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Soviet Withdrawal from Germany

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In proposing the General Treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union in April 1990, Chancellor Kohl and (then) Foreign Minister Genscher viewed it clearly as a package deal that would facilitate Soviet concurrence in unification while expediting the withdrawal of Soviet forces from East Germany. Although the former German foreign minister had become infamous for his at times indiscriminate and imprudent use of "checkbook diplomacy," in this case it was the only course open to German policy makers.

The assistance package was required to help the Soviet leadership to sell the withdrawal from empire plan at home, while defraying some of the costs associated with it. Retrospectively, one can see that Bonn's willingness to use its checkbook in support of its foreign policy brought the political stability needed for wrapping up the agreements providing for German unity and governing the withdrawal of Soviet forces. Of the total amount of DM 70 billion to be paid directly or indirectly to the Soviet Union or its successor states, only about DM 13 billion is directly related to the withdrawal of former Soviet forces. However, the amounts that already have been spent and those that will be expended in the future must be viewed as a premium paid to ensure continued Soviet compliance with its treaty obligations. In this sense, the continued presence of former Soviet forces on German soil gives Moscow leverage in its dealings with Germany, although Moscow has as yet refrained from invoking this wild card too openly.
Already in July 1990 over 173,000 servicemen and dependents were waiting in emergency shelters or hotels for permanent housing. The Soviet military would have to build at least 440,000 apartments by 1995 to accommodate all the military personnel returning from Eastern Europe. Thus the 36,000 apartments, totalling more than 2 million square meters, that are being built with German assistance amount to under 10 percent of the overall requirement. In addition, the planned manpower reductions pose huge problems to Moscow: There are no jobs for most officers now being retired in an economy that is teetering on the brink of collapse. The German program of DM 200 million to retrain some of them for civilian jobs while still on duty in East Germany can alleviate the problem but is by far insufficient to resolve it.

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the SED regime, Moscow's elite forces experienced a serious identity crisis. Their ability to compare daily "socialist" and "capitalist" reality eroded the credibility of the propaganda slogans still issued by the officers. Few still cared about their mission and the daily routine at the military bases virtually came to a halt. Even Soviet Defense Minister Dimitri Yazov complained about the growing lack of discipline, drunkenness, and the inability of the officer corps to keep their troops under control.

Given the poor state of morale, abysmal living standards and the harsh regime inside the barracks, Soviet soldiers have been defecting in large numbers, beginning immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Officially, some 192 Soviet citizens have requested political asylum in West Germany, causing a delicate political situation. Pursuant to the Basic Law, every refugee has the right to ask for political asylum and such requests are being given due process by German authorities. Initially, the Soviets tried to handle the problem of defections by sending out search squads to return defectors forcibly to their units. This practice was stopped, however, after protests from German political authorities. If morale continues to deteriorate, both sides fear that some day entire units might defect; indeed, after asking how many defectors to expect, a German diplomat was told in the Soviet Foreign Ministry: "Count on about 380,000"—i.e., the entire force stationed in Germany.
Since July 1, 1990 the troops receive their salaries in German marks. While a draftee is paid a mere DM 25 a month, a senior lieutenant receives DM 800, and a major as much as DM 1,500. This has fueled hostility among East Germans, most of whom are worse off after unification than the remaining "occupation forces"—especially since the German government is footing the bill for the cost of the CIS troops. Roughly DM 10 billion have been allotted for this purpose, including the costs of returning these forces, e.g., transit fees charged by Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Since monetary union, CIS officers can turn their tour in East Germany into a bonanza. One month's salary paid in DM amounts to over five years' average salary at home when exchanged on the black market. Furthermore, officers can stretch their salaries by investing their money in Western consumer goods that fetch a multiple of their original price when sold on the black market. Even saving up hard currency can provide officers with substantial start-up capital for a business in the former Soviet Union.

Corruption among servicemen is rampant. As early as December 1990 the Supreme Commander in East Germany, General Boris Snetkov, and his three deputies fell victim to the demoralization of their forces. They were relieved of their duties after a battalion commander fled to West Germany, taking his missiles with him. Great profits can be made by trafficking in arms. A Kalashnikov with ammunition easily fetches DM 1,000, with lesser prices for hand grenades or other weaponry. The CIS armed forces have become the armory of organized crime in Germany, perhaps indeed Western Europe as a whole. There have been reports that the Russian mafia controls this flourishing market. It took only a few months of "capitalist experience" to transform Moscow's imperial guard into an undisciplined and demoralized bunch of soldiers, intent on taking personal advantage of the circumstances in which they suddenly found themselves.

Perhaps the most serious problem confronting Germany at present is to account for and subsequently clean up the ecological mess left behind by the Soviet forces. During their stay in East Germany, the Soviets laid claim to about 25 percent of the country. According to a preliminary study of the East Ministry of the Environment published in
mid-1990, some 440,000 hectares are seriously contaminated, requiring expensive clean-up measures.

It is remarkable that Soviet forces have been withdrawn more or less on schedule despite the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the steep downturn in economic conditions. There are doubtless good reasons for President Yeltsin's government to take every possible effort to demonstrate treaty compliance vis-a-vis Germany. The expectation of economic and financial assistance stands out as perhaps the most important reason for its straightforwardness on this issue. Germany has been and is likely to remain the largest single source of aid. Furthermore, her political support is needed to enlist the economic cooperation of the European Community and the Group of Seven, particularly the United States.

The litmus test for the former Soviet troops in East Germany will arrive as their stationing term comes to a close in about two years. Much will depend on the economic conditions then prevailing in the Community of Independent States. It is still premature to estimate the number of soldiers who might opt to stay under whatever pretext. Some may simply vanish, others may seek marriage to German citizens, others again may request asylum. Regardless of what will eventually happen, the Soviet Army in Germany proved to be a hollow shield that virtually evaporated within weeks as a fighting machine once exposed to "capitalist reality."

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