

Gorby's new best friends

How the great wheel of fortune turns. Who would have thought that the Germans would one day come galloping to the rescue of an embattled Mikhail Gorbachev. Aren't they the horrid people in nifty uniforms who keep burning down Leningrad and bayonetting babies?

Da! But that was last week. This week, enter smiling, the good Germans who saved Russia.

Good Germans, of course, are plump, pin-striped bankers who send you wonderful deutschemarks instead of Stukas. On Wednesday, West Germany announced that a consortium of its rich banks would lend the Soviet Union a cool \$1.8 billion. What made the loan so interesting was that unlike past German credits granted for heavy industrial projects, this one was clearly designed to prop up Gorbachev and save his skin.

The low-interest loans will be used to set up factories for consumer goods in the USSR. Urgent priority will be given to producing desperately needed goods like shoes, food, refrigeration units, and decent clothing. So pressing is the need, that some consumer goods may be imported directly from Germany or other countries. As they might say at K-Mart: "Attention all Soviet shoppers, Gorbachev's specials are on the way!"

Producing shoes may not seem like a very dramatic political act to most Canadians. But in the USSR, where almost everything is in short supply or of putrid quality, and where shoppers agonize in endless lines, there is nothing more important or urgent than more consumer goods. Soviet citizens are on the verge of an explosion of anger and frustration and won't put up much longer with a wartime economy that belongs in the 1940s.

There's a neat irony here. Soviet citizens have long



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been told they must sacrifice in order to make Mother Russia strong enough to resist attack from the wicked Germans and their Yankee paymasters. How embarrassing to see the same Teutons now coming to bail out the Soviet economy.

Actually, the Soviets have a long and deep love-hate relationship with Germans. In the Russian language, the term "German" is synonymous with efficiency, modernity and technology. To "be German" means to be hi-tech. All through Russian history, Germans have supplied the vast nation with merchants, farmers, technicians, officers and artists. One of Russia's greatest rulers, Catherine the Great, was a German princess.

Germans have also regularly come to Russia as invaders, from the Teutonic and Livonian knights to Gen. Guderian's panzers. Somewhere deep in the Russian soul, the concepts of modernity and invasion seem to have become mixed up, instinctively producing a simultaneous awe and fear of change and progress.

This time, the Germans have brought financial relief for Gorbachev's biggest headache. By doing so, the West German government, which has long cultivated its trade and political relations with Moscow, has taken an extremely bold political initiative. One that will put the noses

of its close British and French allies out of joint.

They are not sure whether it's a good idea to back up Gorbachev or let the USSR's chronic economic illness run its course. And watching Bonn flirt with Moscow gives both the jitters. Might the West Germans not ditch NATO one day in exchange for getting back East Germany? The wary French, in particular, are saying, 'why save the smartest, most cunning and most dangerous Soviet leader since Stalin?'

Lenin predicted the capitalists would sell the communist world the rope from which they would be hanged. In fact, the capitalists are not even selling the rope but lending it. So does what the German bankers have done make sense? Or are they simply trying to buy off the threatening Soviets and their huge tank armies?

For both West and East Germans, anything that lowers great power tensions makes sense. If a war is fought, it will be on German soil. Nuclear or conventional, a major war will utterly devastate Germany, no matter who wins. The Germans, who think they know the Russians well, are betting that Gorbachev will be the least threatening leader available. If growing economic woes spark an upheaval in the USSR — like ones now happening in Poland and Yugoslavia — then Gorbachev's replacement could well be a beetle-browed throw-back to the bad old days of Uncle Joe Stalin.

Just as Russians have had dreams about Teutonic knights, so Germans toss and turn over frightful visions of hordes of Tatars and Mongols raping and pillaging westward — as they did in 1944-45.

Much better, say the Germans, to buy Gorbachev lots of shoes and socks. Otherwise, he and his barefoot hordes might decide to go get them in Germany.