

Tensions grow in Germany over threat of war with Russia

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A fierce dispute over German policy towards Russia has broken out between two leading German business newspapers, *Handelsblatt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). While the FAZ calls for a robust confrontation with Russia, the *Handelsblatt* describes this as a “wrong track” leading directly to war. The conflict expresses sharp divisions within the ruling class over the future direction of German foreign policy.

Since the start of the crisis in Ukraine, virtually the entire German media has supported and encouraged the federal government’s aggressive line. The *Handelsblatt*, speaking for the German export industry, had merely cautioned for a little more prudence.

But last Monday, *Handelsblatt* publisher Gabor Steingart made a frontal attack on the FAZ. In his “Morning Briefing” column, delivered daily by e-mail to *Handelsblatt* subscribers, he accused the FAZ editorial board of “openly” calling “for a strike against Russia.” He referred to the lead article, “Show strength,” published the same day on the front page of the FAZ, which demanded that the West “strengthen and also demonstrate its willingness for military defense.” Such phrases amount to an “ideological conscription order,” Steingart charged.

The FAZ responded immediately. Christian Geyer described Steingart’s accusations as “ludicrous” and accused him of submitting to “pressure from the business lobby” and making himself into a “mouth-piece for an economism for which business is the be-all and end-all”. Steingart’s maxim, Geyer charged, was: “Be nice to Putin, whatever he does; otherwise business located in Germany will have an economic problem.”

According to the FAZ, “military aggression” by the Russian army has already begun, and anyone who failed to take this into consideration had tragically lost

contact with reality.

Steingart responded with a long essay, “The West on the wrong path,” which simultaneously appeared in Russian and English on Friday. The article is noteworthy because it adopts an openness rarely found in the bourgeois media to warn of the imminent threat of war with Russia.

The *Handelsblatt* publisher compares the war propaganda against Russia with the war fever at the beginning of the First World War. He writes that the formula that “History does not repeat itself” brings him no comfort, as the US Congress is openly discussing arming Ukraine. Former security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was recommending equipping local citizens there for house-to-house and street combat. And the German chancellor was declaring herself ready “to take severe measures.”

Steingart attacked the conformism of the German media, citing by name the *Tagesspiegel*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*. In his view, German journalism has “switched from level-headed to agitated” in a few weeks. The spectrum of opinion had been “narrowed to the field of vision of a sniper scope ... Newspapers we thought to be all about thoughts and ideas now march in lock-step with politicians in their calls for sanctions against Russia’s President Putin.”

At the end of his article, Steingart urgently appeals to Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to abandon the political course of the United States. “(N)o one is forcing us to play the role of vassals,” he writes. Everyone can see how President Obama “and Putin are driving as in a dream directly towards a sign which reads: Dead End.”

Steingart argues that the American tendency to engage in military escalation has not proven itself.

After the successful Normandy landing in the Second World War, all major US wars—Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan—had been clear failures. Moving NATO units towards the Polish border and thinking about arming Ukraine was “a continuation of a lack of diplomacy by military means.”

Steingart advises the federal government to be guided by the example of Willy Brandt. Brandt, as mayor of Berlin in 1961, had reined in his impotent rage over the construction of the Wall, “so as not to slip from the catastrophe of division into the much greater catastrophe of war.” Instead of pursuing a “policy of running your head against the wall”, Germany needed a policy designed to achieve a “reconciliation of interests” with Russia.

The sharp exchange of words between the two business dailies shows that the risk of a war with Russia, which may develop into a nuclear catastrophe, is far more imminent than is otherwise admitted by the media. The *Handelsblatt* editor’s stark warning of an imminent military escalation clearly reveals that leading capitalist interests take this threat very seriously.

For a long time, German business organisations have—albeit grudgingly—declared their willingness to bow to the “primacy of politics” in the Ukraine crisis. However, following the imposition of tough sanctions against Russia, which have also had a telling effect on the German economy and threaten to throw Europe back into recession, they are now breaking their silence.

At the same time, the danger of military confrontation increases daily. The Ukrainian army’s besieging and bombardment of the cities of Luhansk and Donetsk has forced hundreds of thousands to flee to Russia, and is aimed at provoking Russia into a military response.

On Thursday, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen travelled to Kiev and ensured the Ukrainian government of the Western alliance’s financial and military backing. US President Barack Obama also announced support for the regime in Kiev. At the same time, the US Navy announced that a guided missile warship, the *Vella Gulf*, was to arrive Thursday in the Black Sea with a 400-man crew.

This has led to more calls from within leading German circles advocating a fundamental reorientation of foreign policy: a departure from the alliance with the US and closer cooperation with Russia.

Steingart makes a sharp attack on US foreign policy, but he falls short of calling for such a change of course. That is done instead by Jakob Augstein, who recommends a very similar line to Steingart’s in his weekly *Spiegel Online* column. While the *Spiegel* editors clamour for an aggressive confrontation with Russia, *Spiegel* co-owner Augstein pleads for the build-up of new security structures together with Russia—and “if necessary without the United States.”

The stance of Steingart and Augstein is far removed from a principled opposition to war or even a commitment to peace. Rather, they speak for a section of the German economy and a branch of German political thinking that reject the bellicose policy against Russia, because it is dominated by US interests. Their critique focuses on the close bond between German and US policy.

They advocate a foreign policy that allows German politics and big business to pursue their own interests independently, and not—as Steingart calls it—as a “vassal” of the United States. This course would inevitably lead to an arms build-up, militarism and eventual open conflict with the US and other imperialist powers.

The deeper cause of the acute danger of war lies not simply in the policies of the Obama administration. It arises from the capitalist system’s insoluble contradictions, which are driving the imperialist powers—as at the beginning of the last century—to engage a re-division of the world through a global war for raw materials, markets and strategic influence. The threat of war can only be overcome by uniting the international working class in the struggle for a socialist transformation of society.



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