

The closure of the Russian House in Berlin: A blow to culture in the service of war

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“?? ?????—we’re closed.” It is Tuesday, September 8. Every few minutes, a security guard turns away visitors hoping to look around the Russian House of Science and Culture on Berlin’s Friedrichstrasse. Only the café serving Russian specialties is still open. Otherwise, the vast cultural institution in the heart of Berlin stands dark and empty.

It is a heavy blow to culture. The Russian House, founded in 1984 in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, former East Germany) as the “House of Soviet Science and Culture,” and for decades a central hub of German-Russian cultural life, now faces closure. Even the institution’s official website has since been taken offline.

On September 1, the German government terminated the 2011 German-Russian cultural agreement, thereby ending the treaty governing the operation of the Russian House as of June 2027. As a pretext, it cited the drone found at Leipzig Airport, for which it blames Russia without offering verifiable evidence. The accusation serves to further intensify the propaganda campaign aimed at rallying the population behind the war policy against Russia.

The Russian Consulate General in Bonn must also close by September 18. In 2023, the German government had already forced the closure of the four Russian consulates in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Leipzig and Munich. With all five consulates and the Russian House now closed, only a single official diplomatic link to Moscow remains: the embassy in Berlin.

Around 50 staff at the Russian House have been made redundant, including numerous teachers. Leading employees of Russian nationality, among them the acting director, have already left the country. The German authorities instructed them to pack up within a few days and leave with their families. Pavel Izvolsky, the Russian House’s director since 2017, had already resigned and departed in May after German authorities declined to renew his diplomatic accreditation.

The terminated agreement concerns the building, which belongs to the Russian Federation. The land itself, however, is owned by the Federal Republic of Germany, which also pays the property tax. A 99-year property agreement protects the building from enforcement measures for the time being.

Moscow responded by closing the German Consulate General in St Petersburg as well as all three Goethe Institutes—Germany’s official cultural institutes—in Moscow, St Petersburg and Novosibirsk, effective September 13 this year. It marks the end of more than 30 years of German cultural and educational work in Russia.

The closure of the last major bilateral cultural institutions on both sides marks a historic rupture and a dangerous step in the escalation of the war in Ukraine. Berlin is provoking an ever more aggressive drive toward hot war with Russia and is severing all the diplomatic and cultural channels and connections built up since the Second World War.

The Russian House in Berlin-Mitte was one of the largest and most renowned Russian cultural institutions abroad. The massive building, built in the early 1980s to designs by GDR architect Karl-Ernst Swora, covers around 29,000 square metres across seven floors. An oversized bust of

Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, stands right in the entrance foyer. A statue of Lenin once stood there, but it was removed after the end of the GDR.

A small exhibition in the foyer, now dismantled, was devoted to the House’s 40-year history. The cultural centre had, its introduction stated, “developed into a bridge between the peoples of both countries” and played an important role as a “place of dialogue and understanding.”

Wandering through the now-empty Soviet-era building with its white frescoed walls, one reads the names “Chekhov Hall,” “Kandinsky Hall,” “Tolstoy Hall”—the names of the event rooms provide a reminder of the cultural programme that has now come to an abrupt end.

Before the war in Ukraine, up to 400 events were held here each year. On the ground floor were a cinema, an art workshop and a reading lounge with a book exchange. Language courses, concerts, films, theatre performances, a ballet school, workshops for children, art exhibitions, a library, a café and other offerings drew 200,000 visitors a year, according to the institution. A piano recital by Russian pianist Nikolai Kuznetsov met with an enthusiastic response as recently as a few months ago.

The House also let out 64 flats and ran a travel agency. The Russian bookshop Mnogoknig, which sells many literary classics, children’s books and games, remains open, though staff say its fate is uncertain. In the now-darkened corridors of the foyer, several exhibition panels on the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 still hang, alongside a number of Soviet artworks.

The closure of the House is a major loss not only for the German public but equally for the Russian-speaking community. According to estimates from before 2022, 2.5 million people in Germany speak Russian predominantly or in part, around 250,000 of them in Berlin. With the influx of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in recent years, these figures are likely to have risen further. According to the House’s own figures, around 30 percent of participants in its children’s courses in 2024 were of Ukrainian origin.

For the working class in Russia and Germany, forced to fight one another in two world wars, access to each other’s culture and language was of enormous importance. After years in which the German population had been indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda against the “subhuman Slavs” and “Jewish Bolshevism,” a cultural exchange developed among students, schoolchildren, scholars and workers, who built close personal, intellectual and cultural ties with one another.

Particularly in the GDR, but also in the then West Germany, millions of people developed a passion for Pushkin and Chekhov, for Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich, for the Russian language and art—and for the October Revolution of 1917 and Soviet and post-Soviet history.

Even though the Stalinist bureaucracy and the Social Democrats (SPD), with their capitalist “Ostpolitik,” exploited this cultural and educational exchange for their own political interests, German-Soviet—and later German-Russian—friendship, in whose name the Russian House was also founded, was never simply an empty phrase for the working class. It

rested on a connection between the two cultures that had grown over decades and was sustained by a widespread anti-war sentiment: never again should the crimes committed in the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union be repeated, and never again should the peoples of the two countries be incited against one another as enemies.

The destruction of these cultural ties shows in brutal fashion just how far preparations for a direct war have advanced. To stoke the hostile image of the “evil Russian,” places associated with Russian literature and art must disappear from German public life, and the Russian language must be defamed as a disreputable “language of the enemy.” This logic of war policy is increasingly gripping culture and science as well.

The legal basis for the activities of the Goethe Institutes and the Russian House was formed by two cultural agreements concluded after German reunification: one from 1993 and a second from 2011, signed by then-German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle of the Liberal Democrats (FDP) and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

Three years later, at the 2014 Munich Security Conference, the German government announced a return to an aggressive German great-power policy. The accompanying shift of course toward Russia was first put into practice in February 2014. At the same time, an offensive of historical revisionism began, aimed at minimising the crimes of German imperialism in the First and Second World Wars.

In 2022, the German government then used Putin's reactionary invasion of Ukraine to massively escalate military rearmament and unleash an unprecedented campaign against Russian art and science. The invasion was a crime of the Russian oligarchy, but it was deliberately provoked by decades of NATO's eastward expansion and the military encirclement of Russia.

The sanctions against Russia had far-reaching consequences in the cultural sphere. Cooperation between universities, museums and cultural institutions in both countries ground to a halt. The state agency Rossotrudnichestvo, which operates the Russian House, was also placed on the European Union's sanctions list—over alleged “hybrid influence operations.”

Since the war began, several of the more than 80 Russian Houses worldwide have had to close, including in Slovenia, Romania, Croatia, Denmark, Azerbaijan and Moldova. Twelve houses in Europe remain open, including in Paris, Rome and Budapest. Rossotrudnichestvo has announced it will now open new locations in several African countries, as well as in Thailand and Armenia.

Since 2022, a media and political campaign has been under way against the Russian House in Berlin, which is portrayed as a Kremlin propaganda centre. At the forefront are the establishment parties—the Social Democrats (SPD), Christian Democrats (CDU) and Greens—and the Greens' house organ, the daily newspaper *taz*, along with the Berlin-based association Vitsche e.V., which was founded by Ukrainian nationalists.

From late 2022 onward, this association organised protests outside the House and held a referendum in which participants were asked to vote on “whether the Russian House, as an institution, should lose its right to exist and hand over its premises to the Ukrainian community.” On May 9, 2024, the anniversary of the liberation of Germany from fascism, Vitsche called for the Russian House to be converted into a “Decolonial House.” And in May of this year, the association played a major role in the anti-Soviet campaign surrounding the anniversary of the end of the war. It has even designed its own website devoted exclusively to “exposing” the Russian House.

Legal attempts to bring down the House have been unsuccessful. In June 2025, Munich's Administrative Court ruled that owing to European Union sanctions against Rossotrudnichestvo, it may only carry out “preservation of substance” activities. However, the ruling is not yet legally binding. As early as 2023, Green Party politician Volker Beck filed a criminal

complaint against the House over “Russian propaganda,” but the criminal investigation was dropped because the House's leadership held diplomatic status.

In recent months, the campaign has been deliberately escalated and turned into an issue in the Berlin state election campaign. In December last year, leading foreign policy politicians called for the House to be closed. It was a “propaganda den” for Putin's information war (Robin Wagener, Greens) and a “political instrument of Russia” (Roderich Kiesewetter, CDU).

Following the discovery of the drone in Leipzig in early August, candidates from the CDU, Greens and SPD called ever more loudly for the House's closure, claiming it supported a “hybrid war” against Germany. They seized on the unsubstantiated claim by the French Interior Ministry that the cultural institution was being used as “cover” by the Russian intelligence services.

These accusations are wholly dishonest. Neither the nonprofit investigative journalism newsroom *Correctiv* nor broadcaster rbb provided any hard evidence in their reports of supposed infiltration by intelligence operatives. They cited as suspicious indicators, for example, Russian diplomats or former employees of broadcaster RT registered at the House, an allegedly high energy consumption, and conspicuous phone and GPS signals—all of which, on closer inspection, turned out to be insignificant.

Just as the German government harnesses the Goethe Institutes for its cultural-political agenda, the Kremlin, too, has used the Russian House as a showcase for its nationalist politics. That is undoubtedly the case, but it changes nothing about the immense cultural work carried out here.

Beneath the rbb report, several viewers voiced criticism of the closure. Annette from Berlin wrote: “I am absolutely no defender of Putin, but the Russian House [...] was always, for me, a place of art and culture, a platform for exchange, presentations and discussions, a free space for cultural figures from everywhere.” She fears that a cultural space is being abolished here for economic reasons, warning: “This is underhand, downright AfD-style agitation, and it is frightening. ‘The first casualty of war is always the truth.’”

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the right-wing, anti-migrant Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), have sought to harness opposition to the closure—and to the war in Ukraine as a whole—for their nationalist politics. At a BSW protest outside the House, some 600 people gathered, according to police; only around 100 attended Vitsche's counter-rally, at which Bettina Jarasch, the Green Party's parliamentary group leader in the House of Representatives, spoke.

The Left Party has published no official statement opposing the closure. Maren Kaminski, the Left Party's spokesperson for foreign cultural policy, merely complained to broadcaster Deutschlandfunk that the move endangered the Goethe Institutes and further exchange with people in Russia. Maximilian Schirmer, the Left Party's Berlin state chairman, told the *Berliner Zeitung* last year that the House was a “Russian propaganda institution” and suggested it could be examined whether the Russian House's operations might be banned or the building confiscated. This is no surprise, since the Left Party supports military rearmament, which it has also endorsed in the Bundesrat (upper house of parliament).

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is the only party standing in the Berlin state election with a socialist programme opposed to war propaganda and rearmament. Protecting cultural institutions such as the Russian House requires a political struggle by the working class against the war policy. We state in our election programme:

War and militarism cannot be combated through pacifist appeals to the warmongers but only by stripping them of their power. The

policy of war is not simply the result of wrong decisions by individual politicians. It stems from the deep crisis of capitalism, which, as in the 20th century, is once again leading to war and barbarism.

Workers have nothing to gain from war but everything to lose. We therefore oppose growing nationalism and war with the international unity of the working class.



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