

Leipzig Book Fair: A seismograph for the growing opposition to war, genocide, and Germany's coalition government

Our reporters
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This year's Leipzig Book Fair was evidence of a clear politicisation. While the establishment politicians and the media suppress any critical voices against the genocide in Gaza and the proxy war against Russia, these issues were widely discussed by authors and readers at the book fair, as they had been at the *Berlinale*, Berlin's International Film Festival.

This found its clearest expression at the presentation of the book *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the 21st Century* by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and of the Socialist Equality Party in the USA.

With more than 150 participants, the non-fiction forum in Exhibition Hall 5 was bursting at the seams and North's condemnation of imperialist war policy and the return of German militarism was followed by enthusiastic applause. Many members of the audience bought the book directly after the event and had their copies signed by the author.

The stand of Mehring Verlag, which published the book, was also very well received, with many lively discussions developing there. The publishing house sold three times as many books as in previous years.

The Leipzig Book Fair is traditionally a great meeting place for reading and debate. It was cancelled for three years from 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. This year, 2,800 events took place at more than 300 locations at the fair and as part of the "Leipzig reads" reading festival. Many of them centred on the threat of world war, the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the climate catastrophe.

The reason for the change in mood at the book fair is the unprecedented political crisis. Even participants who have been regular visitors to the book fair for decades spoke of a completely changed political climate.

The constant escalation of the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which is accompanied by debates about Germany's "war capability," German nuclear bombs and school lessons on the military, is just as much a cause for concern as the government's support for the genocide in Gaza. The latter led to a variety of protest actions during the trade fair.

The crisis of the capitalist system is well advanced. This is demonstrated by increasingly evident social, economic, and ecological problems. The plans drawn up at a secret fascist meeting in Potsdam to deport immigrants triggered ongoing mass demonstrations in recent weeks. The election of an AfD district councillor in Thuringia, the

swearing-in of an AfD mayor in Pirna and the threat of AfD election successes in the autumn are also fuelling outrage and fear that the ghosts of Germany's past are returning.

However, the rise of the class struggle was also visible at the trade fair. Although a one-day strike by transport workers only took place in the muted and controlled form organised by service union Verdi, it still had a clear impact. Everyone realised that strikes and social protests are currently taking place everywhere, even if the unions are doing their best to isolate them and limit them to a few hours.

Fierce criticism of Chancellor Scholz and President Steinmeier

The political and intellectual self-congratulations of the government and some cultural functionaries, who like to use such major events to present themselves as champions of human culture, knowledge, and progress, met with fierce resistance. Opponents of the genocide in Gaza reacted to appearances by Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, both Social Democrats (SPD), with angry protests.

Scholz had reaffirmed his support for Ukraine in the war against Russia and for Israel in the genocide against the Palestinians in a government statement in the Bundestag in the morning, before giving a speech at the opening of the book fair in Leipzig's Gewandhaus in the evening.

He began with the words: "We are all—and I include myself in this—united by a love of reading." A woman in the top tier then stood up and shouted: "Mr. Scholz, you have no right to talk about democracy here while your money and your weapons are murdering thousands and thousands of people in Gaza and the West Bank."

Scholz responded provocatively: "Stop shouting!" But the woman replied: "No, absolutely not. The blood of the Palestinians is on your hands. You are complicit in the genocide. I am an Israeli and I am telling you, your money is funding fascism and apartheid." As she was led away by security forces, she shouted: "Stop the genocide!"

When Scholz then tried to carry on his speech, and shouted, "We are all brought together here in Leipzig by the power of the word, not the power of shouting!", another woman stood up on the opposite side of the gallery and continued the attack on the pro-war policy of the coalition government Scholz heads. When she was also removed from the hall, a man stood up behind her and attacked Scholz again.

On the second day of the book fair, President Steinmeier spoke on the topic, “Where do we stand as a country in the double anniversary year of 75 years of the Basic Law [West Germany’s post-war constitution] and 35 years of the Peaceful Revolution? [i.e., the restoration of capitalism in the former East Germany]” His speech was also interrupted several times by opponents of the genocide. Seven Palestinians and Israelis appeared one after the other and attacked the German government’s arms deliveries and political support for the far-right Israeli government and its genocidal war in Gaza.

The Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding 2024, awarded during the opening ceremony, was bestowed on the Israeli-German philosopher Omri Boehm for his book *Radical Universalism. Beyond Identity*.

Boehm teaches philosophy in the United States. In his work, he advocates the idea of a Jewish-Palestinian “binational federal state” as an alternative to the Jewish state of Israel founded in 1948. He is an opponent of the two-state solution and demands “a just solution for all inhabitants of Palestine.” Boehm’s philosophy of “universalism” is based on Immanuel Kant, whose 300th birthday will be celebrated next month.

In his acceptance speech, he called for the troublemakers to be listened to. German-Jewish friendship must prove itself by accepting unpleasant truths in the current situation, he said. The audience responded to his speech with a standing ovation, which the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented on with the words: “You could feel that the sympathies in the hall were also more on the side of the Palestinians.”

Great interest in Mehring Verlag

This became particularly clear during David North’s book presentation. His rejection of the genocide in Gaza, the war against Russia and the return of militarism was enthusiastically received by the audience.

Right at the beginning, North explained that Trotsky was particularly important in Germany because he warned of the dangers of war and fascism like no other. Trotsky had declared that capitalism would lead to the catastrophe of world war if it were not overthrown, and it was precisely this question that was coming to a head again today. This could be seen in Ukraine as well as in Gaza, North said.

North sharply attacked the militarism of the German government. If Education Minister Stark-Watzinger was calling for war lessons to be introduced in schools, she should watch the film “Oppenheimer,” in which the effects of nuclear war are demonstrated. “Children should not be prepared for war,” he declared, to applause from the audience. “They should be prepared to prevent war. Germany does not need a new generation of young Siegfrieds, it needs a new generation of socialists.”

What the government was capable of could currently be seen in Gaza. No one should be intimidated by the fact that the ruling class in Germany, of all places, is defaming opposition to the genocide as antisemitism, North said. As someone whose family were victims of the Holocaust, he could only recommend that the government “keep its mouth shut” on the subject of antisemitism. “The terrible genocide that took place here in Germany is being used as justification for the

same terrible crimes against the Palestinians,” said North.

Listening to German politicians talking about nuclear war, you would think they had gone completely mad, North said. “But there are objective reasons for this madness. The contradiction between global production and the nation state cannot be resolved peacefully. It leads either to imperialist war or to socialist revolution.”

Therefore, the only way to prevent a world war, North concluded, was the international mobilisation of the working class against capitalism. The working class was stronger than ever today, but it needed the necessary consciousness. “We must overcome the result of the betrayal of social democracy and Stalinism,” North emphasised. “And that is only possible if the working class is familiar with the lessons of history.”

This required a Marxist understanding of society and revolutionary optimism. “To be an optimist, you need a scientific understanding of the problems of our time, then you can see the possibilities,” said North. “If you are ill and go to a bad doctor, he will say: ‘Nothing can be done.’ A good doctor will say: ‘There are possibilities.’ In politics, the right doctors are the Trotskyists.”

In a subsequent interview with Johannes Stern, editor-in-chief of the German-language WSW and representative of Mehring Verlag, North emphasised: “If Trotsky’s warnings against fascism and war had been accepted and heeded in the 1930s, we would be living in a completely different world today. Many of the tragedies that took place would not have happened... This time we must ensure that the warnings of the Trotskyist movement are acted upon. We must build this movement. It is the only party that really has a perspective and is based on these lessons of history.”

Intense discussions about the threat of a third world war, the AfD, fascism and the relevance of Trotskyism took place at the Mehring Verlag stand every day of the fair. Many visitors were delighted to be able to discuss political issues at length, which was not possible at other publishing stands.

Above all, Trotsky’s significance as an alternative to Stalinism, which countered the nationalist theory of “socialism in one country” with the perspective of world socialist revolution, met with great interest. In East Germany in particular, this question is still central 35 years after the collapse of the Stalinist regime.



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