

Germany, Russia, Ukraine and the shadows of the Cold War

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History looms large in German debates about Ukraine and Germany. This was true at the beginning of the so-called “Ukraine crisis” in 2014 (which, in fact, was already at that point a Russian attack on Ukraine) and it still holds true today after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. A self-centered memory culture of the Second World War, a romantization of German “Ostpolitik” and an exaggeration of its role in bringing down the Berlin Wall as well as the tradition of a joint Russian-German imperialism at the expense of the people and nations in East Central Europe – all these factors contributed to the failure of political elites and large parts of German society to recognize the threat Putin’s Russia posed and poses to Europe in general and Ukraine in particular.

In many ways the “mental map” of the Cold War shaped the interpretation of Russia and its relationship to Ukraine and other former member states of the Soviet Union after its collapse in 1991. To a harrowing degree German politicians and commentators were willing to accept Russia’s claim toward countries such as Ukraine and Georgia as Moscow’s “sphere of influence”. How much the categories of the Cold War were shaping perceptions in Germany became acutely clear during the Maidan, the Revolution of Dignity, of 2013/14 and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Donbas. The term “Ukraine crisis” alone showed the flawed understanding of events in Germany. Many commentators, but tellingly not the journalists on the ground, framed this as a conflict between “East” and “West”, between Russia and the United States (or NATO). Ukraine was as denied any agency, even though it had been its people who had brought down the kleptocratic and authoritarian regime of President Victor Janukovich.

Ukraine’s complex history had remained a blind spot among large parts of Germany, Eastern Europe in general was primarily seen through the prism of Russia. The simplistic categories of “East” and “West” seemed to offer an explanation for events in Ukraine, whereas Russian-Ukrainian relations were often ignored. Many of the so-called “Russland-Versteher” (people who allegedly “understood Russia”) such as the SPD-politician Matthias Platzeck called for a “new Ostpolitik”, i.e. a renewal of the politics toward the Eastern Bloc by the social democratic chancellor Willy Brandt at the beginning of the 1970s. This historical “Ostpolitik” was intellectually prepared by Egon Bahr, an advisor of Brandt, who in 1963 coined the term of “Wandel durch Annäherung” (change through rapprochement). According to Bahr, the West, and in particular Germany, had to accept the status quo, i.e. Soviet power in the Eastern Block, to overcome it. Bahr’s thinking in this time primarily evolved around the question of how German re-unification could be achieved. Closer economic ties and the provisional official acceptance of Soviet hegemony would, in his view, contribute to this goal in the long term.

The chancellorship of Brandt (1969-1974) offered the chance to realize this approach. Indeed, during his government Brandt travelled to the Eastern Bloc and through a series of international

contracts, the so-called “Ostverträge”, did manage to achieve a normalization of Germany’s relationship to countries in Eastern and Eastern Central Europe. In Germany, and in particular within social-democratic circles, this period is regarded a highly successful era of German foreign policy and a historical achievement of the SPD. However, its successes are often exaggerated. In December of 2014 then foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated in an interview, that it was German “Ostpolitik” that put the first cracks into the Berlin wall. This not only overstates the impact of “Ostpolitik”, but also underestimates the importance of democratic movements “from below” within the Eastern Bloc, such as the Polish free trade union Solidarność in the 1980s.

This is one of several flaws in the German reverence of “Ostpolitik”. It was always very centered on states and governments and not on societies. This is one of the reasons why many within the SPD regarded the emergence of Polish Solidarity in 1980 as a disruptive force in Europe, with Egon Bahr even going so far as to arguing shortly after the imposition of martial rule in Poland in December 1981 that “peace is more important than Poland”.

Ironically, Bahr and his supporters were hereby foiling their own strategy: initially they had argued for Ostpolitik in order to change the status quo in Europe in the long term, but when Polish civil society was questioning this status, they opted for the status quo. This second phase of “Ostpolitik” and its lack of solidarity with the peoples of Eastern and Eastern Central Europe has not yet been critically confronted within the SPD.

The second misconception of those who argued for a new “Ostpolitik” after 2014 was of course that they were attempting to transfer concept from the 1970s and 1980s to a totally different new European reality. With the downfall of the Soviet Union and socialist regimes, a number of sovereign and democratic nations had emerged in Eastern Central Europe who were eager to protect themselves from Russian imperialism. Yet, their interests and experiences were often disregarded with Ukraine being the most prominent example, for many Moscow remained the most important “partner” even after its inner and outer radicalization under Vladimir Putin. Again, German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier is a case in point: in said interview in December 2014, Ukraine, which had been attacked by Russia at the beginning of that year, only figured as the source of violence and the “crisis” and Steinmeier nearly exclusively talked about how much he wanted to improve and strengthen German-Russian relations.

He stated explicitly that his thinking was very much influenced by Egon Bahr (who had, in 2014, visited a “congress” of left- and right-wing conspiracy theorists and had there appealed to the “West” to accept, if not officially recognize, the Russian annexation of Crimea). Lastly, the romanticized version of “Entspannungspolitik” misses two other crucial points: First, it was very centered on the (West) German experience and ignored that this “Entspannungspolitik” had always rested on the subjugation of peoples in Eastern and Eastern Central Europe. Yes, the Cold War may have been a world that was easier to understand, but for those in the Soviet Bloc it had been a time of oppression. Second, it tended to disregard the fact that “Entspannungspolitik” had taken place in the context of a security alliance with NATO and the politics of nuclear deterrence.

However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s a reinvigorated peace movement emerged in Western Germany (the peace movement often centered around church life developed under very different circumstances in Eastern Germany) precisely against the politics of nuclear deterrence.

The NATO Double-Track Decision in 1979, which offered Warsaw Pact states a reduction of medium- and intermedium-range ballistic missiles, but also threatened the deployment of more medium-range nuclear weapons in Western Europe, strengthened the peace movement which had already become more vibrant by the mid 1970s. In the 1980s large peaceful protest against nuclear armament took place on a regular basis in the 1980s and the tradition of "Ostermärsche" (Easter marches), who already originated in the 1950s, exists until this day.

While the peace movements did not manage to impede Germany's support of the NATO Double-Track Decision, they did mobilize and politicize considerable parts of German society. It was no coincidence that the German Green Party was founded in 1980, many of its most prominent members were active participants in the peace movements. Anti-Americanism was an element within the West German peace movements, with some activists even going so far as to question Western Germany's integration into NATO and the Western security alliance.

There has been some debate among German historians about the Soviet Union's role in these movements. Though it is not accurate to characterize the West German peace movement as the creation and the puppet of the Kremlin, there can be no doubt that Moscow attempted to use the peace movement for its own political purposes, while suppressing dissidence at home. The GDR also channeled funds toward peace activists in the West. In its propaganda the Soviet Union instrumentalized the protests as alleged proof that Western government's policies were not only dangerous, but also against the wishes of its citizens. Communists were active in the peace movements as were both the Catholic and the Protestant churches, feminists groups and environmental activists. This movement was, in other words, politically and culturally pluralistic, united in large parts by the fear of nuclear escalation in Europe and in the world.

The "Krefelder Appell" (Krefeld appeal), published in November 1981, has been described as the "minimal consensus" of the movement by calling on the German government not to consent to the NATO Double-Track decision, declaring that it did not want "Central Europe to become the weapons platform of the US". The appeal was signed by approximately four million German citizens. It lay in the logic of the decision-making process, that this appeal was directed to the German government and looked in particular toward the USA as the culprit for an escalation of the arms race between the two blocs. However, it also points to a blind spot with regard to the aggressive policies of the Soviet Union.

In Germany in particular, this fear of nuclear escalation has been revived since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. Putin's rhetoric of fear with regard to the deployment of nuclear weapons has, at least in parts of German society, fallen onto fertile ground. The numerous "open letters" calling on the government to reduce or suspend its military

support of Ukraine have all warned against the possibility of “nuclear escalation”. Regularly politicians and commentators who are against supporting Ukraine have declared – historically inaccurate – that “you cannot win a war against a nuclear power”. Russia’s genocidal war against Ukraine has also revealed the fundamental moral and intellectual flaws of what is now left of the German peace movement of the 1980s. During the “Easter Marches” in 2022 and 2023, self-proclaimed pacifists not only spoke out against supporting Ukraine in its struggle to survive, but some even failed to name the aggressor in this war.

A prominent example of this moral and intellectual failure is the former spokeswoman of the Protestant Church in Germany, Margot Käßmann, who has from the beginning of the full-scale invasion opposed Germany’s solidarity with and military support for Ukraine and advocates for “negotiations” without ever answering the question what Ukraine should “negotiate” as long as Russia aims to destroy it both as a nation and state.