

Documentation

Research and War

Speech by DFG President Professor Dr. Katja Becker at the official function
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Research and war: I never would have imagined giving a speech on this subject – let alone as DFG President.

After all, the purpose of our research funding is first and foremost to advance knowledge and to boost the synergies that arise from the researchers' collective activity, i.e. enable collaborative research and protect the added value it provides in service to society and to the benefit of all people.

As we see it, war is primarily an obstacle to this undertaking: where war is being waged, it is impossible to conduct research. This is what is currently happening to ethnological field research in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray; it has also impacted on archaeological excavations in the Near and Middle East for decades. For this reason alone, war and research are a constant part of what we do; yet from 1945 onwards and up until February of this year, we were still able to consider war as a mostly local obstacle to research. Under no circumstances should war ever become the guiding motive behind our funding activities: even in the years of the pandemic, talk of the "war against the virus" was intended as no more than a metaphor.

Now, once again, and for the first time since the atrocities of the Bosnian war, we in Europe share a sense of bewilderment and dismay: there is currently much talk of an "awakening of old reflexes that were thought to have been overcome". Yet almost in disbelief, we are now forced to acknowledge that instead of being able to consolidate the established European peace order, billions are being invested in a process of re-militarisation that is unprecedented in recent history.

Nonetheless, the assumption that it would be possible to use lesser military means in response

to our former ideological opponent was not due to a naïve lack of understanding. Rather, it was a rationally based hope – in spite of the threat scenarios that President Putin had long been uttering in public.

On the part of the DFG, it was a serious attempt to shape international relations solely through the power and impact of dialogue and cooperation. This hope was never blind faith, but well-advised method.

It is precisely this hope that has now been shattered, and the multi-faceted efforts on the part of politicians and civil society to seek rapprochement with Russia – and, on the part of the DFG, cooperation with institutional partners – have been disappointed. The Russian war of aggression is the greatest man-made catastrophe in Europe since the end of the Second World War; it constitutes an open breach of international treaties and geopolitical security guarantees. It has also unleashed one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. This is not least because a European partner country is being robbed of its territorial integrity, even as the global community looks on.

What is more: neither is there an end in sight, nor have further risks been averted. The consequences of the war have long since spread to many countries: be it through the inflow of refugees, or the more or less openly waged economic war between the West and Russia, along with a looming energy crisis in Europe in the shadow of an emerging global hunger crisis – the effects of which are already dramatic in parts of the world.

The federal government has called this a "Zeitenwende" (turning point) – a drastic present that leaves the past behind and holds out the prospect of an unanticipated future. However, we do not yet know what this future holds



and what needs to be done to achieve it. Even the drafting of possible (post-war) scenarios is no more than an attempt to confront the complexity of what is happening. It is a complexity that also includes the question of how we – as German and international researchers – are to respond to military conflict, which threatens all kinds of free research.

Incidentally, on the subject of awakening, it was Hegel who wrote that when we awaken, we first find ourselves in a quite indeterminate state which is entirely distinct from the outside world. From then on, according to Hegel, we open our eyes to arrive at complete wakefulness and the certainty of the same¹. We too have yet

to grasp the reality of the new outside world of science and come to grips with it.

The war threatens not only the values of a free Europe, but also those of free science. Autonomy and self-determination are political values, but they apply equally to sciences and the humanities. Together with the Alliance of Science Organisations, therefore, the DFG has suspended funding for its institutional cooperation with Russia. This far-reaching decision is a direct expression of our deep sympathy and solidarity with Ukraine.

And our actions form part of an international response through which policymakers, civil society and academia in numerous countries are declaring that this aggression in breach of international law must be countered using all peaceful means at our disposal. As researchers, we are indeed experiencing a rude awakening: the freedom of science protected in Germany by the constitution – something this coun-

¹ „Indem wir erwachen, finden wir uns zunächst in einem ganz unbestimmten Unterschiedensein von der Außenwelt überhaupt. [...] öffnen wir die Augen, um zum völligen Wachsein und zur Gewissheit desselben zu gelangen“; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* III § 399, Works Vol. 10 (1970), p. 97.

try has worked hard to achieve and which the DFG constantly strives to realise and preserve – is neither self-evident nor robust in itself. On the contrary, academic freedom requires a stable political framework: if the latter falters, the former comes under threat as well. And so the Russian attack on Ukraine forces us – at least regionally and temporarily – to suspend our intrinsic motivation to promote research and to collaboratively pursue questions of urgent scientific interest.

Let me explain in more concrete terms the price of war paid by sciences and the humanities. In Ukraine itself, research has come to a standstill. This also affects German academics, for whom it is now impossible to conduct field research; exchange of all kinds, especially between students, has come to an end. Historical archives and research libraries have not only largely had to be closed, their holdings are threatened with destruction by arson attacks and rocket fire. Few of these research resources are indexed or digitised, including testimonies of Holocaust victims or files from the secret services of various countries. These documents possess real value for Ukraine's cultural identity, but no less for the understanding of Germany's own past. This is without even mentioning the damage to other research centres, some of them state-of-the-art such as laboratories and experimental facilities. Destruction of the latter means massive setbacks in research, but infrastructures can – hopefully soon – be restored. Unfortunately, this does not apply in the case of historical documents. And what has been irretrievably lost is the life of the Ukrainian researchers who interrupted their research work to fight for their freedom – and indeed that of all of us.

Russia's neglect of the values of liberal democracies is also causing considerable damage to its own research ecosystem: after all, top-level research in Russia is embedded in an interna-

tional context, too. Its isolation as a result of Western sanctions is likely to have a severe impact on those concerned. A certain brain drain is already going on and is likely to increase: after all, the quality of previous cooperation with the West cannot be easily compensated for by projects with other partners. And it is not only from the outside but also from within that research conditions in Russia are being undermined. By the time the websites were blocked, the well-known open letters of protest against the war – the word being banned in Russia – was signed by over 8,300 academics, including well-known Academy members, as well as by over 10,000 students and university members. Both for those who have signed the letters publicly and for those who support them silently: free research has become a life-threatening hazard.

As we can see, the war and its effects are hindering research in many ways. And it is thwarting the underlying beliefs of many academics who – here in Germany, too, and especially in times of crisis – actually regard themselves as bridge-builders to Eastern Europe and as such have often had a positive and productive impact in the past, especially in the methodologically comparative approach of Slavic studies, as well as in the field of Eastern European studies, mathematics, geography, the natural sciences and engineering.

What is more: many of the joint projects we were funding that have now been suspended address global challenges such as climate change and species extinction – issues where cross-border scientific cooperation is indispensable, especially in our multi-dimensional world.

So the fact that we are now setting new boundaries ourselves is a painful experience; yet the situation is even more painful for the people of Ukraine.

Many researchers in Russia, and with them their partners in Germany, currently fear nothing so much as the political alignment of their research system; there is currently great concern that repressive measures will be imposed. In consequence, academic freedom is less and less an abstract entity: it is becoming the key factor that determines the day-to-day quality of the researcher's/scientific work.

The war is turning into a maw that seems to devour any possibility of adopting a neutral position. Yet in those domains where a certain pre-political neutrality pertains, scientific cooperation has so far flourished, even with numerous non-democratic countries. These domains do not simply appear of their own accord, however: they grow gradually through dialogue between colleagues and international networks of researchers worldwide; initiated and accompanied, supported and institutionalised by international cooperation between funding organisations, such as at the European level or worldwide under the Global Research Council. These domains of pre-political neutrality create a basis of trust among researchers which is unfortunately one of the first victims of belligerent attacks. Neutrality is then replaced by an imperative of national partisanship that calls into question the mutual trust that has grown between researchers. It is this imperative that feeds the inconceivable, openly formulated commitment on the part of Russian university rectors to war and to patriotism.

As a result, we too, as the central self-governing institution for research in Germany, have been forced to question the maxims that have provided direction for our society up until now. The notion of “change through trade” – in academia perhaps rather “change through exchange” – was no longer viable.

And precisely because Germany, together with the USA, was one of the most important coun-

tries involved in cooperation with Russian science until the outbreak of the ongoing war, the value of this cooperation should not be minimised. That is precisely the reason for the suspension of activities: because otherwise we would hardly be able to credibly stand up for our values in our dealings with other partners worldwide. We have to draw a line in order not to endanger the humanistic-progressive goals of our actions that might result from uncritical and thoughtless cooperation.

Research can only contribute to the good of humanity insofar as it does not elevate itself above this good. This is a simple and familiar principle. No end, no matter how good, justifies the means if it turns human beings into mere means to an end. It is only within these limits that the inviolability of human dignity applies.

There is therefore no alternative to taking a stance here – in favour of humanity and even at the expense of scientific progress.

The measures imposed by science are aimed exclusively at the institutional side of cooperation, and we deliberately distinguish between the state and civil society. After all, we are aware of the key importance of interpersonal relations between researchers, which is why we strive to keep the individual channels of communication between German and Russian scientists open.

Only in this way can we make the previously stable bridges of science to Russian society passable again after a hopefully early end to the war. This is another reason why we would have liked to continue running our Moscow office. The DFG invested twenty years in establishing this office, continuing a tradition of more than 300 years of academic relations. Unfortunately, in April 2022, we were forced by the Russian government to close it down and formally withdraw from the country.



This touches on a fundamental question at the same time: can research contribute to peace at all?

Let me first play devil's advocate here and turn the question around: hasn't research always contributed to weapons capability?

Academia has a particular responsibility on this issue – not only in the shadow of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the current reminder that nuclear weapons could be used again. As early as 1936, a group of renowned scientists wrote in an open letter in the journal *Nature*: “Science has given modern warfare its catastrophic character.”²

The DFG has a specific responsibility to face up to here. German science made an obvious

contribution to autarchy and armaments in the Third Reich.³ Yet the connection between war and research cannot be limited to a specific historical period: warfare has also always drawn on scientific or proto-scientific knowledge. The feasibility of war always has to do with the availability of technologies and the relevant know-how – both of which always have their origins and basis in science. So we might say that there is no war in which science and its progress are entirely uninvolved. War and research – the liaison is unfortunately a very longstanding one.

In view of this, we must ask ourselves all the more how research can be released from the grip of warlike appropriation and contribute, instead, to peace.

The least science can do to curb the cynicism of war and violence is to protect weapons and

technologies – as well as scientific knowledge in general – from misuse. In terms of the organisation of an academia that regards itself as value-bound, this means setting down clear rules. These rules have long since found their way into questions of science organisation in connection with dual-use research of concern; these and other issues of a peace-oriented research funding that at the same time takes into account the needs of national peacekeeping are likely to be the subject of even more intense debate in the future.

In addition to minimising the application risks of research potentially suited to waging war, science can also actively provide impetus for a better understanding of the causes and dynamics of conflict. Through knowledge transfer and policy consulting, peace and conflict research can contribute to preventing, containing and settling armed conflict and to creating the conditions for lasting peace. In this field of research, it is of particular importance to work independently of politics and ideologies. It is also crucial to further expand the interdisciplinary character of this research field, as recommended in a statement issued by the German Science Council in 2019.⁴

One particularly desirable aspect of peace and conflict research in this country is the scientific and technical component, dealing with issues such as cyber security, autonomous weapons systems and threats from NBC weapons.⁵

It is more urgently necessary than ever to identify gaps in the area of peace and conflict research. And as in many other fields of research organisation, the DFG is capable of playing its part here and is willing to do so. At

the same time, research funding in an international context requires more intense coordination between various actors in science and politics.

Incidentally, in his essay *Zum Ewigen Frieden* (*Perpetual Peace*), Kant formulates the thesis that democracies – or republics in Kant's case – do not wage wars, or are at least more peaceful towards the outside world, because their citizens would choose not to engage in war for rational reasons. It is true that Kant's thesis cannot be empirically proven at this general level because it has since emerged that democracies can be similarly belligerent towards non-democratic countries as non-democratic countries are towards each other. But it is still true that they do not wage war against each other.⁶

This insight teaches us that there is a rationality underlying peace that needs to be discovered and explored. This rationality is itself an argument for democracies today in view of the threat they are under from “authoritarian temptations”⁷ in Germany, Europe and worldwide. As such, it is our task as researchers – though no less as democrats – to shed further light on this rationality of peace.

Secure and trusting cooperation is needed to enable peace-oriented research across national borders. This also includes being able to clearly define and measure the criterion of academic freedom. The Academic Freedom Index offers some points of reference here; based on these, science and cross-departmental politics

² *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft*, Vol. 4 (2010), p. 203.

³ *Ibid*, p. 49.

⁴ Science Council, *Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung der Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* (2019), p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁶ Anna Geis; Harald Müller; Niklas Schörnig, *Liberales Demokratien und Krieg*, in: *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* (ZIB), Year 17 (2010) Issue 2, pp. 171–202. Cf. Bruce Russett, *Controlling the Sword* (1990). same author, *Grasping the Democratic Peace. Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (1993).

⁷ Wilhelm Heitmeyer, *Autoritäre Versuche* (2018).

must jointly agree on “tipping points”, as Georg Schütte recently put it.⁸ The step to freeze funding must remain what it is: a last resort.

Providing space for peace ultimately also means reopening the meeting spaces of international research as soon as possible and re-establishing their pre-political status. This must not mean ignoring political injustice, however. Rather, we must continuously learn from cases of conflict to further optimise the robustness of our cooperation criteria.

Cross-border research is not an end in itself: we must seek to pursue it in consideration of other

ethical values. Only then can this research actually serve the common good.

Karl Jaspers is quoted as saying: “Truth is what unites us.”⁹ We are connected to the Russian-speaking world by centuries of reciprocal academic exchange. We are also united in solidarity with Ukraine here and now and will do our utmost to ensure the rapid reconstruction of science.

What will unite us will be established by what our researchers discover collaboratively. Research funding is truth seeking – and truth-seeking thrives on the connectedness that comes of a shared curiosity.

⁸ Georg Schütte, *Eiszeit für die Wissenschaft*, FAZ of 31 March 2022.

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949).

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