

Germans and The "Just War"

“WHETHER IN PUBLIC OR PRIVATE AFFAIRS,” wrote the Roman historian Tacitus about the Germans, “they always show up in arms.” Lots of Germans actually used to cherish this rap. Listen to Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1900 as he harangued his troops who were embarking for China to help crush the Boxer Rebellion: “No pardon shall be given. No prisoners shall be taken.” Just as “the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves,” the Emperor’s spike-helmeted soldiers were to make sure that “no Chinese will ever dare look askance at a German.”

But the German-as-Hun is history. Today war is *verboten*, and where yesterday’s Wehrmacht attacked to conquer, no jackboot shall ever tread again. Germans, as they like to advertise, have learned their lesson, and that lesson proclaims, “No more war” and “Peace *über alles*.” But goodness is rarely all there is to international politics, and so Wilhelm’s great-grandchildren, pacific and democratic, still end up in the soup.

Take the latest brouhaha in Bonn. Tucked away near the Belgian border in Geilenkirchen is a German NATO base that harbors 18 AWACS planes. Manned by multinational crews, these aircraft with their huge radar domes are being used to monitor air and sea traffic in and around the former Yugoslavia. When the U.N. Security Council finally decided to enforce the flight ban over Bosnia, the planes also became flying fire-control centers for Western jet fighters patrolling the no-fly zone.

As a result, Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s coalition practically declared war on itself. While the Christian Democratic Cabinet majority voted for participation in the AWACS mission, Kohl’s junior partners, the Free Democrats, ran off to the Constitutional Court for a restraining order. Why? Because the constitution allegedly prohibits any military action beyond self- and alliance defense.

Never mind that the Basic Law is actually quite permissive. Article 24 states clearly that Germany may engage in “collective security” ventures with other nations—which is precisely what the U.N. Security Council authorized. Moreover, by joining the U.N. in 1973 the Federal Republic accepted all obligations under the charter. In short, what Germany’s Basic Law permits, U.N. membership demands: participation in peace-restoring missions.

Why do the Germans cower behind their constitution? The real answer is hidden in the psychology of a nation that has *overlearned* the lessons of history, profited nicely from 40-odd years of abstentionism and enjoyed a surfeit of security provided gratis by others.

After Wilhelm II and Adolf Hitler, it is difficult to blame the Germans for going overboard in the opposite direction. When they went the way of Attila, they reaped humiliation in 1918 and catastrophe in 1945. When they chose passivity, as they did under the guns of the victors after World War II, they profited beyond belief. While some of the Western powers squandered blood and treasure in interventions around the world, the West Germans tended their economic miracle. France and the U.S. nearly cracked under the domestic shock waves of war in Algeria and Vietnam; the Germans enjoyed social peace.

Little wonder then that the fabulous profits of pacificity spawned an enduring pacifist ideology. Ask the heirs of Clausewitz about the role of force in international affairs, and most will respond with such homilies as “Peace is the highest value” and “War never solves any problems.” The pooh-poohing of power and the moralizing habit come naturally to a nation that failed so abysmally in war and succeeded so brilliantly in peace. It is easy to withdraw to the high perch of pacifist morality

when down below there are others taking care of security.

When it comes to asserting goodness, Germans clearly lead the pack: 93% support humanitarian measures in distant conflicts. More than half would still finance U.N.-approved interventions, but if real risk were involved, only 20% would participate militarily in “U.N.-sanctioned interventions like the Gulf War,” as a 1993 study by the Rand Corp. found. If they could, a majority of Germans professed during the Gulf War, they would like to live in Switzerland.

That is a telling dream. Switzerland hardly has a foreign policy; sheltered by the Alps and by neutrality, it can avoid both choice and responsibility. The Swiss are friends to each and all—and enemies to none. The British historian Timothy Garton Ash comments caustically: Ideally the Germans would “want friendly relations with Heaven, a deepened partnership with Earth but also productive cooperation with Hell.”

Alas, yesterday’s understandable reflexes collide mercilessly with today’s realities. The glacier-like stability of the cold war is melting away by the hour. The guardian of the old order, the U.S., is in retreat; it will not bail out the Europeans forever. And some fires can only be fought with fire. Does this mean that the world wants Wilhelm’s Huns back in the game?

Germans who score this rhetorical point engage in a naive, if not cynical, misuse of history. In 1914 and 1939, German power set the world aflame; today German power would help squelch the blaze of aggression. Then Germany abandoned the world community to destroy the peace; now Germany is being asked to join with others to restore the peace. The issue is not *Lebensraum* but responsibility. And the true lesson of history is not “no more war” but “no more wrong war.” ■

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