

President of PEN Germany resigns after demanding more weapons for Ukraine

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A remarkable annual conference of the German writers PEN association took place in the German city of Gotha in mid-May. The conference came just months after the international writers' association celebrated its 100th anniversary last October. According to media reports, the meeting in Gotha degenerated into tumultuous scenes, mutual insults and shouting. The president of PEN Germany, Deniz Yücel, resigned at the meeting after just seven months in office.

Yücel is a journalist who has gained a reputation as an opponent of the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. At the Gotha meeting Yücel was reelected to his post by a narrow majority but then promptly resigned when his opponent, PEN General Secretary Heinrich Peuckmann, was also reelected with considerably more votes. Yücel threw in the towel in spectacular fashion—leaping up in the meeting with a roar and shouting that he no longer wanted to be the “figurehead of this bratwurst (German sausage) shop.”

The dispute began in March at the international literature fair Lit.Cologne held in the city of Cologne. At that meeting, Yücel demanded more weapons for Ukraine and the establishment of a no-fly zone—a demand which would lead to the direct involvement of NATO in the war against Russia.

In a protest letter, five former presidents of PEN Germany—Christoph Hein, Gert Heidenreich, Johano Strasser, Josef Haslinger and Regula Venske—accused Yücel of abusing his function as PEN president. They said his initiative had not been agreed with the PEN executive and was also in breach of the International PEN Charter, which obliges members to “work with the utmost vigour for the ideal of humanity living in peace.” The five former presidents then demanded he resign. Another 36 PEN members subsequently also expressed their opposition and filed a motion to vote Yücel out of office.

A majority of German media outlets sided with Yücel, gleefully citing his vulgar outbursts in Gotha and dismissing his critics as small-minded.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), Yücel denounced PEN as a “bunch of philistines and crack-pots” wallowing in their “ancestral gallery” based on the organisation’s historical ties to leading literary figures such as “Alfred Kerr, Dolf Sternberger and Heinrich Böll.” According to Yücel, PEN had been taken hostage “by a bunch of self-righteous, ridiculous wannabe literati.”

In a cynical comment, SZ writer Cornelius Pollmer, who had interviewed Yücel, wrote about “scenes of one of the most spectacular intellectual stands ever taken.” He described PEN as a “slowly drying out foundation of senior citizens” and Yücel as a “tragic hero.”

Germany’s leading daily for the upper-class *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), ran the headline “Hauptsache laut gebrüllt” (Main

thing—shout loudly), and had no problem with Yücel’s aggressive behaviour, but instead railed against the bad manners of other PEN members. *Der Spiegel* editor Jan Fleischhauer was amused by the comparison with a “bratwurst shop” and described Yücel’s call for a no-fly zone as a commendable intervention by a “combative intellectual.”

Under the headline “Bratwurstbude zum Schämen” (Shameful bratwurst shop), the *taz* newspaper quoted one observer who referred to the “toxic masculinity of a squad of old West German gentlemen” dominating PEN. After Lit.Cologne, the *taz* wrote: “There’s a war going on in Europe! You can’t retreat to the ‘ideal of a humanity living in peace’.”

Last and not least, *Die Zeit* writer Jana Hensel described the Gotha conference as “torture.” She wrote that one felt as if one were in the “stadium stands of a fifth league football club” or at “a party conference of the AfD” (the far-right Alternative for Germany). The anti-Yücel camp in particular stood out with their “hooting and hollering, caustic interjections or threats of legal action,” Hensel wrote. At the end of her article, she went so far as to say that Yücel stood “in the tradition of Heinrich Heine, Georg Büchner, Ludwig Börne,” who had also suffered under the “philistines.”

The background to the affair

Who were the “philistines” who made Yücel’s life so difficult? And how can German literary greats such as Heinrich Heine and Georg Büchner be rescued from this mudslinging?

The war in Ukraine has caused the tensions already existing in the writers’ association to explode. Many German journalists and cultural workers are waging a hysterical war campaign against Russia, and well-known authors and journalists in PEN are also involved.

Deniz Yücel, born in Flörsheim in 1973, began his career as a journalist at the weekly *Jungle World*, where he is still a co-editor. He then went on to the *taz* newspaper, which is traditionally close to the Green Party. Finally he moved on to the right-wing daily *Die Welt*, published by the Springer press, as correspondent for Turkey. On the basis of an interview with a Kurdish PKK commander in 2017, he was accused of terrorist propaganda by the Turkish judiciary and spent a year in prison in Turkey. After negotiations with the German government, he was released in February 2018.

Now, in the context of the Ukraine war, Yücel is using his image as an opponent of political oppression to support the warmongering by

NATO and American imperialism.

At a panel discussion on the sidelines of the Gotha conference, he strongly defended the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany, Andrij Melnyk, who reveres the WWII Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera as a hero. Melnyk is the “voice of Ukraine” and is doing a “great job,” Yücel said. Stepan Bandera was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Jews, Poles and Soviet citizens in the course of WWII.

The editor of *Philosophie Magazin*, Svenja Flasspöhler, who had raised her fears of a nuclear war, was ridiculed by Yücel who declared she was not prepared to help Ukraine because she was worried about small nuclear bombs. He simply shrugged off her reference to tactical nuclear bombs that have many times the explosive power of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.

Yücel also responded to calls by Ukrainian PEN writers to ban works by the Russian literary giants Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy for allegedly “brutalising the Russian soul” by declaring that Russian literature was not innocent. Yücel sought to underline his argument by citing the example of the Russian author Saschar Prilepin, who was celebrated as an opponent of Putin 10 years ago and now fights for Putin as a militia leader in the Donbass. Prilepin had justified his change of heart by his reading of works by Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837).

At this point, former PEN president Johano Strasser lost his patience: one could just as well declare that “because Hitler’s soldiers had Goethe books in their knapsacks,” one should boycott Goethe as an accomplice of Nazi crimes.

Finally, Yücel slandered the renowned anti-war slogan “Never again fascism, never again war!” He claimed that after the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp on April 11, 1945, prisoners had only demanded “Never again fascism!” but not “Never again war!” He had read this in documents, he claimed.

This is false. In fact, the famous “Oath of Buchenwald” reads: “We will only cease the struggle when the last guilty person stands before the people’s judges. The destruction of Nazism and its roots is our slogan. The building of a new world of peace and freedom is our goal. We owe this to our murdered comrades and their relatives.”

Yücel’s falsification had a clear aim. Arguing that because Hitler had been defeated by the united war efforts of the Allied powers, it was now necessary, Yücel claims, to wage a war against “fascist Russia.” This comparison of Hitler’s war of extermination against the Soviet Union—in which almost 30 million Soviet citizens, including countless victims from Ukraine as well as millions of Jews, were murdered—with the Putin regime’s war against Ukraine amounts to a brazen trivialisation of Nazi crimes.

PEN at a turning point

PEN is at a turning point. PEN stands for “Poets, Essayists, Novelists.” When the International Writers’ Union was founded in London in 1921, a few years after World War I and in the midst of revolutionary struggles, it was intended to bring together writers all over the world, regardless of their origin, religion or nation, and thus make a commitment to international peace. The principles of the international charter, which members must sign, set out the goals of peace, international understanding and the fight against political persecution and censorship.

Founded in 1924, the German section quickly became embroiled in the political struggles of the Weimar Republic. In 1930, it led a campaign against the banning of the anti-war film “All Quiet on the Western Front,” based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque. When Hitler came to power, many German authors were forced to flee the country, including the PEN president at that time, Alfred Kerr, together with Lion Feuchtwanger, Ernst Toller and Heinrich Mann. The latter became president of the exile organisation founded in 1934.

In Nazi Germany, PEN tried to adapt. It did nothing when the Nazis held their book burning ceremony in 1933. In 1934, at the instigation of Gottfried Benn and Hanns Johst, the organisation was transformed into a national German writers’ association that conducted pro Nazi war propaganda and anti-Semitic agitation. After WWII, the German PEN Centre reestablished itself, but soon split into East and West German sections.

The best-known German authors of the time—Günter Grass, Siegfried Lenz and Heinrich Böll (PEN president from 1970-72)—all played an important role in coming to grips with the Nazi era. A pan-German PEN was only formed again in 1998, and it is also open to representatives of other professions, including journalists such as Deniz Yücel.

Today, the literary world is once again confronted with social upheaval, class struggle and war. Thirty years after the reunification of German and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, capitalism is once again showing its true face in the form of outrageous levels of social inequality, exploitation, police violence, while threatening the future of humanity with a third, nuclear, world war.

Deniz Yücel’s attempt to integrate PEN into the war policy of German imperialism failed at the association’s conference. The vociferous intervention of Yücel’s opponents and the considerable applause when he resigned surprised many media representatives who believe that their own daily lies about the Ukraine war and the role of NATO reflect majority opinion in Germany.

The tumultuous scenes in Gotha reflect a very different mood among the population, the majority of whom reject the official policy. In the wake of many tens of thousands of coronavirus deaths due to the prioritising of profits, the same irresponsible representatives of the ruling class are fomenting an all-out war and foisting the cost on working families. The fact that many PEN members expressed their opposition is a development to be welcomed.



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