



## **PICTURE STORY**

# **Joschka Fischer, the German Greens and the Balkans**

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# Joschka Fischer, the German Greens and the Balkans



Over a long and controversial career, Joschka Fischer evolved from an archetypal 1960s radical and street activist into one of the most prominent politicians in Europe. In 1985 he was one of the first German Greens elected to a laender parliament and went on to become the country's foreign minister from 1998 to 2005.

During the course of the 1990s, Fischer was instrumental to swaying his pacifist party to support Germany's participation in the NATO-led war against Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia. It is an irony of history that Germany's first-ever Green foreign minister took the nation to war for the first time since World War II, a move that had enormous implications for both the Greens party, the Federal Republic, and the Balkans.

The evolution of the Greens' foreign policies is one of the transformations examined by the American Berlin-based writer Paul Hockenos in his new book, *Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic: An Alternative History of Postwar Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2008). There is no better example than Germany's participation in the Kosovo war to illustrate that, despite the ideological twists and turns of Fischer and his generation, the lessons of the German past remained their constant coordinates. This ESI picture story tracks the metamorphosis of the Greens' positions on humanitarian intervention in the Balkans from the 1980s to the 1999 air campaign against Serbia.



## Table of contents

Ghosts of the past .....	4
An army for defence.....	5
Cohn-Bendit's Challenge .....	6
Can Intervention be humanitarian? .....	7
A Green Foreign Ministry? .....	8
Turningpoint Srebrenica.....	10
Red-green Germany .....	11
January/February 1999: Racak and Rambouillet .....	12
Germany at war .....	13
Stop the war.....	14
Serbia's last stand.....	15
The Fischer Plan.....	16
Green showdown.....	17
The Bielefeld congress .....	18
Germany on the Hindukush.....	19

## Ghosts of the past



The brutal Ustashe regime in wartime Croatia was closely allied with Nazi Germany. Photo: Source unknown

In the early 1990s, freshly united Germany became entwined in the Yugoslavia crisis early on. As Yugoslavia collapsed, the German government openly sided with the independence-minded Croats and Slovenes who recoiled from the bullying tactics of Serbia's strongman, Slobodan Milosevic, and moved to separate themselves from a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. As Paul Hockenos notes, Germany's move aroused distrust on several fronts:

The German government's highly controversial decision in 1991 to recognize Croatian statehood in advance of its European counterparts couldn't have looked worse for Bonn. Germany's dilemma was that any move that it made on its own in the Balkans was bound to be contentious, politically loaded *in extremis* since Nazi Germany had, on the one hand, occupied Serbia and, on the other, set up an exceptionally brutal quisling regime in Croatia. For some on the German left – and Germany-skeptics elsewhere – the conservatives' Balkan policy looked like their worst nightmare come true: a resurgent, belligerent greater Germany acting unilaterally in Europe and reconnecting to its World War II allies. This wasn't the case (Bonn's decision was a well-intentioned, poorly timed gaffe) but it was a conclusion that some minds came to.

[pp. 232-233]

### Further reading:

- For a recent detailed analysis of this see also the book *Europe and the Recognition of New States in Yugoslavia* by Richard Caplan. 2005 [Cambridge University Press]

### An army for defence



Bundeswehr recruits taking their vow. Photo: DDP

The German army, the Bundeswehr, was then still conceived as a strictly defensive force.

The debate in Germany over the slaughter in Bosnia immediately collided with the postwar “German questions.” Until the 1990s no thought whatsoever had been given to deploying troops in combat missions abroad. Not only did Germany’s constitution prohibit Bundeswehr participation in non-defensive military operations, but there was not a respected voice in the country who argued that German armed forces be sent to foreign conflict zones. Even in the wake of unification, the postwar consensus held firm: German troops, even under NATO or U.N command, would not participate in missions abroad “out of [NATO’s] area.”

But through the early 1990s this consensus eroded and an impassioned national debate ensued about the role of the Federal Republic and its armed forces in world affairs. In the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War, several Bundeswehr minesweepers trolled the Persian Gulf, while thirty German pilots flying Bundeswehr helicopters aided the U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq. The Greens accused the government of abating Washington’s imperialist agenda, violating the Basic Law, and closing its eyes to Germany’s debt to history. The Greens, left-wing Social Democrats, and the reform communist PDS cited the same rationale with which they would later veto German involvement in Balkan missions: such operations, even humanitarian in nature, put Germany on a slippery slope to military adventurism.

[pp. 233-234]

## Cohn-Bendit's Challenge



Dany Cohn-Bendit was a leading figure in both the French and the German Greens. Photo: Kenji-Baptiste OIKAWA

The debate over Bosnia, where war erupted in 1992, plunged the pacifist-minded Green party into turmoil. As the atrocities in Bosnia mounted despite round after round of international mediation, a handful of dissident Greens led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, at that time head of the department for multicultural affairs in the city of Frankfurt, demanded tougher international measures to halt the Serb onslaught—including military force.

In June 1993 in *Die Tageszeitung*, Cohn-Bendit showed zero sympathy for their [the Greens'] soul searching: "Shame on us! We, the generation that held our parents' generation in such contempt because of its political cowardice, now we watch on seemingly helpless, powerless and yet still holier-than-thou as the Bosnian Muslims are ethnically cleansed." He reminded his former co-revolutionaries of the way the world watched on when fascist forces crushed the Spanish republicans (1936), invaded Czechoslovakia (1938), put down the Warsaw Ghetto uprising (1943), and murdered Europe's Jewry at Auschwitz and Treblinka. "Now we're part of this glorious tradition!" he fumed. "Where are the smart asses now who talked so loud about *an entirely different approach to politics?* Where are the internationalists who in the name of socialism supported every, and I mean *every*, terrorist or pacifist movement in Salvador, Nicaragua and everywhere else?" And it isn't just Greens, he underscored, who have bowed to Serbia's nationalist thugs but the entire republic.

[pp. 234, 235-236]

### Can Intervention be humanitarian?



Joschka Fischer and Dany Cohn-Bendit had been close friends since the early 1970s. This photo shows Fischer, André Glucksmann, and Cohn-Bendit (from left to right) at a 1978 discussion in Frankfurt. Photo: bpk/Abisag Tüllmann

At the time, Joschka Fischer was environment minister in the federal state of Hesse. As Paul Hockenos writes, he had to respond to Daniel Cohn-Bendit's challenge:

Swayed by the interventionists but not yet convinced, Joschka Fischer struck a middle course. He argued that armed intervention in Bosnia, though not to be ruled out, would at the time, in 1993, only throw fuel on the fire and cause fighting to escalate. He also maintained there could be no German military presence in territories that the Wehrmacht had occupied during World War II, such as the Balkans.

Old friends Fischer and Cohn-Bendit went head-to-head on the issue at a televised panel discussion in Frankfurt, which was supposed to address the legacy of the student movement, twenty-five years later. But the topic switched quickly to Bosnia. Tempers flaring, Fischer lit into Cohn-Bendit: "And would you, Dany, be prepared to send *your son* to fight in Bosnia, and maybe even to die there?" The Frenchman retorted: "That'll be his decision, but I ask you, Joschka, if that high-rise across the street was in flames and *your son* was a fireman, would you stop him risking his life to go in and try to save people?"

[p. 236]



## A Green Foreign Ministry?



The Greens' roots are in the peace movement, which put hundreds of thousands of protesters on the streets in 1980s West Germany. Photo: Bundesbildstelle

It was not clear at the time just how important a debate within the German Green party would become to European politics later. As Paul Hockenos writes, the Greens at the time appeared unlikely to ever be at the helm of German foreign policy:

In the early 1990s, neither within the Social Democrats nor the Greens had there been talk of a Greens-held foreign ministry, should a “red-green” coalition in fact come to power. The Greens’ clear priority was the environment ministry. The Social Democrats swore to strategic allies that the anti-NATO environmentalists would not get close to the *Auswärtiges Amt*. In official trips to Washington, Greens foreign affairs expert Helmut Lippelt calmed U.S. policymakers: “I’d go through Congress or to the State Department and say that it is very, very clear to us that we are just a little pacifist party and that we won’t have any influence on foreign policy. We’ll never have the foreign or defense ministry portfolios, I’d say.”

The issue arises when examining the metamorphosis of the Greens’ foreign policies. Fischer’s critics argue that he forced the party’s hand to disavow its antimilitarist roots in order to prep it for prime time: a nationwide red-green coalition with himself as foreign minister. Fischer’s centrality in pushing the Greens toward the mainstream on foreign policy is undisputed. But there is more to the story than ambition run rampant.

During the first half of the 1990s, the Greens as a whole grappled poorly with the epochal geopolitical shifts that were transforming the world around them. The Cold War-era party was out of step with the new realities of the post-Cold War world, which demanded a rethinking of once-fixed assumptions and flexible, creative responses to new problems. Instead, too many Greens clung to their pacifist credo despite the slaughter in Bosnia and they remained adamant that their nemeses of old – NATO, the World Bank, Washington, and industrial capitalism – were still their adversaries, despite the fact that the recently liberated countries of central and eastern Europe were clamoring to join the Atlantic Alliance, as well as to jumpstart freemarket miracles of their own.



Fischer himself had this to say about about the struggle between Realos and Fundis within the Greens:

Despite its grave content, the debate also had absurdist elements to it, especially when it came to bringing reality in line with the illusions of leftist Greens. Our leftists were demanding UN peacekeeping missions with German participation, too. But these units were not to be – nota bene – under the Bundeswehr, but rather with the foreign ministry and the customs agency! What genius had been at work on that one... [Translation from the German by ESI]

[pp. 243-244]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]

[p. 218]

Die rot-grünen Jahre. Deutsche Außenpolitik – vom Kosovo bis zum 11. September. 2007. [Kiepenheuer & Witsch]

## Turningpoint Srebrenica



In August 1995 Serb forces overran the Bosnian city of Srebrenica and executed nearly 8000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys. Photo: Source unknown

In 1995 the Bosnian war reached its tragic climax: Serb forces under General Ratko Mladic overran the UN-protected safe-haven Srebrenica and killed some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys.

The singular magnitude of the Srebrenica massacre jolted many Germans - including Joschka Fischer - and forced them to abandon their objections to intervention on behalf of the Bosnian Muslims. More broadly, it set Germans to rethinking the roles that Europe, and Germany as part of it, should play in the world.

Within the Greens this debate was particularly polarizing. In an open letter, Fischer reversed his own position and exhorted the Greens to wake up to the reality that international policy in Bosnia had failed. He argued that the Greens' nonviolent options – tighter sanctions, further negotiations, more humanitarian aid – were paper tigers in the face of full-blown war and the deliberate ethnic politics that fueled it. “Are pacifists prepared to accept the triumph of brutal, naked violence in Bosnia? What should we do when all existing [non-military] means to stop military violence have been exhausted?” The Greens – *above all*, the Greens – Fischer argued, can't stand by and watch as whole populations are ethnically cleansed, and men herded into concentration camps and slaughtered. His arguments differed little from those that Cohn-Bendit shouted in his direction a full two years before.

Srebrenica changed the attitude of many of the emerging opinion makers in Germany on the use of armed force.

[pp. 247-248]

Further reading:

- Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35 - The fall of Srebrenica
- Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) - Srebrenica - a 'safe' area. Reconstruction, background, consequences and analyses of the fall of a Safe Area

## Red-green Germany



Gerhard Schröder (Chancellor, SPD), Joschka Fischer (Foreign Minister, Greens), and Oskar Lafontaine (Finance Minister, SPD) celebrating the formation of a Social Democrat-Greens ruling coalition. Photo: Bundesbildstelle

The autumn 1998 election in Germany brought a “red-green” coalition to power in the Federal Republic for the first time in postwar history. The new Chancellor Gerhard Schröder from the social-democratic party (SPD) and his Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer didn’t have much time for celebrations as fighting had broken out in Kosovo even before the new government took office. The novice administration had the Kosovo conflict, a major international crisis, thrust upon it from Day One. But there was no hesitation on behalf of the new leadership: Germany would respect its alliance commitments and, if necessary, join a NATO-led strike if Milosevic failed to halt the human rights violations in Kosovo.

Fischer writes on the moment they took power:

We [...] met shortly before midnight [...]. Schröder's first words were: "We'll do that together." The rest was technical agreements about the coalition negotiations and lots of cheerful jesting. [...] There was not much sleep to be had that night. But so what? We had won, and that was what counted. [Translation from the German by ESI]

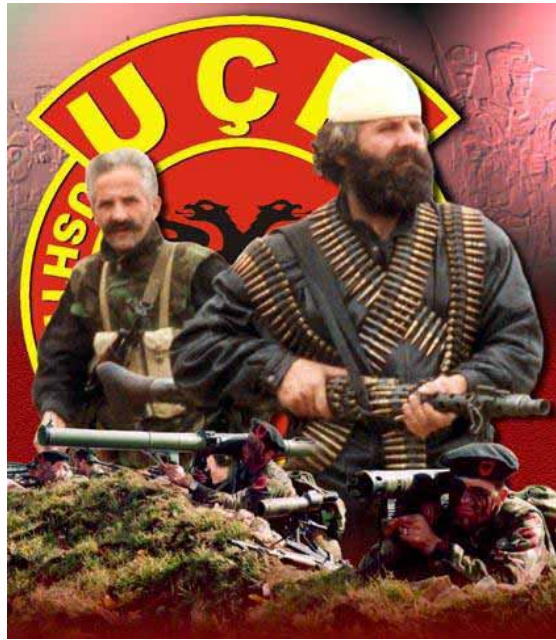
But this moment did not last long. Only two weeks later members of the new government, including Schröder and Fischer met in a joint cabinet session with their predecessors and decided to fully support the NATO threat of military strikes against Yugoslavia.

Within minutes and without any opportunity to consult with my party and the Greens parliamentary group, I had to make one of the gravest decisions in my political life: about war and peace, and about the future of red-green politics. [Translation from the German by ESI]

[pp. 56, 107]

Die rot-grünen Jahre. Deutsche Außenpolitik – vom Kosovo bis zum 11. September. 2007. [Kiepenheuer & Witsch]

### January/February 1999: Racak and Rambouillet



UCK (KLA) fighters. Photo: Glas Javnosti

Kosovo was a province of Serbia inhabited by 1.8 million Kosovar Albanians and 190,000 Kosovar Serbs. After an eight-year non-violent movement, ethnic Albanian rebels took to arms. Their guerrilla force was called the Kosovo Liberation Army, or KLA.

On January 19, 1999, after skirmishes all week with the KLA in the vicinity, Serb forces entered the village of Racak and murdered 45 Kosovar Albanian civilians. An atrocity like that at Racak, all too reminiscent of the atrocities in Bosnia, was exactly what the West feared most – another Srebrenica. The actors on the ground were virtually identical: Yugoslav army units, local Serb police, roving paramilitary gangs, and an under-armed international mission with an inadequate mandate.

With the cease-fire in tatters, western leaders pulled out all stops to reach a political solution before the entire region burst into flames. Serb and Kosovar-Albanian representatives were summoned to meet with international mediators in Rambouillet, outside of Paris. The setup was along the lines of the 1995 Dayton peace talks, when Washington sequestered Balkan leaders at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio to hammer out an accord for postwar Bosnia. But this time the Europeans were speaking with one voice. Since Germany held both the EU and the G-8 presidencies at the time, that voice was very often Fischer's, a tall order for the newcomer. The Rambouillet talks ended in failure as the Serbs refused the international demand for NATO troops in Kosovo.

[p. 267]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]

## Germany at war



A US F-15E Strike Eagle takes off from its Italian base. Photo: DoD (US)

Efforts at mediation between the Serb government in Belgrade and the political leaders of the Kosovar Albanians finally failed at the conference of Rambouillet in France. Paul Hockenos describes what followed:

On March 24, 1999, NATO aircraft took off from bases in northern Italy to bomb Serbia into submission. The first sortie included four Tornado jets flown by German pilots. Germany was in a shooting war for the first time in fifty-four years – without a U.N. mandate, against a state that had not attacked it or a NATO ally, in a region the Nazis had once wreaked terror upon, and under the leadership of a leftist government.

“Germany goes to war, silently. No enthusiasm, naturally not, but also with astonishing little uproar,” commented the weekly *Die Zeit*. “What’s so incredible is the simple acceptance of this in the Federal Republic after half a century of nonviolent foreign policy and a societal pacifism that we thought was deeply rooted.” Was it blind conformism or “normality in the good sense”? asked *Die Zeit*. The author speculated that opposition could mount quickly: “The millions of peace demonstrators from the 1980s are all still there, even if not currently on the streets. Has their world really changed as much as Joschka Fischer’s?”

[pp. 267-268]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]



## Stop the war



The German left claimed that the “NATO war” against Serbia was in violation of international law. Photos: AP/Anthony Harvey

A Greens “antiwar faction” formed within the party. Pacifists like Hans-Christian Ströbele and Uli Cremer claimed that the Kosovo intervention was a ploy to create a new justification for NATO—as global policeman.

Atlantic Alliance leaders, one of whom now was Fischer, had been spoiling for a war against Milosevic and had relied on falsified evidence to launch it, charged German leftists. At Racak, they claimed with some but not overwhelming documentation, the dead were KLA soldiers killed in a shoot-out, not civilians at all. And at Rambouillet international negotiators had intentionally “held the bar too high” for the Serbs. Moreover, Schröder and Fischer had knuckled under much too pliantly to the U.S. president’s pressure. If Germany had stood up and said no to Clinton, other skeptical NATO countries, like Italy and Greece, would have been emboldened to join it in opposition.

Fischer describes these allegations in his autobiography:

Put in plain language the allegation was: finessing Germany's participation in the war by dint of lies and deception! I, Fischer, had not properly informed my highest ranking colleagues [in the foreign ministry] about important parts of the draft treaty of Rambouillet and, even worse, had only fragmentarily reported to the Bundestag, leaving aside fact and truth, to manoeuvre Germany into NATO's war in Kosovo! This allegation was outrageous and was aimed at ruining my reputation and credibility in this central question of war and peace. [Translation from the German by ESI]

[pp. 268-269]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]

[pp. 190-191]

Die rot-grünen Jahre. Deutsche Außenpolitik – vom Kosovo bis zum 11. September. 2007. [Kiepenheuer & Witsch]



### Serbia's last stand



NATO aircraft leave jet trails in the sky (top left) as they bombed a thermal energy plant in the suburbs of Belgrade on 27 May 1999. Photo: Reuters

The longer the air campaign lasted, the more precarious the position of Germany's red-green government became. Initially, military strategists expected Milosevic to capitulate after a few days of bombing, at most a couple of weeks. But a solid month into air strikes the Serbian leader stood fast and thousands of ethnic Albanians were killed, hundreds of thousands expelled. They fled to overflowing refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania.

Running out of targets, NATO was increasingly hitting Serbian infrastructure and industry. What was the point, critics asked, of bombing Serbia into the Stone Age? What would be left for a democratic post-Milosevic era? And the war seemed only to bolster Milosevic's popularity in Serbia while creating a living hell for ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. For no other state leader in the NATO alliance was the situation as high risk as it was for Fischer. His party would take only so much before it abandoned him. Without Greens support, the coalition would crumble - and turn the red-green administration into a quirky historical footnote.

### The Fischer Plan



Joschka Fischer and then NATO General Secretary Javier Solana. Photo: Bundesbildstelle

Paul Hockenos describes what happened next:

The day of reckoning was set for mid-May, when the Greens as a party would vote on the war. The clock was ticking and Fischer knew it. Two-thirds of Germans now felt that air strikes should be halted, negotiations restarted. Washington appeared hamstrung, refusing to bend on its original demand that Milosevic accept the Rambouillet agreement or suffer the consequences. There was no Plan B should the Serbian leader not capitulate. The only alternative to more and yet more bombing was a ground invasion. The deployment of German did not have a wisp of support in Germany. Fischer and Schröder unequivocally ruled it out.

This was the context in which the Fischer plan surfaced in mid-April. All was not as static inside the walls of the German Foreign Ministry as might have appeared from beyond them. The Fischer Plan set the divisive Rambouillet document to one side [and] pulled the sidelined United Nations, and with it Russia, back on board by proposing that a U.N.-led peacekeeping mission administrate the postwar province, sanctioned by the Security Council and supported by U.N. blue helmet troops. The United Nations would run the interim protectorate until a long-term political solution could be found. This was something more palatable to Milosevic than the Rambouillet stipulations. Critically, having Russia with the West rather than against it would deprive Milosevic of his ostensibly staunchest ally and lend the alliance significantly more leverage to deal with Serbia.

[p. 270]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]

### Green showdown



wecheln das Hemd,  
aber nicht die Überzeugung

A logo created by Green pacifists opposed to German participation in the air strikes on Yugoslavia. It reads:  
“Real Greens Change Their Shirts, Not Their Convictions.” Image: Source unknown

But for the opponents of the war, diplomatic efforts were not enough. Thus it came to a showdown at a party congress in Bielefeld:

For party pacifists, like delegate Uli Cremer, the purpose of the Greens’ Bielefeld congress was to get its elected representatives to adhere to the positions that the Greens as a party had already agreed upon. “Throughout the entire 1990s a majority consensus in the party supported pacifist positions, every time,” says Cremer. “We expected a Greens foreign minister to implement the party’s foreign policy positions. This is why we voted for him. If he doesn’t, then there should be consequences.” According to Cremer, the government tried to “blackmail” party delegates by posing a vote against the party leadership as a death knell to the red-green coalition. “There was no reason the coalition would fall apart or have to step down,” he argues.

Never had a Greens party congress experienced a security presence such as at Bielefeld. The tables had turned 180 degrees. Hundreds of riot police ringed the congress hall to protect the party leadership from Germany’s disgruntled left. Skirmishes with far-left *Autonomen* and Serbian émigrés caused the congress to start late. Inside, the atmosphere was fetid. Long-time fellow veterans of the social movements weren’t speaking to one another. Others engaged in shouting matches. As the speeches and the complex process of formulating resolutions began, so did the competing ovations and booing.

[p. 271]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]

### The Bielefeld congress



Fischer at the Bielefeld congress. Photo: SWR

At the party congress in Bielefeld in 1999, Fischer tried to convince his party that military intervention in Kosovo was the only way to “stop a second Bosnia.”

On the stage, against a bright green backdrop with the Greens’ sunflower symbol and the congress theme “Bringing together human rights and peace,” sat the party’s national leadership. Fischer was wearing a black T-shirt and black sports jacket, his bifocals the only familiar accessory from his foreign minister apparel. Shortly before the congress got under way, a small group of anarchist *Autonomen* burst through the security lines. Scuffles broke out as they rushed the podium. In the commotion, one protester let fly a paint-filled balloon. The projectile hit Fischer squarely in the head, exploding against his ear and covering the right side of his face and torso with red paint.

Although doctors would later diagnosis a broken eardrum, at the time Fischer refused medical help. He had to give what was probably the most critical speech of his life since May 1976, when he pleaded with the West German left to renounce violence. This time he was telling them why they had to support it.

[pp. 271-272]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]



## Germany on the Hindukush



A Bundeswehr soldier on duty in Afghanistan. Photo: picture-alliance

On 10 June 1999, the war came to an end. Milosevic withdrew his forces, NATO and UN moved in. But the episode had profoundly reshaped German foreign policy. Paul Hockenos concluded:

The Kosovo intervention established that not only could a united Germany participate in foreign wars in the name of humanitarianism but that its neighbors and allies expected it to do so. At the same time, the general skepticism in Germany about involvement in armed conflicts provided the Berlin Republic with a unique, built-in check against irresponsible military ventures. In no other country was the debate over war and peace in the Balkans as heated as it was in Germany. There would be more to come. The unique role that Germany could play in world trouble spots, as it did in Kosovo, came more sharply into focus. Taking a page from West Germany's *Ostpolitik*, Berlin could act as mediator, as bridge between East and West as well as between Europe and the United States. Germany could also come up with alternative security options. Germany was both a loyal ally and the source of constructive, diplomatic options. Kosovo showed that Germany was in the position to lead when it has sufficient support and allies behind it.

Looking back on the Kosovo war and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, Fischer writes:

Loyalty to NATO and the United States, and because the facts were irrefutable, had led to Germany's first participation in a war since the end of World War II - and under a red-green government. What more ruptures in continuity would there be waiting for us [...]? [...] Germany would neither be allowed nor able to keep itself out of a war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the fight against international terrorism.

[p. 273]

Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic. 2007. [Oxford University Press]

[pp. 432-433]

Die rot-grünen Jahre. Deutsche Außenpolitik – vom Kosovo bis zum 11. September. 2007. [Kiepenheuer & Witsch]