

For the sake of Peace?

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Is it enough to demonstrate against Putin's war on the streets? A pacifism at the expense of others only serves one's own well-being: Why I can't sign the appeal against new armaments. A guest post.

What happened on February 24th and since then? The unthinkable, the incomprehensible: a brutal war in Europe, on our continent, which had gotten off so lightly in a troubled world over the past decades! This is a historic turning point. There is no other comparison: just as Hitler's Germany invaded neighbouring Poland in 1939, Putin's Russia is waging a war of aggression against its neighbouring country Ukraine. And violates all the rules and treaties that have so far made up the European peace order, disregards international law, and destroys European peace with Ukraine.

Putin commits fratricide. The number of dead is unknown, the number of refugees is in the millions, the destruction of towns and villages is incalculable, the suffering of the people is endless. The pictures make you sad and angry and desperate. They must be cause for reflection - about Western, European politics, about peace ethics, peace movements, peace politics.

Preventing a war (at least) in Europe was our goal, which united the peace movement and European politics. It failed! What are the necessary consequences of this bitter defeat? We have to ask ourselves this question. A pacifist who doesn't have any self-doubt or irritation when faced with the pictures from Ukraine probably doesn't have a sensitive heart. If you have answers that are too quick, you may be lacking in cleverness.

I was at the big Berlin demonstrations against Putin's war and saw different posters, including those: "Soldiers are murderers", "Imagine, there is a war and nobody goes there" or "Make peace

without weapons". The slogans of the old peace movement seem outdated, at least thoughtless, and to Ukrainians they must seem cynical.

It was the weakness of the West

The peace movement in particular should face the shock caused by this war of aggression by Putin and Russia and not defiantly cling to old certainties and beliefs. The concept of just peace, the principle of peace ethics: recognizing the causes of conflict, dealing with them, facilitating their peaceful solution - that is not simply done. But we have to ask ourselves what good old concepts and principles are still worth in the face of a war that violates international law. And whether this war hasn't changed the coordinates for peace policy.



The slogans of the old peace movement seem outdated, at least thoughtless, and to Ukrainians they must seem cynical. :Image: picture-alliance

In any case, the peace movement will only remain credible if it faces up to the bitter fact: It was the weakness and disunity of the West and the lack of protection in Ukraine that could and had to be (mis)understood by Putin as an encouragement to aggression! The Afghanistan fiasco made it very clear that America can no longer be regarded as a global regulatory power. That Ukraine 1994 its nuclear weapons surrendered to Russia (against Russia's guarantee of the inviolability

of its borders), had abolished conscription and had not become a member of NATO for an indefinite period of time, making it an apparently easy victim of Putin's Greater Russian ambitions. Putin knew that NATO would not intervene. The result is a bloody war that was not provoked by NATO's aggressiveness, but is due to Putin's ideologically justified geopolitical aggressiveness.

Yes, the West is a danger for Putin's Russia - because freedom, democracy, the rule of law and prosperity are life-threatening attractiveness for Putin's authoritarian-dictatorial regime in the tradition of the tsars and Stalin. This danger was drawn closer by the Orange Revolution and the Maidan, by the (suppressed) democracy movement in Belarus. It is threatening from the Baltic States and from the Central and Eastern European countries that once belonged to the Soviet system. "The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century," Putin proclaimed twenty years ago. Should we react by not supporting Ukraine - for the sake of peace, for the sake of the large number of victims? With no upgrade? One may be able to demand reasonable defencelessness from oneself. But from others? That would be pacifism at the expense of others. That would only be a solidarity of one's own well-being.

"If you want to be heard, you have to have power"

Is it enough to condemn Putin's war and demonstrate against him? For many of us, ordinary people without power, this will have to do. But does this also apply to German and European politics, the politics of the West?

How I would like, like so many others, to sign the beautiful appeal against "armament," but I lack certainty. More than ever I have become aware of the ambivalence of pacifism. More than ever I doubt whether my own peacefulness is enough against the aggressiveness of another who has already taken action.

Ironically, the President of Finland, the neutralized neighbour of Russia, says: "Anyone who wants to be heard must have power"! This is reminiscent of the détente policy of the 1960s and 1980s. I think it - against all brisk accusations - for a success story. Because it is one of the prerequisites for the happy turn of events in European history in 1989/90, for the end of Soviet communism and overcoming the cold East-West system conflict.



The fact that Ukraine had surrendered its nuclear weapons to Russia, abolished conscription and had not become a NATO member for an indefinite period of time made it an apparently easy victim of Putin's Greater Russian ambitions: demonstration in Hamburg, late March. :Image: dpa

However, against possible détente romanticism, as well as against Cold War nostalgia, we should remember that the policy of détente, as advocated by [Willy Brandt](#) and Egon Bahr, had two prerequisites: on the one hand, the strength of the West, the deterrence potential of the USA and, on the other hand, the willingness of the Soviet Union to engage in negotiations and cooperation; because the USSR had become a conservative power that was no longer concerned with expansion, but rather – according to the Brezhnev Doctrine – with securing its own sphere of power. On this basis, the concept of "change through rapprochement" and "security not against each other but with each other" could be successful, cooperation could be agreed - up to the "Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe" with the Helsinki Final Act.

Was that naïve?

It was the first big step after 1945 towards a European peace order, which replaced the dangerous, because always unstable, conflict, the balance of terror. That was good politics. Because it was not war, tanks and bombs that led to the collapse of the Eastern bloc, but "soft power" and the economic strength of the West and the opposition, the citizens' movements of the East, which could refer to the CSCE agreements. The peaceful transition would not have been possible without Gorbachev, who drew the consequences from the economic weakness of the Soviet system and developed the idea of the "common house of Europe". This was followed

in 1990 by the Charter of Paris, which proclaimed the new peace order in Europe, which included the inviolability of borders, the sovereignty of states and freedom of association.

This peaceful chapter in European history was abruptly ended by Putin. Until February 24, we Germans could think that we were surrounded by friends. Until February 24, we Europeans could believe that agreements are valid, that economic ties have peacekeeping effects and are good security policies. (Just as Western European unification has been based on economic integration since the 1950s.) Was it naïve, naïve, unworldly to rely on the concept of common security? Was it good faith to stay in touch with Russia and Putin? Were the attempts wrong because they have now failed? No, they were worthwhile for the sake of peace. It was Putin's lies and deceptions, his criminal war,

Arrogance towards existential fears

Disappointment about this should not lead to a moral condemnation of all previous policies, to dumping all ideas, concepts and instruments of détente in the junk room of history. (Maybe we will need some again after the war?) But the question is: Why didn't we take Putin's words and actions seriously enough? His rhetoric and ideology were unmistakable in their increasing aggressiveness! His trail of blood stretches from Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, the annexation of Crimea and Donbass now to Ukraine! Blaming the West for this, as is done by some on the peace-moving and left-wing side, seems to me to be a dangerous denial of reality. No, that is the inescapable lesson: ignorance and defenselessness do not act as a deterrent to a potential aggressor,

The shock of war should lead the peace movement to examine self-evident certainties. This applies to the anti-American resentment, the tradition of which goes back to the time of the protests against the Vietnam War. This applies to the arrogance towards the existential fears of our East-Central European neighbors of an overpowering, aggressive Russia. In any case, even if it hurts, we should take the criticism from Poland, the Baltic countries and Ukraine more seriously. After all, this applies in general to a pacifism whose consequences others have to bear.

A self-critical pacifism recognizes that, for a peaceful world, freedom, democracy, human rights are not luxuries precisely because they are so contested globally. A historically enlightened pacifism recognizes that there is no real peace without law, that peace is a function of law, that peace can require the use of strength against unjust regimes. (Hitler's Germany is the most convincing example of this connection.) A sobered pacifism recognizes that a stable peace order can only be a rule-based order, a world of treaties and international law, the observance and enforcement of which must also concern pacifists.

Self-defence is the right of sovereign states

But what does that mean in the face of an aggressor who has nuclear weapons and might be willing to use them? In view of this, adventures of partisanship are forbidden. Unfortunately, there is a painful asymmetry in the willingness to use violence. Putin's Russia uses the most modern weapons, bombs cities and civilian targets and threatens to use nuclear weapons. This is

another reason why NATO and the EU cannot and do not want to react with the same means. The establishment of a no-fly zone, so vehemently demanded by Ukraine, would mean an unlimited war, even a world war. Their refusal was bitterly reasonable. In this respect, the West behaves in a thoroughly pacifist manner. And at the same time, in the eyes of the Ukrainians, we find the painful necessity of military restraint unbearable. At least the West supports Ukraine's ability to defend itself. According to the UN Charter, self-defence is a right of sovereign states!

What follows after the end of the war, the unspeakable suffering and misery that will continue to have an effect? Putin is a war criminal. A criminal who has nuclear weapons, therefore he cannot be ignored and cannot be defeated militarily. This is the fact that can neither be demonstrated nor prayed away. But how can you make reliable agreements with a liar and a criminal? I don't know. But I defiantly say: Diplomacy must be given its due (!) again! When the guns fall silent, it must be about politics again!



Putin's Russia is using the most modern weapons, bombing cities and civilian targets and threatening nuclear weapons. For this reason too, NATO and the EU cannot and do not want to react with the same means: military parade on Victory Day in Moscow. :Image: picture alliance/dpa/TASS

Putin is not the same as Russia. For all our angry disappointment, we must not forget that. New-old bloc formations, geopolitical antagonisms of a global nature: are they inevitable? Maybe. Are they conducive to a peaceful world? Probably not. Can they be the goal of European, Western politics, even of peace politics? Certainly not. So it will again and again be about the tiresome business of disarmament efforts, about transparency and control rules, especially for nuclear

weapons, for biological and chemical warfare agents, for cyber weapons. The danger of a renewed arms race is huge. It must also remain the case that security is more than military protection. So it will again be about economic exchange, about modernization cooperation with Russia, about scientific, cultural and, above all, civil society exchange. We must not subject everything to the logic of confrontation, but should understand that the inner civility and liberality of our societies are part of the "defensiveness" of the democratic West.

The (re)establishment of a reliable, not only European, but global order of peace is a prerequisite for the world to be able to successfully devote itself to the real problems of humanity in the twenty-first century: climate change, environmental destruction, global poverty and social injustice. Just as solving these tasks is a prerequisite for lasting global peace. The ability of democratic Europe to defend itself and its willingness to cooperate are both necessary and reasonable contributions to a new global peace order to be won.

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