

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at Green Party Congress on Kosovo (1999)

Abstract

Joschka Fischer was the leader of the Greens from 1998 to 2005, during which time the party was part of a coalition with the Social Democrats under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Just six months into the red-green coalition, Fischer, in his role as federal foreign minister, maneuvered Germany into a NATO intervention to protect the Kosovar population from Serbian troops and paramilitaries. It would become (West) Germany's first military mission since the Second World War. The measure met with resistance, especially within Fischer's own party. Fischer delivered the following speech at a special Green Party congress that convened for the express purpose of discussing the Kosovo deployment. A video link to the speech can be found below under Further Reading.

Source

Speech by the Foreign Minister on the NATO Deployment in Kosovo

Dear friends, dear opponents, dearest opponents, we have already been part of the government coalition for half a year, half a year [*shouting from the audience: "warmonger!"*] — yes, that's just what I've been waiting for — a warmonger is speaking here and soon you'll be recommending Mr. Milosevic for the Nobel Peace Prize. When a fellow party member stood here and said that the party leadership is discussing its internal discord, well I don't know how you all feel when you see those photographs. I never would have dreamt that we'd be having a Green Party congress after only six months. [...]

I thought that we wanted to have a discussion here, and that the peace lovers are interested above all in peace. And if you're so sure of yourselves, then you should at least listen to the arguments and then present your counterarguments. This matter will not be resolved with chants and paint bombs, not here among ourselves but also not on the outside. And we are experiencing that here at this party congress; and in this respect it is not an internal rift but rather an external one. I would never have dreamt that we Greens would need to hold a party conference under police protection. But why do we need to have our discussion under police protection? Not because we want to have a discussion, but rather because some people here obviously don't want to have a discussion, as we just saw. But that is precisely the point! I know, as foreign minister, I have to show some restraint; I am not allowed to comment on certain things for well-considered reasons. It's hard for me to hold back in light of things that I've heard recently. Yes, "give democracy a chance"; I support that wholeheartedly. But let me tell you: I visited Milosevic; I spoke with him for two and a half hours; I pleaded with him to refrain from using force in Kosovo. Now there is war, yes. And I never would have dreamt that the red-green government would have a part in this war. But this war did not just start fifty-one days ago; it has been going on since 1992, dear friends, since 1992! And let me tell you, in the meantime, it has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, and that is the point where Alliance 90/The Greens is no longer a protest party. We decided to be part of the federal government, in a situation where it was clear that the final escalation of the Yugoslav war of succession might well occur. I can still remember. [...] — No, I won't shut up! I won't do you that favor! — [...] I can still remember: it was right after the Bundestag elections, and [Gerhard] Schröder and I flew to Washington. We were still in the opposition, and it was already clear that we would inherit a legacy that under certain circumstances could lead to a bloody confrontation, to a war. And at this point I can only say one thing: even back then, when we decided to form the

coalition, it was clear to us that we were entering into difficult situation.

I never would have dreamt that in the first six months [of our coalition] we would witness not only Agenda 2000^[1] and the [European] Commission crisis but also the Rambouillet issue^[2] and finally the failure of Rambouillet and the war over there. I can only reiterate what I'm not prepared to accept: the prerequisite for peace is that people are not murdered, that people are not expelled, that women are not raped. That is the prerequisite for peace! And I'd be the last to say that I've made no mistakes. Especially recently when people point to the situation reports. Yes, it was a mistake, and I have to accept that. In the first six months I wasn't able to do everything, especially under all the pressure, but I carry the responsibility for that and am therefore rightly criticized. Other mistakes were also made. But on the other hand, I want to say this you, and here I would also like to tell the party about my own personal situation. The crucial point, however, is that we really did try everything to prevent this confrontation. And let me say, God knows I'm not a delicate flower, I can take a lot and I can dish it out, too, God knows, but it really hurt to be personally accused of dragging the Federal Republic of Germany into war. I can only say one thing: The G8 has agreed on a common foundation, a declaration of principles based entirely on Rambouillet. And I can only assure you that I did everything in my power to prevent this confrontation. And if anyone thinks he can take a blameless position on this issue, then we need to talk this position through. I was accused of moral overkill and of trying to eradicate Germany's history and things like that. Let me say: for me, two central points in my own biography played a crucial role, and I cannot ignore my own personal history. And I have to ask myself, in this matter, who can?! In Solingen, there was that terrible murderous attack on a foreign family, a Turkish family, the racist attacks, neo-Nazism, skinheads. Of course, for me, too, this always brings up our history and that plays a role. And I have to ask myself, if all of us have always used this argument in domestic matters, then why aren't we using it now that expulsions and ethnic warfare have returned to Europe and bloody consequences have already been registered. Is that a moral arms race? Is that overkill? Auschwitz is beyond comparison. But I believe in two principles: never again war and never again Auschwitz. Never again genocide and never again fascism. Both belong together for me, dear friends, and that is why I joined the Green Party. I have to wonder why you're refusing to participate in this discussion. Why are you rejecting this discussion by blowing whistles if you identify yourselves as the left or even the radical left? You may very well think that everything this federal government and NATO have done is totally wrong. But I would be interested in hearing how, from a left-wing perspective, we can refer to everything that has gone on in Yugoslavia since 1992, including ethnic warfare and nationalistic policies; what do you call this from a left-wing perspective, from your point of view? Could it be that we have become accustomed to old conceptions of the enemy and that Mr. Milosevic doesn't fit into these conceptions very well? Let me tell you that with the end of the Cold War there has been a return to ethnic warfare and to nationalistic policies that Europe must not accept.

[...]

NOTES

^[1] Agenda 2000 was an action program for the European Union. Its objectives were to strengthen common policies and to give the European Union a new financial framework for the period 2000-06 with a view to Eastern expansion — trans.

^[2] The Rambouillet Agreement was an interim peace agreement between the former Yugoslavia and a delegation representing the ethnic-Albanian majority population of Kosovo. The agreement was brokered by U.S., E.U., and Russian negotiators. They proposed a compromise that would have given Kosovo more autonomy while upholding Yugoslavia's territorial integrity. Yugoslavia's refusal to sign it and the escalation of Serb repression in Kosovo led to NATO air attacks on Yugoslav and Serbian troops in Kosovo — trans.

Source: Speech by Joschka Fischer at the Green Party Congress in Bielefeld (May 13, 1999), Heinrich Böll Stiftung. Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis; reprinted in Eberhard Rathgeb, *Die engagierte Nation. Deutsche Debatten 1945–2005*. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2005, pp. 415–16.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at Green Party Congress on Kosovo (1999), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-241>> [May 17, 2025].