

Appeasers Score an Own Goal

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — Where is Winston Churchill when we need him? The great wartime leader stood ready to fight the Nazis anywhere. Today's English won't resist, and certainly won't invade. They have canceled a soccer match against Germany in Berlin for fear of neo-Nazi violence.

O.K., April 20 is not just any date in the calendar. It happens to be the birthday of the late and unlamented Führer. Also, the chance of violence was real, given that Nazi punks from all over Germany were planning to converge on Berlin for some *mano a mano* celebrations complete with beer bottles and baseball bats.

Still, the day will live in infamy, to borrow a line from Churchill's World War II colleague Franklin Roosevelt. And the decision to cancel the match is not just a British failure. British reluctance to get caught in the cross fire between neo-Nazis and German anti-Nazi demonstrators is all the more understandable in that English clubs — more precisely, their hooligan fans — still have a fearful reputation to live down. After the Heysel stadium mayhem in Brussels in 1985, English clubs were banned from European cup games for several years.

The real failure of nerve is German, and thereon hangs a larger tale.

The venue was to have been Hamburg. Mesmerized by the April 20 date and rumors of violence, Hamburg political authorities begged to be relieved of the honor. After much hemming and hawing, the buck was passed to Berlin. It was a fateful misstep.

Whatever the bald-headed boys in leather jackets and paratroop boots had planned, now they were surely emboldened. Hamburg's demurral meant that the latter-day swastika brigades were being taken seriously! Hitler's great-grandchildren had a shiny victory without lifting a baseball bat. Indeed, they had done much better than their elders, who fail abysmally at the polls whenever they try to field a new Nazi party.

Now mighty Berlin, the wannabe capital, has fallen long before a single Vandal marched up to its gates.

True, Churchill's heirs caved in by canceling the match. But it is no secret that the (English) Football Association had received plenty of hints that such a move would be countenanced with grateful understanding.

Nor was Bonn about to expel the British ambassador. The government was surely consulted by the German Football Federation, as were the law-and-order authorities in Berlin. This is standard procedure before politically sensitive sports events. The bottom line is that everybody — in the soccer and the Bonn hierarchies — was relieved to let the English play Chamberlain and withdraw from the field.

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So the official statement registering "great disappointment" on the part of the German federation rings hollow as well as self-serving.

Franz Beckenbauer, the former national coach, opined, "No football game is worth riots and bloodshed." On the face of it, he may be right. At a deeper level, the German-abetted English cop-out betrays a larger and sadder truth. Germany's powers-that-be saw the enemy, a few hundred at worst, and blinked. They let the would-be storm troopers carry the day without resistance.

In the first place, nobody should have bestowed any significance on Hitler's birthday. There is nothing magic about it. It is a date that should simply be ignored.

Secondly, if one is worried about the new Nazis, one does not fight them by preemptive surrender — first yielding Hamburg, then capitulating in Berlin. The Germans are justly proud of their postwar democracy, but pride of possession implies a readiness to resist democracy's enemies.

Sometimes force may indeed be the cost, but Berlin itself offers a most useful lesson for dealing with fascists of whatever color. In 1989, left-wing punks threatened to turn the Berlin meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund into a violent "revolutionary" happening. In response, 10,000 policemen from all over West Germany converged on Berlin, deterring the nasties by their mere presence.

On April 20 at the Olympic Stadium it could have been done with one-tenth that number. Would the overtime pay for Berlin's finest have been too high a price? Sadly, a far higher price has been paid. It is called appeasement — of those who will not be appeased.

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