

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Evaluating the Soviet economic breakdown

Washington analysts are beginning to concede that the so-called liberalizing policies of glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union are, in reality, driven by a desperate need to redress an almost hopeless economic breakdown now occurring in the East bloc.

For example, Peter Rodman of the National Security Council, speaking at a conference of the Atlantic Council June 13, said that the new Soviet policies would "be put to the test" by the Soviet-controlled nations of Eastern Europe. "Someone will push this new liberalism to the limits, and find those limits in the course of breaking them," Rodman said.

However, Rodman was creating the impression that the new Gorbachov reforms are simply aimed at opening up the Soviet system. He did not comment on the underlying factors behind these reforms, until I asked him if it were not true that uprisings in Eastern Europe, and indeed in the Soviet Union, will be driven by the brutal economic austerity policies that come with glasnost and perestroika.

Only then did Rodman agree with me, and concede that the key to the success of the Gorbachov reform lies in its ability to create governments that are "legitimate" in the eyes of the people they rule, because only such a government "can impose the kind of belt-tightening that is required."

"People are more likely to accept a cut in their standard of living if it is

from a government they support," he said, "and therefore it is the purpose of the liberalization policy to create such governments as a way for the Soviets to gain some breathing space."

He added, "The more they reform their economy, and impose austerity, the more they run the risk of revolt."

More forthcoming in his remarks about the economic collapse driving the Soviet perestroika policy was Dr. Nicholas Eberstat of Harvard, speaking at an American Enterprise Institute conference June 6.

Eberstat pointed to the 50% increase in the Soviet death rate over the last 20 years as evidence of an extraordinary decline in the Soviet economy. "There is nothing which can account for such a dramatic increase in the death rate except an enormous decline in health and standard of living," he said.

Prompted by Eberstat's figures, I traveled to a remote Maryland location to find the government's top expert on Soviet population patterns, working in the Census Bureau.

Dr. Ward Kingkade granted me an interview, and while he disputed Eberstat's use of "crude death rates" as a scientifically sound indicator of a declining economy (he said such figures could be explained by, for example, the introduction of widespread abortion practices in the U.S.S.R.), he had his own criteria for drawing essentially the same conclusion.

Kingkade said, "If you want to see the most astonishing indicator of the state of the Soviet economy, it is the fact that there is a stagnation in the life expectancy of the Soviet population, while in every other industrial nation, there has been a marked increase over the same period."

In fact, the statistics show that there was a significant decline in Soviet life expectancy during the 1970s—from 68.8 years in 1969-70 to 67.5 years in

1979-80—that was so embarrassing to the Soviets that they abruptly stopped publishing statistics on life expectancy during the mid-1970s. They did not re-start publishing statistics until 1986, when they were able to show a modest rebound in their rates for a few years in the early 1980s.

The official Soviet explanation for the decline in life expectancy rates was alcoholism, leading to the Gorbachov crackdown on drinking, and, in the Soviet view, the reversal of the decline.

However, according to Kingkade, alcoholism is not a big enough health factor to account for such a huge change in the figures. He said that "what's in the water" is perhaps the most important single factor, followed by "what's in the diet."

Even as dramatic as the trends in life expectancy are those regarding infant mortality. In this case, he cited Soviet Uzbekistan, where infant mortality rates have soared from 31 deaths per 1,000 in 1970 to 46.2 deaths per 1,000 in 1986.

He said that concerns within the predominantly Muslim populations of Uzbekistan and other central Asian republics that the "Great Russian" people are engaged in deliberate genocide against them has helped to spur the riots there in recent months.

For example, he said, a noted demographer in Kazakhstan, Makush Tatimov, charged precisely this in speeches that helped precipitate the Alma Ata riots last year.

The Muslims are the only group in the Soviet Union now reproducing at above breakeven levels. In addition to economic factors, high rates of abortion have contributed to the fact that there is now a below breakeven (2.1 children per woman) birthrate in the European sectors of the U.S.S.R., while the birthrate among the Muslims is 5 to 6 children per woman.