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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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14.04.2022

The reactionary hate campaign in Germany against Russia

Some 80 years after almost 30 million people—Jews, communists, partisans, soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians—fell victim to the bestial crimes of Hitler’s Wehrmacht (army) in the Soviet Union, hatred of Russians is being stirred up again in Germany.

The war in Ukraine is serving as a pretext to demonise all Russians and everything Russian. A leading role in this is being played by the Ukrainian ambassador in Berlin, Andriy Melnyk, who does not let a day pass without spreading his racist filth.



Andriy Melnyk, Ukrainian ambassador in Berlin (Photo: Bundestag fraction Bündnis 90/Die Grünen / CC BY-SA 2.0)

Melnyk boycotted a benefit concert for Ukraine organised by the German president because exiled Russian pianist Yevgeny Kissin was playing there. He insulted the city of Osnabrück for awarding its music prize to the young Russian violinist Dmitry Smirnov, who—“in order not to burn bridges”—played Ukrainian compositions.

In a long interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Melnyk declared that all Russians were enemies. It could “not now be a question of distinguishing between bad Russians and good Russians,” he expounded. “I say it very clearly, Russia is an enemy state for us. And all Russians are enemies for Ukraine right now.”

Melnyk said he had never had Russian friends, “because what we are experiencing today was planned for many decades.” For him, it was clear that Russia, “probably even after the war, will remain an enemy state.” “Ukraine was, is and will probably remain an enemy of Russian society for a long time.”

Melnyk is not an isolated case. He moves from editorial office to editorial office and event to event so that he can spit out his nationalist venom.

Increasingly, Russian citizens are being collectively punished for the war—even when they speak out against it. In an official letter, the director of Munich University Hospital has announced, “Due to the serious human rights violations by the deranged Putin, we fundamentally refuse to treat Russian patients.”

The Soviet Memorial in Berlin-Treptow, commemorating the 80,000 Soviet soldiers who fell in the battle to liberate Berlin at the end of World War II, has been daubed with swastikas and slogans such as “Death to all Russians.” The police, who constantly guard the monument, claim to have seen nothing. For the media, the incident was barely worth a mention.

Instead, they spread reports about Russian atrocities around the clock, the truth of which cannot be verified, while they blank out and ignore the crimes on the Ukrainian side. Media like RT and Sputnik, which reflect the views of the Russian side, are banned in Germany so that no one can form their own opinion.

The hate campaign against Russia is reactionary in every respect. It is not so much directed against the brutal attack on Ukraine as at driving a wedge between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, thus strengthening the warmongers on both sides.

In Germany, it serves revanchist goals. After decades of having to practice humility and distance itself from the crimes of the Nazis, the ruling class can now give free rein to its outlook and retaliate. What was previously only said behind closed doors and in right-wing extremist circles can now again be said openly.

The hate campaign marks a fundamental reorientation of German foreign policy. Instead of trade, expansion to the East, the traditional thrust of German imperialism, is once again being pushed forward with tanks.

Gabor Steingart, who as former editor-in-chief of finance daily Handelsblatt has close ties to Berlin's political circles, confirms this in his blog *The Pioneer*. He writes:

Since the atrocities of Bucha, accounts have been settled with what was a basic constant of German foreign policy since 1945. The consensus that after the war of aggression by the German Wehrmacht, with at least 27 million Russians killed, a guilty humility should prevail in German-Russian relations, seems to have come to an end. The political concept of change through rapprochement, also conceived as a new beginning following a murderous relationship, is now filed away by many in the folder of failed ideas.

Russophobia in the First and Second World Wars

To justify the confrontational course against Russia, the old means of anti-Russian propaganda are being revived. Russophobia played an important role in both World War I and World War II in whipping up public opinion and intimidating wartime opponents.

Two weeks after the start of the First World War, German troops committed terrible crimes in neutral Belgium. They destroyed the city of Leuven, killed hundreds of civilians, and destroyed the university library with its large and irreplaceable collection of books and manuscripts.

Following this, 93 renowned scientists, artists and literary figures published an "Appeal to the cultural world" denying the German crimes and referring instead to "Russian hordes":

It is not true that our warfare does not respect international laws. It knows no undisciplined cruelty. But in the east, the earth is saturated with the blood of women and children mercilessly butchered by the wild Russian troops, and in the west, dum-dum bullets mutilate the breasts of our soldiers. Those who have allied themselves with Russians and Serbians and present such a shameful scene to the world as inciting Mongolians and Negroes against the white race have no right whatever to call themselves upholders of civilization.

The later Prussian Prime Minister Otto Braun justified the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) support for the war by saying it was a fight against "Russian unculture, for the protection of German cultural assets, for the protection of German women and children." Or should we stand by, he asked, while the "liquor-filled Russian Cossack hordes flatten German fields, martyr German women and children, trample German culture?"

While representatives of the "cultural world" and Social Democrats railed against the "Russian hordes," Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg formulated the real German war aims in his "September Programme," which show striking parallels to those of today.

Only a Germany strengthened by "Mitteleuropa" ("Central Europe") would be able to assert itself as an equal world power among the other great powers, it said. To achieve this, Russia had to be pushed back as far as possible from Germany's eastern border and its rule over the non-Russian peoples had to be broken. Among these "non-Russian peoples," the programme counted first and foremost Ukraine—along with Finland, Poland and Georgia.

Bethmann Hollweg's "September Programme" formed the basis for the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty three-and-a-half years later, which Germany imposed on Russia, where the working class had taken power in the October 1917 revolution. Ukraine became formally "independent" under the supervision of German troops. First the Ukrainian nationalist Symon Petliura and then the long-time tsarist officer Pavlo Skoropadskyi were installed as heads of government. Both were responsible for anti-Semitic pogroms and distinguished themselves with particular cruelty in the Russian civil war.

After the withdrawal of the German troops, the communists also seized power in Kiev at the end of 1919. In 1922, after their final victory in the civil war, they founded the Soviet Union.

During this period, hundreds of thousands of opponents of the revolution, their hands often dripping with the blood of the crimes they committed, emigrated to the West, where they were welcomed with open arms and unleashed hysterical anti-communist propaganda. They coloured the old motifs of Russophobia red and turned them against the Bolsheviks. The Western media eagerly seized on the tales of atrocity of the white Russian émigrés and presented them as facts.

Historian Robert Gerwarth gives an account of this in his book *Die Besiegten. Das blutige Erbe des Ersten Weltkriegs* (The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923):

They were stories of a social order turned completely upside down, of an inescapable vicious circle of atrocities and retribution, and of the total moral collapse of a formerly radiant European superpower. ... The western media literally competed in portraying the Bolshevik leadership and its supporters in the most chilling way possible, as lepers who would stop at nothing.

Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) movement thrived in this milieu. Pavlo Skoropadskyi, who found asylum in Munich, was a co-founder of the Nazi party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*. His political ideas flowed into Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, in which the conquest of Ukraine played a central role. Hitler described Russians as sub-humans who had to be enslaved and decimated in order to create *Lebensraum* (living space) for Germany. Hitler put this plan into practice in 1941 with the war of extermination against the Soviet Union.

The crimes committed by the Wehrmacht and the German Einsatzgruppen are historically unprecedented. Six million Jews were industrially murdered in the Holocaust, partisans and communists were systematically killed by the hundreds of thousands, the city of Leningrad, with its millions of inhabitants, was starved, prisoners of war handed over to death by starvation and disease, and entire regions devastated.

***Russlandpolitik* after the Second World War**

After the defeat in the war, revanchist forces continued to set the tone in West German politics, dreaming of a reconquest of the Eastern territories and a reckoning with the Soviet Union. In practice, however, their hands were tied because neither the US nor France and Britain wanted to allow Germany to become the dominant great power in Europe again.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Germany's policy towards the East began to take a new direction. Instead of rigid confrontation, "change through rapprochement" was the order of the day. As early as 1969, the Hallstein Doctrine, which prohibited diplomatic relations with East Germany's allies, was dropped. In 1970, Chancellor Willy Brandt (SPD) made his famous genuflection to the victims of the ghetto in Warsaw. In the same year, his government signed nonaggression treaties with the Soviet Union and Poland. The "Basic Treaty" with the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) followed in 1972.

The extensive Russian gas, oil and coal deliveries, which made Germany independent of the crisis regions of the Middle East—and thus of pressure from the US—also go back to this time. Germany supplied pipes for the pipelines and thus simultaneously alleviated the crisis in the steel industry; Russia paid with gas and oil.

Germany's goals of "change through trade" achieved their aim. The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe became increasingly dependent on the world economy and Western credit. The bankruptcy of the Stalinist policy of "building socialism in one country" became obvious. As predicted by Leon Trotsky, the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy reacted to growing economic problems and internal tensions by liquidating the property relations created by the October Revolution, introducing capitalism, and finally dissolving the Soviet Union in 1991.

Gorbachev, Yeltsin, as well as Putin indulged in the idea that the major imperialist powers would welcome them with open arms and give them a place at their table. But this was an illusion. Imperialism means the "struggle for markets and the robbery of foreign lands," as Lenin pointed out at the beginning of the First World War. This had not changed 80 years later.

The US interpreted the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a “unipolar moment” that would allow it to cement Washington’s position as the “undisputed superpower.” Germany saw reunification as an opportunity to become the dominant power in Europe once again.

Since then, NATO has moved ever closer to Russia’s borders, contrary to the agreements made in 1991. The US and its allies have waged numerous neo-colonial wars, destroying entire societies—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere.

The war crimes they have committed in the process go far beyond anything that has happened so far in Ukraine. In Iraq alone, at least 1 million people have been killed and millions more forced to flee. Tens of thousands have drowned in the Mediterranean. Julian Assange, who exposed some of these crimes, sits incommunicado in a British maximum-security prison.

In 2018, the US officially elevated “great power competition” to the central goal of its National Defence Strategy, i.e., conflict with Russia and China rather than the fight against terrorism.

The Ukraine War and German militarism

The war in Ukraine is related to this, with NATO waging a proxy war against Russia. It has trained the Ukrainian army and armed it to the teeth. By refusing to give Russia any security guarantees, it has deliberately provoked the war. NATO’s goals are not freedom and democracy for Ukraine, which it is merely using for its own ends, but regime change in Moscow, the splitting up of Russia and unrestricted access to its abundant raw materials. To achieve these goals, it accepts the risk of a nuclear confrontation that would reduce all of Europe and large parts of the world to rubble.

Vladimir Putin’s decision to attack Ukraine militarily is a reactionary response to this threat. Putin’s regime, representing the interests of the Russian oligarchs, is incapable of appealing to the mass of the Russian and Ukrainian population and instead responds with a mixture of national chauvinism and military adventurism.

The war is reactionary in every respect. It is directed not only against the people of Ukraine, but also against the Russian working class, which is paying a high price for it. It can only be stopped by the means of class struggle—by a joint offensive of the Russian,

Ukrainian, German, American and international working class against their capitalist governments and against NATO, which is doing everything it can to intensify the war and prolong it until Russia's military defeat.

Germany is playing a leading role in this. No sooner had the war begun than the German government increased its military budget threefold in one fell swoop to €150 billion. It is supplying Ukraine with heavy weapons. For the first time since 1944, German tanks are in Ukraine again, firing at Russian soldiers. Revenge for the defeat in the Second World War is in full swing.

This revenge has been long prepared. In 2014, the German government supported the right-wing coup in Kiev that laid the seeds for today's war. Shortly before that, it had announced Germany's return to great power politics and militarism. Germany was "too big to comment on world politics only from the side-lines," then foreign minister and now Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier declared at the Munich Security Conference. Steinmeier travelled personally to Kiev when fascist militias overthrew the elected president Viktor Yanukovich.

Even then, the return to German militarism went hand in hand with the rehabilitation of the Nazis and the war against the Soviet Union. Shortly before the coup in Kiev, *Der Spiegel* published the article "Culpability Question Divides Historians Today." In it, Ernst Nolte, who had already justified National Socialism as an understandable response to Bolshevism in the *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute) of the 1980s, blamed the Poles, the British and, indirectly, the Jews for the Second World War. Jörg Baberowski, professor of history at Berlin's Humboldt University, claimed that Hitler had "not been cruel" and that Nolte had been right in the historians' dispute. Political scientist Herfried Münkler downplayed German responsibility for the First World War.

The article also rehashed the invented atrocity stories that Russian émigrés had spread in the 1920s. Among them was the claim that the Bolsheviks had tortured their opponents by having them eaten alive by hungry rats.

In academic circles and in the media, there was no opposition to this revision of history. Only the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its youth organisation the International Youth and Students for Social Equality protested and met

with a strong response among students and workers. This became even greater when the media unleashed a furious smear campaign against the IYSSE. Mehring Verlag has documented this in the volume “ Scholarship or War Propaganda? ”

Then, as early as 2017, Germany stationed tanks in Lithuania, where Hitler’s henchmen and their local collaborators had once committed the worst war crimes. As in Ukraine, the German government is now working there with forces that revere former Nazi collaborators as “heroes.” For decades, Baltic members of SS units who had committed the worst war crimes received special pensions as German “victims,” while concentration camp survivors and forced labourers went empty-handed or were compensated only shortly before their death.

The only way to fight German and NATO militarism and prevent a third world war is to build a socialist movement of the international working class against war and its cause, capitalism. Become a member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei today and take part in this struggle.

World Socialist 13.04.2022