

TORONTO — Albania, the least known European country, could be the setting of a drastic change in the East-West balance of power.

Albania's strategic value, though virtually forgotten in the West, is fully understood by Moscow. At the nexus of Yugoslavia, Greece, and Italy, Albania with two excellent deepwater ports, at Vlore and Durres, dominates the Balkan peninsula and the entry to the Adriatic Sea. The Italian coast is only 50 miles away, across the narrow Strait of Otranto.

In 1961, Albania became the only country to successfully evict Soviet "occupation" forces and a pro-consular establishment. At that time, the party leader Enver Hoxah, a great admirer of Stalin, abruptly broke all ties with Moscow because of Nikita S. Khrushchev's de-Stalinization program. The Russians were just finishing a complex of naval installations and underground submarine pens on the granite island of Saseno, known as "the Gibraltar of the Adriatic," in Vlore harbor. Saseno, and its attendant air and logistics bases on mainland Albania, was to have been the forward base from which the Kremlin would spread its influence across southern Europe and into the Middle East.

The Albanians seized all of these installations, evicting thousands of Soviet advisers and even taking two submarines. Though outraged, the Soviet Union was unable to mount an effective military response because 21 years ago, when the United States Sixth Fleet dominated the Mediterranean, the Russians lacked long-range air and amphibious forces.

The Russians have not forgotten this humiliation at the hands of 2.5 million people, and the pattern of Moscow's anti-Albanian activities over the last two decades indicates that restoration of control over Albania is a important goal of the Kremlin's grand strategy.

Albania, Object of Amnesia

By Eric Margolis

Tangible proof of Moscow's interest in subverting Albania has been evident. The K.G.B., using an extensive pro-Soviet fifth column in Albania, has mounted at least three attempted coups.

Today, events in Albania may present Moscow with the opportunity it has patiently awaited. Mr. Hoxah, 73, is reported to be in failing health. The Albanian radio's report of the "suicide due to nervous depression" of Mehmet Shehu, Mr. Hoxah's second in command, in November suggests the presence of mounting pressures in the Albanian Communist Party as the day of succession nears.

Moscow's sense of opportunity is doubtless heightened by Albania's utter isolation. Capitalist America is Mr. Hoxah's No. 1 enemy, followed by the Soviet Union. After the death of Mao Zedong, Albania lumped China, once its sole ally, with the United States and Soviet Union. The Yugoslavs and Greeks, traditional enemies of the Albanians, still have territorial designs on Albania. In the process of maintaining the ideological Marxist purity of his country, Mr. Hoxah has left it without any friends or allies.

The Soviet scenario for action against Albania may well be predictable: a *coup de main* duplicating successful operations in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. Unlike the situation in 1961, the Soviet Union today pos-

sesses ample forces for long-range intervention and no longer lives in awe of the Sixth Fleet. Airborne forces could drop on Albania, seize key airfields, and bring in heavy equipment and armor. Amphibious forces from the Black Sea and Mediterranean squadrons would isolate and envelop Albania. Resistance by Albania's 50,000-man army and militia would be quickly crushed.

Albania could become the Soviet Union's most important forward base, as crucial to its age-old ambition to control the Mediterranean and the Middle East as Hawaii is to United States domination of the Pacific. The political consequences of the Red Army's being 50 miles from Italy and a few hundred miles north of Athens can easily be imagined.

But imagination seems in short supply in Washington. The absence of diplomatic relations with Albania since World War II has led the West into a sort of amnesia about its existence, and one wonders if there are any contingency plans at all for dealing with a crisis there.

Neither the United States nor the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has ever officially supported the continued independence of Albania, leaving Moscow with the tempting target of a valuable strategic prize that may be seized without the danger of an effective Western response. If a Soviet airborne regiment landed at Tirana airport, Washington's probable response would be, "Where's Tirana?"

If the West does not draw a protective diplomatic cordon about Albania, it seems possible that it will again fall to the Soviet Union — an event that might well portend the most drastic shift in the European balance of power since World War II.

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