

Behind the sacking of German Defence Minister Scharping

Ulrich Rippert
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On July 18, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) held a press conference to announce the sacking of the government's defence minister, Rudolf Scharping (also SPD). At the conference, which lasted just a few minutes, Schröder announced that the new defence minister would be Peter Struck, the former head of the SPD fraction in parliament.

Preceding the press conference, Schröder called a meeting of the SPD executive committee to ensure the backing of the party leadership for his decision. Scharping had rejected the chancellor's request that he resign "voluntarily."

Since the SPD-Green Party coalition came to power, a total of eight ministers have quit the government, but the defence minister was the first to be sacked in such a manner.

The immediate cause for the sacking was a series of press reports revealing that Scharping had a close relationship for 20 years with the Frankfurt media and public relations consultant Moritz Hunzinger. According to a report in the magazine *Stern*, in 1998 and 1999 Scharping received 140,000 German marks (\$72,000) from Hunzinger for lectures and the publication of a book that has not yet appeared. In addition, the magazine published a receipt from an exclusive tailor in Frankfurt where Scharping is alleged to have purchased clothing for over 50,000 marks, with Hunzinger paying the bill.

None of these accusations have as yet been proven, and, in and of themselves, hardly constitute sufficient justification for the resignation of a minister. Not only do many German politicians on the national and state level and from across the political spectrum have close links with the manipulative PR manager Hunzinger, but purchases in luxury shops are also a matter of course for many ministers.

Last weekend Green Party deputy Cem Özdemir admitted that he had received from Hunzinger a "private credit" amounting to 80,000 marks, at a very favourable rate of interest. Whereas Özdemir's indiscretion was dismissed as a "big goof," similar accusations were sufficient to sack Scharping.

The dismissal of Scharping cannot be explained merely on

the basis of the Hunzinger accusations. There are more profound motives.

Schröder's hasty reaction to unconfirmed press reports is an expression of the growing nervousness that has gripped the German government, two months in advance of national elections. As its term of office comes to an end, it is clear that the government, which was elected four years ago on the basis of grandiose promises, lacks any credible answers to the great social problems confronting the country apart from a further dismantling of the German social state system at the behest of big business and the banks.

Such policies are increasingly bringing the government into conflict with broad layers of the population, whose discontent with the coalition is reflected in negative opinion polls. A feeling of utter hopelessness has settled over the government in the wake of successive electoral defeats for social democratic parties throughout Europe, culminating in the collapse of the Socialist Party in the recent French elections.

For weeks an election campaign has been underway in Germany devoid of any real political polemics, due to the similarity between the programmes of the government and the opposition. Fearful that the conservative opposition could use the accusations against Scharping as ammunition in the election campaign, Schröder reacted in trigger-happy fashion in an attempt to portray himself as a determined and capable head of government.

But more important in the sacking of Scharping than these electoral considerations are longstanding and corrosive disputes within the SPD. When Rudolf Scharping took over as defence minister three-and-a-half years ago, he made his accession dependent on the demand for more money for the German army, a measure agreed to at the time by the SPD finance minister in Schröder's cabinet, Oskar Lafontaine. However, things changed after Lafontaine's resignation and his replacement by Hans Eichel, who went on to implement a cost-cutting budget.

In the light of severe cuts in all areas of social spending, the government drew back from making a major increase in

the budget for the German army. Scharping was caught between a rock and a hard place. As a Social Democrat firmly situated on the right wing of the party, he pushed ahead with the expansion and restructuring of the army. Existing structures of the army, themselves products of the Cold War and based on the concept of national defence and a conscript army, were largely done away with, and steps were taken toward the creation of a technically developed, well-armed, professional army of engagement.

Scharping himself set the initial process in motion for the reestablishment of a military general staff, something that had not existed in Germany since the negative experiences made under Hitlerite fascism. The revival of a military caste, with its own political demands, constantly increased the pressure on the defence minister to insist in cabinet for increased investment for the expansion and restructuring of the army.

At the same time, Chancellor Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) declared at a series of international conferences that the German army was prepared to participate in military interventions and international “peace-keeping” operations. As a result, there are, at present, 60,000 German troops involved in interventions around the world.

However, Schröder and Fischer sought to hold down military expenditures. Thus Scharping came under pressure from both sides, and his own position became more and more untenable.

Scharping’s dilemma was plainly visible in January of this year when he signed a contract for the procurement of 73 type A400M transport airplanes, even though the financing for the planes had not been clarified and the purchase contravened budget regulations laid down by the German parliament. In order to prevent a reversal of the purchase by Germany’s National Constitutional Court, Scharping promised to secure the necessary funding in the budget for 2003. This stopgap only put the problem on ice.

An article in the official parliamentary magazine, “Das Parlament,” dealing with the growing differences between Europe and America and arguing for a clear process of military rearmament in Europe (and, above all, in Germany) included the following comment: “The deficit for the army amounts to around 50 percent of the annual expenditure for defence, which currently totals 24 billion euros. The only solution therefore, together with a moderate increase in expenditure, is to standardise the defence of Western Europe as rapidly as possible, in the spheres of both soldiery and armaments. The new Airbus is a step in the right direction. But the approach of the government with regard to finances demonstrates how little faith it has in its ability to win acceptance in the population as a whole for increased

military financing.”

As the international commitments of the German army have grown, so too have the demands from German generals for more money, and their criticisms of Scharping. The chairman of the German Army union, colonel Bernhard Gertz, described the defence minister as a “comic figure” and “lame duck.” When Scharping demanded disciplinary proceedings against Gertz for his remarks, the latter defended what he had said. In March of this year, Gertz declared that his reference to Scharping as a lame duck was a “quite accurate description.”

Other ranking officers have also made deprecatory and abusive comments about the defence minister at international meetings.

Last summer a media campaign was launched following the publication of private holiday photos of Scharping and his new girl friend, Countess Pilati, a move that Scharping had thought would improve his popular image. It remains unclear to what extent Hunzinger played a role in the media campaign. It is clear that Scharping first made the acquaintance of Pilati at a meeting organised by Hunzinger, and that the reporter for *Bunte* magazine, which printed the photos, also had contacts with Hunzinger.

Hunzinger, himself, has been a member of the right-wing Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in the state of Hessen for 27 years, and is a close friend of the CDU state president of Hessen, Roland Koch. He also has close links with the armaments industry and leading military officials.

The abrupt sacking of Scharping, who was the leading candidate of the SPD in national elections in 1994 and chairman of the party until 1995, will undoubtedly be interpreted by the military as a signal to step up their own political and financial agenda. The incoming German government on September 22, whether led by the SPD or the CDU, will have the task of meeting the demands of the military caste for the restructuring of the army into a force for imperialist intervention around the world, notwithstanding the financial cost and the unpopularity of such a policy.



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