The Peace Movement and West German Foreign Policy (October 19, 1981)

Abstract

In the following essay, Alfred Grosser, a French political scientist and expert on German affairs, examines the origins and motivations of the West German peace movement, which he interprets as part of a broader "not with us" attitude in the country's foreign policy. This article first appeared in the Paris daily *Le Monde*.

Source

"This Crisis is the Most Serious One of All"

French political science professor Alfred Grosser, 56, is among the leading experts on Germany. The following article was taken from the Paris daily "Le Monde."

It might well be that Helmut Schmidt remains chancellor until the 1984 elections. But it could also be that he soon falls—either to the right or to the left. To the left would mean that his liberal allies let him down because the government's social policy was too lax and the budget policy not restrictive enough. To the right means that he would be abandoned by his own party because of its military policy.

It is not impossible for the pacifists and the CDU opposition to win at the same time, which would lead to an explosive situation. At the moment, however, most of the attention is being directed at the schism between the demonstrators in Bonn and the totality of the three parliamentary parties.

The most reliable ally of the United States within the alliance is the country with the liveliest anti-Americanism. The country where neither reunification nor Europe were primary concerns, but rather security, has become a country where the "not with us" attitude and the refusal to view foreign policy from the perspective of defense seem to have triumphed. What a surprise!

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore two constant factors, which go a long way in explaining the reversal.

First of all, the [West German] relationship to the past is very different from the French one. When François Mitterrand said at his press conference: "France does not confuse pacifism as a postulate with peace as a result," hardly anyone contradicted him: this was because of 1938, when France and England capitulated in Munich because they were weak[1]; and because they were pacifists, they got war.

In the Federal Republic, the two comparisons are 1939, the outbreak of war, and 1945, the catastrophe, the dead and the ruins that resulted. If so many Germans are demonstrating now for the idea of peace, then it is partly because so many Germans were once led to cheer the war.

Furthermore, there is the continuation of a movement that started in 1950 with the announcement of rearmament, an announcement that surprised an entire generation—a generation that was convinced that militarism must be atoned for with anti-militarism.

There is definitely a connection between the "not with me" of the 1950s and the huge crowds in Bonn. Between the two lies the "no" of the nuclear scientists' manifesto of 1956, as well as the entire anti-nuclear movement: Whereas in France the word "nuclear" has a predominantly positive connotation,

above all because of the sacrosanct notion of national independence, in Germany the peaceful use of nuclear power was poisoned by the totally negative symbolic impact of nuclear weapons.

But how did it reach the scale of the Bonn demonstration and the support it met with? Because people are more likely to demonstrate in Germany than in France? Certainly. And that applies to all kinds of demonstrations. With or without violence. With the affirmation of aggressive marginal groups by youths, or, as in Frankfurt, with a multi-generational demonstration aimed at peacefully preventing the construction of a new airport runway that would harm the environment.

There is a contrast to note here. Sometimes, a demonstration signifies the rejection of the political system; at other times, it is an expression of the democratic spirit, because the democratic will should not be asserted only on election days. At the march in Bonn, both aspects were united—reason enough not to place too much importance on the vigorous efforts of the small communist party and its few small satellite parties to infiltrate the demonstration.

When both currents are able to flow together, it is not just because of the aims of the demonstration, but because institutions have not functioned properly. In the institution of parliament, the large majority party offers little reason for hope and hardly any incentive for participation.

Justice, as an institution, rules too often on the side of authorities who treat people as deviants and enemies when they are simply critical thinkers or young people guided by exacting ethics.

Thus, a court recently decided in favor of the Bavarian government when it did not want to accept a young woman into state service as a teacher. This woman insisted on swearing to uphold the constitution only on the condition that this loyalty did not lead to a conflict with the principles of her Christian faith.

This case is characteristic for two reasons. First, because of the totally new scope of women's activism, but especially because of the religious component of the German "not with us" movement. This was already noticeable in the spring at the church conference in Hamburg, and it will become even more obvious, because the Sermon on the Mount is constantly being cited in justification of the "peace lovers" as opposed to the belligerent missile-deployers.

Here, too, the situation can be explained through a comparison with France: If German churches, especially the Catholic Church, had not become so dissociated from matters of justice, if, for example, on the evening before the Bundestag elections they had spoken of unemployment—as, for example, the French bishops did—instead of divorce, and about the Third World instead of public finances, then the schism with the demanding grass roots might not have given that very grass roots occasion to refer to the Holy Scripture without regard for the political consequences.

This is of course only one of many explanations. German democracy's own logic also creates points of vulnerability for itself: Refusing military service for reasons of conscience immediately became so respected that it could almost become the rule.

And the instruction provided by a whole generation of young teachers, in which existing society was presented as inherently perverted, has had just as great an impact as the Establishment's refusal to grant justice and its lack of understanding.

The establishment, in turn, also advocates a "not with us" attitude in its own way. For its members, it is self-evident that the Federal Republic should not assume any responsibility anywhere in the world, no matter how strong its economic power might be. The outside world will only accept a timid and cowering Germany.

Certainly, fear of nuclear death plays a role. In a different international, social, and political climate it would doubtless be less intense. The infighting among the leaders of social democracy, rising unemployment, the seething tide in Poland that seems to suggest that some leeway is possible under Soviet rule: The points of departure for destabilization are manifold.

It is still too soon to say that the firmly-anchored, thirty-year-long stability of the Federal Republic has already been supplanted. The Federal Republic has previously withstood other moral crises without losing its basic orientation. But the present crisis is without a doubt the most serious one of all.

NOTES

[1] In the Munich Agreement (September 1938), France and England allowed Germany to take the Sudetenland, in an attempt to avoid war with Hitler. Hitler violated the agreement the following March by seizing the rest of Czechoslovakia—trans.

Source: Alfred Grosser, “Diese Krise ist die schwerste”, *Der Spiegel*, October 19, 1981, pp. 34–35. Republished with permisison.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: The Peace Movement and West German Foreign Policy (October 19, 1981), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1133> [October 12, 2026].