

# Last days of Soviet empire?

**H**as Russia become the new Sick Man of Europe? This, a century ago, is what the press used to call the collapsing Ottoman Empire.

As ethnic and political troubles continue to erupt across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the similarities between the Soviet empire and former Ottoman empire seem to be growing by the day.

"Watch. The next place to explode will be Georgia," a prominent Soviet journalist confided to me last January in Moscow. Last week his prediction came true.

Nationalist violence broke out in Tbilisi, the scenic capital of the Soviet Caucasian republic of Georgia. Up to 100 may have died. Soviet tanks and troops are patrolling Tbilisi's streets.

Go back 100 years ago, when the Ottoman Empire was in recession. Exhausted and corrupt, the once-mighty Turks were gradually pulling out of the Balkans. Like a vast green wave on the ebb tide, the receding Ottoman Empire abruptly exposed to view a whole new political and ethnic landscape that had been hidden below.

The new Balkan states created from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire quickly went to war. Serbs, Bulgars, Albanians, Greeks and Romanians — all old enemies — fought each other with ferocity.

Today, the rivalries that caused the Balkan wars persist. The worst example is in volatile Yugoslavia where the rebellious Albanian region of Kosovo has turned into a second West Bank.

The analogy is appropriate. Britain and France drove the Turks out of their possessions in the Middle East and carved it up into artificial mini-states. Thus was created the chronic instability and conflict that makes today's Mideast the modern version of what the turbulent Balkans were like a century ago.



## Eric MARGOLIS

The great imperial war of 1914-1918 also saw the Ottomans driven out of their holdings in the Caucasus Mountains. This area, unfamiliar to most westerners, is what I call Russia's Mideast. It's made up of a dizzying amalgam of races, tribes and religions — held together and at peace, until recently, only by the heavy hand of Soviet rule.

It's said that the Soviet empire is the last of the great 19th century empires. Like the Ottomans, the Soviets may have finally run out of sufficient money, resources and energy to sustain a vast, unwieldy and increasingly restive empire. The Baltic peoples are pressing for independence. So, too, the Ukrainians who may shake the USSR to its foundations. Eastern Europe is edging away from Soviet control. Now it's the turn of the pepperpot Caucasus.

As late as 1921, much of the Caucasus was independent and a hotbed of intrigue where British, French, Russian and Turkish agents competed for influence. The Soviets finally conquered the Caucasus and re-imposed the former rule of the czars. Now the legendary zeal for independence of the Caucasian tribes has re-emerged. And, with it, old hatreds and feuds that go back 1,000 years. Last year Christian Armenians fought Moslem Azeris.

Today it's the splendid Georgians, a truly noble race (Stalin, Georgia's most infamous son excepted) against the Moslem Abkhazians. Tomorrow it could be the Georgians against the Armenians or Ossetians — or perhaps everyone against the Russians.

Blame much of this nationalist passion on economics. The Soviet economy is on the verge of total breakdown. Since genuine political expression remains impossible in the USSR, angry, frustrated citizens are venting their wrath by rekindling old tribal and religious passions. A similar process is occurring in Eastern Europe, worst of all in Yugoslavia where Orthodox Serbs have convinced themselves that by oppressing Catholic and Moslem Albanians they are somehow fighting a crusade against their old foe, the wicked Turks.

Even more worrisome for the Kremlin, the flames of nationalism may spread to the USSR's so far quiet but potentially most explosive minority. There are 50 million Turkic Moslems spread across the USSR from the Crimea to China. The last thing Mikhail Gorbachev needs is Moslem holy warriors galloping over the plains of Soviet Central Asia.

Watching this great historical drama unfold is both fascinating and frightening. Is Moscow really going to allow its empire to slowly crumble? Can it, in fact, do anything to prevent this powerful historical process?

A collapsing economy and disintegrating empire may prove too much even for the redoubtable Gorbachev. Recall also that Europeans in 1889 were convinced that the 20th century would bring world peace. As we look at the oncoming 21st, are we seeing in the dying Soviet empire the first signs of another century of world conflict?