It is my contention that Europe’s influence on how secure the Russians feel is a key element in understanding Russia’s role in European security. I am told that it was a Tsarist foreign minister who once coined the expression that ‘the only safe border is one Russia is on both sides of’. Who knows what the Tsarist gentleman had in mind. Today the expression would most likely be trotted out to point to the potential threat posed to the world outside by an expansionist Soviet Union. And it could apply to almost any border. There is, of course, a less cynical interpretation – that Russia (and for my purposes here, the Soviet Union) has never felt secure with its neighbours. Without getting into an argument with myself over whether the Soviet Union is by nature an aggressive power or just a misunderstood defensive power, I would argue that when it comes to feeling insecure with its neighbours, the Soviet Union’s border with Europe presents the biggest headache of all. And by Europe I mean both parts of it – East and West.

Of course, as any Russian will tell you at the drop of a hat, the western borders of modern Russia have been tempting targets for hostile armies, from Napoleon to Hitler. Today the Warsaw Pact’s western front – NATO’s eastern front – is littered with one of the greatest concentrations of weaponry in the world. The battle-lines were drawn long ago. The two military Blocs have solidified against them. And the effect has been to produce a quite remarkable period of military stability, if not exactly peace, in Europe.

But it is not the military dimension of security I had in the front of my mind when thinking about this talk. Rather it was the political one. Because, whatever the military disposition of Russia’s Western neighbours, from Peter the Great to Karl Marx, the Russians have either gone in search of Western ideas or had Western ideas thrust upon them. From the October revolution to the present, from Stalin to

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Gorbachev, through periods of at times considerable hostility, the same process is still at work. Take, for example, the word Yalta. Depending on which side of the issue you take, Yalta may be convenient shorthand for the legitimate division of Europe into two halves, or for the unacceptable Soviet claim to dominion in Europe’s eastern half. No prizes for guessing how the Soviet Union sees it. But Yalta and the lines drawn and since fortified in its name have been unable to solve the Soviet Union’s problem with Europe.

I mentioned that when I used the word ‘Europe’ I had in mind both parts of Europe – East and West. I would first like to take a look at Eastern Europe’s role in the problem before making the link to the wider issue of European security and the Soviet Union’s role in it. The Soviet stake in Eastern Europe can be broken down into four main parts: the physical, or geographical stake, the economic, the military and the ideological. The first of these – physical security – is straightforward. Since the 1940s, the states of Eastern Europe have formed a physical security buffer along the Soviet Union’s western borders. But the Soviet stake in Eastern Europe has grown considerably since then. As the Comecon economies have developed, traded with each other and come to rely on each other in that peculiarly inefficient way Comecon has of creating mutual dependence, the Soviet Union too has come to depend on its Comecon allies. Though by far the largest economy and in many ways self-sufficient, the Soviet Union has come to rely on the colonial system in reverse: in the 19th century colonial powers used political dominion to gain economic benefit. In the Soviet case the reverse has happened: the Soviet Union uses its economic dominion to bolster political control.

The countries of the northern tier – East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia – are of special importance to the Soviet military stake in Eastern Europe. They form the first strategic echelon in Warsaw Pact military strategy. Since the 1970s, the Soviet Union has been putting much greater emphasis on military integration within the Pact. To some extent the pressure for greater coordination in military affairs has increased the room for mischief-making by the East Europeans. Romania, which criticised Soviet handling of the Geneva talks and missile deployments in Europe, is a case in point. Naturally, Romania’s voice is studiously ignored in Moscow, which of course demonstrates how limited that room for real mischief-making really is. And the Soviet Union would not tolerate the withdrawal of any of the East European states from the Warsaw Pact. But while Pact membership is a necessary condition of Soviet tolerance of limited