German Green party calls for professional army

Ulrich Rippert
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Earlier this month Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green party finally reached an agreement on continuing their coalition government in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and passed a new coalition agreement. This was preceded by weeks of bitter in-fighting, during which the state's minister president, Wolfgang Clement (SPD), repeatedly humiliated the Greens, making it clear he preferred a coalition government with the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

However, federal Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (SPD) let Clement know in no uncertain terms that he would have to curtail such a move for the moment. If the SPD had switched to the FDP in Germany's biggest state, it would have meant the end of the current SPD/Green national coalition government as well. But the Greens are still needed in the federal government to fulfil some very specific tasks, one of them being the reform of the German army and re-arming of Germany's military forces.

Since assuming government power as junior partner of the SPD, the Greens have carried out so many political about-faces that their reversal on the military question might seem almost routine. Nevertheless, their switch from pacifism to militarism is quite remarkable.

It is not even two years since the following was published in the Green's election programme under the heading “The Way Forward for the Foreign Policy of the 21st Century”:

“The Green Party is ... opposed to the foreign policy of the Conservative-Liberal government which would have Germany playing the traditional role of a Great Power in international politics.” The programme then calls for “self-restriction in the field of power politics” and “non-military methods of preserving the balance of international interests”. It goes on to say: “We want to start the de-militarization of international politics right here at home.”

After observing that a lasting perspective for peace can only be achieved through economic and political integration, the election programme categorically states: “The Green Party is not prepared to support military enforcement of peace or combat operations.” The aim of the Green Party is portrayed as the “de-militarization of politics—all the way to the abolishment of the army and the dissolution of NATO.”

That election programmes have a very short “service life” is not new. Nevertheless, with the Greens one sees a party which said it would prove that politics could be credible adding a new dimension to the *lack* of credibility of bourgeois politics. Even before the Green federal ministers had assumed office, the party's parliamentary group had voted in favor of supporting NATO's threat to bomb Serbia. Four months later they approved the first deployment of German soldiers in aggressive military action since 1945.

Currently, some Green politicians at various levels of the party organization are stressing that the Kosovo War must remain an “absolute exception”, and that there must be no further approval of combat operations. But this only shows the meager understanding the Greens have of their own decisions, and the opportunistic character of their approach to political principles.

The Kosovo War was a watershed event that profoundly changed the political situation. Behind the distorted mask of morality and human rights, the German power elite staked its claim to promoting its economic and political interests with military means. Since then, the maintenance of “German interests” has become the constantly evoked central aspect of Germany's foreign and domestic policies. It is only against this backdrop that one can understand why the transformation of the German army into a heavily armed intervention force is being discussed and decided as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

The lurch to the right by German political parties since the Kosovo War is most obvious in the case of the Greens. Only three months after the end of the war, the defense spokeswoman of the Green parliamentary group, Angelika Beer, presented a 12-page paper entitled “Less is More! Proposals for a Security-Policy and Technology-Oriented Modernisation of the Bundeswehr [German Army]”. Up to then, the Greens had always linked their opposition to military service to a general rejection of the army. Now they call for the abolition of military service and the creation of a powerful professional army that can be deployed swiftly and reliably anywhere in the world.

In Angelika Beer's opinion, the reform of the German army must be oriented toward enabling Germany to make a powerful contribution to the creation of an independent European defense identity: “NATO defense and crisis management require the restructuring of the German army into an army that can deploy suitable, excellently trained and adequately equipped forces requiring a low level of mobilization time in Europe and its peripheral and neighbouring regions.”

Beer calls for armed forces “that are characterized by great mobility, technical and operational superiority, leadership-adapted discipline and flexible deployment capacity in the context of multinational and international operations.” Following detailed technical proposals aimed at creating “higher performance and more cost-efficient armed forces”, Beer concludes her paper with a clear affirmation of support for national German interests and the warning that there is a danger “that we could miss our chance of making a German contribution to the change in international relations”.

In the introduction to her theses, Beer repeats a few phrases from her pacifist past. She has much to say about “strengthening the preventive elements in foreign and security policy” and “early detection and

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prevention of conflicts". But, then, so do top military leaders like former German Army Chief of Staff Klaus Naumann, who has often stressed "the elimination of conflict sources as a central aspect of crisis management".

Based on Angelika Beer's paper, the Greens have taken on the role of foremost proponent of a heavily armed professional army. They praise the report of the Weizsaecker Commission (a commission headed by former German President Weizsaecker which recently submitted its proposals for a reform of the German army) and criticize the plans put forward by Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping (SPD), because these plans do not go far enough and continue to call for military service.

The hapless attempts by Green members of parliament to pacify critics in their own ranks by claiming that the reduction in the number the soldiers, the closure of a few barracks and their demand for the abolition of military service are all steps in the direction of disarmament are farcical. Nothing can obscure two fundamental facts: first, that the restructuring of the German army is linked to a gigantic rearmament programme budgeted at 120 billion marks for the next 10 years; and second, that the Greens have made a 180-degree turnabout in their position on military issues.

As on so many other political issues, the Greens' arguments are thoroughly opportunistic. In the debate on military service they take a narrow-minded position which approaches the question entirely from the standpoint of individuals who would no longer be obliged to do military service. The Greens ignore the broader consequences for society.

The creation of a professional army does not—as the Greens claim—reduce the influence of the military in society. Rather it increases it, while reducing the influence of society on the military. German history over the past century has amply demonstrated how closely linked the creation of a professional army is with the danger of a military caste that strives for social recognition and political influence, and thus becomes an independent power factor.

But all such issues are of no interest to the Greens. Instead, they proclaim that democratic control of the army is secured through parliament. They themselves demonstrated what that means in practice. With very few exceptions, the members of parliament voted for a war in which 15 heavily armed NATO countries bombed an underdeveloped country for weeks on end. It has long since been exposed that the immediate reasons presented to parliament to justify the war were fabricated.

Nor will parliament be a hindrance to future military adventures. And when soldiers start coming back in coffins, the argument will be: occupational hazard—fire fighters and others also risk their lives (but they also get decent pay for it). Thus, the creation of a professional army will reduce the inhibition threshold for military adventures in the context of Germany's new Great Power politics.

The Greens' turnabout from pacifism to militarism has several sources. First, it is a reaction to the increasing social polarization not only in society as a whole, but also, and especially, in relation to the social strata from which the Greens emerged 20 years ago. The term "mouse-click proletariat" is an indication that many people employed in technical professions, many of them even with a university education, are living and working under increasingly difficult conditions. The Greens have become the mouthpiece of people from such strata who, through ruthlessness and egotism, "made it to the top", and are now defending that position tooth-and-nail.

Second, there is a political connection between the anti-war protests of the past and today's call for a powerful professional army. The Greens' pacifism in the 1970s and 1980s was greatly influenced by the situation of Germany at that time—wedged in between the two nuclear superpowers and condemned to impotence in the field of foreign policy. The ruling elite attempted to cope with this situation by clinging to the US and NATO; the Greens' answer was to call for disarmament.

The Greens divorced the question of war from the underlying class issues. They never asked themselves which social class aspired to war and what political aims it pursued in doing so. Their protest against the gigantic weapons systems on both sides of the "Iron Curtain" was general, and included all social classes. Not surprisingly, many of the former peace marchers were the sons and daughters of clergymen or came from wealthy families. Thus, the Greens' pacifism remained in harmony with "German interests" over the years.

The situation changed with the reunification of Germany. German foreign policy regained its scope for manoeuvre. As Germany's powerlessness dwindled, so did the Greens' pacifism. Having attained the pinnacle of government power, the Greens discovered that denouncing the madness of war was besides the point. "Structuring" peace was the thing—and, miraculously, this task was in line with the interests and appetites of German foreign policy.

The office of foreign minister, normally reserved for the political elite, went to Joschka Fischer, the former "street fighter" who never even completed his upper school education. The object of this manoeuvre, which at first rattled many foreign observers, was to ensure that the Greens identified themselves with German interests in international relations. In this context, Angelika Beer's warning that there is a danger of Germany "missing its chance to make a contribution to the change in international relations" is very revealing.

Upon taking over the responsibility for Germany's foreign policy, the Greens' attitude to the underdeveloped countries also changed. The pauperisation of entire regions, which is currently proceeding at a rapid pace, brings with it the danger of uncontrollable eruptions of violence and the mass exodus of refugees. Whereas the Greens once were committed to economic aid under the slogan "help for self-help", they now have only one answer to the social crisis and its consequences: the call for military intervention.

But this is also the end of the road for the Greens. By integrating the peace movement into Germany's new Great Power politics, their mission is completed. After all, who needs this party of Green turncoats? They have no alternative to offer anymore, and they are of no use as a "law-and-order" party, either—there are others who have been representing that position longer and more convincingly.

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