

Stationing of long-range US precision missiles in Germany: Another step towards Third World War

Peter Schwarz
26 July 2024

Between 1981 and 1983, then West Germany experienced the largest mass demonstrations in its history. Millions protested against the deployment of American Pershing II medium-range nuclear missiles. In the German capital at that time, Bonn, 300,000 people took part in a peace demonstration on 10 October 1981 and half a million on 10 June 1982. There were also hundreds of other large demonstrations and sit-in blockades. On 22 October 1983, 1.3 million people took to the streets across Germany.

The deployment of the Pershing II was part of an escalation of the Cold War against the Soviet Union under US President Ronald Reagan, which was supported by the German Social Democratic (SPD) Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The demonstrations were fuelled by pacifist ideas and the fear of a nuclear catastrophe. The participants were aware that the deployment of nuclear weapons which could reach Moscow in less than 10 minutes increased the risk of war and made Germany the prime target of a Soviet nuclear strike.

At the Bundestag (parliament) session on 21 November 1983, which gave the final green light for the deployment, Otto Schily, who later became SPD interior minister and was still a member of the Green Party at the time, spoke of an “act of submission to the increasingly aggressive military strategy of the current US administration, a capitulation of reason, a fiasco for peace in Europe.”

Schily castigated the “ludicrously excessive power politics that has materialised in the nuclear arsenals and to which the German government has also committed itself.” He described the “concept of war prevention through deterrence,” used to justify the deployment, as “a risky game with the downfall of Europe, with the end of the world.”

The mass protests failed. They could not prevent the deployment of the Pershing II. The Greens, Stalinists of the DKP (German Communist Party) and church representatives, who dominated them politically, were careful to ensure that they remained limited to impotent appeals to the government and did not call capitalist rule into question.

Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who tried to force the deployment against sections of his own party, had to leave office prematurely. The Liberal Democrats (FDP), who had governed for 13 years in alliance with the SPD, switched sides, helping the Christian Democrat (CDU) Chairman Helmut Kohl to power, who carried out the deployment and remained chancellor for 16 years.

After 1987, the Pershings were finally dismantled again because the Stalinist regime of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev retreated and voluntarily gave the imperialist powers what they had wanted to conquer by force. It smashed up the socialised property relations created by the October Revolution, introduced capitalism and dissolved the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union.

Far more dangerous than Pershing II

More than 30 years later, the German government has taken a decision whose dangers and political consequences are far more serious than those of the deployment of the Pershing II.

During the NATO summit in Washington at the beginning of July, the German and US governments signed an agreement to deploy Tomahawk cruise missiles, SM-6 guided missiles and Dark Eagle hypersonic missiles in Germany by 2026. They are intended to bridge the gap until Germany, in cooperation with other European countries, has developed its own precision weapons with ranges of several thousand kilometres.

All three weapons can easily reach the largest Russian cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg. They are capable of taking out “Russian high-value targets”, e.g., central elements of the Russian nuclear forces. They are launched from mobile launchers and are difficult to defend against.

While the Tomahawk uses extremely low altitudes to fly under enemy radar, the SM-6 and Dark Eagle reach speeds that overwhelm even the most modern missile defence system. The SM-6 flies at five times the speed of sound, and the Dark Eagle, which is still in the developmental stage, even flies at 17 times the speed of sound.

The warning time thus tends towards zero; the danger of escalation grows accordingly. The Russian military would be practically forced to retaliate within fractions of a minute at the mere suspicion of an attack or to launch a pre-emptive attack in order to avoid the destruction of its own nuclear forces.

The *IPG Journal* of the pro-SPD Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung writes in one of the few critical articles on the subject:

Moscow could escalate nuclear in the event of war in view of its own inferiority. Even pre-emptive strikes would be conceivable should the Kremlin conclude that conventional but precise stand-off weapons in Europe would be able to threaten its own nuclear capabilities.

Deploying the missiles in densely populated Germany puts the lives of millions of people at risk.

This is one of the reasons why NATO has only deployed comparable long-range precision weapons at sea or in the air in recent decades. But this limits their effectiveness considerably. Missiles fired from aeroplanes can only be launched after takeoff, which takes a lot of time, and sea-based missiles have too short a range and are too slow.

According to a background article by the government-affiliated German

Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the return to land-based medium-range missiles pursues two objectives that “cannot be optimally fulfilled by the short- and medium-range air- and sea-based NATO missiles available today”:

Their first task is to put those Russian deep-strike capabilities, which are intended to keep the alliance at a distance, in the crosshairs (hold at risk) and possibly destroy them before they fire on NATO territory. ...

The second task of the medium-range weapons is to be able to destroy at least some time-critical high-value targets in Russia. These include mobile command centres or launching pads for ballistic missiles and cruise missiles.

This alone makes it clear that the new weapons are not—as the official propaganda would have us believe—for “defence” or “deterrence” but to escalate the NATO offensive against Russia, which has reached a dead end with the hemorrhaging of the Ukrainian army and the growing war-weariness of the Ukrainian population. NATO and the German government are preparing a devastating military strike against Russia, risking a nuclear catastrophe.

No public discussion

Unlike the Pershing II, the decision to deploy the new US missiles was made without any public discussion. The German government made the decision in a cloak-and-dagger operation and is doing everything it can to suppress any debate about it. It is supported in this by the synchronised public and private media, which barely mention the decision and play down the deployment and its dangers.

The official announcement of the German-American agreement consisted of four short sentences. Neither the Bundestag nor the relevant foreign affairs and defence committees had been informed in advance. It was only 10 days after the agreement that the Parliamentary State Secretaries Siemtje Möller (Defence) and Tobias Lindner (Foreign Office) sent a short briefing to the two committees.

The Greens, in particular, who have transformed themselves from a disarmament to a pro-armament party, are furious at anyone who even slightly doubts the decision or even advocates a de-escalation of the war in Ukraine.

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, for example, described criticism of the deployment as naive and irresponsible. Putin’s Russia was “the greatest security threat to us,” she told the *Funke Mediengruppe* newspapers. “We must protect ourselves and our Baltic partners against this, including through increased deterrence and additional stand-off weapons. Anything else would not only be irresponsible, but also naive in the face of an ice-cold Kremlin.”

In the magazine of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), *Chrismon*, the lecturer at the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) University in Munich, Frank Sauer, also berated critics of the deployment as “disinformation mongers” who “unnecessarily instil fear of nuclear death in people for domestic political reasons.”

The transformation of the Green Party and the Protestant Church, which four decades ago had supported the pacifist anti-Pershing movement, into angry warmongers sheds a harsh light on the driving forces behind the war policy of the ruling class.

In his groundbreaking analysis of imperialism, which is highly topical

again today and which he wrote in the middle of the First World War, Vladimir Lenin explained the connection between imperialist war and the rightward turn of all those who defend capitalism. He wrote:

The enormous dimensions of finance capital concentrated in a few hands and creating an extraordinarily dense and widespread network of relationships and connections which subordinates not only the small and medium, but also the very small capitalists and small masters, on the one hand, and the increasingly intense struggle waged against other national state groups of financiers for the division of the world and domination over other countries, on the other hand, cause the propertied classes to go over entirely to the side of imperialism. “General” enthusiasm over the prospects of imperialism, furious defence of it and painting it in the brightest colours—such are the signs of the times.

We are experiencing the same thing again today. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union did not herald a period of peace, as bourgeois propaganda claimed at the time. On the contrary, the struggle between “the nation-state financial groups for the division of the world and for domination over other countries” has taken on enormous proportions.

Since then, the US and its European allies have waged uninterrupted war and destroyed entire societies in the Middle East and other regions. Not content with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they also want to break up Russia in order to gain access to its vast natural resources. China, whose cheap labour they initially exploited, is to be reduced to the status of a semi-colony. Their support for the genocide in Gaza shows that they will not shy away from any crime.

This policy is supported by all establishment parties. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the BSW split-off from the Left Party, which criticise Germany’s role in the Ukraine war, also support the military build-up. However, they believe German imperialism should not ally itself too closely with the US in the fight for its global interests but should position itself more independently of it.

There is only one way to stop the threat of a Third World War: The independent mobilisation and unification of the international working class on the basis of a socialist programme that combines the struggle against war, social inequality and fascism with the struggle against their cause, capitalism. This is what the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the International Committee of the Fourth International stand for.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact