



SIMON ALVES

teacher or party bureaucrat from Tblisi to Tashkent is aware of it. Veteran Russia watchers cannot recall a time since the 1930s when there have been so many public posters exhorting Russians to shape up, work harder and produce more.

**Inertia the enemy**

But history and human nature are not on Gorbachev's side. If Intourist is any clue, the concepts of service and professionalism remain alien to most Russians. This vast government agency, which attends most foreign visitors and is thus one of Russia's prime sources of coveted "hard" currency, continues to breed indifferent, surly personnel (guides excepted) and to erect huge new hotels endowed with tattered upholstery, malfunctioning air conditioners, nineteenth century plumbing and room lights that encourage blindness.

The shoddiness of Soviet workmanship would be a national embarrassment if the average worker even cared a kopek's worth: alarm clocks and television sets that do not work; ill-maintained autos that break down on the road. Meanwhile, the Russians we met seemed more concerned about the malaise of their young, the endless store lines, the spread of AIDs, and hustling Western dollars and chewing gum.

**Reform means unemployment**

It is not just the disease of complacency and parochialism that infects most Russians. An inherently distrustful people, the unknowns of perestroika have exacerbated their national suspiciousness about change to the detriment of Gorbachev and his plans. Soviet officialdom has been warning for months that temporary losses in some areas of restructuring are inevitable, that there is bound to be a certain amount of psychological stress because, in the words of one local economist, "All of us have become too accustomed to economic impunity." Two identical sets of numbers leap out in the Soviet imagination — the twenty million Russians who died in World War Two and the twenty million Russian workers who may be displaced under perestroika's industrial restructuring. The first set of numbers has for more than forty years argued the case for a vast and financially crushing Soviet military complex, one that has bled some of the best productive energies and industrial talents from the larger consumer economy. The second set of numbers, unfortunately for Secretary Gorbachev, argues the case for ordinary Russians stonewalling his reform drive.

**Gorbachev must press on**

And this may be as unfortunate for the West as it is for Gorbachev. For the Western democracies, like the Russian people, are also asking whether Gorbachev can be trusted, although in a different arms control and strategic context. They are aware of the Soviet Union's desperate need to refurbish its external image, as well as its internal system, if it is ever to recapture communism's evangelistic appeal of seventy years ago. Perestroika, if successful, would go far in accomplishing that. The West may not relish the prospect of an economically rejuvenated USSR, but the alternative — foiled reform; a discredited Gorbachev; a lapse back into the dark, rocket-rattling psyche of the old Kremlin guard — would pose a worse dilemma.

Yet the Soviet leadership, slow to acknowledge error, may already be inviting that dilemma by proceeding on a false assumption that could abort perestroika: the idea that its centralized economic system is not fundamentally itself at fault, but rather that it simply has not been applied effectively by its managers. At the same time, even as Mr. Gorbachev bravely trumpets and threatens reform, history suggests his greater burden remains the reluctant Russian masses. Or, as a contemporary wrote of that other great Russian reformer, Peter the Great, "The Czar pulls uphill alone with the strength of ten, but millions pull downhill." □