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Zelensky appeals to Germany's militaristic traditions

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the German Bundestag (parliament) via video link on Thursday. His speech was an appeal to the worst traditions of German history.



Members of the German parliament Bundestag give Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky a standing ovation after he speaks in a virtual address to the parliament at the Reichstag Building in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, March 17, 2022. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

80 years after the German war of extermination against the Soviet Union, which claimed the lives of 27 million of its inhabitants, he accused Germany of not acting aggressively

enough against Russia, where memories of the terror of Hitler's Wehrmacht (army) are still extremely vivid.

By sticking to the Nord Stream 2 Baltic Sea pipeline for so long, refusing preventive sanctions against Russia and refusing to admit Ukraine to NATO, Germany had helped to isolate his country and hand it over to Russia, Zelensky accused the assembled parliamentarians, whom he said lacked "strength" and "leadership."

He invoked Cold War anti-communism, accusing his audience of hiding behind a wall—a "wall in the middle of Europe, between freedom and unfreedom". He quoted US President Ronald Reagan, who had shouted in front of the Berlin Wall, "Tear down this wall!" He called on Chancellor Olaf Scholz, "Destroy this wall. Give Germany the leadership it deserves."

Zelensky demanded the imposition of a full trade embargo on Russia and more direct NATO involvement in the war effort—even if that means risking a third world war.

The day before, he had already demanded the establishment of a no-fly zone over Ukraine in a video address to the US Congress. He repeated this demand in the Bundestag. Germany must help make the skies over Ukraine safe and prevent Russian air attacks, he said.

Military experts agree that the establishment of a no-fly zone would be tantamount to NATO officially entering the war. Former Bundeswehr Inspector General and Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Harald Kujat called the demand irresponsible.

"Apart from the fact that there would be no UN mandate for no-fly zones, a no-fly zone would be tantamount to a declaration of war on Russia," he said. "In order for NATO fighter jets not to be shot down, Russia's air defence systems would first have to be taken out. Even if this were to succeed, air battles would follow. NATO and Russia would be at war with each other and on the brink of nuclear war."

Nevertheless, the demand is gaining support in the US and Europe.

In the Bundestag, Zelensky did not even shy away from invoking the victims of Nazi terror to justify it. "I address you on behalf of the elderly Ukrainians, the many who

survived the Second World War, who managed to save themselves during the occupation 80 years ago. Of those who survived Babi Yar,” he said.

On 29 and 30 September 1941 in the gorge of Babi Yar, the Wehrmacht had shot 34,000 Jews from Kiev—men, women, and children—within 36 hours. The victims had to lie on their stomachs on the corpses of those already murdered before they were killed themselves. The mass murder was part of a strategy to create “Lebensraum” (‘living space’) for German settlers in the East. It was the prelude to the Nazis’ systematic murder of millions of Jews, communists, and Red Army soldiers.

If Zelensky had recalled these crimes against humanity to ask the German government to work for an immediate ceasefire, this would have been understandable. Instead, he is asking them to pour oil on the fire and show “leadership”.

The Bundestag thanked him with a standing ovation. From the Left Party to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), in which numerous neo-Nazis can be found, all the parliamentary deputies rose to their feet. Even long-time AfD leader Alexander Gauland, who calls Hitler and the Nazis just so much “bird shit” in a thousand years of glorious German history, applauded.

For Germany’s ruling elites, the Ukraine war serves as a welcome occasion to realise the rearmament and great power plans they have been long preparing. In February 2014, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then Foreign Minister and now German President, was directly involved in the right-wing coup that sowed the seeds for the current war. He met in Kiev with Oleh Tyahnybok, leader of the far-right Svoboda party, among others. In the same month, the German government announced the “end of military restraint” and its intention to once again play a role in world politics commensurate with Germany’s economic weight.

This return to militarism was accompanied by a revision of German history. *Der Spiegel* published the article “Culpability Question Divides Historians Today”. In it, historian Jörg Baberowski from Humboldt University attested that Hitler had “not been cruel”. And defended the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte, who had described Nazism as an understandable reaction to Bolshevism.

“The revival of German militarism requires a new interpretation of history that trivialises the crimes of the Nazi period,” the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) and its youth organisation IYSSE wrote at the time. Because they criticised these and similar statements by Baberowski and opposed the return of German militarism and fascism, they were fiercely attacked by the university administration, the media and all parties and put on the list of “anti-constitutional” organisations by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

If Zelensky is now also calling on Germany to return to its militaristic traditions and play a “leading role”, this is not a misunderstanding. Ukrainian nationalists like Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with Hitler’s Wehrmacht in World War II and participated in its mass murders, are highly regarded in Ukraine. They are publicly honoured with monuments and commemorations.

Ukrainian Ambassador Andriy Melnyk, who sat in the Bundestag public gallery during Zelensky’s speech, had just the day before publicly defended the Azov Battalion, which is composed of right-wing extremists and wears Nazi symbols on its uniform. “Please stop demonising the Azov Battalion and playing into the hands of propaganda—now also in the middle of the RUS war of extermination,” he wrote on Twitter. “These brave fighters are defending their homeland, especially the besieged city of Mariupol. Leave them alone.”

Melnyk’s protest was directed against an article in *Die Zeit* that had described the far-right troops as “militarily drilled neo-Nazis with combat experience, with bazookas and assault rifles” who were “unlikely to simply submit to a democratically elected president again” once the conflict was over.

The Kiev government’s sponsorship of fascist groups does not justify Russia’s reactionary military attack. But it does expose the lie that the war is about democracy and freedom, and shows that the main responsibility for the war and the suffering of the Ukrainian people lies with the NATO powers.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, these powers have pursued the goal of eliminating Russia as a geostrategic rival and gaining access to its vast raw materials and land. To defend their position, they waged wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria in violation of international law and expanded NATO ever further eastwards.

In Ukraine, which is economically and culturally closely linked to Russia, they deliberately promoted right-wing nationalists and neo-Nazis. Since the right-wing coup of 2014, which they supported and promoted, they have systematically rearmed the country, pumped in billions worth of weapons, and trained its army.

The current conflict is a proxy war between Russia and NATO, being fought on the backs of the Ukrainian population and financed by NATO. In the newly adopted US budget, 14 billion dollars have been earmarked for Ukraine, twice as much as its own military budget. Since the beginning of the war, \$550 million of this has now been spent, and President Biden has already released another \$800 million. The other NATO members are also flooding the country with military aid and weapons.

For the German government, the war serves as a welcome opportunity to launch the biggest arms drive since Hitler. The danger that the war will spiral out of control and lead to a third world war is growing from day to day. It can only be stopped by a working-class offensive that unites the workers of all countries in the struggle against capitalism.

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