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A New Chapter in German Foreign Policy? (December 21, 1991)

By forging ahead in recognizing the sovereignty of Croatia and Slovenia, Germany's federal government underestimated the shadows of the past, and its policy sparked fears among its European alliance partners. Unilateral politics, in the opinion of this author, were inconsistent with German integration into Europe and detrimental to Germany's international role.

Germany's Go-It-Alone Approach

The aftermath of the Second World War is already a considerable burden for German foreign policy. With its Yugoslavia policy, the federal government is now well on its way to shouldering part of the burdensome consequences of the First World War as well. With it, it is unearthing memories that once seemed long buried. But perhaps it is only we who are surprised by this, since even history majors, such as Helmut Kohl, seem to have nothing but short-term memory. Larger-than-life are the shadows from the depths of history that are suddenly being cast upon us and Europe: the Austro-German alliance against the Balkan peoples in the First World War, the flagrant disregard for the right of nations to self-determination [as established] in the peace treaties of 1918, Hitler's support of Croatian nationalism, and the atrocities of the Nazi-backed Ustasha regime. Nations have long memories, especially when their history largely consists of persecution and oppression. Humiliation is not quickly forgotten.

Genscherism and Kohlism

Not only in the Balkans do memories go back two generations, but also in Paris and London. The fact that Bonn wants to forge ahead in recognizing Croatia and Slovenia, of all things, and is trying to force the EC to follow suit is perceived as a power play and as blackmail, as insistence upon a German claim to leadership. Coming so soon after the Maastricht summit, this creates the impression that Germany wants to collect the reward for its concessions to Europe, that behind this zeal for European integration lurks a master plan to claim economic and political dominance in Europe. Thus the desire to limit the expansion of German influence in East-Central Europe is correspondingly strong. The French and the British are all the more annoyed because they know they will hardly succeed in doing this. The era of European power politics à la the nineteenth century is over, in Bonn too. No one is strong enough for that. The magic word in the EC is integration. This, of course, requires that everyone play by the rules. Those who

don't, such as John Major in Maastricht, can hardly complain when others go their own way. The French are more consistent here. Without their skillful diplomacy, the Yugoslavia compromise among the EC foreign ministers would not have come to pass. They understood that Kohl – who had promised that Croatia and Slovenia would be recognized before Christmas – needed help to save face.

If Bonn isn't playing power politics, then what exactly is it doing? That Germany's neighbors are annoyed by the actions of the federal government is in fact understandable and justifiable. It's hard to make sense of the mixture of Genscherism and Kohlism, of compromise formulas and strong-arm tactics that currently holds sway in German foreign policy. It is immediately obvious that Helmut Kohl is playing himself up as the inventor, promoter, and implementer of the Political Union [in the European Community], only to put it on the line at the first chance he gets. No less confusing is a comparison of Germany's behavior during the Gulf War and the Yugoslavia conflict. "The Germans," wrote one American columnist at the beginning of Operation Desert Storm, "are standing behind us, but so far back that we can barely see them." The blame for Germany's reluctance to assume international responsibility was largely placed on Genscher, who has a reputation for disliking Americans and for maneuvering and eluding rather than leading. Now the Germans are suddenly standing so far up front that even Washington is wondering what they're doing there.

One of the reasons for Germany's reluctance in the Gulf War lay in the Basic Law, which supposedly prohibits German troops from being deployed outside of NATO territory, and which doesn't even permit them to participate in United Nations peacekeeping missions as Blue Helmets. Although there was talk of a constitutional amendment, no one was in much of a hurry since there is no majority for a reasonable compromise anyway, especially since the SPD is fairly divided on this issue. It's all the more astounding that Kohl and Genscher, of all people, are pushing for a peacemaking role in Yugoslavia, not least because they're under pressure from the SPD. And they're doing this without having the slightest power to implement and maintain peace, and without having thought about the actions that could follow their words. For if it were truly a matter of employing military force, we would have to refer once again to the Basic Law and to the burden of history, justifiably this time in the case of Yugoslavia. Whoever would want to send German soldiers to Yugoslavia must be crazy.

What then is Bonn's pressing ahead other than an empty gesture, a foreign policy reflex in response to domestic pressures, a case of making a big show? After the unification of Germany, the unification of Europe, and now peacemaking in the disintegrating East. If only that were true! No would need to fear that. But that isn't the situation; instead, we have to worry that Bonn's unilateral actions will be detrimental. Detrimental first to the [European] Community, since the cabinet's decision to acknowledge Croatia and Slovenia represents an open disregard for the EC formula, which requires considerable hairsplitting to be read as an automatism. Otherwise the foreign ministers wouldn't have convened an arbitration commission or set January 15 [1992] as the date for a joint declaration of recognition. More than anything else, however, these actions could be detrimental to Croatia, since the Serbs must feel like they have a virtual

invitation to seize as much Croatian territory as possible before January 15. And no one will be able to stop them. We provoked and goaded the Serbs, and we will disappoint the Croats. Not only won't we be sending them any soldiers, we also won't be supplying the weapons they're hoping for.

Dangerous good intentions

After the U.N. secretary general reprimanded Bonn for making the situation worse, Genscher defended himself by claiming that the situation there is getting worse every day anyway. That's just as true as the realization that Europe can't accept a brutal war on its doorstep. But it's not enough, since the "how" of the intervention is what's important. And on this point we can't avoid the insight that for different reasons the Americans, British, and French aren't willing to follow our lead. That must be disappointing, particularly for Genscher, for whom the saying applies that nothing is more dangerous than good intentions. As one of the guardians of the CSCE process, he had hoped that its principles could help in the transition in the East, that they could both slow down the dissolution of the Soviet Union and help enforce the right to self-determination. The CSCE, however, is as dead as the old world order from which it emerged. German foreign policy has become more difficult.

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