

The East Bloc unravels

Watching scenes of East Germans rioting in Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin these past two weeks was elating — at first. It seemed the writing was finally on the Berlin Wall for East Germany's musty Stalinist leaders.

Thanks to the westward flight of thousands of East German citizens and mounting street demonstrations, the grandiose bash put on to celebrate the 40th anniversary of communist rule turned into a humiliating fiasco. Equally galling, the guest of honor, Mikhail Gorbachev, told his hosts to either change their hard-line policies or face ending up on the rubbish heap of history.

Gorby's message caused the East German politburo heartburn, but ordinary citizens loved it. On the streets, East Germans sported buttons saying, 'I like Mike.'

Such events don't yet add up to a political earthquake, but East Germany is clearly feeling the first tremors of a coming shock. And this is precisely what western strategists have long feared.

Most scenarios for the outbreak of a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact begin by a popular revolt in East Germany. They envisage wide-scale rioting and civil unrest across the German Democratic Republic. Security forces and the army battle protesters. Fighting breaks out, refugees storm the wall to escape to the West and are mowed down by communist border guards. West German border forces provide covering fire to protect the refugees. Regular units on both sides of the border are drawn into the fighting, which quickly turns into full-scale war.

This scary scenario has suddenly taken on grim urgency. The Soviet Group of Forces in East Germany comprise 22 crack divisions. Any uprising in East Germany could involve Soviet troops — as in 1953, when Red Army tanks put down a popular anti-communist revolt. From the point of view of the Soviet military, a blowup in East Germany could not be coming at a worse time.

The Warsaw Pact is literally falling apart. Poland, with the Pact's largest army after the USSR, has a coalition government in which the communists are a grumpy, junior partner. Its armed forces are still under communist command, but the loyalty of rank and file soldiers is in serious question. Worse, the vital rail supply lines of the Soviet garrison in East Germany run through Poland and are increasingly vulnerable to sabotage by anti-Russian Poles.

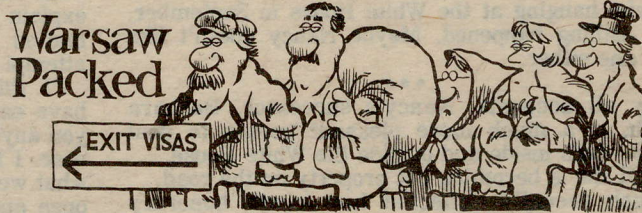
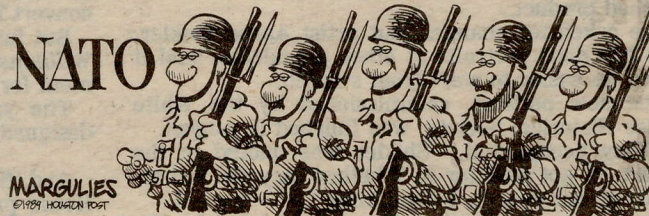
Hungary's communist regime has just collapsed like a rotten tree. In the event of a war or crisis, the weak Hungarian armed forces would be either totally unreliable or even hostile to the USSR. What's more, the Hungarians are in an increasingly nasty feud with Romania. Recently, the excitable Hungarians even claimed that Romania had secretly developed an A-bomb and was planning to drop it on Budapest. Hungary is now deploying the bulk of its not very strong army on the Romanian border. The Romanians are doing the same. They seem fated to become the Greeks and Turks of Middle Europe.

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This leaves the shaky Czech regime, with its unwarlike army and the far-off Bulgarians, Moscow's only firm ally. The Bulgars would never send their army west for fear of being attacked in the rear by the Turks, Greeks or Yugoslavs.

All of which must be keeping the Soviet general staff awake at night. Bad enough the Warsaw Pact is decomposing and East Germany boiling. Now, even worse, the USSR's transportation system



is breaking down. Food and fuel shortages are growing in all Soviet cities because of rail bottlenecks and breakdowns. Military vehicles are being used to transport potatoes and grain. If large numbers of troops and equipment had to be moved by rail and road, the USSR could face famine in many regions.

Some anti-Soviets may take delight in Moscow's mounting woes. I find them frightening. Will the powerful Soviet military or party hard-liners continue to sit back and watch the Warsaw Pact fall into ruins? If communist rule collapses in East Europe, won't the infection of western free market democracy spread into Ukraine and Belorussia? Or even to Gorky Street?

Don't forget either about shaky Yugoslavia where the republics of Slovenia and Croatia are talking about seceding. I suspect that the Slovenes and Croats would like to join Hungary and Austria in a loose federation — in fact, with charming historical irony, the refounding of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire!

Which suggests to me that in a few more years, East Europe and the Balkans could once again become the world's leading hot spot — as it was before World War I. Move over Arabs and Israelis, we're bored with you. Enter stage centre feuding Bosnians, Moravians, Slovaks, Ghegs and Vlachs — waving guns.