# German conservative newspaper threatens Poland with territorial demands

**Peter Schwarz**
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The Polish government is demanding reparations from Germany for the war crimes committed during the Second World War. The demand is not new, but has never before been raised so persistently.

The chairman of the governing right-wing nationalist Law and Justice Party (PiS), Jaroslav Kaczynski, breathed new life into the reparations debate in late June. Ever since, Prime Minister Beata Szydlo has issued repeated demands on the issue. She told the RNFFM radio station on September 7, "Poland has a right to reparations, and the Polish state has the right to demand them." Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski stated that Poland's demand amounted to €840 billion.

The Bureau of Research of the Polish parliament published a 40-page report on Monday justifying the Polish demand. According to this, an official 1953 statement in which the Polish government relinquished its right to claim reparations from Germany is not legally valid because it was made under pressure from the Soviet Union and only applied to the German Democratic Republic (GDR), not Germany.

The German government has emphatically rejected the Polish demand. Government spokesman Stefan Seibert declared last Friday that in 1953, Poland relinquished its claim to further reparations "legally and with applicability to Germany as a whole," and subsequently confirmed this on numerous occasions. "From our point of view, this question is therefore fully settled, legally and politically."

### Threats from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Comments in the German media have also rejected the Polish demand. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), and its Sunday edition, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, have adopted a particularly aggressive tone.

One FAZ comment noted that the German government must resist Warsaw's demands. "If they do not do so, they will leave the door wide open to similar demands from other countries—Poland was certainly not the only victim of Nazi aggression." A video comment by the FAZ was titled "Tough luck for Poland."

An article in the September 10 edition of the FAZ, headlined "Dangerous discussion," by historian Gregor Schöllgen went even further. He threatened Warsaw with a refusal to recognise Poland's western border should it continue to insist on its reparations demand. "Whoever makes an issue out of the demand for reparations is also making an issue out of Poland's western border," he wrote.

Schöllgen did not call into question the horrific crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime in Poland. "Hardly any other country suffered more under the German war of annihilation, conquest and plunder than Poland," he wrote. "More than five-and-a-half million Poles did not survive it and the subsequent occupation."

But he claimed that Poland's demand for compensation was settled when the Polish border was moved westward. "With the possession of formerly German territories, a large proportion of the compensation claim made by the Polish People's Republic against Germany was covered," he added.

The Soviet Union and Poland's formal relinquishing of reparation payments in 1953 took account of the fact "that with the separation of German eastern territories, including all immovable and movable property, gave enormous wealth to Poland," stated Schöllgen.

This interpretation of history leads him to threaten that a demand will be made for the return of the German territories ceded to Poland after World War II. Since the Federal Republic recognised the Oder-Neiße line in 1970 as part of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik as Poland's western border, only neo-Nazis, associations of expelled peoples and right-wing elements in the CDU/CSU have demanded the return of the "lost eastern territories."

Schöllgen makes use of extremely aggressive language. "Anyone raising the demand today for Polish reparations from Germany must know that they could be playing with fire," he wrote, and referred to a statement by German Foreign Minister Walter Scheel (Free Democrats), in 1972. "As part of such a discussion, one can never avoid the fact that former German territories were seized. One would then have to take account of personal damages [a reference to those killed while fleeing Poland] and material losses that have arisen," Scheel said.

"Whoever makes an issue of Poland's western border inevitably also makes an issue of Poland's eastern border," continued Schöllgen. "And anyone making an issue of Poland's eastern border inevitably raises the issue of Poland's relationship to Ukraine and Belarus."

This is a barely concealed attempt to incite demands among Poland's eastern neighbours for demands of Polish territory. Poland was forced after the war to give up parts of its former territory to the Soviet Union, which today belong to Belarus and Ukraine.

### Legally justified

From a legal standpoint, the Polish demand is not unjustified. Peter Loev, deputy director of the German-Polish Institute, stated to *Focus* magazine, "In purely legal terms, Poland certainly has grounds to demand reparations."

Poland's relinquishing of the right to claim reparations in 1953, which came about at Moscow's initiative, did in fact apply in practice to the GDR, since Poland never had an opportunity to claim reparations from the Federal Republic after its separation in 1949. The relinquishing of reparations was Moscow's response to the workers' uprising of June 17, 1953 in the GDR. The Kremlin regime, weakened after Stalin's death,

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sought in this way to lessen the economic crisis in the GDR because it feared the uprising could spread throughout Poland and to the Soviet Union itself.

The 1953 relinquishing—in addition to all agreements reached between West Germany and Eastern European states prior to 1990—contained the proviso that only a peace treaty would finally clarify the question of reparations. This is how the German government interprets the Two-plus-four agreement which sealed German reunification and fully re-established German sovereignty. In this agreement, Germany once again explicitly recognised the inviolability of the Oder-Neiße border.

However, Poland was not party to the agreement. The use of the term "peace treaty" was deliberately avoided at the time so as not to unleash another reparations debate. Despite this, the German government now claims that Poland relinquished all future claims to reparations because they did not make the claim at the time.

Germany enjoyed a substantial financial benefit thanks to the unsettled issue of reparations. The Federal Republic has paid a mere €73.4 billion since 1945 in compensation payments globally, according to Schöllgen's calculations, including payments to Israel and Jewish organisations, surviving victims in Eastern Europe, forced labourers, and anyone else he could find. Poland received only a small percentage of this.

**A reactionary demand**

But even though Poland's demand for reparations has a legal basis, it is politically reactionary. The PiS government is not concerned with compensating the victims of the Nazi regime. Warsaw is not demanding any compensation for victims who are still alive, who have a miserable existence under their rule, but rather transfers into Polish state coffers. But PiS is using the reparations demand above all to incite right-wing nationalist ideas.

PiS emerged from those elements in the leadership of the Solidarnosc movement who misdirected the uprising of Polish workers into the dead end of the Catholic clergy, Polish nationalism and capitalist restoration.

The restoration of capitalism had catastrophic consequences for the Polish working class. The shipyards and factories, where Solidarnosc enjoyed a mass base, have largely been shuttered. The country wound up serving the major corporations as a cheap labour location. More than 3 million Poles have left the country and work for low wages abroad. A quarter century after capitalist restoration, poverty rates are horrendous.

Incapable of mitigating the social crisis, PiS is mobilising petty bourgeois and impoverished sections of the population in backward rural areas, and developing dictatorial forms of rule to suppress all forms of opposition, which is widespread. According to a recent poll, 82 percent of those aged 19-29 and 52 percent of all voters described themselves as opponents of the government. Only a minority of them said they back the bourgeois opposition, which advocates a programme of economic liberalism and defends the European Union.

PiS's model is Marshall Pilsudski, who ruled Poland as a dictator from 1926 to 1935. Leon Trotsky described the Pilsudski regime at the time as "an antiparliamentary and, above all, anti-proletarian counterrevolution, with whose help the declining bourgeoisie attempts—and not without success, at least for a time—to protect and preserve its fundamental positions." Like Mussolini in Italy, Pilsudski mobilised petty-bourgeois forces to intimidate the working class.

The PiS government is also coming under increased pressure on the foreign policy front. To date, the European Commission has initiated legal proceedings against Poland for violating EU treaties due to the lack of judicial independence. Hysterically anti-Russian like Pilsudski, the PiS government relies heavily on the US and lives in constant fear of the US abandoning it, or of Germany forming an alliance with Moscow at Warsaw's expense. PiS is responding to this mounting foreign policy pressure with the demand for reparations.

**Growing war danger**

State demands for reparations are generally not an effective method to make good past wrongs. They do not combat the roots of fascism and war, but rather reproduce them. They are a source of persistent conflict, intensify international tensions, and create the ideal breeding ground for chauvinist propaganda. They poison the political climate and set an international precedent that could trigger a flood of further demands. A cautionary example in this regard is the Versailles Treaty of 1919, which compelled Germany to pay crippling war reparations and contributed significantly to the rise of the Nazis and the Second World War.

The fact that 72 years after the end of World War II, Berlin and Washington are seeking to outdo each other with demands and threats shows how tense and poisonous the political climate in Europe has become. The tensions and conflicts that transformed Europe into a battlefield are once again breaking out.

Berlin, which likes to point the finger at the reactionary regime in Warsaw, is no less reactionary. In striving to subordinate Europe to its interests, Berlin is displaying growing arrogance. As we have explained in earlier articles on this subject, Germany cannot return to the pursuit of great power policies and militarism without resurrecting all of the reactionary ideological ballast from the past. It is a sign of how far the media and academic establishment has shifted to the right that a respected contemporary historian is calling Poland's western border into question in the FAZ.

The FAZ and its Sunday edition have long played a leading role in this process. In the historians' dispute of the 1980s, they served as a platform for Ernst Nolte, the most well-known Nazi apologist among German post-war historians. In recent times, they have defended the right-wing extremist professor of history Jörg Baberowski, who supports Nolte and described Hitler as being "not vicious." They have published several hysterical attacks on the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei and its youth organisation, the IYSSE, because they politically exposed Baberowski and attacked him publicly.

We wrote in an article two years ago on the issue of Greek demands for reparations from Germany: "The compensation for past injustice—like the fight against the austerity dictates of the troika and the struggle against war and fascism—is inseparably bound up with a socialist perspective. It demands the unification of the European working class on the basis of a revolutionary program, with the goal of abolishing the European Union, establishing workers' governments, turning the large corporations and banks into public institutions, and reorganizing society within the framework of the United Socialist States of Europe." (see: "Why is Syriza demanding reparations from Germany?")

This applies no less forcefully to Poland.

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