

VIEWPOINT

Josef Joffe

All Quiet on the Eastern Front

A decade after the end of the cold war, Germany plans to revamp its army

TO UNDERSTAND MODERN GERMANY, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND the Weimar Republic. To make sense of the scraggly blueprint for the military revolution unveiled in Berlin last week, you have to go back 70 or 80 years to that ill-fated German experiment in democracy that spewed forth Adolf Hitler in 1933.

A revolution it certainly is, at least nine-tenths of it. The blue-ribbon commission installed by Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping and chaired by former President Richard von Weizsäcker recommended doing away with about half a dozen sacred cows. Get rid of Germany's panzer- and infantry-heavy army was the core proposal—on the sound assumption that the Fulda Gap no longer needs defending against hordes of Warsaw Pact divisions. If Germany, as Scharping loves to trumpet, is surrounded only by friends, it no longer has to prepare for World War III.

Specifically, the commission told the Schröder government to cut the Bundeswehr from about 460,000 down to 320,000 (including civilians). Use the savings, say \$1.5 billion a year, to buy the stuff the Bundeswehr really needs for future Bosnias and Kosovos: fleet-footed fighters, light armor, long-range transport and precision munitions. Above all, make sure that this army can prevail when it has to march into harm's way. That requires not kids right out of boot camp but well-trained, hence long-serving, professionals.

Professionals? This is where the blueprint turns scraggly in unfond memory of the Weimar Republic and its all-volunteer army. Bold as it was, the commission could not quite bring itself to go the last one-tenth of the way and to say the *P* word. Never mind that Germany's most important allies—the U.S., Britain and France—have done away with the draft. Never mind that it would be close to criminal to despatch ill-trained draftees to a high-tech battle field.

Historical memory prevailed, and its moral is this: the Weimar Republic's (1919-33) professional *Reichwehr* quickly turned into a "state within the state" and then into an enemy of democracy. So Germany's new Bundeswehr will remain a draft army—of sorts. In addition to 80,000 civilians, the commission wants 240,000 soldiers. Of these, 30,000 are to be draftees who would serve for a few months only, at any rate for less than a year. What would we call a force where seven out of eight are professionals? A volunteer army garnished with a fig leaf, and one that is destined to wilt away soon.

This is all the more certain because this particular Weimar analogy, like so many others, has been emptied of all reality. Civilian supremacy has been occasionally challenged in postwar Germany, but the political masters of the military have always (and easily) prevailed. Democracy in the First German Republic was doomed almost from the beginning;

in the Second, it has struck ultra-stable roots. Even to surmise that a volunteer army might turn antidemocratic would be an insult to those young Germans who sign up. Like their colleagues in other NATO countries, they will be lured by the money and the skills, not by any Pied Pipers.

Nine-tenths of the blueprint is sound and sensible, but the last one-tenth is not just a victim of obsolete anxieties. Sharpening, it turns out, got himself more than he bargained for when he charged that commission with thinking unorthodox thoughts. For any Defense Minister, in Germany or elsewhere, must worry not only about grand strategy, but also about lowly domestic politics. To cut the Bundeswehr as drastically as the commission urges, he would have to dismantle lots of bases and garrisons. Unfortunately, that also cuts into jobs and pocketbooks, and so Scharping is mumbling about 280,000 soldiers, 40,000 more than Weizsäcker et al have proposed.

But then, one day after the release of the report, the Defense Minister summarily fired the chief of staff, Hans-Peter von Kirchbach, who wanted even more. Like all generals, Von Kirchbach likes to think that Big is Beautiful, and so he insisted on 290,000, including 110,000 draftees. Such are the ways of a democracy in which military policy is always intertwined with institutional interests and pork-barrel politics. Commissions propose and governments dispose.

Still, the revolution is on track. For the next several months, Germany will argue about numbers, but not about principles. For this oversized and underequipped Bundeswehr has lost two critical assets: the strategic threat and the money. Indeed, with only 1.5% of gdp devoted to defense, Germany ranks well below France, which spends at almost twice that rate.

When the haggling is over, this odd-man-out among Europe's great powers will be set for its greatest military reform since the birth of the Bundeswehr in 1955. In the next Kosovo-type operation, it will be able to field 40,000-plus soldiers—enough for peace-enforcement, not enough to resurrect ancient worries either at home or abroad. ■