

German imperialism and the strange case of Alexei Navalny

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On August 20, the pro-Western Russian politician Alexei Navalny fell ill on a flight to Moscow. After he was transferred to a hospital in Berlin, the German government announced categorically that he had been poisoned with a “Novichok” nerve agent.

Politicians and media outlets in Western countries, and above all in Germany, have declared that the Russian government is responsible for Navalny’s poisoning and have escalated their calls for a confrontation with Russia. A certain pattern is repeating itself. An incident takes place and immediately it is declared by media outlets that Putin or Assad is responsible, requiring an immediate response.

Even the most routine homicide case involves a great deal of investigation before the alleged perpetrator is publicly named. But in this case, the entire Western media immediately and unanimously concluded who was to blame.

Assuming that Navalny was poisoned, one would think there would at least be a range of suspects. Is it not possible that an individual or individuals could have poisoned Navalny not because they support the Putin regime, but because they oppose it?

After all, the German government is under immense pressure from the United States to stop the construction of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline and the latest events have already accelerated calls for an abandonment of the project.

Germany has historically looked upon Eastern Europe as its sphere of influence, or, to use Hitler’s term, “Lebensraum.” Now, almost 80 years since the start of Operation Barbarossa, which led to over 27 million Soviet deaths, Germany is once again leading the charge for a conflict with Russia.

In an interview with the *Rheinische Post* newspaper, German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer explicitly threatened the Russian government with retaliation.

The “Putin system” is an “aggressive regime, which seeks without scruples to enforce its interests by violent means and repeatedly violates the international norms of behaviour,” she said. The poisoning of Alexei Navalny, she asserted, is

proof that in Russia outlawed chemical weapons are used against people. The Putin regime is thus “on the same level as regimes, such as that in Syria, which have used chemical weapons against their own civilian population.”

The unsubstantiated and in many cases thoroughly disproven allegations that the Syrian government deployed chemical weapons against civilians have repeatedly served as pretexts for the Western powers to launch air strikes on the country.

The rhetoric is equally aggressive on the opinion pages of the main newspapers. The German financial daily *Handelsblatt* raged on August 25 that it had to be made clear that “the West has a bite as well as a bark, and that its approach of cozying up to Moscow is at an end.” On September 3, *Der Spiegel* demanded, “The time for toughness is now. Now is the time to hurt the man in the Kremlin.”

Chancellor Angela Merkel threw fuel on the fire on Wednesday when she declared at a press conference that German Army toxicologists had proven “beyond doubt” that Navalny was the victim of a crime and had been poisoned by a nerve agent from the Novichok family. She delivered an ultimatum to the Russian government to “answer very serious questions,” and announced that the European Union and NATO would take joint action.

Both organisations responded immediately to Merkel’s demands. In a statement on Thursday, the EU threatened Russia with sanctions. In a letter to the EU high representative for foreign affairs, Josep Borrell, 107 European Parliament deputies demanded an investigation “within the structures of the United Nations or European Council” to “investigate the real background to this crime.” The initiative for the letter was taken by the German Green Party deputy Sergey Lagodinsky.

It would be the height of naiveté to believe that the possible poisoning of Navalny is the reason for this aggressive campaign against Russia. His case merely serves as a pretext to intensify the offensive against Russia that NATO has long been pursuing. Germany, in particular, is

exploiting the case to take a further step towards its long cherished goal of emerging once again as a major military power.

Nothing said about the Navalny case by the media or politicians can be taken at face value. The hypocrisy of the alleged concern over his fate is impossible to overstate.

After the murder of the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia and the Slovakian investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé, there was no talk of sanctions, even though strong evidence in both cases pointed to the involvement of powerful circles within the government and big business. Both countries are members of the EU and NATO.

Just this week, the Slovakian businessman Marian Kocner was acquitted by a court of Kuciak's murder, even though several witnesses identified him as having ordered the journalist's assassination.

The Saudi regime was never confronted with the threat of sanctions after it ordered the murder and dismemberment of oppositional journalist Jamal Khashoggi in its consulate in Istanbul.

No evidence has yet been presented to prove "beyond doubt" that Navalny was poisoned by a nerve agent from the Novichok family. The laboratory in Munich that presented the evidence is neither neutral nor independent. It is under the command of the German Army, which is playing a leading role in NATO's military build-up against Russia and has a direct interest in discrediting the Russian government. Twenty years ago, the German foreign intelligence agency (BND) played a major role in "proving" the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the charge that served as the major pretext for the US-led war on Iraq but was later proven to be without foundation.

But even if one accepts that Navalny was poisoned, this in no way proves the involvement of the Putin regime. Novichok was produced in Soviet laboratories during the 1970s and 1980s, but after the dissolution of the Soviet Union it, like everything else, could be obtained with money. For example, it is known that the BND purchased a sample of Novichok from a Russian military scientist in the 1990s and passed it on to its Western counterparts, suggesting that they are in a position to produce Novichok. The nerve agent has also been discovered in private hands and has been used to settle scores among Bulgarian gangsters.

It is moreover inexplicable why the former intelligence agent Putin would be so foolish as to first poison Navalny, then allow him to leave for a German clinic two days later, where he must have assumed the poison would be discovered.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an article this week, Navalny has ties to right-wing extremists, oligarchs

competing with the Kremlin, and Western intelligence agencies. He has many enemies who have an interest in disposing of him. It is also possible that he trod on the toes of one of his mentors, who may have seen the attack as an opportunity to discredit Putin.

In 2014, the German ruling class drew the conclusion that it was necessary to assume more "international responsibility" and launch a major military build-up. "Germany is too large to comment on world politics from the sidelines," said then-foreign minister and current German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Munich Security Conference.

Since then, the country has launched a massive rearmament programme, participated in several military interventions in the Middle East and Africa, and joined the NATO military build-up on Russia's borders. The revival of militarism has been accompanied by the trivialisation of the Nazis' crimes and the strengthening of far-right forces such as the Alternative for Germany. With the coronavirus pandemic, these developments have intensified.

Already prior to the Navalny affair, the German Society for Foreign Affairs (DGAP) published an aggressive comment from its president, Tom Enders, calling for Germany to pursue a "courageous and combative" foreign policy. Enders was head of Airbus before switching to the DGAP. Airbus, along with Boeing, is not only the world's largest producer of civilian aircraft, but also Europe's largest arms manufacturer.

The fact that German imperialism is now turning against Russia follows an historical pattern. In its struggle for "living space in the East," the Nazi regime invaded the Soviet Union and sought to exterminate large sections of the Soviet population. In its deepening conflict with Russia, the German bourgeoisie is drawing on these criminal traditions once again.



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