

German pacifism

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As recently as 1 April, a group of mostly retired German Social Democratic politicians and trade union officials published an open letter calling for peace with Russia. This publication hardly came as a surprise. There's been a series of open letters and statements by current and retired politicians, veterans of peace and civil rights movements, opinion and religious leaders, cultural figures, real and self-proclaimed intellectuals, and illustrious TV personalities calling for an immediate ceasefire and diplomacy instead of providing Ukraine with arms and other forms of military support.

The latest letter was co-authored by historian Peter Brandt, son of former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. As expected, the appeal includes a reference to Brandt's policy of *détente* as the supposed cornerstone of European unity and peace. It states: "The war [in Ukraine] has turned into a bloody static battle (*Stellungskrieg*) in which there are only losers. A large part of our citizens do not want to see a spiral of violence without end. Instead of the dominance of the military, we need the language of diplomacy and peace."

The choice of words is revealing. At first glance, the letter is striking for its focus on "us", i.e. German citizens, and their presumed wishes and needs. This distorted perspective is common to all German appeals for peace, but it would be too short-sighted to dismiss it as a mere expression of narcissistic indifference to the country that is actually under attack and fighting for its very survival. There is more to it. The call to "listen to us" is usually accompanied by the argument that weapons would only prolong wars and that no war has ever been ended with weapons. This is a remarkable position to take, especially in Germany, which was defeated in two world wars, in both of which it was the aggressor. One might have the impression that a part of German society has forgotten its past, but it is rather stuck in it and has never moved forward. In the lifetimes of all German citizens and their not-so-distant ancestors, Germany has never fought a defensive war or a war of liberation, nor sided with countries that did. The only perspective from which German society can view a war is that of the aggressor, the fighting party, which has the freedom both not to start the war and to end it unilaterally.

The mention of the static battle, typical of current German peace rhetoric, is a direct reference primarily to the First World War. Such battles are characterized by very little change and heavy losses; the longer they last, the more people die. The temporary lack of events on the battlefield in Ukraine, caused by many factors (winter, shortage of weapons and ammunition, the need to replace troops), reminds German pacifists of the infamous *Stellungskrieg*, the agonizing fight for nothing on the side of the attackers. The 2022 German WWI film "All Quiet on the Western Front" based on the 1929 novel of the same name by Erich Maria Remarque, which recently won four Oscars, depicts precisely this vision of a war as a brutal and utterly pointless meat grinder. This is the war that the Germans pacifists are opposing.

This is something that German pacifism has in common with Russian neo-imperial militarism. Both are rooted in the political realities and concepts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; today they feel deeply archaic. They still see the world as dominated by great empires and divided into their spheres of interests. Ironically, the German calls for peace only amplify this imperial view of Europe. Seen this way, the outcome of a European war is a mere shifting of borders with little to no effect on the lives of the population, a change of jurisdiction rather than subjection to entirely new circumstances, and possibly oppression and genocide. This partly explains why German pacifists remain so unmoved by the fact that Russia's war against Ukraine is the first war of aggression launched by a dictatorship against a democracy in recent decades. The idea that Ukraine should "give up some territories" for the sake of peace is rooted in the late 19th century perception that political differences between European countries, from republican France to the absolutist Russian Empire, were non-essential and negligible at the level of "ordinary people", if one generously ignores all non-privileged groups, be they women, ethnic or religious minorities. It is the less privileged, the inferior, who are not included in the "we" of German calls for peace.

In line with this historical tradition, modern German pacifism regards the mere desire for independence and self-determination as a manifestation of nationalism, which in turn is rarely seen as an emancipatory movement, but as an evil far-right ideology essentially related to National Socialism and a cause of violent turmoil. Yet it is not the rejection of violence that turns the left against Ukraine. The German left has historically been highly skeptical of national liberation movements that ran counter the very project of the borderless communist utopia. In her 1918 pamphlet "On the Russian Revolution" the socialist thinker and anti-war activist Rosa Luxemburg blamed Finland, Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic countries, the Caucasian countries - the "peripheral countries", as she called them - for abandoning the cause of the revolution and siding with the enemy: "one after the other, these 'nations' took advantage of their freshly bestowed freedom in order to ally themselves with German imperialism". She criticized the leader of the Russian revolution, Lenin, for supporting Ukrainian self-determination which in her eyes was the worst of all: "Ukrainian nationalism in Russia was very different from, for instance, the Czech, Polish or Finnish varieties: it was nothing but a mere whim, a folly of a few dozen petty-bourgeois members of the intelligentsia, without the slightest roots in the economic, political or intellectual relations of the country, without any historical tradition (given that Ukraine had never formed a nation or a state), without any national culture apart from the reactionary, romantic poems of Shevchenko."

The echoes of this thinking are astonishingly loud in the present. More than just another reminder of the political hate rhetoric of the past, the pamphlet was recently republished by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, also in an English translation. It was cited by left-wing publications, most notably by Junge Welt on 8 March 2014, as Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms were taking hold of Crimea, from where it found its way to the websites of various peace initiatives. In a 2014 interview, former German Social Democratic Chancellor Helmut Schmidt relativised Russia's aggression by declaring that Ukraine was not a nation, and in 2022 Russia's ruler Putin himself parroted Luxemburg's idea that Ukraine was invented by Lenin in

his de facto declaration of war on Ukraine. Luxemburg's statement that the Ukrainian desire for independence "provided the cover for the creeping advance of German bayonets" could well have been a quote from one of the latest German peace manifestos, or a poster from the recent Easter peace marches.

These marches demonstrated once again the ability of right-wing and left-wing movements to unite around a common cause. This is hardly a new phenomenon. The tradition of annual Easter peace marches, which grew out of protests against the acquisition and deployment of nuclear weapons, dates back to 1960. Although widely perceived as left-wing, the movement has had supporters from across the political spectrum. One of the key figures in German post-war pacifism, whose influence continues to this day, was Martin Niemöller, a theologian and co-founder of the anti-Nazi Confessing Church. Niemöller was a staunch conservative who never tried to hide his nationalist and antisemitic views. He served in the First World War as a submarine captain in the German Imperial Navy and voted for the Nazis as early as 1924. However, he opposed the Nazis' attempts to subordinate the Protestant Church to the state, which made him their enemy. He was arrested in 1937 and imprisoned in various concentration camps until 1945. In 1939, while a prisoner in Sachsenhausen, he wrote to Hitler asking to be reinstated as a submarine captain, but Hitler refused. It was not until 1954 that Niemöller became a radical pacifist. In the name of reconciliation, he worked with the communists, traveled to North Vietnam and the Soviet Union, and was even awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1966. Niemöller is also one of the many links that bind German pacifism to the experiences and perspectives of the First World War.

Political scientist Torsten Gromes of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt analyzed the calls for Easter peace marches listed on the website of the Peace Cooperation Network. Of the 48 calls, only eight called for a Russian withdrawal from Ukraine, while a significant number relativised Russia's responsibility or even made Ukraine primarily responsible for the military escalation. Some of the calls directly portray the Ukrainian government as a powerless puppet rather than an independently acting subject, as if it were a pawn in the modern version of the 19th century Great Game between the mighty empires.

The common motive of all recent German peace manifestos is the call for negotiations, but there are some differences as to who should be the negotiating parties. Basically, ideas about the war in Ukraine oscillate between two poles: a proxy war between the US-led West and Russia, or a war in which Ukrainian nationalists don't want to give up territory to which Russia has a more or less legitimate claim. Either way, these calls imply that there is a desire for peace on both sides, and that there is indeed a conflict over some reasonable interests that can be resolved peacefully. To make this scheme work, German pacifism ascribes to the aggressor the motives and qualities that it does not have: legitimate security concerns, a genuine interest in peace and stability, and an intention to avoid loss of life. In doing so, it downplays the actual reasons for the aggression and deflects attention from Russia's real motives, such as imperial ideology, expansionism and resentment, extreme nationalism promoted by the government and widely supported by the population, and the desire to dominate. In fact, it denounces the mere

mention of these motives as war mongering. Founded as an opposition to the policy of deterrence, the German peace movement has actually succeeded in whitewashing Russia, playing down the danger of war and dismantling the very mechanism that was designed to prevent it, and now it continues to facilitate the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine by shifting the responsibility away from the aggressor.