

With Its Western Alliance at Stake, Germany Becomes Responsible

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — During the Gulf War, some Germans hung white sheets from their windows to show off the proper pacifist spirit. Other Germans paid for that display in cold cash: \$6.5 billion into the coalition's kitty, Bonn's shamefaced contribution to the war effort.

Today, three years into the Bosnian war, two-thirds of Germans oppose the dispatch of Luftwaffe Tornados to Bosnia. But this time Bonn won't resort to Deutsche marks. Late on Tuesday the government opted for a profound break with 40 years of abstentionism.

If the withdrawal of United Nations troops in Bosnia has to be secured, those Tornados will fly and, if need be, hurl their anti-radar missiles against the "eyes" of Serbian anti-aircraft batteries which have recently sprouted all over Bosnia. Before any NATO rescue operation, those missile batteries will have to be suppressed if NATO is to achieve air supremacy. Bonn would also supply medics, logistic support and naval forces. This is the beginning of the end of the Kohl Doctrine — and of an era.

With a view to the former Yugoslavia, Chancellor Helmut Kohl had produced a tidy little principle: The new German army could not tread where the Wehrmacht had struck. Of course, that did not leave many places in Europe where the Bundeswehr could venture — Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal and Ireland. There is scarcely a country where Nazi Germany was not involved in World War II.

The recourse to history has been prudent, but it has also been profitable. For the heirs of Hitler, discretion in matters military was wise. After two world wars, after unspeakable crimes committed by Nazi Germany, it was right to trade the jackboot for the felt slipper.

There was also a genuine revulsion against the militarism of Wilhelm's and Hitler's Germany. That revulsion contributed mightily to the flowering of the liberal democracy now sturdily implanted in German soil.

But the new pacifism was also profitable. Look at the United States and France. While they

squandered blood and treasure around the globe — from Indochina to Algeria, from Korea to Vietnam — the West Germans could tend their garden and add to their gross national product.

The war in Algeria destroyed the Third Republic, and the Vietnam War almost rent asunder the United States. West Germany, by contrast, lived happily ever after in deep domestic peace.

This twin lesson — the disaster of militarism and the sweet wages of pacifism — is not easily unlearned. Indeed, during the Gulf War a majority of West Germans confessed to pollsters that they would prefer to live like Switzerland and Sweden.

But today the Kohl Doctrine rings a bit hollow. The point is not lebensraum, hegemony and Germany über alles. The issue is the responsibility that goes with power. Can a nation of 80 million act like Switzerland writ large? "No," says the Kohl government — and "no," although much more grudgingly, says even the Social Democratic opposition, whose pacifist roots reach back into the 19th century.

It it were just Bosnia, the nays would have prevailed even in 1994. But suddenly the issue was no longer a "war of conscience" but the core of German postwar policy by the name of NATO.

Once the alliance was drawing up contingency plans for the insertion of 45,000 men to protect the withdrawal of 23,000 United Nations troops, the issue came down to hard realpolitik. Would Bonn refuse to protect its allies (together, Britain and France make up the largest UN contingent) as they fought their way out of Bosnia? That would have been the end of alliance with the West, the sturdiest home Germany has ever had.

For the time being, Tuesday's cabinet decision in favor of alliance solidarity does not come with a price tag attached. Nobody wants to withdraw the UN Protection Force, and neither France nor Britain is asking Bonn to send its Tornados into battle preemptively. So Germany has signed no more than a

promissory note.

Still, five years ago it was straight cash in exchange for opting out of real commitment. Germany has now made half a commitment: to maturity and international responsibility.

The writer, foreign and editorial-page editor of Süddeutsche Zeitung, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.

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