

The Return of German Militarism

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The announcement by the new grand coalition government in Germany that the country's previous policy of military restraint is at an end marks a historic turning point. It heralds a new stage of aggressive imperialist foreign policy.

For the first time since the end of World War II and the monstrous crimes of the Nazi dictatorship, Berlin's leading politicians have clearly stated that Germany will in the future intervene in crisis areas and global hot spots more strongly and independently than before, including by military means. The days when Germany was obliged to practice military abstinence are finally over, they insist.

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party—SPD) first announced the new policy last week in the Bundestag (parliament). He said Germany was “too big and too important” to confine itself any longer “to commenting on world politics from the sidelines.”

Due to its economic power and geographical location in the centre of Europe, Germany bore a special responsibility in regard to world affairs, Steinmeier declared, adding, “We recognise our responsibility.” Germany would serve as a catalyst for a common European foreign and security policy, he said, and while the use of military force was only a last resort, it could not be ruled out.

This change of course is supported by the entire government. Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) said Germany would take on “more responsibility in NATO and other alliances” and announced a significant expansion of foreign missions by the Bundeswehr (armed forces). Von der Leyen added that she had begun to work with Steinmeier and Development Minister Gerd Müller (Christian Social Union—CSU) to develop a “strategy for Africa.”

At the Munich Security Conference last weekend, German President Joachim Gauck bluntly called for the strengthening of German military power. In a demagogic speech, he described the previous policy of military restraint as moral cowardice and freeloading.

Germany had finally to live up to its international responsibilities and change from “a beneficiary to a guarantor of international security and order,” Gauck demanded. Employing a repulsive mixture of pastoral blather and war propaganda, the former East German clergyman preached militarism in the name of humanity.

He warned that “from restraint, something like self-privilege arises” and called for a clear commitment to NATO, “even if the United States cannot always afford more.” It should, he said, be natural for Germany to intervene militarily “if human rights violations culminate in

genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity.”

This “humanitarian” war propaganda is being repeated in leading newspapers and promoted by all TV channels. *Die Welt* praised Gauck’s speech as a milestone, marking a rhetorical break with German “Ohnemicheltum” (not with me). The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* spoke of a “brilliant speech by the president” that will reverberate for a long time because it initiates a “farewell to post-war German self-diminution in foreign and security policy.” The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* praised Gauck as a warning voice against the “defensive comfort” of Germany.

This united front of the media makes clear the level of corruption in the editorial offices and reveals the thoroughgoing integration of the press into the imperialist offensive of Germany’s political elite.

There is literally no one in official politics or the media who characterizes Germany’s foreign policy reversal for what it is. Barely 70 years after the collapse of the Third Reich and 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, German imperialism is once again revealing its historical roots. It is pushing into Eastern Europe and the territories of the former Soviet Union, and reconnecting with its old colonial policy in Africa.

The events in Ukraine expose the propaganda lie that its foreign policy offensive serves the interests of democracy and freedom. The Berlin government is working with an opposition movement whose leaders include Oleh Tyahnybok of the neo-fascist All-Ukrainian Union, or “Svoboda.”

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Berlin has sought to remove Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence and bring it into its own. It wants to transform Ukraine into a low-cost platform for German and European corporations and simultaneously increase pressure on the Russian government.

The return of German imperialism and militarism to the world stage is not limited to foreign policy. It is also directed inwards, against the vast majority of the working population who reject a policy of war and expanded foreign military missions, for which they are forced to pay the costs.

For this reason, the foreign policy shift that had long been planned did not feature in last year’s general election campaign. It was prepared behind the backs of the people. Despite endless TV debates and election meetings, the real plans were concealed from the population in a veritable political conspiracy.

It is no coincidence that the Social Democratic Party has taken the initiative for the foreign policy turn in the grand coalition. More than any other party, it is closely connected with the state apparatus and places state interests above party interests.

Fifteen years ago, it was the Social Democrats, then in a coalition with the Greens, who championed a Bundeswehr combat mission outside the NATO treaty area and ushered in the transformation of the conscription-based Bundeswehr into a professional army. The military offensive was bound up with the social attacks embodied in the government’s Agenda 2010.

And so it is today. Alongside the expansion of Germany’s military capacity, the government is planning an Agenda 2020 that will go far beyond the current social cuts.

In this, it has the support of all the other parliamentary parties. The Greens, who govern in the state of Hesse with the CDU and are currently negotiating a drastic austerity programme, have already signalled their support to the federal government. At the Bundestag sitting at which Foreign Minister Steinmeier proclaimed the end of military restraint, the Green Party parliamentary group voted in favour of extending the mandate of 400 German soldiers and two units of the Patriot air defence system in Turkey.

While the Left Party voted against the extension of the Turkey mandate, since a majority in favour was secure without its consent, it has also signalled support for a more aggressive German foreign policy. In mid-January, together with Green Party politician Agnieszka Brugger, Left Party Member of Parliament Stefan Liebich published a strategy paper supporting foreign military missions if they were covered by a mandate from the United Nations and served the “strengthening of human rights.”

Last autumn, Liebich co-authored a strategy paper for the Science and Politics Foundation on the topic “New Power—New Responsibility: Elements of German Foreign and Security Policy for a Changing World.” The paper argued in favour of the current foreign policy shift.

The working class must treat very seriously the return of German imperialism and militarism. The past century saw two world wars, fascist dictatorship and the Holocaust. To prevent another such catastrophe, the struggle against war must be combined with the fight against unemployment and cuts in social spending.

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