German satirical television show *Die Anstalt* and the Ukraine war, or, *How I Learned to Love NATO*

Peter Schwarz
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The Russian invasion of Ukraine is causing many artists and intellectuals who were previously critical of German militarism to topple like dominoes. They are responding to Russia's brutal military offensive by throwing their weight behind NATO and ruefully distancing themselves from their earlier criticism of the alliance.

The world's largest military alliance, which since the collapse of the Soviet Union has permanently waged wars, destroyed entire countries, killed millions and driven countless people into flight, is suddenly seen by them as a "defensive alliance" that protects "freedom" and "democracy."

Responding impressionistically to war images and anti-Russian propaganda, they forget everything they used to say and write. They close their eyes to the fact that NATO is deliberately escalating the war and—just like Russia—conjuring up the danger of a third world war. What the Greens have long ago accomplished, the transformation from pacifism to militarism, now also finds their support.

The satirist Jan Böhmermann (*ZDFMagazinRoyale*), the artists' association Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Centre for Political Beauty) and others are following along this path. Cabaret artists Max Uthoff and Claus von Wagner, who have co-hosted the ZDF political satire show *Die Anstalt* ("The Mental Institute") for eight years, are particularly good examples of this. (ZDF is a German public-service television broadcaster.)

The first episode of *Die Anstalt* was broadcast in February 2014, as efforts to revive German militarism were escalating. Federal President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party) and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union) had announced the "end of military restraint" at the Munich Security Conference. Shortly afterward, the German government put its new great power policy into practice in Ukraine. In close collaboration with Washington and right-wing militias, it organised a coup that brought a pro-Western regime to power and planted the seeds for today's war.

Die Anstalt sharply attacked this process at the time, earning it the deserved wrath of the political establishment and the enthusiasm of younger viewers in particular. The first programme castigated German militarism. The second portrayed the "revolution" on Kiev's Maidan for what it really was—not a "freedom struggle," but an uprising by corrupt, right-wing elements.

The third programme exposed the propaganda of the German media. On a large display board, it documented the numerous connections between leading journalists and transatlantic think tanks where "military leaders, business bosses and politicians discuss foreign policy strategies in a discreet atmosphere." As a result, Josef Joffe and Jochen Bittner of *Die Zeit* filed a lawsuit against *Die Anstalt*, which they finally lost on appeal.

This makes the most recent programme of *Die Anstalt*, broadcast by ZDF on March 8, all the more shameful. In it, Uthoff and von Wagner distance themselves from everything they previously advocated.

They begin the programme with the call to switch off any critical thinking and to refrain from any discussion of the causes and background of the war. "We wanted to differentiate," they explain. "But then you [Putin] decided to put a vacuum bomb up the backside of the European post-war order and launched a war of aggression." That is why, they say, they shredded two scripts and "thought this is not the time to differentiate, but to fight back, and against you."

The rest of the programme consists of Putin jokes, whose level is often below the belt, delivered by various cabaret artists. In between, von Wagner and Uthoff contritely settle accounts with their former positions.

Von Wagner: As a satirist, NATO for me was always something of a... And now I simply believe that if Ukraine had been in NATO, Putin would never have dared to attack Ukraine.

Uthoff: What about the idea of Ukraine's neutrality now?

Von Wagner: When Ukraine was neutral in 2014, that's when Putin grabbed Crimea. Countries like Ukraine have a good reason to want to be in NATO.

To the objection that for Putin, Ukraine's NATO membership would have been a threat, von Wagner replies: "Has NATO expanded, or haven't many states joined it voluntarily?" NATO was not dissolved in 1991 "because it was successful as a defensive alliance." The Warsaw Pact, on the other hand, was "only a kind of forced association to secure Soviet domination" and was the only military alliance in its history to have attacked only its own members.

Uthoff: Perhaps we, notorious for soiling our own nest, simply

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underestimated how attractive NATO was to outsiders.

The extent of denial and repression is shocking. Would Uthoff and von Wagner rate the Warsaw Pact more positively if it—like the "defensive alliance" NATO and its superpower the US—had waged brutal colonial wars in Korea and Vietnam and supported military dictatorships from Greece to Chile?

Have they ever considered why NATO is deliberately fuelling the Ukraine conflict, blocking any approach to de-escalation, arming the country to the teeth and interfering ever more directly in the proxy war against Russia? Do they really believe that a military victory over Russia and a regime change in Moscow, as NATO is striving for, would lead to freedom and democracy?

The same was claimed by bourgeois propaganda three decades ago, when the Cold War ended, and the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union dissolved themselves. There was talk then of the final triumph of liberal democracy and the "end of history." But the opposite took place. The imperialist appetites of the NATO powers, to which the very existence of the Soviet Union had set certain limits, now knew no bounds.

In the winter of 1990-91, the US attacked Iraq. Then, together with Germany, it supported the break-up of Yugoslavia and bombed Serbia in 1999. After 2001, the US and its NATO allies invaded Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya under the pretext of the "war on terror" and fomented the regime change war in Syria.

In the meantime, "great power competition" replaced the "war on terror" in the official US National Defence Strategy. The targets of the massive arms build-up are now primarily China, whose rise to the world's largest economic power the USA wants to prevent at all costs, and Russia, which dominates a large part of the Eurasian landmass and has the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal.

The proxy war in Ukraine against Russia is targeting the country's vast raw materials and its strategic importance. If the US and its European allies succeed in eliminating Russia as a geopolitical actor, it will be easier for them to isolate China in preparation for a war. The danger that the confrontation will escalate and that the use of nuclear weapons will destroy the basis of humanity's existence becomes ever greater in the process.

In this conflict, the Ukrainian population plays only the role of a pawn on the "Grand Chessboard," as US geostrategist Zbigniew Brzezinski put it in his 1997 bestseller of the same name, upon which the USA is defending its strategic supremacy as the "sole world superpower."

The European Union (EU), too, is at best willing to grant Ukraine the role of a supplier of raw materials and cheap labour. It faces the same fate as the Eastern European EU members, where starvation wages and social misery are administered by governments so authoritarian and corrupt that even the EU bureaucracy in Brussels raises its warning finger from time to time.

As for Putin, he was celebrated in the West as long as he kept Russia open to looting by international finance capital and the Russian oligarchs. Only when, for nationalist reasons, he resisted NATO encirclement did he turn villain. As a Great Russian chauvinist and a lobbyist for the oligarchs, Putin is completely incapable of turning to the Russian and international working class, which is the only social force that can stop the spiral of war. Instead, he vacillates between attempts to wring a deal out of NATO and brutal threats of war and military strikes.

It was therefore easy for NATO to lure Putin into a trap, which it is now exploiting for its own ends. In Germany, the federal coalition has tripled the military budget in one fell swoop—a move that would have met with fierce protest under any other circumstances.

Building an international working-class anti-war movement to stop the dangerous slide towards World War III requires not only rejection of the Russian invasion but also irreconcilable hostility to NATO militarism.

The adaptation to NATO by artists like Uthoff and von Wagner has both material and political-ideological causes.

They face pressure from well-off middle-class layers who have profited from the huge redistribution of income and wealth during the last three decades and have made their peace with imperialism. The war hysteria of these strata is also expressed in the anti-Russian boycott campaigns in music and science. Influenced by the subjectivist theories of postmodernism and identity politics, they have developed a fierce aversion to the working class and socialism. The Greens embody this most clearly.

In addition, the lessons of the twentieth century are largely misunderstood by them. The great lie of the century—that the Stalinist dictatorship was the legitimate heir to the Russian October Revolution and the only possible form of "real existing socialism"—has cut many off from Marxism. The shift to the right of social democracy, the trade unions and their pseudo-leftist appendages has also meant that for some time, the working class has hardly appeared on the public stage as an independent social and political force.

But the same objective factors that are driving NATO and Russia into war are also creating the basis for the revival of the international class struggle, a process that has long since begun. Decades of social cuts while those at the top accumulate billions, the disastrous pandemic policies that have sacrificed millions of lives to profit, and the costs of sanctions policies and militarism now being heaped on the backs of wide layers of the population are driving the working class into struggle.

The international socialist perspective, which the International Committee of the Fourth International has defended against social democracy, Stalinism and the pseudo-left groups, now gains decisive significance in these circumstances. It will also attract the best elements from the middle class. It is to be hoped that critical artists who have presently lost their heads will soon find them again.

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