

# Gorby feels the squeeze

**M**ikhail Gorbachev reminds me of the great 17th-century artist of the siege, Vauban. He planned precise mathematical attacks on fortresses and executed them with precision.

Supplies were brought up, saps were driven forward toward key bastions and guns emplaced. Each day, the saps would advance, and behind them the guns. Finally, the guns would be able to enfilade the fort's bastions and a breach would be blown in the wall.

When this occurred, usually after many months, the defenders would give up and march out with flags flying. It was all very predictable and polite. Last-ditch defending was considered crass.

Last week, that deft modern besieger, Marshal Gorbachev, struck again after months of careful planning and sapping. And, as in the polite 17th century, the besieged accepted the inevitable and gave up. Fully one third of the members of the powerful Central Committee announced their retirement, many for "health" reasons. Nearly all were old-time party warhorses and holdovers from Leonid Brezhnev's days, now officially known as the "era of stagnation."

This sweeping purge of the party's "dead souls" — as cynical Muscovites call party conservatives — ostensibly removes one of the last key centres of opposition to Gorbachev's reforms. Old-timers have now been eliminated from the government, military and upper ranks of the party. Next on Gorby's list could be the middle ranks of the bloated party apparatus — and maybe even that most sacred Soviet cow, the KGB.

So now that the old guard has been pensioned off, will Mother Russia finally perk up? Based on my most recent reports from Moscow and other Soviet cities, the answer is a very loud nyet. In fact, things are going from worse to terrible. Food shortages are growing. Potatoes are now being rationed in Moscow as well as the rest of the USSR. This, in a nation that plans to land a man on Mars.

Meat is impossible to get. Things we in the West take for granted, like toothpaste and toilet paper, are treasures in the Soviet Union. Food and consumer products are available. But they never make it out of storerooms and onto the shelves. People with the right connections, like party brass, and those with hard currency, skim off such goods before they get to the general public. Officials in important organizations get special deliveries of frozen fish and meat.

"I don't know how the ordinary Soviet citizen manages to find food," a frequent visitor to the USSR told me. "There's nothing at all in the stores."

Now, it turns out, the financial cupboard is also bare. The Soviets, who keep lousy statistics, or none at all, have suddenly discovered they have a huge government deficit — almost as large, per capita, as Canada's.

Subsidies for food and housing will have to be cut. Rents and grocery bills will go up. So will

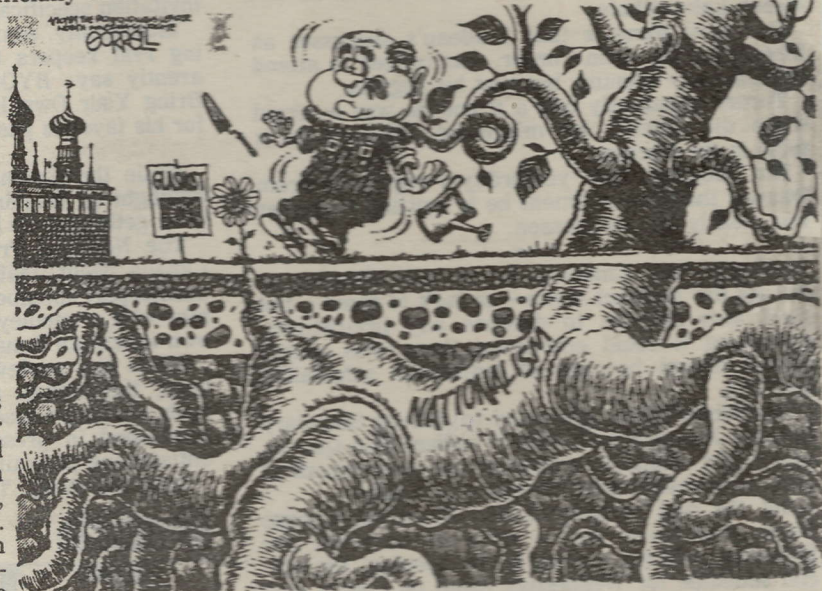
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taxes for people making money from small businesses. All of this means that already unhappy Russians will be growing a lot unhappier.

Into this unhappy mix add a soaring crime wave. Many private restaurants in Moscow, I am told, now close up at 10:45 p.m. No matter if diners are finished or not, out they go. For promptly at 11 p.m. arrive Armenian, Georgian or Central Asian gangsters who hold up the eateries and their clients. The police are still refusing to provide protection to non-state property.

Pollution has become a major Soviet problem. Large numbers of factories that have been massi-



vely polluting are being shut down. Growing ethnic unrest in many parts of the USSR is now being stirred up with anger over nuclear plants and dirty factories.

Abroad, the Soviet image is just dandy. But at home, nothing seems to be going right. As a result, some informed Soviet sources are saying that Mikhail Gorbachev's time is fast running out. Last fall there were strong rumors that he was almost overthrown by a coup.

In spite of the recent Central Committee purge, opposition to Gorbachev remains strong. Worse, surging ethnic unrest and the unravelling of the Soviet East European protectorate could impel conservatives and the military to move against Gorbachev.

"We didn't put you in power to preside over the demise of the Soviet Empire," they will say.

So while the great besieger has managed to storm the Central Committee, he is finding that he, in turn, is under siege himself. A siege that is growing tighter. At night, Gorby must almost hear the picks and shovels of enemy sappers growing closer and closer to the Kremlin walls.