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COLUMN ONE

Germany Versus Scientology

■ An open letter to Chancellor Kohl likened the church's travails in his nation to what Jews suffered under Hitler. Officials say they must protect the public from totalitarian groups.

By MARY WILLIAMS WALSH and JOHN-THOR DAHLBURG
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

BERLIN—On one thing, at least, the Church of Scientology and German authorities agree: The issue is tyranny.

They disagree, however, on just who the tyrant is. German

officials say the Los Angeles-based church "aims at world domination and the destruction of our society," in the words of Family Affairs Minister Claudia Nolte.

The Church of Scientology, meanwhile, has been lobbing accusations of totalitarianism right back at Germany: It has been running big ads in prominent newspapers—some with photos of Dachau inmates—charging that Germany is treating Scientologists today the way the Nazis dealt with the Jews.

Even the U.S. State Department has ventured into the fray, citing Germany in its latest annual human rights report, issued last week, for putting the church "under increasing scrutiny" at federal and state levels, and giving examples of German ac-

tions against the organization. German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel says he will discuss the matter with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright when she comes to Bonn on her first foreign trip in her new job later this month.

What's going on here? How has modern, democratic Germany ended up in the same boat with the likes of Iran and China—as a perceived redoubt of human rights abuse?

The answer has everything to do with Germany's terrible past and the powerful, well-intentioned public suspicion of fringe movements that past has given rise to.

"Hitler's book, 'Mein Kampf,' became our political reality at one point," says Ursula Caberta, **Please see GERMANY, A6**

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head of a four-person Scientology task force for the city-state of Hamburg. "In East Germany, we have another example of what can happen when you don't put an end to an anti-democratic system. In Germany, the level of sensitivity to totalitarianism is much higher. I think the mentality in America is different."

To be sure, Scientology has been running into trouble in countries across Europe. Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands have begun investigations of the maverick church, which was organized around the writings of the late Los Angeles science-fiction author L. Ron Hubbard. Scientologists believe that through special training and instruction they can achieve a state of spiritual well-being, but observers have long charged that the training is exorbitantly priced and that the church looks like just another dubious self-help purveyor, dressed up as a religion.

France has had Scientology under surveillance for years, and the European Parliament's Human Rights Commission is likely to include it in a forthcoming study of religious sects and cults.

In France in November, a court in Lyons convicted a prominent Scientologist of swindling, attempted swindling and involuntary homicide in connection with the suicide of a man asked to pay about \$6,000 for a Scientology "purification cure." In Madrid, a judge has declared Scientology's main objective to be making money—not spirituality—and referred the determination of its status to the Spanish Supreme Court.

In Greece, a judge recently ordered the Scientology center in Athens closed after finding the church's "medical, social and ethical practices . . . dangerous and harmful." And in Italy in December, a court ordered jail terms for 29 Scientologists found guilty of "criminal association" through church activities.

But in Germany, opposition to Scientology goes well beyond the realm of courts, prosecutors and parliamentary panels. Here, political leaders have declared Scientology to be "a cancer" on society and its members so dangerous that they must be "outed" and ostracized. And although Scientologists in Germany number 30,000 at the most, in a population of more than 80 million, the public—from kindergarten teachers to bankers to professional societies—seems willing to comply.

Consider:

- A number of German banks have established formal policies against opening accounts for Scientologists or making loans to their businesses.

- The southern state of Bavaria requires all applicants for civil-service jobs to reveal whether they are Scientologists. Those who admit membership aren't hired.

- Such respected newspapers as Munich's *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* will not accept advertisements from companies owned by Scientologists. Another daily, the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, published a long article about Scientology with the same headline that the anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stuermer* used atop an article about the Jews in 1936: *Ihr Gott ist das Geld*, or *Their God Is Money*.

- Various German private schools and day-care centers have refused to admit the children of Scientologists. In Bavaria, the public schools offer anti-Scientology instruction as part of their curriculum. Some German Scientologists have reacted by withdrawing their children from

schools here and sending them to a Scientology-run boarding school in Denmark; German authorities have threatened to fine them for truancy.

- Such professional groups as the Society of German Real Estate Brokers and the German Management Consultants bar membership to all Scientologists.

- The postal workers union for the Cologne district reserves the right not to deliver Scientologists' mail.

- The interior minister for Bavaria, Guenther Beckstein, has said that Scientologists are stockpiling large amounts of cyanide and weapons. Nonsense, say church officials.

- The governing party in Bonn, the Christian Democratic Union, refuses membership to Scientologists, arguing that their beliefs are incompatible with "Christian ethics." The CDU wants the church put under covert surveillance, a drastic step in Germany normally reserved for terrorists and neo-Nazis. Other important German political parties have likewise barred Scientologists as members.

- The CDU's youth wing has organized boycotts of recent films featuring Scientologist actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta—actions that apparently did not affect moviegoing. Musicians and artists—including, on occasion, jazz pianist Chick Corea—have had performances and exhibits canceled because they are Scientologists.

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GERMANY: Treatment of Scientology Sparks Debate

Hans Ruscheweyh, an engineering professor at the Technical University in Aachen in western Germany, worked in peace for three decades—until the university chancellor and the local newspaper found out he is a Scientologist.

"I never used the classroom as a forum for religious discussions," Ruscheweyh says. "I never asked students to become members of Scientology."

Once he was "outed," Ruscheweyh suddenly became *persona non grata*. He wasn't fired, but he was moved to a new office, far from colleagues. He says he was forbidden to sign documents, to manage the research group he had founded, to organize or manage scientific projects or to attend conferences and meetings as usual. He says his mail was opened and even his tools were "borrowed" and not returned.

"My scientific work is totally blocked, and the atmosphere of my workplace is full of chicaneries," says Ruscheweyh, who has decided to resign his professorship and become an independent consultant. "This situation is indeed comparable with the [anti-Semitic] discrimination in the beginning of the Hitler era."

One woman more than anyone else in Germany is responsible for raising the public alarm about Scientology: Ursula Caberta, the head of the Scientology task force in Hamburg. She works with her staff of three out of a well-guarded office building in the river-port city. She considers it a point of honor that Scientologists have called her "the new Goebbels," referring to the Nazi propagandist.

"Maybe we're aggressive, but that's because we're doing good work," Caberta says.

Hamburg concluded it needed a Scientology task force in 1991, not long after local tenancy rules were changed to allow the conversion of rental apartments to condominiums.

As the local condo-conversion business took off, Hamburg tenants began complaining that landlords were muscling them out of their apartments. And, as it happened, some of the sharpest complaints were lodged against a landlord who was also a ranking Scientologist.

Before long, many tenants in Hamburg believed that Scientology



FRANKLIN HOLLANDER / For The Times

Ursula Caberta heads Scientology task force in Hamburg city-state.

itself was manipulating the local real estate market, exploiting tenants in accordance with church doctrine.

"You can read all this in Mr. Hubbard's writings," Caberta says. "If you gain influence in certain sectors of a country's economy, then you can achieve a certain power in that country. In Germany, economic power is political power. The strategy is a little bit different in each country [where Scientology operates], but the goal is always the same."

Soon, buildings in Hamburg were festooned with banners proclaiming "Scientologists scam," and the local tenants support group had formed a rare, anti-Scientology alliance with its natural opponent, the real estate brokers association.

It was against this backdrop that Caberta, an ex-member of the Hamburg Senate for the center-left Social Democratic Party, received her mandate from the municipal parliament to study Scientology full time.

Her first public report, based partly on extensive interviews with

Scientology dropouts, was issued in 1995. It played to the Hamburg public's worst suspicions: Caberta alleged that the Hamburg branch of Scientology was making most of its money from real estate deals and that the church hierarchy was brainwashing members into thinking it was "ethical" to commit tax evasion, fraud and other crimes.

"They did really disgusting things" to get tenants out of buildings, Caberta charges. "They enlisted neighbors to spy on each other. Or they bribed people," to relinquish their homes.

One Hamburg resident, Yvonne Seifert-Dreyer, even complains that her Scientologist landlord planted rats in her building in hopes of forcing tenants out.

"At first, we were so shocked that we killed two of them," says Seifert-Dreyer, a beautician. "But then we realized they must be tame, because we could see they were wearing little tags."

Seifert-Dreyer believes the landlord got the rats from a lab,

then loosed them in the building. Like Caberta, she doesn't believe that these alleged practices were merely the work of a sharp businessman.

Scientologists "had to do these things, because they were using the [business] techniques of Ron Hubbard," charges Caberta, who says she believes Scientologists have also tried to infiltrate and dominate such German business sectors as management consulting and job placement.

Scientology officials respond that none of the faithful has ever committed a criminal offense in the Hamburg real estate market, with or without church sanction or aid. They laugh at allegations that they are trying to dominate certain German trades, pointing to their minuscule share of the German population.

Helmuth Bloebaum, president of the Munich branch of the Church of Scientology, charges further that Caberta cooked up the rat fiasco and other sagas because she discovered she could win support by outing Scientologists, much as Sen. Joseph McCarthy scored points by targeting alleged Communists in the Cold War era.

"She lives from the fact that she fights Scientology," Bloebaum says. "It's her means of existence. She creates the demand [to study Scientology], then she drafts a resolution to create a special hit squad, then she writes her own future right in there. That's democracy?"

But Caberta says the improprieties don't stop with the real estate market. She cites many of the usual complaints about Scientologists, heard practically anywhere they have established their church: that they entice people to enroll in costly personal-growth seminars; that they convince newcomers that they need more and more philosophical instruction; that gullible students who buy into the program end up hopelessly in debt; that people who try to drop out are hounded without quarter to pay their bills.

None of Caberta's many accusations will come as news to the various American bodies—cult-awareness groups, tax inspectors and others—who have watched Scientology with apprehension for more than 30 years. What is different in Germany is the widespread assumption that the full apparatus of the state is entitled—even obliged—to step in, sniff out potential spiritual snake-oil peddlers and protect the public from them.

The first article of the German Constitution sets an abiding tone, calling on "all public authority" to protect "the dignity of man." This is widely understood to mean protecting vulnerable people from exploitation, hang the niceties of American-style civil liberties.

The German Constitution also guarantees religious freedom, but it doesn't countenance anything comparable to the American firewall between church and state. As a result, there are many customs here in Germany that would never pass an American Civil Liberties Union church-state-separation test.



A. OSTEN-SACKEN

"Scientology—No Thanks" protests alleged real estate practices.

The most glaring of these is the so-called church tax. The established religions here—Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Jewish—share membership lists with the government as a matter of course; Bonn then collects the members' tithings, in the form of a regular, 8% paycheck withholding. No German taxpayer can escape this system without formally leaving his or her church or synagogue.

The practice gives German Scientologists a made-in-heaven response to the frequent accusation that they overcharge for books and seminars: At 8% a year, it is also expensive to be a Catholic, Protestant or Jew in Germany, and the government goes after potential deadbeats in the pews.

Scientologists—with their California-based American outlook—are quick to call such elements of the German system discriminatory. And they have been girding for a battle ever since last summer's CDU youth boycott of Tom Cruise's "Mission: Impossible."

"You don't win by just thinking it's all going to blow over," says the Rev. Heber Jentsch, president of the Church of Scientology International in Los Angeles. "You have to get out there and say it's not right."

And so it is that the church has stepped up its campaign against the German government in recent weeks. So far this year, it has filed two motions for injunctions against a planned federal inquest on sects and cults. It has also filed a complaint against Germany with the European Human Rights Commission in Strasbourg, France, charging a "systematic campaign of discrimination." And it hopes to work with a special rapporteur from the United Nations this spring, when the international body is expected to conduct a study of religious intolerance in Germany.

This week, the church intends to publish evidence of crimes and moral offenses by various German politicians: theft, tax fraud, misuse of public office for personal gain and negligence. The allegations are supposed to appear in a forthcoming issue of Scientology's in-house magazine, Freedom.

And then there are those ads: in-your-face, provocative images denouncing Germany as the only country in the world that systematically discriminates against Scientologists. One recent ad, an open letter to Chancellor Helmut Kohl signed by 34 non-Scientologist entertainment and literary figures—including Gore Vidal, Dustin Hoffman and Oliver Stone—assailed Germany's "shameful pattern of organized persecution."

"In the Germany of the 1930s . . . Jews were at first marginalized, then excluded from many activities, then vilified and ultimately subjected to unspeakable horrors," said the letter. "In the 1930s, it was the Jews. Today it is the Scientologists."

One seemingly obvious forum for the Church of Scientology to exercise its crusade would be the German Constitutional Court, the highest court for such bedrock issues as religious freedom.

Bloebaum says one Scientologist couple tried to take a test case there, after a motion for an injunction against the anti-Scientology Bavarian school curriculum was rejected by a lower court. The Constitutional Court, however, declined to review the case.

"It's a political court," charges Bloebaum, adding that even if the court took a case and ruled in Scientology's favor, he wouldn't expect politicians to live by the decision.

"Basically, [German politicians] think they're above the law," Bloebaum says.

Not so, says Caberta, arguing that she's ready for a head-on Constitutional Court challenge from Scientology.

"They have always said they would bring their complaint to the German Constitutional Court, and I always say: 'Do it! I want to see that discussion,'" she says. "But they never do, and I know why. Because they know they will lose."

Walsh reported from Berlin and Dahlburg from Paris.

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Albright Plays Down Dispute Over Scientology

By TYLER MARSHALL
TIMES STAFF WRITER

BONN — Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on Monday called the U.S.-German differences over the treatment of Scientologists "clearly a subject for bilateral discussion" but downplayed the issue in talks with German leaders and termed members' claims that they suffer from Nazi-style persecution "distasteful."

U.S. officials said the subject did not even arise in Albright's hour-long meeting with Chancellor Helmut Kohl and came up only in the final minutes of a longer session afterward with Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel.

"I think the issue here is one that can be resolved amicably and bilaterally between the U.S. and Germany," Albright said after the meetings. "But I must say any discussion which draws comparisons between what happened under Nazism and what is happening now [is] historically inaccurate and totally distasteful."

The treatment of the estimated 30,000 Scientologists in Germany

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ALBRIGHT: Discussions in Germany and France

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has surfaced as a public issue in recent months. The Los Angeles-based Church of Scientology has run ads in prominent newspapers comparing current actions against its members in Germany with the initial steps taken by Nazi Germany in the 1930s to exclude and persecute Jews — moves that led to the Holocaust.

Albright met the German leaders on the second stop of a global trip that will take her to nine countries in Europe and Asia before she returns home early next week.

Her talks here and later Monday in Paris with French President Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister Alain Juppe and Foreign Minister Herve de Charette were dominated by pressing transatlantic trade and security issues, including preparations for enlarging the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Albright was given an overtly warm reception in Paris as she worked to smooth a series of irritations that have plagued Franco-U.S. ties. She received a traditional two-kiss greeting from Chirac, a total of five kisses from De Charette (two on each cheek plus one on the hand) and a verbal olive branch at the end of her meeting with Juppe.

A senior U.S. official who attended the meeting quoted Juppe as noting, "We've had some ups and downs in our relationship. Why not have an up period?"

In the past year, Paris and Washington clashed openly on a number of issues, including how to resolve conflicts in Central Africa and

who should be given commanding positions in a reorganized NATO.

In Monday's meeting in Bonn, Kinkel, not Albright, brought up the Scientology issue. In comments to reporters, Kinkel denied allegations of persecution.

"Scientology and its members are not being persecuted, in no way whatsoever," he said. "These people are free."

Germany is one of several European nations that have acted against the maverick church, which was organized around the writings of the late science-fiction author L. Ron Hubbard.

Scientists believe that through special training and instruction they can achieve a state of spiritual well-being, but observers have long charged that the training is exorbitantly priced and that the church looks like just another dubious self-help purveyor, dressed up as a religion.

Spain, like Germany, officially classifies Scientology as a for-profit business rather than a religion, while French police have had Scientology under surveillance for years.

Recent pro-Scientology ads, signed by such personalities as Dustin Hoffman and Oliver Stone, were followed by the publication last month of the U.S. State Department's annual human rights report, in which Germany was cited for putting the church "under increasing scrutiny" at federal and state levels.

The report noted that during the preceding year, Scientologist artists were prevented from performing or showing their works; the state

government of Bavaria began refusing to accept Scientologist applicants for civil service jobs; and the youth wing of Kohl's ruling Christian Democratic Union organized regional boycotts of the film "Mission: Impossible" because its star, Tom Cruise, is a Scientologist.

The language used to describe the German actions was actually slightly milder than that used in the previous year's report, and the document also praised the German Interior Ministry for resisting pressure to place Scientology under surveillance.

But inaccurate news leaks in advance of the report's release that talked of a far tougher American stance, together with the newspaper ads, angered and dismayed many Germans.

On the French leg of Albright's trip — her first overseas foray since taking office — French officials smiled with apparent satisfaction at a joint De Charette-Albright news conference as she began her opening remarks in slightly accented but fluent French, then ended the session by responding to a Russian correspondent in his native language.

Albright also attended a brief commemorative ceremony at the U.S. Embassy in Paris for Pamela Harriman, the U.S. ambassador to France who died earlier this month. Albright planted a tree in the embassy garden and praised Harriman as a woman of "wisdom, grace and dignity."