

MANIFESTO

ON
CRITICAL
PEACE
RESEARCH
2.0

EN

UPDATED AND REVISED VERSION OF THE FIRST DRAFT PRESENTED AT THE AFK COLLOQUIUM IN LEIPZIG (MARCH 11–13, 2026).

As of April 15, 2026

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Translation finalised: September 15, 2026

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published by the Working Group “Critical Peace Research”

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Hamburg, Marburg, Volzendorf: Working Group “Critical Peace Research”, 2026

MANIFESTO ON CRITICAL PEACE RESEARCH 2.0

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FOREWORD

The ‘Manifesto on Critical Peace Research 2.0’ was initiated by the working group ‘Critical Peace Research’ of the ‘German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies’ (AFK).

It emerged against the backdrop of a long-growing unease regarding the course taken, particularly by that segment of peace research that appears to represent the discipline in the public sphere. Not least since Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza in response to the Hamas attacks of October 2023, the image of the discipline is too close to the state, too uncritical and too security-oriented. This course threatens to blur the distinctions from *strategic* or *security studies*, whose epistemic stance and practical recommendations peace research had originally set out to challenge. Furthermore, a heated controversy erupted at the AFK general assembly in March 2025 regarding how political the statements of an academic association may be in light of the current attacks on academic freedom. This tangible dissent reinforced the desire to positively shape our visions of a different, more critical form of peace research. Since the idea of a manifesto had already been circulating, the project was able to gain momentum as early as April 2025 with an initial draft and the formation of a writing and editorial team (consisting of Sabine Jaberg, Philipp Lottholz, and David Scheuing). From then on, the topic was a constant feature at the monthly working group meetings.

Even though the manifesto emerged from the Working Group Critical Peace Research and was published by it, it is not limited to the particular critical perspectives of our own working group, whose exact translation would be ‘critical of domination’ or ‘power-critical’ for the German adjective *herrschaftskritisch*. This approach nonetheless left its mark on the text. This made it possible both to continue the tradition of the 1971 Wannsee Declaration on critical peace research and to involve other AFK working groups in an eye-level discussion and drafting process. A key milestone was the online commentary conference held on January 16 and 17, 2026, to which we had extended invitations both through the working groups and via the AFK newsletter. The draft, revised in light of the discussions there, was distributed in print at the AFK Colloquium from 11th to 13th of March 2026 in Leipzig and, above all, discussed intensively as part of a dedicated panel. The present version of the manifesto essentially corresponds to this draft version, which, however, was reviewed once again and slightly edited, not least in light of the debates held at the colloquium.

The process is at least as important to us as the product presented here. We do not view the manifesto as an end, but rather as a milestone in an ongoing debate within critical peace research. Furthermore, we see it as an invitation to discussion that extends beyond our own academic community to social movements and critical initiatives—but also to those parts of peace research that do not consider themselves decidedly critical in the sense of the manifesto.

We, as the lead writing and editorial team, would like to thank everyone who has contributed to our ability to present the manifesto in its current form, through constructive suggestions, critical comments, and encouraging support. We would like to mention by name: Claudia Brunner, Josef Mühlbauer, Daniela Lehner, and Werner Wintersteiner, as well as Christine Buchwald. They all played a decisive role in shaping individual sections. We owe valuable critical comments and remarks on draft versions to Patricia Rinck, Werner Wintersteiner, Claudia Brunner, Mechthild Exo, Christoph Weller, Klaus Moegling, and Corinna Kostka. The ultimate responsibility for the text, including its shortcomings, lies solely with us.

April 2026

Sabine Jaberg, Philipp Lottholz and David Scheuing

THE MANIFESTO – IN BRIEF

The Manifesto on Critical Peace Research 2.0 aims to present a contemporary, yet open-ended program for critical peace research. It is also a document calling for greater resilience in peace studies through epistemic resistance: against integration into the system of war and violence, against the denial of scholarly professionalism, against the defamation of a consistent peace perspective as taking sides with aggressors, and against attempts at assimilation into *strategic* and *security studies*. We present it here in brief:

What is (critical) peace research?

We understand peace research as any research on or for peace—regardless of which of its facets is concerned, from which academic discipline it originates, or where it is practised. Peace research occurs wherever people systematically engage with overcoming violence, constructive conflict transformation, and the promotion of peace. In line with the 1971 Wannsee Declaration on Critical Peace Research, we see ourselves as academic advocates for those affected by various forms of violence; we reject mere pacification research and support processes of emancipation. We reject claims to dominance by individual disciplines and open ourselves to perspectives from other academic contexts and social movements, as well as to epistemologies from the Global South, including indigenous world-views.

Why a manifesto on critical peace research now?

More than fifty years after the Wannsee Declaration, the system of war and violence still persists in all its facets (e.g., nuclear deterrence, arms races, imperial power politics, patriarchy, climate change); in this context, the ‘West’ in particular is vigorously pulling the escalation lever, from the global to the local level. New challenges have emerged, such as the convergence of diverse issues into a polycrisis. Science and education are once again being more aggressively integrated into the system of war and violence, civil clauses are being undermined, and in some cases, obligations to cooperate with the military are being enforced.

Furthermore, countervailing processes of formation within peace research itself have gained momentum—particularly since Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, which violated international law, and the war that Israel launched against Gaza following the Hamas attack in October 2023. It is time to move beyond positions we view as too close to the state, too uncritical,

and too security-focused—as advocated by parts of peace research. Simply criticising these positions is no longer enough; we must also outline our own vision for a different kind of peace research.

Critical—about what and for what purpose?

Despite all constructive efforts towards a more peaceful world, the focus of this manifesto lies on the critique of everything that stands in the way of it. Yet every ‘negative’ critique also reflects a ‘positive’ utopia of peace, regardless of the degree to which it is explicitly articulated. In all debates about peace—including on the possibilities to find a universal definition—the baseline is a life for all free from violent interference, within an intact relationship between humanity and its natural environment, in which survival on the planet is reliably guaranteed. The critique of our approach targets what restricts, prevents, or threatens to destroy this peace.

Critical – in what sense?

We understand critical peace research as an—always incomplete—dynamic constellation of perspectives and methods that are partly complementary and partly contradictory. In this manifesto, we explore various critical perspectives from theory and practice to identify their potential contributions to a stance of resistance. We find such contributions in, among others: critical theory, feminism, post- and decolonial approaches, as well as pacifism and anti-militarism, but also Marxism, anarchism, and planetary thinking. We remain open to new approaches or syntheses that—like the concept of Democratic Confederation—emerge from concrete social struggles. In choosing research approaches, critical peace research is guided not exclusively by methodological considerations, but also by ethical and moral ones (e.g., reasonableness, appropriateness, necessity), in which the conscience retains an important role.

Critical—but where?

Established academic venues such as universities and research institutes are embedded in violent social conditions, partly reflect these, but also generate their own relations of violence. Although these institutions also create spaces and (can) ensure the visibility of the discipline as a whole, the question arises as to whether and to what extent they can serve as vehicles for critical perspectives.

Notwithstanding these ambivalences, we are committed to organising subversive network structures that actively bring together researchers from both the university and non-academic sectors.

Critical Research – Critical Peace Practice

Critical peace research, as we understand it, establishes many connections to peace practice. The field is thus more permeable in both directions than is the case with traditional academic perspectives. As a committed discipline, it cannot stand apart from its subject matter, but is entangled with the way that this subject matter evolves. Whenever possible, its advocates also engage outside of teaching and research to practically overcome social relations marked by violence. In this, critical peace research aligns with critical peace education as a theory of critical peace education. Both view each other as providers of peace knowledge that mutually complements and enriches one another. In the face of expected opposition, they are equally dependent on attitudes of epistemic resistance and on structures of solidarity.

Principles of critical peace research

We see critical peace research as characterised, above all, by the following principles:

- (1.) scientific rigour and transdisciplinarity,
- (2.) openness of knowledge and critique of epistemic violence,
- (3.) openness to theory and a sense of incompleteness,
- (4.) an understanding of itself as a transformative and interventionist science,
- (5.) a fundamental critique of violence, and
- (6.) orientation towards ideals of peace.

Challenges that remain: Open questions, areas of tension, tasks

Critical peace research faces at least two central challenges: On the one hand, it needs to sharpen its own critical profile, to resist hegemonic discourses of violence, and to intensify exchange both among ourselves and with progressive actors outside the academic sphere, without being instrumentalised by the latter. In doing so, it is important to emphasise common ground without denying differences and to explore possibilities for an (intersectional) synthesis without for-

cing the unassimilable to conform. On the other hand, we need to stay in dialogue with those parts of peace research that do not see themselves as critical in the sense of the manifesto, but can nevertheless contribute to a critique of the system of war and violence. Ultimately, we encourage the discipline as a whole: *“Dare to be more critical!”*

1. WHAT IS (CRITICAL) PEACE RESEARCH?

Peace research¹ emerged internationally in the late 1950s and in German-speaking countries in the late 1960s as an independent perspective with a tendency towards becoming its own academic discipline. It served as a counter-narrative to strategic studies, whose recommendations were pushing ever closer to the nuclear abyss. Peace research placed “forgotten peace” (Koppe 2001) into the centre of its scholarly attention.

Aware of initial fundamental controversies, we understand peace research today “as any research on or for peace [...]—regardless of which of its facets is currently at issue, from which academic discipline it originates, or where it is done” (Ja-berg 2024: 57). *Peace research is done wherever people systematically engage with the overcoming of violence, constructive conflict transformation, and the promotion of peace.*

Therefore, peace research includes fully academic peace research—whether as a fully developed independent discipline, as an interdisciplinary project, or merely as a line of inquiry within other individual disciplines—and at the same time peace research in non-academic settings, such as within the context of social movements or indigenous communities. Such an understanding opens the door both to transcending disciplinary boundaries within the sciences and humanities² and to a transdisciplinary approach that extends beyond the academic sphere. The acknowledgement of different approaches precludes claims of dominance by individual approaches.

Across all differences, peace research has one thing in common: it thinks from the perspective of peace and towards peace. In doing so, it mostly follows a broad concept of peace or an understanding of peace that incorporates multiple dimensions. These now include not only personal and structural, but also cultural and epistemic aspects: ‘personal’ refers to actors (e.g. individuals, groups), ‘structural’ to social relations (in the broadest sense), ‘cultural’ aspects to patterns of legitimisation (e.g. ideologies, legal norms), and ‘epistemic’ aspects to knowledge or

1 We understand ‘peace research’ and ‘critical peace research’ as established disciplinary or field-specific terms that encompass all elements of a scientific discipline (research, teaching, study). In the German version, this also includes ‘peace-scientific’ (*friedenswissenschaftliche*) perspectives and ‘peace research’ is understood to include research that does not have a particular scientific approach or focus on conflicts (e.g. philosophy of peace, peace research in the natural sciences). Furthermore, the singular focus on peace in the discipline or field designation emphasises the normativity and utopian potential of the field, while the handling of conflicts and their transformation receives less attention here than would be the case in a dedicated peace and conflict research.

2 As the term ‘science’ is used throughout the document the authors want to stress that our use of the term encompasses general ‘scholarship’, ‘natural sciences’ as well as the ‘humanities’.

knowledge systems. Added to this is the complex relationship between humans and nature in the Anthropocene.

An explicitly critical peace research today draws on various sources:

- First and foremost, among these is the discipline's memory. Peace research emerged, not least in the German-speaking world, as critical peace research, as programmatically summarised in the 1971 Wannsee Declaration (cited in Senghaas 1971: 416–419): In the face of a nuclear abyss, an intensification of the North-South conflict, and escalating conflicts within industrialised nations, the Wannsee Declaration rejected “peace research oriented towards the status quo” along with its “premises of harmony, symmetry, and neutrality“. Instead, it sought to help “overcome political apathy, dismantle the fixation on friend-enemy dichotomies, and raise awareness of hidden or ideologically veiled social conflicts.” In this way, it hoped to “set emancipatory learning processes in motion and create a public sphere that is not susceptible to manipulation and is politically capable of action”. According to the Wannsee Declaration, critical peace research understood itself as a “scientific ally of people affected by the unequal distribution of social and economic life chances within and between nations (through structural violence): of the exploited, the socially discriminated and those directly threatened in their physical existence”.
- In addition, there are critical perspectives developed in other academic contexts as well as in social movements. Some of these have been reflected in peace research since its inception. Others were added later. Today, the reservoir of critical theoretical traditions and perspectives includes, for example (see Chapter 4): Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, feminism, Marxism, anarchism, pacifism, and anti-militarism as well as intersectional and post- or decolonial perspectives, but also planetary thinking. Furthermore, there is a fundamental openness to new approaches and syntheses that—like the concept of Democratic Confederalism—have emerged from concrete struggles. Other academic metatheories, such as reflexive constructivism or critical realism, as well as political projects such as convivialism, can serve as inspiration, just as the work of other critical academic networks can, and be harnessed to foster a critical peace studies perspective. The same applies to epistemologies from the Global South, including indigenous world-views and forms of knowledge (Connell 2009) which challenge the hegemony of Western thinking and the notion of a global ‘liberal peace’ it foregrounds.

Thus, critical peace research understands itself as an endeavour of scholarly critique directed at systems, actors, symbolisms, and modes of knowledge that stand in the way of the development of emancipatory peace perspectives. Its positive counterpart lies in the promotion of such processes of knowledge, understanding, and learning that contribute both to overcoming these systems of violence and to the development of a more peaceful world. In doing so, it must be understood as “research that feels compelled to critically question the status quo in politics and society as well as in science itself,” while it should also “expect resistance from all those forces interested in defending [that status quo]” (Picht 1971: 14).

2. WHY A MANIFESTO ON CRITICAL PEACE RESEARCH NOW?

We remain committed to the mission of critical peace research, as outlined in the Wannsee Declaration, because peace research oriented towards the status quo would merely perpetuate global conflict: Thus, criticism of the deterrence system has lost none of its relevance, but, to the contrary, becomes more urgent given the renewed arms build-up efforts by global adversaries, coupled with the simultaneous dismantling of existing disarmament and arms control treaties. New (old) friend-enemy dichotomies are once again increasingly shaping perceptions and actions. In contrast, the different actors’ own shares of responsibility in conflicts and deeper causes of global unrest are rendered invisible. The under-representation of critical voices in German-language mainstream media also contributes to this. Social media reinforces this isolation within separate discursive spaces. Without emancipatory learning processes, neither violence can be overcome nor peace created in the face of the widespread experience of individual powerlessness against social conditions and their systemic constraints. Furthermore, there continue to be billions of marginalised, exploited, and discriminated people all over the world, as well as those whose physical existence is threatened. Among the factors responsible for this are wars, patriarchy, and, not least, an “imperial way of life” based on the capitalist exploitation of people and nature (Brand/Wissen 2017; Mühlbauer/ Gabriel 2022), in which the poor finance the wealth of the rich.

Why, then, do we still consider a second manifesto on critical peace research necessary? In addition to the differentiation of critical perspectives (see Chapter 4), there are two reasons for this, which we will elaborate on below: Firstly, more than fifty years have passed since the Wannsee Declaration, which means that there is a need for a fresh look at today’s world—from which critical peace

research draws its topics (see Chapters 2.1–2.4). Today, new challenges—some superficial, some profound—are accumulating, while the structures underlying research and education remain largely unchanged. Secondly, countervailing processes of formation (of status quo-oriented and critical movements) are once again taking place within the discipline as a whole, and we aim to help shape this development constructively with our manifesto (see Chapter 2.5).

2.1 CHALLENGES FOR GLOBAL PEACE

With regard to *global* peace, the question of survival on Earth is gaining increasing urgency and existential relevance in the Anthropocene era. Imperialism, capitalism, nationalism, militarism, racism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism still represent effective forms of domination and power that must be understood as violence that needs to be called out and overcome. This also applies to all other forms of group-based hostility (e.g. anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim racism, sexism, queer-phobia). They often overlap and reinforce one another in a syndrome-like manner. Moreover, long-standing post-imperial and post-colonial realities persist to this day while old and new great powers (especially the U.S., Russia, and China) are once again openly asserting such claims and enforcing them, in some cases by force, without regard for affected populations and natural resources. In doing so, armed forces contribute significantly to environmental destruction not only through their military operations but also through their ‘normal business’ in peacetime: If the global military were a country, it would rank fourth among the largest CO₂ emitters at 5.5 percent (see Parkinson/Cottrell 2022: 2). The consequences of the permeation of nearly all areas of life by artificial intelligence—with its seemingly inexhaustible capacity for the autonomous simulation of human capabilities—as well as the novel symbiosis of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, are not yet foreseeable.

2.2 CHALLENGES TO PEACE IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The hopes—albeit already doubtful at the time—for a breakthrough of peace within the *international system*, which were harboured with the end of the bloc confrontation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact Organization in 1989/90, have definitively proven illusory. Physical violence was and remains a feature of many processes of state disintegration. The illusions of a liberal peace have been shattered and attempts to build states based after the Western model in the wake of military interventions, such as in Afghanistan (2001–2021), have failed spectacularly. The “global West’s” claims to dominance are clearly reaching their limits in the face of rising powers

in the 'global South', yet massive efforts continue to enforce them. Various structural, cultural, and epistemic forms of violence have, however, remained largely unchanged: historically established patterns—which still include the militarily underpinned competition among great powers over the division of the world into imperial spheres of influence—often manifest themselves more openly than before during times of crisis and transition. In the process, international law—a force for peace that, despite power-political distortions, is worthy of protection and implementation—is being violated, misused for legitimisation, or even explicitly declared irrelevant.

Instead of making global organisations like the United Nations and worldwide exchange relationships more equitable, protecting disarmament treaties, strengthening the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and reinforcing regimes aimed, for example, at restricting the arms trade, promoting health or addressing climate change, these are being deliberately weakened or even destroyed. Instead of increasing investments in the survival of our planet and the quality of life for all people, global spending on expanding military apparatuses and revolutionising the battlefield—not least through artificial intelligence—is soaring to unprecedented heights. NATO member states also bear significant responsibility for this: While the U.S. has traditionally had by far the largest military budget and is driving it to ever more absurd heights, the other alliance members are now expected to catapult their military spending—including investments in war-related infrastructure—to five percent of their gross domestic product.

By cutting back on nearly all accompanying instruments of peace policy, the NATO states are falling even further behind the 1967 Harmel Report, which sought to link their own arms build-up at least with offers of *détente* to the adversary. Instead, they are relying exclusively on a system of military deterrence that, even during the Cold War, narrowly avoided nuclear apocalypse on multiple occasions. In the context of the war in Ukraine, however, all parties involved either downplay the risk of escalation into a nuclear war or even accept it as a necessary evil, while the aggressor, Russia, has already openly issued nuclear threats on multiple occasions. Yet it is precisely in highly escalated conflicts that both the controllability of violence and the ability and willingness of the parties involved to manage the situation diminish, which in turn increases the risk of an intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons that could lead to a nuclear exchange. If even the drops of the (from today's perspective) rather 'small' atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki triggered a catastrophe whose effects are still felt today, a 'limited' and certainly a 'large-scale' nuclear war threatens omnicide: even the use of less than three percent of the world's nuclear weapons could wipe out a third of humanity (see Bivans 2022: 5).

The European Union (EU) is now also joining this game of chance. Given the upheavals in transatlantic relations, it is seeking refuge in a ‘strategic autonomy’ that is likely to include some form of nuclear component. This reveals the already questionable portrayal of the EU as both internally effective peace project and outwardly active “peace power” as liberal wishful thinking. Meanwhile, the EU also maintains an imperial “border regime” in which it cooperates closely with external actors such as the so-called Libyan Coast Guard (Sea-Watch 2025). Casualties are evidently factored in: between 2015 and 2025, an estimated 30,000 people drowned in the Mediterranean alone, some of whom had fled the consequences of our ‘imperial way of life’ (see Mediendienst Integration 2026).

2.3 CHALLENGES FOR BOTH INTRASTATE AND SOCIETAL PEACE

Nearly three-quarters of humanity lives in authoritarian states today (see V-Dem Institute 2025: 7). Wherever they occur, authoritarianism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism destroy *societal peace*. This applies (in various ways) to crumbling empires like Russia, rising powers like China and India, totalitarian theocracies like Iran and postcolonial despotisms. Even ‘old’ democracies are not immune to such threats. Particularly during Donald Trump’s second term, the destruction of democracy and the rule of law is unfolding in the U.S.—with the active assistance of tech giants and oil magnates—at an alarming speed and with brutal force, moving towards a (white, male, Christian) fascism. But authoritarian and nationalist shifts are also advanced in EU member states, where right-wing and (post- or pre-)fascist parties are on the rise. In some countries, they are already in government; in others, they are working to establish the hegemonic capacity of their positions as a prerequisite for taking over the state apparatus. People who—for reasons such as their political views, their religion, their attributed origin, their skin colour, their social marginalisation, their sexual orientation and gender identity, or their physical or mental disabilities—do not fit into the reactionary world-view are already under enormous threat. Attempts at division by state and non-state actors along the lines described above or along other lines are increasing, as is *hate speech* on social media. This also applies to the German-speaking world.

Not only international peace but also *internal peace* is further threatened by a state policy of (pre-)war: In NATO member Germany in particular, according to Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (2023), not only the Bundeswehr but also society needs to be made “fit for war” in the (supposedly plausible) scenario that Russia attacks a NATO state after its war in Ukraine. A discursive, mental, economic, and infrastructural militarisation is the intended consequence. Parallel

to the war hysteria stoked in the media and academia (Neitzel 2025 speaks of the “last summer of peace”), voices for peace in Germany and Global South-based initiatives for an end of the war in Ukraine are wholesale defamed as taking the aggressor’s side. The nearly unconditional support for Ukraine as the victim of an imperialist Russia stands in stark contrast to the complicity with friendly states (e.g. the U.S., Turkey, Israel) that violate international law—whether through concealment, relativisation or even justification.

This occurs simultaneously with the ongoing shift towards authoritarian patterns of violence. Particularly on the issue of ‘refugees and migration,’ the discourse has shifted drastically to the right. Existing laws are deliberately violated in order to seal off ‘Fortress Europe’ even more ruthlessly and re-establish border regimes within the European Union that had seemingly been overcome. Accordingly, the work of private maritime rescue organisations is criminalised as human trafficking and obstructed—with catastrophic consequences for the people who have fled. Furthermore, the rigorous deportation policies that affect an ever-increasing number of people at least encourages the ‘mass remigration’ demanded by the identitarian right. These methods and initiatives are driving an increasing division within society. They drastically jeopardise the possibility of shaping peace in this context.

All of this fits the authoritarian approach of not addressing problems substantively, but rather to combat the people affected by them at whatever cost. This is also served by the expansion of state surveillance and repression apparatuses through automated facial recognition software, chat monitoring and newly drafted police laws in many federal *Länder* in Germany. These lead to an increasing militarisation of the police with ever more comprehensive tasks, increasingly martial equipment (see Behr 2025) and with the aid of software, whose developers and financiers have explicitly committed themselves to repressive and authoritarian projects. The best-known example is ‘Palantir Technologies,’ a company owned by Trump supporter Peter Thiel.

2.4 THE CO-OPTION OF SCIENCE AND EDUCATION FOR THE SYSTEM OF WAR AND VIOLENCE

Universities, colleges, schools, and other educational institutions also reproduce societal power relations. Their hierarchical organisational structure further facilitates individual abuses of power of various origins. Now, the entire sector is more aggressively integrated into the system of war and violence system and contribute to ‘war readiness,’ for example, by banning civil clauses or even through mandatory cooperation with the military. Nor does politics shy away from state

interventions in civil liberties, namely freedom of expression and assembly, as well as the freedom of art and science. The German Ministry of Research has already published relevant guidelines for security-oriented research in the *Zeitenwende* ('turning point in history') (BMBF 2024).

Although repression occurs in various contexts of state interest (such as in the conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish movement), the decisive lever for restrictions on academic freedom and university autonomy—as is currently the case in the U.S.—is a blanket suspicion of anti-Semitism (see Working Group Critical Peace Research 2025). This is exemplified by the two resolutions adopted by the German Bundestag in 2024 and 2025 on this topic. They attempt to integrate universities into the apparatus of repression through a “structured dialogue” (German Bundestag 2025: 2; see also 2024) with the security authorities, and impose the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism (IHRA 2016) on research eligible for funding. However, this definition is highly controversial in academia due to its vagueness and susceptibility to abuse for political purposes. With its help, even profound criticism of Israeli policy and warfare grounded in peace studies, human rights, and international law can easily be delegitimised as anti-Semitic. The same applies to postcolonial and decolonial theoretical perspectives and their specialised terminology: For example, the IHRA document finally stigmatises an accusation of racism directed at Israel as ‘Israel-related anti-Semitism.’ The document thus fits perfectly into strategies that declare Israel’s security to be a matter of *Staatsräson* ('reasons of state interest') in the German context. This pre-democratic paradigm, which subordinates everything—including law and morality—to the (supposed) national interest, is thus part of the global system of violence.

Even the mere suspicion of anti-Semitism can lead to organisations and projects losing their eligibility for funding, and to people losing their professional livelihoods. This fosters a tendency towards both censorship and self-censorship, entangling academia ever more deeply in the global system of war and violence—whether through direct participation in arms research or through concealing ongoing violence, as well as actively making it invisible. These tendencies also have implications for peace research and its intra-disciplinary formation process.

2.5 PEACE RESEARCH BETWEEN CRITIQUE AND APOLOGETICS OF THE SYSTEM OF VIOLENCE

The outline of the diverse global, international, and intra-societal challenges to peace already suggests a question: “What are the topics of critical peace research today?” The above-mentioned impacts on the academic landscape raise another

one: “How is critical scholarship in general—and critical peace research in particular—even possible under the current conditions?” Although both the thematic updating and the defence of critical perspectives against systemic adversities must certainly be taken into account, they alone do not fully justify the need for a *programmatic* manifesto. This arises *last but not least* from a countervailing process of formation within peace research in the German-speaking context.

On the one hand this process involves a massive drive towards disciplinary closure, even to the point of amalgamation with (more or less critical) *security studies*, but also with *strategic studies*, whose epistemic, theoretical, analytical, and praxeological orientation peace research originally sought to counter. Programmatically, this shift is documented in the displacement of the concept of peace in favour of the concept of security. The starting point and lever for this is the concept of *human security*. From the perspective of critical peace research, this does not initially pose a problem, as its dimensions could be read as a security-policy reformulation of well-known concepts from peace studies: Thus, the dimension of *freedom from fear* corresponds to the idea of negative peace, while those of *freedom from want* and *freedom to live in dignity* with the idea of positive peace. In any case, it is quite common within peace research to supplement the concept of peace with additional (orienting) categories; ‘security’ is also among them. However, part of this security-oriented trend goes a decisive step further by redefining peace research as (more or less critical) security research, in which the concept of peace, if at all, is given only secondary significance (Daase et al. 2024): In opposition to a strong peace perspective, as exemplified in the approach of peace logic (see Chapter 4.1.4), these scholars accuse this branch of peace research of failing to recognise the signs of the times and thus of contributing to the deprofessionalisation of the field. They direct the same verdict at those parts of critical peace research that refuse to accept the disciplinary reorientation presented as having no alternative. Their attempt to realign the discipline is reflected in the visible formation of a community. A telling indication of this is the open letter “*Ei-nigt Euch*” (“Come to an Agreement”), initiated by the security research community and co-signed by representatives of institutionalised peace research in March 2025. Citing Russia’s claims to dominance and the anti-European course of the U.S. under Trump, the signatories demand—without any discernible impetus from peace studies: “In this critical phase of German and European security, the question of Germany’s and Europe’s defence capability must not come with a price tag. [...] The question of financing German and thus also European security allows no delay and no tactical manoeuvring.” (quoted from: Wiegold 2025). This marks a departure from the scholarly search for peaceful ways to reduce international tensions.

On the other hand of the current disciplinary formation process, there has long been a renewed focus on both the guiding category of ‘peace’ and on the critical strand within peace research, which has tended to be marginalised since the end of the bloc confrontation in 1989/90. In particular, the (heuristic and praxeological) approach of peace logic (*Friedenslogik*), which has been developed in the context of the ‘Platform for Civil Conflict Management’ (PZKB) since the 2010s in engagement with security logic, reinvigorates the idea of “peace as an independent concept” (Nielebock 2022: 25). The revival, diversification, and networking of critical perspectives, however, are documented not least in various working groups of the German Association for Peace and Conflict Research (AFK). These include, for example, the Working Group ‘Peace Pedagogy’, the Working Group ‘Feminist Peace Research’, and the Working Group ‘Critical Peace Research’. Following some critical interjections (e.g. Baumann et al. 2009; Berndt 2013), critical peace research, in its growing diversity, is now itself becoming a topic of scholarly discussion (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch 2024 and Mühlbauer/Moegling 2026).

Another fault line that *cuts across these formation processes* concerns the question of the boundaries between academia and politics. This was also evident at the AFK general meeting in March 2025 in a heated controversy over how political the statements of an academic association may be in light of ongoing attacks on academic freedom. In such disputes, *one side* insists on the possibility and necessity of limiting statements to those it classifies as strictly academic. Consequently, it even rejects ‘political’ interventions. In contrast, *the other side* emphasises the inextricable intertwining of science with social conditions, which does not permit a strict separation of the two spheres. Although such a view comes more from the critical tradition, it is not necessarily limited to it (see the call to “Come to an Agreement” above).

Given the contradictory dynamics within the discipline, we believe it is no longer sufficient to engage in detail with individual positions perceived as too close to the state, too uncritical or too security-oriented. These include, for example, uncritical support for government policy in the war in Ukraine, the advocacy of unlimited military build-up (and now also of nuclear deterrence) or the widespread silence regarding Israel’s genocidal warfare in Gaza. *Rather, the task now is to outline a contemporary agenda for critical peace research that, despite all its diversity, emphasises commonalities while also making visible differences and inherent areas of tension.*

3. CRITICAL – WITH REGARD TO WHAT AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

The concept of critical peace research makes it clear: Amid all constructive efforts towards a more peaceful world, the focus of critical peace research is initially on critiquing everything that stands in the way of such a world. This raises the question: “What is critical peace research directed against?” And conversely: “What does it strive for?”

While the colloquial conceptual opposite of peace is war, in peace research it is violence. According to Johan Galtung (1975: 9), violence occurs “when people are influenced in such a way that their current physical and mental well-being is less than their potential well-being,” provided that this discrepancy would have been “avoidable” at the time of its occurrence. Violence is thus “that which increases the gap between the potential and the actual or hinders the reduction of this gap” (Galtung 1975: 9). In this sense, the critical aim of peace research ultimately addresses all causes, all manifestations, all constellations, and all locations of violence. But violence is also precisely that which destroys—or is capable of destroying—natural living conditions.

All this also means, however, that every ‘negative’ critique reflects a ‘positive’ utopia of peace, regardless of the degree to which it is explicitly articulated. Even if there may be differing views on peace, including its definability, it ultimately implies at least to a life free from violent impairments for all, within an intact relationship between humanity and its natural environment, in which the survival of the globe is reliably guaranteed. Critical peace research thus embarks on the (global) search for new modes of organising knowledge and society in which personal, structural, cultural, and epistemic forms of violence can be overcome in an endless and fundamental process of transformation. The ultimately all-encompassing program of critical peace research can be captured neither completely nor conclusively. Consequently, only a few parameters can be mentioned:

- Today, as in its early days, critical peace research is critical of global non-peace and the social conditions from which it arises. In doing so, this critique must also address the current and historically enduring contribution of one’s own social context to conditions of violence—not least colonialism and imperialism. For there is a special responsibility to overcome one’s ‘own’ share in global non-peace, especially since criticism of the ‘self’ is the prerequisite for credible criticism of the ‘other’.

- Critical peace research is critical of an economic system, a political order, and a world-view that accept the exploitation of nature as a matter of course or even defend it as necessary. Instead, it regards 'peace with the natural world' as a crucial, highly topical field of research. It strives to shed light on the connections between this and other fields.
- Compared to the early days of peace research, in recent decades—primarily through the establishment of feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives—awareness of epistemic violence has grown—and with it, recognition of the role that academia has played and continues to play in global non-peace and its perpetuation. Critical peace research is therefore critical of the manifold entanglements of violence within the academic and educational systems (e.g., coloniality, racism, sexism). This also includes their co-optation for the optimisation of the global system of violence and the concealment of their own complicity therein. The same applies to the overlooking or invisibilisation of factors that promote peace and of resistant actors. What is therefore required is a plurality of critical perspectives that perceive the global situation and current conflicts also from the viewpoints of the Global South.
- Critical peace research remains critical of peace research that accommodates prevailing power relations, relies on instrumentalising various forms of violence, and thereby reproduces them time and again. This includes criticism of attempts to subsume peace research into other academic perspectives, such as strategic studies or mere policy consulting.
- Critical peace research cannot and must not exempt itself from criticism. For one thing, it too does not exist outside existing power relations but is embedded within them, so that these power relations (can) also be reproduced within it. Furthermore, the academic and educational system and its institutions generate their own phenomena of violence—such as precariousness caused by short-term and poorly paid project contracts, the introduction of personal maximum limits on fixed-term contracts, and the manifold dependencies in graduation procedures. On the other hand, shielding peace research from criticism would contradict its fundamental scientific principle. Therefore, it must not only reflect on its scientific approaches, its conditions of production, and its findings accordingly, but also open itself up to objections from other (peace studies) perspectives. For any science that immunises itself against criticism mutates into ideology.

4. CRITICAL – IN WHAT WAY?

We understand critical peace research as an—always incomplete—dynamic network of perspectives and methods that are partly complementary and partly contradictory. Instead of viewing this diversity as a weakness, we regard it as a strength: First, the very recognition of plurality acts as a stop signal against the dogmatism of a particular perspective, since the different approaches can function as mutual correctives. Second, a plurality of critical perspectives opens up the possibility of intersectional analysis by allowing for the combination of different approaches. Third, it offers critical scholars from other disciplinary contexts multiple pathways into peace research. Fourth, a commitment to plurality signals a fundamental openness to scholarly innovation.

4.1 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THEORY AND PRACTICE

Despite their diversity, critical perspectives are linked by a “deep look behind the taken-for-granted and the obvious”, through the “unveiling of hidden mechanisms of exploitation and alienation caused by power asymmetries beyond what is legally established and what is considered normative” (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch 2024: 11, 10). Yet, critical theories are not *per se* peace research, however useful they may be for it. Rather, they must first be made accessible to peace research and adapted to its needs. The influence of critical perspectives can span an enormous range, from being the theoretical premise in the background to explicit references to extensive adoption. Of course, only a few approaches can be addressed here that belong to the repertoire of critical peace research, where they are always available for (re)activation, regardless of current modes of discourse—including our own. What can critical peace research learn from other critical perspectives, or to what can the latter sensitise the former?

4.1.1 Critical Theory

At first glance, the concept of critical peace research suggests a discipline-specific version of general Critical Theory in the sense of the Frankfurt School—originally a symbiosis of, among other things, early Marxism and social psychology, which has since evolved over several generations. However, this impression obscures the fact that critical peace research leaves room for diverse critical perspectives. Nevertheless, there are obvious parallels between it and the critical theory of, say, Herbert Marcuse, which can be mobilised to sharpen its critical aspirations (see Jahn 2024: 80–85).

Thus, Critical Theory reminds peace research of the mutual interdependence of science and society. This leads to two conclusions: First, ‘pure’ science is not possible; critical peace research is therefore always *also* political. Second, mindful of its social and historical embeddedness, Critical Theory warns peace research against attempting to endow the concept of peace with timelessly valid content. Wherever peace research approaches its guiding category, however vaguely, it must therefore have safeguards in place to counteract any form of essentialisation. This includes, for example, Johan Galtung’s (1998: 40) proposal to always conceive of peace in the plural as “*the* peaces,” but also the construction of peace as holism without a specific whole in the sense of Martin Seel (2002: 98), the emphasis on the processual nature of peace as in Ernst-Otto Czempiel (1972: 17, 25), or Hanne-Margret Birckenbach’s (2023: 36) reference to the fundamental openness of peace to concrete needs in concrete conflict constellations.

Critical theory also reminds peace research of its intertwined relation with society. It calls on society to subject the societal imbalances—which peace research understands as relations of violence—to a fundamental transformation in line with its guiding category, namely peace. Critical theory thus urges peace research not to lose itself in partial problems, but to always make the overall social context that gave rise to them the starting point of analysis. In this way, peace research becomes ‘radical’ in the best sense of the word, because it not only treats symptoms but also consistently addresses the roots of the problem.

Critical theory leads peace research to understand its concept of peace as a regulative ideal that refuses to violate its own fundamental conditions: Accordingly, peace may only be achieved by peaceful means. The flip side of this is a fundamental critique of violence. In this way, peace research also arms itself against the danger of a “tyranny of values” (Hartmann 1949: 576), against which, in particular, a peace stylised as an absolute supreme value—reduced to a mere goal to be achieved—would not be immune. Ultimately, critical peace research, in line with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and alongside (the late) Ekkehart Krippendorff (1999: 991), calls for “living within the idea” that is, “to treat the impossible as if it were possible.”

Critical theory encourages peace research to overcome the separation between theory and practice. At the same time, it warns against mere social technology. Rather, the primary task, according to this view, lies in creating space for new conceptions of peace—and thus also for different political peace practices—by analysing and questioning the prevailing understanding of the problem. Critical theory also strengthens peace research in its hope for a fundamental transform-

ability of the world—including through scholarly practice. This underpins its self-understanding as “intervening science” (Wintersteiner 2024: 81, cf. Ch. 7).

4.1.2 *Feminism*

Feminist theory has repeatedly—and largely ignored by the male protagonists of critical peace research—pointed to the close interconnection of militarism, nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy as the epistemic, social, and material foundations of armed conflicts and war (Enloe 1990; Federici 2015; Merchant 2020; Mies 2015; Reardon 1996). Feminist perspectives do not have their roots in state-supporting institutions, but in the women’s movement, which historically also emerged as a peace movement. As early as 1915, more than a thousand women from twelve nations at the International Women’s Congress in The Hague, based on an analysis that today would be described as intersectional-feminist, called not only for an end to the war, but also for the establishment of an international court and an international organisation to mediate political conflicts, as well as for the control of the arms trade and a new world economic order (WILPF 2015).

Feminism raises awareness in peace research regarding the relevance of heteronormative patriarchal social structures and corresponding “sexuality policies” (Dietze 2017). From a feminist perspective, these constitute a key factor in oppression, exploitation, and various forms of violence, but particularly in war and armed conflicts (Batscheider 1993; Enloe 1990; Reardon 1996).

Furthermore, feminist research interests—often framed by standpoint theory—lead to research questions that remain hidden even to many critical approaches that remain androcentric. The basis for this perspective is an explicitly broad concept of violence, with particular attention to the structural and epistemic preconditions and effects of those social phenomena that are also the focus of peace research and related disciplines (Brunner 2020).

The concept of security is also framed in a counter-hegemonic manner from a feminist perspective, namely not as primarily military and geopolitical security, but as security that encompasses human and biological foundations of life for all of us (Wibben 2011). Comparable feminist re-significations of central concepts in peace research are being advanced in a lively and controversial manner within an inter- and transdisciplinary theoretical debate and are repeatedly adapted for critical peace research. Furthermore, a feminist perspective advances emancipatory processes within the community of peace research, as it not only formulates

codes of conduct and statements against sexualised violence in academia, but also repeatedly demands the practical implementation of its principles.

Complementary to this, however, key categories and concepts from gender studies are also subject to anti-feminist appropriations, as well as those that, while feminist, cannot be described as intersectional, systemic, and critical of power structures in the sense of critical peace research (Brunner 2016, 2025). Both are the case, for example, when war is waged in the name of civilisation and gender democracy, or when the military is trivialised as a diversity-oriented-inclusive employer. Precisely for this reason, feminist theory—especially in its intersectional form, which is also capable of analysing racialisation and class relations as well as other structures of exploitation and oppression—remains an indispensable source for critical peace research. After all, gender, as a social marker and structural category, is not only a resource for domination and order but—when viewed from a feminist perspective – also capable of fundamentally challenging and rethinking them (Brunner 2022; Clasen et al. 2011). It is no coincidence that one of the guiding principles of feminist perspectives is: “*Subvert the dominant paradigm!*”

4.1.3 Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches

At the heart of postcolonial and decolonial approaches lies a critical examination of various forms, histories, and continuities of European colonialism and coloniality. The latter is still evident today in social organisational forms and political practices, as well as in the theories and epistemologies with which a still Eurocentric academic system attempts to grasp current crises, conflicts, and wars while obscuring their colonial dimensions.

However, the differences between the two approaches should not be overlooked: *postcolonial* research aims primarily to uncover forms of domination and violence (see Said 2019; Spivak 2020). These include exploitation, inequality, and the epistemic erasure of dominated subjects, ways of being, and modes of knowledge. *Decolonial* approaches, on the other hand, focus more on what life might look like without the principles of order and power inherent in modern capitalism and (post-)colonialism. They do not limit themselves to theoretical considerations but also explore possibilities for their practical implementation.

The recognition of post and decolonial perspectives, along with their often far-reaching implications for critical theory and practice, remind peace research of that “coloniality of power, knowledge, and being” (Brunner 2020: 37) that is also inherent in modern-liberal conceptions and practices of peace. Critical

peace research cannot therefore be content merely to make marginalised perspectives visible in order to fill gaps in Eurocentric bodies of knowledge or to perfect liberal peace strategies such as interventionist statebuilding (see Cárdenas 2016, Chojnacki/Namberger 2014). Rather, it is about a “confrontation with alternative, non-assimilable narratives” (Exo 2017: 13), which in turn expose Eurocentric theories as mythologies that contribute significantly to the maintenance of existing violent relations of power and knowledge.

Critical peace research is called upon to self-reflexively scrutinise its own approaches and bodies of knowledge for hidden forms of colonialism (see Buckley-Zistel/Koloma Beck 2022), without losing sight of the originally addressed issues in the process of its own decolonisation. These include the ongoing colonisation and capitalist exploitation of the lands of indigenous communities, as well as the destruction of their livelihoods, extending even to the eradication of their existence. Ultimately, post- and decolonial approaches continue to represent an indispensable corrective even for critical peace research.

4.1.4 *Pacifism and Anti-Militarism*

Pacifism is a term that emerged around 1900 to describe a world-view that, for various reasons—such as ethical or religious ones—rejects war *in every form* and advocates for peaceful understanding *at all times*. As early as the early twentieth century, Alfred H. Fried (1864–1921) distinguished between reformist pacifism, which is directed exclusively against wars and their means, and causal pacifism, which goes further to address their causes (see Koppe 2001: 183ff.). Even though the concept of pacifism was used particularly in the peace movement that was already emerging at that time, it became scientifically linked early on with the doctrine of international law to form a *legal pacifism*, which, however, may provide not only for peaceful proceedings before international courts but also for the enforcement of law by force.

Even in its *reformist* variant, pacifism warns peace research against becoming the scientific accomplice of any war. Taken seriously today, it must oppose not only wars of aggression that violate international law, but also any forms of large-scale military force that are legal under international law or (seemingly) justifiable under the ethics of peace. These include legally compliant wars of self-defence in accordance with Article 51 and collective military enforcement measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, as well as so-called humanitarian interventions beyond the scope of applicable law.

Furthermore, pacifism encourages work on and with methods of both nonviolent resistance and social defence, as well as constructive conflict transformation. The approach of peace logic (PZKB 2022) provides a useful heuristic for this, which also helps to resist hegemonic discourses of war: First, it identifies *any* impending, ongoing, or past violence as the primary problem, regardless of who perpetrates it, whom it affects, or the forms it takes. Second, it understands violence as a consequence of destructive conflict dynamics and seeks to identify its own contributions to the problem. Third, it relies on civil conflict management. Fourth, it derives its legitimacy from the ethos of humanity as well as from international law and human rights. Fifth, it responds to failures with self-reflection, learning from experience, and a principled openness to mistakes.

For peace research that takes the influences of Critical Theory seriously is not satisfied with merely criticising or curing external ‘final’ or ‘penultimate’ symptoms (war or the military apparatus). Rather, critical peace research must reveal the (personal, structural, cultural, and epistemic) preconditions of these external manifestations so that the system of violence can be transformed into a system of peace. It thus corresponds to the idea of a *causal* pacifism. Today, however, this can no longer be exhausted in the originally sought-after “establishment of an order of interstate coexistence in place of anarchy” (Fried, cited in Koppe 2001: 184). Rather, it must take into account all causes at every level and in every subject area that can lead to violence or foster peace. Among the causes of violence is also a militarism that is eating its way ever deeper into everyday civilian life, increasingly ‘normalising’ the military (Thomas/Virchow 2006). Pacifism therefore includes a decidedly anti-militarist stance (though the reverse is not necessarily true). In particular, an anti-militarist “peace ecology” (Moegling 2025: 147) seeks to highlight and overcome the military’s contribution to the destruction of natural foundations of life. Furthermore, it raises awareness of conflict constellations resulting from ecological upheavals. It thus reveals intersections between the themes of peace and ecology, as well as the related sciences and social movements.

4.1.5 Marxism

The Marxist and neo-Marxist discourses that dominated the early days of peace research have also left their mark on the discipline. This can be seen, among others, in Galtung’s work: they are recognisable in peace studies through their re-interpretation within the analytical category of structural violence and have ultimately been ‘idealistically’ shaped conceptual system that is conceived and oriented very strongly around the individual and their potential.

Orthodox Marxism, on the other hand, explicitly sensitises peace research to the relevance of the economic base consisting of relations of production and productive forces. It directs its attention directly to capitalism as the driving force behind war and other forms of violence. In doing so, it also examines the societal conditions of reproduction of the capitalist system and the resulting ‘objective interests,’ which may be enforced through military force. This then forms the starting point for a “political-economic foreign policy analysis as part of critical peace research” (Berndt 2024: 96). With its critique of (global) capitalism and imperialism, the approach also reminds non-Marxist critical peace research not to dissolve the social into either the discursive or the identity-political, but also to examine economic realities and social fault lines in terms of their relevance to peace.

In contrast, a *Gramscian* Marxism (cf. Schreiber 1990), despite its political-economic foundation and critique of capitalism, directs greater attention to the ideological ‘superstructure.’ For Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), the interwar period was about achieving political-cultural hegemony as a prerequisite for a long journey towards a “regulated” (classless) society. In such a society, the coercive nature of “political society”—as Gramsci calls the state in the narrow sense—would be overcome. Unlike orthodox Marxism, Gramscian Marxism recalls not only the importance of the economic base but also that of the cultural sphere for the stabilisation as well as the overcoming of existing (including global) relations of power. This brings the ‘intellectuals’ into focus as organisers of political-cultural hegemony: While the ‘traditional’ intellectuals of the ruling class support the existing system, the ‘organic’ intellectuals work towards the hegemony of the emerging forces. Unlike orthodox Marxism, Gramscian Marxism focuses on a broader spectrum of ‘old’ and ‘new’ social actors, as it elevates non-proletarian subalterns to the status of political subjects within a historical bloc based on genuine conviction, alongside the working class. Gramscian Marxism thus urges peace research not to see itself as an intellectual partisan of the ruling class, but rather as an advocate for those forces working towards the transformation of the system of violence into a system of peace.

4.1.6 Anarchism and Anti-Statism

The fundamental idea of anarchist or anti-statist peace research lies in the assumption that the state, as the monopolist of violence, cannot be a guarantor of peace. Peace here refers to positive peace, which is not limited to the mere absence of war. Rather, it also encompasses the absence of strong hierarchies and power imbalances. This applies in particular to a state apparatus equipped with

police and military forces, in which personal and structural, but also cultural, elements of violence are intertwined.

Even in liberal defensive rights—such as human and civil rights or certain liberties (e.g. freedom of assembly, the right to resist, freedom of expression)—a certain fundamental scepticism towards state-monopolized rule is reflected, from which the anarchist works of Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and Gustav Landauer (1870–1919) are inspired. This scepticism has found its way into critical peace research through at least two of its pioneers: Johan Galtung and Ekkehart Krippendorff. In his writings, Galtung draws on Bakunin’s ideals of communal autonomy and decentralisation and Pyotr Kropotkin’s ‘mutual aid’ (see Galtung 2021; Miething 2024: 4). In his very last interview, he once again explicitly emphasised his affinity for Bakunin (see Galtung 2021). Krippendorff also pursued an anti-statist approach in his work “State and War. The Historical Logic of Political Irrationality,” he also pursued an anti-statist approach: For him, the state and the military are “twin institutions” that “stand synonymous for domination and organised violence” (Krippendorff 1985: 11). Nevertheless, there is an important difference between these two pioneers of peace studies: While Galtung, under the motto “*Small is beautiful*,” accepts small states, small militaries, and small wars, “such a concession to the right of war and the military to exist, no matter how ‘small’ they may be, [...] is not found in Krippendorff” (Miething 2024: 4).

There is no consensus on the question of violence among the various anarchist or anti-statist traditions of thought (see Christoyannopoulos 2024a). While today some anarchists close to the peace movement resort to nonviolent actions, such as certain actors in the War Resisters’ International network, others are fighting against the Russian invaders in the regular Ukrainian army (see Assembly 2022). In particular, the ‘classical’ approaches of Bakunin and Kropotkin, there is even a veritable glorification of violence and terrorism (see Eibisch 2012). Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the idea of nonviolence—at least the rejection of personal violence against people—is deeply rooted in anarchist and anti-statist approaches. Anarchism sensitises peace research to:

- a critical perspective on *any* state power, *any* war, and *any* militarism,
- a fundamental scepticism towards hierarchical forms of rule as well as a fundamental openness to ways of thinking and acting beyond a state monopoly on violence,
- the rejection of structural and cultural violence (such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism),

- as well as, in light of the danger of seeking to achieve noble goals through means that run counter to them: the prefiguration of the means by the end, which must, as it were, be anticipated in them—that is, for peace research: peace through peaceful means (cf. Christoyannopoulos 2024a; 2024b).

4.1.7 Democratic Confederalism

The political-philosophical approach of ‘Democratic Confederalism’, developed since the 2000s, has its roots in the writings of Abdullah Öcalan—imprisoned in Turkey since 1999—and in the broader theoretical framework of the Kurdish movement. It is being put to the test in the democratic, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious self-governing region known as Rojava in northern and eastern Syria—albeit under the most adverse conditions, to which massive military attacks by Turkish and Syrian forces as well as Islamist groups contribute in particular.

Democratic Confederalism has found its way into German-language critical peace research through the knowledge production of the Kurdish diaspora and its reception by left-wing, ecological, and feminist internationalist organisations. Democratic Confederalism and the understanding of peace embedded within it contain cross-references primarily to feminist, decolonial, anarchist, and Marxist approaches, but also to planetary thinking (see Exo 2025; Güneş 2026). They can inspire critical peace research in several ways.

In particular, the ‘theory of democratic solution’ can sharpen critical peace research’s awareness of the difference between (largely) power- and domination-free forms of democracy on the one hand, and power- and domination-saturated ‘statist solutions’ on the other. Thus, Democratic Confederalism consistently focuses on the potential of democratic societies (and not on that of the state). This brings local communities into view as the foundation of a ‘peace from below without established statehood’. This cannot arise from mere social technology, but exclusively as a long-term project of profound social transformation.

Furthermore, Democratic Confederalism illustrates that diverse theoretical and practical approaches, through critical engagement, can be synthesised into a unique and innovative peace policy framework. At its core lies the primacy of liberated gender relations, and the constant consideration of humanity’s relationship with the animal and plant worlds as well as the cosmos.

Last but not least, the concept developed within the Kurdish movement reminds critical peace research that innovations in peace policy do not arise primarily in the study, but from the practical struggles of those people whose peace is at stake in each case. Furthermore, Democratic Confederalism places every person—including critical peace researchers—to see themselves, as it were, as part of a local community within their own immediate living environment, from which democratic and self-responsible social organisation in the service of peace emanates.

4.1.8 Planetary Thinking in the Age of the Anthropocene

Planetary thinking is based on the premise that the survival of humanity and many other species can only be guaranteed if we perceive the world in its planetary dimension as well. Humanity, as the decisive influencing factor, is responsible for this existential threat to the entire ecosystem in the form that sustains our lives in the Anthropocene.

This makes it necessary to “understand everything”—including critical peace research and its topics—“in a planetary context” (Morin/Kern 1999: 174). Merely adopting such a perspective breaks with anthropocentrism. When thought through to its logical conclusion, it emphasises the ontological equality of humans and the non-human. Such an understanding is exemplified in many indigenous world-views, in which non-human entities (e.g. oceans, rivers, lakes, glaciers, reefs, mountains, forests, grasses, animals) are regarded as equal components of a community not understood as exclusively human (Lakitsch 2024: 428–436).

This approach encourages critical peace research to understand individual phenomena as “an ensemble of diverse crises” (Morin/Kern 1999: 110) that are interwoven in complex feedback loops. This poly-crisis includes, among other things, human-induced environmental destruction, (neo-)colonialism, poverty and hunger, economic instability, pandemics, the erosion of democratic structures, the threat of nuclear war, wars, and other forms of mass violence (see Wintersteiner 2021: 64).

At the same time, the existential and complex dimension of the planetary crisis reminds critical peace research once again that neither merely treating symptoms nor sheer social engineering is sufficient; rather, it ultimately requires a major social transformation, for example through a network of systemic alternatives (cf. Wintersteiner 2021: 129ff.). To put it bluntly: All peace strategies must include ‘peace with the natural world.’ More than any other, a planetary perspective adequate to complexity calls for a “multi-paradigmatic, critically-integrative peace

research” (Graf 2020: 162), which also seeks to incorporate approaches that are not strictly critical.

Nevertheless, critical peace research remains called upon to shed light on specific interconnections—such as those between climate change and coloniality—that threaten to disappear by the general discourse on both the planetary crisis and human-induced climate change. Its tasks also include making visible the contribution of the long-standing “morally anthropocentric silence” (Krohn 2024: 448) of modern-liberal or modern-colonial conceptions of peace.

4.2 CRITICAL METHODOLOGIES

In choosing research approaches, critical peace research is guided not exclusively by methodological considerations, but also by ethical and moral ones (e.g. reasonableness, appropriateness, necessity), in which one’s own conscience retains its legitimacy. It is committed to the principle of methodological openness. In doing so, it rejects the insistence on the exclusive use of established methods, as this also constitutes an instrument of domination and power that disadvantages non-conformist scholars in multiple ways: in the allocation of research funding, access to academic journals, and, not least, in the hiring process. Furthermore, an exclusive fixation on established methods stands in the way of scientific innovation and the structured forms of knowledge production and dissemination based on them. Productive innovations often emerge outside the established scientific apparatus, which is steeped in power and control. The following section outlines several common methodologies that can be utilised for critical peace research. These include both predominantly qualitative and quantitative (statistically based) methods. They can all be combined with one another in various ways.

4.2.1 Historical and Historicising Approaches

Historical and historicizing approaches play a fundamental yet still relatively underrecognised role. These help to analyse concepts with global hegemonic implications, such as ‘liberal peace’, not only in terms of their political and conceptual contradictions but also to critique them in terms of their power-mediated historical development. Historicising analyses also promote an understanding of ever-perpetuating relations of exploitation. For example, programs to build and reform state apparatuses in the Global South (as well as in the formerly socialist countries of Eurasia), which have been ongoing for decades, have led to a dialectic between domination and liberation. While change has indeed taken place in

this way, it has occurred only along the political and economic lines dictated by Western states and international organisations (Schlichte 2015).

4.2.2 Approaches of Political Economy and Materialist Analysis

Equally central are approaches from *political economy* and *materialist analysis*. Especially in early critical peace studies, these were established by Ekkchart Krippendorff, among others, as a tool for a global analysis of power and domination relations and were further developed in the following decades (see Ruf 2003; Berndt 2021). Recently, however, the political-economic approach has lost significance in German-speaking critical peace research. Nevertheless, the international research landscape continues to yield important contributions from peace studies on the economic dimension of international power relations (e.g. Sylla/Koddenbrock 2025; Veit/Fuchs 2024) or on possibilities for building sustainable peace (Distler et al. 2020). These approaches allow for an examination of solidifying patterns of economic and economic-policy constraints, including their effects on the persistence of violence (e.g. in the form of the violence economy) and conflict dynamics.

With regard to (often statistical-stochastic) analytical methods and the use of sources (often mass datasets), political-economic and materialist analyses are generally dependent on the interpretation of existing datasets. These are usually generated by (inter)governmental institutions and actors oriented towards market-based issues and interests. While they often offer insights and starting points for critical analyses, they actually require supplementation with independently generated datasets.

4.2.3 Deconstructivist, Semiotic, and Sociological Approaches to Knowledge

A third group, into which the majority of recent critical peace research likely falls, includes *deconstructivist* and *semiotic methods* as well as *methods from the sociology of knowledge*. Deconstructivist methodologies, for instance, provide tools such as critical discourse analysis, while semiotics offers methods—including those of aesthetic and visual analysis—that also decode symbolic and culturalised aspects of conflict and violent behaviour, as well as the underlying dispositive structures, making them accessible to critique and transformation.

Sociological approaches to knowledge uncover unequal power relations both at the epistemic level and in concrete social interactions. They also discuss ways of addressing such constellations of violence and of creating solidarity-based and

anti-hegemonic practices. In addition to text and literature corpora generated from public discourses, specially collected data is also utilised: For instance, through interviews, photography, film, and participant observation of peace actors, the mechanisms of exclusion affecting marginalised positions can be made visible.

4.2.4 In-depth Social Analyses: from Anthropology to Co-operative Approaches

Ethnology and anthropology, as academic disciplines and fields of study with their respective specific methodological approaches, as well as critical psychology, are significant for *in-depth social analyses* of power and violence relations, including in peace and conflict processes. Anthropological approaches have, however, been extensively criticised due to their colonial legacy and entanglement in intelligence and military operations (Asad 1975; Denskus/Kosmatopoulos 2015). On the other hand, ethnographic peace research has now demonstrated its strong potential (Naucke/Halbmeyer 2023; Johais et al. 2024). Critical peace psychology offers a further anthropocentric approach to a deeper understanding of violence, which also contributes to the analysis of socio-structural power relations.

Overall, anthropological and ethnographic research approaches have explicitly addressed critical questions regarding the representation of the people and groups under study. This has led to important self-reflection and a critical engagement with fundamental questions, e.g. on the factors shaping research agendas or the various impacts of researchers on the field. Through such reflections, these approaches are not limited to a mere critique of existing relations of violence (including power asymmetries and other injustices), but they seek ways to overcome them. The critique of and reflection on the role of science using anthropological and ethnographic approaches has also led to the advancement of participatory and co-operative research, which is now increasingly being applied in peace research, too (Lottholz/Kluczevska 2024).

5. CRITICAL – BUT WHERE?

One question that remains is: What is a good place for critical peace research? In this regard, it is clear that established academic institutions must also be understood as apparatuses of power and domination. Consequently, doubts are already emerging regarding the ability of universities to adequately reflect the full

range of societal viewpoints and lived experiences. By the postdoc level at the latest, women and other individuals marginalised along lines of gender, social or migrant background, racialised classifications, or any physical or mental disabilities are clearly underrepresented. Mechanisms of socialisation and within academia itself, as well as its structural underfunding, are part of this selection process.

Critical peace research needs to be aware of these hierarchies and exclusions through a comprehensive “hegemonic (self-)criticism” (Brunner 2022), but it must also continuously work to overcome them. To do so, it needs to facilitate dialogue and equal collaboration among people of diverse origins, affiliations, and orientations. In addition to inclusive organisation and communication, this also requires an epistemic openness that goes beyond mere acceptance: what is needed is a serious engagement with and recognition of scholarly and normative positions that are perceived as ‘different’. To this end, it is essential to specifically include scholars and their work that operate outside officially recognised academic institutions.

In the early years of critical peace research, its institutionalisation was, out of necessity, high on the agenda. But the ambivalences of state-funded ‘professionalisation’ soon became apparent, as when Ekkehart Krippendorff—one of the few professors of critical denomination in institutionalised peace research—contrasted professional peace research with a scientific “underground” in which one could no longer build a career (Krippendorff cited in: Wasmuht 1998: 386). The now extreme precariousness has significantly increased the pressure to conform within the entire higher education sector. Moreover, the exclusionary and violent framework of higher education are faced with the successes of alternative learning, teaching, and research spaces. Even if universities and especially specialised research institutions create spaces and (can) ensure the visibility of the discipline as a whole, critical peace research today faces, more than ever, the question of how much it can still rely on these established institutions as bearers of critical perspectives.

In any case, critical peace researchers feel committed to organising subversive network structures that actively bring together researchers from both the university and non-academic sectors.

6. CRITICAL RESEARCH – CRITICAL PEACE PRACTICE

Critical peace research, as outlined in this manifesto, establishes many connections to peace practice. Even though it is distinct from the latter—and also has to be, given its borrowings from critical theory—it renders itself more permeable in both directions in its own self-understanding than is the case with traditional academic perspectives. This concerns the engagement of researchers in social movements, the unequivocal stance against all forms of violence, the openness to the perspectives of people affected by violence or peace activists, as well as the work on and with various approaches to constructive conflict transformation. As engaged scholarship, critical peace research cannot stand apart from its subject matter; it is woven into its progression. Advocates of critical peace research are committed to practically overcoming the existing conditions of violence, whenever possible also outside of teaching and research, as this corresponds with their normative ledger.

Therefore, peace pedagogy, as theoretical arm of peace education, also constitutes an indispensable component of critical peace research. Peace research and peace education regard each other as providers of peace knowledge that mutually complements and enriches one another. In the face of expected confrontation, they are equally reliant on attitudes of epistemic resistance and on structures of solidarity. German-language critical peace education (Wulf 1973), which emerged from a context of social critique and anticapitalism, was inspired not least by Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1971). This is a liberating, dialogical approach that focuses on raising awareness, solidarity, and social transformation. In addition to the widely held belief in the individual responsibility for peace-capabilities, it also focuses on systemic critique and a restructuring of “organised peacelessness” (“*organisierte Friedlosigkeit*”).

However, the decades-long neoliberal transformation of the educational system has left deep scars, as competition, selection mechanisms, social inequalities, and thus structural, cultural, and epistemic violence have been exacerbated. Furthermore, liberal peace education has suppressed any critique of the political system, of violence, and of war. After the proclamation of the *Zeitenwende* (‘turning point in history’), education has been planned to be subordinated to the goal of *Kriegstüchtigkeit* (loosely translates to ‘war readiness’ and the ‘prowess to pursue war’). Educational collaboration between the armed forces and schools and universities are being pushed and forged into binding cooperation agreements. In their search for answers to the political challenges of our time, educators often turn to guidance offered by the military and the police.

Critical peace education is self-aware of its mandate for practical intervention. While respecting the autonomy of the participants in educational formats, it must—especially under the current adverse circumstances—preserve or open up spaces for critical reflection in which relational, embodied, and emotional forms of knowledge and of ‘Being’ are exchanged. Drawing in particular on insights from feminist, postcolonial, decolonial, and planetary thought (see Chapter 4.1), these spaces could succeed in addressing one’s own privileges and entanglements in violent systems (Krohn/Pauls 2023; Stein/Andreotti 2016; Zembylas 2018), while also drawing strength for political action and exploring forms of planetary co-existence (Bernhard 2017; Krohn/Pauls 2023; Reardon 2021; Wintersteiner 2025). “*Peace Education for Global and Planetary Citizenship*” offers a unifying formula.

7. PRINCIPLES OF CRITICAL PEACE RESEARCH

Critical peace research, as defined in this manifesto, is guided by a set of principles intended to provide ethical, methodological, and—politically relevant—substantive orientation.

7.1 SCIENTIFIC RIGOUR AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

- Critical peace research is scientific research. It adheres to established standards—which it simultaneously and repeatedly questions—, the ethical justifiability of its practice, the application of appropriate methods, and the establishment of transparency and intersubjective transmissibility. However, it also respects the researchers’ own conscience and emphasises a principled openness to methodological innovations.
- Critical peace research follows the ideal of intra-scientific multi-, inter-, and supra-disciplinarity, as well as transdisciplinarity that extends beyond the academic terrain. Its broad understanding of science incorporates approaches from social movements, critical initiatives, and indigenous communities. Nonetheless, it also acknowledges forms of practice that are more strongly tied to specific disciplines (see Section 5.2).

Furthermore, critical peace research is guided by the ideal of transnationality. While acknowledging difficulties associated with this ideal, it works toward overcoming methodological nationalisms.

7.2 OPENNESS TO KNOWLEDGE AND CRITIQUE OF EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

- Critical peace research acknowledges the critique of hegemonic forms and understandings of knowledge. In its research orientation and methodology, it emphasises the potential of non-academic peace research (such as within social movements) as well as 'alternative' forms of knowledge (such as those of indigenous peoples and social movements).
- Such an understanding of research requires a high degree of willingness to engage in criticism of (one's own) hegemony and thus also in self-reflexivity. This applies to individual scholars, research organisations (universities, colleges, institutes), as well as their overarching functional units (e.g., national and international scientific associations). Critical peace research and its organisations must work toward overcoming relations of epistemic violence and must transform themselves accordingly.

7.3 OPENNESS TO THEORISATION AND INCOMPLETENESS

- Critical peace research does not exclude any scientific methods of inquiry or research approaches, but is committed to the plurality of critical perspectives and the various possibilities for their combination or integration.
- Critical peace research can only succeed if the equality of major critical theories and approaches is practised, without claims to dominance.
- Critical peace research can never be regarded as finite. Discursive, theoretical, and methodological closures contradict a critical approach.

7.4 TRANSFORMATIVE AND ENGAGED SCIENCE

- Critical peace research positions itself as an interventionist science. This includes its thematic orientation stemming from a scientific commitment to those affected by personal, structural, cultural, and epistemic peacelessness. Furthermore, it exposes violence rendered invisible by hegemony, (complicit) entanglements in violence, and the 'pre-war state'.
- Critical peace research is a progressively transformative science. It fulfils this mission by providing the foundations for overcoming relations of violence through a critique of domination and a critique of violence (see Chapter 7.5), while also fostering a utopian surplus (see Chapter 7.6).

- Critical peace research cannot therefore serve the interests of domination or power of any party—neither a specific state nor a specific group. It provides structures of solidarity and fosters resistant epistemic attitudes in order to better resist hegemonic attempts at co-optation and to withdraw from attempts of self-assimilation.

7.5 FUNDAMENTAL CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE

- The critique of violence must be at the core of all critical peace research. In doing so, it follows a broad understanding of violence, which it nevertheless continually questions. Critical peace research incorporates itself into the critique in a self-reflexive manner by seeking out its (possible) own contributions to the reproduction of power relations—which must in principle be overcome—in theory and practice.
- Any critique of violence can only be conducted in harmony with pursuing an explicit goal of a process of violence reduction, extending all the way to nonviolence. Reducing violence also requires building peace (see 7.6). Even—and especially—where peaceful avenues do not initially seem promising, and counter-violence might be viewed as legal or legitimate, it cannot be the task of critical peace research to cast itself as an advocate for such counter-violence. Rather, its mission remains to critically examine this violence as well, for instance by highlighting its consequences, identifying risks of escalation, pinpointing failures, and seeking approaches to alternatives. Otherwise, it would itself mutate into a source of cultural and epistemic violence.

7.6 PEACE IDEALS

- The fundamental critique of relations of violence in general and relations of domination in particular is also fuelled by a utopian surplus of a ‘peace ideal’, which in turn must itself face criticism. This constructive orientation toward the ideal of peace is also necessary for primarily ‘critical’ peace research in order to articulate the normative content of its endeavours, to distil criteria for its critique and to guide peace practice.
- Critical peace research is committed to a broad and positive understanding of peace.
- Critical peace research acknowledges the diversity of conceptions of peace and does not standardise their use. However, it is capable of exposing and criticising the legitimisation of violent relations through discursive ‘peace markings.’

8. CHALLENGES THAT REMAIN: OPEN QUESTIONS, AREAS OF TENSION, TASKS

Critical peace research, as we understand it today, continues the tradition of the 1971 Wannsee Declaration. This applies above all to its self-understanding as a scientific advocate for those affected by various forms of violence. In this respect, the “criticism of domination and support for the underdogs [...] remain central” for critical peace research, but “without making itself the lackey of every form of opposition from below” (Michael Berndt quoted in Jaberg/Scheuing 2025: 48). Because, despite the justified criticism of Eurocentrism, “not every form of particularism is suitable for developing concepts for sustainable peace” (Graf/Wintersteiner 2016: 78). On the other hand, with every step towards escalation, the parties to a conflict risk further narrowing their own perceptions and capacity for action, which could ultimately plunge all those involved—and possibly even those not involved—‘together into the abyss’ (cf. Glasl 2020: 245).

Nevertheless, despite the continuity of deeply entrenched patterns of violence, critical peace research cannot remain stuck with the state of the Wannsee Declaration: For one thing, the issues have changed, as could only be illustrated here by way of examples. Some issues—such as the systemic conflict between bourgeois democracy with its capitalist market economy on the one hand, and the dictatorship of the proletariat including the socialist planned economy on the other—has disappeared, even though an East-West conflict persists in a new power configuration. Other issues, particularly the existential escalation of the climate catastrophe and the convergence of individual developments into a poly-crisis, have emerged. On the other hand, critical perspectives have become more differentiated. Above all, feminist, postcolonial, decolonial, and planetary approaches have provided important new impulses. Therefore, we see a need to further develop the demands, tasks, and objectives of critical peace research. To this end, constructive-critical debate is indispensable, especially within critical peace research itself. We therefore actively call for this polylogue.

This requires both the ability and the willingness to challenge the foundations of one’s own position and to continually re-examine them. For example, the Wannsee Declaration was based on two conceptions of critical peace research—one that relies exclusively on “nonviolent actions” and another that does not fundamentally reject “counter-violence understood instrumentally” (cited in Senghaas 1971: 417). In fact, however, some statements at the time went far beyond this: For example, the early Ekkhardt Krippendorff (1968: 22) saw the task of peace

research as also “legitimising [...] legitimate forms of socio-political use of force [...]” Such a hope—that structural power relations and the personal violence embedded within them could be permanently overcome using precisely that same violence—was shattered by the reality of many left-wing revolutions—such as in Nicaragua—in which one dictatorship ultimately merely replaced another.

“No domination, no violence (not even that of the marginalised) is beyond criticism,” is therefore Michael Berndt’s guiding principle for contemporary critical peace research (cited in Jaberg/Scheuing 2025: 48). This insight is further supported by the numerous critical perspectives (see chap. 4.1) that ultimately remind peace research of the necessity of a fundamental critique of violence, which must interpret all propaganda of violence as an expression of cultural violence. Nevertheless, a residual tension remains between the obligation to criticise violence on the one hand and the danger of reproducing postcolonial arrogance on the other.

Critical peace research, as we have outlined it in our manifesto, faces at least two central challenges: On the one hand, it is a matter of sharpening our own critical profile, of resisting hegemonic discourses of violence, and of intensifying exchange both among ourselves and with progressive actors outside the academic sphere. In doing so, we must emphasise common ground without denying differences, and explore possibilities for an (intersectional) synthesis without forcing the irreconcilable to conform. On the other hand, discourse must be conducted with those parts of peace research that do not see themselves as decidedly ‘critical’ in the sense of the manifesto, but can nevertheless contribute to a critique of the systems of war and violence. Ultimately, the following applies to the discipline as a whole: *“Dare to be more critical!”*

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