

A scary view of the Soviet Union

This week I had what the Chinese like to call "an exchange of views" with France's leading authority on the Soviet Union, Prof. Helene Carriere d'Encausse.

Elegant, brilliantly informed and razor-sharp, she is on close terms with many of the senior Kremlin leaders and is known as a confidante of Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1978, she published a major work that accurately predicted the unravelling of the Soviet Empire. She observes:

1) Boris Yeltsin, who just finished a high-profile tour of the U.S. in which he predicted that Gorbachev had only six months to a year left of political life, is not a viable alternative as national leader. He attracts the frustrations of society rather than its aspirations. Yeltsin is a master at saying what the public wants to hear, and a symbol of the little man. But beyond that he has no answers for the USSR's sea of problems. Populism won't put sausages on the store shelves.

2) Yegor Ligachev is seen in the West as a glowering hard-liner left over from the bad old days of Brezhnev and Stalin. There's much more to Ligachev than this one-dimensional picture. He is an extremely cautious man who knows that the party and nation are deep in decay but who is not sure that Gorbachev's solutions will work.

The majority of the Soviet people, as often noted here, are very conservative, if not downright reactionary. Intellectuals, who are having a field day under the warm sun of glasnost, adore Gorbachev. But for many ordinary Russians, their man in the Kremlin is Ligachev. He says things they want to hear about law and order, social and family values and discipline.

3) Russians are frightened and uneasy. Until Gorbachev came to power, they were told that the USSR was the most humane, best organized society on Earth; a few more years of sacrifice, and the USSR would also be rich. With glasnost came a terrifying flood of truth. Today, Russians are being told that they and their parents before them are suffering for nothing. The whole USSR is a colossal failure built on lies that is quickly slipping into Third World poverty. Ordinary Russians now have to face the unfamiliar terrors of unemployment, inflation and surging crime.

4) As the old social and economic order of the USSR comes apart at the seams, people are desperately looking for security. Some have turned to the Church, as I saw during Orthodox Christmas in Moscow. Many others will likely turn to that last remaining bastion of law, order and Russian values — the KGB. Which, just coincidentally, has been busy brushing up its image.

Gorbachev's mentor, Yuri Andropov, cleaned up the old KGB and kicked out all the old thugs from its musty offices. He brought in bright young university men with the intent of turning the KGB into a Soviet version of corporate IBM. These younger men are running the KGB today. As the crime wave grows, the local police have proven totally inept. Many Russians now want the



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KGB to go from being a secret police to a public one.

5) In spite of its grave internal weakness, the USSR still is able to exert its power abroad in a highly forceful and successful manner. Many westerners think because people are queuing up for potatoes in Moscow that the USSR no longer has muscle. Not so. In fact, in Afghanistan, the USSR managed to pull its troops out of an unpopular struggle and now appears to be winning the war there. At the same time, Soviet diplomacy has been scoring quiet triumphs in Iran, the Mideast, Western Europe and Asia.

Much of the credit for this tour de force goes to the little-appreciated Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. At first he was derided as a small-town KGB cop from Georgia. But, as reported here last winter, Shevardnadze has been the driving power behind many of the brilliant foreign policy triumphs credited to Gorbachev.

6) The nationalities issue is going to get much worse. Moscow will never let the Baltic states secede but at least they may be allowed to become "Finlandized." Ukraine, which produces 33% of Soviet industrial output and 25% of the nation's food, is a different story.

Gorbachev has persistently underestimated the danger and strength of the USSR's ethnic movements. Now it's too late to put the genie back in the bottle. Ukraine is going to keep seething, and may soon explode. And watch for a lot more trouble among the USSR's 50 million restive Moslems.

Gorbachev will likely stay in power because no one else knows what to do about Russia's mind-bending problems. We see a vast, decaying empire seething with troubles and alarms — one that could suddenly turn very dangerous and unpredictable.