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GERMAN NARRATIVES ON RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

Positions and Counter-Positions

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Russia's war in Ukraine is not only a material war with weapons, but also a media war of words being waged between various groups who are battling for the superiority of their own narratives. Since February 24, 2022, there has been fundamental agreement throughout the German-speaking public that the war should end as quickly as possible. However, on the question of how to bring it to an end, there could not be more disagreement. This is particularly evident in the open letters for and against arms deliveries, which have been published in the media by different celebrities since the end of April 2022, signed by tens or even hundreds of thousands: First came Alice Schwarzer's letter in "Emma": Der Offene Brief an Kanzler Scholz | EMMA ↗ ("Open Letter to Chancellor Scholz | EMMA"), then, in early May, the letter written by the circle of intellectuals around the journalist Ralf Fücks: Waffenlieferung an die Ukraine: Offener Brief | ZEIT ONLINE ↗ (Delivering arms to Ukraine: an open letter | ZEIT ONLINE). This was followed by further open letters and, in February 2023, the "Manifesto for Peace" petition by Sarah Wagenknecht and Alice Schwarzer, who then jointly organized the "Uprising for Peace" demonstration in Berlin on 25 February 2023, almost in time for the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The same team spoke out again at the beginning of December 2024 with the "Appeal of the 38: One minute to 12!": Appell der 38: Eine Minute vor 12! | EMMA ↗. A response to this appeal for peace is presumably already in the works...

The reasons for these completely contradictory attitudes lie in the different views about the causes of the war and the intentions of the warring parties as well as their capabilities, and even in the different names given to the war: Some refer to the war of aggression as a conflict or even just a crisis, while others speak explicitly of a war waged by Russia against Ukraine and differentiate between the "attacker" and the "defender". There is also disagreement regarding ideas about Europe after the (at least temporary) end of the war: While part of the population thinks that an early ceasefire or negotiations through territorial cessions from Ukraine to Russia could restore peace in Europe and perhaps even enable Western European states to trade with Russia again, others are convinced that this would only increase the danger of the war spreading to other countries in Eastern Central and Eastern Europe. These differing views are based on narratives that are fed by different sources and pursue different aims. Each narrative presents its own story about the causes, intentions and goals behind the war, traces preferred options for action back to the respective explanatory story, and proposes corresponding solutions.

In the following series of blog posts – some longer, some shorter – a group of literary, linguistic, cultural and media scholars from Ukraine, Germany and Poland aim to get to the bottom of this 'battle of words' that has accompanied the war: Shamma Shahadat ↗ opens with the reception of Ukrainian literature under wartime conditions and the 'literary dispute' surrounding the awarding of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade to Serhij

Zhadan. Monika Wolting ↗ looks at the predictive power of literary works during war in the 'Kassandra' project, while Olena Saikowska ↗ examines the latest developments in Ukrainian literature. Cornelia Ilbrig ↗ deals with the narrative of the turning point in the context of war, while Natalia Grinina's article ↗ focuses on the language of Russian propaganda. German reactions to Russia's attack in literature are presented and analyzed by Jana Mende ↗ and also Silke Pasewalck ↗, who describes them as a crisis reaction. The series concludes with an interview ↗ with translator Claudia Dathe and Professor of Germanic Philology Maria Ivanytska from the University of Kyiv on the dissemination and representation of Ukrainian literature and culture in Germany.

The contributions collected here are the result of a conference entitled “German Narratives on Russia's War in Ukraine – Positions and Counter-positions”, which took place at Herrenhausen Palace in Hanover from February 22 to 24, 2023. The event was part of a theme-based week on Russia's war in Ukraine, initiated and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. We would like to thank Copernico and the Volkswagen Foundation for funding the publications.

English translation: William Connor ↗