



Selling Hitler: old wartime newsreel inflames new passions

Belgrade fans fears of German 'reich'

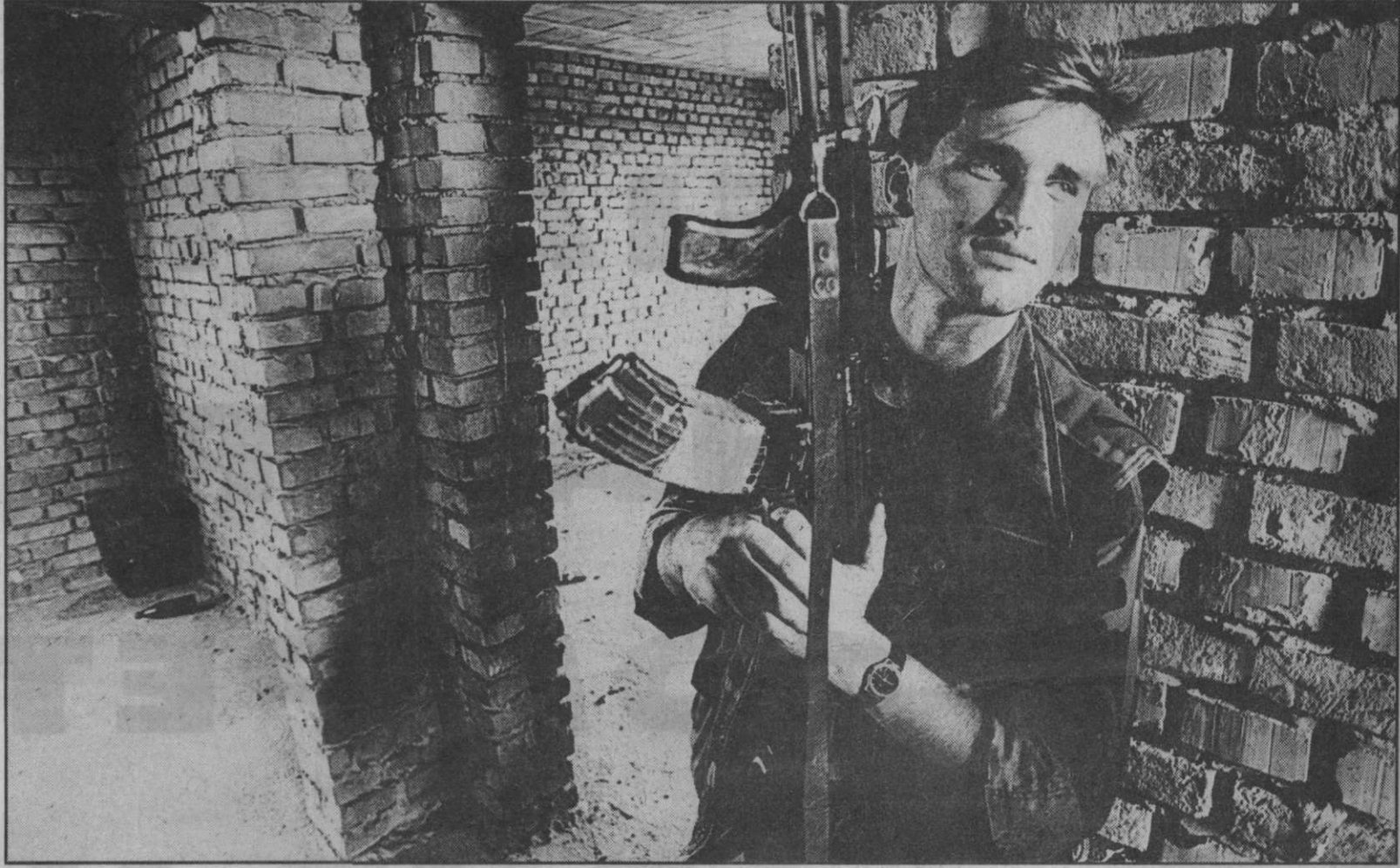
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by Tony Allen-Mills
Berlin

country's Serbian-dominated central authorities, there was no mistaking its relevance. Infuriated by Germany's growing support for the independence movements of Slovenia and Croatia, the Serbs have been whipping up deep-rooted suspicions of German imperialism.

Few outside Belgrade doubt that Germany's efforts to resolve Yugoslavia's ethnic crisis have been sincere. But Chancellor Helmut Kohl's government has again proved unable to shake off the bonds of mistrust that tie modern Germany to its past.

For Belgrade's Serbian rulers, German interest in Yugoslavia has nothing to do with dedication to regional stability. Serbian officials and news-



Defending the new faith: while Germany champions the cause of Slavic self-determination, a Croatian militiaman protects his village against Serbian federal troops

papers are presenting German support of Slovenia and Croatia in terms of a Nazi-style plot to destabilise Yugoslavia in order to extend German influence southward.

The aim, according to the Serbs, is a fourth reich stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic. One newspaper claimed that 40 instructors from the Bundeswehr were training Slovene citizens in civil defence. Another said Germany had supplied Slovenia with anti-tank missiles.

There were vaguer accusations that the German secret service was plotting to bring about the collapse of Yugoslavia. "The vulture flies

again," warned the Belgrade newspaper Vecernje Novosti.

This wilful misinterpretation of German intentions served several Serbian purposes, not least by whipping up local hostility against the Croats.

Last week the Serbian press seized on German support for Croatia to revive memories of the worst excesses of the Nazi era, when the fascist guerrillas of the Croatian Ustashi perpetrated appalling atrocities against the Serbs, communists and Jews.

While few of Germany's allies doubted the unfairness of the accusations, there was concern that Kohl's govern-

ment had to some extent shot itself in the foot. Less than a month ago, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the foreign minister, was publicly dubious about the independence movements and appeared convinced that the best interests of European stability lay in Yugoslavia remaining intact.

But Genscher found himself isolated as first the Social Democrat opposition, then senior figures in his own ruling coalition, began to criticise his failure to offer more support to Slovenia and Croatia. Eventually he accepted the majority position, and Germany suddenly emerged as

champion of self-determination for the Slavs.

This was the second serious setback for German foreign policy this year. During the Gulf war, Genscher's insistence that conflicts should not be resolved by force looked a little wan in the aftermath of the triumphant allied ejection of Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Germany's failure to send troops to the region also contrasted painfully with the Israeli government's complaints that German technology and equipment were helping Saddam Hussein build chemical weapons and rain Scud missiles on Tel Aviv. Genscher has never looked more

uncomfortable than the day he visited Jerusalem to be met by Israeli protesters complaining that the Germans were still trying to gas the Jews.

All this suggests that Germany still has far to go before it can play an international role free of the constraints of the past. The challenge for Genscher and his colleagues is to construct a foreign policy that reflects Germany's stature as the biggest economic power in the region without threatening any of its neighbours; the danger is that continuing failures like the Gulf and Yugoslavia could sour Bonn's relations with the rest of the world.