Seventy-five years after the end of World War II

Right-wing ideologues in Germany demand sacrifice of human lives in coronavirus pandemic

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Over the years, Germany has emerged as a promoter of, rather than a danger to, the global order of human rights and international law, asserted German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in his commemoratory speech on the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. According to the head of state, German democracy has matured through "decades of wrestling with our past."

These are trite phrases aimed at concealing the exact opposite. Three-quarters of a century after the end of the most brutal war in world history, a war of annihilation that included the Holocaust, the German ruling elite is returning to authoritarian and ultimately fascist policies to enforce its programme of militarism and glaring social inequality. To these ends, the Nazis' crimes are being trivialised.

These tendencies are accelerating due to the coronavirus crisis. The ruling elite, with its policy of reopening the economy, is accepting the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people as a price worth paying to protect the wealth of the super-rich and strengthen the position of German imperialism against its international rivals. While hundreds of billions of euros are flowing into the accounts of the major banks, there is supposedly not enough money for even the most basic safety measures.

This ruthless ruling class policy stands in irreconcilable opposition to basic democratic rights and fundamental standards of humanity. Therefore, ever more explicitly right-wing extremist and fascist ideologies, which draw directly on the language of militarism and the Nazis, are being employed to justify it.

In the United States, one of Trump's most important advisers, former Governor Chris Christie, has called on people to "sacrifice" their lives for the "American way of life," like they did during the two world wars. Similar images are being conjured up in the German-speaking media to justify dying for the super-rich.

Already on April 17, Swiss businessman Georges Bindschedler stated in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) that in light of the "arbitrary acceptance of the *destruction* of the economy," one must ask, as Frederick the Great said to his soldiers at the Battle of Kolin, "So, do you want to live forever?"

This was Frederick the Great's exclamation as his soldiers retreated before the enemy in a hopeless situation. It became synonymous with the waging of ruthless and brutal warfare. The most well known adaptation is the book and film of the same name, *"Dogs, do you want to live forever?*", which tells the story of the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II.

Today, the businessman uses the militarist slogan, which was pushed to the extreme by the Nazis, to justify his support for the back-to-work campaign that is being enforced in practice by governments all around the world. Like the driving of deserters back to the front, workers are to be sent back to work so they can risk their lives for the profits of Bindschedler and his ilk.

The philosopher Bernhard Gill was even more direct in drawing a connection to the Nazis' inhumane ideology. In an article for *Der Spiegel*, he expressed his opposition to a limiting of the spread of infections. He claimed that the victims of the pandemic died due to their frailty and old age. In his view, this "dying is a natural process, which is painful for the individuals involved, but viewed from a distance creates space for new life."

Gill himself is, of course, aware that his natural selection theory has social implications. For example, British researchers found that residents of poorer regions were twice as likely to die from coronavirus as people living in wealthy neighbourhoods. Another study revealed that COVID-19 reduced the average life expectancy of men who died by 13 years, and women by 11 years. Therefore, there can be no talk of the chief reason being frailty due to old age.

In the final analysis, Gill is concerned with providing a pseudo-biological justification for mass death caused by social conditions. There is nothing to differentiate this position from Adolf Hitler's "aristocratic principle of nature," which, according to the Führer of the Nazis, was summed up by the strong prevailing against the weak. Gill's justification of the death of people with pre-existing conditions or the elderly follows the same logic.

The Social Democrat Konrad Heiden stated in his Hitler biography that with this statement, "Hitler basically said everything that he had to say." In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler counterposed this aristocratic principle of nature to the "mass of numbers and their dead weight," i.e., the principles of democracy and equality.

This is now being raised again. The German-American professor

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Hans-Ulrich Gummbrecht railed in an article published in the NZZ on March 24 against the "principle of equality," meaning the equal protection of all human life. This principle is, in any case, rather young, he claimed, adding, "Until the mid-twentieth century, the conscious decision to sacrifice a large portion of the young male population for the purposes of power and honour was one of the consensus-generating principles during exceptional situations of national wars."

Although the professor said that one can consider subsequent developments as representing human progress, he noted that one ought not to close one's eyes to the drawbacks. For example, it needs to be asked whether the protection of life is not calling into question "the survival of humanity or at least the future of the young generation."

Gummbrecht is here also following the militarist and fascist ideology summed up by Heinrich Lersch in 1916 in the midst of the World War I, when he wrote in the poem *Soldier's Farewell*, "Germany must live, even if we have to die!" The slogan was prominently embraced by the Kaiser's authorities and by the Nazis, whom Lersch later joined.

The revival of such positions is not a trivial matter. The second-highest figurehead in the German state, federal parliament President Wolfgang Schäuble, adopted this inhumane line of argumentation and even attacked the principle of human dignity contained in Germany's Basic Law. This does not include the right to life, insisted Schäuble. It is not true that "everything must take second place" to the protection of life.

But if seriously ill people do not receive a life-saving ventilator, resulting in them horribly suffocating to death in order to protect corporate profits, then Article I of the Basic Law, which was adopted in the wake of the Nazis' crimes against humanity, is not worth the paper it is written on.

Schäuble's fascist demand for lives to be sacrificed for the rich was taken up by representatives of all parties in parliament. Free Democrat Leader Christian Lindner, far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) head Alexander Gauland, and two leading members of the Green Party, Robert Habeck and Katrin Göring-Eckardt, all praised Schäuble for his remarks.

The revival of fascist ideology goes hand in hand with the comprehensive campaign to trivialise and apologise for the crimes of the Nazis. Already in February 2014, Professor of Eastern European History Jörg Baberowski defended the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte. By way of justification, he added, "Hitler was not vicious." He compared the Holocaust to shootings during the Russian Civil War, stating, "Essentially it was the same thing: mass killing on an industrial scale."

This repugnant falsification of history, which appeared in *Der Spiegel*, Germany's largest-circulation news magazine, went uncriticised by a single professor or historian for three years. The Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei--SGP) and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, were bitterly attacked because they opposed Baberowski's falsifications. Representatives of all parties in parliament and the German government backed the professor.

Humboldt University Professor Herfried Münkler also received applause from the political establishment when he denied that Germany had imperialist goals during World War I and urged Berlin to become "the disciplinarian of Europe."

The military historian Sünke Neitzel, who was the only studio guest invited by ZDF onto its official programme after Steinmeier's speech, had blamed the Soviet Union on the 75th anniversary of Nazi Germany's invasion for being jointly responsible for the war of annihilation. In its strategy of extermination, the Wehrmacht took the Red Army as a model, claimed Neitzel. When right-wing extremist terror cells were discovered in the army one year later, Neitzel openly called for the army to base itself more closely on the traditions of Hitler's Wehrmacht.

Steinmeier has played a critical role in the revival of German militarism and fascism. At the Munich Security Conference in 2014, the foreign minister urged Germany to "engage in foreign and security policy earlier, more decisively, and more substantially." He railed against a "culture of restraint," and declared, "Germany is too big just to comment on world politics from the sidelines."

Ever since, he has repeatedly worked with right-wing extremist forces on domestic and foreign policy to pursue this goal. In February 2014, he welcomed to the German embassy in Kiev Oleg Tyagnibok, the leader of the fascist Svoboda Party, who had played an important role in the coup in Ukraine backed by Berlin. In November 2017, he invited the AfD's co-leaders, Alexander Gaulland and Alice Weidel, for a meeting at Bellevue Palace, the president's official residence. As a result, the grand coalition government embraced the policies of the far right and politically integrated the AfD into decision-making processes.

The policies of militarism and social inequality, which are now being intensified by the coronavirus pandemic, and the revival of fascist ideology confirm the warnings of the SGP that the trivialisation of the Nazis' crimes is part of the ruling elite's preparation for new crimes of historic dimensions.

After Baberowski described Hitler as "not vicious" in February 2014, the IYSSE wrote, "The efforts to justify an historically false narrative coincide with a critical turning point in German history. They are closely bound up with the declarations of President Joachim Gauck and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier that it is time to end the decades of Germany's military restraint. The revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history that downplays the crimes of the Nazi era."

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