

Hans-Christian Ströbele (1939-2022) and the rightward shift of Germany's Green Party

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The biography of Hans-Christian Ströbele, who died on August 29 at the age of 83 after an extended illness, provides a profound insight into the evolution of Germany's Green Party from its origins in the 1968 protest movement to its current role as Germany's leading war party.

Ströbele, who as a young lawyer defended persecuted students and members of the RAF (Red Army Faction) against a merciless judiciary, was a founding member of the Green Party and the party-affiliated daily newspaper *taz*. He represented the Green Party in the Bundestag (Federal Parliament) for 21 years and remained loyal to the party until his death. In the last interview he gave to *Der Spiegel*, on May 15 of this year, he answered the question, 'Which party would you represent in the Bundestag today?' by saying, 'I would represent the Greens, of course.'

Ströbele fulfilled a very special function for the Greens. Whenever the party moved further to the right, decided to support foreign missions by the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) or called for new war missions, he acted the part of the party rebel. He voted against his own parliamentary group several times in the Bundestag and attacked Green foreign minister and vice chancellor Joschka Fischer (1998-2005) to great effect in the media. When the party refused him a promising place on the 2002 ballot, he ran as a direct candidate in Berlin's Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, and, with the slogan "Voting for Ströbele means tormenting Fischer!" became the first Green to win a Bundestag direct mandate, which he defended in the three subsequent elections.

For that reason, obituaries appearing in virtually all German media described Ströbele as a "symbolic figure of the left wing of the Greens," who had "radically," "tenaciously" and "incorruptibly" stuck to his "principles." "Integrity from head to toe," the *taz* wrote. "One who followed his conscience," said the *Tagesschau*. The *Neue Ruhr Zeitung* called him the "left-wing conscience of the Greens."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrats—SPD) mourned Ströbele as a pugnacious politician who had helped shape political debate over decades and strove to change society. Berlin's mayor, Franziska Giffey (SPD), praised him as a champion of the SPD-Green coalitions that have dominated Berlin state politics. The chairwoman of the Left Party, Janine Wissler, characterized Ströbele as "smart and full of integrity, straightforward and upright." He had been "a loud and admonishing voice against war, rearmament and an unjust world," who would be sorely missed.

Christian Democratic (CDU) politician Julia Klöckner paid him "respect and tribute," even if she held a different viewpoint. Even the leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Tino Chrupalla, acknowledged Ströbele, saying that he was sometimes wrong and sometimes right.

So much praise is suspicious. If Ströbele had really been principled, straightforward and consistent, he would not be the subject of such high praise. Rather, he would be damned as incurably intransigent. The party he co-founded in the late 1970s and actively supported until the end of his life has transformed all the principles it wrote into its founding program—environmental protection, pacifism, democracy, social

justice—into their opposites.

Ströbele did not oppose this development. On the contrary, he ensured that it was implemented smoothly. His occasional protests did not serve to block right-wing policies, but to absorb and neutralize opposition to them, thus helping Green party leaders and ministers to break into mainstream politics. When it came to taking a decision after heated debate, Ströbele always made sure that the party leadership got the majority. He played the role of left-wing fig leaf and safety valve.

The maneuver by which he secured a majority for the Schröder/Fischer government on November 16, 2001 in favor of German participation in Operation Enduring Freedom epitomizes his role. Ströbele and seven other Green Party members of parliament had initially opposed participation in the war in Afghanistan and George W. Bush's "war on terrorism." In order to nevertheless secure a majority for the SPD-Green federal coalition government, they agreed to split the vote. Four voted yes, four—including Ströbele—voted no. Six weeks later, Ströbele voted in favor of the ISAF mission, that is, another Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan.

The result is well known. Twenty years of war in Afghanistan claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, including those of 53 Bundeswehr soldiers, and socially and economically devastated the country. Complex radical right-wing networks have taken form in the Bundeswehr. Ströbele, who could foresee this, could have prevented the decision to go to war, but he deliberately chose not to.

This *modus operandi* is a hallmark of Ströbele's entire career. At the Green Party federal delegates' conference in Bielefeld on May 13, 1999, which amidst great tumult approved German participation in the war in Kosovo, Ströbele introduced an alternative motion to defuse opposition to the war. He did not fundamentally reject the main motion set out by Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, but criticized only one tactical detail: instead of a temporary cease-fire, he advocated an indefinite one.

"In other words, the 'opposition' was getting verbally excited about things over which they had no control," the WSW commented at the time, "instead of undertaking something which could have had an effect, if they were ever really seriously concerned about putting an end to the war: ending Green party support for the SPD, expelling their members in government responsible for the war, calling for mass demonstrations against the bombing."

Ströbele stuck to this pattern throughout his life. Even in his last interview with *Der Spiegel* he supported the proxy war that NATO is now waging against Russia in Ukraine. His only criticism of Green Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who is campaigning around the world for an escalation of the war, concerned the caliber of the weapons to be supplied.

"Deviating from the original Green program, I have come to the conclusion after some hesitation: It is right to supply Ukraine with weapons," Ströbele told the news magazine. "But I am... strictly against supplying heavy weapons like tanks." Ströbele also supported the ongoing, massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr, saying, "Of course the Bundeswehr needs money." He said he was only "opposed to this lump

debt generation of 100 billion euros.”

Ströbele has at no time halted or even slowed down the rightward development of the Green Party. Quite to the contrary, he was one of the driving forces behind the participation of the Greens in government. He was the architect of the first coalition that the Greens (then called the Alternative List) formed with the heavily right-wing SPD in Berlin in 1989.

He sat in the Bundestag for the Greens for the entire seven years of the first SPD-Green coalition federal government, organized the Bundeswehr’s first international war missions, launched a full-scale social counterrevolution with the “Agenda 2010” program, and built up the police and secret services. In 2017, he retired from the Bundestag due to illness, but there is no doubt he would have supported the current federal coalition government.

Ströbele’s political development, notwithstanding his reputation as a left-wing rebel, ultimately ran along the same lines as that of the Green Party as a whole. It demonstrates again that the role of a politician or a party is not determined by abstract principles and good intentions, but by the class interests they represent.

Students in 1968 rebelled against the calcified structures in education, the state and society, the unresolved legacy of the Nazi dictatorship, the Vietnam War, and much more. But they harbored distrust and hostility toward the working class. Influenced by the theories of the Frankfurt School, they viewed the working class as a reactionary mass, dominated by “consumption terror” and the propaganda of the *Bild* tabloid newspaper. Their perspective, notwithstanding the sometimes radical phraseology, focused on reforming bourgeois society, and above all on their own advancement within it.

By the time the Green Party was founded in the late 1970s, the anti-capitalist rhetoric of ‘68 had disappeared from their program. Instead, they focused on environmentalism, pacifism and limited social reforms within the framework of bourgeois society.

The stock market boom of the 1990s lifted the social class that formed the basis of the Greens. The Greens became a party of the affluent middle class, profiting from the social polarization of the past decades and inextricably linking their fate to that of German imperialism and the suppression of class struggle.

Hans-Christian Ströbele, as far as is known, took little part in the ideological debates of 1968. Unlike many leading representatives of the first generation of Greens, he was not a member of a Maoist organization. He found his way to the ‘68ers and the Greens through his profession as a lawyer.

Born in the city of Halle in 1939 into a middle-class family—his father ran the Buna works in Schkopau and was a member of the Nazi-party forerunner NSDAP—he experienced the horrors of war as a six-year-old. After completing high school and military service, where he defended comrades against the arbitrariness of their superiors, he passed the state law examination in 1969.

By 1967, Ströbele was a lawyer-in-training in the law office of Horst Mahler, with whom he founded the Socialist Lawyers’ Collective in 1969, which provided legal assistance to activists of the 1968 movement. Mahler joined the RAF in 1970 and went underground. When he was arrested shortly afterwards, Ströbele took over his defense together with Otto Schily. Mahler was sentenced to 14 years, of which he served two-thirds.

When the top leadership of the RAF was arrested in 1972, Ströbele and Schily joined their defense. In doing so, Ströbele undeniably demonstrated steadfastness and courage. The ruthlessness and vindictiveness with which the state and right-wing media persecuted the RAF and its lawyers, throwing elementary principles of law overboard, was breathtaking.

In 1975, two weeks before the start of the Stammheim trial against the RAF, Ströbele was excluded from the proceedings, making a proper defense virtually impossible. Because he had exchanged information

between the strictly isolated defendants, which was essential in making an effective case, he was temporarily placed in detention, subjected to disbarment proceedings and sentenced to 18 months’ probation for “supporting a criminal organization.” The probation was subsequently reduced to 10 months.

Ströbele later distinguished himself as an advocate for those persecuted by the state. Defense lawyer Johannes Eisenberg, who long worked with Ströbele, attests of him on *LTO.de*: “In the end, he was the last and today probably the most prominent member of the generation of defense lawyers who emerged from the ‘68 student movement, freeing defense from the dark field of cooperation between lawyers, prosecutors and judges against the accused that had existed since the time of National Socialism.”

But Ströbele’s political perspective never went beyond that of a bourgeois democrat. His goal was not to overcome capitalist rule, but to improve it. As class antagonisms intensified, he moved further and further to the right.

As a member of parliament in the SPD-Green coalition, he supported his old lawyer colleague Otto Schily, who had co-founded the Greens, later switched to the SPD, and then, as interior minister in the Schröder/Fischer government, pursued a strict law-and-order course and built up a police-state infrastructure.

Ströbele himself never held a government office, but as a member of the Bundestag he sat on multiple investigative committees dealing with security issues—the role of the BND (German secret service) in the Iraq war, illegal abductions by the CIA, the NSU (National Socialist Underground) terror group’s ties to the German state, and the US National Security Agency (NSA) wiretapping scandal. Much of the information these committees received was subject to secrecy. They were not allowed to see many secret documents at all. They thus served less to clarify the matter than to cover it up.

Here, too, Ströbele played the role of the indispensable fig leaf. He occasionally drew attention to himself through spectacular actions, such as visiting NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden in Moscow, but he never disappointed the trust placed in him and strictly upheld his obligations of confidentiality.

Ströbele bears full responsibility for the Green Party he left behind upon his death—a party of militarism, domestic rearmament and the dismantling of social gains. He was instrumental in setting the Green Party on its current course.



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