

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Dissidents prefer silence on Balkans

Coerced by Blair and Gore into "solidarity" with the NATO air war, Germans are trapped.

An old German saying warns that you cannot build a home without building a wall first, which in politics, means that you cannot have cooperation without being constructive. Apparently, this wisdom was absent in Bonn, when Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov arrived there on March 30, coming from six hours of talks with Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic. Primakov's plan was to discuss with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, in Schröder's capacity as the current chairman of the European Union, ways to get off the air war track and back to diplomatic talks.

But Schröder, doing what even the German media admitted other NATO leaders had told him to do, rejected Primakov's message as "unacceptable."

German television news broadcasts that evening showed a stone-faced Schröder standing beside a much livelier Primakov, after their short meeting. In Moscow three hours later, Primakov told journalists that he did not view the Bonn meeting and his talks in Belgrade as a failure just because NATO would not stop its air war against Serbia. Primakov used an old Russian saying, that "the appetite comes with the eating," to indicate that he was confident that the time for renewed cease-fire proposals would come.

The German government has been coerced into an insane "solidarity" with the hawks in NATO on the Balkans, and it is coming under massive pressure from the population, including from labor and industry, which do not want to see tensions generated by NATO geopolitics spill over into German industrial relations with Russia.

This pressure, including the strong peacenik "anti-war" currents in both government coalition parties (Social Democrats and Greens), is making it difficult for Schröder to maintain "solidarity" with the NATO hawks.

There is a reason for him to look stone-faced. During the cabinet session on March 31, one day after Primakov's visit, Schröder urged that no one question "solidarity." "We must face up to our responsibility. . . . Whoever is spreading doubts from this desk to the public outside, no longer has a place here. The decisive point in fighting the butcher of humans in Belgrade, is our own firmness. . . . Germany's reasons of state include its part in the Western Alliance."

This message was not only designed to please London and other NATO hawks' strongholds, but also addressed those in Germany who, particularly after reunification, have been hoping to improve Germany's status in NATO. This author has had many discussions over the years with pro-American politicians among the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Free Democrats, who have argued that, in order to intensify the alliance with the Americans, the Germans would have to shoulder more direct military burdens in the Balkans, to equal the status of the British and the French, and to be able to convey German interests inside the alliance. Now, these Germans are grabbing for what they view as a "chance to get in," through the prominent role that Germany is playing with logistics and the air force contingent in the NATO air war.

This is dangerous nonsense, be-

cause it puts pro-American Germans in a trap: On one side, they are pulled into a British script for military confrontation with "rogue nations," a scenario run under the auspices of the oligarchical circles that want a "new NATO strategy." On the other, they are contributing to growing anti-Americanism among those, like the peaceniks, who have always been against the United States, and those drawn into anti-American positions — because there are good reasons to disagree with the NATO air war. And, it makes it impossible for Germany to maintain a dialogue with the Russians. Over the first two weeks of the war, the climate in Germany has grown increasingly hysterical, and Schröder's rejection of the Primakov offer and his address to the cabinet are just two among the more spectacular events.

But at the same time, government officials and other institutions have begun to send out signals to Moscow that Germany is uneasy about the war in the Balkans, and that it would prefer diplomatic efforts — as long as they do not conflict with Germany's "solidarity" with NATO. At the same time, German officials keep telling the Russians that they sympathize with "softer" conditionalities on Western loans for Moscow — as long as they do not interfere with the International Monetary Fund fundamentals. This is like saying that one wants to have a home, but without having to build a wall.

Germany is heading for a policy disaster. The government, which is already teetering on the economic abyss, may fall over the Balkans issue. And, who knows: When Primakov spoke of "the appetite that comes with the eating," he might have been thinking of a new German government. After all, Primakov's government seems to have more support in Russia, than Schröder's does in Germany.