

“Why I would never fight for my country”

German journalist Ole Nymoen’s book: A protest that can’t stop the warmongers

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The recently published book *Why I would never fight for my country. Against Combat Readiness (Warum ich niemals für mein Land kämpfen würde. Gegen die Kriegstüchtigkeit*, Rowohlt, 2025) by Ole Nymoen has attracted a great deal of attention. The journalist and podcaster, who was born in 1998, addresses the widespread opposition to militarisation, conscription and rearmament.

The starting point was a much discussed article that Nymoen published in newsweekly *Die Zeit* in the summer of 2024. It sparked a “shitstorm” and prompted Rowohlt Verlag to have his theses published in book form. Over the course of a good hundred pages, Nymoen provides arguments against “combat readiness”—in other words, against militarism, rearmament and the expectation of fighting for one’s country in an emergency.

In June 2024, Social Democratic Defence Minister Boris Pistorius had told parliament, “We must be ready for war by 2029,” and called for the reintroduction of military conscription.

Younger readers in particular will find Nymoen’s pacifist stance appealing, especially as he says: “Not wanting to fight for a state ... [is] an act of humanity and protest for more collective self-determination.” His opposition to nationalism and military service—Nymoen even refers to Marx’s slogan “Workers have no fatherland”—clearly strikes a chord at a time when huge sums are being spent on armaments, conscription is being reintroduced, the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza are being intensified and a third world war is looming. The book went through several editions within a short time and was widely discussed.

Nymoen’s theories are now present in the mainstream media: he discussed them on the 3sat talk show “Bosetti Late Night” and on the ARD talk show “Hart aber fair” (“Hard but fair”), where a German army officer contradicted him with the nationalist slogan “Germany is worth it.” At the same time, he also finds a hearing in the pseudo-left milieu. He is a columnist for *Jacobin* magazine, which is close to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and has appeared as a speaker at events organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which is close to the Left Party.

However, anyone looking for an explanation of the causes of the current war madness in his book and an answer to the question of how it can be stopped will be bitterly disappointed. Nymoen provides no political perspective for the fight against war. On the contrary, he openly emphasises that “no realpolitik stance or strategy can be derived” from his criticism—he had “no constructive, realistic solution on offer” (p. 67).

He himself considers the prospect of gaining broad support for his pacifist viewpoint to be slim: “I know myself that I won’t be able to convince many people with this stance.” (p.115). Consequently, Nymoen only advocates individual refusal to do military service and—in extreme cases—fleeing into exile. “I would rather try to flee” (p. 114), he writes. He

does not reveal where he would flee from a third world war.

This leaves Nymoen with an individual act of moral protest, which may be symbolically significant, but will not stop the warmongers in reality. For as noble as the refusal to shoot at foreigners is, it does not answer the question of who initiates wars and how their power can be broken.

This might be seen as the result of naivete or historical ignorance on the part of the author. But Nymoen is not naive. He specifically attacks the only perspective that can stop the development of war: The mobilisation of the international working class to overthrow capitalism.

No link between capitalism and war

In the chapter “On the relationship between the state, capitalism and war,” Nymoen argues against the Marxist view that imperialist wars are the consequence of the death crisis of capitalism. He explicitly attacks the analysis of imperialism that Vladimir I. Lenin had developed in the course of the First World War.

In his essay *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin demonstrated that imperialism is not an arbitrary “policy” that can be replaced by another, but that it inevitably results from the objective contradictions of capitalism and represents a new, final stage of capitalism. He writes:

Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development where the rule of monopolies and finance capital has emerged, the export of capital has gained outstanding importance, the division of the world by international trusts has begun, and the division of the whole territory of the earth by the largest capitalist countries has been completed.

Lenin concludes from this that imperialist wars for the redivision of the world are inevitable as long as capitalism is not overthrown by the working class. And he concludes that the same objective contradictions that drive the imperialist powers to war also exacerbate class antagonisms and create the conditions for socialist revolution.

This distinguished Lenin from pacifist and other socialist opponents of war at the time. While the latter limited themselves to appeals for peace and the demand to renounce annexations, Lenin advocated ending the war by means of class struggle. In October 1917, the workers in Russia seized power under Lenin’s leadership and ceased hostilities on the first day.

Nymoen quotes the above passage from Lenin's book (p. 49)—and attacks it sharply. He describes Lenin's analysis of the power of finance capital as "almost conspiracy theory" and ridicules the idea that "some American bankers" had "got together, worked out the global boundaries and then passed them on to the ruling politicians so that they could be violently enforced."

He describes the view that finance capital demands warlike expansion so that further profits can be made as "more than cockeyed." The state did not appear here as an "independent actor with its own goals, but as a mute servant of money" (pp. 50-51). Further down, he writes that "it is not particular capital interests that are essentially behind military confrontations—but the states with their claims to power and violence" (p. 54).

Here, Nymoen avoids the obvious question of whose claims to power the states embody. He presents the classic illusion of the petty-bourgeois democrats that the state hovers neutrally above the classes—only turned upside down and negative. While the petty-bourgeois democrats claim that the state represents the interests of all citizens—which Nymoen rejects—he declares that the state pursues its own power interests, which are independent of or even in opposition to those of capital.

He claims in all seriousness that the First World War in particular "completely disgraces Lenin's theory of imperialism, which emerged at the same time." In addition to the "inherent logic of state power politics, there was a second reason for this: the harmfulness of war for capital as a whole." For most of those involved, the First World War was a losing proposition, with the overall economic damage exceeding the individual benefits many times over (pp. 52-53).

Here, Nymoen not only fails to recognise the elementary driving forces behind imperialist wars but also ignores all serious historical research into the material war aims of the great powers. Fritz Fischer's classic book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (*Germany's Aims in the First World War*), published in 1961, demonstrated in detail that German war aims were deeply rooted "in industrial-capitalist, agrarian and overseas-commercial interests." Fischer has also shown that Hitler largely pursued the same goals in the Second World War.

On the WSWS, Nick Beams showed that the two world wars were an expression of the inevitable contradictions of the imperialist system, which is based on the struggle for colonies, raw materials, markets and strategic world regions. Capital interests were not violated but enforced in the most brutal way—with huge profits for banks, the arms industry and export monopolies.

For Nymoen, the fact that millions of workers died in the trenches is apparently just further proof that "capital as a whole" would have preferred peace. This is a grotesque inversion of reality. Lenin's analysis that in imperialism, wars do not arise from irrational state mania, but from the inner logic of global capitalism, was not refuted but confirmed by the First World War.

The rule of the financial oligarchy

One wonders what kind of world Nymoen lives in. Compared to the power of finance capital today, it was still in its infancy in Lenin's time. And the connection between state power, financial oligarchy and imperialist war has never been as obvious as it is today.

When Lenin wrote his book, there was exactly one billionaire in the world—the oil magnate John D. Rockefeller. Today there are 2,800, many of whom have fortunes in the double and triple-digit billions. According to Oxfam, the total wealth of billionaires grew from \$13 trillion to \$15 trillion last year alone. The richest 1 percent of the world's population

owns almost half of global wealth.

However, the cause of war and militarism is not just the scale of the wealth accumulated, but the financial parasitism on which it is based. As David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS, explained in his May Day speech, the foundation of the US economy has shifted over the last 50 years from industrial production to financial parasitism:

The wealth of the American ruling class has been based not on the growth of production, but on the limitless expansion of debt. American capitalism now consists of a vast edifice of fictitious capital—legal claims to future income streams arising from loans and infinite forms of debt creation.

The national debt of the US, which was just under \$1 trillion in 1980, has now risen to \$36 trillion. In the last four years alone, the increase has totalled \$10 trillion. Only around 15 percent of the money circulating through US financial institutions flows into new corporate investments, with the remaining 85 percent chasing existing investments. The rise in the price of shares and other securities has little to do with the real production process. This enormous mountain of debt is undermining confidence in the dollar and thus in the international financial system, on which the temporary stabilisation of global capitalism after two devastating world wars was based.

American imperialism is trying to free itself from this impasse by using its military superiority and declaring war on the whole world—as well as on its own working class. This is the significance of Donald Trump's presidency. He epitomises the dictatorship of the American financial oligarchy with its gangster methods like no other president before him. He is not only a billionaire himself; when he was sworn in, the richest men in the US—Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Sundar Pichai—stood behind him.

Trump reacts to problems for which there is no progressive solution within the framework of capitalism by lashing out wildly. He is trying to reduce the US trade deficit through tariffs that are strangling the global economy. He is trying to plug the hole in the budget by slashing social programmes on which the survival of millions depends. And he is establishing a fascist dictatorship. He is laying claim to Panama, Canada and Greenland and is preparing a war against China. The Democrats are doing nothing to oppose Trump because they too represent the interests of Wall Street.

Similar developments are taking place in Germany and all other imperialist countries. In the First and Second World Wars, German imperialism tried to free itself from its constrained position in the centre of Europe by subjugating Europe and conquering new *Lebensraum* (living space) in the East. Both wars ended in catastrophic defeat.

However, Germany's ruling class never came to terms with the fact that it had to take a back seat militarily after the failure of Hitler's war of annihilation. As early as 2014, Angela Merkel's government at the time demanded that Germany should once again play a military role commensurate with its economic weight. A strategy paper, which served as a blueprint for the government's foreign policy, claimed an international "leadership role" for Germany. As a "trading and exporting nation," it lived from globalisation like "hardly any other country" and required "demand from other markets as well as access to international trade routes and raw materials."

This strategy is being put into practice in the Ukraine war, which the German government has supported to date with military aid totalling €28 billion. It is not a matter of "peace" and "democracy," but about controlling Ukraine with its rich resources and subjugating Russia.

German imperialism is once again advancing in the same direction as in the First and Second World Wars.

Adaptation to German imperialism

In Nymoen's work, one searches in vain for a concrete analysis of the Ukraine war, the Gaza conflict or other wars of our time. He operates with empty abstractions—"war," "state," "power"—as if every war were the same. He manages to write an anti-war book without taking a political stance on a single current war. He does not mention the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza at all.

For him, there is no history. His historical ignorance makes reading the book embarrassing for long stretches. He replaces historical and social analysis with an eclectic mix of quotes ranging from Marx and his bitter opponent Nietzsche, to Bertolt Brecht and *GegenStandpunkt*, a cynical, anti-working-class publication.

Nymoen's abstract approach transforms every war into a generalised conflict between "State X" and "State Y" (p. 33). "In their totalitarian claim—that the life of the individual is less important than the political sovereignty of the rulers—attacking and defending, democratic and dictatorial states are completely alike," he states (p. 65). It becomes "unimportant whether the war is defensive or offensive, imperialist or national," he quotes Simone Weil, about whom Leon Trotsky had already written that she "of course, has a right to understand nothing. Yet it is not necessary to abuse this right."

Nymoen repeatedly emphasises that wars are "pointless." But they are only pointless from the point of view of a morality that floats above social reality. Wars result from the complex interaction of social, economic and geopolitical processes and interests on a global scale. They certainly have a purpose, which must be understood in order to fight them. The Prussian military theorist Clausewitz already realised that wars are "the continuation of politics by other means." Wars always take place in a political context.

The transformation of war into an ahistorical abstraction that stands above social reality paves the way for capitulation to the warmongers. It is characteristic of pacifism, which as historical experience shows is only suitable for times of peace. As soon as shots are fired, the pacifists jump into the camp of war supporters and defenders of the fatherland.

Germany's Greens have recently demonstrated this. Founded in 1980 as a pacifist party, they were still fundamentally opposed to war missions by the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) during the 1998 parliamentary election campaign. But even before they entered the government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democrat, SPD), they voted in favour of the Bundeswehr's first war deployment in Yugoslavia in 1999.

The leading Green Joschka Fischer, who became foreign minister under Gerhard Schröder, justified this with the cynical argument that Germany's responsibility for Auschwitz obliged it to bomb Belgrade (as the Wehrmacht had already done under Hitler) in order to prevent an alleged genocide. Today, when Benjamin Netanyahu's regime in Gaza is committing real genocide with German support, the Greens are fully behind it.

Lenin had already warned during the First World War: "Pacifism and abstract preaching of peace are a form of misleading the working class." Peace propaganda that was not accompanied by an appeal to the masses for revolutionary action could only create illusions, demoralise the working class by instilling confidence in the humanity of the bourgeoisie, and turn it into a plaything in the hands of the secret diplomacy of the belligerent countries.

How close Nymoen is to the warmongers in Berlin and Brussels is

shown by his refusal to clearly condemn the NATO deployment against Russia and the genocide in Gaza. Although he personally refuses to die for his country, he does not want to oppose the warmongers politically. He rejects wars in general and preaches individual renunciation of military service. But when it comes to condemning current war crimes, he remains loftily silent. The fact that Germany is mobilising against Russia for the third time since 1914 apparently affects him just as little as the mass deaths in Gaza.

Socialism without class struggle

This is not about far-fetched theoretical questions, but about the basis of a political perspective without which no serious struggle against war is possible. It is not possible to take serious action against the threat of a third world war without understanding its causes.

Nymoen is in favour of a "modern socialism," a "sensibly planned society" in which "people take their economic conditions into their own hands" and "cease to identify themselves first and foremost with their nationality or their state" (p. 131). He describes "poverty and competing nation states" as the "main causes of violence" (p. 114). He writes, "I would like to live in a world where nobody has to worry about how they will make ends meet next month, because neither war nor poverty hangs over their heads like a sword of Damocles" (p. 127).

But by denying the connection between war and capitalism, Nymoen blocks the path to this goal. He sees the task in individual persuasion. "Millions of isolated working citizens who have to prove themselves in a dog-eat-dog society in order to make ends meet," "whose highest unity consists in the fact that they are allowed to wave a black-red-gold [German] flag at the fan-fest every two years," who try to "take advantage of and outdo the others" (pp. 128-29), must be convinced of the advantages of a society based on solidarity—an unmanageable Sisyphean task!

In reality, the only way to socialism is through the development of the class struggle. "The revolution that will create the political basis for socialism is being prepared in countless struggles in which the working class worldwide is defending its interests and rights," the WSWS wrote in its New Year's Perspective in January. "The international working class is the most powerful and massive social force on the planet, the source of all value in capitalist society. ... The international working class is united objectively in the process of global production, which is dominated by transnational corporations and distribution networks that exploit workers throughout the world in the interests of profit."

Unleashing this powerful revolutionary force is the aim of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the International Committee of the Fourth International. With the founding of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the ICFI has taken an important step towards uniting the working class across national and sectoral borders. In action committees, workers can organise themselves democratically, assert their demands and link their struggles with those of their colleagues around the world.

The IWA-RFC serves as a framework for the exchange of information, the planning of collective actions and a joint offensive against exploitation, social cuts and war. It opposes all forms of national chauvinism and migrant-baiting used by the ruling class to pit workers against each other.

Its construction requires a systematic political struggle against the nationalist trade union leaders, who work closely with the corporations, and against all parties, including the Left Party, that defend capitalism.

It is no coincidence that Nymoen's book is being promoted by the Left

Party's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. His criticism of militarism and various aspects of capitalist society, while at the same time rejecting class struggle, is compatible with a party that spouts left-wing platitudes, but in an emergency votes for war loans of €1 trillion in the Bundesrat (upper house of parliament), helps Christian Democrat leader Friedrich Merz to a quick election as chancellor in the Bundestag (lower house of parliament), and organises social cuts and deportations in state governments.

The Left Party uses the same methods as Nymoen. In party conference resolutions, it presents itself as a central force “in the protest against rearmament, social cuts, climate destruction and the shift to the right” and condemns war in general. But when things get serious, it chickens out and backs the government. At its most recent party conference, it defended Israel's “right to self-defence”—synonymous with mass murder, obliteration and expulsion.



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