

Russian tanks were headed west

Beating swords into plowshares, as the Soviets are lately discovering, is no easy business.

Last year, Mikhail Gorbachev announced plans to take 10,000 older tanks — 17% of the total Soviet armored force — out of military service and convert half to civilian use. To Moscow's chagrin, the project has turned into a giant boondoggle and a nasty scandal.

The Soviets make excellent tanks, but they are designed to last for only three battles. Soviet designers reasoned that in intense modern combat, tanks wouldn't survive more than a few days of heavy fighting.

This may be fine for warfare, but not for civilian vehicles. Those tanks that have been put into service in farming or forestry work have been breaking down with alarming frequency and are enormous gas guzzlers. State farms are demanding that Moscow take its tanks back and send them proper vehicles.

Worse, the newly frisky Soviet press broke a truly embarrassing story last January that caused a lot of red faces in the Kremlin.

The Soviets have been forming co-op ventures between government organizations and private individuals as a way of getting around the ossified state bureaucracy. One of these, called ANT, was set up to export Soviet goods to obtain desperately needed foreign currency. Some of the leading figures in the Soviet aerospace industry were involved with ANT, party bigwigs with connections right into the Kremlin.

At the end of last year, KGB border guards were poking about a freighter that was getting up steam to sail from the port of Novorossiisk to an undisclosed destination in Western Europe. In the hold they found 12 of the latest model T-72 tanks that were described on the ship's



manifest as "cargo for re-melting." ANT had arranged the shipment, which was probably going to France or Belgium.

But tanks are not supposed to be smuggled out of the USSR. Even worse, it was revealed that the T-72s in question had the most advanced, top-secret glass-ceramic laminar armor which western intelligence agencies have been dying to get a look at.

A mighty scandal erupted and soon involved a bevy of senior Soviet officials. Fuelled by sensational press reports, the scandal began to lap up against the walls of the Kremlin. Things got so bad Prime Minister Ryzhkov was charged with heading up a major investigation.

Reports coming out of Moscow say at least one of the senior officials involved has been shot and other heads may soon roll. Now there are rumors that Ryzhkov himself may have somehow been implicated in the smuggling scheme. This comes at a time when the prime minister, regarded as a conservative, is increasingly at odds with Mikhail Gorbachev and highly unpopular with the public.

The rumors could well be the product of Kremlin infighting and part of a campaign to oust Ryzhkov. Whatever the case, the whole episode makes the Krem-

lin leadership look either incredibly silly or dangerously corrupt. Ordinary Russians, who are lining up for scarce soap and potatoes, are furious at what they see as the latest example of greed and arrogance by party fat-cats.

The tank scandal comes just when the Soviet leadership has apparently made a decision to gingerly begin selling military technology to the West. A number of joint ventures between the Soviets and foreigners are offering metallurgical, rocket, composite and electronic technology to western organizations that is officially described as civilian, but which also has military uses.

Moscow is also hard at work trying to sell its new, top-of-the-line fighters, the MiG-29 and SU-27, to foreign customers. In years past, the Russians would not have even allowed such aircraft to be photographed. Now the planes are being sent on publicity tours and test-flown by western pilots.

I strongly suspect, after having looked into some recent joint venture technology deals, that the Soviets are edging toward the direct export of pure military technology, an area in which their industry is extremely competent and, in some areas, well ahead of its western counterparts.

All this has not been done for the sake of brotherhood. Moscow must obtain foreign currency to buy computers and machine tools to produce advanced, hi-tech weapons for the military and electronics for civilian industry. Hard cash is also needed to buy western consumer goods to placate the angry public. But with the tank deal, things just got out of hand — in typical slapdash Russian style.

What next? Maybe we'll learn Lenin's Tomb in Red Square has been secretly sold to a Japanese consortium