

From the Stalinist SED to the xenophobic BSW: The political evolution of Sahra Wagenknecht

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12 November 2024

A few months after its founding, the Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) has achieved double-digit election results in three East German state elections—a result exceeding that achieved by any other new party over a comparable period. In addition to widespread, popular anger against all of Germany’s established parties, the most important factors behind this development are Wagenknecht’s rejection of the war in Ukraine and her condemnation of social inequality. Many voters who have qualms about voting for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) look upon a vote for the BSW as a way to protest against official politics.

They will be disappointed. The BSW is not an alternative to the established parties, but rather an attempt to erect new props for capitalist rule in the midst of the deepest global crisis of capitalism. War, social cuts and fascism can only be stopped by an independent movement of the working class and youth, directed against all of the mainstream parties and the capitalist system they defend. But this is precisely what the BSW is trying to prevent.

With regard to refugee policy and domestic security, the BSW has adopted the AfD’s programme. It targets refugees and migrants as scapegoats for a social crisis, which is in fact caused by soaring profits and the costs of war—thereby seeking to divide the working class. The BSW advocates a massive build-up of the police and secret services to suppress political opposition and social resistance.

Its condemnation of the war in Ukraine has nothing to do with peace politics. The BSW supports the rearmament of the German army (Bundeswehr). It merely opposes Germany subordinating itself to the US instead of pursuing its own imperialist interests. “Europe must become an independent player on the world stage instead of being a pawn in the conflict between the great powers and subordinating itself to the interests of the US,” reads the BSW’s European election programme. Therefore, the BSW wants to “help ensure that the European Union regains the independence of its political, economic and security policies.” [1]

Oskar Lafontaine, Wagenknecht’s husband and closest adviser, has even written a book on this subject entitled *Ami, it’s time to go: A Plea for Europe’s Self-Assertion*. In it, he claims that Germany, the world’s fourth largest economic power, is merely a “vassal” of the USA. In the newspaper *Weltwoche* Wagenknecht has called for “placing our own security and economic interests at the centre” instead of “chasing after questionable morals that turn out on closer inspection to be American special interest policy.” [2] Her comment has nothing in common with peace, but instead expresses German great power politics.

The BSW’s willingness to participate in governments led by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) or Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the East German states of Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg reveals its real stance behind all its social demagogy. The CDU and SPD have been at the forefront of the dismantling of the

country’s social fabric for decades. The claim that they would change course if they governed together with the BSW is absurd.

Wagenknecht is simply continuing the policy of the Left Party and its predecessor, the PDS, to which she belonged for 35 years. They also spouted social promises in election campaigns, only to support the most vicious social attacks when they were in government.

The BSW is not even opposed to a coalition with the AfD. On 9 October, Wagenknecht appeared on *Welt TV* together with AfD leader Alice Weidel. What was announced as a “duel” turned out to be over long stretches a mutual exchange of compliments. Wagenknecht assured Weidel that she could well imagine the two of them working together. Her only objection at present was an alliance with the Thuringian AfD leader Björn Höcke, who openly defends fascism.

Stalinism instead of socialism

For a long period of time, Wagenknecht was considered the left face of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Left Party. In the PDS, she served as the figurehead of the “Communist Platform,” an association of veteran Stalinists. At that time she dressed like Rosa Luxemburg, used Marxist phrases and wrote a master’s thesis on the reception of Hegel by the young Karl Marx. When the PDS merged with Lafontaine’s WASG in 2007 to form the Left Party, Wagenknecht was one of the initiators of the internal party current “Anticapitalist Left,” an alliance of pseudo-leftist groups.

She soon moved on, however and in 2011 made an unconditional commitment to capitalism. In a book titled *Freiheit statt Kapitalismus* (Freedom instead of Capitalism) [3], she published a paean of praise to West German post-war capitalism and Ludwig Erhard (CDU), economics minister and later federal chancellor. The terms socialism and Marxism no longer appeared in her book. During this time, she also moved closer to Oskar Lafontaine, a former leader of the SPD and co-founder of the Left Party. The pair married in 2014.

Since then, Wagenknecht has continuously moved further to the right. In 2021, she published her book *Die Selbstgerechten* (The Self-Righteous).[4] In it, she rails against “cosmopolitanism” and open-mindedness, promotes protectionism and a strong state, and denounces migrants and refugees for suppressing wages, breaking strikes and generally as culturally alien elements. The book anticipated the BSW’s platform: a mixture of social demagogy, peace rhetoric, economic nationalism and anti-refugee agitation.

Wagenknecht now dismisses her earlier Stalinist and pseudo-leftist statements as sins of her youth, as her defiant reaction against the opportunism of high-ranking East German Stalinist functionaries who, after the reunification of Germany in 1989/90, suddenly became enthusiastic supporters of capitalism. There is, however, a continuity between her earlier Stalinist positions and her current anti-communist

ones.

The “Marx” to whom Wagenknecht referred in her youth had nothing to do with the author of the *Communist Manifesto*, who was a revolutionary in every fibre of his being and whose foresight and boldness of thought continue to astonish today. She interpreted Marx in the ossified version of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which distorted the revolutionary into a servile philosopher of the state in order to justify its own dictatorship over the working class. The national narrow-mindedness, the insistence on a strong state that ensures peace and order, the panic-stricken fear of any spontaneous movement from below, the xenophobia, and everything else that typifies the BSW today—all this was already characteristic of the Stalinism of East Germany’s state party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED).

The claim that the dictatorship that Stalin had established in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and transferred to East Germany and Europe after the Second World War was the inevitable consequence of the Russian October Revolution and embodied the only conceivable form of socialism (“real existing socialism”) is the great lie of the 20th century, a lie spread equally by both die-hard Stalinists and fanatical anti-communists.

Sahra Wagenknecht also propounded this lie. In a long essay titled “Marxism and Opportunism,” which she published in April 1992 in the *Weissenseer Blätter* [5], she wrote that it “cannot be denied that Stalin’s policy—in its orientation, its goals and probably also in its approach—can be considered a principled continuation of Lenin’s.” Neither Bukharin’s nor Trotsky’s approach offered a viable alternative to Stalin’s line, she claimed. “The model of society that emerged in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era, that was later adopted in its basic features by the countries of Eastern Europe” was the “only possible form of socialism.”

Wagenknecht defends Ulbricht

When Sahra Wagenknecht joined the SED at the age of 20 in the summer of 1989, the utterly reactionary character of Stalinism was visible for all to see. Resistance to bureaucratic rule was developing throughout Eastern Europe. What attracted Wagenknecht was not the social achievements of East Germany (GDR), but rather its bureaucratic dictatorship.

In her 1992 text, she not only justifies Stalin but also the worst crimes of the GDR regime. She explicitly praises Walter Ulbricht, who had been placed at the head of the German Communist Party and then the postwar SED by Stalin personally. It was Ulbricht who was responsible for the suppression of the workers’ uprising of 17 June 1953 and the building of the Berlin Wall.

She explicitly welcomes Ulbricht’s decision to increase work norms and state repression with the “New Economic System” introduced after the Wall was built. “The liberation of the economy from the direct control of the centralised apparatus was matched by the consolidation of the party’s leading political role,” she writes—a description of the growing importance of state surveillance and repression by the security forces. “This second, political side of the NES was often accused of contradicting the economic changes. However, on closer inspection, these measures were unavoidable for the time being.” Otherwise, according to Wagenknecht, they would have very quickly led to developments such as the Prague Spring of 1968. [6]

Wagenknecht attributes the decline of the GDR, which ultimately led to its dissolution, to “Ulbricht’s fall in 1971” and the “changes introduced during that period.” She is referring to the social concessions that Ulbricht’s successor, Erich Honecker, had to make to appease the working class. In the face of fierce class struggles, which also raged in Western countries between 1968 and 1975, the Stalinists feared their power was in jeopardy should workers in the East and West unite in a struggle against capitalism and Stalinism.

Wagenknecht reproaches Honecker for giving in to workers’ pressure instead of standing firm. She accuses him of “redistributing national

income in favour of consumption—while irresponsibly reducing the rate of accumulation.” She continues, “Because the principle of performance was suspended by means of social policy, the will to work declined; idleness, sloppiness and cronyism were the result.” A “policy of egalitarianism” had been able to assert itself in almost all areas of society.

An increased rate of accumulation, the principle of work performance, hostility to egalitarianism—these are all the hallmarks of Wagenknecht’s policy proposals today. She could not express her abysmal contempt for the working class more clearly. In the name of “socialism” she advocated a policy that ruthlessly ignored the needs and will of workers. Today she defends capitalism with the same arrogance. “The fault of today’s capitalism is not that it is a meritocracy, but that it is not a meritocracy,” she writes in *Freedom instead of Capitalism*.

Accordingly, despite her socialist phrases, Wagenknecht was not an opponent of capitalist restoration. Rather, she spoke for a wing of the bureaucracy that sought to carry out the restoration of capitalism in the “Chinese way.” In June 1989, the Maoist regime in China brutally suppressed student and worker protests with the Tiananmen Square massacre, thus paving the way for the introduction of capitalism while maintaining its dictatorship.

The transitions between the various camps of the SED were fluid. Hans Modrow, who had personally travelled to Beijing that summer to congratulate the regime on the Tiananmen massacre, was the last SED/PDS prime minister of the GDR, and organised the unification of Germany six months later. According to him, this was “absolutely necessary” and had to be “pursued with determination.” [7]

As the head of the Communist Platform (KPF) within the PDS, Wagenknecht played a decisive role in keeping on board the old GDR elites, who had come away empty-handed from reunification, while smoothing the way for the restoration of capitalism. Her socialist phrases and her homage to Ulbricht and Stalin were more than just background music. The identification of socialism with Stalinist crimes was intended to suppress any serious socialist opposition in the working class.

In reality, Stalinism was the gravedigger of the revolution that brought the working class to power in Russia in October 1917. The parasitic bureaucracy, whose interests Stalin embodied, was a cancerous growth in the young workers’ state, which proliferated as a result of the civil war and the international isolation of the Soviet Union. Control over the distribution of the most basic necessities gave the members of the state and party apparatus privileges the suffering working masses could only dream of.

To defend its privileged position, the bureaucracy eliminated Soviet democracy. It suppressed opposition from the working class and went on to kill hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries and Marxists in the Great Terror of 1937-38. The main victims of the terror were members of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International, who, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, defended the international programme of socialist revolution.

Stalin replaced this programme, upon which the October Revolution had been based, with a nationalist perspective corresponding to the conservative interests of the bureaucracy. He no longer linked the building of socialism in the Soviet Union to the progress of the world socialist revolution, but claimed that socialism could be built “in one country,” i.e., independently of the world economy.

This nationalist programme became the source of devastating crises within the Soviet Union and catastrophic defeats for the international working class. In Germany, Hitler would never have come to power without the disastrous policies of the German Communist Party (KPD). Although the KPD and SPD parties combined were far stronger than the Nazis, the KPD, under pressure from Stalin, refused to fight for a united front against the Nazis.

The heroism and sacrifice with which the Red Army defeated the Nazis

in the Second World War showed that the achievements of the October Revolution had retained an enormous appeal despite Stalin's crimes. However, the postwar expansion of the Soviet Union's social model into Eastern Europe did not mark a return to the programme of world socialist revolution.

While the war was still going on, Stalin had agreed with his American and British allies to divide Europe into zones of influence. These allowed Stalin to control a buffer zone in Eastern Europe aimed at protecting the Soviet Union from military attack. In return, Stalin promised the US and Britain that, with the help of the Communist parties, he would suppress revolutionary uprisings that the Kremlin feared just as much as Washington and London.

This applied not only to Western Europe, where the Stalinists disarmed Italian and French partisans who had fought against the Nazis, but also to Eastern Europe. In Germany, the "Ulbricht Group," which had returned from exile in Moscow with the Red Army, dissolved spontaneously formed anti-fascist committees and workers' councils. This "was nothing other than the crushing of the first attempts at a potentially powerful, independent, anti-fascist and socialist movement," Wolfgang Leonhard wrote in his memoirs. [8] Leonard was an original member of the "Ulbricht Group" who later broke with Stalinism.

It was only with the beginning of the Cold War that the Stalinists in East Germany and Europe established regimes based on the Moscow model and proceeded to the large-scale expropriation of industry, banks and large estates. This was a huge social advance that deprived the main props of the Nazi regime—the Junkers, industrialists and bankers—of their material holdings, created the conditions for the planned use of economic resources and provided the working class a relatively high degree of social security.

But unlike in the Soviet Union, the expropriations in Eastern Europe and the GDR were not the result of a proletarian revolution. There were no soviets or workers' councils. On the contrary, they were accompanied by increased repression and growing economic pressure on workers.

As a result, the first proletarian mass uprising against Stalinism broke out in the GDR on 17 June 1953. A protest by East Berlin construction workers against increased production quotas developed within the space of 24 hours into a mass strike, which was then bloodily crushed by Soviet troops and tanks. Over a hundred workers were shot, and hundreds of strikers and their leaders were arrested as "counterrevolutionary agents" and thrown into prison for years. In the following years, workers' uprisings were also brutally suppressed in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In 1961, Walter Ulbricht, the most powerful man in the GDR from 1950 to 1971, ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall. It was intended to prevent workers from migrating to the West, thus enabling the bureaucracy to further increase the pressure of work.

In 1963, Ulbricht introduced the "New Economic System" praised by Wagenknecht, which declared that the bourgeois principle of performance was a "socialist principle" and intensified state repression. "For production workers the NES meant a huge increase in work pressure... For senior employees, members of the technical-scientific intelligentsia in the factories and, of course, functionaries in the state and party apparatus, the NES, on the other hand, provided access to new privileges and riches," wrote Wolfgang Weber in the book *DDR—40 Jahre Stalinismus* (East Germany—40 Years of Stalinism). [9]

As early as the 1930s, Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Left Opposition to Stalinism and founder of the Fourth International, had warned that the Stalinist bureaucracy, "which is increasingly becoming the tool of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state," would overturn the new property forms and throw the country back into capitalism if the working class did not smash the bureaucracy and open the road to socialism. [10]

This warning was confirmed in the early 1990s. What Hitler's tanks had failed to achieve, the destruction of the Soviet Union and the property

relations created by the October Revolution, was finally accomplished by the Stalinist bureaucracy under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

This was their response to the growing resistance of the working class. In particular, the mass strikes in Poland in the early 1980s unleashed panic among the Stalinist rulers in Moscow. But decades of persecution of revolutionary Marxists had politically disarmed the working class, which was unable to prevent capitalist restoration. In the GDR, Trotskyism was also systematically suppressed. Oskar Hippe, a leading Trotskyist in the Weimar Republic who had survived the Nazi terror, was imprisoned by the Ulbricht regime in 1948 for eight years.

On 4 November 1989, when a million people protested in Berlin against the SED regime, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), the predecessor of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), distributed the call 'Overthrow the SED bureaucracy! Build workers' councils!' The BSA supported the protest, but warned against illusions in bourgeois democracy, which in reality meant the dictatorship of capital. There was only one alternative to the Stalinist dictatorship: workers' democracy and socialism.

The appeal met with widespread approval. However, in collaboration with "democratic" civil rights activists and the main political parties of West Germany, the SED/PDS Stalinists, managed to direct the movement towards German unity—with catastrophic social consequences. East Germany's industrial sector was almost completely liquidated, millions lost their jobs and many sank into poverty.

No discussion of Stalinism

When the PDS actively supported German reunification, Wagenknecht not only remained in the party, but became part of its leadership. The question of Stalinism repeatedly led to tensions, but Wagenknecht's Communist Platform and the right-wing leadership around Gregor Gysi, Lothar Bisky and Hans Modrow all agreed on one thing: there should be no political reckoning with Stalinism.

In January 1995, Gysi, Bisky and Modrow presented a motion to the PDS party conference declaring "Stalinist views" to be incompatible with membership of the PDS. In practice, this should have led to the expulsion of Wagenknecht and the Communist Platform, whose pro-Stalinist positions were seen as an obstacle to the PDS entering local and state governments.

The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter intervened at the time with an Open Letter to delegates, opposing the expulsion of the Communist Platform. While the positions of the Communist Platform were reactionary, its expulsion would only serve to stifle discussion over the question of Stalinism, the letter explained. Without a clear understanding of the role of Stalinism, however, the causes of capitalist restoration and the social catastrophe associated with it would remain incomprehensible:

Stalinism is far more than an undemocratic regime or a bundle of repressive measures. The historic crime of Stalinism consists in the fact that for over 70 years it systematically undermined the consciousness of the working class and destroyed its socialist traditions. This is the only way to explain how the working classes in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were reduced to political paralysis faced with a massive resurgence of nationalism and fascism.

The first, most furious and systematic repressive measures of Stalinism were directed against socialists, above all against the Trotskyists, who defended the perspectives of the October Revolution. Stalin could rightly boast that he had killed more communists than Hitler. In the interest of a privileged bureaucracy, he committed a genocide against a whole generation of socialists.

Those who today try to make Bolshevism responsible for

Stalinism “forget” that Stalin’s path to power took place over the corpses of all of the Bolsheviks—tens of thousands in number—who had realised the October Revolution alongside Lenin. [11]

Neither the party leadership nor the Communist Platform showed the slightest interest in clarifying the question of Stalinism. In the event Wagenknecht was not expelled, but did temporarily lose her seat on the party executive. When the party conference resumed a year later, the dispute with the Communist Platform had long since been settled. “The goal has been achieved. The political course of the PDS has been set in the direction of government participation and collaboration with the SPD. There was no political reckoning with Stalinism,” commented the *Neue Arbeiterpresse*, the newspaper of the BSA. [12]

Three years later—the PDS had since appointed its first state ministers in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania—a member of the Communist Platform was again elected to the executive and Wagenknecht received as much applause as PDS chairman Lothar Bisky for her speech at the party conference. She was now needed as a left-wing fig leaf to cover up the right-wing policy of the PDS and later the Left Party.

She continued to play this role for over 20 years as she rose through the party leadership. She was a member of the European Parliament, a member of the Bundestag, deputy party leader and leader of the parliamentary group in the Bundestag. Wagenknecht only left the Left Party when its election results plummeted.

Stalin and Ulbricht have disappeared from Wagenknecht’s vocabulary. What remains is crude nationalism, a belief in the state and the hostility to revolution that characterised the Stalinist bureaucracy. Based on this, Wagenknecht is trying to mobilise members of the middle classes—trade union bureaucrats, state functionaries, small business owners—who feel overwhelmed by technological progress and globalisation, but fear even more a working-class uprising.

Leon Trotsky had described the Stalinist bureaucracy as a tool of the world bourgeoisie inside the workers’ state. This was confirmed with the capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Wagenknecht’s development from arch-Stalinist to defender of capitalism and vehement chauvinist follows the same logic.

It is impossible to stop war, fascism, mass layoffs and social cuts without fighting their cause—capitalism. Only a movement based on a socialist programme and uniting the working class internationally can prevent a slide into barbarism. To do this, the lessons of the hundred-year struggle of the Trotskyist world movement against Stalinism must be studied and understood, and the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International built as the new party of the working class.

[1]

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[2]

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