

Germans and Russians: Far From Rapallo

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — Helmut Kohl's foray to Moscow this week has been a recall to realism all round — for those who suspected and those who expected too much.

Bonn's Western allies are always quick to fear a latter-day Rapallo — Germans and Russians pulling a fast one on the West as they in a 1922 treaty signed in that Italian town. And there are West Germans who overestimate their country's true weight in the global scheme of things and imagine that Germany and Russia can jointly manage the fate of Europe.

On the very first day of Chancellor Kohl's visit, he and Mikhail Gorbachev staked out the limits of the would-be entente. "The ice has been broken," Mr. Gorbachev declared. But there are plenty of floes left to make for awkward navigation in the years to come.

Listen to Mr. Kohl as he laid West German interests on the banquet table in the Kremlin on Monday. First he reminded his hosts that Germany's partition was "unnatural." Then he served up the grating Berlin problem: West Berlin must be part and parcel of all agreements; indeed, it is the very "thermometer" of the political climate. As his *pièce de résistance*, he put the most indigestible dish on the table: security. "Those who have more must disarm more."

Specifically, Mr. Kohl insisted on equal ceilings for short-range nuclear missiles in Europe, where the Soviets have a 14-to-1 advantage over the United States. For the Russians, those "equal ceilings" are doubly distasteful.

One hitch is the implicit rejection of the "third zero" that the Soviets are hawking but that Britain, France and the United States oppose. (It would rob NATO of the last few American missiles left in Europe after the Pershings and cruises have been withdrawn under the INF agreement.)

The second difficulty goes by the name of "nuclear modernization," something which Moscow wants to squelch. By requiring "equal ceilings," and thus the continued presence of U.S. short-range forces, Mr. Kohl in effect stressed NATO's option of replacing the aging Lance missile with something more impressive.

Now listen to Mr. Gorbachev. The German question? History has already delivered the answer, and any attempt to change it would be an "unrealistic," even "dangerous" policy. The status of West Berlin is "inviolable," and those who would turn West Berlin into a "touchstone" would merely sabotage the entire relationship. As to German hopes of using economic might as a lever, he noted brusquely that the Soviet Union is "no economic backwater." If need be, Moscow can go it alone.

So much for Rapallo '88.

The true meaning of the Moscow summit is a modest one. The two governments have broken the ice that has jammed the relationship since 1983, when the West Germans went ahead with the deployment of Pershing-2 and cruise missiles despite brutal Soviet pressures. There are now a number of peripheral agreements on environmental protection, joint ventures in space and cooperation on medical technology. As a sweetener, Chancellor Kohl took a 3-billion-mark credit line to Moscow. But the towering ice floes will not melt soon.

Mr. Gorbachev has merely lifted the "quarantine" that Moscow imposed on Bonn five years ago. The West Germans grasped eagerly at the new opportunity. Neither government has offered the other a deal on the basics. Nor could they.

Some Germans may dream of a Soviet option, and the Russians have always waved it in their faces (without ever delivering). The two leaders are more realistic. Mr. Gorbachev keeps invoking a "common European house," but in his heart he knows he must settle the big-ticket items with Mr. Big, who happens to reside in Washington.

Might he play the German card nonetheless and offer to tear down the Berlin Wall? This is the worst possible moment for him to meddle with Europe's architecture: East Germany is the strategic brace that keeps Moscow's restless East European empire under control.

Mr. Kohl knows that the best laid Ostpolitik will go awry if it is not embedded in a cohesive Western alliance. West Germany may be an economic giant, but in the security arena it is a lightweight compared to the Soviet nuclear behemoth. Nor would the chancellor want to risk the West European connection while the European Community is poised to leap into its post-1992 unification venture.

Bismarck was right to see the "link to St. Petersburg" as a must in German foreign policy. But the heavy weight of conflicting interests will keep the link from broadening into an "axis." On both sides, dreams will persist. They will not be pursued too far — for fear of the nightmares that lurk at the end.

The writer is foreign editor of Süddeutsche Zeitung. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.

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