

Myths and Facts about the War in Ukraine

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The Russian invasion must prompt the Left to re-think its geopolitical assumptions

There is good reason to doubt whether we have, in fact, entered a “new world” since the start of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. Nonetheless, 24 February 2022 does mark a historical turning point. It was a watershed moment that raised new questions and intellectual challenges, particularly for the traditional Left, which has not exactly covered itself in glory by declaring that US/NATO imperialism and Ukrainian nationalism are the driving forces behind the war and failing to mention the fact that Russia was the aggressor. Current events should have prompted the Left to recognize its own blind spots and tackle the issues of Vladimir Putin, his regime, and the roots of the long-standing Ukrainian–Russian conflict. But no such reckoning has taken place.

Since the fact that Russia invaded is undeniable, parts of the Left and the peace movement have shifted their focus to the run-up to the war. But while any analysis must undoubtedly look at the run-up to the war, too many are relying on a one-dimensional view that falls back on old, familiar patterns of thinking and categories. A glance at the Russian president’s speeches is enough to reveal the motives and objectives behind the ruling Russian elite’s decision to start a war of aggression. It is astonishing how little-known those speeches are in the relevant circles. Moreover, too little attention is paid to the role of the Russian Federation’s military-industrial power complex and intelligence networks. Looking at these — in conjunction with an analysis of the collapse of the Soviet empire, its consequences, and Russia’s geopolitical decline to semi-peripheral status — would have provided an adequate basis for explaining the war.

If we examine the reasons for such a reductive analysis, it is not difficult to see that parts of the Left are reluctant to give up old ways of thinking.

However, other parts of the Left also took some time after 24 February 2022 to understand the history of the conflict, the reasons behind the establishment of the Putin regime, and the current configurations of international conflict. Peace researcher [Klaus M. Schlichte](#) from the University of Bremen recently made a creative and complex contribution to a sourced historical and sociological analysis of the war. In an important forthcoming manuscript, sociologist Klaus Dörre from the Friedrich Schiller University Jena addressed the circumstances and background of the war and identified several open questions. It is essential to build on this if we want to leave the superficial debate behind us.

This article will deal critically with the myths that have developed within the Left’s narratives about the war. At its core are the security policy issues that I have been working on for many years, including the period from 2005–2013, when I served as a member of the Defence Committee in the German parliament. Hopefully, the issues addressed here will help to build a realistic basis for future debates.

Who Is Responsible for the War?

The central thesis of the people who directly defend Russia’s war (to whatever extent) is that

responsibility really lies with the US and NATO, whose expansionist policies drove Russia so far into a corner that the Putin regime was in fact forced to respond militarily. The watered-down version of this argument claims that, although “the West” may not bear sole responsibility, it was largely to blame for the run-up to the war.

Even if this argument were accurate, it would not diminish Putin’s responsibility for the war, nor could it really explain the Russian president’s decision. Even if we give credence to reports that the leadership in Moscow deceived themselves into believing that they would be able to march into Kyiv within 48 hours, such a radical decision required a degree of evangelical conviction and ruthlessness that cannot be explained by security concerns and perceived slights alone. This decision also required an autocratic elite to shape society and condition the population for a brutal military incursion.

This argument therefore explains very little. It also fails to answer the question of whether the West’s provocative encroachments into the post-Soviet space also contributed to Moscow’s imperialist actions.

The Sins of the Western World

Before we address this question in detail, one basic observation is necessary: the fact that Putin’s war is embedded within an existing constellation of international conflict comes as no surprise in a globalized world. However, shifting the gaze to this meta-level makes it far easier to pursue the motive (outlined above) of preserving the ideology that forms left-wing identity. It allows a person to remain on familiar terrain and rely on old concepts and patterns to explain the world.

We can undoubtedly point to a catalogue of sins committed by the United States and NATO — military interventions that have violated international law, sacrificed many lives, wrought destruction, and forcibly shifted borders. But this does not help us in our effort to understand the present war.

Moreover, referring back to Western imperial policies can be misconstrued as a qualification or even justification of Russian aggression. The French intellectual [Étienne Balibar](#) was entirely correct when he wrote that, “*even if* NATO had a policy of “surrounding” the Eurasiatic political space traditionally dominated by Russia, which seems undeniable, it did not *militarily* attack Russia in the first place. We can never forget *which armies invaded Ukraine* and currently destroy it.” One unlawful act cannot be justified by another.

If we were to stick with the theory that it is not Putin, but “the West” that is responsible for the war, then we would have to prove the causal connection between Western misdeeds and the current war. There are plenty of indirect references to be made: “Western” policies have helped to erode the rules-based order in Libya and Iraq, to name just two examples, thus providing Putin with pretexts for his own war. However, they do not provide any causal link.

A Magic Geopolitical Formula

One response from the traditional Left to the question of who is responsible for the war is to invoke “geopolitics”. At first glance it may seem surprising that they are willingly borrowing from neorealists such as John Mearsheimer, although their theories focus exclusively on power, empire, and the military. Even the RAND Corporation, which was founded by the US Air Force, has been very popular of late.

To be clear: the “realists” interpret the expansion of NATO territory primarily as a threat to another power’s sphere of influence. Ukrainian aspirations barely register with them. According to this

theory, Ukraine belongs to the historical-cultural sphere of “Greater Russia” and Russia is defending it against the “territorially foreign powers” of the West (the US, NATO, and the EU). The neorealists’ sympathy for Russia is limited — they are interested in geopolitical balance, and they believe that Russia is a valuable ally in a potential large-scale conflict with China. Since they are consistently concerned with the balancing of interests, which they admittedly want to shape militarily in their favour, they regard the human rights-oriented foreign policy of Obama, Biden & co. as a major error.

“Mounting frustration with oligarchic capitalism, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies drove the people of Ukraine to opposition and increasingly reinforced the desire for close ties with the EU.”

The newly discovered affinity between left-wing “anti-imperialism” and the neorealist approach is evidently rooted in the assumption that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” — and that this friend is exclusively anti-American. From this perspective, any analysis of the direct participants in the war — Ukraine and Russia — fades into the background and does not need to be pursued further. The social conditions, processes, and conflicts that are worked out between people remain conspicuously absent. Horst Kahrs and Klaus Lederer [have noted](#) that, “according to this interpretation, the world and its people are at best residents occupying imperial spheres of interest and putty in the hands of great powers. On the other hand, the progressive transformation of Russian society into a repressive autocracy, Putin’s sustained collaboration with global right-wing radicalism, Russia’s attempts to destabilize liberal democracies, and the Ukrainian population’s democratic desire to avoid submitting to Russian paternalism hardly seem worthy of active critical consideration”.

Russia’s Security Interests: Was There an Existential Threat?

Still the question remains: is there any truth to the theory that the US/NATO policy of eastward expansion marginalized Russia to the point that a fierce reaction should have been expected?

One thing is for sure: at no point was there an existential — read: military — threat to Russia. A NATO attack on Russia was never on the agenda of the “Western elites”. Russia’s capabilities for a nuclear second strike and, consequently, for deterrence were not in danger at any point. NATO’s conventional military power stationed at the borders of the Russian Federation has never been sufficient for a large-scale offensive. And what sense would it have made to invade a country whose doors were open to commercial relations? Wouldn’t it have been paradoxical to engage in widespread destruction of a country whose wealth the West wanted to appropriate?

One look at the map makes it clear that the purported “encirclement” of Russia is a delusion. It is not possible to “encircle” the world’s largest country by landmass, which has long borders with allied or neutral states, including China and Kazakhstan. This image is also inadequate in other respects: Russia became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the G7 became the G8 to accommodate Russia, and economic treaties and relations were forged and expanded.

A Shift in the Balance of Military Power

In 1990, NATO and the Warsaw Pact agreed to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). It set upper limits on five main weapons systems — tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters — and led to a significant reduction in armament potential. With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the CFE rules became obsolete and had to be readjusted via tough negotiations that took place between 1995 and 1999.

It is obvious that this dramatically shifted the balance of military power between NATO and Russia, and that NATO’s eastward expansion put Russia at a disadvantage. Moscow has consistently

complained about it and, during the attempted redraft of the treaty in 2008, demanded a reduction in NATO's maximum capability as compensation for the coalition's expansion. But Moscow could not seriously have expected this request to be accommodated. There is no innate right to world power status, which Russia lost for a reason after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even so, a concession was made on what is known as the flank agreement, a particularly important point for Moscow.

The fall of the Soviet empire led to increasingly intense, sometimes violent conflicts on Russia's periphery, which Moscow sought to counter by increasing the number of military units stationed near its borders. At the time, NATO saw Russia as a stabilizing force in the (sometimes frozen) conflicts in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Moldova. Thus, the regions included in the treaty were reduced, while the upper limits were retained. Russia took advantage of this to assemble larger formations of personnel and engage in military interventions. This is likely also the main reason why the Russian Federation co-signed the Istanbul Document in 1999 and then ratified it together with CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) members Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in 2004.

From an objective point of view, the CFE had only a minimal effect on the emerging constellation of conflicts. Actual troop levels were and are significantly below the established upper limits and are therefore not a bone of contention. More important were the agreements relating to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. From the Russian side, the primary issue was preventing NATO from permanently stationing combat units in its new member states (in the late 1990s, the new members' military power was anything but fearsome). NATO accommodated Russia on two points: it declared that it would not pursue plans to station nuclear weapons or install nuclear arsenals on its new members' territory, and it confirmed that it had no desire to station combat troops in new member states on a permanent basis.

These foundations for NATO-Russia relations in the sphere of military security endured until 2014, when the immediate history of this war began with the annexation of Crimea and Russia's military intervention in the conflict over the Donbas region. Those who point to US military support for Ukraine after 2014 as grounds for war tend to brush these facts under the carpet. Every step that the NATO alliance took towards arming Ukraine and relocating rather modest numbers of troops to Eastern European member states should be seen as a consequence of the Putin regime's military escalation and human rights violations. Putin's war began long before 24 February 2022.

NATO's Eastward Expansion

Nonetheless, isn't it true that NATO's eastward expansion, driven particularly by the United States, represented a serious threat to Russian interests and that Putin had to respond somehow? And wasn't that expansion deliberately pursued in order to back Russia into a corner?

It is evident that the decision to expand towards the east and the manner in which this expansion took place were, in fact, fundamentally dubious. Warnings from shrewd security experts that expansion would facilitate the rise of right-wing, militaristic circles in Moscow have also turned out to be justified.

But it is [also true that](#), "contrary to certain claims, the expansion was not the result of an orchestrated assimilation, but rather a response to the desire of most Central and Eastern European states to enhance their own security through membership in the alliance". In February 1991, Poland, Hungary, and what was then still Czechoslovakia united to form the Visegrád Group and applied to join NATO. Other states soon followed suit. The West, by contrast, was hesitant at the time to approve their membership.

In assessing these events, therefore, it is necessary to consider not only Russia's security concerns,

but also the perspectives of the Central and Eastern European states. The traumatic consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact for Poland and the Baltic states are all too frequently overlooked. Additionally, Western leftists often simply ignore the decades-long experience that Central and Eastern Europeans have of Soviet dominance and oppression. The Red Army is viewed solely as a liberating army, while the other side of the coin — namely the Soviet Union's imperialistic land grabbing after 1945 — goes unmentioned. It is an irony of history that this glorification is experiencing a resurgence today in eastern Germany, a stark contrast to the reality of the occupation that made its way into the everyday language of East Germany in the sarcastic use of the expression "the friends".

It is also true that the Kremlin noted the first stage of NATO's eastward expansion with approval. Ultimately, this step was linked to the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council in 1997, the expansion of the G7 into the G8, and the continuation of negotiations on future stocks of conventional weapons and forces, which were concluded in Istanbul in 1999.

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However, the subsequent rounds of NATO expansion were not accompanied by similar "trade-offs". On the contrary, the US terminated existing arms control frameworks and forged ahead with rearmament in the new NATO member states. The fact that Russian proposals were usually disregarded or quickly dismissed ("the Russians just want to divide the Atlantic alliance") should not go unmentioned. This applies, for instance, to the way that NATO handled what was known as the Medvedev Plan in 2008. Moscow's ideas were vague, but, at the same time, NATO made no serious, discernible effort to respond to them. Even so, the 2010 New START treaty, which ensured stability via a carefully-balanced reduction in strategic nuclear weapons, was signed during this period.

In the context of a period of rising tensions, it is remarkable that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov acknowledged the right of Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. During an [interview](#) with German business newspaper *Handelsblatt* on 2 January 2005, Lavrov said: "That is their choice. We respect the right of every state — including our neighbours — to choose their own partners, to decide for themselves which organization they wish to join". One possible reason for this astonishing statement is that, despite the Orange Revolution that took place in Kyiv in 2004, Russia still felt relatively certain that it had a foot in the door and could control the developments in Ukraine from Moscow. This is highly revealing.

Nonetheless, the insidious development of tensions and antagonism, in which the West played its part, should not be overlooked. NATO's intervention in the Yugoslav War in 1999 forms part of this constellation of conflict, as does the forced "regime change" in Iraq in 2003. Both of these took place within the historical arena of Soviet and Russian influence. And, while cooperation between the US and Russia was still possible during the so-called War on Terror, Washington used the growing conflicts in the post-Soviet space to its own advantage under the banner of "supporting human rights and democracy".

Ukraine as Part of the "Russian Empire"?

It is simply false to claim that the West has been purposefully dragging Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic structures since the 1990s. For the record, then-US President George H.W. Bush travelled to Kyiv in 1991 to talk the Ukrainian leadership out of declaring independence. At the time, Western elites clearly saw the idea that Ukraine was part of Russia as self-evident.

The effort to draw Ukraine into Western structures did intensify, to a degree, during and after the 2004 Orange Revolution, as Putin's Russia sought to maintain Ukraine's satellite status. And it is also true that US President George W. Bush, who shared the fantasy of a unipolar world order with his neoconservative associates, was in favour of aggressively encouraging the integration of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO in 2008. However, he encountered stiff resistance from France, Germany, and other EU states, and, while those former Soviet states were accepted in principle, their admission was de facto put on hold.

[Karl Schlögel](#) is absolutely right when he notes that, "if 'the West' or the EU can be blamed for anything, it is not that they were overly dedicated to their eastern neighbours, but rather that they regarded them as an imposition that threatened the cohesion of Europe and the European Union". The EU's reservations about Ukraine are particularly noteworthy. For a long time, Brussels viewed Ukraine as a bulwark against immigration from the east and snubbed Kyiv's continued overtures rather than supporting them.

It was mounting frustration with oligarchic capitalism, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies that drove the people of Ukraine to opposition and increasingly reinforced the desire for close ties with the EU. A shift in economic conditions only intensified that urge, and, while imports and exports between the EU and Ukraine grew, they declined significantly between Russia and Ukraine. It was President Viktor Yanukovych, a representative of the pro-Russian Donetsk clan, who initiated and sought to implement the rapprochement with the EU via an association agreement — but who ultimately bowed to pressure from Moscow and abandoned the request. It was this rupture that gave decisive impetus to Ukraine's efforts to join the EU.

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If we follow Putin's narratives, which he developed before the war in order to justify it, then the West is guilty of creating new divisions, while Russia only wanted European unity. In 2021, [he said](#) that "many countries were put before the artificial choice of being either with the collective West or with Russia. In fact, it was an ultimatum. The Ukrainian tragedy of 2014 is an example of the consequences that this aggressive policy has led to. Europe actively supported the unconstitutional armed coup in Ukraine. This was where it all started."

But no such ultimatum ever existed. To put it more precisely: it was Russia that fuelled this conflict. It is therefore more accurate to say that both the EU and Russia pushed Ukraine towards a yes/no decision and did not sufficiently explore the possibility of mediation between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union. As far as the alleged 2014 "coup" is concerned, it should at least be noted that France and Germany made diplomatic efforts to encourage a coalition government in Kyiv and put an end to the violence. Paris and Berlin also supported a diplomatic resolution to the conflict via the Minsk negotiations.

By contrast, the belligerent violence came exclusively from Russia, with its annexation of Crimea and military support for pro-Moscow militias in Donbas. The Minsk II treaty, which included significant concessions to the Russian side, proved to be untenable due to unresolved questions and was not implemented by either side. Did that provide grounds for war? Not at all. A new round of negotiations, as suggested by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on the eve of the full-scale war, would have been the right thing to do.

What Parts of Western Policy Should Be Criticized?

The US and the NATO member states are partly responsible for the conflicts that have been building up since the 2000s. For example, NATO still refuses to ratify the 1999 Adapted CFE Treaty. The US unilaterally declared that Russia had violated the so-called Istanbul commitments by stationing troops in Transnistria, the separatist constituent republic of Moldova. Moscow's demands during the negotiations for a new CFE, not all of which are unreasonable — the participation of the Baltic states, further reductions in upper limits and weapons stockpiles, and the clarification of the term “substantial combat forces”, among others — were either rejected or insufficiently accommodated. The most serious failures during this period were in the field of arms control and disarmament. By stationing new missile defence systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, NATO countries have fueled Russia's fears that its own deterrence capabilities are weakening.

Nonetheless, the bottom line remains the same: NATO countries adhered to the terms of the Founding Act, which Moscow had signed, until the Russian aggression of 2014. There may be reasons to criticize, for instance, the deployment of US troops to Bulgaria and Romania, but such an action complied with the treaty and, moreover, was linked to the withdrawal of US units from Germany.

By contrast, Russia flagrantly violated the terms of the treaty, which upholds “respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states”. All states should choose the means to ensure their own security — Moscow has also violated this principle.

In my view, the most valid accusation against the West is the fact that the leaders of NATO member states failed to develop structures for pan-European peace in tandem with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) after 1995. The NATO-Russia Founding Act of June 1997 even states that “[t]he OSCE, as the only pan-European security organisation, has a key role in European peace and stability.” Yet foreign policy has increasingly prioritized strengthening and expanding the Atlantic alliance and extending the EU's sphere of influence. Both sides have contributed to the new arms race and adversarial policies, but why has there been no consistent effort to reconcile competing interests and find diplomatic solutions? The previously mentioned tug-of-war over a new version of the CFE shows that the US in particular had no real interest in disarmament, arms control, or cooperation.

A [study by Japan's Toda Peace Institute](#) rightly raises the criticism that the spirit of the 1990 Paris Charter, of the “Common European Home”, has been increasingly relegated to the background and opportunities for a new security partnership through a systematic expansion of the OSCE have been squandered. The authors also address the “peace treaties” that the Kremlin proposed just before it attacked, which were most likely designed to camouflage Russia's preparations for war. Nonetheless, it would have been better if Western leaders had taken the looming threat of war seriously, looked more closely at specific paragraphs, and offered to discuss them.

Going back to the question of what caused the war, a clear distinction should be made between the pursuit of capitalist business interests and military policies of conquest and subjugation. Of course, the US and the EU want to do business in Ukraine and expand their (hegemonic) influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the United States in particular sees an opportunity to use the war to further weaken its potential geopolitical rival in Moscow on a permanent basis, particularly in military terms. Yet it is unlikely to regard a country with the same gross domestic product as Italy and an economy that is not geared towards the future as a competitive threat in the global marketplace.

Additionally, Barack Obama's “Pivot to Asia” initiated a reorientation of US foreign policy, targeting China as the chief rival to the US for global hegemony. It is no coincidence that influential hawks in Washington regard the war against Ukraine as an unwelcome distraction from this main objective.

and want to avoid the enormous costs involved in supporting Ukraine. The idea that the hegemonic conflict between the US, the EU, and the Russian Federation necessarily had to lead to war on Ukraine is an arbitrary assumption that is not supported by any evidence.

The Metamorphosis of Russian Power

If we were to summarize this article thus far, we would come to the following conclusions: it is true that we should not simply dismiss the fact that the steady expansion of “Western” alliances, such as NATO and the EU, has been perceived by Moscow as an alarming loss of power and control. But when President Putin or Foreign Minister Lavrov claim that they simply had no choice due to the threat to their country, their argument has no basis and obviously serves to conceal their own expansionist objectives.

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From today’s perspective, their seemingly paranoid positions go far beyond reasonable concern and feed into the obsession that they are victims of sinister scheming and conspiracies. This way of thinking absolves them of any need to question what their loss of power has to do with their own shortcomings and wrongdoing. Moreover, Putin and Lavrov’s statements reveal the hubris with which they cast themselves as the saviour of humanity in the face of Western colonialism. A persecution complex mixed with delusions of grandeur: their major detachment from reality is what makes the current situation so critical and dangerous.

Looking at the war and its backstory in terms of security policy shows that the crucial factor was the metamorphosis of Russian power and its policies. That transformation, which began when Putin took office in 1999 and intensified during his third term after 2012, is a result of Russia’s internal contradictions and the substantial gulf between its aspirations to global power and its semi-peripheral status in the world. The security interests that resurface time and again do indeed play a role in Russia’s perceptions, but they are subordinate to the regime’s imperial interests.

If there is a decisive “red line” for Putin in this context, it has to do with securing his regime and its imperial interests. More precisely, it is about preserving or re-establishing Russian dominance and control over the post-Soviet space, with Belarus and Ukraine of particular importance.

Not Just a Proxy War

It is obvious that the Russo-Ukrainian war cannot be separated from the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the alliance of Western states. This constellation has contributed to the outbreak of the present war and its progression; it will also be a factor in a possible end to the war. In that regard, Étienne Balibar points out a fact that is often suppressed or denied in left-wing politics: when smaller nations want to achieve or defend their independence, they always have been and always will be dependent upon alliances with larger states. This applies in this context, too: without forming substantial alliances, Ukraine would have no chance. It made sense for Ukraine to resist Russia’s invasion with the help of NATO member states and other allies. We have to learn to deal with the resulting contradictions.

And yet the term “proxy war”, which is popular in left-wing circles and beyond — including among neorealists in the US and Germany — is still incomplete and distorts reality. If we apply it consistently, it means that one actor — in this case, Ukraine — is being used by another country or a coalition to assert its own interests. Accordingly, the conflict of interest between Russia and the

US/NATO would be the decisive dynamic that overrides the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. However, this interpretation is incorrect for at least two reasons.

Firstly, neither the US nor NATO ever pushed Ukraine to start a war — not after 2014, when the West came to terms with the annexation of Crimea fairly quickly, and not in 2022, either immediately before or after the Russian invasion.

Secondly, it was the Russian invasion that greatly intensified the Ukrainian population's efforts to achieve permanent independence from Russia. All of this has little to do with US or EU intervention. Ukraine's readiness to defend itself is a consequence of the Russian attack and Russian war crimes.

It is true that Ukraine's growing dependence on the United States in particular is undeniable. Washington is supplying the bulk of the weapons as well as the reconnaissance tools needed to fight and survive the current war. Kyiv and Washington are also likely to coordinate when it comes to methods of warfare. As long as the Western alliance acts rationally and moderately, it will have the enormous advantage of being able to reel in a possible future escalation driven by the Ukrainian desire for revenge.

This has also been the case thus far: a no-fly-zone over Ukraine has been rejected and no strategic warplanes or long-range stand-off weapons have been delivered. Support has predominantly taken the form of defence systems, which Ukraine genuinely needs. Due to the dynamics of warfare, this is not set in stone. There is a growing danger of uncontrollable escalation. For this reason, the calls for a new round of peace talks are entirely understandable.

However, when some leftists talk about geopolitics and proxy wars or call for an end to solidarity with Ukraine, they are not only invoking old friend-enemy paradigms ("the enemy of my enemy is my friend"), but also blurring the line between perpetrator and victim in this war. This is morally unacceptable and politically foolish.

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Translated by Joseph Keady and Rose Wellbrook for Gegensatz Translation Collective.

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