

History Repeats, Europe Forgets

The empire
is dead. Now
what about
the ghosts
of yesteryear?

By Josef Joffe

W here was Europe? A few hours into the Moscow putsch, as

Europe's chanceries were preparing to cave in to the amateur plotters, George Bush took the lead by hoisting the "coups fail" banner. Last August it was the United States that drew a line in the sand, dragging a bunch of reluctant allies all the way to victory against Saddam Hussein.

How about closer to the European home — say Yugoslavia, where the Serbs are no longer skirmishing but conducting a real war against the Croats, complete with tanks and aircraft? Well, the Europeans are still pondering the issue. Germany is threatening to recognize Slovenia or Croatia, but so much fecklessness does not play in France or Britain, which fear a Teutonic power play in the Balkans.

Just a year ago, Europe was merrily surfing along yet another wave of the future. Soviet power was retracting, U.S. power was turning obsolete. Indeed, the might of nations was becoming thoroughly "civilianized," with economic clout muscling aside tanks and thermonuclear weapons. Poised for a more perfect common market as of 1993, the European Community was eyeing imminent superpower status. And just two months ago, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher was presiding over an inaugural meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe that would act as a latter-day "Concert of Europe" and bring peace to the restless natives on the periphery.

Alas, Clio — the goddess of history

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— is a nasty lady. Amid celebrations of transcendence she has reminded us that history, seemingly banished, has a habit of sneaking in through the back door. Just look at Europe, where three forgotten dramas are being enacted again.

In the East, an empire is exploding once more, and though the republican revolution is entirely wholesome, it is already overshadowed by the classic codas of such breakups: nationality and border strife. Consult the encyclopedia on such friendly tribes as the Gagauz and Moldavians, the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis. Also familiarize yourself with the traditional resource flows of the Soviet Union and ponder what the southern republics will do when Russia, already eyeing pieces of Kazakhstan and the Ukraine, cuts off their water supplies.

In the Southeast, recall Sarajevo 1914. Serbian imperialism gave us World War I, and the '91 model is already well positioned to carve out a Greater Serbia from the remains of Yugoslavia. Neo-Communism plus expansionism does not equal peace. But Europe has nothing more to offer than yet another team of mediators, complete with battalion of "observers" armed to the teeth with notepads and binoculars.

In the rest of Europe, the ghosts of yesteryear are reappearing all over again — albeit not clad in jackboots. Call it power politics on cats' feet. Norwegians and Danes rushed their diplomats into the Baltic republics to make sure that the Germans did not get there first. The French and the British, already wary of a "Greater Central European Co-Prosperty Sphere" centered on Berlin, cannot bring themselves to make common cause with Germany in the Balkans because they suspect the making of a "Teutonic bloc."

But, most important, what about post-putsch Russia? The Germans have shelled out \$34 billion since 1989 to keep Mikhail Gorbachev afloat. Much of it was strictly protection money, disbursed to speed the withdrawal of some 400,000 Soviet troops from eastern Germany. That makes for a powerful separate interest toward Russia-U.S.S.R. that France, Britain and Italy naturally do not share with the same urgency.

The moral of this tale is the opposite of common foreign policy, let alone of a European superpower in the making. While the demise of the cold war has liberated ancient blood feuds in the East, it has — predictably — loosened the political bonds forged

in the West. Western Europe '91 resembles a bunch of teen-agers suddenly forced to fend for themselves.

In the old days, they could collectively rub up against the powerful father figure that was the United States, confident of Washington's forbearance and protection. And there was always the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev and successors, offering the opportunity for cautious side deals that delivered leverage against the United States.

But today? There is power without real purpose, aspiration without real leadership. Nor will Europe rise to the challenge. In the crunch, the French will always fall back to their favorite policy of "splendid aggravation." The British will never quite leave their favorite place on the fence. The Germans will try to please everybody while quietly cultivating their Central European garden. And all of them will be quick to check one another's ambitions rather than coalesce in a common policy. Which leaves the United States in the not-so-enviable position of No. 1 in the world. □

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