

The German army lobbies for rearmament

Soldiers demonstrate against cuts in the defence budget

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On September 11, some 5,000 soldiers in uniform demonstrated in Berlin against cuts in the German defence budget. Initial plans to march through the streets of the capital were dropped in favour of holding an indoor meeting at the International Congress Centre. Irrespective of the venue, the event marked a turning point in the history of Germany, where, up until now, soldiers in uniform were pledged to strict political neutrality.

With the words, "The time of being the silent victim of the political process is over—we won't allow ourselves to be made fools of", the main speaker and organiser of the meeting, Colonel Gertz, who is chairman of the German Army Union, openly questioned the supremacy of the political leadership in national affairs. Soldiers waved banners bearing the motto of the meeting: "First they send us into war, then they kick us in the backside".

In his 45-minute speech, Gertz fiercely attacked the coalition government of the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and the Greens. He accused Finance Minister Hans Eichel (SPD) of "having failed to cast aside his limited provincial outlook as former minister president of [the German state of] Hesse."

Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping (SPD) was depicted on a large background screen as a tramp, begging: "Have you got a mark for me?" To the howling of the assembled soldiers, another speaker, Günther-Friedrich Nolting (spokesman for security matters of the Free Democratic Party), complained that, with regard to issues of national security, Germany was descending to the level of a "banana republic".

It quickly emerged that the main concern of those organising the meeting was not the "social security of soldiers and their families", but rather the fighting capabilities of the German army. An "active, creative

foreign policy", Gertz declared, "demands the substantial contribution of an army which, in its strength, equipment, weaponry and level of training, corresponds to the political and economic weight of the Republic of Germany in Europe and in the Alliance."

These are remarkably clear comments which directly link the tasks of the German army with foreign policy and economic aims. Up until the reunification of Germany (1990) official doctrine was that the sole purpose of the German army was national defence. In the spring of this year participation by the German army in the NATO war in Kosovo was justified on the basis of the defence of human rights, and any suggestion of self-interest was denied. Now it is being frankly said that Germany requires a strong army in order to win recognition in establishing its economic and political power in the world.

Despite hostile comments directed against him, the final speaker to take the stage was Defence Minister Scharping. His speech began to a chorus of boos but ended with the applause of the assembled soldiers. Scharping made clear that he was in general agreement with the aims of the meeting and considered it welcome support for his own plans for a massive increase in the defence budget. For his part, in a later comment to the press, Colonel Gertz stated that in "98.5 percent of questions" he saw eye to eye with Scharping.

The defence minister agreed with the chorus of complaints about the miserable condition of the weapons and armaments arsenal of the German army, and gave a number of concrete examples. He blamed the current state of affairs on his predecessors from the conservative CDU (Christian Democratic Union), who had cut investment and reorganised "aimlessly and without a plan for years". He spoke of an "enormous injection of funds which is necessary to retain the

capability of the army”.

The savings of 3.5 billion German marks planned for the year 2000 could no longer be reversed, Scharping said, and he expressed regret that a year was being lost. But the cuts planned for the coming year had been decided by the Cabinet “with reservations”.

With regard to Finance Minister Eichel, Scharping believed that the “horizon can once again be expanded”. In other words: once the hue and cry over cuts in pensions and the social security system has abated, it will be possible to push through an increase in spending for rearmament.

Three days before the Berlin meeting, Scharping expressed himself even more clearly in a declaration of principles at the Officers Academy in Hamburg. In front of 440 participants of an officers' training course and the assembled press, he left no room for doubt that he regards a substantial increase in the military budget as unavoidable.

“For years the army has been existing on a substandard basis,” Scharping said. “A large injection of finance is necessary in order to rectify these past deficits and realise the necessary investment for the future.” He said an investment backlog of 20 billion German marks had accumulated over recent years, i.e., roughly half the current yearly budget.

Measured against gross national product, Scharping continued, Germany “spends for defence only about half that which is regarded as necessary by our European partners France and Great Britain. If there were convergence criteria for European defence and security policy similar to the criteria for participation in the European Currency Union, Germany would be left out in the cold.”

An instructive comparison. Germany's gross national product is one-third higher than the French and more than twice that of the British. If this were to be made the measure for military spending, the German defence budget would be comparable to the French and the British taken together. Germany would not only be the leading economic, but also the leading military force in Europe—a prospect not likely to be greeted with enthusiasm in Paris or London.

Scharping made clear once again in his speech that he is striving to establish just such a military role for Germany. “Because of its geographical position Germany is situated at the centre of Europe, its size and

economic power playing a key role in the formation of a secure European environment,” he said at the beginning of his remarks. In his conclusion he once again emphasised: “As one of the leading economic powers, as the country in the European Union with the largest population in a key geo-strategic position, as a pillar of the transatlantic bridge of security, Germany bears a particular responsibility.”



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