

Pulling uphill in the land of "perestroika"

by Lansing Lamont

Forget for a moment Secretary Gorbachev's obsession with the sclerotic Soviet system and bureaucracy. As he strains to gain momentum for his vaunted social and economic reform (perestroika), it is the Russian people who present his biggest psychological challenge. Anyone who thinks that the conversion of Moscow's central planners and sluggish local managers into enlightened catalysts of industrial boom is the answer to Gorbachev's dream has not observed ordinary Russians. They recognize that a tall dose of perestroika is probably what they need and long overdue. But nobody takes to castor oil willingly.

On a recent 3-week trip through the Soviet Union, under the auspices of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, one was struck not only by the inertia of so many individual Russians, but by the stubborn skepticism and, in the more distant republics, the almost ritual aversion to any new policy or decree bearing the stamp of Moscow. A World War Two veteran of Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia, cheerfully gives a thumbs-up sign when asked what he thinks of Ronald Reagan, but rolls his eyes and hands in that classical "maybe 'yes,' maybe 'no'" gesture when queried about Gorbachev. An engineer in Tbilisi snorts derisively at the mention of Gorbachev and perestroika.

Moscow resented

The farther one ventures beyond the Moscow-Leningrad orbit, the more one senses the abiding distrust of the Kremlin bureaucrats. In parts of the Soviet Union — home to more than 100 ethnic and racial groups with their distinctive cultural, religious and linguistic traditions — this feeling translates into unabashed nationalism. The regions which our CIA group visited were those likely to be affected most profoundly by internal change under perestroika, for they are among the oldest and most closely bound to those traditions and life style.

In the southern republics of the Caucasus, for example, as well as in the largely Muslim republics of the eastern border region near China and Afghanistan, attempts by Moscow to "Russify" local customs and language are deeply resented. Where expressions of nationalistic ardor have turned violent, as with the riots in Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, last December, they pose a serious challenge to the Kremlin's control and perestroika's success. Barely a year ago, on a visit to Soviet Central Asia, Gorbachev gave a

speech in Tashkent in which he called for "a firm and uncompromising struggle against religious phenomena." In particular, he urged strict disciplining of Party officials who "help promote backward views and who themselves take part in religious ceremonies." The tone of the speech indicated how fearful Soviet leaders are that the religious zealotry sweeping the Islamic world may storm across Russia's eastern borders to contaminate the growing Muslim populations of Soviet Central Asia. The fact that these nationalist peoples, with a much higher birthrate than the ethnic Russians, may soon reduce the Russians to minority status in their own country does not make Gorbachev's campaign to unify reform throughout the Soviet Union any easier.

Some real progress

Yet the beginnings for perestroika have been auspicious up to a point. The anti-drinking campaign seems to be having a salutary effect already. In the seven major cities we visited, we saw few if any instances of public drunkenness, a major change from a short while ago. Pravda recently reported that the number of work hours lost due to drinking had dropped by two-thirds, with a one-third cut in auto accidents caused by booze.

The anti-corruption drive in Soviet industry and commerce is also making some apparent inroads. Nothing more concentrates the thoughts of a potential high level bribe-taker than the specter of a crippling fine, demotion in the Party ranks, even capital punishment. Shortly after we left Uzbekistan, Tass reported that the First Secretary of the Communist Party in the republic's Bukhara region had been sentenced to death by firing squad for taking bribes while in office. On notice, too, are the black-marketeers who once infested tourist hotels, raking in fortunes trading in Western goods and currency. "These prostitutes are no longer visible," confirmed a young Leningrad student. "There's real fear now. If you're caught, the penalty is very severe."

One detects a similar tone in the colloquy we had with a panel of teachers in Alma Ata. Those responsible in the recent past for laxness and lack of discipline in the schools have been punished, we were told. At the same time, more attention is being paid to hitherto neglected vocational training; the methodology of this training, while still administered according to a centralized design, now has some flexibility built in. In one particularly refreshing burst of glasnost, an older academician observed that "The problem of education in this country, under our selective system of choosing the best students to proceed to university, is that we have in fact *not* been selecting the best ones."

So the spirit of perestroika is undeniably sweeping across the USSR, in some cases with bracing effects. The lowliest

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