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Pacifism in the Federal Republic (January 2003)

By the time the U.S. was preparing to invade Iraq, pacifism was no longer primarily a concern of the Left, as it had been in the 1980s. Rather, pacifism, as a basic stance, enjoyed the support of a broad segment of German society, as became exceedingly clear in the debate over the war in Iraq. At the same time, however, there was no general public resistance to foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr, since these deployments were not understood as combat operations but rather as "police missions" in support of spreading peace.

"Then there's only one option: Never again!"

War against Saddam? Not with us! German pacifism, born of guilt and fear, has long since reached the bourgeois middle. At the same time, the Left is getting used to armed struggle for human rights: A journey through the emotional world of the Federal Republic.

How would, how will the German public react to an attack on Iraq? In the Gulf War of 1991 the mood bordered on hysterical, with white sheets hanging from windows and people glued to the television news reports every morning at breakfast – although the Federal Republic wasn't even involved militarily. German soldiers participated in the [military] intervention in Kosovo in 1998, but things remained calm on the streets because that operation, the first war deployment since the Second World War, was morally shielded, as it were, by a liberal government. The public was at its most agitated when no shots were fired at all, namely, during the arms race of the early 1980s: fear that the world would come to an end in the shadow of intermediate-range nuclear missiles, of the Pershing and the SS-20. So how do things look this time around?

It's hard to speak reasonably about peace, the longing for peace, the peace movement, peace policies. For some, in fact for many, this is the quintessential untouchable, a moral no-go area, a virtual, or even literal, religious taboo. Others, on the other hand, especially when dealing with the peace issue, experience a particularly unpalatable do-goodism, the bad taste of political kitsch. Sometimes the meek-hearted actually do seem like caricatures of themselves. The first public comments at a recent discussion on Iraq in the Market Church in Hanover were sent via email from "Dahad, Southern Sinai, Egypt" by Pastor Tina Hülsebus, who passed harsh judgment on the un-Christian arrogance of the United States. If a satirist had written a skit like this, he would have been criticized as silly and cheap. But that's exactly how it happened: Ms. Pastor was directing world events from Mount Sinai. So this milieu really does still exist.

Nonetheless, the church pacifism of the early 1980s is no longer the key to West German peace sensibilities. The Hanover event had no inherent apocalypticism or fanaticism about it. It was a talk show with tolerably professional moderation and was broadcast a few days later on Phoenix, with Christian Ströbele and Peter Scholl-Latour as guest stars. Opponents of the arms race had never navigated the mainstream media so smoothly. But above all it was beneficial for viewers to get a closer look, and their concern about an attack on Iraq had brought them out in such numbers that many of them didn't even get into the studio. It was a decidedly middle-class audience, well-dressed and coupled up, evenly distributed in age between forty and seventy. That is the heart of German society, and anyone who saw them sitting there knew immediately that Gerhard Schröder really did win the Bundestag election with the slogan "War? Not with us!" It is no longer leftist, no longer alternative, and no longer radical to be against bombs, missiles, tanks, and especially against the Americans; it is the basic underlying mood and majority sentiment among Germans.

This is about being able to win a majority, also among voters and in the cosmos of CDU/CSU values. That is new. Wolfgang Schäuble felt it when, as the person responsible for foreign policy in the Stoiber campaign, he did not want to rule out the war option entirely. The [chancellor] candidate [Edmund Stoiber] and his strategists wanted nothing to do with this unpopular realism. More letters of protest were sent to the Adenauer House[1] than when the unmarried mother Katherina Reiche was nominated to be the future minister of family affairs, a move that apparently agitated the soul of the party to a considerable extent. As Schäuble observed, it is precisely the older people who continue to see war as the greatest evil. In a certain way, that was always the case for the generation that experienced Stalingrad and Dresden. But at the time, anticommunism and fear of the Soviet Union also ran deep. Now that we no longer have to fear the Russians, the war trauma has free rein so to speak. And the United States isn't so urgently needed anymore either.

How are people in the Federal Republic thinking and feeling about the subject of war and peace? Those who were burned on the campaign trail are trying to make sense of the massive mood of refusal that prevented any and all rational discussion on Iraq last summer and fall. Hans-Ulrich Klose, the Schäuble of the SPD on this point and just as isolated within his party, wouldn't call it pacifism: "It's more like an injured nation shrugging its shoulders; here we differ from the Americans and the British and are more like the Japanese." In the collective memory of the Germans, war means guilt and defeat. And for the civilian population it means suffering – the sensational success of Jörg Friedrich's recent book on the bombing of German cities[2] shows us just how much. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the Second World War, despite all the destruction wrought upon England, is thought of differently in the end – heroically, as the victory of a just

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[1] The Konrad Adenauer House is the CDU party headquarters in Berlin – trans.
[2] Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*. Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002; available in English as: Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945,* translated by Allison Brown. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006 – trans.

cause. Guilt is also an issue, but not guilt for waging a war of aggression, rather for waiting and watching too long, for appeasement. The specter of history in Berlin is Hitler the criminal; in London it's Chamberlain the limp-wristed failure.

But aside from the intense reluctance to engage in violence, isn't there also a totally different countertrend at the same time? A few years ago, German Blue Helmets [i.e. peacekeeping forces] were still inconceivable; in the meantime, the Bundeswehr has participated in military operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan without mass protests or even a loss of support for the government in the arena of public opinion. For hard core antimilitarists, such as Green [Party] parliamentary representative Christian Ströbele, these are indeed sins and dangerous precedents, examples of the militarization of foreign policy. Likewise, every step by a German soldier somewhere in the world is viewed with profound mistrust within the more or less organized peace movement, among activists left over from the arms-race era, or, of late, within the milieu of ATTAC[3] globalization critics.

From this point of view, history since 1989 looks like a process of turning away from civil conflict resolution. War, in contrast to the days of the nuclear standoff, which now seem oddly idyllic, is once again possible, wageable, acceptable. Seen from that perspective, the Balkan interventions led straight to the threat of an attack on Iraq, straight to perdition. This catastrophe theory is not the exclusive privilege of the pacifist milieu, it can also be found in academic peace research. For example, Ernst-Otto Czempiel, the doyen of the discipline in Germany and a highly esteemed political scientist in the field of international relations, interprets developments in much the same way. Of course, he explains, the deployment of NATO bombers against Serbia in 1999 was a mistake, well-nigh a step backwards for civilization. And of course, just as the peace demonstrators say, war doesn't solve any problems. Ever. It's an anachronism, a remnant of a long out-dated "world of states" of Great Power ambitions. The future, or actually the present, belongs to the "world of society," to global domestic policy in which affluence and democracy cause people to lose interest in fighting. The fact that the West never really disarmed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that it is has been involved in the meantime in ousting tyrants and protecting human rights through the use of force, that full-blown militarism reigns again in the United States under Bush Jr. – in Czempiel's view these are all facets of a monumental failure to seize the moment in 1989-90 and finally shift from conflict resolution to conflict prevention.

Enough pure theory. That's not what drove voters to support the chancellor in his rejection of military involvement in the matter of Iraq. As much as the peace movement and peace research might regret it, there is no general resistance to the "militarization of foreign policy." What there is, however, is a deep, guilt-ridden and angst-filled aversion to war – but paradoxically that might precisely be why deployments in the Balkans and the first phase of the anti-terror struggle were so easy to push through. They are evidently perceived as police actions with military

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[3] Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens; its members work on behalf of social and just globalization policies and against militarization – eds.

means, basically along the lines of Czempiel's international domestic policy, albeit not free of violence. Even a police officer needs a pistol for emergencies. War, real war, between countries and possibly for naked interests, for energy resources or for power – that is something entirely different.

One cannot avoid noticing a characteristic West-East difference in this matter. Christian Ströbele's constituency covers Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, in other words, it's a district that includes part of both sides of the once-divided Berlin. One side has strong Green Party leanings; the other is more red-red, postsocialist-social democratic. Ströbele's antimilitarism enjoys great support from both. But in Kreuzberg, among its emancipatory-alternative public, the new Joschka Fischer doctrine of armed humanity has not remained entirely without echo or impact. What about those massacred in Srebrenica or the enslaved women of the Taliban? Couldn't we, shouldn't we intervene? On the other hand, of course, the old anti-imperialist certainties also resurface: in reality it's all about cheap oil, Bush is a man of the military-industrial complex, and so on and so forth.

In Friedrichshain, according to Ströbele, the climate is different. There is a "deep and placid underlying mood" against all violence of war. No aggressive bloc mentality as in the autonomist[4] scene in the West. But there is no support for military intervention in the service of human rights either. For the most part, the East [here meaning the Eastern part of Germany] doesn't seem susceptible to the argument that made pacifism increasingly dubious for the West German Left and occasionally the Greens – namely, that freedom and justice can sometimes, in the exceptional case, only be protected or reestablished through use of force; that is, war was necessary to bring the death mills of Auschwitz to a halt.

Still, a widespread difference in perception persists between "police-style" military intervention, which is largely accepted, and "genuine" war between states, which triggers fear and resistance. The distinction is not without reason, but it can definitely fuel a new kind of denial of reality. A consensus is gradually forming that the threat of terrorism, ethnic unrest, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction can only be fought with force and violence. At the same time, the main message is: the way the Pentagon sees it cannot be the way. There is a flood of intelligent commentaries and treatises on the "asymmetrical" nature of today's conflicts, in which armies are no longer of much use against fanatical lone fighters and shady terrorist networks. Now and then, the chancellor lends his ear to Erhard Eppler, who paints a picture of a global panorama of "privatized violence" of warlords, drug gangs, and religious partisans, in which al Qaeda figures as a kind of multinational enterprise specializing in terror.

There is certainly a good deal of truth to that. But this fixation on "privatized violence" tends to hide the fact that countries can indeed play a role in creating this problem, and not only as failing states in which the collapse of public order allows crime to take root, but also through

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[4] The autonomists [*Autonome*] represent the most radical part of the political Left. They support anarchist and anarcho-communist ideas, and their tactics are usually militant – trans.

state sponsorship, whereby terrorism is given an infrastructure. This is where the taboo zone of war begins. People want to move "beyond" the others, the dinosaur-like warhorses of the superpower – perhaps no longer as the avant-garde of nonviolence, which is how many détente-friendly Germans saw themselves in the era of confrontational blocs, but now through deeper insight into the nature of the challenges of the 21st century, which cannot be solved with recipes à la [Donald] Rumsfeld. A certain inclination toward know-it-allness and a selective perception of reality has remained.

When the West German peace movement mobilized against the arms race in the West in the early 1980s, its moral standing was immense. Its proposals might have been deemed pragmatically wrong or its entire worldview naïve, but its idealism demanded and won respect. Protests against the Gulf War were different. That was when many liberal and leftist observers started feeling uneasy about peaceableness. What was the real moral substance of a pacifist who was prepared to accept the illegal occupation of Kuwait, who wasn't plagued by sleepless nights on account of a butcher like Saddam, and who responded to the threat to Israel's existence with nothing more than a shoulder shrug – if not even an occasional anti-Semitic "It's your own fault!" addressed to the Jewish state? A progressive "bellicism" emerged at the time and went on to unfold completely in the face of the genocidal expulsions in the Balkans. This bellicism approved of sending out bombers and troops as a last resort in fighting inhumanity.

The situation leading up to a possible attack on Iraq is also different. Even those who wanted to see Kuwait liberated by force or ethnic cleansing in Kosovo put to a stop might see no justification for an intervention right now. There is no such thing as an intellectual "war party." The Balkan bellicist Peter Schneider, for example, or Micha Brumlik, who began to view the German peace movement as insufferable during the Persian Gulf conflict, are strictly opposed to a preemptive strike. There is no acute genocide to prevent and the legal grounds for an invasion would be, to put it cautiously, shaky. The cause of peace, one could say, again has a moral strength that it hasn't had for a long time.

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