

The German card up Mikhail's sleeve

The Germans," Winston Churchill once quipped, "are either at your feet or at your throat." In this bon mot, the last British warlord aptly captured the geopolitical plight of that enigmatic, talented and martial people whose fate it has been to be caught in the storm centre of 2,000 years of European history.

Germany's tragedy is that it is a great nation without natural borders. Modern united Germany, in fact, only came into existence in 1871; for the two previous millennia, Germany was no more than a collection of tribes, states or principalities which was to be the favored battlefield for Europe's dynastic and, later, national wars.

Germany, as the scholar Peter Vierick noted in his superb study of the Nazi movement, is not even a true European country in that it does not share the Greco-Roman cultural roots of Western Europe. The Roman Empire stopped at the Rhine. To the east was a vast, mysterious land of dark forests and ferocious warriors.

Looking at today's super-prosperous West Germany, one is hard-pressed to imagine that a mere 50 years ago Nazi storm troopers marched through the streets and people worshipped Wotan in forest clearings. Since the end of World War II, West Germany has become a world model for good democratic government, fiscal responsibility, human rights and tolerance.

Even its once-magnificent armed forces are now reduced to a highly efficient but clearly non-threatening 486,000 men who form the bulwark of NATO's defences.

All should thus be well on the Rhine, but suddenly the German question is once again making Europe — and particularly France — remarkably uneasy. In September, East Germany's leader, Erich Honecker, will visit West Germany. This will be the first time an East German party leader has visited Bonn.



Eric MARGOLIS

Moscow, which originally vetoed Honecker's visit, is now firmly behind the visit. West Germany's conservatives, who have been ardently promoting better relations with East Germany, are delighted. The French and other Europeans are not.

France has long been fretting that West Germany might some time soon be seduced away from NATO by the lure of reunification with East Germany. First Gorbachev strips Europe of its nuclear missiles, complain the French, and then he takes away its best army. Such alarms may be overdrawn, but they do merit a lot of thought. By playing the German card, the bold and unpredictable Gorbachev certainly does have the ability to turn the 42-year-old power structure in Europe on its head.

The thought of 17 million industrious East Germans joining 61 million West Germans is a prospect that must worry many Europeans and, most of all, the Soviet Union. In spite of their massive military power, the Soviets still have a deep-seated terror of the martial Germans. Illogical, to be sure, but, as a British general once said, "You will never know war until you have fought Germans."

Still, the German question offers the Kremlin a stunning diplomatic opportunity. West Germany passionately desires reunification with East Germany. To overcrowded West Germany, the East's more open spaces beckon alluringly.

This is by no means the old desire for *Lebensraum* of pre-war days; yet one should not dismiss that powerful part of the German psyche that craves community and holds the land in religious reverence.

Could Moscow capitalize on such yearning by offering East Germany in return for West Germany's exit from NATO? Of course, and there has already been a good deal of talk about a sort of "non-aligned, nuclear-free central Europe."

The French, who care a great deal about the security of Europe, are horrified at this prospect and fear that lust for *Anschluss* might overcome the good sense of their German allies and neighbors.

Such an event would destroy NATO and effectively bring Western Europe under Soviet military domination. A non-aligned Middle-Europe would stay so only so long as the Kremlin ordained.

Short of Bonn's abandonment of NATO, there is no way that Moscow will otherwise allow East Germany to reunite with its western sister. The prospect of 78 million industrious, land-short Germans bustling away is not pleasing to either the Soviets or Poles who, it should be recalled, have annexed between them 30% of pre-war Germany. It might not even arouse delight in some of German's other western allies who are now content to see German economically strong but politically and militarily a second-rate power.

They probably recall Churchill's words and wince.