

Gorbachev's Second Russian revolution

A bitter joke currently making the rounds in Moscow concerns two Russian dogs.

One asks the other what he thinks of glasnost and perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev's campaign to open and restructure the Soviet Union's economy and society. Well, the dog answers, my food bowl has been moved farther from me but my chain has also been made longer — and I can bark as loud as I want.

So far, most Soviet citizens are feeling pain or irritation from Gorbachev's reforms instead of the benefits that many had expected to reap. Consumer goods are scarcer than ever and waiting lines numbingly long. Featherbedding and overstaffing is ending, along with cushy, no-work jobs. The days of working at 40% of capacity are supposed to be over.

The anti-drinking campaign has made vodka, Russia's national solace, almost impossible to obtain — and enormously expensive. A single bottle can cost a worker 10 months salary. As a result, there is now a sugar shortage. People are using sugar to make moonshine, so the government is restricting supply.

Resourceful people are responding by spreading toothpaste on pieces of white bread and marinating this concoction in their refrigerators. Fallen after two days, this ghastly mixture somehow approximates being drunk. Toothpaste is now also in short supply.

As public irritation mounts, defenders of glasnost are saying: Patience, our reform campaign has not yet begun. The real revolution will come at the end of June when Gorbachev will hold a critically important party conference. Massive and sweeping changes in the Soviet system are expected to come out of this conference — so much so that opponents of reform are digging in for a last-ditch fight.

Eric

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in Moscow



Just how far the reforms will go is not yet clear but some extremely well connected Soviet sources tell me that the revolution Gorbachev is planning may turn Soviet society on its head.

There are even rumors Gorbachev is planning to take over the position of prime minister and run the nation through the government rather than in the traditional method as head of the Communist party. This would enable Gorbachev to circumvent the entrenched party fat-cats have been bitterly opposing reform and rule the nation directly through the government. The party would then be downgraded to a consultative function.

Gorbachev's second Russian revolution may not go to such lengths, but it seems clear a decisive attack will be made against the party. If this battle can be won, Gorbachev must immediately turn to the economy which, by all counts, is deteriorating rapidly.

Though no Soviet official will openly admit it, the USSR is gripped by a sort of concealed runaway inflation. For years the government has been spending far more than it takes in — just like many inflation-wracked western and Third World governments.

A Russian noted that in the bad old days under Leonid Brezhnev, crisp, new bills were given to all workers.

Now, for the first time in memory, old money is being handed out. The government printing presses have been shut down. The USSR has to stop living beyond its means — and fast. Cutting arms spending at this weekend's summit is one clear way; cutting all the fat out of the economy will also have to be done.

But until the power of the party is broken, reforms cannot be enacted. Senior party members, who face losing their stately Chaika limousines with their interiors of leather and Persian carpets, will fight to the last bureaucrat.

Without a total economic and social revolution, say Gorbachev supporters, the Communist party is in grave peril of becoming discredited to the point where it may even lose power. To prevent this happening, Lenin's thinking is being revived and restored. Word has just gone out that every factory must have a portrait of Lenin.

Gorbachev clearly plans to wrap himself in the mantle of Lenin and claim that he is the true Communist while the party conservatives have betrayed the public.

Nor is there any doubt that Gorbachev plans to bring back Lenin's New Policy of the 1920s in which a mixed private and government economy was allowed.

Soviet citizens are, of course, watching all this with rapt fascination — and not a little fear. Ironically, some find it safer to discuss this subject with foreigners. I was told, "After Stalin, we're afraid to talk to anyone — you just never know."

Clearly, the Soviet Union badly needs a solution. Whether Gorbachev's June revolution will be as decisive as Lenin's October one, remains to be seen. Still, in Moscow you can almost feel the tremors of excitement.