

German weekly *Die Zeit* calls for a “strong state”

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In a long article under the provocative headline, “Political leadership: Might it be something more?”, the liberal German weekly *Die Zeit* calls for a “strong state”. In fact, it is more of a scream. In every paragraph, the central message of the article is drummed into the reader: Germany once again needs a “strong, effective state”!

The article begins with the following declaration: “If not mistaken, we are experiencing the return of the strong state. One does not have to think twice to see clearly that the enormous tasks lying ahead in the next few years cannot be mastered without a strong state.”

Only a “strong state” can fulfill the classic state functions of “security and order, law and justice,” the author of the article, Heinrich Wefing, continues. “Civil society cannot do this..., the market cannot do it, the algorithms of the digital despisers of the state Google and Co. even less so, and Europe is failing pretty miserably.”

In the next paragraph, Wefing, the political editor of *Die Zeit*, explains, “Everything indicates that in future we will need more police officers, more judges, more teachers, probably more soldiers and spies. And in every case, more means a lot more. We are not talking about a handful of additional social workers and prosecutors here and there, but rather of hundreds.”

He continues, “Integration, internal security, intelligence, i.e. intelligence-gathering by the secret services—these are the three major tasks of the state in the coming years, and they can only succeed if the state has sufficient resources—and it also uses them.”

Then Wefing impresses upon his readers that no one can avoid the need for “a strong executive”. For example, those who “want to close the borders or even heavily restrict immigration, cannot do so without state officials and controls, without turning [people] away and deportations, which if necessary must be enforced by coercion”. However, he adds cynically, “even those who do not reject the migrants but want to accept them need a strong state.”

Wefing leaves no doubt what he means by a “strong state”. He says that it probably means “that we will get used

to everyday annoyances in the shadow of danger. To security checkpoints outside railway stations and official buildings, body searches outside concerts and department stores. In other words, more extreme... A little less idyllic, a little more Israel.”

He repeatedly expresses his desire for a “more powerful state, which ensures compliance with the law and which also has the means to do so”. While in the refugee crisis, the EU had proved itself an “executive dwarf” that could not “secure its external borders” or “enforce its rules,” national states were taking advantage of “the moment with the utmost determination. Controlling borders, closing crossings, building fences, allowing the military to march and helicopters to circle.”

It may be surprising, especially for older readers, that of all publications it is *Die Zeit* that so aggressively demands the massive rearmament of the military, police and intelligence services. The weekly newspaper has long been considered the liberal flagship of the German media. On Wikipedia, it is even referred to as “left liberal”. Its readers include mainly academics and educated middle class layers, i.e. the so-called German *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated classes). Although deceased, the former Social Democratic Party Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and the Nazi critic and perennial Chief Editor Marion Dönhoff remain as honorary publishers.

How are the hysterical calls of *Die Zeit* for a “strong state” to be explained, and what lies behind them?

In reality, there is no contradiction between the somewhat “left liberal” post-war tradition of *Die Zeit* and its advocacy of militarism and authoritarianism today. Under conditions of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s and the growing political and social tensions in Europe and worldwide, the German elites are forced to cast away all the rudimentary democratic and pacifist phrases they had to laboriously learn after the Second World War.

Wefing himself indicates what is behind the “historical trend” he refers to: the enforcement of the domestic and foreign policy interests of German imperialism with military-

police methods. And, if need be, this must be done independently of the allies of the post-war period.

Wefing writes: “Given the departure of the Americans from Europe and the Middle East, we need to guarantee our own security in the future...” and “to an extent that seemed unthinkable a few years ago and which stands completely against the habitual pacifism of the [German] republic.” The war mission in Syria is “presumably just a beginning.”

He is also concerned with “harder questions, decisions that inwardly tear us apart”. For example, “At some point, [we will] no longer be able to avoid the debate about whether we want to remain dependent on the Americans, British and French in intelligence gathering in the long run”. A “power in the middle like Germany” must also “become sovereign in intelligence-gathering” and “expand the secret services against all acquired political reflexes”.

Seventy years after the end of World War II, affluent layers of the German petty bourgeoisie are returning to the reactionary nostrums that characterised their origin. Throughout Germany’s history, these layers have reacted to profound social tensions and crises by calling for a “strong state” in order to defend their privileges against the aspirations of the masses for democracy and social justice. There has never been a viable bourgeois-democratic tradition in Germany.

In 1848, the German petty bourgeoisie and bourgeois intelligentsia stabbed the democratic revolution in the back. The unification of the German *Reich* through “blood and iron” made them stalwart supporters of Bismarck and the Wilhelmine Prussian state. In 1878, the majority of the national liberal deputies in the *Reichstag* (parliament) voted for the adoption of the Anti-Socialist Laws. On the eve of the First World War, the same layers were the most ardent supporters of German imperialism and militarism, and enthusiastically marched to the front in 1914.

Hitler’s “strong state” and Nazi militarism also found broad support in the milieu of the affluent, educated petty bourgeoisie. While many had recoiled from joining the Nazis during the Weimar Republic, they supported the fascists all the more fanatically later. “The immense poverty of National Socialist philosophy did not, of course, hinder the academic sciences from entering Hitler’s wake with all sails unfurled, once his victory was sufficiently plain”, Leon Trotsky wrote in his brilliant essay “What is National Socialism?” in June 1933.

Die Zeit is fully aware of the tradition in which it stands in calling for a “strong state”. Wefing complains that it is “still almost like a provocation” to “speak of the strong state”. The term inevitably unleashes “defence reflexes” and sounds “like Wilhelmine authoritarianism or American police brutality, like mass surveillance, Guantanamo and

waterboarding”.

He then asks the rhetorical question, “Have we not long enough made bad, indeed disastrous experiences with the over-strong state, especially in Germany? Are not all our political tormentors also proponents of the strong state, autocrats like Putin, Erdogan, Orbán? Have they not endlessly mocked the gay and frail West—and now we want to say they are right? And finally, aren’t the states of the West showing just what they are made of?”

Wefing’s cynical answer: “We need not only a strong state, we need above all a new concept of why the state must be strong and what makes it so. And how it differs from the authoritarian state.”

It requires the intellectual depravity of a bourgeois German journalist to take two pages (print edition) to initially argue for the establishment of a de facto police state and then believe he can conceal the real content of his own proposals with a conceptual sleight of hand.

In truth, the “authoritarian state” is precisely the “strong state” Wefing demands. As if to underscore the historical continuity of his demand, at one point Wefing is carried away and states, “flesh and blood maintain their role in world history, especially blood.”

Wefing’s article must be taken as a serious warning. It is part of the new *Die Zeit* series “The times are changing/us!” The message of the largest circulation “liberal” weekly could hardly be clearer. Times have changed, but not the German elites. Just as on the eves of the First and the Second World Wars, they are responding to the deep international crisis of the capitalist system, the violent political and social tensions in Europe and the intensification of the class struggle with their old recipes—militarism, war and dictatorship.



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