

The war through French eyes

PARIS — Paris is never gay in February. And particularly not this one as France shivers through icy gales and snowstorms that have produced the coldest winter in 55 years.

Up in Normandy, where I sought a few days refuge from the Gulf war, thick, wet snow made the rolling countryside look like rural Quebec. Fortunately, there was sufficient Calvados firewater, rich, runny cheese and perky oysters to keep me from getting depressed.

Not, however, the French. There is widespread unease and worry here as they watch events unfold in the Baltic and the Gulf.

The French, who have vastly more knowledge of history and geography than North Americans, and a far deeper appreciation for the subtleties involved in both crises, sense danger ahead. Even though 70% of the public so far supports French military action against Iraq, you see and hear none of the flag-waving, whack-Iraq yahooism that so disfigures North America. The mood is sombre.

Most French, who have seen what wars did to their own nation, didn't want this war to happen and wish it would end. Nothing good will come of it. A grim-faced President Francois Mitterrand went on TV to underline this point, predicting brutal land battles and heavy loss of life.

Unlike North Americans, who are practically wetting their pants in fear over the ludicrously over-inflated hobgoblin of terrorism, the French remain calm, though security has been tightened everywhere.

I find it disgusting that many North Americans, who are sitting at home lustily cheering the destruction of Iraq as if they were watching a Sunday football game, are too terrified to take a plane or even the train — as the current huge drop in travel figures shows.

The ultimate disgrace: Cancellation of plans by Mr. Tough Guy USA, Clint Eastwood, and a bevy of Hollywood stars to attend a gala in London for fear of terrorism. Hence taunts by Saddam Hussein that Americans are cowards who are ready to drop bombs on cities but afraid to come out and

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fight like men — mano a mano.

Unhappiness over the war is also strong among France's ruling socialists. The defence minister recently resigned over his opposition to French military action against Iraq. Traditional pro-Israeli feeling by French socialists is being eroded by growing dismay at the plight of the Palestinians. On the political right, as well as on the left, there is fast-rising concern that the UN action to free Kuwait has been turned by the U.S. into a campaign to crush Iraq into rubble.

The French fear a widening war will plunge the Mideast into an unpredictable cycle of violence and turbulence.

At the same time, the French and most other Europeans are far more worried than North Americans by events in the Baltic and Soviet Union. The ascendancy of hard-liners in Moscow and Mikhail Gorbachev's crackdown on liberals in the USSR are raising fears the Soviets may again emerge as a military threat to Western Europe.

Sympathy for the Baltic peoples is stronger here than for the obscenely rich, disco-dancing Kuwaitis. Still, the French feel they can't be left out of the effort by the western alliance to deal with Saddam Hussein. Nor do they want to be excluded from the lucrative arms market in the post-Gulf war Mideast.

So, like the skilled diplomats they are, the French are playing both sides of the street. Bombing the Iraqis — but with a certain reserve — while pressing for diplomatic solutions to the war.

Happily, at least until now, worries that there might be violence between the 600,000 French Jews and the more than two million Muslims living in France have proven unfounded. Claims by far-rightists that France was dragged into the war by Jewish influence has been properly scorned by the French public. France's North and West African Muslim population has equally ignored Saddam's calls for a Holy War. But when the war turns bloodier, as it surely will, violence inside France cannot be discounted.

In spite of the general calm in Europe, tourism is off by 40-60%. North Americans are afraid to go to Europe — which is perfectly safe. Instead, they are spending their vacation time in such safe places as New York City, where, on an average day, eight people are murdered. The streets of Tel Aviv or Riyadh — Scud missiles included — are still far safer than those of American cities.

The greatest danger for visitors here in France is bankruptcy, not bombs. Since last summer, the drop in value of the Canadian and U.S. dollars in francs means that prices, that were sky high before, have gone up another 20%.

Even so, as I reflected happily over a crepe normande and a glass of Calvados, the risk is one well worth taking.