

## Germany: “We Have to Be Honest”

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### **Jan van Aken on the need to talk about where and when wrong turns may have been taken**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine changed the world as we knew it for the worse. It was not good before, either. But the hope for a “peace dividend” that emerged at the end of the Cold War and successively faded in the years to follow seems to have been banished for the foreseeable future.

The war exacerbated the crisis of the Left: not in terms of its struggle for a peaceful world, but rather in terms of the question of how to deal with this concrete war. It took only a few days for the first commentators to blame the peace movement for the invasion. The movement had naively demanded disarmament again and again, they claimed, when military strength and rearmament had been the order of the day.

So what mistakes did the Left make, if any? And what can we learn from this horrible turn of events for the future? Kathrin Gerlof, editor of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s international politics magazine *maldekstra*, spoke with Jan van Aken about wrong turns, one-sided narratives, and where the peace movement is at four months after the war began.

**This issue of *maldekstra* will be published in June, by which time the war that Russia started on 24 February, and which had a very long prologue, will have been going on for four months. The term *Zeitenwende* (a historical turning point) has been circulating a lot these days, to the point where it has begun to lose its meaning. But let’s use it as the starting point for our discussion anyway. What warrants the term being used so frequently, and can we say with any certainty when this “turning point” actually began?**

I don’t think the term is the right one to be using in this situation. It obscures how many wars of aggression have occurred in the past 30 or 40 years, including in Europe. This is a terrible war. It’s happening very close by, close to Europe, to Germany, too, and so it requires that particular attention be paid to it. But from a political perspective it is hardly a turning point. I have to say, for me personally — and I also notice it amongst my friends — the shift has primarily occurred in the sense that the real fear of war is suddenly back. I haven’t experienced that for 40 years and that is of course a major change.

Let’s stay with the term for a moment though. War returned to Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, with Western states participating. Despite this, can we establish important moments or shifts as having occurred in the recent past? Of course, but when it comes to “turning points” we are speaking about historic time periods. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989/90 can certainly be considered a turning point, for instance.

**Then let’s look at the term “post-war era”, which describes the period from 1945 onwards. This also appears to be quite the euphemism, not just because there have also been wars in Europe since this time, but because in all the years since 1945 there has never been a time that has been free of war.**

That's an interesting thought. We always speak about the "post-war era" despite there obviously always having been wars going on — the Korean War and the Vietnam War, for instance. So on the one hand it makes sense to question this term. On the other hand, World War II has a singular quality to it. So I would continue to use this term.

**In his article for *LuXemburg* magazine, Ukrainian historian Taras Bilous writes that since the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine has been ground down by the competing interests of two imperialist power blocs. Germany belongs to one of these blocs — the West. In different ways, autonomy and the right to self-determination have been called into question by both sides, with Ukraine given the devalued status of buffer zone between the two blocs. There hasn't been constructive opposition to this from the left, either. Or is that an incorrect assessment?**

I believe that Ukraine has been seen less as a buffer zone and more as a sphere of influence. Think of the events that led to Euromaidan in 2013. The tug-of-war over Ukraine. The EU wanted to use Ukraine as a bulwark against Russia, Russia wanted to extend its influence over Ukraine in order to wield it against the EU and NATO. Ukraine was forced to decide between the two, and that resulted in the disaster.

Suddenly, a country existing between the two blocs and which in ideal circumstances would be able to maintain relationships with both sides was torn apart, because both sides tugged hard at the same time. And yes, many on the Left only acted in terms of this tussle between Russia and NATO, positioning themselves as being on one side or the other. Instead, what they should have been doing was taking the side of Ukraine.

**It seems that it has been difficult for the Left to get to grips with the ambiguity of the situation. Of course, it is always easier to say: these are the good guys and these are the bad guys, and that's why we're positioning ourselves in this way. But the present state of this current war shows how impossible that is.**

I think there are leftists and then there are leftists. I think that there should be a single point of reference for leftists, and that is people. At present this means the people of Ukraine. Some of them are bad people, as is the case everywhere. But it is the people of Ukraine who are being oppressed, and so as a leftist I stand on the side of the people in Ukraine who are being affected by this war of aggression.

This position does not require that I resort to black-and-white thinking in which I say that the people on one side are only good and the people on the other only bad. It means I can live with certain ambiguities. I can and must say that Russia is waging a war of aggression that contravenes international law and is committing war crimes. I can equally say that the Americans are making a big mistake in the way they are currently treating it as a proxy war. To them it is less about a just peace for Ukraine and more about a victory over Russia. To them it is a proxy war in which Ukrainian soldiers fight as foot soldiers for the United States. I can criticize this in equal measure.

**Is it not just as easy to say: Russian soldiers are dying, too, they were ordered to take part in this war, and are going home in coffins or not at all? Is it possible to advocate for them with the same (or a similar) amount of empathy?**

I wouldn't say that it is "just as easy". It is Moscow's war, the Kremlin's war, rather than Russia's war. Many people in Russia support the war. This has a lot to do with propaganda, with ignorance, but is also connected to a certain view that Russian people take in relation to other peoples of the former Soviet Union. This is another issue that we on the Left haven't examined and discussed — or

not sufficiently. This has been a mistake.

Of course our solidarity extends to those in Russia who have been protesting the war, who have suffered as a result of it. Similarly, I wouldn't paint all soldiers with the same brush. There are those who jumped at the chance of taking part in this war and others who would rather be doing something else.

**This is a topic on which we currently lack information, for it seems as if Russia as a country forms a monolithic bloc in favour of the war.**

Every war and conflict that deploys measures designed to exterminate human life poses the same questions: could it have been prevented? When would have been the right moment to act to avert disaster? What can we do now? Have we deluded ourselves in thinking that a more peaceful post-war order had come into being following World War II? Is it pointless to engage with these questions at present?

Now is the time to reflect on such things and to talk about them, so that we can do better in future. Because of course we now have to eschew anything that will inhibit long-term peace in Europe. That's why I'm so vehemently opposed to the 100-billion-euro militarization package. It sets in motion an arms race that will only continue in the coming years. This will impede a peace-based order in the decades to come.

For this reason we need to look to the past and ask ourselves where we may have taken a wrong turn. To me, what is most important to say in hindsight is this: I often hear at the moment that the concept of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) has failed, and that despite developing an ever-closer economic relationship with Russia, they still ended up starting a war.

I actually don't think that this approach failed, but that the West didn't even try it. At the beginning of the 2000s Moscow attempted to set up a trade region spanning from Vancouver to Vladivostok — this was Russia's attempt at pivoting to the West and the West simply said no.

**Is there a parallel here with Erdoğan's efforts?**

Yes. He also tried pivoting to the West. He wanted to join the EU. In the course of the negotiations around joining, many things in Turkey changed for the better. Until the EU said no. That was the point at which Erdoğan reoriented eastwards and installed an increasingly authoritarian regime. Currently Turkey is also waging a war that contravenes international law: in Syria. In both cases — Russia and Turkey — the principle of "change through trade" could have worked if the West had pursued it seriously.

**A brief historical digression: when the Cuban Missile Crisis was at its height, John F. Kennedy is said to have told his war-hungry generals that they first had to really know why the Russians were doing what they were doing. To take a step back at the point of greatest danger in order to once again pose essential questions — this might also be important in situation that has escalated as horribly as the one we have now, too.**

I am not aware of this interpretation, but would it be helpful currently? Of course, we know how NATO has acted towards Russia over the past 30 years. To the West, Russia is a minor-league player, and all security interests and offers to co-operate more closely have been ignored. Back then, Kennedy obviously knew very well why the USSR had stationed missiles on Cuba — NATO had also stationed missiles very close to the Soviet border. So it's a nice story, but perhaps that's all it is.

**But perhaps we need nice stories, in order not to lose hope.**

Yes, for sure.

**Only a few days after the war broke out, there were already accusations that the peace movement bore some responsibility for the war and should therefore apologize. Die Linke has always understood itself as being part of the peace movement, a movement that now has its back to the wall. How should this be responded to?**

With honesty. We have to be honest. Yes, in Die Linke there was a small but vocal minority who thought in simple terms: the United States is bad, and Russia is good. For a long time they refused to see that Moscow was no longer headed by the general secretary of the CPSU, and that instead there was a neoliberal, conservative, and autocratic government led by Putin. Despite this, everything was defended: Russian bombs were good, and American bombs were bad. Here we have to be honest and say: that was incorrect. Many of us did in fact criticize this position, and it was never one held by the majority.

Currently the broader Left in Germany is disjointed. Some discuss weapons exports as an expression of solidarity, as an act of assistance in the fight against an authoritarian regime. Others emphasize non-military pathways to peace, to a just peace in which Ukraine is not abandoned. This is my position. Then there are also those who reject any form of involvement by making reference to a possible nuclear escalation. This doesn't work, for me, because there needs to be some kind of response to Russia's aggression, otherwise what happened in Moldova or Georgia will simply happen again.

**At present there seems to be depressingly broad support for maximum militarization. Those opposing this are few in number. What are the arguments in favour of speaking out against a politics of deterrence and expanded militarization anyway?**

I'm no radical pacifist. I think it's completely fine that the people of Ukraine are taking up arms to defend themselves. But my question is this: What is the best thing that the German government can do to support the people of Ukraine?

At the moment there's only this one-sided view focused on military solutions. It's become barely permissible to say: can we also discuss other solutions, rather than just talk about weapons? It's a situation that I'd never have thought possible. I grew up in a Germany that had a fundamentally peace-oriented attitude, and this was true of both the East and the West. And now "pacifism" has practically become an expletive.

I want to talk about alternatives, however. And in this regard I believe the German government, the EU, and the West as a whole have refrained from doing many things that could perhaps help in terms of sanctions and diplomacy. Meanwhile, for many the war is evidently no longer about Ukraine's freedom but about victory — victory over Russia and as extensive a destruction of the Russian army as possible. And when it's a matter of victory, then you can only talk about weapons, I understand that.

But I don't want to talk about victory. I want to talk about a just peace.

**Die Linke is weak. Marginalized. The diagnosis cannot be sugar-coated. Are there approaches that give you hope, despite this weakness?**

Not many at the moment. The feeling of total paralysis has a strong hold over many, combined with worry about an expansion of the war. One very good approach was the appeals made in opposition to the militarization package, but this has also dissipated in the daily debates around more and heavier

weapons.

**Die Linke has always been criticized on this point — apart from the unfair generalization that they can't do foreign policy — that their suggestions for a peaceful world order were simply insufficient. More catchphrases than concepts. Are you also of this view, that there are major deficiencies here?**

Yes, we've only ever made it halfway out the blocks in this regard. I took another look at our party programme, and it says: no weapons exports, no overseas deployments, the federal army for national defence only, a co-operative security system across Europe. Those are all correct positions, even today. But the concrete meaning of these positions is something that we have thought about far too little.

Finland is the best example [of how a state should behave], having always been neutral. I completely understand that in the current situation they now want to have some military protection. As leftists, when we say no to NATO we need to then discuss what the alternatives would look like.

Historically we haven't held such debates. But now we are. In the coming months there will be intense debate, and many things must become more concrete. We can't simply go about with nice-sounding general principles. We also have to be able to say what is to be done in specific situations.

**According to communication theorist Paul Watzlawick, the paradoxical intervention at this juncture would be the suggestion that every country in the world become a member of NATO.**

If that happened, I would of course be pro-NATO. Once it has 194 members we can call it the UN and then everything's fine.

**Which weaknesses continue to foster the possibility of war? Efforts since 1945 to forge a global community capable of agreeing that the top priority of collective action should be the prevention of war have yet to succeed.**

There is also no lively debate occurring on this topic on the Left, either. Two things are clear to me. Firstly, I think the UN charter is correct. It is based on state sovereignty. This means that no military interventions based on human-rights considerations may take place. We therefore cannot march into Saudi Arabia because women's rights are being trampled on there. I accept this notion of state sovereignty, and it is on this basis that political decisions must be made. Secondly, I think that the UN General Assembly's power over the UN Security Council needs to be strengthened, because only the general assembly is democratic: one country, one vote.

**Do you have a little historical optimism that a stronger, broader movement for a satisfactory peace will develop out of this disastrous situation?**

Such a movement won't develop on its own, it must be created. And as things stand the forces that could create it are lacking. Nowadays, movements become strong when people see that they can effect concrete change. And when there are opportunities for them to act wherever they find themselves. Therefore I think that in relation to weapons exports, for example, the potential for a larger movement lies dormant. But there is yet to be a force in Germany capable of bringing together the many small actions against weapons exports and crafting a powerful, large-scale movement. Die Linke hasn't managed to be this force. But we need such a force.

**Are you afraid?**

I am, actually. And that is something new.

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## **Jan van Aken**

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## **P.S.**

Jan van Aken worked for Greenpeace as an expert on genetic engineering and was a biological weapons inspector for the UN from 2004 to 2006. From 2009 to 2017, he served as an MP for Die Linke in the German parliament. He currently works for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in the areas of security and peace.

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<https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/46721/we-have-to-be-honest>