

Germany: conflicts in the Foreign Ministry over past fascist links

By Martin Kreickenbaum and Peter Schwarz
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The summary dismissal of a high-ranking career diplomat has brought to a highpoint disputes over past fascist involvement of German Foreign Ministry diplomats and staff. Two weeks ago, at the request of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, President Horst Koehler sent the German ambassador to Switzerland, Frank Elbe, into immediate enforced retirement. Elbe had fiercely attacked the German foreign minister in a letter because Fischer had banned memorial tributes to diplomats who had been members of Hitler's Nazi Party (NSDAP).

Elbe's letter was deliberately intended to unleash a scandal. He accused the Foreign Ministry of miserable crisis management, "bureaucratic sloppiness and a lack of political sensibility." His statements received immediate publicity in the tabloid *Bild* and other right-wing papers.

Elbe, who will be 64 in May, has enjoyed a long political career. He is a member of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and for many years headed the office of Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher (FDP). He was in charge of the planning staff at the Foreign Ministry and was considered as a candidate for the post of minister or undersecretary of state should the FDP return to government. He had served as ambassador to New Delhi, Tokyo and Warsaw, before being sidelined under Fischer into the relatively insignificant Swiss embassy in Berne.

For two years, arguments have raged in the Foreign Ministry over the practice of commemorating deceased diplomats, leading to a virtual rebellion against the foreign minister. "A climate of bitterness, distrust and intrigue prevails, which even long-serving diplomats have not experienced before," reported *Der Spiegel*. The man in charge is "experiencing a rapid loss of authority. He is obviously threatened with losing control of his ministry, which increasingly resembles a minefield."

The arguments began with an obituary to the German consul general (retired) in Barcelona, Franz Nuesslein, which appeared in mid-2003 in the house organ *internAA*. A Foreign Ministry employee drew Fischer's attention to Nuesslein's biography and his membership in the NSDAP. Fischer then decided in September 2003 that diplomats who had been NSDAP members should no longer be honoured by having an obituary in the Foreign Ministry's internal journal.

The precedent was then established in October 2004, on the death of former NSDAP member and retired ambassador Franz Krapf, who was not given the posthumous honour of an obituary in *internAA*.

At first, it was only former diplomats and undersecretaries of state who protested. At the beginning of this year, more than 100 placed an obituary notice in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper, in which they expressed their "esteemed remembrance" for the deceased NSDAP member. Conservative papers like *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the right-wing tabloid *Bild* then carried reports quoting several former diplomats.

One retired diplomat, Paul Verbeek, told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* that Fischer had revealed "a lack of historical knowledge and a measure of ideological blindness...which is frightening for a German foreign minister." Retired diplomats were quite aware of Krapf's past, because in

large part they had also been members of the NSDAP.

As in the "visa affair," in which Fischer remorsefully admitted his errors, the foreign minister also made a step towards his adversaries here. (See "Germany: Foreign Ministry under fire in 'visa affair'".) On March 17, he issued a memorandum to Foreign Ministry staff that in future, *internAA* would not carry obituaries but would merely record the deaths of staff and former employees.

This obviously encouraged acting diplomats to take part publicly in the campaign against their superior. Seventy ambassadors and other Foreign Ministry staff signed an open letter protesting against the new policy and accusing Fischer of "arrogantly overestimating his own capabilities." The letter was to appear in *internAA*, but has so far not been published.

Elbe's letter to Fischer, which he also sent by e-mail to 40 others, then made the whole dispute public. A few days earlier, FDP parliamentary faction leader Wolfgang Gerhardt had called on the diplomats to air their displeasure with Fischer's policy.

Elbe's letter begins with a plea for the deceased ambassador Krapf, which praised him in the loftiest tones. He was a "respected colleague" who had been refused "an honourable remembrance for his services in office and for the Federal Republic of Germany," Elbe complained.

Then follows an amazing paragraph. Elbe claims: "It is part of Western tradition to honour the dead and to say nothing ill of them," and that Fischer's memo "gives rise to doubts that we cannot differentiate between decent and allegedly compromised Foreign Ministry staff."

"Allegedly" compromised Foreign Ministry staff? In Elbe's view, there are none who are really compromised, and if there were, we should "say nothing ill of them." He does not say whether this also applies to Nuesslein, discussion of whom sparked the entire affair. His letter does not say a word about this legally condemned war criminal.

In fact, the Foreign Ministry has been a stronghold of fascist continuity. "No other ministry continued the Nazi traditions like the Foreign Ministry," noted Heribert Prantl in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. "Here, not only national *noblesse* but fascist traditions felt at home. For a long time, the diplomatic service kept firmly silent. While most large private enterprises established historical commissions to investigate what the firm had done under the Third Reich, the Foreign Ministry acted as if this were unnecessary."

Not least because of the personal participation in the Nazi apparatus of rule of numerous Foreign Ministry staff, the past of this department was never seriously been dealt with. It was not only staff who were former NSDAP members. Walter Scheel and Hans Dietrich Genscher, both FDP foreign ministers, had belonged to the Nazi party.

In 1952, there was a heated debate over the political past of Foreign Ministry staff. The then-Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) had to admit that two thirds of the higher-ranking officials were former NSDAP members, substantially more than in other ministries, as the historian Hans Juergen Doescher uncovered. The five section chiefs included four time-served Nazis.

The organisational structure of the ministry in 1951 barely differed from that of 1936. The number of former NSDAP members employed was even greater after 1945 than the number of active party members in the ministry in 1939. While former Nazis had no problem continuing their diplomatic career, those like Fritz Kolbe—who risked mortal danger to smuggle documents to Switzerland about the genocide in Auschwitz to alert the Allies—were regarded as washing the ministry’s dirty linen in public and found no further employment in the diplomatic service.

Doescher told *Financial Times Deutschland* that Adenauer had relied on former Nazis because he wanted to quickly establish a functioning ministry and could rely on the staunch anticommunist views of former NSDAP members in order to push through the policies binding the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany to the West.

The Foreign Ministry operates its own form of “coming to terms with the past,” in which it seeks to hide the brown stain. As Heribert Prantl has written, referring to the work of historian Ulrich Herbert, “Over many years, it acted as a kind of central office for ‘springing’ former Nazis from foreign prisons and as an early warning system for Nazi criminals who had been condemned to imprisonment abroad in their absence.”

Franz Nuesslein, who was honoured in the autumn of 2003 by *internAA*, is certainly a glaring example of the involvement of German diplomats in the crimes of the Nazi regime. However, his is not an individual case.

Nuesslein not only joined the NSDAP early on, but was also senior public prosecutor in Prague under the Deputy Reichsprotektor and SS Obergruppenfuehrer Reinhard Heydrich in the German protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The Czech archives contain hundreds of death sentences signed by Nuesslein.

In a letter to the NSDAP headquarters, Martin Bormann, one of Hitler’s closest collaborators, stressed that “in administering military law and the laws governing political crimes, Dr. Nuesslein had demonstrated an especial understanding for the necessity for a decisive struggle against those who broke the law and had shown themselves to be enemies of the state.” The letter was quoted by the ZDF television programme *Frontal21*.

Nuesslein was obviously faithfully devoted to his superior Heydrich. Up to his death in 1942, Heydrich was involved in planning and carrying out the annihilation of the Jews. He was responsible for forcing Poland’s Jews into the ghettos, and for the mass execution of communists in the Soviet Union.

After the Second World War, Nuesslein was handed over to Czechoslovakia by the US, where he was condemned to 20 years imprisonment in 1948 for war crimes. He was released after just 7 years and was deported to West Germany, where he received compensation for his imprisonment and made a new career for himself in the Foreign Ministry. Nuesslein became consul general in Barcelona, not least due to his ideological affinity to the fascist Franco regime.

Franz Krapf, who was also praised by Elbe, also exhibits a very “brown” biography. Although he only became an NSDAP member in 1936, he had already joined the SS in May 1933. When he entered the foreign service in 1938, he was promoted to the rank of SS Untersturmfuehrer and was an “unofficial” agent for the SS’s own security agency. The SS security agency was attached to the Central Reich Security Office and was an important tool of the Nazi terror regime. Between 1940 and 1945, Krapf was a legation secretary and attaché with the German embassy in Tokyo and was active as an informant for the security agency.

The historian Ulrich Herbert told *Frontal21*, “Members of the SS and in this case...of the Reiter-SS, a very specific variant, were very close to the regime.”

But Krapf’s participation in Nazi crimes is systematically denied. The *Bild* columnist Graf Nayhauss plays down Krapf’s membership in the Reiter-SS, cynically claiming he had joined this particular branch only

because of his love of ~~frankf~~ riding. The *Allgemeine* supports the diplomats’ attacks on Fischer, almost completely whitewashes Krapf’s past. In a press statement, the CDU/CSU (Christian Social Union) parliamentary faction honoured his postwar services, brushing aside his participation in Nazi crimes as “youthful sins,” pointing out that after the war he was “exonerated” by an arbitration board.

Indeed, Krapf was able quickly to make a career for himself after 1945. After joining the Foreign Ministry in 1950, he was first employed in the political department and became permanent representative of the German NATO ambassador. Finally, he was an envoy of the German embassy in the US, head of the political department II of the Foreign Ministry, ambassador in Tokyo, as he had been during the Second World War, and ambassador to NATO from 1971 to 1976.

When Joschka Fischer became foreign minister in 1998, he was very conscious of the ministry’s fascist past. The 1968 protest movement, out of which his Green Party had emerged, had a detailed knowledge of the topic. But Fischer, like his predecessors, was little concerned with removing the brown stains from the past. Rather, he strove to acquire the confidence of the status-conscious diplomatic caste.

For many decades after the establishment of the German Reich in 1871, the diplomatic service recruited its members almost exclusively from among the Prussian aristocracy. It hated the Weimar Republic and threw itself at Hitler, in order to satisfy its own pretensions for world power. Even though the number of diplomats with aristocratic titles has decreased, the personnel structure of today’s Foreign Ministry is still relatively homogeneous ideologically.

In his first speech before the assembled diplomats, Fischer sought to flatter them by saying he was a man who was willing to learn. He would be pleased to use the rich wealth of experience of the ministry, he said, and assured them that as far as he was concerned it was not one’s world view that counts, but “competence and loyalty.” “There is no Green foreign policy, but only a German foreign policy,” was another formulation employed by Fischer at that time.

Moreover, Fischer had to fear that he would be reproached for his own past as an anarchist street fighter should he step on the toes of any conservative diplomat. There were such attempts when he first took office, and they had their effect. For example, *Der Stern* published pictures of a hooded demonstrator that was supposed to be Fischer in his earlier days. There were also rumours that Fischer had been involved in a life-threatening assault on a policeman. But this soon stopped when Fischer began leading the ministry along the lines of traditional German diplomacy.

Allusions to Fischer’s past have emerged once again. According to *Der Spiegel*, the diplomats adorned their open letter with the sentence: “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” And the CDU parliamentarian Michael Hennrich said that “today’s foreign minister has a very militant past. But the minister continually points to the past of others.”

The rebellion in the Foreign Ministry and the unusually sharp attack of the now-sacked ambassador Elbe on the foreign minister show that a large section of the diplomats no longer stands behind Fischer and the Schröder government. “It may be assumed that the attack was calculated, and that it was not only about obituaries” was the comment on Elbe’s letter passed by the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. “The Foreign Ministry has been divided for a long time because many diplomats regard the foreign policy of the Schröder government with unease.... Elbe did not want to clarify things—at the end of his career, he wanted to send out a political message, which betrays more about the condition of German foreign policy than over the unease of an individual ambassador.”

The dispute surrounding the commemoration of former NSDAP members is only the superficial cause for the conflict. The fact that dealing with the past becomes such an important question is itself a result

of fundamental changes in German foreign policy. Since German reunification in 1990, and even more so since the Iraq war, German foreign policy is to intervene in international events as an independent world power. The call for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, once only uttered timidly in hushed tones, is today expressed openly and loudly. German soldiers, once strictly limited to the role of national defence, are today to be found operating everywhere in the world. And both in the European Union and in NATO, Germany pursues its own interests increasingly egotistically.

The aggressive pursuit of German interests produces a counter-pressure. Under these circumstances, unsettled questions from the past can develop into a serious foreign policy problem. This was shown both in the dispute surrounding the compensation of former Nazi slave labourers, and also by the recent anti-Japanese mass demonstrations in China, which were ignited by the playing down of Japanese crimes during the Second World War. (See “Japan stokes tensions with China”.) Hence Fischer’s sudden move against obituaries for former NSDAP members, a practice he must have known about since he entered office as the pictures of those being commemorated hang in the corridors of the Foreign Ministry.

The diplomatic caste is by no means averse to a more aggressive imperialist foreign policy. But there are several reasons why it rejects the course of the Schröder-Fischer government.

Firstly, the chancellor has increasingly seized the foreign policy initiative—bypassing the Foreign Ministry. One accusation against Fischer reads (in the words of the CDU foreign policy expert Wolfgang Schäuble) that he has allowed Schröder to “disempower” him.

The chancellor collaborates closely with the heads of the large companies and trade associations, who constantly accompany him on his numerous journeys abroad. His foreign policy is closely aligned with economic interests and often leads to criticism. The close alliance with Vladimir Putin’s Russia also meets with reservations, like his efforts to have the weapons embargo against China lifted and the confrontation course with the US.

Since Germany now acts increasingly as a world power, the diplomatic corps, in the tradition of Bismarck, looks down upon the representatives of the economy with a certain contempt, and demands its rightful place. Elbe’s letter appeals openly to the *esprit de corps* of the diplomats, which he translates into the modern vernacular as “corporate identity.”

“The foreign service can tolerate no divisions,” he writes. “Its members are only too frequently exposed to crisis situations, which require close personal cooperation. The ‘corporate identity’ in the Foreign Ministry goes further than its equivalent in a business enterprise oriented to profits. Cooperation develops on the basis of respect for personal and professional achievements.”

The visa affair has continued to undermine the authority of the foreign minister. In his first years in office, Fischer was accepted to a large extent by the career diplomats. But the campaign surrounding the visa affair, which was not only directed against the minister but also against the ministry, cost him the respect of many officials.

In addition to these direct reasons can also be added the general crisis and disorientation of German foreign policy. It unleashes numerous conflicts and tensions, which run throughout the political institutions and parties.

In his latest book, *A Republic without a Compass*, historian Hans-Peter Schwarz, professor at the University of Bonn, describes “the critical state of German foreign policy” as follows: “The West is disintegrating and with it those firmly anchored structures which have given the Federal Republic [of Germany] stability over half a century. Confidence in America is shaken, old NATO merely a historical reminiscence. But also the hybrid that is the extended European Union, now with 25 members, in which Germany expected to find security, has lost its equilibrium.”

The “present disorientation in Berlin’s foreign policy” is not merely

down to the SPD-Green Party government, according to Schwarz. “In reality, all parties are at a loss.”

He then lists “[T]he big decisive questions” that require an answer “one way or another”: “How dangerous is America? How indispensable? Can the European Union give rise to a new security community? Or should we rapidly head towards a ‘core Europe’? But isn’t France also a problem for us, like the USA? Should the European Union be extended endlessly, as before, also to include Turkey? Does Germany really have to plunge into the complex crisis zone of the Middle East, where powder kegs are strewn everywhere, as in the Balkans in the decades preceding 1914?... Generally: How can and how should Germany define in future its well acquired interests—nationally, European, globally?”

These questions lead inevitably to fierce controversies and form the background of the disputes in the Foreign Ministry—whereby all camps are united in the fundamental objective: that Germany’s imperialist interests be pursued more energetically.

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