A few weeks after taking office as general secretary of the Communist Party, Gorbachev was on the road, mingling with crowds, explaining perestroika. Here he talks with residents of Krylatskaya, a Moscow suburb, in May 1985.

Reform in Russia

"This society is ripe for a change," Mikhail Gorbachev wrote in 1987, adding that any delay in launching *perestroika*—the "restructuring" of the failing Soviet system, notably its economy—could have led to "serious social, economic, and political crises." Seven decades after the Bolshevik Revolution, Gorbachev is pushing his 286 million compatriots to speak out, to explore "new thinking," to support more autonomy in the workplace and more democracy in the Communist Party—all in Lenin's name. Some Western scholars believe that Gorbachev must overcome not just the legacy of Joseph Stalin, but also 1,000 years of Russian history. Here, S. Frederick Starr compares the current bewildering upheaval to past eras of Russian reform; he finds some strong similarities. Robert Rand reports on ordinary Muscovites' reactions to Gorbachev's promises of a better life.

A PECULIAR PATTERN

by S. Frederick Starr

A reforming crusade grips the USSR. Enthusiasts of change call for new laws, new economic mechanisms, even a new and more independent national psychology in place of the old conformism. What Gorbachev calls "rapid transformations in all spheres of our life" are exhilarating to some, threatening to others. For everyone—in the Soviet Union and abroad—they are confusing.

Where does one turn to make sense of it all? Many Western observers seek parallels to Gorbachev's *perestroika* elsewhere. Some scrutinize current "market-oriented" reforms in China or Hungary, or the troubled experiments in Communist Yugoslavia. Others seek hints about the Soviet future in Western Europe's past or even in Third World experiences.

Many Soviets have begun examining previous waves of reform in their own country. Newly published memoirs of the Khrushchev "thaw" (1956–64) find avid readers in Moscow. Gorbachev himself often hails the era of Lenin's New Economic Policy (1921–28) as a pattern for the present—without reference to the era's darker side. Those with a longer view turn to episodes of reform under the tsars. Some think the way in which quasi-parliamentary government was established and then curtailed under Nicholas II in 1905–07 holds lessons for today. Others look to the first decade of Alexander II's reign (1856–66)—a period of legal reforms, decentralization in government, and military cutbacks—all, then as now, in a climate of openness. Further in the past, certain reforms under Catherine II in the 1760s and the perestroika under Peter I after 1700 stir debate

in Moscow. Western scholars, too, are reexamining the Russian past in hope of gaining insights into the Soviet present.

Implicit in all this is the question: Is there a peculiarly Russian way of reform?

It would appear so, and pessimists argue that past patterns do not augur well for the Soviet future. Indeed, sharp swings between eras of stagnation and spurts of dynamism followed by reaction or torpor have been a feature of Russia's history since at least the 17th century. The causes are not hard to find. The absence of both a vigorous private sector and an elected parliament has always given the centralized bureaucracy unfettered power to act—or not to act. Thus, instead of the constant shifts and tradeoffs that preoccupy peacetime politicians in democracies, Russia has experienced something else: a few bouts of massive change, each in response to a crisis.

Over the centuries, other elements have reinforced this tendency. Among them:

- Without orderly means of succession, most tsars and Communist party general secretaries have stayed in office until removed by death, palace coups, or rebellion. Even the most reformist among them have eventually settled for self-preservation.
- Russia's historic hunger for security or imperial prestige has thwarted steady economic and social evolution. With so much of the budget committed to the military, there has been little money left for new civilian needs or general uplift.
- Official controls on free expression and international contacts have suppressed the natural yeasts in Russian society, further blocking normal development.

Together, such factors give Russian history a certain "geological" character, with long eras when the tectonic plates are locked and short eras during which rapid, grinding shifts occur. Sometimes the plates clash with explosive force. Such was the case during the bloody upheavals and civil war of 1917–20 and the undeclared revolution and civil strife accompanying Stalin's rise in 1928–31. Occasionally, too, leadership of Russia has fallen to men committed to ceaseless innovations, regardless of cost or attendant suffering. Such was the case with Ivan IV ("The Terrible," 1533–84), and Peter I ("The Great," 1682–1725).

The few periods of genuine reform in Russia have not been the product of great upheavals or complete social breakdown. They were relatively unmarked by terror, and were something more than the creation of a restless or maniacal leader. To a surprising degree, Russia's reformist surges have conformed to a common scenario.

First, reform has generally been preceded by years of rigid rule at the top, which masked deep shifts in the society below. Thus, while Tsar Nicholas I (1825–55) was keeping the lid on change by dispatching suspected radicals to Siberia, innovative young men in the junior ranks of his own bureaucracy were plotting the limited reforms they later implemented. The legalization of political parties by Nicholas II in 1905 was preceded by several decades during which his government spared no effort to suppress them, even as they developed unofficially. Today, we are seeing the official adoption of ideas that were similarly suppressed by Leonid Brezhnev but which gained wide support among educated folk nonetheless.

This prior frustration and subsequent

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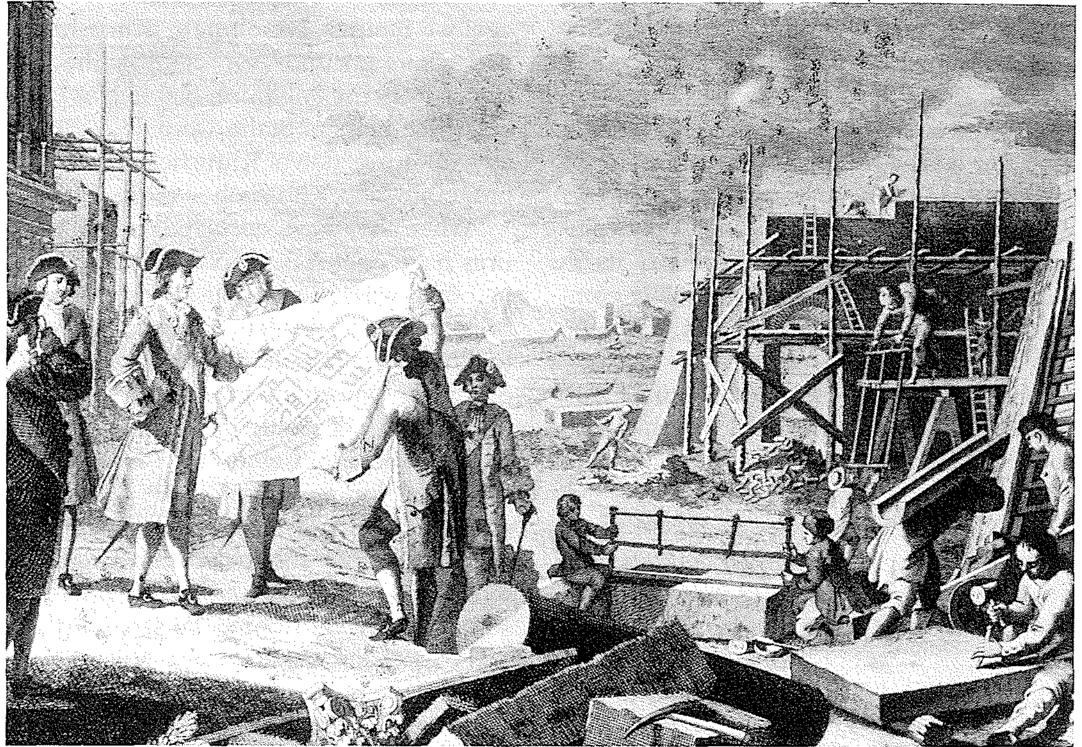

Tsar Peter I ("the Great") overseeing the construction of St. Petersburg (now Leningrad). His chief domestic effort was "Westernization"—only a partial success.

commitment to change links all the reform eras. Long before Catherine II ousted her drill sergeant husband, Peter III, in 1762, she had become a magnet for all those educated Russians who were alienated by his crude behavior. Khrushchev's "thaw" after 1956 gave a first taste of liberalization to Gorbachev and encouragement to a generation of young officials and intellectuals who had been stymied (or terrorized) by their elders during the Stalin era.

Today, pro-Gorbachev activists like the journalist Feodor Burlatsky, who was fired twice under Gorbachev's predecessors, or economist Tatiana Zaslavskaya, whose calls for change under Brezhnev had circulated only among fellow specialists, represent the suppressed underside of the previous era.

What has triggered episodes of change in Russia?

Marxist historians long argued that reform was invariably a response to mounting unrest among peasants or workers. But this scarcely fits the pre-Gorbachev situation, nor the preludes to other major Russian reform eras—with the exception of 1905, when strikes paralyzed Nicholas II's capital and peasant uprisings rocked the countryside. More commonly, it has taken an external shock to shake up the regime and its supporters. Military defeat has often provided such a shock.

The upheavals launched by Peter I—focusing on Western-oriented economic and technological uplift—came in the wake of disastrous campaigns against the Tartars on the southern steppes and of defeat at the hands of Sweden's King Charles XII in 1700. The "Great Reforms"

of Alexander II followed the disastrous Crimean War against England and France (1853–56) and the 1905 reforms of Nicholas II were introduced immediately after Russia's defeat by imperial Japan. In the same vein, Gorbachev's call for change in 1985 came just as the country was beginning to face up to its failed military intervention in Afghanistan, and its costly commitments to Vietnam, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Angola, and Cuba.

Historians may counter by citing Catherine II's campaigns for reform, which followed not Russia's defeat but her victory in the Seven Years' War (1756–63). While this triumph marked Russia's successful entry into European politics, it had ruinous consequences nonetheless. As the Empress stated "In the treasury I found imperial *Ukazes* for payments totaling 17 million roubles, which had not been met. The currency was valueless . . . ."

Tsars Alexander II and Nicholas II faced similar postwar fiscal crises. Both sought to cushion the shock by taking out huge loans from Western European banks. After the Crimean fiasco, Alexander borrowed to prevent the collapse of Russia's state bank. After the loss to Japan, Nicholas II's loans from France were the largest international debts incurred anywhere at the time. Gorbachev's recent $9 billion line of credit from Western and Japanese banks fits the same pattern. The size of these loans attests to the anxiety with which Gorbachev views the domestic strain caused by his predecessors' military spending policies.

Nikita Khrushchev (1956–64) is the obvious exception to the linkage between war and reform. In his famous "Secret Speech" to the 1956 Communist Party Congress, Khrushchev excoriated Stalin for his brutality. However, with no record of military failure or ensuing financial chaos to hurl against Stalin's henchmen, Khrushchev had scant grounds for ousting the Old Guard from the Politburo. Fighting as insiders, these heirs of Stalin were able eventually to bring down Khrushchev's reform program—and Khrushchev himself.

When they have occurred, military failures have contributed to domestic reform in other ways. Defeat suspends, however briefly, Russian leaders' chronic tendency to stress foreign policy—that is, expansion of Russian power and imperial prestige—at the expense of domestic affairs. Scarcely was Gorbachev in office than he spoke of the need for *peredyshka*, or "breathing space," from overseas commitments. In practice, he has conducted more vigorous diplomacy than his immediate predecessors, notably in wooing Western Europe and bargaining with America. Nonetheless, the stated purpose is not imperial expansion but creating the international stability necessary for reforms at home.

The immediate initiative for change in Russia always comes from the top. With the exception of the reforms extracted from Nicholas II after the revolution of 1905, every era of benevolent change in Russian history has coincided with the advent to power of a new ruler.

Yet the ability—and desire—of a would-be reformer to install key administrators committed to change may be the most accurate indicator of future success. Here, Gorbachev looks very strong, stronger than any of his reform-minded predecessors, having surrounded himself with the likes of his adviser Alexander Yakovlev, his foreign minister Edward Shevardnadze, and Moscow-party chief Lev Zaikov. By comparison, Khrushchev had few such backers and as a result was forced to work more as a soloist than as leader of a team.

Glasnost (openness) has always been part of the scenario. It entered Russia's political vocabulary during the reformist

phase of Catherine II's reign. It became central to the policies of Alexander II, and has reemerged under Gorbachev as a necessary condition of reform. Under all three rulers (and during the reformist years of Alexander I and Khrushchev) people who only a few years earlier had been branded "dissidents" were given a public forum.

In every case, then as now, Russia's reformers have been acutely aware of the political benefits. With their predecessors in disgrace, reformers can advocate glasnost, confident that, initially, most of the opinions emanating from the press will be critical of the old order. The real test comes later, when the new regime's foes exploit the same openness to discredit reform.

And without exception, Russia's reformist episodes have coincided with the most cosmopolitan periods in the nation's history; Russia, so often xenophobic and closed off, opens up at such times. The 17th-century reforming tsar Alexei (1645–76) was far more hospitable to Western

Catherine the Great. During her reign (1762–1796), the empire expanded, trade grew, and Russia became a major player in European politics, albeit without lasting internal reform.

ideas than any of his predecessors. Alexander I's reformism had been encouraged by his tutor, the Swiss philosopher Frédéric-César de La Harpe; Alexander II permitted the publication of works by British, French, and German political economists advocating policies that had been anathema under his predecessor. In the same spirit, the public inauguration of Khrushchev's brief reform era was the International Youth Festival held in Moscow in 1957. Nominally a gathering of communist youths from abroad, this became in fact an unprecedented exhibit of the latest in Western fashions, pop culture, and art.

Gorbachev's massive importation of Western books, films, concert artists and exhibits places him squarely in this tradition. In accepting President Reagan's 1986 invitation to send 1500 young Soviets to the United States and through similar exchanges of scientists, he emulates Peter I, Catherine II, Alexander I—and Khrushchev, who signed the Soviets' first cultural exchange agreement with the Americans in 1958. Gorbachev clearly is seeking to strengthen the zeal of those backing change by putting them in contact with advanced ideas and practices abroad.

Russia has long been remarkable for its ability to borrow, adapt, and assimilate innovations from overseas, especially during eras of reform. The pattern was well established even before Peter I's reign, when Russia absorbed Western ideas on everything from the Roman alphabet to shipbuilding and zoology. Catherine II's famous *Instruction*, given to the commission she established to rewrite Russia's laws, was based on Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. When Alexander II set about emancipating the serfs his officials reviewed all West European legislation on the subject. Virtually every reform of the "tsar liberator" drew heavily on foreign models, whether German and French ideas on law or British notions of self-government. Later, during the drafting of the Constitution of 1905, Nicholas II's bureaucrats in St. Petersburg reviewed the experience of many Western nations, in preparing new laws on political parties and the press.

Fifty years later, however, the USSR's self-conscious role as Mother Church of the Communist world curbed Khrushchev's inclinations to draw on foreign models in planning his reforms. The Soviets had difficulty admitting that they were "backward" in any sphere. Nonetheless, his rule was marked by borrowing from abroad in matters as diverse as agriculture and education. That Khrushchev did not borrow more reflects the limited scale of his reform effort overall.

By contrast, Gorbachev seems to have reverted to the cultural and institutional borrowing of the tsar-reformers of old. Sympathetic intellectuals and bureaucrats have been encouraged to draw on the latest foreign experience. Thus, sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaya has championed the development of public opinion polling along American lines, and journalist Feodor Burlatsky, head of the USSR's official Human Rights Commission, has been guided by standards elaborated by Western jurists and civil libertarians.

Most important, Gorbachev's critique of centralized planning and his espousal of partial deregulation and a degree of privatization of the economy reveal the influence, albeit carefully filtered, of the policies of Britain's Margaret Thatcher and America's Ronald Reagan. Not since the rise to power in 1917 of revolutionaries inspired by Karl Marx, a German, have the fundamentals of change in Russia been more directly influenced by Western ideas.

Not surprisingly, emulation being the most sincere form of flattery, Westerners have always taken Russian reformers to

TSAR ALEXANDER II

A British observer, Andrew D. White, visited Russia in 1854 and again in 1892, 31 years after Alexander's emancipation of the serfs. He later wrote:

"A change had indeed been brought by the emancipation of the serfs, but there was little outward sign of it. The muzhik [peasant] remained to all appearance, what he was before.... The peasants, with their sheepskin caftans, cropped hair, and stupid faces brought back the old impressions so vividly that I seemed not to have been absent a week."

From *Russia: A History* (Lippincott, 1964) by Sidney Harcave

their hearts. Until their eventual disillusionment, noted Western intellectuals outdid themselves in praising Catherine II, their disciple and financial patron. Voltaire effused that "France persecutes philosophers while the Scythians protect them." Friedrich Grimm, who served as Catherine's diplomatic representative in his native Hamburg, even penned a worshipful parody of the Lord's prayer, which began "Our Mother, who art in Russia...."

During the early years of the 19th century, Tsar Alexander I toyed with reform; several aides even advocated an American-style federal system for Russia. The tsar himself entered into correspondence with Thomas Jefferson, whose admiration for the young ruler was so great that he placed Alexander's bust in the entrance hall at Monticello, where it can still be seen. True, Jefferson was also grateful to the tsar for his diplomatic support of the United States in its differences with England. In the same way, Lincoln's high regard for Alexander II may have been due at least as much to the latter's support for the Union during the Civil War as for his emancipation of the serfs. Preoccupied with his own secession crisis at home, Lincoln turned a blind eye to Alexander's brutal crushing of the Polish nationalist uprising of 1863.

Today, older Americans still remember Khrushchev at the United Nations pounding the rostrum with his shoe. Yet in late 1959 Khrushchev was welcomed across the land as President Eisenhower's guest. Americans appreciated this folksy and inquisitive visitor for his genuine enthusiasm for U.S. achievements, notably in Corn Belt agriculture. The fact that the Red Army's tanks had crushed the Hungarian revolt only three years earlier was not forgotten. Yet much was forgiven in the hope that a better day was dawning in Moscow.

The present "Gorbomania" in Europe and North America probably surpasses Western admiration for any previous Russian reformer. Europe's intellectuals enthused over Catherine II but its kings and prime ministers were far more circumspect. Other reforming tsars earned plaudits abroad but never to the point where their well-wishers lost sight of the autocratic nature of the Russian regime.

Gorbachev, by contrast, has persuaded many opinion-leaders abroad that Western governments are duty-bound not merely to maintain an even-handed policy toward the USSR but to become active collaborators in his domestic program. The fact that he, no less than Catherine II, relies on autocratic power to bring about change or that he, no less than Alexander II or Nicholas II, may be backing domestic reform as a necessary step toward rebuilding Russia's strength as a world power, seems temporarily to be overlooked. As Margaret Thatcher put it, "I like Mr. Gorbachev. I can do business with him." For the time being, West-

Tsar Nicholas II leaving Moscow's St. Basil's Cathedral during the 1890s. Ahead lay the 1905 revolution, reform and reaction, World War I, and the 1917 Bolshevik upheaval.

ern opinion-leaders seem more impressed by what Gorbachev seeks to change than by what he insists must be left in place, notably a one-party regime and an economy still dominated by the state.

At first glance, one is struck by the differences among the goals of Russia's various reformers. Catherine II had to decide what duties were owed to the state by Russia's land-owning gentry. Alexander I confronted the question of how to rule the non-Russian peoples of the empire. Alexander II faced the problem of ending serfdom. Nicholas II had to decide on whether to permit an elected legislature. Khrushchev contended with the relationship between the Communist party and the government apparatus, while Gorbachev faces the heavy legacy of Stalinist planning in the economy.

Yet for all their diversity, Russia's episodes of uplift share a family resemblance. Reformers have invariably called for some sort of administrative decentralization and some transfer of control over certain governmental functions either to local citizens' bodies or to private groups.

The basic thrust in each case has been to enlist local and private energies in the solution of the nation's current problems. In effect, the "Russian way of reform" is to shift initiative from discredited central bureaucrats to local administrators, and from

ineffectual state officials to private forces. This is the underlying purpose behind Gorbachev's dismantling of the centralized State Planning Agency, his efforts to dismiss thousands of Moscow bureaucrats, his decentralization of certain remaining administrative functions, his willingness to tolerate mushrooming informal citizens' groups, and his support for the establishment of private ("cooperative") businesses. All this he characterizes as "fulfilling the people's socialist self-government."

Such efforts, the Russian leader knows, cannot succeed unless local managers and the citizenry have access to the information needed to make sound decisions. This accounts for the loosening of controls on the press and the overall glasnost in every reform era, and also the recurring emphasis on law, as opposed to autocratic commands, as a means of regulating society.

It is no surprise that Catherine, both Alexanders, and Gorbachev have all stressed the need for an independent judiciary, and placed legal matters at the center of their program. When Gorbachev speaks of his dream of a "state based on law" he is alluding to and translating the same German notion of a *Rechtsstaat* that inspired judicial reformers under Alexander II, 125 years earlier. Gorbachev had been exposed to this tradition at Moscow University's law department, where it was presented as an ideal superseded by Communism but nonetheless worthy of study.

The inner logic of all these efforts, then as now, is that they may ease the state apparatus out of a blind corner into which it has been wedged thanks to its own ineptitude. Disorganized, disdained by the public, and, above all, strapped financially, the government which every Russian reformer inherits is not able to act on its own to resolve the crisis. "Decentralization" and "citizen participation" are not just philosophical ideals but stark necessities.

Who has the power to bring on reform in Russia? Under tsars and commissars alike the power has rested with the autocrat. To be sure, Catherine established her Legislative Commission to give the appearance of consultation, just as Alexander II set up provincial committees of gentry and Gorbachev has convened special conferences of the Communist Party to consider and adopt new proposals. But in the end, all of Russia's reforming rulers have relied on their personal power to impose change and have even increased centralized authority in the name of reform. Thus, Gorbachev's move, in June 1988, to buttress his personal power by creating a new presidency for himself stands squarely in the Russian tradition from Catherine to Khrushchev. All these rulers have acknowledged that, however much benefit reform might bring to the public at large or to the state, it invariably produces resistance from the stubborn phalanx of bureaucrats whose prerogatives it will diminish. Hence, the reformer must build "clout."

Reforming leaders in Russia all have claimed a new age is dawning. Catherine adorned her palaces with images of the sun. Alexander II at the time of the serfs' emancipation welcomed an editorial by the emigré publicist Alexander Herzen declaring "Galilean, thou hast conquered!" The title of Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *The Thaw* came to stand for Khrushchev's era as a whole, while today Mikhail Gorbachev stresses "new thinking" and goes out of his way to meet with former dissidents like academician Andrei Sakharov to symbolize his break with the past.

Yet Soviet society is far too complex, dispersed, and diverse for all its elements to move forward at the same pace. As in tsarist days, reform eventually reaches a plateau. While some Russians conclude that

change has gone too far, many others want change to proceed farther and faster. Thus, the National Front organizations established recently in the three Baltic republics and Georgia have swept beyond Gorbachev in calling for a mixed economy and near-complete autonomy. Other radical activists have recently called for independent political parties and an immediate move toward parliamentary democracy. Such appeals particularly attract the young, who in each reform era take for granted the hard-won changes introduced by their elders, complaining instead about compromises made along the way. Without exception, Russia's past episodes of reform have given rise to radical movements and dissidents advocating further liberalization.

Such currents of protest may easily swell into violence. Under Catherine II, the peasant rebel Emelian Pugachev led armed insurrectionists against Moscow with the claim that Catherine was a usurper who had used reform to worsen the lot of most peasants. Peasant resistance to Alexander II's less than total emancipation of the serfs was also strong. It gained the support of radical youths in Russian universities, who dismissed the tsar's entire program as hypocrisy. Industrial strikes and peasant unrest following Nicholas II's October Manifesto were so threatening that within a year his regime had canceled many of the civil rights included in the Manifesto.

Khrushchev, too, had to deal with popular upheavals. In 1962 he called out troops to quell a strike in the southern city of Novocherkassk, killing seventy people, and then used police and soldiers again to put down an outburst in the Ukrainian town of Krivoi Rog. It was in this environment that Khrushchev introduced harsh punishments for the dissemination of "anti-Soviet propaganda" and brought offenders to trial in Minsk, Omsk, and Leningrad.

Nominating Gorbachev for the general

CONTRADICTIONS

In September 1944, having returned to Moscow after a seven-year absence, George F. Kennan, then a U.S. Foreign Service officer, wrote a report to Washington. One excerpt:

"Russia remains today, more than ever, an enigma for the Western world. Simple American minds imagine that this is because 'we don't know the truth about it.' They are wrong. It is not our lack of knowledge which causes us to be puzzled by Russia. It is that we are incapable of understanding the truth about Russia when we see it.

"We are incapable, in the first place, of understanding the role of contradiction in Russian life. The Anglo-Saxon instinct is to attempt to smooth away contradictions, to reconcile opposing elements, to achieve something in the nature of an acceptable middle ground as a basis for life. The Russian tends to deal only in extremes, and he is not particularly concerned to reconcile them. To him, contradiction is a familiar thing. It is the essence of Russia. West and East, Pacific and Atlantic, Arctic and tropics, extreme cold and extreme heat, prolonged sloth and sudden feats of energy, exaggerated cruelty and exaggerated kindness, ostentatious wealth and dismal squalor, violent xenophobia and uncontrollable yearning for contact with the foreign world, vast power and the most abject slavery, simultaneous love and hate for the same objects: These are only some of the contradictions which dominate the lives of the Russian people.

"The Russian does not reject these contradictions. He has learned to live with them, and in them . . . ."

From *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Little, Brown, 1967) by George F. Kennan

secretaryship, the veteran Soviet diplomat Andrei Gromyko warned that the new leader has "a broad smile but teeth of steel." Gorbachev has yet to bite down hard with these teeth, but if past patterns hold, he will eventually do so. Many, including both supporters and critics, see his decision to use the Red Army to quell Armenian unrest in early 1988 as evidence that he is already resorting to force to define the limits of reform. The Kremlin's stricter laws on political demonstrations (introduced last summer) support this view, but the evidence so far is not conclusive. Gorbachev's deputy, Alexander Yakovlev, has warned autonomists in the Baltic states against radicalism but the central government has so far refrained from overt intervention there. Similarly, Moscow officials have fulminated against the growing number of wildcat strikes, but have not used force against them. Negotiation holds the edge over confrontation—for the time being.

Most Russian and Soviet reformers have eventually alienated the country's intellectuals. Scarcely had Catherine II's reform drive gained momentum in the 1770s than a young writer, Denis Fonvizin, began using her glasnost to write pungent satires on the shallow worldliness he attributed to her reign. Over the next few years, others followed suit, including Alexander Radishchev, who affirmed that most Russians were worse off under her rule than before and that her innovations were a sham.

So bitter was the opposition to Alexander I by the end of his reign that it led to the so-called Decembrist Uprising of young intellectuals in the army in 1825. Within a decade of his coronation, Alexander II also lost the intellectuals, among them the novelist Leo Tolstoy, whose disillusionment with reform (and politics in general) is described in *Anna Karenina*.

In the fourth year of his rule, Gorbachev's standing with the intellectual community—especially those of its members in their forties and fifties—remains high. He has given them unprecedented freedom and public visibility. However, there are ripples of discontent. Andrei Sakharov's sharp criticism of Gorbachev's efforts to enhance his own power may be a harbinger of future moves by Moscow intellectuals to distance themselves from the gritty realities of reform.

Indeed, in Russia, as elsewhere, enthusiasm for innovation eventually runs its course. Leading partisans of change retire or are replaced. Those who remain—or survive—devote themselves more to preserving past reforms than to instituting new ones. No American should be surprised, in light of the eventual waning of public and Congressional support for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

In Russia, the reformers' central difficulty is that they must necessarily rely on the apparatus whose flaws created the need for an overhaul in the first place. Possibly in the same way that decentralization under Alexander II eventually died at the hands of the same provincial bureaucrats who had caused the old system to fail, Gorbachev's decentralization of ministries and industrial operations is confronting stubborn antipathy from the bureaucracy at the local level.

Meanwhile, if the past is any guide, the gradual recovery of national self-confidence will eventually lead the Kremlin back into the international arena where such pride typically is best indulged. Just as the passing of America's "post-Vietnam syndrome" caused both Republicans and Democrats to call for increased spending on defense by 1980, so the passing of a "post-Crimean syndrome" in the 1860s and of a "post-Japan syndrome" in the 1910s led the Russian impe-

rial leadership to seek ways to reassert national prestige abroad.

What this suggests is that Gorbachev's goals at home are more easily accomplished while the present "post-Afghanistan syndrome" endures. If and when it fades, a more interventionist foreign policy is likely to re-emerge. Andrei Sakharov has recently asserted that a mood supportive of such a policy is already setting in. If and when events confirm his judgment, one can be sure that the current wave of reform will have passed.

But is Gorbachev different? Russia's experience to date may lead Americans to pessimistic conclusions. Clearly, a chronic feature of Russian reform efforts is their tendency to surge up, flourish, and then fade away within five or, at most, ten years. Far from being a chronicle of steady problem-solving and progress, Russian history suggests that the same difficulties recur—and that reformers seek to cure them with the same ultimately futile strategies. If the present era fits this pattern, Gorbachev's efforts are as doomed to failure as were those of Catherine II, the two Alexanders, Nicholas II, and Khrushchev.

The Soviet Union's present characteristics lend special reinforcement to this gloomy prognosis. Until the last three generations, a substantial percentage of the population worked in small-scale agriculture and were thus partially sheltered from the great economic winds blowing over the

Khrushchev in Iowa, 1959. During a quick American tour, the Soviet premier inspected (and envied) the corn crop at the farm of Roswell Garst (left) near Cedar Rapids.

land. Today, with the population far more urbanized and with most peasants working on large "industrial" farms, nearly all Soviet citizens feel directly any failures in the economy. The present government may be committed to reform but its commitment could change rapidly if economic hardships—shortages, inflation, and the like—are not soon relieved. Continued economic distress could stir up political trouble—and calls for a return to more familiar ways of doing things.

Yet in some important ways, Gorbachev and his team of collaborators differ from their predecessors. For example:

- The pro-reform faction within the Soviet government today is far larger than it was in Khrushchev's time, more conscious of its own role, and far better organized.
- Gorbachev himself is a pragmatic experimenter, far less narrowly committed to a specific path of change than were Catherine II or Alexander I, and less given to "hare-brained schemes" than Khrushchev.
- Gorbachev is not only older and stronger but more experienced than any of the reforming tsars. He has the immeasurable advantage of having spent twenty years learning from the failure of Khrushchev's prior efforts.

Yet if the Gorbachev era is not to go down in history as just another brief cycle of top-down reform, success may be due more to underlying social factors than to Gorbachev's psyche or skills. Throughout history, Russian reformers have been divided between those rulers who sought to force the people to conform to some ideal blueprint and those rulers who were themselves swept along by dynamic changes in society. There is something quixotic about Catherine II, Alexander I, and Khrushchev, all three of whom wanted to impose from above some new order that scarcely suited the actual circumstances of their countrymen. Alexander II and Nicholas II, by contrast, were more reactive, making changes at the governmental level to fit more closely the needs of the changing populace. However reluctant or indecisive, these two tsars were more successful as reformers and the changes they instituted were more substantial.

There is considerable evidence that the Gorbachev era fits more closely the latter pattern than the former. Soviet society is in flux. Gorbachev may decry the "stagnation" of Brezhnev's reign, but the shifts in those years were dramatic, and he knows it. Nine-tenths of all Soviet youths finish high school today, as compared with one-third in 1960. New technologies—notably radio, cassettes, and television—have opened vast worlds of

SOVIET CONSERVATISM

In 1985, just before Gorbachev took power, Princeton's Stephen Cohen discussed the bureaucratic opposition to economic reform, and suggested that many ordinary Soviets were conservatives too:

"Underlying [everything] is the entire Soviet historical experience with its particular combination of majestic achievements and mountainous misfortunes. Man-made catastrophes have repeatedly victimized millions of ordinary citizens and officials alike—the first European war, revolution, civil war, two great famines, forcible collectivization, Stalin's terror, World War II, and more. Out of that experience . . . have come the joint pillars of today's Soviet conservatism: a towering pride in the nation's modernization, wartime, and great-power achievements, together with an abiding anxiety that another disaster forever looms and that any significant change is therefore 'some sinister Beethovean knock of fate on the door.' Such a conservatism is at once prideful and fearful and thus doubly powerful. It influences most segments of the Soviet populace, even many dissidents. It is a real bond between state and society—and thus the main obstacle to change."

From *Rethinking the Soviet Experience* (Oxford, 1985) by Stephen F. Cohen

information to the average Soviet citizen. An expanding telephone system enables Soviet citizens to form links with each other and to "network" according to common interests and causes. Back when the Soviet economy mainly produced steel and other basic goods it could fairly easily be managed through commands from the top. No longer. To produce the more sophisticated products needed today, greater initiative must be granted to low-level managers and technicians.

Stated differently, Soviet society has outgrown the Kremlin's "command economy" system and modern technology makes that system obsolete under any circumstances. Low productivity, far from being evidence of Russians' innate passivity and sloth, attests to the unwillingness of independent-minded people to function merely as cogs in a bureaucratic machine, without civil rights and with limited access to information. In effect, they "vote" against the system by abstaining from work and by cutting deals on the side.

Together, these conditions create an environment dramatically different from those faced by previous reformers. While a few elites may have backed change under Catherine II or Alexander I, society at large, rural and uneducated, was indifferent. Similarly, the educated elite under Alexander II had outgrown the legal and governmental structures inherited from earlier tsars, but the peasantry's evolution was far slower, which may explain the limited character of the peasant emancipation. The pace of fundamental industrial and social evolution prior to the reforms of Nicholas II was more brisk, pushing the government towards change. Khrushchev, by contrast, ruled a society still reeling from Stalin's upheavals, and he more easily got by with half-measures.

The outright dissidence that slowly welled up under all these reformers could be dealt with through force or the threat of force. Gorbachev, too, can use his "steel teeth" but he cannot do so in secret. News of his use of force would quickly spread at home and abroad, exacting a political price in the process. Hence, it is no surprise that he has grown steadily more willing to contemplate even the boldest reforms, and that a tone of mounting urgency can be detected in his calls for change.

Does Gorbachev sense that the current mood could evolve into a more revolutionary climate if he does not quickly institute measures that get at the root of the USSR's problems? Maybe. But should violence increase or terrorism erupt, the Kremlin leadership will come face-to-face with the dilemma that confronted such previous reformers as Alexander II and Nicholas II: whether to forge ahead and lead the country into unknown and possibly risky realms or to recoil and resort to force to create the semblance of order.

No prior reformer in Russian or Soviet history has been bold enough to follow the former course. At some point, Gorbachev will confront a momentous choice: whether to follow history or make it.