at a time when growing layers of the European population were turning away from the EU. The Kiev protests for integration into the EU in no way constitute evidence of the democratic and progressive character of the EU; on the contrary, they reveal a lot about the anti-working class political orientation of the Maidan protesters.

What the EU Association Agreement means for the great majority of the Ukrainian people was never a secret. It is conditioned upon the implementation of an International Monetary Fund austerity dictate, consisting of radical cuts in pensions and social security benefits, as well as a drastic increase in household gas prices. The Association Agreement also precludes a simultaneous customs union with Russia. For broad sections of eastern Ukrainian heavy industry, this means factory closures and hundreds of thousands of layoffs.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that fascists played a leading role on the Maidan square. The objectives of such a programme cannot be accomplished by democratic means; they are achievable only through the intimidation and terrorisation of the working class. This is precisely the aim served by the Right Sector, Svoboda and the war hysteria against Russia.

The fascist character of Svoboda is undeniable. The party reveres the war criminal, Stepan Bandera. Venomous tirades from its leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, against the “Russian sows” and “Jewish pigs” have been documented on video. In May last year, the extreme right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) hosted an official reception for a Svoboda delegation in the Saxony state parliament, later publishing photographs and an enthusiastic report of the event on their Facebook

page.

Last week, a paramilitary group led by Svoboda deputy Ihor Miroshnychenko forced the head of the Ukrainian state television channel to resign. Scenes of this brutal attack are documented on video. They demonstrate how these forces are used to intimidate all opposition, silence it and carry out provocations. Many of these fascist thugs will join the People’s Militia, now being formed by the new government.

The collaboration of the German government and the EU with outright fascists in Ukraine is a warning: the European bourgeoisie is preparing to bring fascists into government in other European countries—e.g., in France—to suppress the working class.

But let us return to the issue of social inequality in Europe. A great amount of statistical data is available, but for reasons of time I will only cite two examples. The first concerns the pay gap in Europe. There has never been another integrated economic region in which the differences on wages and living standards are as crass as in the EU.

The German economy can profit directly on its doorstep from wages that are barely higher, and in some cases even lower, than in China. It exploits this situation in turn to suppress wages throughout Europe by outsourcing production to Eastern Europe, or employing eastern European workers as temporary and contracted labourers on starvation wages in Germany.

The Federation of German Industry (BDI) has made an international comparison of hourly labour costs in manufacturing. The study is concerned not with average wages, but the costs—including ancillary Labour costs—that a company must pay for an hour of work.

Western Germany holds a top position with €38.90 per hour, while labour costs in eastern Germany are significantly lower at €23.60. France is on a level similar to Germany’s at €36.80. In contrast, labour costs in the United States (€25.90) and United Kingdom (€25.10) are much lower because of the low ancillary wage costs for employers. Travelling just 90 km east from Berlin to Poland, one finds labour costs of €6.65, or only one sixth of the western German level.

An hour’s work currently costs €3.00 in Ukraine, according to the BDI. This is slightly more than in the EU’s last-placed Bulgaria (€2.90), but significantly less than in Russia (€5.90) and China (€4.00). Labour costs in Ukraine will now be reduced even further by the IMF programme.

The social situation is extremely explosive throughout Europe. This is shown by, among other things, the euro zone unemployment rate, which has grown rapidly since the 2008 financial crisis. While approximately 7.5 percent were unemployed in January 2008, today it is more than 12 percent—and these official figures are largely euphemistic and grossly understated.

Particularly disastrous is the situation in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Ireland, which have been dependent on EU bailout packages and corresponding austerity measures in recent years. Unemployment and especially youth unemployment are extremely high in these countries, and increasing sections of the population are completely denied social services and health care.

Italy and France are on the verge of a social explosion as well. President François Hollande and his Socialist Party government have failed to get the economic situation under control in France. Unemployment has reached a new record, and the country is falling further and further behind Germany economically. This is why sections of the ruling class are seriously considering bringing Marine Le Pen and her extreme right-wing party to power.

In Italy, much of the ruling elite considers the new head of government, Matteo Renzi, to be a mere loudmouth. He promised to revamp the economic and social systems without delay. But the 39-year-old has no experience in conflicts with the working class, and the trade unions, which aided his predecessors, are widely discredited.

Looked at superficially, the economic situation in Germany appears to

be better. But the extent of social inequality and tensions is enormous—according to some studies, the greatest in Europe. Millions work precarious or poorly paid jobs and three million have a second job, without any party to represent their interests.

The unbridled warmongering of the German media must be seen in this context. Since Joseph Goebbels headed Hitler's propaganda ministry, no one in Germany has heard such lies, twisted facts and demagogic ravings as those now being trumpeted by the country's press, radio and television. It is significant that this applies not only to the traditional right-wing media, but also to the *taz*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Die Zeit*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and state television broadcasters.

This polarisation of published opinion is itself an expression of mounting class tensions. It demonstrates what lies ahead of us, when open class conflict breaks out in this country.

Putin's policies

Our opposition to German and US imperialism in no way means we support Putin and his policies. They are reactionary in every respect. Putin embodies the legacy of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which destroyed the achievements of the October Revolution. He represents the interests of the Russian oligarchs who plundered social property and plunged the working class into destitution.

His policies are limited to inciting Russian nationalism and unleashing the military. He is completely incapable of appealing to the international working class, which he fears just as much as the imperialist bourgeoisie. He is desperately trying to return to business as usual with the imperialists, especially the Germans.

But this does not mean that we are indifferent to the present conflict or regard it as merely a dispute between two imperialist blocs—as does the German Socialist Alternative (SAV). Russia is not an imperialist country.

It is necessary to understand the current development within its historical framework. In 1917, Russia was faced with the alternative of becoming a semi-colony of the imperialist powers or abolishing capitalism. By guaranteeing the self-determination of nations, the Bolsheviks were able to unite the separate constituents of the tsarist empire on the basis of national equality within the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Ukraine, established after the fall of Skoropadskyi's dictatorship, was at the time very attractive to Ukrainian peasants and workers, who were subject to Polish or other foreign domination in Galicia and other parts of present-day Ukraine. Only Stalin's return to the policy of Great Russian chauvinism and his disastrous collectivisation policy destroyed these sympathies and boosted anti-Soviet nationalist movements.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a disaster for the working class in both Russia and Ukraine. If the imperialist powers are able to reduce Ukraine and Russia to the status of some kind of semi-colony—and that is the goal of their current offensive—it would have a devastating impact on the Russian masses. Our methods of fighting against such a development, however, are diametrically opposed to those of Putin. We advocate the international unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme—and not the bolstering of Russian nationalism.

The tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

The political situation and the tasks that it poses cannot be understood without assimilating the experience of our own movement. The International Committee of the Fourth International has made an important development since its split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party nearly 30 years ago. Today we stand completely opposed to all those who once described themselves as “the left” and whom we now rightly call the “pseudo-left”—with the emphasis on “pseudo”, because they are actually forces of the right.

Time and again, our opponents attack us for being “sectarian”, for involving ourselves only in Internet editorial work, instead of fighting

inside the working class, and similar things. (The latter is, of course, slanderous because we have always worked systematically to convey our political perspective to the working class, and continue to do so.) It is a fact, however, that unlike our political opponents, we insist that the establishment of a socialist party in the working class requires a well-conceived Marxist programme, and that a turn to the working class requires a continuous struggle against the political and ideological pressure exerted on the revolutionary movement by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies.

In this respect, we have made important progress over the past year. This has brought us into a closer relationship with the working class, while the middle class and pseudo-left organisations have moved into the camp of imperialism. This transition is one of the most important features of the current political situation.

By participating in federal government and backing the war in Kosovo, the Greens transformed themselves from a pacifist into an imperialist war party as far back as 1999. Now they are among the worst warmongers.

At a recent meeting of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Joschka Fischer met with speculator George Soros, who financed the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. Both were in unison in their praise for the policies of Chancellor Angela Merkel. Rebecca Harms, leader of the Greens in the European Parliament, appeared regularly at the Maidan demonstrations in Kiev, together with Christian Democratic Union (CDU) agitator Elmar Brok.

Green Party politician and former East German civil rights campaigner Werner Schulz denounced Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “criminal”, an “aggressor”, a “warmonger” and an “unscrupulous power politician”. He joined Erika Steinbach, president of the Federation of Expellees (BdV), in a popular television talk show, agreeing with the ultra-right CDU politician in every respect.

The same development can now be observed in the camp of the pseudo-left.

L'Hebdo Anticapitaliste, the weekly newspaper of the French New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), last week published an article that could just as well have found its way into *Le Figaro* or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). It was stated there that, “following a military invasion and a vote at the barrel of a gun, Putin's putsch in Crimea” had succeeded at least for the time being. “This annexation is the Russian power's response to the popular democratic uprising on the Maidan, which toppled their straw man, Yanukovych. And everything indicates that Moscow is going to increase the pressure”.

Writing under the title, “Ukraine Crisis: neither Brussels nor Moscow”, the German Socialist Alternative (SAV) declares: “There's no doubt about it! First President Putin supported Yanukovych, the corrupt Ukrainian government head, and now he is positioning 6,000 soldiers in Crimea—simply and solely to maintain Moscow's power and influence”. The SAV refers to Russia as an imperialist power and describes the conflict in Ukraine as a dispute between two imperialist camps.

The executive board of the Left Party—the party to which the SAV belongs—declared in an official statement that the actions of the Russian Federation in Crimea were “against international law” and condemned Russia for its alleged “collision course”.

The thirst for war shown by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, the Left Party and their pseudo-left supporters stands in stark contrast to the mood of the working class and broad sections of the population. All the opinion polls show that a vast majority is against imposing sanctions on Russia, strictly rejects military intervention, is outraged by the presence of fascists on the Maidan, and is sympathetic to Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The media are adopting such an hysterical tone in their warmongering against Russia because they know their drum beat is finding scarce resonance in the population. The *Berliner Zeitung* candidly announced last

week that “German newspapers and radio stations are receiving bags of letters and reader comments complaining about their one-sided reporting”. The media was being “accused of Russia-baiting”. Predominantly negative reactions are also to be found in readers’ comments on the Internet—e.g., on the web site of German Television’s *Tagesschau*.

This shows that we have drawn closer to the working class in the struggle against the Left Party and the petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left tendencies. Last year, we made important progress in the struggle against the Left Party and its pseudo-left satellites. Now they are in the camp of imperialism, while we are formulating the needs and interests of the working class.

The struggle against anti-Marxist conceptions

An important issue in the struggle against these tendencies was the need to sharpen the offensive against postmodern, post-structuralist and other anti-Marxist conceptions, which have been systematically promoted at universities for years.

We had already made an important step with respect to this issue in our confrontation with Steiner and Brenner (see “Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness” and “The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner”). Since then, the role played by this systematic attack on any scientific understanding of society in the petty-bourgeois layers’ gravitation to the right has become increasingly evident.

In a tribute to David Hyland, which he gave in Sheffield in January, David North pointed out that the British Socialist Labour League/Workers Revolutionary Party (SLL/WRP) paid a high price for failing to clarify the issues of political perspective that were decisive in the break with the French OCI in 1971. “The evasion of these issues meant that the critical problems of international revolutionary strategy arising out of the great events of May-June 1968 in France were not dealt with and incorporated into the program of the International Committee”, he said.

“There was yet another element of the conflict with the French organization whose significance the SLL failed to recognize”. North continued. “Almost since the end of World War II, the French intelligentsia had been at the forefront of the struggle against Marxism. Though discredited in Germany due to his despicable collaboration with the Nazis, Heidegger found innumerable acolytes in France. Existentialism became the rage of the French intelligentsia.

“In the aftermath of the upheavals of May-June 1968, terrified by the specter of socialist revolution, large sections of the French intelligentsia and student youth severed whatever connections they had previously maintained with Marxism. In the post-1968 environment of intellectual reaction, even Sartre was seen as too conciliatory with Marxism. A new generation of theoretical irrationalists came to the fore. The age of Lyotard and Foucault had dawned. Having broken with the OCI, the SLL was largely unaware of these developments and their far-reaching implications for the theoretical and political work of the revolutionary party”.

Our intervention on the occasion of Robert Service’s appearance at Humboldt University was a major achievement in the struggle against these tendencies. We succeeded in clarifying the connection between theories of irrationalism, the systematic attack on Leon Trotsky and the October Revolution, the rehabilitation of German imperialism (including Nazism) and the current shift to the right of German foreign policy, and conveying this understanding to broader layers of students and workers.

As we wrote in an open letter, Professor Jörg Baberowski’s invitation to Service to speak about his biography of Trotsky in a colloquium at Humboldt University was an “intellectual provocation”. David North’s book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, Bertrand Patenaude’s review of it in the *American Historical Review*, the letter of 14 historians to the Suhrkamp publishing firm and Service’s refusal to respond to it—all of this had completely discredited him as an historian.

We were not willing to simply put up with the invitation. IYSSE

member Sven Heymann justified our stance at the successful meeting, conducted by the IYSSE at Humboldt University: “It would not only be a grave intellectual mistake to ignore this invitation, but also a political and even moral one. A lie cannot be simply ignored, as if it were something harmless. And it certainly can’t be ignored when it concerns fundamental historical questions of the 20th century. Lies about politics and history have wide-ranging implications”.

An article appearing in *Der Spiegel* magazine in the same week illuminated the relationship between these issues. It was devoted to the rehabilitation of German imperialism’s role in the First and the Second World War, specifically referring to Baberowski, his professorial colleague, Herfried Münkler, as well as Ernst Nolte, who initiated the so-called historians’ dispute with his downplaying of Nazism in 1986. Baberowski was quoted by *Der Spiegel* as saying: “Nolte was wronged. He was historically right”, and “Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not cruel. He did not want people at his dinner table to talk about the extermination of the Jews”.

After the IYSSE had informed students in several leaflets about the background to the Service invitation, the event ended in a fiasco and a confession of intellectual bankruptcy for Baberowski and Service. It was cancelled without notice and moved to a secret location. Attendance was granted only to people who were considered unlikely to pose critical questions. David North was excluded, as were Potsdam historian Mario Kessler, who had signed the letter composed by the 14 historians, and critical students of Humboldt University.

In a letter of protest to the university administration, we wrote: “Baberowski’s behavior was an attack on democratic rights and violated all the norms of appropriate conduct at an academic institution. The only reason for his exclusion of students and historians from his meeting was the fact that they had criticized a book! Baberowski wanted to ensure that Service’s discredited work would not be challenged, and to this end launched an assault on free expression at the university. With his action, Baberowski has created a precedent for political censorship”.

The letter goes on to state: “The attempts to establish a historically false narrative come at a critical point in German history. Such efforts should be seen in the context of recent statements by President Joachim Gauck and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier that it is now time to end decades of military restraint in Germany. The revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history that downplays the crimes of the Nazi era. A specific policy requires specific means. Baberowski’s behavior on February 12 has shown that such a revision of history can be achieved only through intimidation and the suppression of dissent”.

The success of our intervention at Humboldt University demonstrates the strength of our perspectives and our party. If we challenge the right-wing development of official policy and ideology we can have a powerful impact. This also applies to the current warmongering. We will therefore use the coming weeks until the European elections to struggle energetically against it.

We will place this issue at the heart of our campaign and make it the focus of our TV spots and election appearances. We will post daily articles about it on the WSWS, analyse new developments and engage in polemics against our political opponents. And we will continue our ideological offensive in the universities. We are convinced that we can thus achieve a major advance in the development of the PSG and the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe.



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