

As Germany's Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer vociferously defends the very policies he once denounced, infuriating the fundamentalists in his own Green Party.

A Peacenik Goes to War

By Josef Joffe

THINK OF ABBIE HOFFMAN OR Jerry Rubin, yesteryear's counterculture icons, and imagine them as Secretary of State today.

That will give you a first approximation of Joschka Fischer, 51, the onetime political prankster, street fighter and revolutionary who was sworn in as Germany's Foreign Minister last fall.

When Fischer himself fell prey to a prankster earlier this month — having his head and face splattered with red paint — his personal transformation was virtually complete. Joschka Fischer, the perennial bad boy of German politics, was now the victim of political theater, the establishment object of counterculture protest.

Thirty years ago, he battled against American "imperialism" in the streets of Frankfurt; this year, he closed ranks with the United States in Germany's first shooting war since 1945. Two decades ago, Fischer and his fellow Green Party members marched against the deployment of Pershing nuclear missiles in Western Europe; today, the defrocked pacifist looks on approvingly as the Pentagon lobs cruise missiles into Serbia.

Fischer recalls his last conversation with the Yugoslav President, Slobodan Milosevic, in Belgrade, just before NATO unleashed its planes on March 24. "I am ready to walk on corpses, and the West is not," the Serbian strongman said. "This is why I shall win." Milosevic's cynical arrogance, Fischer says, bristling, convinced him right then that the bombs had to fly.

Nor is the renegade from the peace *über Alles* camp alone. His Chancellor, the former left-wing radical Gerhard Schröder, wants to "break Milosevic's criminal will," but not with ground troops, as he emphasized in a May 19 statement that reverberated throughout NATO capitals. That's a step too far, not only for Germany but also for virtually every European nation except Britain. Like Fischer, the Chancellor, a Social Democrat, says that "Milosevic must not win this war." And so do many of Fischer's Greens — grudgingly, ambivalently. One of those is

Angelika Beer, a Communist in her student days, who now represents the Greens on the Bundestag's Defense Committee. "Guarding the peace and protecting human rights," she intones, "are two Green objectives that cannot be realized simultaneously at this point."

Fischer's enemies in the party are not so polite, heckling him, jeering and, in that one celebrated instance, pelting him with a plastic bag filled with red paint. In that incident, during a convention called hastily this month to debate the Kosovo war, his eardrum was broken by the impact. Yet Fischer didn't give an inch. His address to the 800 delegates (protected by 400 police officers) was his final farewell to the party's fundamentalists.

"Peace," he thundered, "means that men aren't murdered, women aren't raped and people aren't driven from their homes." Some of his comrades were calling for an unconditional halt in the bombing. "If you pass this resolution," he belted, "I will not act on it!" The pacifist extremists got only 318 votes; while the moderate resolution introduced by the leadership carried the day with 444 votes.

The Greens did not bolt from the Government, and Germany did not go AWOL on the West's war against Belgrade. Today, the old America-basher Joschka Fischer has only kind words for the "last remaining superpower." No, he insists, he was "never anti-American." He was "against a lot of American policy," he said recently. "But I felt close to American culture. Berkeley was around the corner. Woodstock ... was our own culture." He sounds like Madeleine Albright when he affirms that "the United States is an indispensable power for me — even if Europe unites, it will need an Atlantic insurance policy."

In conversations with reporters, Fischer keeps insisting on the powerful connection between Germany's democracy and its *Westbindung*, or "community with the West." "If we turn our back on that community," he says, "we might jeopardize our democratic revolution." And that, he is quick to add, is the first in German history

that has worked. No *Schaukelpolitik* for him — the policy of maneuver and balance between East and West that has regularly brought grief to both Germany and Europe. “To me,” Fischer insists, “the West is an indispensable insurance against the return of German nationalism.”

But Germany is indisputably shedding the fetters of the cold war, raising difficult questions about what its foreign policy should be. Fischer is emphatic on what it should not be. It should “never again be back to Bismarck,” a hegemonial policy that would try to run Europe from Berlin. That would reactivate precisely the “nightmare of coalitions” Bismarck had dreaded all his life. But isn’t that too modest a role for Europe’s most powerful country?

Fischer responds with a slight smile, “We lead from the second row, but we are doing quite well there.” This could be Helmut Kohl speaking. Like the former Chancellor, to whose girth Fischer once aspired, the new Foreign Minister has the twin lessons of this century practically bred into his genes. When Germany struck out on its own, it reaped disaster. When it went for community and integration, it flourished.

“The more we pursue our interests multilaterally, through Europe,” Fischer postulates, “the more we’ll get for ourselves.” In other words, you do well by doing good for others. Not bad for a medium-great power that has learned in the most painful way that wingtips and cell phones are far more useful than panzers and jackboots.

A PACIFIST GOING TO WAR? AN ANTI-VIETNAM marcher praising America? Self-reinvention is Joschka Fischer’s business. He reminds you a bit of Forrest Gump, who ran his way to fame and riches, grabbing and shedding personas as he went. Fischer, who began the morphing game when he ditched his official first name, Joseph (for the Joschka of his forebears, who lived in Hungary), started running seriously rather late in life — when his third wife, Claudia, 17 years his junior, dumped him in 1996. (He just married No. 4, Nicola Leske, a 29-year-old journalism student.) Traumatized by the breakup, Fischer literally transformed himself. He was so fat back then that he would wheeze after a mere dash to the refrigerator. So he took up jogging with a fierce determination. Over the next several months, he drove his ballooning frame down from 240 to 165 pounds.

And he kept running. No more booze, cigarettes and wurst, just mineral water, veggies and muesli. And Puccini, especially “La Bohème,” which struck him as “real tripping music, and more psychedelic than Pink Floyd.” It was the Hamburg Marathon next, and — joints willing — it will be New York, his great dream, one of these days.

In the meantime, though, there was a bigger race to win: the 1998 election. His Greens, an infighting bunch of pacifists, ecologists, counter-culturists and plain old leftists, had been around for almost 20 years, in and out of Parliament. Unlike his fundamentalist comrades (known as “fundis”), Fischer and his growing retinue of “realos” knew that ’98 was the Greens’ first, and perhaps only, chance to slip into Government — as junior partners of Gerhard Schröder’s Social Democrats.

So Fischer stopped pursuing the runner’s high and instead began to jog for power. To bring in the vote, he crisscrossed the country, “a bit in each district,” for a grand total of 300 miles. He drew enough recruits for the Greens (6.7 percent of the vote) to push the Social Democrats over the top.

On the night of Sept. 27, Kohl, Germany’s apparent Chancellor-in-Perpetuity, was history. The man who had ruled Germany for 16 years was replaced by a Red-and-Green duo: by Gerhard Schröder as Chancellor and Joschka Fischer as Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister.

No more Nike running shoes like the gleaming white pair Fischer wore at his swearing-in as Environment Minister in Hesse, his home state, in 1985. Back then, the good people of Frankfurt could not believe that this punk, who used to lead the shock troops of *Revolutionärer*

Kampf (Revolutionary Struggle) against their finest, was now going to ride around in an official Mercedes-Benz.

Since last fall, however, nobody has seen the ex-punk in anything but a gray three-piece suit, complete with french cuffs and dark solid or polka-dot ties. He also sports a signet ring, the traditional affectation of German aristocrats. Considering his most humble beginnings, this get-up has “Only in America” written all over it. Though this is Germany, Fischer does embody an American career in spades — from high-school dropout to the seventh floor of Foggy Bottom, as it were, in 33 years.

HIS FATHER, A BUTCHER IN A MEAT-PROCESSING plant, was felled by a stroke when Fischer was

18. He recalls how he went to the hospital to pick up his father's belongings, "those work clothes reeking of fat and blood, the greasy butcher's satchel he had lugged around all these years." Back in his parents' apartment, he had an epiphany, as he recalls it. "I was at home, all alone, and I told myself, 'No, I ain't gonna live like that.'"

He had already quit high school the year before, at 17, and there was Edeltraud, a girl he had just met. The two of them took off together, hitchhiking to Paris, Amsterdam and Marseilles, where they spent the nights in empty freight cars. To feed themselves, they covered the Marseilles sidewalks with chalk paintings — Jesus figures and windjammers — that might elicit some coins from passers-by. Then a run to Gretna Green, Scotland, where minors could marry without parental consent in those days.

Fischer (who never did finish high school) also tried his luck as a wedding photographer, auto worker, used-book seller and taxi driver, his most stable job. He wrote countless tracts on left-wing politics and taught his fellow travelers from the Revolutionary Struggle how to fight the "pigs." Did Fischer ever engage in "revolutionary violence" himself? He is adept at dodging the question. A former comrade in arms, Thomas Schmid, now the editorial-page editor of the conservative daily *Die Welt*, says, "No comment."

Since his latest reinvention, Fischer has roamed the world in a Luftwaffe Airbus, with his very own sleeping quarters decorated in haute motel-modern. In the back there is a retinue of 20 aides and two dozen reporters and photographers. Asked why he keeps recasting himself, Fischer stretches out on his cabin bed and clasps his hands behind his neck. "I hate nothing more than boredom," he says. "When you reach the point where you've exhausted all the possibilities of your present life, you choose another one — just like a mountain climber who goes for the top only to start looking for the next one."

He has gone for a new life every 10 years or so, he reports, but, no, he is no Forrest Gump. "More like Robert De Niro, who really lives his roles. So do I, I live them, too. And now I am the Foreign Minister." Thomas Schmid agrees with the De Niro analogy, adding tartly, "He has an incredible mimetic talent."

So Fischer keeps changing and running, and the media lap it up. "They treat him like a rock star," said Richard Burt, the former United States Ambassador to Germany, as he watched a horde of photographers converge on Fischer at a recent strategy conference in Munich.

Fischer is quite specific about the events that made him veer off the revolutionary road, which by 1976 left him arrested and jailed after a police car was firebombed during a demonstration. With a young officer near death, Fischer and a dozen others were brought in on a possible charge of attempted murder. But at the arraignment the next day, the judge let all of them go. Two months later, pro-Palestinian German terrorists hijacked an Air France airplane to Entebbe, Uganda.

Suddenly, Fischer saw ugly reality behind the self-righteous anti-Zionism of his kaffiyeh-clad comrades, who chose to cast the Israelis as Nazis and the Palestinians as Jews. Why would young Germans concoct this bizarre projection if they were supposedly protesting not only against capitalism and imperialism but also against their parents' complicity with Nazism? By raging against the evils inflicted on the Palestinians by Jews, young Germans could regain the moral high ground precisely against those who kept reminding them of their inherited guilt. That was the unconscious function of anti-Zionism. Nor is this ancient history. During the gulf war, one of Fischer's Greens, Hans-Christian Ströbele, declared that Saddam Hussein's Scud attacks on Israel were but payback for the occupation of Palestinian lands.

In Entebbe, Fischer recalls, "those pretending to be anti-fascists almost compulsively re-enacted what they had blamed their fathers for, where they separated Jewish and non-Jewish passengers." He deliberately uses the German word *selektieren*, the process by which Jews were chosen for the gas chamber.

Entebbe and a wave of terrorist murders that swept Germany in 1977 were the turning point where "illusions were lost," Fischer reports. At that moment, "the best ideals and intentions . . . degenerated into high crimes — that was a defining experience for me." It was time for another metamorphosis.

IN 1981, HE JOINED THE ONE-YEAR-OLD GREEN Party and, after the 1983 election, suddenly found himself sitting face to face with Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the Bundestag. Though he would not drop one of his previous personae: the clowning provocateur who loves to play to the gallery. He remained an in-your-face agitator who, during one heated debate, hurled a scatological epithet against the President of the Bundestag before quickly adding, "If you don't mind, sir." Rhetorically, he bragged, he was doing to Kohl's parliamentary minions what "Attila and Genghis Khan had done to the West."

Throughout the early 1980's, Fischer continued his slow transformation from revolutionary to *Realpolitiker*. The strategic calculus was obvious. His Greens could climb to the top only on the backs of the Social Democrats, but as rad-

ical pacifists and neutralists, the Greens were untouchables — even for the leftish Social Democrats. So while holding on to his pacifist cloak, Fischer started pushing to the right. It was a long, uphill battle.

In 1985, he signaled his party to grow up by subtly ridiculing its hatred of NATO. Cautiously, he expressed his “doubts” about “how far one could get with the slogan ‘Out of NATO!’” Not very far, he might have added, if the Greens wanted the Social Democrats’ stamp of approval. In the mid-80’s they did not, putting ideology above interest. A year later, the party congress passed its notorious “Germany Out of NATO” resolution, which further stated that “there can be no peace with NATO.” Fischer refused to vote for it — an act of considerable courage in those days.

Fundamentalist strength reached its zenith in 1986, arguably the height of the cold war, but it took another 10 years before the intraparty balance of power began to tilt toward the “realos.” Much of the credit belongs to Fischer, who patiently chipped away at the extremist positions of his brethren. In 1994, he published “Risiko Deutschland” (roughly, “Hazard Germany”), a long essay on German foreign policy. With the “fundis” watching his every step for “right-wing deviationism,” Fischer still felt constrained to drape his pro-Western sentiments in the conditional. “If it is true,” he reasoned, “that integration in the West is Germany’s central *raison d’être*, then the German left will have to rethink its nationalist-pacifist and neutralist course.” Anything stronger could get you excommunicated, even in 1994.

The break with his party’s peace *über Alles* dogma came one year later, after the slaughter of more than 7,000 Bosnians in Srebrenica. But Fischer still had to fight pacifism with pacifism, as it were. “If war once more turns into a successful means of policy, then we can forget about a peaceful future for Europe.”

By this year, he was openly advocating force to stop force. He was even willing to dispense with a United Nations Security Council mandate — “if there is no consensus while we are facing a humanitarian catastrophe or a grave threat to the regional peace,” as he said last November. To those Greens who now claim that NATO’s strikes against Serbia are morally worse than the daily massacre of Kosovars, Fischer says, “I learned not only ‘No more war’ but also ‘No more Auschwitz.’”

WHILE FISCHER HAS NO DOUBTS about Kosovo, or Germany’s place in NATO and Europe, his Green Party is deeply divided. Its members still don’t know whether they are in politics for good or whether, though fuller of girth and grayer of hair, they want to continue as a utopian movement that clings to principle over the exer-

cise of power. They will have to decide soon.

The Greens have much the same problem as Levi Strauss, which has been closing blue jeans plants all over the world because kids refuse to wear the same pants as their parents. Neither do German youngsters want to meet their bearded and Birkenstock-shod math teachers in the local Green Party meeting.

So the young are absconding in droves, and in the most recent German election, in Hesse, Fischer’s home state, the Greens’ take plummeted from 11 percent to 7 percent. They have lost votes in 11 state elections since 1994, as they did in the national vote in 1998. And no wonder. The Greens are essentially a party of functionaries, teachers and public servants whose jobs are as safe as their fringe benefits are fat. Largely sheltered from the “real” economy, with its permanent double-digit unemployment, many of these 50-somethings are wedded to statism and the status quo: to high Government spending, anticompetitive regulations and a reactionary utopia that romanticizes trees and vilifies technology.

In an open letter to Fischer, four young Greens protested that “the party no longer reaches people because it has moved away from the realities of life.” Those include a high unemployment rate and the country’s leisurely passage from manufacturing to a job-rich service economy. The solution is not windmills or solar power, they wrote, but “cars, computers, chip cards and cell phones.” In its conservatism, they said, the Green Party “resembles the Catholic Church.”

If anybody grasps the existential quandary of the Greens, it is Fischer, the man who smells a trend faster than Dick Morris. Was his party just the one-shot project of a protest generation that is now slowly moving toward retirement? “Perhaps,” he concedes. “I’ve been warning them for years about this danger.” Asked how he would crack the quandary, the Foreign Minister slips into generalities. “We have to combine the professionalism of a party in power with the visionary élan of a programmatic reform movement.”

But as Fischer well knows, environmentalism was co-opted by the established parties, and the Greens’ other big issue, peace, rings not only hollow but also morally bankrupt when people are dying in Bosnia or Kosovo. The party has aged, but not matured; it is in power, but not in control of its future.

So where is Fischer? In Washington, at NATO’s 50th-birthday celebration. Or in Moscow, pushing his peace plan for Kosovo. Or in Brussels, Amsterdam or Luxembourg at one of those innumerable inter-Governmental meetings seeking to reform the screeching decision-making machinery of the European Union. Or in Sana, Djibouti or Beijing.

Quelle: NYT
New York Times MagazineSonntag
30.05.1999

Nr:

Seite:
30

He is running as always, crisscrossing the world in his Luftwaffe Airbus, using a small corner of his brain to think about the next way to reinvent himself. For as much as he wants to give his "utmost," he hates "boredom." So when "something is exhausted," he muses, "it is time to leave it behind."

His life, Fischer explains, "unfolds in 10-year cycles." So he'll keep that Luftwaffe plane until 2008? Given the extraordinary longevity of German Governments — from 13 to 16 years in the past — it's a good bet that he will, especially after that last party congress this month. His comrades may have hit him with paint bombs and ultrapacifist resolutions, but they did not bolt, and so the Red-and-Green alliance continues to hold. Maybe those 50-somethings have grown up after all. If so, they owe it to Joschka Fischer, the high-school dropout and former pavement painter who has developed into one of the most extraordinary politicians of his generation. ■

To Greens who claim that NATO's strikes against Serbia are morally worse than the daily massacre of Kosovars, Fischer says, "I learned not only "No more war" but also "No more Auschwitz."

PHOTOGRAPH FROM DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR
Josef Joffe is the editorial-page editor and a columnist for Süddeutsche Zeitung, a national daily published in Munich.

■