

# Europeans don't want another war

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

George Bush may have reckoned with an outburst of anti-war sentiment among Americans, and certainly hoped to destroy Iraq before a movement could get off the ground. He must have foreseen that Muslims throughout North Africa and the Mideast would take to the streets in sympathy with Iraq's standing up to the U.S. war colossus. But, he probably had little inkling of what would happen in Europe, whose history and culture he does not understand at all.

Europeans, unlike Americans, have lived through two world wars *fought on their territory*. Bombs dropped by strategic bombing raids, like those pounding Iraq today, did not hit buildings which exist only on the television screen; they hit people's homes, schools, and factories; they demolished churches, like the Gedächtniskirche in Berlin, left standing as a partial hulk in grim reminder of the closing days of the Second World War. They hit the Frauenkirche in Dresden, a city which was so brutally battered by allied bombers in 1945, that its name has become synonymous with the ravages of war. They hit the Santa Maria delle Fiori church in Milan, whose residents risked death to pile up sand bags, in order to spare Leonardo da Vinci's great fresco "The Last Supper" from utter ruin. War for any European is a very sensuous concept, a personal experience for anyone 45 years old or older. It means terror, unspeakable suffering, and human loss; it means separation, deportation, hunger, and the division of the continent into two parts, each occupied by a force calling itself a superpower.

Since the wall dividing Europe came down just over a year ago, Europeans had begun to grapple with this past, and to set about the task of rebuilding the whole of Europe. In this setting, characterized by optimism, albeit mixed with uncertainties and fears, the news that another war was about to begin, this time in the Persian Gulf, went through Europe like a cold chill down the spine.

## Rallies and vigils everywhere

This explains why, as the clock started ticking to George Bush's Jan. 15 deadline, people in every part of Europe took to the streets. On Saturday, Jan. 12, the last non-working day before the deadline, Bonn, the quiet capital of the western part of formerly divided Germany, saw 5,000 marching against the war; 25,000 demonstrated in Munich and Cologne, twice as many in Berlin, 30,000 in Hamburg, somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 in Frankfurt, 5,000 in

Erfurt, and thousands in Dresden. In over 120 cities in Germany, demonstrations took place, bringing at least 200,000 citizens out. In over 70 cities in France (which has a Muslim population numbering over 4 million), people demonstrated, and in Rome, 200,000 marched. Nothing like this had been seen since the last war.

This is not a resurrection of the old peace movement, made up of leftist-leaning youth protesting against armaments. This is a qualitatively new phenomenon, representing the vast majority of the population, about 80% of the Germans, according to polls, who are against war. To be sure, there are the leftists, the anarchists, the greenie environmentalists, and the terrorist sympathizers, who have occupied houses and unleashed riots in the past decades. But they are a minority, from whom the real anti-war movement distances itself. Those demonstrating today are housewives, workers, white-collar workers, public servants, teachers, and policemen, who have been holding work stoppages to protest the war. Above all, they are youth, including the very young. These children, ranging from 5 to 18, have never seen war, but the experience of their parents and grandparents has been impressed on their minds and consciences. Some are the children of the peace movement of the 1970s, who have grown up with a moral repugnance to violence. Such children did not wait on Jan. 15 for anyone to organize demonstrations. Entire classes left their schools, and marched silently through the streets. Every city and small town was the scene of vigils.

It is not the Gulf war alone which has moved these people to political protest, but the simultaneous butchery being practiced by Mikhail Gorbachov in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe. People who, just over a year ago, went through the joys and agonies of fighting for freedom against the Soviet occupying forces, are suffering with the Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, as they struggle to achieve independence. Thus, at every anti-war vigil no matter where, alongside the signs reading "No Blood for Oil," "Stop the Gulf War," "Americans out of Arabia," are banners calling for "Solidarity with the Baltic Freedom-Fighters." In Sweden and Denmark, small groups of exiled Balts had been holding vigils over the past year, almost unnoticed. Now their plight has become the concern of the hundreds of thousands of others.

The night of Jan. 15 into the day of Jan. 16 was one of vigil throughout Europe. Few slept. In the morning, when it was clear that no war had broken out, people again gathered in the streets. That night, the bombs started destroying Baghdad, while the Soviet military threatened Lithuania, and by dawn, every city and town in Europe was the scene of vigils and demonstrations. People stood speechless, confounded by an act which all had deeply feared but never really believed the U.S. President would be ruthless enough to commit. They stood gripped by the fear that another atrocity was in the making in the Baltic. It was like reliving the terror of other dictators, from other times.