Mehring Books presentation at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair

The burning relevance of Trotsky's "Portrait of National Socialism"

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26 October 2023

"The Lessons of 1933" was the title of a book launch organised by publishers Mehring-Verlag on Sunday, October 22, to coincide with the Frankfurt Book Fair. Christoph Vandreier, national secretary of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), presented the expanded new edition of Leon Trotsky's *Portrait of National Socialism*. As his presentation showed, these writings about Germany, written 90 years ago, are of the utmost relevance again, especially today.

"We are not simply discussing historical issues," Vandreier, who also wrote the new foreword, emphasised, "but the burning questions of current political developments." The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) had just won 18 percent of the vote in the Hesse state elections; nationwide, it was now the second strongest force in the polls, Vandreier said. This was the result of the fact that all the establishment parties had adopted the programme of this fascist outfit.

This was particularly evident in war policy, most recently with regard to the Middle East, said Vandreier: "In the Bundestag [federal parliament], every single deputy up to and including the Left Party has adopted the AfD line, fully backing the radical right-wing government in Israel and supporting the genocide against the Palestinian population."

Vandreier referred to the recent bombing of the Al-Ahli Arab hospital by the Israeli military and stated that the German government and all the Bundestag parties were thereby supporting war crimes. To applause, Vandreier contradicted the constant propaganda that Israel had the "right under international law" to self-defence: "As if the slaughter, starvation and expulsion of thousands of civilians had anything to do with self-defence!"

In the historic Haus Gallus, where the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials had taken place 60 years earlier, Vandreier set the record straight on the mendacious "antisemitism" accusation against any criticism of Israel and the false and vicious comparison of the Palestinian uprising with the Holocaust. He said, "It is certainly not the Arab workers and youth shouting 'Free Palestine' who stand in the tradition of German imperialism and the Nazis, but the ruling class in Germany itself in its support for genocide."

Vandreier urgently warned against the expansion of the Ukraine war and the Middle East conflict, saying: "We are witnessing the NATO powers opening a second front in the Third World War." As in the First and Second World Wars, German imperialism was again pursuing the goal of "detaching Ukraine and other countries that once belonged to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire from Moscow's sphere of influence" and bringing them under German control. "And to this end, German tanks are again rolling against Russia."

Using charts showing the exponential growth of the defence budget, Vandreier demonstrated there had been a "veritable explosion of German militarism." The declared aim, he said, was to arm Germany to become the biggest military power in Europe. And he pointed out that the government was financing the horrendous rearmament by cutting education, health and housing budgets. To this end, "war abroad goes hand in hand with class war at home." Because the policy of militarism and social attacks could not be enforced with democratic methods, "all the Nazi muck" was returning.

Four years ago in Frankfurt, Vandreier had already presented his analysis of the return of fascism in his own volume: *Why are they back?* On Sunday, he vividly presented the timeliness of Trotsky's writings on Germany, which, he said, "offer an incomparable

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understanding of the processes and dynamics that led to the catastrophe of National Socialism [Nazism]". He quoted topical passages such as this:

> At the moment that the "normal" police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium–the turn of the fascist regime arrives.

It becomes clear that Trotsky's writings were not only literary masterpieces and unsurpassed analyses of historical development, but are "themselves part of history," Vandreier said. Reading the volume showed, "Hitler could have been stopped and the catastrophe prevented." He explained the disastrous policies of the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies that Trotsky had exposed and against which he had developed a viable perspective to fight fascism.

He then explained the stark contrast to the approach of a Daniel Goldhagen, or a Götz Aly in the post-war period, who saw the cause of fascism in "ordinary Germans" or in "Hitler's Volksstaat [People's State]" or, like the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, blamed the Enlightenment and modern division of labour for the rise of fascism. What they had in common was the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class: "The quintessence of their view is the deep pessimism that characterised the Frankfurt School and which formed the basis for their coming to terms with Nazi-infested post-war Germany," Vandreier said.

The question of why the mass of workers did not launch a general strike against Hitler and oppose the terror was "not a psychological question," Vandreier stressed. "It can only be explained in terms of the programme and perspectives of their leadership. Trotsky discusses these questions in the present writings with unprecedented clarity."

In particular, the German Communist Party (KPD) of the time, deprived of its most important leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, proved incapable of breaking the working class from social democracy and winning it to revolution under the pressure of the strengthening Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. In contrast, Trotsky stressed "that fascism was a question of life and death for the working class and could only be stopped by its mass mobilisation."

On the current situation, Vandreier said that—unlike in the 1930s—the ruling class today did not have a mass fascist movement, and the working class had only just begun to engage in struggle. "The class struggle is breaking out powerfully all over the world," he said. The Palestinian uprising should also be seen in this context. This force—the international working class—is the only social force capable of stopping fascism and a third world war, he explained.

The audience followed Vandreier's presentation with rapt attention and there was applause at several points. Many participants, including a group of students from Frankfurt's Goethe University, were enthusiastic about what he had to say.

Dietmar Gaisenkersting, SGP regional chair of North Rhine-Westphalia, who moderated the meeting, concluded by explaining the significance of the new Trotsky publication, describing several texts newly included in it. These were, for example, the article "Against National Communism" (1931), in which Trotsky drew lessons from the nationalist adaptation of the KPD to the Nazi referendum against the Social-Democratic Prussian state government. Or his article "Nation and World Economy" (1934, first translated into German in its entirety), which proves how the imperialists' drive to war is linked to their drive for autarky. All these articles, Gaisenkersting said, were, like the entire book, of the highest contemporary relevance.

Gaisenkersting called on the participants to order the book together with the two new Mehring publications, Trotsky's *Whither France?* and his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*, at a special price.

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