

From environmental radical to imperialist politician

# The new German foreign minister: the Greens' Joseph Fischer

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*The following is a biographical sketch of Joseph Fischer, the leader of the German Green Party who this month became foreign minister. The Greens are the junior partners of a coalition government with the Social Democrats as a result of the election last September that brought down the Christian Democratic government of Helmut Kohl.*

The most striking characteristic of Joseph Fischer is his adaptability. External circumstances have played an inordinately greater role in his life than inner personal convictions. The vague notions of a better world, which he adopted from the student movement at the end of the sixties, gave way, in the course of 10 years, to a profound resignation, in the wake of which concerns for his own social improvement displaced all better inclinations.

His official biographer, Sybille Krause-Burger, sees in Fischer's life the material for a 'classical character novel'. No other parliamentary deputy has 'overcome so many worlds, has discovered so much new for himself'. This is a clear misunderstanding. The classical character novel describes the unfolding of a personality. Fischer's 'conquering of new worlds' on the contrary consists in the atrophy of his personality in the course of adapting to the existing political establishment. The talents he employed in the process were a certain crude cunning, a rather big mouth and a liberal portion of unscrupulousness. Above all the lack of any sort backbone came in handy.

These characteristics must be the reason why the shrewd professionals in the chancellery and foreign ministry have accepted him as foreign minister. They proceed no doubt from the standpoint that he can be manipulated like wax and will be able to effectively sell their policies to the public. It is quite possible that their calculations could come unstuck. An impressionable petty-bourgeois soul, dispirited by a thousand humiliations but now with the levers of power in his hands, is capable of a nasty surprise.

And is it not the case that the state of mind of Joschka Fischer, his feeling of finally ridding himself of the stigma of underdog, fatally corresponds with the psychology of the German bourgeoisie itself, which after proceeding for decades in sackcloth and ashes, now seeks with all its might to bully itself back into the circle of the powerful on the world stage? It is not without significance that his first task as foreign minister consisted of securing the agreement of his Green party for a military intervention by the German army in the Balkans.

## Background and youth

Joseph Martin Fischer, born in 1948, came from a strictly Catholic petty-bourgeois family. His father was a butcher, his mother, before marrying, ran a tobacco shop. After the end of the war and two years before the birth of Joseph, the German speaking family moved from a suburb of the

Hungarian capital Budapest to a remote Swabian village. Later they lived near Fellbach, a suburb of Stuttgart; the father was forced to relinquish his independence and work as an assistant in slaughter yards and later take up work in large supermarkets.

After his tenth year of schooling the young Joseph broke off his education without graduating and began training to be a photographer, which he also soon abandoned. Following other short-term jobs he ran off, and in the summer of 1966 tramped through half the world. In autumn his young sister became mortally ill and he returned home. Shortly afterwards his father died of a heart attack. Despite new attempts Joseph Fischer was unable to establish himself in any sort of profession.

Finally in the spring of 1967 he secretly married the daughter of a policeman from Stuttgart and together they went to Marseilles where they earned some money painting kitschy images on the pavement. Soon he would go to initial actions of the student protest movement. His development at that time was very typical of many.

A key experience, apparently, was his participation in a demonstration following the death of the student Benno Ohnesorg, who, in the course of a rally against the Shah of Persia on the second of June 1967, was shot by security forces. His biographer describes the scene: 'Two days after this incident a crowd of angry people gathered in the Stuttgart marketplace. Joschka Fischer was among them and he had no doubts that what took place here politically corresponded to what he experienced personally: the revolt against handed down authorities...' (p. 75). And further below she concludes: 'If Joschka Fischer had come into conflict with his parents in the fifties and if he had failed at his school--the Gottlieb-Daimler Gymnasium--during that period, he would have hardly developed into a professional revolutionary. After failing to complete an apprenticeship, it would have been quite possible for him to achieve a school graduation through evening classes. However at the end of the sixties those youth who came into a tight spot were swept up by the spirit of the times, which took them endearingly in its arms and confirmed their very inactivity, their failure, their rejection of everything, their existence as outsiders. Home for such youth was not in the middle, at the heart of society, but rather at the fringes' (p. 81).

The newcomer from the province painfully discovered his theoretical deficits in comparison with those students from better houses. He tried to keep up and attended lectures by Adorno, Habermas and Hans Jürgen Krahl at the university of Frankfurt. He claims that already in Stuttgart he had read 'Marx from top to bottom' as well as 'my Hegel, my Kant, Fichte, i.e., the whole of German idealism.' 'I enjoyed a profound theoretical education, a study, if you like, without certificate and without graduation, and I profit from that up until today,' he is quoted by his biographer (p. 75).

It is striking, however, that neither in any biographical presentation nor

in Fischer's own books can one find any evidence of what exactly the young man learned from these classical writers, or what conclusions he drew from his reading. One has the impression that he either read a lot, but understood very little--or, that his contemporary Christian Schmid was correct when, in his ill-disposed book *Joschka Fischer and his Frankfurt Gang*, he claims that his hero assimilated only single paragraphs, which were then to be discussed at classes held by the students.

The 'Sponti'

At any rate, he joined that part of the protest movement in Frankfurt whose spokesman was considered more of a comical figure compared to the theoreticians of the German student APO (Extra-Parliamentary Opposition), someone who rejected the search for any broadly based theory in favour of 'politics in the first person' and quickly advanced to become a favourite of the media: Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his circle around the magazine 'Plasterstrand'. They were called 'Spontis', as derived from the word 'spontaneous'. 'Son of a petty bourgeois, Fischer,' according to Krause-Burger was 'fascinated not least by the big bourgeois Cohn-Bendit, his love of good food, his French savoir vivre, his worldliness. To live life like Danny, meant for Joschka the overcoming of his own background within a much broader framework. His own social revolt acquired more dignity' (p. 96).

Later many members of this group acquired local and state government posts and made good use of their mutual acquaintance in city and regional politics. They reciprocally organised various positions and rewarded each other with generous subsidies. In Frankfurt the 'Office for Multicultural Affairs' was especially created for Cohn-Bendit. Tom Königs became city treasurer and Margarete Nimsch state minister for Hessen. Others included Johnny Klinke, today the head of a variety theatre in Frankfurt ('Tigerpalast'), the cabaret performer Matthias Beltz, the concert organiser Ralf Scheffler (boss of the goldmine 'Batschkapp') and Klaus Trebes who today owns an expensive restaurant in Frankfurt.

But for the moment, in the days of 1969-70, they founded the 'Revolutionärer Kampf' (Revolutionary Struggle). Impressed by the militant strikes of steelworkers in the Ruhr Area in September 1969, the group changed their up until then demonstrably contemptuous attitude towards political work in the factories as propagated at that time by numerous Maoist groups. They got jobs at the Opel car factory in Rüsselsheim near Frankfurt and tried to disseminate their rather confused conceptions amongst the work force with their newspaper *Wir wollen alles* (We want everything).

Joschka Fischer also began work on the assembly lines at Opel. As opposed to the more socially privileged protesters who could afford romantic notions, the plebeian butcher's son found the factory work humiliating. When, after a few months, he was sacked without notice after calling for an indefinite strike at a factory meeting it was positively a source of relief. This was in the autumn of 1971. A few years later the 'R.K.' dissolved itself. Joseph Fischer made the following evaluation to his biographer: 'I was at Opel for a quarter of a year and I realised that everything in our theoretical conceptions was wrong. The workers did not want the revolution' (p.103).

With rather more success Joschka Fischer went on to organise a so-called 'Putzgruppe' in Frankfurt, which defended occupied houses in violent confrontations with the police--conducted in a professional manner--and then, at the weekend, practised stone-throwing in the neighbouring Taunus mountains. He was known as someone who could do his bit when called for, and defended this strategy of 'revolutionary violence' in hefty exchanges with the former national chairman of the Jusos (youth organisation of the SPD) and later SPD deputy Carsten Voigt. Here it was particularly evident that he interpreted the Marxist concepts that he had picked up in a very immediate sense.

In 1974, at the high point of the house occupation struggles, the 26-year-old bellowed at his opponent Voigt: 'We attacked on Saturday, and the attack took place because the comrades were not prepared to accept that a house was smashed up here, that Mueller [the head of police] could declare his Gestapo-type terror methods to be a great tactic with an obscene grin on his face, we have to demonstrate that a resistance from below is possible. That is the reason why the stones have flown against those at the devastated house who represent this system. And comrades, it is quite clear here the alternative between a reformism which in the final analysis represents the practice of capital--in Frankfurt we have experienced this concretely--or what is dismissed as the action of 'political rockers', but which in reality however means: organising mass resistance against reactionary violence!' (Krause-Burger, p. 90)

The Sponti scene in Frankfurt was a big village, everyone knew everyone else and as friend and supporter of Cohn-Bendit Fischer had won himself a position of some esteem. But their environment gradually fell apart. The mass of the student movement was absorbed by Willy Brandt's SPD, many went on to make their careers and establish themselves. Another section turned towards the RAF ('Red Army Faction') and the politics of terrorism. Fischer rejected this path--he was not prepared to go so far in terms of his own violent confrontation with the state. But he had no alternative himself. The ideology of the Spontis, a sort of permanent adolescent revolt, became more and more childish as they all got older. The 'scene' fell into a hangover. In addition Fischer did not have enough money to live and was finally forced to struggle through as a taxi driver.

Both Krause-Burger and Christian Schmid quote typical comments of Fischer from this time, 1977 and 1978, in *Pflasterstrand*, a paper with its own brand of jargon difficult for outsiders to understand: 'So there we are--some more so, other less so, but I feel especially strongly--we have all become veterans for whom times are tough at the moment and who feel they will choke on reality' (Schmid, p.116). 'The times of revolutionary heroism were clearly spent,' writes Krause-Burger, 'and that was understandably seen as a loss of meaning. It was clearly not enough just to celebrate an alternative existence, to contemplate one's own belly button and find it terrific.' She quotes Fischer's statement of that time: 'The lack of perspective, the hanging about, the not knowing what to do, became more and more unbearable. The air in the ghetto is suffocating and our retreat into our inner selves had also not changed reality' (p. 114).

At the beginning of 1979 and following the upheaval in Iran, this depression found a temporary respite in enthusiasm for Islam.

Entry into the Greens

The Frankfurt Spontis stood apart from the environmental and citizens groups which emerged at that time. They also did not have anything to do with the founding of the Greens as a national party in January 1980. Cohn-Bendit and Fischer had attempted instead to adapt to the new movement in a somewhat risible manner with the creation of a 'Citizens Initiative--Rebellion and Chaos' then 'Chaos and Swamp'.

Fischer stirred properly into life, however, when the question emerged of whether the Spontis should stand candidates on the electoral list of the Greens for the Frankfurt city parliament. Now he energetically agitated within his circles for the road to parliament. In those years various environment groups often had considerable success in elections at a local level. Fischer decided to join the new party and to leave the sins of his youth behind him. This was in July 1981. A large part of his 'power base' in Frankfurt followed him and provided him with support for many years to come. And now an astonishing picture emerged.

'Suddenly,' writes Krause-Burger, 'the one-time revolutionaries emerged as revisionists and reformers. Spontis appeared to sober up and the environment freaks revealed themselves as hotheads ... the latter (Fischer),

was clear that he did not want a repetition of the defeat of a revolutionary impetus as a member of the Greens. He was cured of such a notion. Now he argued for a clear course of reform and confirmed what he had thought years before; that it makes no sense to romp around in parliament as an anti-parliamentarian. 'They wanted to take up the parliamentary way to revolution, which I held to be complete nonsense. Nobody had been able to explain to me why revolution should work in parliament when it had not worked on the streets--and so the conflict between the *Fundamentalists* and the *Realists* began. It began with my entry into the party in Frankfurt" (p. 124).

Christian Schmid formulates the same thing somewhat maliciously: 'The advantage of the unemployed cast of Sponti politicians over the political amateurs of the Greens was precisely what seemed to be the greatest deficit of the former: their obvious failure and resulting political hopelessness. Because they had already tried out everything, precisely because they thought that they and their movement were finished, they were motivated--more than the average Green politicians with their sceptical attitude towards power--to realise their last chance in this new party and make their careers without any consideration for loss of program' (p. 144).

One thing is certain: concern about the environment was the very last reason that attracted Joseph Fischer to the Greens. The rejection of violence and pacifism, another distinctive emblem of the Greens, had played an equally subordinate role in his history. And from the very beginning he regarded the vision of a radical democracy inside the organisation to be merely an obstacle.

The rest, as one says, is history. The 16 years of the Kohl government in Germany were the period in which Fischer was able to establish himself and rise to the top. In the autumn of 1982 the SPD government led by Schmidt was replaced by the conservative coalition of Helmut Kohl. In the prematurely called fresh elections of March 1983 he was voted into the Bundestag (national parliament) for the first time. At that time he attracted the interest of the media with his rebellious interjections and his--at least in comparison with the other deputies--impudent speeches. His biographer describes at length the extent to which he relished his personal contact with the powerful and how, over time, he adapted to Bonn like a fish in water.

In line with the rotation regulations adopted by the Greens, he was forced to give up his seat as deputy after two years, but not without loud protests. He turned to regional politics in Hessen and in the face of considerable resistance inside the party established the first coalition government with the SPD in the autumn of 1985.

#### His career

A complete presentation of his career would exceed the bounds of this article, but a number of key events should be mentioned. A formative experience was undoubtedly his first period in office as environment minister in Hessen between December 1985 and February 1987.

During this time he developed a close affinity to the minister president of Hessen, Holger Börner. Before the coalition came into being, Börner, a social democrat of the old school with appropriate 'pedigree', had threatened to teach the Greens some manners--'with a wooden roof plank if necessary'. This sort of mentality apparently appealed to Fischer; 'he could even get to love him,' wrote Krause-Burger, unchallenged, about Fischer's 'substitute father' in Hessen.

With regard to the environment the achievements of the minister are negligible. He did not know where to put the hazardous waste produced by the chemical giant Hoechst, failed with the introduction of new regulations for household rubbish, and the nuclear plant, Alkem in Hanau, continued to operate although it was revealed that the plant was producing highly poisonous plutonium without the appropriate authorisation. The

biggest success of his period in office, something of which Fischer himself says he is 'really proud', is the construction of 'fish steps' in the dam walls of the region, allowing eels to proceed up river.

With respect to the more serious catastrophe at the atom plant in Chernobyl on April 26, 1986, the minister could only react helplessly with the creation of an emergency team which first met on the first of May. The coalition with the SPD eventually collapsed because of local Green insistence on an immediate stop to atomic power and their rejection of a partial license for Alkem. While Fischer was willing to permit such a license and rescue the coalition with the SPD, the state attorney's office was already conducting investigations against the atom plant in Hanau. Fischer himself was threatened with possible investigation for aiding and abetting the illegal activities of an atomic plant through negligence.

The next state elections in Hessen in April 1987 were won by the CDU. Fischer retained his mandate as deputy and soon was regarded as 'clandestine leader of the opposition'. At this time he attracted the growing interest of the 'Brandt descendants' in the SPD around Lafontaine and Schröder. Following the elections in Hessen in January 1991, the Red-Green coalition returned to power and Fischer was once again minister for the environment.

In the same year the radical ecologists led by Jutta Ditfurth split from the party. The conflict between the 'Realos' (realists) around Fischer and the so-called 'Fundis' (fundamentalists) wove like a red thread through the Greens in the first decade of their existence. In Jutta Ditfurth's view of the world Fischer plays the role of the devil in person who, wherever he pops up, destroys every worthwhile ideal and aim. It is quite true that in the small change of the inner-party intrigues with which Fischer and his supporters secured posts and mandates was revealed a lack of tact and democratic fairness. Nevertheless, the 'Realos' were apparently able to inexorably impose themselves against the 'Fundis', who rejected any form of participation in government and wanted to concentrate their activities in forms of protest outside of Parliament.

There were no fundamental differences between the two wings. Everywhere the Greens won mandates, their deputies, as a rule, quickly turned into 'Realos' and quietly acquiesced. The Fundis together along with the Greens as a whole misjudged the class character and limitations of the existing parliament. They always sought their salvation in a democratic renewal of bourgeois politics, on the other hand quivered at the temptations of the flesh pots on offer, but then in light of their hopeless position merely ended up running up against a brick wall. This in turn was gist for the mill of the Realos, who mocked the Sponti-freaks and eco-freaks.

In October 1994 Fischer resigned as environment minister for Hessen in order to concentrate on national politics following the success of the Greens in national elections one month earlier--elections in which the Greens emerged as the third largest party in Bonn. With respect to the environment his second term of office in Hessen had been no more spectacular than his first. During his period of responsibility an unparalleled series of dangerous accidents took place at Hoechst AG and a fire erupted at the Atomic work Biblis A.

The four years which have passed since then up until his recent appointment as minister in the national Red-Green coalition have seen the final blossoming of Joseph Fischer into a politician who is ready to make any compromises in order to secure power and influence in Bonn--and soon in Berlin. In this regard a key role was played by his position regarding German military intervention abroad.

Pacifism had been a central principle of the Greens. At the beginning of the eighties and much to the disgust of the conservative deputies, Fischer had made heated speeches in parliament against the further nuclear armament of NATO. In the course of a parliamentary debate over NATO nuclear missiles in November 1983 Fischer made his well-known interjection to Richard Stücklen: 'With your permission, Mr. President,

you are an asshole.' Afterwards he made numerous apologies, including in a written form.

However following the collapse of the Soviet Union and along with the majority of the petty-bourgeois left Fischer changed his position. In July of 1995 he presented a paper to his party calling for the securing by military means of UN protection zones in Bosnia. Earlier, in concordance with official post-war ideology, he had denounced Nazi crimes and declared, 'The Third Reich is the negative point of departure for all of his political considerations' (Krause-Burger), now he advocated armed intervention in a region where during the Second World war the German army had carried out bestial crimes. Even before the new coalition officially took office Fischer gave his approval to military intervention by the Bundeswehr in Kosovo.

The withdrawal from atomic energy, full citizenship rights for refugees and immigrants, the withdrawal from NATO and the disbandment of the army: all the core elements of the Green program have been thrown overboard one by one. The party remains true to its social character. From its whole background, its composition and its program it is a virtually chemically pure party of the petty-bourgeois. With a few moans and groans, but generally without effort, it has allowed itself to be harnessed to the cart of the ruling class. They have been driven far more by the changing times than they themselves have acted to change anything. And the most prominent lever of the spirit of the times inside their own ranks has been Joschka Fischer. A man who, according to his own biographer, was always heavily dependent on the approval of those around him; a man without any firm convictions, but with a certain instinct for political power. His rise to prominence is directly bound up with the decline of the protest movement of 1968.

As the latest election results make clear, this party has lost any attraction for young people. Curtain up for the next generation.

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The most important sources for this article:

Sibylle Krause-Burger: *Joschka Fischer. The March through the Illusions*, third edition, Stuttgart: 1997.

Christian Schmid: *We are the Ludicrous. Joschka Fischer and his Frankfurt Gang*, Munich-Düsseldorf: 1998.

Peter Gatter: *The Social Climbers. A Political Portrait of the Greens*, Hamburg: 1987.

See Also:

Germany's red-green coalition: Vague promises and calls for sacrifice from all

[28 October 1998]

The social climber:

A biographical sketch of German SPD leader Gerhard Schröder

[8 May 1998]



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