

# German elite divided over policy toward Russia and the US

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Sixty prominent figures from German politics, economy, culture and the media published an open letter last Friday sharply criticizing the policy of the German government towards Russia.

The letter, “War again in Europe? Not in our name!” appeared in the German weekly *Die Zeit* and bears the signature of many politicians who occupied leading state and government posts in the period following German reunification.

The signatories include former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party, SPD); former President Roman Herzog (Christian Democratic Union, CDU); the last prime minister of former East Germany, Lothar de Maizière (CDU); former state premiers Eberhard Diepgen (CDU, Berlin), Klaus von Dohnanyi (SPD, Hamburg) and Manfred Stolpe (SPD, Brandenburg); former federal ministers Herta and Paul Amirian (SPD), Erhard Eppler (SPD), Otto Schily (SPD) and Hans-Jochen Vogel (SPD); plus the chairman of the Eastern Committee of the German Economy, Eckhard Cordes.

The appeal was initiated by Horst Teltschik (CDU), who was, from 1972 onwards, one of the closest advisers to former Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU). Between 1999 and 2008, Teltschik headed the Munich Security Conference. Other initiators were Walther Stützle (SPD), a former state secretary in the defence ministry and Antje Vollmer (Green Party), who served as vice president of the German Bundestag from 1994 to 2005.

For a country accustomed to consensus within the ruling elite over foreign policy, and where it is unusual for retired politicians to publicly criticize their successors, the appeal is unusually blunt in its language. The very first paragraph declares that war is “inevitable” if North America, the European Union and Russia fail to “find a way to stop the disastrous spiral of threat and counter-threat”.

Like the government and the vast majority of the media, the appeal condemns “the illegal annexation of Crimea by Putin”. However, unlike them it blames “East and West alike,” for the escalation of the crisis. It accuses “Americans, Europeans and Russians” of abandoning their “guiding principle of eliminating war permanently from their relationship”. This was the only way that “the expansion of the West to the East” could be explained, an expansion that looked “menacing to Russia” and took place “without simultaneously deepening the cooperation with Moscow”.

The appeal stresses that the “security requirements of Russians” are “as legitimate and definitive as those of Germans, Poles, the Baltic peoples and Ukrainians,” and draws a parallel to the Second World War. It states that Russia has been “one of the recognized powers shaping Europe since the Congress of Vienna in 1814”. All those who had tried to change this fact by force “failed bloodily—most recently the megalomaniac Germany of Hitler, which in 1941 undertook a murderous campaign to subjugate Russia”.

The signatories urge the federal government to adopt “a new policy of appeasement for Europe”. This was only possible “on the basis of equal security for all and of equal and mutually respected partners”.

The letter also criticises the media, which had failed to comply “with its obligation to report without prejudice”. “Editorials and commentators demonize entire nations without adequately respecting their history,” it states.

The appeal provoked a sharp reaction. The German chancellor Angela Merkel responded with a weekend interview in the newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* in which, while never mentioning, she vehemently defended her government’s course of sanctions on Russia and support for the aggressive polity of the European Union towards Moscow.

When asked by *Welt am Sonntag*: “Are you concerned

that three of your predecessors—Helmut Schmidt, Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Kohl—regard your policy towards Russia to be false, especially regarding sanctions,” Merkel replied: “I am convinced that the joint European response to Russia’s actions is correct.” Russia’s violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine could “not remain without a response”. Merkel went on to accuse the Kremlin of harassing Moldova, Georgia and Serbia in addition to Ukraine.

One day after publishing the appeal, *Die Zeit* published a fierce rebuttal by journalist Carsten Luther. He accused the signatories of reconciling themselves with Russia’s “brutal imperialist excesses” and “succumbing to the law of military strength.” The signatories, he wrote, were of the opinion: “We are too weak. Let’s just do nothing.”

In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger charged Schröder with “amnesia”, because the former chancellor had forgotten that the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU took place under his leadership. Frankenberger accused the signatories of ignoring the “nationalist fervor in Russia”, which had significantly contributed “to burying the many illusions on the future of the relationship between Russia and the West that prevailed during the period of historic change in Europe”.

“War again in Europe?” and the reactions to it reflect fierce divisions within the ruling elite over the future course of German foreign policy. The issue is not preserving peace. This is clear from the very fact that many of the signatories of the appeal have played a leading role in the revival of German militarism.

The Schröder government was not only responsible for the expansion of the EU and NATO towards the East, it was also behind the German army’s first international combat mission since World War II, in Yugoslavia, and its biggest ever intervention in Afghanistan. As interior minister following the terror attacks of 9/11 in the US, Schily initiated the mass surveillance of the population. As for Horst Teltschik, in his role as head of the Munich Security Conference he played a key role in international wars in recent decades.

What has led the signatories to draft their appeal is above all Germany’s relationship to the United States. They do not address the US directly but anyone following the events in Ukraine is aware that, along with Berlin, it was Washington and its closest East European allies—the Baltic States and Poland—which worked unceasingly to fuel the crisis.

The signatories are of the opinion that German President

Joachim Gauck, Chancellor Merkel and those journalists with close links to transatlantic think tanks have manoeuvred Germany into an impasse that threatens its economic interests and even its very existence.

It is significant that the appeal fails to make any reference to “Western values” and “partnership with the US”—phrases that invariably crop up in statements of German foreign policy. Instead, the authors state that Germany has a “special responsibility”, and stresses: “Germany is not choosing a *Sonderweg* (special path) when the government continues to call for calm and dialogue with Russia in this stalemate.”

At the end of November, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier gave a speech in Berlin to business leaders. He portrayed a world in which “the struggle for influence and domination” prevails, a world characterized by “cracks and divides,” in which we “stare at the differences between countries, peoples and cultures”. He stressed that even “in dealing with our closest partners, especially the United States”, the “public debate is dominated by differences, not common ground.”

The signatories of “War again in Europe?” are well aware, or suspect, that in a world dominated by national conflicts, the United States is Germany’s biggest rival—not Russia. Far from speaking on behalf of a nonexistent “peace-loving” wing of the ruling elite, they propose that Germany adopt a more independent policy to pursue its imperialist interests—in particular, independent from the United States.

The threat of a third World War, raised by the signatories, can only be prevented by an independent movement of the working class. Such a movement cannot be subordinated to any wing of the ruling elite, but must unite the working class internationally in a political struggle to replace the capitalist system—the root cause of war—with socialism.



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