

August 23, 1989

East Germany: Leadership Concerns

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Summary:

An analysis of diminishing faith in East Germany's leadership.

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3536

~~Top Secret~~

6.2(d)

EAST GERMANY: Leadership Concerns

The growing exodus of East Germans to the West and the announcement that East German leader Honecker has undergone major surgery probably are increasing uncertainty in the leadership and may stiffen opposition to reform.

6.2(d)

3.3(b)(1)

[redacted] the 77-year-old Honecker is recovering from gallbladder surgery he had last week. A gallstone attack at the Warsaw Pact summit in Bucharest last month forced him to go back to East Germany, where he reportedly had been vacationing since his return.

3.3(b)(1)

6.2(d)

Meanwhile, more than 1,000 East Germans ostensibly vacationing in Hungary fled across the border to Austria last weekend, most through a gate left open during a picnic celebrating European unity.

3.3(b)(1)

[redacted] some 3,000 to 15,000 East Germans may have fled through Hungary this year: another 4,000 reportedly have tried.

3.3(b)(1)

6.2(d)

Comment: Honecker's illness probably has increased the drift in the leadership at a time of growing public dissatisfaction and official dismay over the liberalizing trends in Poland and Hungary.

3.3(b)(1)

6.2(d)

He probably will try to ease the emigration crisis and show he is still in control. He may press Hungary to repatriate promptly those East Germans whose tourist visas expire as the summer vacation season ends and to increase border patrols against illegal crossings. East German restrictions on travel to Hungary are not likely before then for fear of a popular backlash.

6.2(d)

If Honecker fails to stem the flood of illegal emigrants, party hardliners—who probably oppose even the modest easing of travel and emigration regulations over the past year—will gain temporarily. They may press for restrictions on travel and emigration and a crackdown on dissent, encouraged by what they see as support from hardliners in the Soviet leadership. Last week, the Soviet newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* reprinted East Germany's spirited defense of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and cited the importance of strengthening the East German state while improving relations with West Germany.

6.2(d)

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