

**Sabine Adler**

# **UKRAINE AND ITS WESTERN ALLIES**

## **Germany's Failure**

## **and the Necessary Lessons for the Future**

With a Foreword by Andreas Umland

*ibidem*

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Source: Forsvaret / Danish Defence

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# Foreword

*by Andreas Umland*

When the German version of this book, under the original title “Ukraine and Us” (i.e. the Germans), was published in autumn 2022 by Ch. Links Press in Berlin, this was an event by itself in Germany. Sabine Adler’s critical review of Berlin’s Ukraine policy represented then and still represents today a landmark in German political publicism. These are some reviews of the book’s German edition in a number of influential German media:

- “A dramatically revealing book” – Christian Thomas for *Frankfurter Rundschau*;
- “An authoritative contribution to enlighten [the readership about German-Ukrainian relations]” – Natascha Freundel for *RBB Kulturradio*;
- “Adler evaluates [Germany’s relationship to Ukraine] with wisdom and the sharpness of a razor” – Viola Schenz for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*;
- “Adler manages with her book to hold a mirror up to us. She points out the errors in [our] thinking.” – Paul Toetzke for *Liberale Moderne*;
- “This book explains a lot. You will be wiser afterwards.” – Jörg Thadeusz for *WDR 2*;
- “This [book] might be unique at the [current] moment, with its degree of depth and sharpness.” – Bernd Schekausti for *MDR Kultur*.<sup>1</sup>

Adler’s study was in 2022 and remains in 2023 one of the most consequential contributions to the currently ongoing German rethinking of the so-called *Ostpolitik* (literally: Eastern Policy) after the end of the Cold War. The German attitude towards Eastern Europe, in turn, has been one of the most significant international relations in

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1 Source: “Die Ukraine und wir: Deutschlands Versagen und die Lehren für die Zukunft Gebundene Ausgabe–16. August 2022 von Sabine Adler,” *Amazon.de*, <https://www.amazon.de/Die-Ukraine-wir-Deutschlands-Versagen/dp/3962891803/>.



Europe as a whole—in the past and until today. It will co-determine much of Europe's future. It thus made sense to provide a wider public outside Germany with an English translation of Adler's seminal study.

Like myself, Adler is an East and not West German with considerable life experience in the former Soviet bloc (we both studied, in different periods, at the Journalism Section of the then Karl Marx University of Leipzig). With her background in the GDR, Adler brings to the table a somewhat, in comparison to West Germans, different background and viewpoint on Russia, Ukraine, and Germany's role in Eastern Europe. In her particularly long and strong skepticism towards Putin, as well as her explicit sympathy for Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, Adler joins a number of further influential German analysts of Eastern Europe with a biography in East Germany.<sup>2</sup> They include, among several others, the late Werner Schulz who was a long-term member of both the German and European parliaments for the German Green party, Stefan Meister of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), Jörg Forbrig of the German Marshall Fund (GMFUS), and Andre Härtel of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). Like these analysts, Adler has, for more than two decades now, been among those German experts on Eastern Europe who have, with their written publications and oral interventions, prepared the recent radical turn in Berlin's attitude to Russia and Ukraine.

Readers should keep in mind that Adler's book was originally written not for a foreign, but for a German-reading audience. It addressed especially readers among the political and intellectual elites of the Federal Republic, and, in particular, those living or working in Berlin. It is also not the only such recent German book which critically reviews German policies towards Russia and East Central Europe. Several important new studies by various journalists have come out after the start of the famous *Zeitenwende* (change

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2 See, for instance: Jörg Thadeusz, "Sabine Adler - Journalistin und Expertin für Osteuropa," *WDR 2*, 30 January 2023. <https://www1.wdr.de/mediathek/audio/wdr2/joerg-thadeusz/audio-sabine-adler---journalistin-und-expertin-fuer-ost-europa-100.html>.

of times) in February 2022. Among the most important and deep additional such studies are, in chronological order of their appearance:

- Thomas Urban, *Verstellter Blick: Die deutsche Ostpolitik* [Biased View: The German Eastern Policy]. Berlin: Tapeta, 2022;
- Michael Thumann, *Revanche: Wie Putin das bedrohlichste Regime der Welt geschaffen hat* [Revanche: How Putin Created the Most Dangerous Regime of the World]. München: C.H. Beck, 2023;
- Reinhard Bingener and Markus Wehner, *Die Moskau-Connection: Das Schröder-Netzwerk und Deutschlands Weg in die Abhängigkeit* [The Moscow Connection: The Schroeder Network and Germany's Path to Dependence]. München: C.H. Beck, 2023;
- Winfried Schneider-Deters, *Russlands Ukrainekrieg und die Bundesrepublik: Deutsche Debatten um Frieden, Faschismus und Kriegsverbrechen, 2022-2023* [Russia's Ukraine War and the Federal Republic: German Debates on Peace, Fascism and War Crimes, 2022-23]. Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2023 (forthcoming).

Yet, Adler's study represents, as of June 2023 when this foreword was written, still the only such German book specifically focusing on Ukrainian-German relations within *Ostpolitik*. Moreover, she has written not an academic study, but a book for a broader audience. Her investigation should thus be of interest also to a non-German and wider readership interested in the evolution of Berlin's position vis-à-vis Kyiv and Moscow. It constitutes a vivid illustration, documentation, and interpretation of recent German debates, concepts and policies regarding the Ukrainian state, security in Eastern Europe, and the Russian threat. Whoever wants to understand the past, current, and future German relationship with Ukraine needs to read Adler's book.

*Stockholm, 11 June 2023*



## Introduction to the English edition

When Europeans woke up on February 24, 2022, a war raged in Europe. Many think the first war since 1945, having forgotten the Balkan wars of the early 1990s and the war in eastern Ukraine that has been going on since 2014. Now Putin's troops are attacking Ukraine from many directions; towns everywhere are being shelled with rockets, and tanks are moving in. A full-scale invasion is underway. Western military experts have long observed that more and more Russian troops are stationed on the Ukraine border. The US had warned the public in detail months in advance. The German government, the European Union, and the United States did their best to dissuade Vladimir Putin from his increasingly aggressive course toward Ukraine and NATO. But in response to Ukraine's immediate need and request for help, Germany was late and persistently hesitant.

How could this escalation have happened? What have we overlooked? What mistakes were made in Germany and the European Union? These questions have been hotly debated in public since the beginning of the war and are the focus of this book. To answer them, looking only at the current situation is not enough. For that, it is also necessary to look back into history. Not only to 2014, when Putin occupied Crimea and fueled the war in eastern Ukraine, not only to 2013, when Ukraine refused to sign the EU Association Agreement, or till 2008 when Ukraine and Georgia were denied accession to NATO. And even beyond 2005, the year in which Chancellor Gerhard Schröder launched the first Nord Stream project with Vladimir Putin. It is necessary to look back even further: to the Chechen wars, to the collapse of the Soviet Union, of which not only Russia remained, but 14 successor states of the USSR, and of course, to the Second World War, from which Germany's responsibility for Ukraine arises in a very special way. It has not been fully recognized until today.

I have observed the developments of the past 25 years as a correspondent from Russia, Ukraine, and Berlin. This regular change of perspective between Germany and Eastern Europe has

shaped my perception of our relationship with troubled Ukraine.  
This book will also discuss this issue.

*Berlin, May 2023*

## The tragedy

... begins with a joke that makes you laugh your head off. The world will witness a gigantic Russian troop deployment along the Ukrainian border for almost a year. In January 2022, there will be at least 130,000 soldiers armed to the teeth. In the face of this threat, the Ukrainians' request for German weapons is becoming louder and more urgent. On January 19, the government in Kyiv asks again and becomes precise: Can Germany help with helmets and protective vests? Later, Ukrainian Ambassador to Berlin Andriy Melnyk added warships and air defense systems. The capital turns a deaf ear.

They have neglected Ukraine since 2014. Only a few, very few, are hearing the cries for help. Robert Habeck is open about it. In May 2021 – before the German election campaign – he was on the front lines in eastern Ukraine. Habeck is one of the two Green Party leaders. There, he not only has a close look at the war that has not wanted to end for seven years but also listens to the hardships of the Ukrainian population on the demarcation line to the separatist areas. While still on the trip, he makes a strong case for the people asking for support to defend themselves against the pro-Russian occupiers. “Weapons for defense, for self-defense, I think it’s hard to deny Ukraine,” he told Deutschlandfunk Radio. “Ukraine feels left alone in terms of security policy, and it is left alone.”

In Germany, he is received with shame and disgrace. The CDU-led federal government at the time pointed to the principle of not supplying weapons to crisis regions. This is a political line also taken by Habeck’s co-chair of the Green Party, Annalena Baerbock. Unlike former party leader Jürgen Trittin, Baerbock does not distance herself from Habeck openly, but she does so audibly enough: “That’s also in our program, and that’s how we both see it as party leaders.” Habeck relents for the sake of Baerbock, the candidate for chancellor.

Unlike the Greens, the then SPD parliamentary group vice-chairman Sören Bartol is not plagued by doubts. Unlike Habeck, he has never visited Ukraine, nor have most members of the Bundestag, not before or after the annexation of Crimea, not during the

fighting in the east, not since Russia's invasion. With Habeck, he said, you can see where such a trip leads: "Habeck visits Ukraine and already he's denouncing the consensus. That's naive." Germany would be well advised to rely on diplomacy.

Berlin's former mayor, Michael Müller of the SPD, also warns against traveling to Ukraine in the *Berliner Zeitung* on April 21, 2022. Not because there is a war there and it is too dangerous, but because Anton Hofreiter (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann (FDP), and Michael Roth (SPD) have come back full of emotion and with demands on the federal government, which is really not helpful. Strack-Zimmermann, who is considered to be a far more capable defense minister than Müller's party friend Christine Lambrecht, then spoke plainly in the *Tagesspiegel*: "I would be happy to offer the new security expert Michael Müller to develop emotions in order to understand that a brutal war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine is not something that can leave us cold."

The Left Party Member of Parliament Sevim Dagdelen outrages Habeck's empathy with the Ukrainians, who for seven years have been trying, if not to oust the occupants in the east of their country, at least to prevent them from advancing further. "Anyone blinded by hatred of Russia who ignores the ultra-right militias in Ukraine and claims that the country is defending Europe's security and therefore needs to be armed is a real danger to security in Germany and Europe." For Die Linke, the real security threat comes not from Russia but from Habeck, Strack-Zimmermann, Roth, and Hofreiter, and those who want to help Ukraine defend itself against the aggressor. Dagdelen is not the only one who would like to see the Ukrainians sacrifice themselves to Putin, hoping his appetite would be satisfied. They sell this as a peace solution, pointing to Germany's historical responsibility. Daria Kaleniuk cannot hear it anymore. The young Ukrainian, who heads the Kyiv Anti-Corruption Action Center, gets upset that Germany is holding back on military cooperation because of its role as a perpetrator in World War II, saying it is "one of the stupidest statements ever made." On Twitter, she asks as early as January 2022, "Germany's history has

already killed millions of Ukrainians once, and now more should die because of Germany's history?"

Meanwhile, Kyiv's list of required weapons, helmets, and protective vests is on display at the Foreign Office, but the ministry remains silent. Finally, the defense minister sets a "very clear signal." Christine Lambrecht announced on January 26 that Ukraine will receive 5000 helmets. President Zelenskyy cannot believe his ears and struggles to keep his composure. Vitali Klitschko rumbles: "An absolute joke! The mayor of the Ukrainian capital voices what is thought not only in Kyiv: 'What does Germany want to send next for support? Pillows?'"

While Germany continues discussing weapons assistance, more armed Russian soldiers appear on the Ukrainian border. Meanwhile, the country is threatened from three sides. From the east, where Russian troops have never really withdrawn after maneuvers despite repeated announcements. From the south, where the Crimean peninsula has been upgraded to a military base since the Russian annexation in 2014. And even in the north, there is Russian military in a foreign country, Belarus. There, the election fraudster Alexander Lukashenko is only holding on to power with the help of Vladimir Putin, to whom he has, in return, laid his country at his feet as a deployment area. The 200 kilometers to Kyiv are a stone's throw. The engines are already running, initially for a Belarusian-Russian maneuver. In parallel, the Winter Olympics will begin in Beijing on February 4. Putin promises Xi Jinping not to overshadow them with war. At the 2014 Sochi Games, too, he sent his "green men" — special forces of the Russian armed forces in uniforms without insignia — to Crimea only one day after the closing ceremony. The countdown is on.

Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have long supplied weapons to the threatened country. Tallinn may have started supplying them in December 2021. The Baltic states wanted to give Ukraine nine howitzers. But because they came from stocks of the National People's Army of the German Democratic Republic, the Estonians first had to ask Berlin for permission because German arms legislation requires a declaration of end-use. Anyone who buys weapons in Germany and then passes them on must state to



whom and wait for approval. Berlin's officials are taking their time. In mid-February 2022, when the three Baltic heads of government visited the new chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, the Estonian colleague Kaja Kallas still received no answer as to whether she could use the old GDR weapons.

The German government has not decided whether or not it will be allowed to send these simply constructed guns to Kyiv. The Federal Republic of Germany sold 218 of them to Finland in 1992, and 42 howitzers were taken over by the Estonians in 2009, who now want to pass on exactly nine of them as quickly as possible. The new German government is putting on the brakes and acting like the old one in the coronavirus crisis: primarily bureaucratic. There is no trace of leadership.

Germany becomes an international laughing stock, first the helmets, then the howitzers. The Ukrainian house threatens to go up in flames, but Germany hands out the water bottle instead of calling the fire department. The traffic light coalition makes itself known to the world with a disastrous false start, to which Annalena Baerbock initially also contributes. On February 7, the foreign minister once again declared during her visit to Kyiv that there would be no arms deliveries from Germany. In doing so, she once again distanced herself from Robert Habeck. The Russian side would interpret Berlin's massive armament of Ukraine as a provocation and make war more likely. Military aid could also damage Germany's role as a mediator. However, this is impossible now because its reputation has already been permanently tattered on the world stage. Germany's loss of authority means far more than just an image problem. The appearance as an international mediator, which Berlin would like to have, not least because of its supposedly good relations with Moscow, ended before it had even begun. Later—the war in Ukraine has already lasted almost two months—things worsen.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier is disinvited when he spontaneously wants to join a trip by his Polish counterpart Andrzej Duda from Warsaw to the Ukrainian capital in mid-April. The German head of state is an unwelcome guest in Kyiv now.

A scandal, an affront.

After Russia's invasion, the German president sided with Ukraine and later admitted that he had made mistakes in his policy toward Russia. He seems to be getting away with it among Germans. However, German presidents have had to vacate Bellevue Palace for more trivial reasons. The Ukrainians do not make it so easy for Steinmeier. For them, he is the face of the German appeasement policy with Moscow par excellence. Moreover, no politician has so permanently and unswervingly championed energy dependence on Russia against all warnings. Steinmeier is now down for the count.

Meanwhile, Volodymyr Zelenskyy is waiting for Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Out of sheer consideration for those in his party who understand Russia, the so-called Russia-understanders, however, the Social Democrat wastes valuable time that Ukraine does not have. Scholz will first try his hand at crisis diplomacy and travel to Moscow to Putin's white table in mid-February. Across the six-meter-long marble slab, he can only communicate with the Russian president via a headset. Since the coronavirus pandemic, Vladimir Putin has been extremely reluctant to go among people; when he does, he keeps an exaggerated distance.

For this reason, the Russian youth calls him "grandpa in the bunker." Neither French President Emmanuel Macron, who was in the Kremlin before Scholz, nor Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who will come after him, can get through to Putin. The German cannot because he does not mouth three words in Moscow: Nord Stream 2. A timely stop to the second gas pipeline from Russia to Germany might have made the ruler in the Kremlin sit up and take notice. But it did not come. Not after the annexation of Crimea, not at the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine, not after the shooting down of passenger plane MH 17, not after the Novichok poisoning of Alexei Navalny. No offense, no matter how egregious, was significant to German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She had reason enough to pull the ripcord, and her successor has stuck to this course so far.

Putin's antennas, therefore, remain switched to transmit instead of receive. He follows only one agenda, namely his own. He shares with his rapidly changing interlocutors his insights from a

multitude of history books about tsarist Russia and the communist Soviet Union, which he read during the coronavirus lockdown. He not only mourns both empires, which no longer exist in either extension, but he has also wanted to restore Russia according to their models for quite some time. This is impossible without Ukraine. The neighboring country became Putin's obsession, especially when he lost his most important man in Kyiv in 2013: Viktor Yanukovich, the president loyal to Moscow.

For years, Germany overlooked Ukraine, despite being the second-largest country in Europe. Only when the war approaches the EU border, when millions of Ukrainian women and children flee to Poland, Germany, and other EU countries while their men defend their homeland, is Ukraine finally noticed. Unlike politicians, citizens in Germany immediately understand that they must help. They become active with an enormous willingness to help. Many pick up war refugees directly at the Ukrainian-Polish border, take them in their cars to shelters or help at train stations to support the arrivals in finding their way. People are donating more money than ever before. Rarely have the electorate and politicians reacted so differently to a new challenge. Some do what they can, and others can do more.

## Chechnya as a blueprint for Ukraine

If there were a world championship of Putinunderstanders, the winners would often come from Germany. Sometimes the race might be closer because Victor Orbán from Hungary, Aleksandar Vucic from Serbia, or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from Turkey have caught up. But in 2001 and several times after that, the winner would have been Gerhard Schröder at the top of the podium. Schröder was and is unchallenged because no other foreign head of government can call Vladimir Putin his friend. However, such a friendship has to be worked for.

In 2001, Schröder did not simply invite the Russian president to Berlin as he had done the year before; this time, the guest from Moscow was to speak in the Bundestag. When Putin stepped up to the podium on September 25, he was 48 years old and had spent the longest period of his life in the KGB. He looks different from today, much slimmer, almost lanky. Two weeks before his trip to Berlin, Islamist terrorists attacked the US, sending passenger planes into the two towers of New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington and probably crashing a fourth over Pennsylvania. Putin was the first foreign head of state to telephone his US counterpart George Bush and offer him cooperation in the fight against terrorism. It was an impressive gesture not lost on Russian-American relations, which appear to be turning a corner. Putin is now on the front line with the US, alongside President Bush, to fight together against terrorism. A front that, according to his account, has long since run through the North Caucasus, through Chechnya, where Russia is waging war against Islamists with all its might. After the declaration of solidarity with the United States, criticism from Western capitals of Russia's numerous human rights violations in this struggle fell silent.

The Russian begins his speech in the Bundestag in his mother tongue but immediately switches to German. Now everyone can hear how well he speaks the language of the country where he has lived for years. He speaks of the end of the Cold War, for which he

receives a standing ovation. Only CDU chair Angela Merkel murmurs to her seatmate in the Bundestag: "We have the Stasi to thank for the fact that he knows German."

While Berlin politicians enthusiastically applaud Putin, his troops are fighting against the population in Chechnya. The speaker mentioned the war: It was the answer to the attempt to establish a caliphate in the Caucasus. But the methods to stop the Islamists have been extremely questionable for two years. Moscow's soldiers commit crimes against the civilian population. Men with their hands tied with barbed wire are found in Chechen mass graves, as in Bucha near Kyiv in 2022. In 1999, a maternity clinic in Grozny is shelled, killing 27 mothers and newborns, and a similar attack is repeated in Mariupol in 2022. Anyone still in the Chechen capital in October 1999 is considered a terrorist. Twenty years later, Ukrainians are called neo-Nazis or fascists by Putin. To sell the Chechen war in 2001 as a fight against international terrorism is Putin's very own truth. He manages to make the crimes against the civilian population disappear from the politics of the day.

Chechnya could be a blueprint for Ukraine: first, a region is reduced to rubble, then the civilian population is further decimated and massively intimidated by massacres, and finally, it is forced under Moscow's thumb by force. After the small Caucasus Republic, Putin has now set himself a much more ambitious goal with Ukraine, but the man in the Kremlin has long since lost touch with reality. He will not voluntarily return to the negotiating table, but only if defeat threatens and his calculations do not add up.

For German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who criticized Russia for the violence in Chechnya in 1999, it ceased to be an issue in 2001. Six months before September 11, he initiated the Petersburg Dialogue with Vladimir Putin. The two are close, have the same macho posturing, and have a similar background from a low-income family. The supposedly civil society forum is linked to the German-Russian government consultations. The organizers see the presence of the chancellor and the Russian president as a maximum dialogue enhancement. But the media interferes with this right from the start. At the founding event in April 2001 at the University of St. Petersburg, Peter Boenisch, ex-government spokesman for