

# Germany: Why Die Linke shouldn't abandon a principled anti-war stance

We Still Need Anti-Imperialism

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**Putin's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine is a catastrophe. But it's no surprise that the German government and security policy establishment is using it to push through its long-held demands for rearmament.**

**Some leftists have adopted the appeal of Hedwig Richter, a historian at the Bundeswehr University Munich, to "harmonize the wish for freedom and the will for defence". Die Linke should reject this along with the notion that it needs to "change with the times" by jettisoning its principled pro-peace positions. A condemnation of Russia's war of aggression is just as needed as a critique of NATO and German military build-up.**

## **Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Is an Act of Imperialist Aggression**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine joins a series of bloody military interventions under Putin's leadership. Russia under Putin quashed the Chechen independence movement, went to war against Georgia, annexed Crimea, bombed Syria to save the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, and recently intervened against mass protests in Kazakhstan.

Putin has stated explicitly that he is invading Ukraine to force regime change, a goal he has justified with chauvinist arguments. The Russian government's policy of expansion, its military deployments to the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East are imperialist in nature. They are the expression of Russian capitalism's ambitions to expand, and they stand in the tradition of the oppression of non-Russian peoples by the Tsarist empire and Stalinism.

## **The People Pay the Cost**

The Ukrainian people are the first victims of the war. They are being killed, injured, and traumatized. Families are being torn apart, cities devastated. The images from Ukraine have moved people around the world — and rightfully so — to oppose the war and express solidarity with its victims.

Moreover, the Russian working class is also paying for the war. Russian soldiers are dying, and the majority of the Russian people — not oligarchs and the rich — are now feeling the painful effects of economic sanctions in their daily lives.

People are also feeling the effects of war elsewhere in Europe. The conflict is already threatening to [spill over into the Western Balkans](#). The dynamic of escalation that would unfold were a NATO member state to become involved in the war would affect the general population.

## **You Can't Apply "Imperialism" Selectively**

Historians are lamenting the “return of imperialism”. At the moment, imperialism appears above all in the guise of Putin’s policies. But just as it was never correct to exclusively criticize the United States or NATO as imperialist, so too is it now false to portray Russia as the sole imperial power.

Imperialism is a system where the most economically developed and powerful capitalist states compete with each other over how the world is to be divided. While this competition is primarily economic in nature, it threatens to assume political and military forms in periods of stagnation and crisis.

NATO’s purpose is to provide military support to the most industrialized Western countries’ ambitions to expand. It serves neither to maintain peace nor to preserve the independence of smaller, economically weaker nations. Since World War II, NATO’s leading military powers — the US, the UK, and France — have conducted over 80 wars and military operations in all parts of the globe. Since 1999 alone, NATO or its individual member states have pursued 13 wars and military operations, including against Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Yugoslavia/Serbia, Chad, Somalia, and Mali. None of these was defensive.

The driving force behind wars is competition between capitalist nation states. Economic competition between national monopolies and corporations turns into military competition between nation-states.

### **The Backdrop: Breakdown and Resurgence of the Russian Empire**

In 1989, the Soviet army was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. Russian imperialism had been dealt a severe blow. At the end of the 1980s, Gorbachev announced that the Russian army would no longer intervene against uprisings in Eastern Europe, as it had done in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Around the same time, the Soviet Union became the site of major uprisings itself. Miners in Siberia and Ukraine playing a central role in these, as the labour movement melded together with movements for national independence. In total, 14 states split off from the Soviet Union. The geographic territory under Moscow’s immediate rule ultimately shrunk by a quarter.

The breakdown of Russian influence continued into the 1990s, threatening to seize other parts of the country. In the middle of that decade, the Russian army was defeated in Chechnya and forced to withdraw. Other attempts to reverse the breakdown, such as through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), were unsuccessful.

Yet the tide turned under Putin. In the Second Chechen War from 1999 to 2009, the Russian Army managed to regain control over Chechnya. Russian war strategy in Chechnya included the obliteration of cities, the mass murder of young men, rape, and plunder. In 2008, the Russian army also invaded Georgia for the alleged purpose of protecting Russian citizens abroad, the same pretext for its invasion of Ukraine.

These events made it impossible to deny or downplay Russian imperialism. The Russian government’s policy of expansion, which has entailed military deployments in the Caucasus and the Middle East, were and are imperialist in nature, for they serve the interests and needs of Russian oligarchs.

For Russian capitalism, Ukraine plays an important economic and geopolitical role. Ukraine’s industrial production was closely linked with the Russian market until 2013, and the country is an important recipient of and transit destination for Russian raw materials. Additionally, Ukraine has an exceptional geopolitical importance.

## **EU, NATO, and Inter-Imperial Competition**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the countries of Eastern Europe were quite rapidly integrated into the West. This initially happened through trade and association agreements, and later through admission to the European Union. The majority of Eastern Europeans welcomed this development, hoping it would come with an improvement to their living conditions.

The eastward expansion efforts of the US and NATO preceded EU expansion, gradually redrawing the spheres of power and influence in Southern and Eastern Europe. The West waged an economic war against the former Soviet Union, which grew increasingly dependent on participation in the international division of labour.

NATO was founded by the US and its Western allies to militarily secure the regions of influence they had won in World War II. Later, this fixed “front” enabled the US to pursue wars without having to fear diversionary attacks in Europe. Although NATO’s existence was justified with the threat of the Eastern Bloc, it remained after the latter collapsed, exploiting Russia’s weaknesses to push eastward into its rival’s former sphere of influence.

Agreements such as the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act were supposedly intended to foster mutual trust for the purpose of creating a “a common space of security and stability”. Concretely, this meant Russian recognition of the redrawn spheres of influence in Eastern Europe in exchange for the promise that NATO would pursue no further unilateral measures in conflict with Russia’s geostrategic interests. This pledge also included an agreement that neither significant numbers of troops from NATO member-states nor nuclear weapons would be stationed in the alliance’s new Eastern European countries. However, in the capitalist world order, competition between states can only be contained for so long by treaties and declarations of intent.

In 2004, as Moscow was forced to accept the accession of three Baltic states to NATO, Ukraine became the site of open conflicts over economic and geopolitical interests. In addition to Ukraine’s enormous economic potential, it carries strategic importance given its location on the northern coast of the Black Sea.

In 2013, the EU offered the Ukrainian government an association agreement that entailed the severance of economic ties to Russia. This inevitably led to a split among Ukrainian oligarchs, as the industrial enterprises in eastern Ukraine (iron ore, coal, steel, gas) are traditionally closely connected to Russia. The mass protests on Kyiv’s Maidan Square were primarily motivated by the social upheaval stemming from the rule of various oligarchs and the hope that a closer relationship with the EU would improve living conditions in Ukraine. The question of EU association ultimately became the dominant issue and led to civil war.

Following its decades-long eastward push, the West used its economic strength to push Russian capital out of eastern Ukraine as well. Moscow responded militarily, annexing the Crimean peninsula in March 2014. At that time, it also began supporting the separatist movements in eastern Ukraine.

### **A New Phase of Escalation**

The economic competition between East and West did not first become a military competition on 24 February 2022. Rather, it had already led to a new arms race, with both sides performing shows of strength and provoking each other through levels of military activity not seen since the 1980s.

Both Russia and NATO did much to drive this process forward. The Russian government modernized its weapons system, developed combat drones, and increased arms exports, while NATO built up a

“rapid response force” that can be mobilized at a moment’s notice. In recent years, NATO has also stationed more troops on its eastern flank, increased its naval presence, and conducted regular manoeuvres on Russia’s western border.

These facts do not justify Putin’s war of aggression. But they do reveal that talk of NATO’s “purely defensive tactics” does not correspond to the material reality of the conflict’s origins.

### **NATO Is Not a Defensive Alliance**

Those now calling for the Left to abandon its critique of NATO are falling for NATO’s self-serving rhetoric, which it uses to portray its pursuit of imperial interests as self-defence. They are also revealing that they’ve failed to grasp the reality of imperialist wars. While this reality is always brutal, only some imperialist wars attract the attention of the media and the middle class.

NATO bombed Serbia in 1999. The Kosovo War led to thousands of deaths, the breakaway of Kosovo, and a permanent NATO occupation of the Balkans.

Following the 2001 attack on Afghanistan, the country was occupied for 20 years under NATO leadership. Many NATO states such as the UK, Italy, and the Netherlands also participated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq as members of the US-led “Coalition of the Willing”. A number of former Eastern Bloc states joined this coalition, including the non-NATO countries Ukraine, Georgia, Albania, and Macedonia, as did several states of the Global South. These two wars were disastrous, producing hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of refugees.

### **The Political Establishment’s Long-Term Vision**

The “sea change” in defence policy proclaimed by German chancellor Olaf Scholz fits in with the German ruling class’s ongoing attempt since 1991 to transform the German Army into an army capable of being deployed around the world.

Initiated under the government of Helmut Kohl, this process took place step-by-step over the 1990s. We have provided detailed documentation of this process in our [“Black Book”](#) on the build-up and operationalization of the Bundeswehr, a critical handbook published by Die Linke’s parliamentary group and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in 2016.

As late as 2010, Horst Köhler resigned from the office of the German presidency after triggering a scandal by suggesting that Germany use military means to defend its economic interests. Back then, it was still imprudent to speak openly of the fact that official German security policy since 1992 has specified that “the maintenance of free trade and unimpeded access to markets and raw materials around the world” qualifies as a reason to deploy troops abroad.

At the Munich Security Conference in January 2014, Germany’s then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), and President Joachim Gauck outlined a more offensive concept of Germany’s role in the world. “Germany is in fact too big to just comment on global politics from the side-lines”, Steinmeier said. Von der Leyen agreed: “If we have the means and capacity, then we also have a responsibility to engage.” To this, Gauck added that German engagement should become “more prompt, decisive, and substantial”.

Dubbed by Von der Leyen as the “Munich Consensus”, this new doctrine was presented before both the mass flight from Syria to Europe and awareness of the Islamic State as a threat. It also predated the Crimean crisis, which only began to escalate on 26 February 2014, or four weeks after the Munich speech by Gauck, Von der Leyen, and Steinmeier.

The claim that Germany should become a *Gestaltungsmacht* — a “shaping power” that intervenes more frequently and decisively with its military — had an overly aggressive ring to it for the generally anti-war German public. The Munich Consensus was therefore sold not in terms of Germany’s own interests but rather its alleged “responsibility”. Among other places, this idea was elaborated in a paper by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs titled “New Power New Responsibility”. It was then taken up by the 2016 edition of the *Weißbuch*, a general policy document published periodically by the German Ministry of Defence, which affirmed the German Army’s commitment to “actively shaping the global order”.

Defence Minister Von der Leyen called for substantial armament measures. These included acquiring additional materials in view of the Russian conflict, modernizing existing but technically outdated materials, and “qualitatively expanding the German Army’s scope of ability” for future foreign deployments. Along these lines, Germany’s Ministry of Defence wrote in a letter to the German parliament’s defence committee that “defence spending must substantially increase over successive phases and then be stabilized”, while arms investments should increase from approximately 14 percent to 20 percent of the defence budget. According to the ministry’s calculations, this would mean spending 130 billion euro on arms by 2030.

Angela Merkel repeatedly reiterated the goal of setting aside two percent of Germany’s GDP for its defence budget. Between 2014 and 2021, the military budget was raised by 50 percent.

### **We Should Never “Get Used to War”**

“Sober democracy and distance from militarism are noble”, Hedwig Richter wrote in a [recent article in the German weekly \*Die Zeit\*](#). “However”, she continued, “the diverse, free world of peace and raw military defence go hand-in-hand. Indeed, they must go hand-in-hand.”

Does Richter really believe there is a military solution to the current escalation?

Reading Richter’s statement, I can’t help but think of comments made by Admiral Dieter Wellershoff back in 1991. Serving as Inspector General of the German Army at the time, [Wellershoff remarked](#) before 480 ranking officers gathered for a commanders’ conference that “Not the overcoming of fear, but rather the living out of fear has been elevated to a national virtue. ... We should ask whether we’ve pushed the idea of war, death, and injury too far into the background.”

Germans’ anti-war sentiment and critical attitude towards foreign deployments has long hindered the militarization of German foreign policy. It found expression as hundreds of thousands took to the streets against the 1991 Gulf War and the Iraq War. These demonstrations — in contrast to those against the Kosovo and Afghanistan wars — were supported by the Social Democrats and the Greens.

In 1992, when the German Navy participated in NATO patrol operations in the Adriatic Sea designed to enforce an embargo against Serbia at the beginning of the Yugoslav Wars, *Der Spiegel* wrote that “neither the citizens nor the army are prepared for such military excursions”, The German Minister of Defence [Volker Rühle](#) responded that “this is exactly my issue. This is why we have to take things one step at a time. The point is also not only to prepare the soldiers for these new tasks, but rather society as a whole.” Rühle’s gradual approach to operationalizing the army was systematically implemented in the following years.

Ultimately, the taboo around foreign deployments was broken by the SPD-Green coalition government during the Kosovo War in 1999 and the Iraq War several years later. This influenced certain segments of the population that had taken to the streets to protest the previous wars,

making it difficult to build an anti-war movement.

Covered largely uncritically in the media, the German government's recently announced military build-up is not motivated by a politics of peace and will not secure peace. Above all, it is a boon to the arms industry. Yet it is apiece with the strategy pursued by all German governments since 1990, which has been to normalize militarism. And it is directly in line with the party truce between the SPD, the Greens, and the libertarian FDP, the three parties that make up Germany's current coalition government. It is no coincidence, then, that it was the SPD Chancellor Scholz and the Green Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock who spearheaded its passage.

### **New Angels of Peace, Old Interests**

The true interests behind wars are covered up with arguments that are designed to sound reasonable to certain target demographics. In other words, war lies are a part of war. Examples may be seen in the alleged "genocide" of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine invoked by Putin, or the alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq cited by the United States government in 2003.

For this reason, our ears should perk up when those who have spent years as full-throated advocates of armament, escalation, and the imperial ambitions of Germany and the EU suddenly style themselves as angels of peace. In other words: when the conservative Bavarian politician Markus Söder shows up to speak at a peace demonstration in Munich, something isn't right.

On the website of the libertarian Friedrich Naumann Foundation, FDP politician Karl-Heinz Paqué is [explicit about what is going on here](#):

"What's certain is that the credibility of the policy change is essentially dependent on whether the new course is here to stay. Germany's (unconditional) pacifism must not be allowed to return. Ensuring this happens is a central priority of the FDP in our governing coalition with the SPD and the Greens — for the FDP's commitment to national defence within the NATO framework and to its financing have traditionally been more unreserved than the Greens and the SPD. In parliament, the CDU/CSU will support this new course, as they in fact did in the historical debate last Sunday, which was applauded by the NATO partners in the West and the East. Their relief at the message of the historical parliamentary debate was palpable. A major opportunity for the values-based military alliance of the West!"

Around the world, the price for imperialist politics is paid by the working class, the majority of the population. In Germany as well, wage-dependent workers and their families will once again bear the costs for these policies of militarization and war.

Karl Liebknecht highlighted precisely this when he claimed that "the main enemy is in your own country". Today, however, perhaps we should say that "the main enemy is in our own camp".

### **Down with the Warmongers on Both Sides of the Border**

Many are demanding that Die Linke rethink its pro-peace positions and stance on NATO. I have presented a case for why I think this is deeply mistaken.

Indeed, there are two mistakes Die Linke must now avoid making:

First, it was and is a mistake to downplay the imperialist politics of Putin's Russia and to hold back on our criticism of his militarism, chauvinism, and repression of political opponents and the working class. This mistake has been made a number of times, and I and many others have repeatedly criticized it. Recently, I came across an old "Open Letter to Gorbachev" from members of Die Linke

in which they called on the former Soviet leader to initiate a conference for world peace in view of the aggressive geopolitics of the US and NATO. Addressed as a motion to our party's 2015 national conference in Bielefeld, the letter was [publicly criticized](#) by my comrade Klaus-Dieter Heiser — who unfortunately passed away last year — and myself because it omitted criticism of Putin and wasn't oriented towards the militarism in our own camp.

When Karl Liebknecht spoke of the main enemy being in our own country, he didn't mean that peace advocates should adopt the position of international opponents of one's national ruling class. As he wrote further, "Down with the warmongers on both sides of the border!"

Second, it was and is a mistake to let our shock at the events cause us to jettison the pro-peace positions of Die Linke. This is precisely what happened to the SPD on the eve of World War I in 1914, and to the SPD and the Greens during the Kosovo War in 1999 and then again during the Afghanistan War following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

Die Linke often justifies its position on pacifistic grounds. Yet the current situation makes it clear that what is needed are arguments from the standpoint of antimilitarism and anti-imperialism — regardless of how intense the headwinds. This includes highlighting the countervailing forces to the drivers of imperialism.

The party's immediate task is to advocate for de-escalation in this dangerously volatile situation while fighting the looming military build-up. This would help build a peace movement capable of strengthening all those who don't want armament and confrontation to have the final word.

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Translated by Adam Baltner.

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