

Berliners react to terror attacks in US: shock, grief and fear of American military action

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Last Friday evening 200,000 people assembled at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin in response to the call made by all German parliamentary parties for a “demonstration of solidarity with the American people”. Many families and entire groups of school children and students gathered alongside elderly citizens. At the centre of the demonstration one could see a banner bearing the words, “No to war”.

The enormous brutality and destruction unleashed by the terror attacks in New York and Washington have profoundly shaken broad layers of the German population and left a deep impression. Immediately after news of the attacks broke, crowds began to gather in stores, cafes and railway stations where television screens transmitted reports of the disaster. Public reaction was dominated on the one hand by enormous anger, on the other hand by fear of the reaction by the American government.

Public life came to a standstill in a manner not known since the Second World War, with moments of silence and short memorial meetings taking place in all the main factories, offices and administrative centres. On both public television channels regular programmes were immediately interrupted in order to report non-stop on the catastrophe in America. Theatre and opera performances as well as sporting activities due to take place on the evening of the attack were cancelled. The opening of one of the world’s largest auto shows was postponed.

Flowers and wreaths were spontaneously laid in front of the American embassy in Berlin, and hundreds of candles were lit. Classes of school children assembled in front of the embassy and attached telegrams of condolence to the fence that surrounds the compound.

The mood of grief and solidarity was intermixed with a palpable fear that the US government would unleash a war of retribution. On the morning after the attacks several hundred people demonstrated on Unter den Linden, the main street leading to the Brandenburg Gate,

carrying a banner with the inscription “Please, No War!”

There was as well a clear sense of unease within German ruling circles over the events in America, but it had very different roots from the anxiety felt by ordinary citizens.

Immediately after news arrived of the first attack, the German parliament broke off discussions on the budget. The budget debate, which usually lasts three days and is normally the most important exchange between the government and the opposition, was postponed for an indefinite period.

Crisis teams were immediately formed in the Foreign Ministry and the chancellor’s office. Their mandate, however, was not simply the immediate threat of further terrorist attacks, but also how to best realise German interests under transformed conditions, in which the reaction of the American government could endanger the fragile world situation and inflame the already tense relations between the great powers.

All of the German parliamentary parties made similar statements, declaring that in light of the “threat to the entire civilised world” the differences between the parties had to be put aside in the interest of “democratic values” and “the national interest”. This abrupt, although certainly temporary, unanimity of the parties recalled the words of Germany’s last Kaiser, who, following the assassination of the successor to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo in 1914, declared that for him there were no longer parties, only Germans.

The decision by the governing council of NATO to implement its alliance and mutual assistance pact for the first time in the 50-year history of the North Atlantic Alliance was unanimously supported by all German parliamentary parties, with the exception of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor party to the Stalinist SED of the former East Germany).

This decision, however, is contradictory. On the one

hand the German government offers the government in Washington its “unlimited support and solidarity” and thereby grants a carte blanche for military attacks. On the other, the government is expressly pursuing the goal of preventing, by means of close international collaboration, an uncontrolled reaction on the part of Washington.

Immediately after declaring his solidarity, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called for moderation. The NATO decision had demonstrated the resolve of the Alliance, he said. It was necessary to react forcefully, but also with “calm and composure,” he added.

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared in almost the same words that it was necessary to proceed with determination, but also with a cool head and composure. And Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping warned against reacting to the attacks purely with military measures. In a number of interviews he stressed, “We are not confronting a war. We are confronted with the task of determining the appropriate answer to an extraordinarily brutal terrorist attack.”

Many newspaper commentaries endorsed the government’s support for the NATO decision on the grounds that it provided a basis for avoiding a conflict with the US. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* spoke of a threat to the very existence of NATO: “If NATO had failed to reach its decision on Wednesday, it would have been regarded as a nasty snub by America.... It would have driven America into a position of going it alone, and NATO would have been split.” German foreign policy interests, the newspaper continued, could not be served by an angry and isolated America or the collapse of NATO.

In Berlin, fear is growing that the US might exploit the world-wide shock over the terror attacks and the broad international solidarity with the American people to carry out military strikes aimed at entirely reshuffling the deck of cards of world politics. Following the failure of the so-called “peace process”, which has been the focus of US diplomacy in the Middle East for years, a renewed military offensive against Iraq and the occupied territories could strengthen the leading role of the US in the region.

An attack on Afghanistan, which borders not only China, Iran and Pakistan, but also Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, could transform the power relations in the disputed region around the Caspian Sea, with its huge reserves of crude oil and gas.

In light of this scenario, critical voices could be heard on Friday describing the NATO decision as a “dangerous blank cheque”. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* wrote: “While seeking to make a short-term gesture of solidarity,

it [NATO] has ratified a decision with dangerous consequences. It has established a bridge from the entirely justified rhetoric of a ‘war against civilisation’ to a genuine war.”

The same paper reported that behind the scenes Foreign Minister Fischer was feverishly working for a diplomatic solution to the conflict in the Middle East.

Together with other European governments, Germany’s ruling SPD (Social Democratic Party)—Green Party coalition is attempting to use the widespread shock over the terror attacks to carry out a policy of intensified militarism both at home and abroad. The government is insisting on implementing a series of measures that up to now have met with popular resistance, while seeking to cast all opposition to these measures in a criminal light, i.e., as evidence of sympathy or toleration of terrorism.

This applies to drastic increases in the military budget at the expense of social expenditures, the creation of a professional army, the tightening of immigration policy, and the lifting of legal protections for personal data.

Interior Minister Otto Schily has already announced a “new security concept”, i.e., a new balance between the democratic rights of the individual and the security demands of the state. The pan-European police organisation, Europol, is to coordinate the work of intelligence services, the military and the police on a European level. Within a day of the attacks on New York and Washington, the authorities in the Hague had already set up a crisis centre to accelerate the exchange of information between the various European police bodies.



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