

Der Spiegel calls for a strongman in Germany

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The entirety of the July 29 edition of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* was dedicated to the theme: “The State of the Nation.” The focus as stated in the editorial is: “How do Germans live and think?” But what readers discover above all else are the political thoughts of the editors and publishers of the most important opinion-making magazine in Germany.

The issue is published in a special edition with six different covers. Each shows a caricature of German chancellor Angela Merkel. But while five of them present Merkel, drawn in the colours of the German flag, as a narcissistic helper of refugees, dreamily oblivious to the “aggression of the Russian bear” or simple-minded and self-satisfied, one cover stands out: with all her might, Merkel kicks a soccer ball into the face of American president Donald Trump. The message is clear: Merkel is not like this, but the *Spiegel* editors crave just such a chancellor, full of brutal aggressiveness.

In light of the widespread hatred of Trump and his reactionary policies, they expect this provocation to easily gain the approval of superficial readers. But no one should be deceived: With these politics, *Der Spiegel* is not mobilizing against the reactionary and brutal policies of Trump, but in favour of a German government that acts in a way equally brutal and reactionary: outwardly, against the US, as well as domestically against its own population.

The latter is the subject of this issue of *Der Spiegel*. Germany must finally be shaken from its slumber by a government of action, its police and military built up, and it must be freed from the political and mental “fetters of the post-war order”—that is the central theme of the three most important articles.

First is a five-page-long article about the supposedly miserable state of the police in the capital city of Berlin, written in a sensational tone typical of reactionary propaganda and end-of-the-world language of the extreme right: the police “with the smallest salaries in Germany, probably the worst equipment, with precincts guaranteed to be shoddy, and an endless workload.”

As with the build-up of the police, a gigantic upgrade to the military is also presented as an irrefutable necessity “without any alternative.” In the essay “Final exam—why Germany must abandon its military restraint and finally lead,” American commentator Anne Applebaum, whose husband is Radosław Sikorski, the former Polish foreign minister, describes the tasks of foreign policy. Germany must be prepared, she writes, for the full withdrawal of the United States from Europe, must take the lead in the fight against so-called “cyber terrorism” and “follow a hard line” militarily, especially toward Russia.

Alas, according to Applebaum: “Germany lacks the military power and therefore the power to assert its foreign policy.” In the Middle East and Africa, the Germans could talk about peace and “talk about the future ... but they cannot do anything.” Instead of pushing for the required military build-up of Germany, Foreign Minister Sigmar

Gabriel supposedly even distanced himself from it for electoral considerations and “turned the question of German defence spending into a campaign issue”—“extraordinarily irresponsible,” from the author’s point of view, “considering the poor state of the Bundeswehr.”

Her core message is therefore concerned with *domestic policy*: the Germans must “change their way of thinking.”

“Whoever wants to maintain what he has achieved must change,” she argues. “The German hesitancy to seek confrontation” certainly was historically understandable, but it was no longer appropriate today. Believing in non-violent solutions to conflicts was certainly honourable but politically naïve. Germany could not survive that way.

Author Dirk Kurbjuweit makes the same diagnosis and even provides the therapy: a Trump type, a strongman is needed! His article “The political miracle” is perhaps the most significant in this issue of *Spiegel*. It is subtitled: “Why there is no Trump among us. And why that is not entirely for the best.” In plain text: a man like Trump as chancellor would also have his good sides!

But the author does not consider speaking so plainly to be opportune: “Yes, one must reject almost everything he is, *but* he has been possible because the US can develop immense power, both positive and negative.” And: “In this respect, Germany cannot keep up.” But it must, if it wants to be steeled for the future! So according to Kurbjuweit: the entire article serves to develop this tortuous yes-but-argumentation.

What are these enormous forces and qualities that, according to the *Spiegel* author, shape the “political constitution” of the US and have produced Trump? “Megalomania, the spirit of redemption, the violation of taboos,” the “gambler’s economy of real estate and financial speculation,” “doing business in a heinous or even brutal way,” a “conception of reality influenced by Hollywood.”

All of that was allegedly lacking in Germany, and that was bad. Because according to Kurbjuweit, while the boredom (of Germany) has its good side, so too do these qualities. They also shaped Silicon Valley, they are behind the success of businesses that have “conquered the world like Facebook, Apple, Google, Amazon, and Tesla.”

“Conquering the world” with help from such “immense powers” like megalomania, a redemptive spirit, heinousness and brutality in business and in politics—that is what is required according to Kurbjuweit, if Germany wants to “keep up.”

What then are the obstacles that prevent Germany from “keeping up?” In the judgement of historians, and as Kurbjuweit himself suggests, the last German politician to whom all of these grandiose characteristics applied was Adolf Hitler. And here lies the problem, in the opinion of the *Spiegel* author: The alleged lack of these qualities lay “not in the DNA of this country,” but rooted in the wartime defeat of the Third Reich and in the subsequent post-war history.

After 1945, his diagnosis states, Germany ...

“... is established not as an independent entity, but as part of a larger unit, as an appendage of the US, as a member of NATO, as part of Europe. It was protected, fostered and controlled by alliances. It was too broken for egoism, for megalomania. It was and is perfectly satisfied to make arrangements with others, to find compromises and to understand the interests of Europe by and large as their own. Germany first is no motto for Germany.”

Hence the politics of internal accommodation, of small, cautious steps, the external policy of considerateness and of compromises—in short: the entire policy of boredom! Under the conditions of the Cold War and the last 25 years, Germany could have won influence, power and admiration—“only 72 years after the war ended ... quite a political miracle.”

But Kurbjuweit has not taken up his pen to celebrate this “political miracle,” rather to declare it obsolete and no longer satisfactory:

It is ... not appropriate, to rejoice in comfort that we do not have this stupid Trump, but the solid M erkel. The political miracle [is] indeed a lovely thing for the moment, but this land of blissful boredom is not especially well equipped for the future.

The “fetters of the past” were now to be shed. The recognition of the old fetters and taboos had a crippling effect, prevented the “pendulum swing” into liberating extremes, and these are, if one follows the implicit logic of Kurbjuweit’s arguments, the extremes of right-wing radicalism:

The swing of the pendulum is not a German movement. The great German taboo lies entirely in anything that approaches the Nazis, and it is widely accepted. This taboo keeps the polarity small. Move a little too far to the right, and already you are almost a Nazi, and one is already near the Nazis and that’s it. You are a goner.

Already a good three years ago, Kurbjuweit attempted to break the “great German taboo.” In the notorious article “The Change of the Past,” Kurbjuweit made the case for revising the assessment of Hitler and the crimes of National Socialism as it was established in the postwar period. He quoted Humboldt University professor Jörg Baberowski who said, “Hitler was not a psychopath. He was not vicious. He did not want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

Basing himself on Baberowski, Kurbjuweit also attempted to rehabilitate historical revisionist Ernst Nolte who justified National Socialism as an understandable defensive reaction against the spread of the October Revolution and with this argument suffered a defeat in the Historians Dispute of the 1980s. Kurbjuweit quoted Baberowski again saying: “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he

was right.”

Kurbjuweit was thereby supplying the ideological lever for the “new foreign policy” announced at the same time. Germany’s return to militarism and its re-emerging as a great military power require a reinterpretation of the history of German imperialism, of the First and Second World Wars, and above all, that requires a re-evaluation of Hitler.

But Kurbjuweit and Baberowski met with opposition. The Socialist Equality Party of Germany (SGP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) publicly attacked the playing down of Hitler and other extreme right-wing statements of Baberowski, warning in articles, leaflets and well-attended public meetings of the return of German militarism. This found a large response among students and workers alike.

Now a loud hue and cry went out in the media—Baberowski was being bullied, slandered and deprived of his freedom of expression. Baberowski himself went to court attempting to legally forbid the student representatives of Bremen from calling him a right-wing extremist and a racist—and he suffered a clear defeat.

Kurbjuweit alludes to this—without naming names—when he writes: “At some universities there is already a tendency that comes close to the American atmosphere. But there it involves small minorities who can, however, ruin a professor’s life.”

Now *Der Spiegel* is launching a new attempt to break the “great German taboo.” With its issue on the state of the nation, it is unmistakably and emphatically calling for finally overcoming domestic political obstacles that always block the way forward: the politics of the centre, of compromises, of small steps, of consideration—the domestic heritage of the wartime defeat in 1945!

Kurbjuweit in all modesty points out that the repulsive, reactionary characteristics of Hitler and Trump “like everything bad in the world” also had their good side: only a chancellor equipped with these characteristics could finally shake Germany from its slumber!

He finds support first and foremost in the SPD. Its candidate for chancellor, Martin Schulz, is apparently of the same opinion. In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, he accused Merkel of neglecting her duty and promised to take Trump as his role model: “Men like Trump ultimately need what they themselves disseminate: clear declarations. I would confront him as clearly and explicitly as possible. A German head of government has not only the right to do this, but also the duty.”

In refugee policy and domestic rearmament, the SPD also increasingly orients itself to Trump and with right-wing slogans vies for the support of voters for the ultra-right Alternative for Germany.

It is no accident that outside of the SGP and the IYSSE hardly anyone came out against Baberowski and Kurbjuweit’s efforts to rewrite history and downplay the crimes of the Nazis. Today the SGP is the only party participating in the federal parliamentary elections with a programme against the return of great power politics and militarism.



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