

The Silent Peaceniks

By Josef Joffe

Last time, they hung white sheets from their windows. That was in 1991 when the United States started lobbing cruise missiles into Baghdad. But it was not Iraqis who were waving the traditional flag of surrender — it was peace-minded Germans. Never mind that they were not the targets. They wanted to demonstrate their moral superiority in the face of American “cowboy imperialism.”

These last few days, we have seen no such displays of righteousness in Europe. Indeed, as the pounding of Yugoslavia goes into its second week, the most intriguing news from Europe is that the dogs of peace have not been barking in the night.

To be sure, there have been protests — in Vienna and in Bucharest, Romania, in Stockholm and The Hague. Even in Melbourne, Australia, demonstrators burned the American flag. But these were not the usual suspects — Greens, pacifists, assorted anti-Americans — but Serb nationals or, as in Bucharest, Orthodox priests inveighing against Muslim infidels.

So what makes this fight so different from all other fights? To begin with, this is a battle not even pacifists can resist: a war of conscience, not of interest. The attack on Yugoslavia is aimed at saving lives, and for purely moral reasons.

This makes all the difference to the postmodern liberal mind, which reflexively recoils from force when it is employed for strategic purposes — say, oil, economic advantage or the balance of power. Europeans (of all stripes) like such force even less when applied by the United States, the “last remaining superpower.”

When the Air Force went after Saddam Hussein, using its ultrasophisticated World War III hardware, Europeans were reminded that they are all alone in the world with an overwhelming giant. And so, the instincts of the weak whisper (against their better judgment), “Let’s not restrain Saddam but Uncle Sam.”

This time, balancing against Mr. Big was not an issue. Though the United States is doing most of the military work, the NATO campaign is seen as selfless by most Europeans.

There is also, however, an element of Realpolitik in this rare instance of trans-Atlantic harmony. When pacifist-neutralist Europeans turned out by the hundreds of thousands to protest the deployment of American nu-

clear missiles in the early 1980’s, they were driven in large part by the fear that their countries would become a “shooting gallery of the superpowers.” Even in 1991, visions of a wider war struck angst into the hearts of those who hung out the white sheets.

But now the Soviet Union is no more, and even the faint of heart do not believe that Russia will rush to the aid of its Serb-Orthodox brethren. Unlike the czar’s divisions in 1914, the Russian Army today is not capable of projecting power abroad. Though President Boris Yeltsin condemned the NATO strikes, he pointedly told his Parliament on Tuesday that Russia “will not allow itself to be drawn into military conflict.” It is always easier to heed the call of obligation when the risks are low.

The final explanation for the widespread support of the air strikes is the changing of the political guard in Europe. Those who hurled rocks against American cultural centers in the 1970’s and staged sit-ins in front of American missile bases in the 1980’s are now in government themselves.

Nowhere is this shift more dramatic than in Germany. Gerhard Schröder, a radical leftist in his youth, is now Chancellor, and Joschka Fischer, the former peace advocate and street fighter, serves as Foreign Minister. Rudolf Scharping, the Social Democratic Defense Minister, was once suspended from his party for overzealous agitation against the armed forces.

It seems these men have discovered that when you are in power and there is a fire next door, pacifism becomes a perilous luxury. There is nobody else to take care of business. Mr. Milosevic should listen closely to the sounds of silence and not count on discord in the ranks of NATO. At least not soon. □
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Why Europe isn't raising the 'U.S. imperialism' cry.

Michael Bierut