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By Alessio Arena  
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## ***Will Germany direct European imperialism?***

Editor's notes:

*The following are excerpts, chosen from a more extensive essay on developments in Europe, which focuses on the role of German imperialism within the European Union. The author is the secretary general of the Fronte Popolare (Popular Front) in Italy. Translation by WW managing editor John Catalinotto.*

**By Alessio Arena**

German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen's election as head of the European Commission has historic importance. She is the epitome of the German ruling class that has imposed itself today at the head of the new phase of so-called "European construction," which promises to be decisive for the evolution of the world balance of power in the near future.

Von der Leyen is the first German to hold such a high position in a European organization since Walter Hallstein, who was appointed president of the European Commission in January 1958. Hallstein was very close to Washington and was a founder of the European Union, as well as the author of the "Hallstein Doctrine," which prevented countries from recognizing the German Democratic Republic [also known as East Germany, which was allied with the Soviet Union].

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Bonn, Germany, was the most faithful executor of Washington's early post-World War II offensive against the USSR, as in all the subsequent phases of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Historically, this scenario allowed German imperialism, defeated in the Second World War, to rise again with the blessing and support of the U.S.

German imperialism could reestablish its economic, financial and, therefore, political power — and, also to an increasing extent, its military power over the decades. Then Germany could reemerge on the world stage as a protagonist following the 1989-91 disappearance of the socialist camp and the annexation of the GDR.

### **The emergence of German hegemony in Europe**

Today, Europe and the world are at a new, decisive turning point. German imperialism with its solid strategic position, aided by the relative weakness of its competitors as well as its privileged partners, is preparing to be the interpreter of that change. The German state has always prepared for this role, and since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that effectively established the EU, it has gradually taken on the very form that the German monopolies have assiduously worked to bring about.

Since 1989, German imperialism has gradually subordinated all other European imperialist states to its own apparently irresistible hegemony. Berlin has progressively shaped the European economic area — the richest market in the world — to the point of making it assume the function of the much sought after German “living space.” [German imperialism from 1890-1945 sought “Lebensraum,” territory to seize and settle, mostly to the East.]

German imperialism has had a decisive impact in making the monetary union [that established the euro as the common European currency] an exact transposition and instrument of its own ascent, during which Germany expanded its financial and military capacity. In the most efficient way, it has taken advantage of the “free movement of persons” within the borders of the EU — a seemingly very striking and allegedly “progressive” principle — to practice a scientific policy of wage reduction within the German labor market itself.

German imperialism has drawn from this strategy an incredible vitality as an international exporter. Germany has used its profits to become one of the main international creditors of the United States and has influenced U.S. policies as much as possible. All this constitutes an extraordinary display of the capacity of politics to organize and accompany the process of centralization and concentration of capital.

But there's more: Mirroring the economic, political and ideological rise of German imperialism, the other European imperialists have politically accepted the fate of their decline and subordination to German imperialism.

### **The example of Italy**

The case of Italy is emblematic. Despite its weaknesses, the country continues to be the second largest European exporter. The political leadership of Italy's national imperialism has consciously, systematically and obediently renounced all claim to leadership in order to promote a lucrative framework for the Italian monopolistic ruling class in the new continental and world order.

The advantages that the Italian bourgeoisie derives from European policies are enormous. Within the framework of the EU, the Italian monopolies are united in different forms with the European monopolies in enormous concentrations that allow them to compete on a world scale.

Benefiting from the free movement of capital, goods and people, these concentrations guarantee fiscal advantages and a large market within which to operate. They also guarantee a labor market in which the high mobility of workers is accompanied by different conditions of national origin; this makes it very easy to reduce wages. This is done within a well-defined power balance, in which the top of the pyramid is occupied by German imperialism.

It is no surprise that all the Italian pro-capitalist political parties, from the reactionary League to the Democratic Party (PD), are totally in tune with each other. These parties also support the underlying motives for the so-called "differentiated autonomy" [that applies different rules to different regions]. They do this with different nuances to put on a

show for the benefit of the public of fake opposition between “Europeanists” and “populists.”

The northern part of Italy, driven by the industry of Lombardy province, is a candidate for the role of “Pearl of the South” of the new Europe. The rest of the country, however, starting from Italy’s South and the islands [of Sicily and Sardinia], is again assigned the function of being a reservoir of migrant labor as it was during the Cold War.

This reservoir of labor provides a reserve army of unemployed workers, who are competent and competitive in all economic sectors. This fuels the spiral of wage reduction in the geographical areas destined to be the engine of European economic power. For the most part, these areas correspond to what was West Germany during the Cold War — and its immediate neighboring territories, including Northern Italy.

### **The only major contradiction**

The only, but broad-reaching, contradictory element is the choice of the declining European imperialisms to submit to Berlin’s hegemony. The contrast is between the emergence of Germany at the head of the EU and the interests of U.S. imperialism, to which most of the wealthy and dominant sectors of European society are still strongly linked.

The communist left was to a great extent an orphan of the Cold War in that it continued its binary approach to international politics [that remained from the confrontation of imperialist and socialist blocs]. This left wants at all costs to see the world divided between an alleged Atlantic monolith — consisting mainly of the U.S. and EU imperialists — and another bloc, generally represented by emerging economies that are all thrown into a single undifferentiated pot (the BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). In this scheme the role of Russia in the contemporary world is somewhat exaggerated.

Whether one considers the Eurasian giant led by Vladimir Putin as an imperialist power, or rightly contests such a definition, one tends to emphasize its centrality in the power balance on the planet. Certainly Russia’s geographic extension, its wealth of raw materials, military power inherited from the USSR and its flourishing arms industry, gives the country considerable importance and particular prominence on the diplomatic scene.

However, all this fails to correspond to the structural relations in which the Russian economy is inserted. These relations are the decisive factor in determining the overall international role of Russia, which Barack Obama called a “regional power.”

Once again, German imperialism has been one of the most lucid interpreters of how that role would take shape, and this has been the case since the last years of the USSR of Gorbachev.

Since the 1990s, marked by the so-called “strategic sauna friendship” inaugurated by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, German capital has guaranteed itself a leading role in the new Russia, which is strangled by the primitive and predatory capitalism of the oligarchs.

German-Russian relations manifest the very deep complementary bond, which links one of the main imperialist actors of our time, Germany, eager for raw materials and outlets for its investments and exports — particularly in the industrial sector — to its perfect opposite: Russia’s economy. That economy is based on income from the export of gas and oil, unstable and fed by a weak currency. Yet there are huge areas of underdevelopment — and along with that exists a consequent political weakness to be exploited.

That German bosses have exploited this relationship for decades does not mean that German imperialism overlooks the dangers to its own interests should Russia reach higher levels of economic development. Here is the perfect dualism: While cultivating a strategic partnership with the Russian oligarchies, German imperialism plays an active role in reducing the international role of Russia, sometimes alongside the United States and sometimes with its own well-defined autonomous profile.

The most striking example was definitely in Ukraine, where then Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen — under the pretext of monitoring compliance with the Minsk agreements — sent military personnel and drones to support the war of the coup d’état government that took office in Kiev in 2014 against the Russian-speaking populations of Donbass.

## **Conclusions**

The strengthening of progressivism in the United States and the growth of popular participation around advanced slogans represent a new development of vital importance for anyone who sincerely wants to fight for the cause of progress at this stage.

The battle for social, racial, gender and environmental justice in the U.S. shows the first signs of defining its own autonomous political shape. If this were to come to fruition, the working classes in the U.S. would have an unprecedented opportunity to impose changes whose depth is unpredictable and whose repercussions would spread positively throughout the world.

We are not at that point. Quite the contrary. But as things stand, everything is possible, and the encouraging signs are multiplying.

Even in continental Europe, the mass movements that have developed in France over the last three years [strikes, Yellow Vests] and the unfinished move to the left of the main trade union, the CGT, tell us that the path of struggle is viable and that the battle to direct the anger of the masses toward the radical transformation of the existing society still has hope. What is necessary is that a conscious political entity — organized and capable of interpreting and shaping the deep aspirations of those who are succumbing under the weight of a system that is in every sense unsustainable — leads this struggle.

We are on the threshold of epoch-making changes. It remains to be determined whether the popular masses will be independent actors or passive objects. It is of little importance that the phenomena within the political left mentioned above have contradictory social and ideological characteristics or are immature and sometimes even tarnished by opportunism, or by the refusal to embrace a perspective of reversing the present state of things.

If we become aware of the fact that the defeat of our communist movement in 1989-91 expelled revolutionary theory from the conceptual horizon of the masses, then we know that our role is to bring it back — with all the tactical flexibility and adaptability which are necessary for such a difficult task.

Otherwise, either the von der Leyen presidency will be able to complete its mandate to make a qualitative leap forward in the construction of the “Fourth Reich,” the German-led European superpower destined to compete with the United States and China for primacy in

tomorrow's markets — or the supremacy of U.S. imperialism will be affirmed once again. Neither of these two options is preferable or desirable. In both cases, the consequence will be an environmental, social and economic disaster capable of overwhelming us all.

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