

Purged ... either way

Medieval Germany's most famous prankster, the merry Til Eulenspiegel, ended up on the gallows. Grumpy burghers failed to appreciate his escapades. Let's hope that his modern counterpart, Mathias Rust, gets off with a lighter sentence.

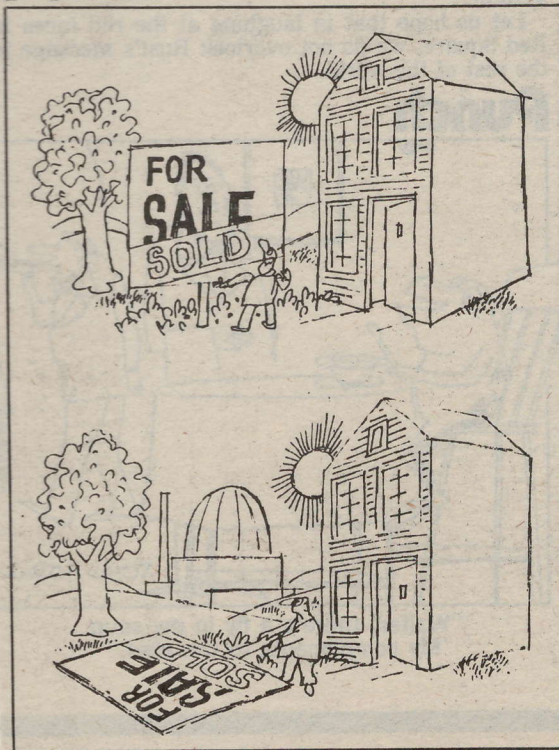
Rust, in case anyone has not yet heard, flew a small Cessna 450 miles into the Soviet Union, buzzed the Kremlin and landed smack dab in the middle of Red Square. Red-faced Soviet officials have been no more tickled by this bizarre episode than the medieval Germans. The rest of the world, however, is having a hearty belly laugh at the blushing Bolsheviks. And with good reason.

You have to feel some sympathy for the wretched senior officers of the Troops of Air Defence (Voyska PVO). They're purged if they do and purged if they don't.

First, the PVO shot down two Korean passenger airliners that had strayed over Soviet airspace, provoking worldwide condemnation and outrage. Now the PVO has allowed a light aircraft, piloted by a German of all people, to penetrate one of its key air defence zones, buzz the Kremlin, Holy of Holies of communism, and land in Red Square next to Lenin's Tomb. It's like Khadafy suddenly parachuting into the White House Rose Garden.

Soviet Defence Minister Sergei Sokolov, 76, was immediately fired by an enraged Politburo. The 76-year-old marshal was reportedly on his way out before the Cessna incident. The head of the PVO, Chief Marshal Aleksandr Koldunov, was also given the boot. That's too bad. Koldunov was one of the 10 top fighter aces of World War II, with 48 enemy aircraft to his credit, and a gung-ho warrior. He deserved a better retirement.

Punch



ERIC MARGOLIS



Watch for other senior military heads to roll. Good candidates are PVO generals Maltsev, Yurasov, Dmitriyev, Bochkov or Votintsev. Other more junior officers will also likely be purged. The disgrace of the vaunted PVO is no laughing matter for the Soviets. Some 18% of the total defence budget is spent on air defence. The PVO ranks third in the Soviet military hierarchy, after the Rocket Forces and the Ground Forces.

In terms of men and arms, the PVO outnumbers most of the world's standing armies. It has 1,300 interceptors on ready alert; 14,445 anti-aircraft missile launchers; 100 ABM missiles; and more than 7,000 radars — operated by 371,000 regular troops.

The route that pilot Rust followed took him from Finland across the Baltic and over two Soviet theatres of military operations. This is one of the three major routes that U.S. low-flying bombers and cruise missiles would follow in time of war.

So, not surprisingly, this is where the Soviets should have been keeping their collective eyes open. Adding to the general embarrassment, this latest example of perfidious German aggression came just as 230,000 Soviet Border Guards were celebrating Border Guards Day! Worse yet, hundreds of besotted Border Guards were reveling in Moscow's Gorky Park while Rust was buzzing the Kremlin.

Ha, ha, ha. It's fun to see the cranky Russians with egg on their faces. Their arms customers around the world, however, may not find the Rust episode quite so funny. Many, like the Arabs who use lots of Soviet equipment, will see in this fiasco confirmation of their suspicions that the stuff they buy from Moscow is brand X. Potential customers for air defence equipment, a Soviet specialty, will have a hard look at French and British catalogues.

The U.S. Navy, with egg all over its face after two French-made Exocets blasted the USS *Stark*, will be delighted to see the world laughing at the Russians instead of its abashed admirals. By the way, this column has heard faint rumors that maybe those missiles were not Exocets after all, but perhaps Israeli-designed Gabriels made under licence in South Africa and sold to Iraq.

What next? The unamused Soviets will now probably order their PVO troops to shoot first and ask questions later. Woe to the next civilian airliner or even large seagull that strays into Soviet airspace. Maybe we'll see the Kremlin surrounded by barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns. So much for being Mr. Nice Guy, glasnost could become "passnost."

Whatever the case, hats off to Mathias Rust. How nice to see a youth totally puncture the pomposity of the Soviet Union and its bemedalled marshals.