

Frankfurt Book Fair dominated by Ukraine war propaganda

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The 74th Frankfurt Book Fair, featuring authors and publishers from 95 countries and thousands of visitors, ended on Sunday. Anyone, however, expecting the book fair to provide a forum for cultural exchange and efforts to promote peace against the background of a possible nuclear war would have been bitterly disappointed. The book fair excluded Russia from any sort of participation and was dominated by anti-Russian war propaganda.

At the beginning of March 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the book fair management had already decided to exclude the traditional stand reserved for Russian literature. A Ukrainian stand, on the other hand, was allocated a centrally located area, with all costs covered by the German foreign office. The most prominent speaker at the fair was the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky. Three out of four of the fair's book prizes went to Ukrainian authors, and its world renowned peace prize was awarded to a rabid nationalist.

The book fair thus joined the official anti-Russian campaign aimed at further escalating the war in Ukraine. The Putin regime's war is reactionary but has been systematically provoked by the NATO powers. Now they are using the Ukrainian population as cannon fodder to wage a proxy war against a nuclear power that threatens to result in the annihilation of humanity. The racist campaign against Russians serves to legitimise the war and intimidate all opposition to it.

Zelensky set the tone for the anti-Russian campaign at the fair. Joining online at a reception of the European Publishers Association, the Ukrainian president called for an end to any attempt to understand the position of Russia. "We have to say openly," Zelensky said. "There are still many people in Europe who are committed to 'understanding' Russia." With this comment, he summed up the absurd war propaganda: the broad public must finally stop seeking to "understand" and instead support the fight against Russia without hesitation and until final

victory.

This is also the grotesque essence of a comment published by the weekly *Die Zeit* on the occasion of the peace prize award Sunday in the Paulskirche to Serhij Zhadan, an author and musician from Kharkiv. Zhadan (58) is a native Russian speaker, but has become an ardent Ukrainian nationalist in recent years, in particular following the outbreak of the war. He now writes in Ukrainian, supports the Ukrainian armed forces and proudly sports the "Cossack cut" favoured by rabid nationalists.

Volker Weidermann, head of the arts section of *Die Zeit*, initially described the award ceremony as a "scandal": "The Peace Prize is one of the most important European cultural prizes of our time. The award-winning personality must, according to the statute, have made an outstanding contribution 'to the realisation of the idea of peace'." Zhadan, however, has called the Russians a "horde," "criminals" and "rubbish" in his latest book (*Sky Above Kharkiv: Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front*). Denouncing the "Russian animals" it declares on p. 45: "Burn in hell, you pigs."

Weidermann comments: "Even if this were not about our most important prize in the name of peace, this would be outrageous. Wasn't literature invented for the opposite of this one-sided, hateful partisanship? Is this not the great art of understanding that which cannot-be understood? To recognise and describe the dehumanised opponent as a human being? Isn't it fatal, in these horrific, hate-filled times, to reinforce hatred through literary means?"

Following these comments Weidermann then conducts an abrupt and remarkable about turn and flatly rejects these thoroughly enlightened arguments. At the end of his comment, he answers his own question: "Is it permissible to award the Peace Prize to an author who hates the Russians?" with an explicit: "Yes." He writes: "It is the right place to honour this laureate. It is also the right

prize. The scandal is not the poet and not his book. The scandal is the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the daily killing.”

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier also welcomed the awarding of the peace prize to Zhadan in his opening speech at the book fair. He thanked the writer who he said “exemplified social and cultural commitment in eastern Ukraine in an admirable way.”

Any form of understanding, therefore, is to be strictly ruled out. Research into the causes of the conflict is to be prevented and nipped in the bud. This ban on rational thought (“Denkverbot”) is being advocated so hysterically because there is so little genuine public support for the war.

Art, culture and literature must be free precisely because they help us to understand what is new, unknown or different. This view was widespread among both authors and readers at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

For the warmongers, however, the book fair’s anti-Russian campaign did not go far enough. They rigorously demanded the exclusion of everything Russian from the book fair and worldwide.

Together with PEN Ukraine, the Lviv International BookForum and the Book Arsenal in Kiev, the Ukrainian Book Institute published an appeal to the literary and publishing world for a total ban on Russian literature and culture, which includes four points:

1) All distribution of books by Russian authors and publishers should be stopped, “online and offline.”

2) No rights should be acquired from or sold to Russian publishers.

3) All Russian “publishing houses, cultural centres and authors should be banned from participating in all international book fairs and literary festivals,” and

4) All scholarships for translations of contemporary Russian authors into other languages should be terminated.

This call for a total boycott of Russian literature, reminiscent of the Nazi book burnings, is not the end of the story. This summer, the Ukrainian government announced a ban on the import of all Russian books and performances of Russian music.

The Ukrainian Book Institute, now an official partner of the Frankfurt Book Fair, announced in May it would remove up to 100 million Russian works from school and public libraries and other Ukrainian institutions. These include works by Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, etc.

Oleksandr Tkachenko, Ukrainian Minister of Culture

(and former CEO of a media company), proposed at the time: “Russian propaganda works confiscated from Ukrainian libraries could be used as waste paper.” The Frankfurt Book Fair officially invited Tkachenko to attend.

While the book fair did not completely exclude any Russian participation it made it extremely difficult for Russian authors to be present. Regarding the boycott of Russia, the fair stated: “The measure is not directed against Russian authors ...) The Frankfurt Book Fair will continue to allow individual stands of Russian publishers, even if this admission represents more of a theoretical possibility in light of the sanctions imposed.”

Fervent advocates of the war and sanctions against Russia, including the German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD), Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht (SPD) and Culture Minister Claudia Roth (Greens), also spoke at the fair to further escalate the war propaganda.

Embracing crude anti-Russian stereotypes, the ruling elite in Germany is harking back to the country’s horrendous past. The war against Russia and the massive rearmament of the German military have encouraged the most reactionary forces.

Three years ago, the Mehring Publishers presented the book *Why Are They Back?* at that year’s book fair. In the book, Christoph Vandreier urgently warned against the danger of a return to fascism. Two years ago, Mehring Publishers presented David North’s *Thirty Years of War*, which traced the historical escalation of war since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and analysed this process from a Marxist point of view. The book stated that a third world war, fought this time around with nuclear weapons, was a concrete danger that could only be prevented by the international mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme. All those repelled by the omnipresent propaganda for war at this year’s book fair should read these books.



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