

# Chernobyl Clouds German Thinking

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MUNICH—"May you live in interesting times" is one of the more subtle Chinese curses, and in the fallout from Chernobyl West Germany is passing through its most interesting times in a generation. On the surface, of course, this placid, gleaming society has suffered no dents. The Depression of the 1980s has left nary a scar. A paragon of political stability, the Federal Republic sees governments pushed out of power only every decade or so. And people are wont to worry more about their social security checks than about Soviet SS-20 missiles.

So where is the curse? Always a sensitive harbinger of things to come, the stock market has been in a virtually irreversible slide since Chernobyl became a household word. Perhaps it is only the acrid smell of rising interest rates that has sent investors scurrying for cover; more likely, however, it is the suddenly askew politics of the country that has set their hearts a-flutter. Come June 15, according to the almost unanimous murmur of the pundits and pulse-takers, Helmut Kohl's Conservatives will lose the bellwether election in Lower Saxony, an old Christian Democrat stronghold.

They will lose, so the bet goes, because they will not win enough for an absolute majority, while the anti-nuclear and anti-NATO Greens will reenter the legislature with strengthened battalions—courtesy of Mikhail Gorbachev and his smoldering reactor. Conversely, the Christian Democrats' natural coalition partner, the pro-nuclear Free Democrats, may not clear the 5% hurdle mandated for parliamentary representation, and thus there will be a Socialist minority cabinet governing with the "tolerance," hence at the mercy, of the Greens.

## Regional Upset

What is so upsetting about a regional upset? In this case, a not-so-minor shift in the power balance of the Upper House, where a Socialist majority after June 15 would hamstring Chancellor Kohl's government in Bonn, particularly his economic program that is committed to another round of supply-minded tax cuts. Worse, transpose

the Chernobyl shock to the federal level, where elections are looming next January, and you can dimly foresee the Christian Democrats going down in defeat while bravely clutching banners that proclaim the virtues of nuclear power.

This may be nothing but idle punditry, destined for oblivion as soon as German burghers will have shifted from powdered (but bequerel-free) milk to the real thing, trading canned asparagus *made in Taiwan* for those delicious blanched spears making

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up the normal fare of higher-priced restaurants during spring and early summer. Perhaps the next "historic" newsbreak will again combine with short memories to leave deeply embedded voter loyalties in place along with the parties and politicians who thrive on them (as did after all happen in Dutch elections on Wednesday).

For the time being, however, that bet appears about as safe as the molten RMBK-1000 reactor of Chernobyl. Consider the following additional harbingers of "interesting times" in present-day Germany.

While much of Europe is taking a worried but sober second look at nuclear power, convinced that the demon can be tamed, Germans are gearing up for a major exercise in exorcism. Up and down the land, the sacred word is *Ausstieg*, literally: "getting out" of nuclear power, as if those 19 plants making up a third of West Germany's generating capacity were jalopies only safe enough for one last trip to the shredder. The Greens want *Ausstieg* now; the Social Democrats—formerly the staunchest defenders of the nuclear faith—want it a bit later. Only the Christian and Free Democrats are still holding on, yet anxiously looking over their shoulders for a safe avenue of retreat.

Why would the Germans want to get rid of their nuclear plants, even though the cloud of doom was launched almost 1,000

miles farther east—by a plutonium-producing reactor of a type neither the U.S. nor Britain thought safe enough to place in populated areas? Assume an accident caused by a runaway foreign car. A pragmatic response would hardly banish all cars from our roads. Instead we would press the manufacturer for a recall and the total replacement of all brakes; thereafter we would move to tighten our vehicle inspection laws.

But pragmatism is not what moves the

German soul when it comes to nuclear power these days. *Angst*, the familiar badge of an "authentic rationality" and a superior moral sensibility, has joined forces with the grim-faced determination to make the exorcism stick this time. And this is why Chernobyl might transcend your average hit-and-run crisis. The burning pile in the faraway Ukraine has rekindled the fires of West Germany's fundamentalist opposition, stretching from the Greens via the peace marchers all the way to the Social Democrats. Thought to have been safely domesticated after the first assault against nuclear power had ground to a halt in the late 1970s, after the old Atlanticist Establishment had won the War of Euromissiles in the early 1980s, the fundamentalist critics of the Federal Republic have returned to the offensive with a vengeance.

What used to be a noisy but impotent fringe movement might now grow into a force capable of overturning a good many of the old verities. First, the nuclear angst of the 1970s was handily neutralized by the real fear of mass unemployment at a time when switched-off reactors would have merely worsened the economic damage exploding oil prices had already wrought. Against organized labor and Helmut Schmidt's Social Democrats, the Greens proved powerless. Today, however, the movement can count on the sympathies of a populace that refuses to see Chernobyl as anything but the handwriting on the wall—and there is

neither OPEC nor a recession to make the case for realism.

Second, during the War of the Euromissiles, angst pretty much followed partisan lines: Christian Democratic voters worried about Soviet SS-20s, Green and SPD loyalists were more prone to view Pershings and cruise missiles as a heinous American conspiracy against Germany. Yet today the quest for anti-nuclear repentance transcends class, age and partisan barriers, and that could throw any election, including the federal contest next January.

Third, there is the dog that did not bark. One might have expected a strong anti-Soviet reaction in a population that sees itself as a prime victim of Chernobyl. Yet there were no demonstrations in front of the Soviet Embassy, no angry demarches from Bonn to Moscow. Indeed, under the cloud of Chernobyl the national convention of the Greens came out with its most rabid anti-American and anti-Alliance slogans ever.

## Sounds of Silence

This suggests the disappearance of the oldest verity of them all. While ambivalence, if not resentment, toward America is growing (recall the tide of anger after the U.S. raid on Libya), the Soviet Union is protected by the sounds of silence—as if Chernobyl were a Martian operation. There is a virtual taboo on attacking the Soviets, and we can only speculate why. Do people fear the stigma of "pro-Americanism" if they were to confront Moscow? Or do they simply fear Moscow—as the looming superpower that can make life hard for a country to defend itself, or to improve intra-German contacts without Soviet consent? After Chernobyl, the center of psycho-political gravity in West Germany has shifted ever so slightly to the east—away from those uncouth Americans and French who keep brandishing their reactors and missiles even if the handwriting is on the wall.

And this is why we are living in interesting times—not only the West Germans but also their neighbors and allies in Europe and the U.S.

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