

The crisis in Die Linke

Tuesday 25 April 2023, by [MASON Paul](#) (Date first published: 27 May 2022).

Why the German left should stop opposing arms to Ukraine

[This article consists of a reply to an essay by Harald Wolf and Raul Zelik and a separate polemic by Zelik against my support for Ukraine. It's long because it needs to be.]

Die Linke is in crisis. It only narrowly squeaked through to gain parliamentary representation in the 2021 Federal election; has failed to gain seats in three regional elections; has been damaged by a #MeToo scandal and is openly split over Ukraine.

On one side stand a historic faction of “Putin-understanders”; on the other, those who condemn the Russian invasion but remain opposed to sending arms to Ukraine on grounds of anti-militarism. As a result, the party’s MPs voted alongside the far-right AfD against arms supplies, inflicting further reputational damage.

The contribution of [Harald Wolf and Raul Zelik](#) on how to resolve this crisis is a step in the right direction. It identifies the key problems that have undermined *Die Linke*’s support. Namely:

- a foreign policy framework rooted in “campism” which sees NATO and the USA as the main aggressor in all conflicts;
- the tendency to underestimate the dictatorial/aggressive nature of Putin’s system;
- the determination of some high-profile MPs/activists to give the impression they are “Putin-understanders” (a not very veiled reference to Sara Wagenknecht).
- the failure to adequately prioritise radical policies on climate change;
- a pattern of getting drawn into culture war debates on German TV, allowing the right-wing media to portray the party as insensitive to its voting base;
- the practice of combining revolutionary rhetoric with technocratic government where the party holds power in regional government.

But the Wolf/Zelik article skirts around two major problems.

First, *Die Linke*’s crisis can be traced to this fundamental truth: **there are two Marxisms and they are incompatible**. As the historian Edward Thompson [wrote in the 1970s](#): “one is a theology, the other is a tradition of active reason”. They are not two branches of the same political philosophy: they are fundamentally opposed to each other.

Wolf/Zelik’s mistake is to assume, because all the party’s adherents are anti-capitalist, pro-planet, anti-austerity etc, that these philosophical differences can be contained in the same organisation. They cannot.

Secondly: The party’s unwillingness to face this truth stems from its origins and its position in the German party system. Formed out of the remnants of the East German communism and the anticapitalist WASG in 2007, its [programme](#) states:

“Die Linke will never agree to German participation in a war. War does not solve any problems, it is always part of the problem”.

Though it struck the demand for the abolition of NATO from its [Sofortprogram](#) at the 2021 election, its leader, Janine Wissler [reiterated](#) the call for NATO’s dissolution, and for a collective security alliance with Russia. Even as Russian troops massed on Ukraine’s borders the party proposed a €10bn cut in defence spending.

Before the Ukraine invasion there were high hopes that *Die Linke*’s electoral progress could put it in position to offer a Red-Red-Green alliance government at Federal level. Today it is clear that *Die Linke* can never join a Federal government unless it commits overtly to NATO’s Article V provision — which obliges Germany to go to war if an ally is attacked. And disarmament is off the agenda.

What kind of party?

All political parties are coalitions — of ideologies, demographic groups and material interests. *Die Linke* is essentially a coalition of the former East German communist party voters and the radical and ex-social-democratic left of West Germany, combined with a new generation that didn’t experience either reality, and hoped they could bury their differences (and their legacies) through practice and focusing on the future.

If the German political system creates room for an anti-capitalist party that can achieve above 5% in Federal elections, and govern in coalition at *Länder* and city level, then such a party should exist — in particular because the Greens are now acting effectively as a left-liberal party, leaving a gap to the left of mainstream social democracy.

But there is an unanswered question haunting *Die Linke*: what kind of party does it want to be?

This question may have seemed pointless before the Ukraine war: the party is a historical creation of circumstance; it wins votes; it has so far contained its inner tensions. But the war, and the acute global crisis it is the symptom of, demand clarity — not just from the organisation but its members.

I have noticed, in the Corbyn movement and parties like *Podemos* and *Die Linke*, the phenomenon of activists harbouring a “Leninist soul in a social-democratic body”.

Privately, they maintain Leninist theoretical assumptions — disbelief in the possibility of reforming the state; routine defeatism in war; differential hostility to the US imperialism; indifference to international law and principle — including the “responsibility to protect” defenceless civilians from genocide; and opposition to any form of moral philosophy.

Yet publicly, their practice is effectively left social-democratic. They act as if the bourgeois state can be used to enact socialism; treat the state apparatus as legitimate; adopt pacifist, rather than revolutionary defeatist slogans in response to war, and use moral concepts such as social justice.

For *Die Linke* as a whole, such doublethink has become a way of avoiding the question: what does an anti-capitalist electoral party look like in an age when a) we need to decarbonise the world sometime in the 2030s (ie under a form of capitalism) and b) there is no revolutionary class consciousness among proletariat?

The failure to give a coherent answer allowed the party to be squeezed between a resurgent SPD and an increasingly confident Green Party in 2021. Today, in the new conditions of the Ukraine war, there is only one answer.

The only point to a German anti-capitalist party should be the ambition to serve in a Federal government, pushing social-democracy and the Greens to the left on the significant issues facing workers and young people, while mobilising the grassroots struggles over climate, social justice, housing etc in the direction of a challenge to the profit system.

Everything that gets in the way of this has to be discarded. Even during periods in opposition, by creating a viable governing programme, a revitalised *Linkspartei* could exert political pressure on behalf of the exploited and oppressed throughout the system. It could also play an organising and educative role for those resisting neoliberalism, racism, sexism and the far-right. But it needs clarity and coherence — from its political philosophy to its programme to its tactics.

So, although Selik/Wolf are right to say “don’t waste time with a discussion over a detailed programme” — it’s pretty obvious that *Die Linke* needs to be refounded on new political principles, sidelining the pro-Putin wing and those more interested in gestural politics than power.

The price, in the short term, might be to keep the party’s vote below the 5% threshold . But even by the next Federal elections, the gain could be considerable.

The unavoidable step is to break with the philosophical legacy of Stalinism.

Marxism as a “tradition of active reason” sees itself as a product of the Enlightenment, and as a legitimate part of the Western politico-philosophic tradition. It has broken overtly and complexly with Leninism. Its critique of liberalism is constructive. It sees its route to power as elections, backed by mass mobilisations and grass roots organising. It fully accepts the legitimacy of the bourgeois state, the universal nature of human rights, the validity of the post-1945 UN charter system, and thus international law.

Theological Marxism, by contrast, inherits from the Stalinist Comintern a profound anti-humanism. It sees history as a “process without a subject” (Althusser). It remains differentially hostile to the democratic imperialist powers of the West, and differentially tolerant of the totalitarian dictatorships in Moscow and Beijing. Though it participates in elections, it tacitly believes the bourgeois state cannot be used to effect radical change, and therefore remains relaxed about not being in power. It has no attachment to universal human rights, or the rules-based international order and regards liberalism with differential hostility.

In practice, within *Die Linke* (as with Corbynism) because these traditions never properly confront each other at the level of philosophy, large numbers of activists exist “somewhere in the middle”. Their politics become a pick-and-mix of those advanced by the competing wings.

The Ukraine war as detonator

We need to understand why the Ukraine war has blown things apart in a way all previous crises did not.

Wolf/Zelik correctly state that Putin’s attack on Ukraine is driven by the need to delegitimise any form of democracy in a country whose language, religion and culture is adjacent to that of Russia. But they fail to understand the true magnitude of the conflict.

On 4 February 2022 Russia and China [announced](#) an era of systemic competition with the West. They demanded an end to the rules-based international order, and to any universal concept of human rights. Though many leftists preferred to sit in polite silence about the declaration, the most dedicated voices in Neo-Stalinism made it clear: they actively support this new and fully theorised framework for international relations.

Today, the world situation has to be framed within this systemic conflict. The Ukraine war is not simply a just war of national self-defence, by a population that will see its rights destroyed if Putin wins. It also, for sure, bears aspects of a proxy conflict between US imperialism, EU imperialism and Russian imperialism, over geographic spheres of influence, the mode of extracting surplus value and who gets the profit.

But **its decisive quality is systemic**: it is a conflict between a flawed-democratic form of capitalism, in which democracy and human rights create space for self-organisation and freedom of speech — and a thoroughly totalitarian form of fossil capitalism, whose rulers stand justifiably accused of genocide, have pre-emptively threatened the West with nuclear attack and are wielding power in a way reminiscent of the inter-war fascist states.

The outbreak of systemic conflict between a totalitarian dictatorship and the fragile democracies of the West is not just “another thing that happened”: it is a world-historic moment, demanding strategic adaptation by all those confronted with it.

For the workers I met in Kyiv, the Ukrainian army and its territorial brigades are all that stand in the way of torture, kidnap, the dissolution of their organisations and the atomisation of the society they are trying to protect. They remain highly critical of the Zelensky administration, and of the oligarchic capitalism it represents: yet they support Ukraine’s resistance and have in some cases volunteered for military service.

So Wolf/Zelick are mistaken when they write:

“In the geopolitical competition between the capitalist superpowers USA and China, leftists have nothing to gain; our place is alongside all those political movements and parties fighting for solidarity, equality and basic democratic rights in their countries.”

A concrete analysis of the stakes, and listening to the Ukrainian working class reveals facts that contradict this assertion.

To be alongside the workers, left parties and social movements of Ukraine means supporting their right to resist; supporting the army that protects them and mobilising to send arms, money and medical supplies via the only vehicle currently available: the Federal German state. It also means mobilising the German state to place pressure on the Ukrainian state over the social conditions of reconstruction.

But here’s where the doublethink kicks in. Wolf/Zelik continue:

“Our solidarity and loyalty is not to states, but to striking Chinese migrant workers and the independent trade unions in Hong Kong, the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, the anti-authoritarian human rights groups and anti-war groups in Russia...”

This is meaningless in the context of Ukraine, and betrays — again — a lack of seriousness about pursuing state power through electoral means.

An anti-capitalist party can be critical of the state, promote internationalism against the national chauvinism etc. But it cannot avoid the basic task of any party that wants to govern: to ensure national security through the maintenance of a coercive state.

The Marxist tradition never had a problem with supporting wars waged by states where they served the interest of the working class, or of anti-imperialism — from Marx’s support for the French Republic in 1870, to supporting the USSR against Nazism, to solidarity with Vietnam in the 1960s

and 70s.

When the Ukrainian army's ammunition runs out, Russia will take and annex territory. In that territory trade unions, feminist groups, human rights defenders and left political parties will be shut down and their activists jailed and tortured. Voting to prevent arms supplies from Germany will have facilitated that.

So, just as in the Allied countries in the Second World War, leftists do have something to gain from the defeat of a totalitarian/genocidal armed power by a democratic capitalist power. That is why it *Die Linke* should rescind its opposition to Germany supplying arms to Ukraine, and work for the military victory of Ukraine in its war with Russia.

NATO and anti-militarism

It is not necessary for *Die Linke* to accept that forming NATO was a good idea, or to stifle criticisms of NATO's out-of-area interventions. But it needs to get its thinking straight on NATO and militarism.

Unlike the Finnish and Swedish left, *Die Linke* doesn't have to agonise over whether to join NATO. Germany is already a NATO member and committed to its Article V mutual self-defence pact. Any attempt to leave NATO (or "dissolve it" as the Neo-Stalinists currently demand) would be a geo-strategic victory for Putin.

Die Linke, therefore should simply state that, if it were to enter a governing coalition it would uphold Germany's NATO membership and fulfil its obligations in terms of Article V and the 2% of GDP spending commitment. At the same time, it should outline a programme of democratic reform, both of NATO, the European Union and the German armed forces.

***Die Linke* should become, in practice, a radically left-wing social democratic party.**

On the German left there is a justified hostility to "militarism" given the country's brutal military traditions pre-1945, their historic fusion with Nazism, and the lingering nostalgia for them on the right. But in a period where the national security of the Federal Republic, in particular its energy security, is threatened as never before, we need to ask what "anti-militarism" actually means.

For [Karl Liebknecht](#), it was about recognising that the standing army, separate from the people, brutalising its recruits and using them against strikes and colonial uprisings, was an essential part of the capitalist system. The way to combat militarism was through agitation, education, political rights for soldiers and through international disarmament, removing the excuse for the arms race.

But Marxist anti-militarism has never been pacifism. In the new situation of the *Zeitenwende* Germany, like all democracies, will need to modernise its armed forces and spend more on them. *Die Linke* should not oppose this.

Instead it should say: yes to rearmament in defence of democracy — but yes, also, to the democratic rights for soldiers; a reserve system to root the army more strongly in the community; and forcefully eradicating far right networks in the police and army.

In addition it should place demands on NATO and its nuclear armed leading powers — eg No First Use of Nuclear Weapons, a declaration that their "sole purpose" is deterrence, compulsory recognition of the International Criminal Court, no "out of area" operations etc.

By doing this, the party's long tradition of anti-militarism, which is supported by large numbers of potential voters, can be expressed in a new way, which meets the demands of the new situation.

Zelik's polemic in Der Freitag

On 2 May Raul Zelik additionally penned an [attack on my position](#) in *Der Freitag*, which I want to respond to here.

Zelik acknowledges I have been a consistent critic of Putin, (he could have added that I was warning about the danger of an invasion more than a year ago). He admits my position — defend Ukraine, arm Ukraine — is likely the only operational position possible for the Ukrainian left. But he distorts my argument:

“Mason not only demanded arms deliveries immediately after the outbreak of war, but also propagated a new alliance of the left with NATO. “The democracies” absolutely have to win the war against Putin’s authoritarianism — also militarily, according to Mason, in agreement with the German Greens and other transatlanticists”.

First, I do not advocate an “alliance of the left with NATO”. I simply advocate — as Jeremy Corbyn did when he was Labour leader — staying within NATO, honouring the Article V and 2% GDP commitments, but demanding radical reform of the Alliance, in accord with its stated principles of defensiveness, democracy, liberty and the rule of law.

I have produced a [detailed proposal](#) on this, which I hope will inspire the social-democratic and green governments at the Madrid summit to move the centre of gravity of the alliance away from the US-UK and towards Europe.

Second, for clarity, I do not advocate that NATO wage *war* against Putin’s Russia. Ukraine is not a NATO member and not covered by Article V. In fact, before the war I argued that Ukraine should not be admitted and that the “open door policy” — without more serious conditionality — was a diplomatic mistake. On 12 February I [wrote](#):

The left should demand that NATO becomes a defensive-only alliance of democracies. The open door policy — which allows new entrants to significantly tip the balance of geopolitics at will — needs to be scrapped.

Third, my position is not the result of some wild political evolution, along the lines of Christopher Hitchens in the Iraq war. Zelik accuses me of moving:

“From anti-capitalism to anti-fascism to NATO — a bizarre, albeit unfortunately widespread, twist. Decades of theoretical and political work to finally arrive at the age-old anti-communist narrative, according to which the struggle between East and West is identical to that between dictatorship and freedom”.

Nowhere have I said that “East vs West” is identical to “dictatorship vs freedom”. I [wrote](#), instead, that:

The West, going forward, is everybody who does not want to live in the world they have designed. Everybody who wants one definition of democracy, one yardstick for human rights, and one peer-reviewed body of scientific knowledge. The West will be a mindset that can inhabit the brains of people in Moscow and Beijing just as much as Putin’s mindset increasingly inhabits the brains of presenters on Fox News.

Since 2015 I have described myself as a “revolutionary reformist” or “radical social democrat”. The mistake I made, during the years between the 2011 uprisings and the early years of Corbynism, was to assume that the “two Marxisms” could co-exist within a broadly democratic, anti-austerity and

pro-planet left.

I wrote *Klare Lichte Zukunft* under the dawning realisation that the 21st century was going expose the left to the ideological influence of Xi Jin Ping's "Sinicised Marxism", to a large scale Russian influence operation and to a thoroughgoing skepticism about rationality — though I could barely imagine a section of the left overtly supporting Putin's genocidal war.

And then I watched Neo-Stalinism destroy Corbynism — as it destroys everything it touches — by embracing Brexit, adopting a fatally complacent attitude to Putinism and launching a bureaucratic attack on those who disagreed.

The dangers of the Ukrainian defencist position

What are the dangers of my position on Ukraine? Zelik spells them out. First, that — as a result of the USA taking control of Western strategy during the Ramstein conference — the inter-imperialist aspect of the war could become dominant: the USA could move from "weakening Russia" to trying to crush, invade or humiliate Russia.

Second, that Zelensky's administration, under the pressures of war and oligarchy, turns itself in a totalitarian direction, partly destroying the premise for defending Ukraine. Third that the USA under Trump, or Poland on its own, stages some kind of militarist provocation to draw NATO directly into the conflict. Finally, as Habermas argues, there is a risk that even some minor victory on the battlefield by Ukraine triggers the fear of strategic defeat in Putin's mind, causing him to launch a nuclear attack.

Of these risks, I think the first is the biggest. Not because Biden and Blinken harbour aggressive goals against Russia but because there is a small chance that the Russian state will suddenly collapse, tempting the USA (and its most Russophobic NATO allies like Estonia/Poland) into some kind of offensive war. That would most likely be justified by the (real) threat that Russia's nuclear warheads are being stolen by warring mafiosi, or that another Chernobyl is imminent. In this case, I would demand that the UN be the sole body that could authorise intervention.

As to a Zelensky (or post-Zelensky) Bonapartism — it's possible; so is the emergence of armed far-right factions within Ukrainian civil society, if any ceasefire is imposed against their will. In either case the workers will resist.

As to a second Trump presidency, it would shatter US democracy, trigger a low-level civil war and probably take the USA out of NATO. In this case, the Ukrainian people are doomed to a further Russian onslaught, because — after years of pacifism and *Ostpolitik* — the military powers of Europe can do nothing without the USA. That's why I have argued that, as an insurance policy, the EU must formalise its demand for Strategic Autonomy, and NATO must elevate the EU to the status of an alliance member.

Wartime anti-fascism as a model

I am not surprised that the outbreak of a systemic conflict, between totalitarian capitalism and democratic capitalism, has disoriented the global left.

Many had bought into Hardt-Negri's theory of *Empire*, in which such inter-state conflicts were impossible. Those coming from the Trotskyist tradition never fully accounted for the mistakes of the Fourth International, which (citing Lenin's *Imperialism*) refused to see the anti-Nazi resistance movements as a form of just war. As for the Stalinist tradition, its gyrations over the Popular Front and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had, by 1941, dissolved any theoretical coherence.

As a result, there is no commonly accepted methodology among 21st century Marxists for dealing with a systemic conflict between dictatorships and democracies. At the outbreak of the last global systemic conflict, our tradition was shattered. But we can learn from the British antifascist left, which in the late 1930s had to undergo the same test.

The Labour Party, from its origins, was a pacifist party. Faced with the victory of Nazism in Germany, a combination of the democratic, anti-fascist left and the pro-imperialist trade union bureaucracy shifted Labour's position to support for British rearmament. Figures like George Orwell, the left Labour MP Aneurin Bevan, and Tom Wintringham, the commander of the British battalion at Jarama, (who split from the CP in 1937) evolved the project of "revolutionary patriotism".

Meanwhile, at the outbreak of war in 1939, the Communist Party of Great Britain rushed out a [bestselling pamphlet](#) arguing:

"The Communist Party supports the war, believing it to be a just war. To stand aside from this conflict, to contribute only revolutionary-sounding phrases while the fascist beasts ride roughshod over Europe, would be a betrayal of everything our forebears have fought to achieve in the course of long years of struggle against capitalism.... The prosecution of this war necessitates a struggle on two fronts. First to secure the military victory over fascism, and second, to achieve this, the political victory over the enemies of democracy in Britain."

Tragically, within two weeks, the Comintern ordered the CPGB to reverse this position, in support of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It was forced to denounce Britain's war aims as "imperialist" and demand "a people's peace" with Hitler.

This opened a wide space for Labour's radical anti-fascist left who, by contrast, originated the slogan of "a people's war", demanding a welfare state and a post-war order based on international legality.

This left-social democratic "revolutionary patriotic" movement enjoyed wide support. They understood that, for the working class of democratic countries, faced with invasion by a totalitarian dictatorship, the Leninist position of "defeat on both sides" is nonsense. The workers will resist whatever it says in Lenin's *Imperialism*.

Bevan had been expelled from Labour for advocating an anti-fascist popular front with Churchill before the war (a demand that came to fruition after the Norway debacle in May 1940). Wintringham formed a left-wing populist party called Commonwealth and set up a guerrilla warfare training school, to prepare a revolutionary resistance to a Nazi invasion. Orwell [promoted](#) the project of socialist transformation in wartime.

The British left's position in 1939-1940 was pretty close to that of the left-wing group *Sotsialny Rukh*, who wrote at the outbreak of the Ukraine war that only a socialist and democratic Ukraine can defeat a totalitarian Russia. The opportunity to turn this into a people's war, sweeping away Ukraine's oligarchic *systema* may arrive, once Putin's armies are defeated.

Arm Ukraine!

Some of the leftists I met in Kyiv are in now in the territorial defence brigades. The heaviest weapon in their disposal is a Maxim gun, made in 1944.

The practical question is how do they get better weapons, body armour, thermal imaging and training? None of this can be easily supplied bilaterally, between leftists within civil society (though

we are trying). But it could easily be supplied by the Federal German state.

Once their bullets run out — which would be the practical outcome of *Die Linke*'s vote in the Bundestag — they will be forced to surrender, to an army that routinely tortures, rapes and executes people just for being Ukrainian, let alone leftist.

History — and the German electorate — will judge harshly any party that goes on refusing practical solidarity with the great anti-fascist struggle of our time.

Paul Mason

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P.S.

Medium

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