

Mayday call from May Day parade

To say that it rained on Mikhail Gorbachev's parade would be a serious understatement.

For more than 20 embarrassing minutes this past week, Soviet leaders fidgeted and sulked atop Lenin's tomb, which had just been saved by the vigilant KGB from a plot by anti-communist miscreants to blow it up, while throngs of May Day parade marchers booed, hissed and shouted abuse at them.

Stalin must have been spinning in his grave.

The last time such an outrage happened was in Bucharest during a harangue by the late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Suddenly, the normally docile crowd began screaming "murderer" and "down with the tyrant."

Ceausescu froze with horror. It was every dictator's worst nightmare — the mob had turned.

Gorbachev and his colleagues survived the May Day fiasco, but the event raised anew the question everyone in Moscow has been asking: "Who is in charge here?"

Who, for example, let all the protesters into the parade? Who is running the collapsing economy, or the armed forces, or the food distribution system, the government or the party?

One possible answer is that there is simply no one in charge of ailing Mother Russia.

This may sound awfully odd to westerners who are used to thinking of the USSR as a perfect totalitarian mechanism in which the Kremlin leader pushes a button and things happen in far-off Vladivostok. Such was the case under Stalin. His answer to unresponsive was to shoot or starve up to 30 million of his people. After that, everyone obeyed. Stalin's glad-to-be-alive successors, however, thoroughly decentralized the Soviet



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system so another tyrant could never seize all the reins of power.

They did such a good job that today power in Moscow is shared by a score of secretive, competing bureaucracies, parliament, the official government, the armed forces, KGB, interior ministry, party cabals and the little-known but vastly powerful defence council which runs the military-industrial complex currently gobbling up 25% of the Soviet GNP.

Much of the rest of this huge nation, which spans nine time zones, is run by local mafia chieftans, feudal barons, party bosses and small-town tyrants. In many cases, Moscow's writ hardly extends beyond city limits.

Atop this ziggurat of bureaucratic chaos sits the amiable Mikhail Gorbachev who, at times, seems more of a visiting academic observer than a national leader. In fact, Gorbachev may well answer to a secret power superstructure we know almost nothing about.

During my trips to the USSR, I have kept picking up rumors and hints that there are one or more absolutely secret organizations to which the party leader and the KGB report. First rumors of such organs came in the 1930s when Stalin may have seized control of a shadowy organization called the Party Control Committee, whose mission was to police the top leadership.

In the Soviet system, virtually every organ of state power is watched by some other competitor. Stalin may have attained supreme power and eliminated his rivals through the Party Control Committee. There is some evidence this organ still exists today and functions as a covert super-leadership. It is also possible that a second top-secret parallel organ exists. Russians speak of these two groups in hushed tones, or not at all.

No one seems to know who sits on these committees or even if they truly exist. Whether they do or not, it is no surprise that the Soviet Union is grinding to a halt. With so many Big Brothers, so many centres of power and so much overlapping of control functions, no one is really in charge. Some Russians even say that the long-feared KGB is, in reality, a paper tiger which is trying to hide the fact that it has little real power.

All this sounds contradictory and bizarre, but such is the nature of the enigmatic Soviet Union where few things are as they seem on the surface.

Now add to this Byzantine confusion a surging revolution at the grassroots level that is going in two opposite directions at once. One extreme is pushing for popular democracy and western values while the other, centred on newly forming labor organizations, is urging a return to a form of Czarist absolutism or Stalinist totalitarianism. On top of all this, unconfirmed press reports coming out of Moscow say there may have been some sort of attempted military coup on Feb. 25.

One of my sources was in a hotel close to Red Square that day that was filled with heavily-armed Spetnaz commandos apparently poised to move on the Kremlin.

No wonder Gorbachev looked a bit fidgety and glum atop Lenin's Tomb. It was not a happy May Day at all.