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Antje Vollmer's legacy of a pacifist: "What else I have to say"

The former vice-president of the German Bundestag criticizes the Greens for turning away from pacifism. In the essay, she formulates her political conclusion. A Guest Post.

Antje Vollmer

Antje Vollmer was Vice President of the German Bundestag and signed the peace manifesto of Sahara Wagenknecht and Alice Schwarzer as the first signatory. Vollmer is a pacifist and was an opponent of the Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As an author, she has worked intensively with the actors of the 20th. July 1944 and the anti-fascist resistance. Antje Vollmer is seriously ill. You can read her text as a political legacy - it is a great reckoning with the zeitgeist. We publish the guest post in full. The editorial office.



Metodi Popow/imago

Antje Vollmer

"...And fight yourselves every day. A green diary" (1984) Antje Vollmer was born on 31. May 1943 in Lübbecke, Westphalia. She is a former vice-president of the German Bundestag and a Green politician. Among other things, she receives the Carl von Ossietzky Medal (1989), the Hannah Arendt Prize (1998) and the 2002 Masaryk Order of the Czech Republic for services to German-Czech reconciliation (awarded by President Vaclav Havel). She wrote numerous books, including: "...and defends you every day. A Green Diary" (1984), "Hot Peace. On violence, power and the secret of civilization" (1995), "Double life. Heinrich and Gottliebe von Lehnendorff in resistance against Hitler and von Ribbentrop" (2010), "Stauffenberg's companions" with Lars Broder-Keil (2013).

I stood at the train station of my hometown and waited for the ICE. Suddenly, a huge conduction approached on the siding, fully loaded with tanks - with martens, cheetahs or leopards. I can't distinguish that, but I was shocked to read the picture. The transport went from west to east.

It was not difficult to imagine the counter-image. Somewhere in the east of the continent, military transports full of Russian battle tanks rolled from east to west at the same time. They would not meet for a tank battle in the style of the First World War anywhere in Ukraine.

No, this time they would once again mark the weapon-staring abyss between two power blocks, where the world may face each other for the last time in a confrontation with a possibly apocalyptic outcome. So we were back in the Cold War and in a spiral of mutual existential threat - with no way out, no perspective. Everything I have fought against politically all my life was present to me at that moment as a single huge defeat.

When it comes to history, it is always important from which beginning you tell it

It has become customary at the beginning of every mention of the tremendous tragedy surrounding the Ukraine war as an oath formula of the "turn of the century", of Putin's brutal war of aggression contrary to international law with the established sole guilt of the Russian side and to humbly confess how much one was wrong in trusting in a phase of relaxation and reconciliation with Russia after the great turn of 1989

Where exactly did the defeat begin? Where did the error begin? When and how did this renewed deadly escalation of war, violence and block confrontation arose from one of the happiest phases in the history of the Eurasian continent, after the almost non-violent end of the Cold War? Who was interested in the fact that the then possible peaceful coexistence between East and West did not come about, but fell victim to a renewed global antagonism?

This oath formula is demanded like a ritual, like a kowtow, in order to be allowed to have a say at all. The statement is not wrong either, but it often conceals exactly the central questions that would actually have to be clarified.

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And then the question of all questions: Why did Europe, of all people, this continent with all its historical tragedies and power-political aberrations, find the strength to become the center of a peaceful vision for the endangered planet?

For the interpretation of historical events, it is always crucial with which aspects you begin to tell a story.

Russia's large advance of the renunciation of violence

I contradict today's thesis that in 1989 there was an established European peace order, which was then unilaterally destroyed step by step on the part of Russia under the dictates of the KGB agent Putin, until the outbreak of the Ukraine war finally occurred.

That's not right. It is true: In 1989, an order that was more correctly called "Pax atomica" was bro-

ken without a new peace order taking its place. Creating this would have been the task of the hour. But the visionary imagination of Europe and the West in the turning point was not enough to come up with the durable concept of a stable European peace order, which would have been able to offer all the countries of the former Soviet Union a place of reliable security and hopes for the future.

Two reasons are decisive for this. Both have to do with old European errors: On the one hand, the comprehensive economic and political collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 was unilaterally interpreted as a triumphant victory of the West in the system conflict between East and West, which thus finally sealed the historical defeat of the East. This tendency to declare oneself victorious is an old Western hubris and has always been the reason for many humiliations that shape the unequal relationship with the East.

The inability to seek other equal solutions after such comprehensive upheavals has its main cause in this fatal arrogance. Above all, however, the enormous and unique merit of the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev was classified with an astonishing ignorance as a welcome gift of history: The great advance of the renunciation of violence in reaction to the desire for freedom of the peoples of the Eastern Bloc was considered almost self-evident.

Mikhail Gorbachev has disappointed many of his citizens

But it wasn't that right now. To this day, it is astonishing, even incomprehensible, how little weight was given to the fact that the dissolution of a Soviet world empire was almost non-violent. The naive description of this unique process was then something like this: Like a house of cards, highly earned and inevitable, an entire system has collapsed.

The fact that this non-violence was the greatest miracle in a series of miraculous events did not become an issue of its own. Rather, it was interpreted as a weakness. However, there are hardly any role models in history for such a process. Even the weakest regimes of violence, especially at the stage of their demise, legally tend to cause an orgy of violence, destruction and self-destruction and to drag everything around them into their own demise - as was exemplified by the demise of the Nazi Empire.

The Soviet Union of 1989 under Gorbachev, although politically and economically weakened, had the greatest nuclear potential, it had its own troops stationed on the entire territory of its rule. It would have been easy to mobilize all this. This was also vehemently demanded by many representatives of the old regime.

With the historical distance, it becomes even clearer what a statesmanic achievement it was to rather be "heroes of retreat" (Enzensberger) than to resign from history in a last uprising as a bloody avengers and butchers. The election that Mikhail Gorbachev made almost alone has not least brought him the disappointment of many of his citizens. It was said that he had subsequently lost the Great Patriotic War.

The great reformers have shown courage, they are gladly forgotten today

Like a silent memorial of gigantic European ingratitude, the frighteningly private character of the funeral service around probably the greatest statesman of our time at the Moscow celebrity ceme-

ry stands for it. It would have been an order of the day that the greats of Europe Mikhail Gorbachev, who had long been isolated in his own country, had shown their esteem and respect by bowing to him.

At least from Germany, which almost owes the happiness of reunification to him alone, a Federal President Steinmeier should have stood at this grave. The loneliness around this dead man was unbearable. Viktor Orbán, of all people, took the opportunity to undermine this boycott of an appropriate appreciation. It remains a shameful sign, a mention of historical ignorance. A few days later, the representatives of the European zeitgeist all crowded at the grave of the English Queen and the German Pope Benedict XVI in a media-friendly manner.

To this day, it is difficult for me to understand why there has not been at least a demonstration of gratitude among the actual profiteers of this violence, at the movements of peaceful citizens' protests. They in particular had experienced firsthand the fears of what could have happened if there had been a similar reaction in East Berlin in 1989 as during the student protests in Beijing.

And in fact, part of today's reluctance in eastern Germany to the unilateral denunciation of Russia is probably due to this ongoing gratitude. Media spokesmen and interpreters, however, became different - and they became more and more brazen. In their interpretations, the share of the merit of non-violence on the Soviet side became smaller and smaller, the legend of their own great resistance became more and more powerful.

All knowledgeable contemporary witnesses know exactly that the resistance and heroism of Joachim Gauck, Marianne Birthler, Katrin Göring-Eckardt was quite moderate and did not significantly exceed the degree of survival-worthy adaptation. However, some self-descriptions today read like Hochstapelei. They conceal or misunderstand what other forces contributed to the great change and that some reformers in the system had by no means dared to do less commitment and courage.

Cheap anti-Russian resentment

This may be human, all too human and therefore not worth mentioning further. What is fatal, however, is that this part of the civil rights activists today is one of the most zealous key witnesses of a cheap anti-Russian resentment. This is unrestrictedly linked to the ideology of the Cold War, which shapes many variants of Western enemy images to this day, from justified anti-Stalinism to understandable anti-communism to irrational Slavic phobia.

The most important questions that would have to be negotiated between East and West today are: What does it actually mean to be a European nation? What makes us different from others? What skills does a nation need to acquire in order to belong? What are the lessons of our history? Which ideals shape us? What errors and crimes? These questions are clearly raised using the example of Ukraine and its defensive struggle against Russian aggression.

Europe should not always be looking for rogue states

In our media, Ukraine embodies the ideal and model of a freedom-loving Western democracy of heroic design. Ukraine, it is said, is not only fighting for its own nation, but at the same time for the universal historical mission of the West. Anyone who asserts himself in power politics, who defends his existence with bloody sacrifices and weapons is considered a bulwark for the European ideals of freedom, whatever the cost. But anyone who seeks the path of consensus, cooperation, understanding and reconciliation is considered weak and therefore irrelevant, even despicable. Therefore,

Therefore, Gorbachev and Zelensky are the actual antitypes in the question of what it means today to be European and to embody the European virtues.

In addition to this tendency to the heroic and self-exaltation, here lies the root that I consider to be the fundamental error of a European identity: the seemingly ineradicable need for national chauvinism. For centuries, national excesses have shaped the history of our continent. No nation was free from it: not the French, certainly not the British, not the Spaniards, not the Poles, not the Ukrainians, not the Baltics, not the Swedes, not the Russians, not even the Czechs - and certainly not the Germans.

It is a fatal mistake to think that by resisting the other imperial powers, one's own nationalism gains something like a historical innocence. This is self-deception and one of the most serious European errors. Even today, he still seduces many young democracies to see themselves only as victims of foreign powers and to consider their own history of violence, their own fantasies of violence to be justified. What Europe had to learn again and again and historically mostly missed is the art of self-limitation, peaceful neighborhood, fairness, the protection of mutual interests and respect for each other. What Europe must finally unlearn is the constant distribution of heretic hats, the making out of axes of evil and ever new rogue states.

The vision of Helmut Kohl and Hans-Dietrich Genscher

Oh, Europe! Every time one of the great crises and wars of the continent was over again - after the 30-year war, after Napoleon's campaign against Russia, after two world wars, after the Cold War - one could hope that the power-political error was now refuted by bitter experience and finally gave space to a more survivable understanding of the world. And every time, as if through a curse, the peoples of Europe fell back into the temptation to go the way of dominance and confrontation.

However, the great counter-example is all the more valuable: Gorbachev's hope that a new security order would also be possible for all former states of the Soviet Union, which would meet the different security needs, was certainly envisaged in the Charter of Paris as an area of joint economic and political cooperation between the old Western Europe and the new eastern states. At that time, this was also the vision of Helmut Kohl and Hans-Dietrich Genscher. But there was no plan, no concept, the vision was just too unclear.

The war senselessly devours the billions

How quickly the feeling of light triumph aroused again can be seen from a sad example: dealing with Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was one of the non-aligned states, it had detached itself from Stalinism in time and reasonably pacified the centuries-old national rivalries from the time of the Danube monarchy. Nothing would have been easier than to offer this Yugoslavia as a whole an opening to Europe and the EU in 1989.

It would have taken time, but it would have been possible. One should only have refrained from giving in to the national urge of the Slovenes and Croats too quickly and cultivating the new enemy image of the aggressive Serbs. Such wisdom, however, was completely lacking in the overbid competition for the recognition of new nation states in the Balkans. The Bosnian civil war, Srebrenica, the destruction of Sarajevo, hundreds of thousands of deaths and traumatized people, NATO's war

of aggression against Belgrade in violation of international law, the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state in violation of international law, the diverse uprising of new national chauvinisms would have been avoidable.

What does all this mean for the immediate present and for German politics in 2023?

The coordinates have shifted decisively. Until the end of the Schröder government, it could be assumed that Germany in particular from the time of the détente policy had privileged access, at least a certain scope to balance the conflict between the large geopolitical sources of tension. This time is finally over.

Around 2008, Putin began to distrust the status quo and align his sphere of power with the West. Germany began to define itself as a European leader in the new concept of NATO. As part of the reactions to the Ukraine war, it finally moved to the center of the anti-Russian counter-strategies. The welcome, but much scolded in the media's hesitation of Chancellor Olaf Scholz was too little supported by a sustainable political alternative and thus slipped.

Economically and politically, we pay a high price for this. The German Minister of Economic Affairs is trying to replace the old dependencies on Russia and China with new dependencies on states that can by no means pass as model democracies. The Foreign Minister is the most shrill trumpet of the new antagonistic NATO strategy.

Their justifications amaze with argumentative simplicity. At the same time, the arms costs and the influence of the armaments and energy companies are growing immeasurably. The war senselessly devours the billions that are urgently needed to save the planet and against the poverty of the global South. However, the rising China is propagandistically identified as a new geopolitical opponent and constantly provoked in the Taiwan question. These are all not good Auspizien.

The peace and survival of the whole planet

And yet: If not everything deceives me, Europe is on the verge of the phase of a great disillusionment that will deeply shake its own self-image. But for me, this is a reason for hope. The self-confident West simply has to learn that the rest of the world does not share our self-image and will not help us. The hastily sent messengers of a new Anti-Chinese alliance in the upcoming crusade against the Middle Kingdom do not seem to be particularly successful.

How could we assume that the great China and the advanced cultures of Asia would ever forget the time of arbitrary free trade and opium wars? How should the long-suffering African continent ever forgive the twelve million slaves and the exploitation of all its mineral resources? Why should the ancient cultures of Latin America forgive the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors their arbitrary rule? Why should the indigenous peoples worldwide simply put aside the injustice of illegal settlements and land grabbing in their historical memory?

My hope is that all this will result in a new non-align movement, which, after the time of the many violations of international law, will again work on the sole right of the UN to serve the peace and survival of the entire planet.

The Greens were once pacifists

My very personal defeat will accompany me in the last few days. Especially the Greens, my party, once had all the keys in their hands to a truly new order of a fairer world. Due to fortunate circumstances, she was much closer to this message than all other parties.

We had a real treasure to keep: We were not involved in the power-political block logic of the Cold War. We were dissidents per se. We were equally against armament in East and West, we saw the

threat to the planet from unchecked economic growth and consumerism. Anyone who wanted to save the world had to strive for a solid alliance between peace and environmental movement, that was a clear historical necessity that we lived. We had this future alliance in our hands.

What has seduced today's Greens to give up all this for the mere goal of playing in the big geopolitical power poker, while despising their most valuable roots as loud anti-pacifists?

Against hatred and war

I remember my great role models: The great representatives of non-violent strategies always had to pass the toughest tests in their own ranks. Gandhi tried to stop the relapse of the Hindus and Muslims into the national chauvinisms with two hunger strikes, Nelson Mandela had extreme trouble breaking the violence of his young comrades-in-arms, Martin Luther King had to be mocked by the Black Panthers as a toothless uncle Tom. Nothing was given to them. And this also applies today to us last pacifists.

The hatred and willingness to war and to produce enemy images is deeply rooted in humanity, especially in times of great crises and existential fears. Today, however, the following applies: If you really want to save the world, this precious unique wonderful planet, you must thoroughly unlearn hatred and war. We only have this one future option.