

Moscow loses ground in East Germany, as exodus disturbs 'New Yalta' plans

by Rainer Apel

The West Germans are struggling hard to provide homes, jobs, and food for the thousands of refugees flooding in from East Germany through Hungary and Austria these days. For several weeks running, the refugee issue has been the number-one news item in the West.

In East Germany, the communist SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime is getting nervous about this drain of skilled workers, most of them younger ones below 25 years of age, into the West. This is a mass-based political discrediting of the Kremlin's model socialist state East Germany, of the myth of a "modern industrial society run under a socialist administration," right before the eyes of the world.

The stream of refugees, coming on top of some 110,000 "legal" emigrants to West Germany, is hitting the SED at a very vulnerable point: Its next Five Year Plan had assigned some 500,000 young Germans to training in computer skills and micro-electronics production.

At the expense of other industrial sectors, the SED has invested a lot in the past years in the micro-electronic sectors—the chief motive here being to provide the Soviet military-industrial complex with state-of-the-art products from the high-tech branches of the East German "model economy." The problem is that many of these 500,000 young East Germans who were to work for the SED's socialist glory and for the Soviets, are simply running away into the West.

East German youth are turning rebellious. Many of them who arrived in the West, often after an adventurous escape from East Germany, report that they ran away "because there is no perspective for us anymore." Especially young East Germans between ages 18 and 22 fear that if they are drafted into the National People's Army, they will be ordered, very soon, to fire on other, protesting young Germans, in the same way the Red Chinese soldiers did with protesting young Chinese on Tiananmen Square this past June.

Moscow is aware of the rebellion "problem": It happened before, in many parts of the Soviet Union, in the Baltic, and in Eastern Europe. A secret evaluation compiled by Valentin Falin, one of Gorbachov's chief German policy advisers, warns of "uncontrollable mass riots next spring" in East Ger-

many. Falin, according to leaks in the West German press, noticed a "deep split between the SED party and the population at large," a "profound crisis of confidence."

The Kremlin is also worried that during Gorbachov's attendance at the Oct. 7 official SED party celebrations of 40 years of East Germany's existence as a Soviet puppet state, mass protests could occur, not unlike those which haunted the Soviet leader Gorbachov in Beijing some months ago.

This is why Yegor Ligachov, the Soviet politburo's "riot control" expert, was deployed to East Berlin Sept. 12 to meet SED party leaders. Officially traveling on a "mission concerning questions of agricultural cooperation," Ligachov rather dealt with the political-strategic aspects of the situation in East Germany. This became clear in his interview Sept. 15 with the SED party daily, *Neues Deutschland*, where he advertised Gorbachov's visit for Oct. 7, praised East Germany as a "proven ally of the Soviet Union," and otherwise emphasized that "the Soviet-German treaties on friendship and military assistance are vital and will be maintained."

In other words: Ligachov gave the SED Moscow's go-ahead for whatever measures will be considered necessary to reestablish political control, and gave assurances that in case of deeper trouble, the Soviets would provide "military assistance," indeed.

Détente fantasies swept aside

These kind of signals, broadcast widely over official SED-controlled propaganda media, have many in West Germany worried as well. Returned, all of a sudden, is the almost-buried (under the impact of "détente") enemy image of the "communist despotism" ruling over close to 17 million Germans in the East. The SED, many in West Germany fear, will be the party that will fire on Germans, as it did on June 17, 1953, when workers rallied in protest against the Soviet looting policy of the East German industry. Soviet tanks rolled in, crushing the revolt.

When Germans in the West, and those who can receive Western television in the East, saw the film footage of the Tiananmen Square massacre, many of them recalled the

bloody events of June 1953. The stream of refugees from East Germany foreshadows bad things to come.

For many Germans, probably the broad majority, the world looks, all of a sudden, as if there had never been détente or “East-West convergence” in the past two decades. West Germans are getting furious about the prospect that something awful might happen in East Germany, upon directives from Moscow, very soon.

Most important for the United States in this context, is the news that the request for American troop stationing in West Germany as a counterbalance to the 400,000 Red Army soldiers in East Germany, is stronger, in this highly precarious situation, than ever before in the past 20 years.

This is certainly bad news for the Kremlin, which is watching the rapid erosion of “Gorbymania” in West Germany and is losing ground in East Germany at the same time. The condominium gameplan is one thing; reality is another.

Economic misery

The intense interest which West German firms are showing in the labor potential of the young Germans who have been fleeing the East Germany, is a clear signal that these refugees can be relatively quickly integrated into economic life in the West. Most have good chances of bringing their professional skills up to Western standards through re-education and training programs. For the West German economy, these Germans from the east are a definite plus.

This brings up the question of why the great potential of these Germans could not be realized in the (SED)-controlled state. The answer comes from the settlers and refugees themselves, whose stories paint a horrendous picture of the SED’s economic policies. What follows has been assembled from a number of such conversations.

For many factories in East Germany, the day often begins with the following scene: Workers gather around to determine who among them will spend the rest of the day shopping for hard-to-obtain consumer goods for the rest of them. The designated colleague or comrade may have to travel great distances in order to buy vegetables and fruits at a specific spot in another part of the city (or a suburb), and then might have to travel to the opposite end of the city to hunt down some fresh meat. This is often prepared, days ahead of time, by telephone calls or word-of-mouth inquiries about whether the desired item or items will in fact be available at the promised location; or if, perhaps, they might be available somewhere else on another day.

It’s only the “poorly informed” people who line up daily in long queues outside of the food shops. Anyone who has friends in the party apparatus, in the state-run trade union (misleadingly named the Free German Trade Union Federation), in the Women’s Association, or in the Free German Youth association, belongs to the “better informed” category. This is one of the reasons why the SED has more than 2 million members—fully 12% of the total population. But

ironically, the bartering which is facilitated by party connections, takes place largely *outside* of the routes prescribed by the official Five Year Plan.

The system works best with direct barter: Someone has vegetables, and offers them to a barber, who knows a workman. The workman gets his vegetables, and goes to the house of the person who had the vegetables, in order to perform long-overdue repairs on his water pipe. The repair job in this case could only be done because someone who went on a detour from another city, or even from the West, such as West Berlin, had brought along the replacement water valve—a model which since the last Five Year Plan has no longer been produced in East Germany.

What does the barber get out of it? Well, he supplies soap and other articles of personal hygiene to the person who procured the water valve, along with another replacement part which the workman brings into the barbershop. Keep in mind that this kind of barter proceeds best when the SED or one of its front organizations is not involved, since there is a truism, that the party is never helpful to anyone without expecting some political favor in return. That’s why many Germans in East Germany are saying, “No, thanks!”

How not to run a factory

The situation with consumer goods and private households holds equally true for the “People’s Factories,” known in German as *volkseigene Betriebe* or VEBs. To see how this works, let’s return to the beginning of our story: In VEB X, one worker is ordered to go out and make purchases. At the same time, a female worker is sent out in a tiny two-cylinder car called a *Trabant* (people have to wait 15 years to buy one), in order to hold conversations with certain people somewhere else within East German territory. The topic of the discussion is certain raw materials or replacement parts which the factory does not have because a shipment from VEB Y has been delayed, but which are absolutely necessary for production to continue. It is an urgent matter, since such things as premiums, trips abroad for selected workers, and other benefits all depend on fulfilling the production plan.

Were the factory in question to rely on the planning system itself, i.e., on the functioning of the party bureaucracy, it would run the risk of not being able to reach its plan target. The same goes for the other factory which supplied the replacement parts. Therefore, the plan target is met by means which, according to the plan, do not even exist.

There are many VEB’s, however, which do not enjoy such connections. In such cases, many of the idled workers find themselves spending hours behind the knob of a street-car, or doing other odd jobs about town.

And so, what the SED proclaimed 40 years ago to be “real, existing socialism in the first workers’ and peasants’ state on German soil” is going awry, and can only be managed at all by huge distortions. No wonder why more and more people are making their way into the West.