

Soviet Economy by Konstantin George

Russians and robots

Those who say the Soviet empire is crumbling from its own economic difficulties are in for a rude surprise.

In early March, soon before Mikhail Gorbachov's formal assumption of power, Radio Moscow announced, "There are now more industrial robots in operation in the Soviet Union than in the United States and Western Europe combined, though not as many as now in use in Japan." The broadcast added that the Soviet leadership had decided to expand the program to automate large sections of Soviet and East bloc heavy industry during the 1986-90 Five-Year Plan.

This fact, fraught with military-strategic significance, is never mentioned in the Western media. Since Yuri Andropov came to power in November 1982, the words "industrial robots" and "micro-electronics" have appeared in the Soviet and East German media as many times as "peace movement," far more often than "proletarian internationalism," and—in the Soviet media—about as often as "sacred borders."

Note the following items, chosen from the East German Socialist Unity Party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* during one typical week in March of this year:

March 16-17: At the mining and steel complex Freiberg Bergbau und Hüttenkombinat, "several production lines were streamlined with four industrial robots . . . for the production of cooling systems for locomotive diesel engines. There has been an 80% increase in productivity."

March 20: The Machine Tool Kombinat Umformtechnik in Erfurt "has installed a new automated forge

press complex . . . a 45% improvement in productivity."

March 20: At a foundry in Eberswalde-Finow, "300% higher productivity has been reached through automating forge presses and pressure casting machines, 3 of the total of 10 machines now perform automatically with the help of robot technology."

March 21: The Betonkombinat Magdeburg, which makes concrete slabs and blocks, "already has 17 industrial robots in operation, lifting and moving slabs up to five tons. Now, six more will be added."

The magazine of the Soviet foreign trade ministry reported in its April 1984 issue that the Comecon countries had agreed on the goal of placing 200,000 industrial robots in operation by 1990. Large retooling of production facilities is underway to meet this target. Czechoslovakia, which will have produced over 3,000 robots between 1983 and the end of 1985, will produce at least 13,000 industrial robots during the next Five-Year Plan.

To report objectively on this phenomenon would puncture one big prop of the thesis that the Soviet Union is a "crumbling empire"—namely, the assertion that it has "a stagnating labor force." In terms of raw numbers, there is indeed stagnation. In 1979, for example, 2,300,000 joined the work force; in 1983, only 900,000, and the decline continues. But through the introduction of industrial robots and automating entire production lines, the stagnation is being overcome. This is not only the case in the Soviet Union,

but in the industrial heavies of the Comecon, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, beset with zero population growth.

The industrial workers being "automated" out of their present jobs will be retrained to fill new jobs in the expansion of the automated plants, or moved either to the expanding war-production sector or to new industrial enterprises. Automation will not replicate the U.S. and West European phenomenon of industrial shutdown and "post-industrial" ballooning of the so-called service sector.

A good example of the scope of the Soviet industrial automation program is provided by what is happening in the southern Urals industrial city of Chelyabinsk, with its famous tractor plant—nicknamed in World War II "Tankograd." *Neues Deutschland* of March 21 reported: "Through the introduction of flexible, automated production systems, robotized assembly lines, manufacturing centers and machine tools, one-third of all jobs will be replaced during the coming Five-Year Plan (1986-90). In this way, 12,500 workers from the tractor plant will be freed for other activities. Not least of the results of this rationalization, capacity is to be doubled."

A Chelyabinsk plant director from another heavy industry plant is quoted, "Last year, our production increased by 40% and labor productivity by 45%. 300 workers could be transferred to other activities, and by 1990 another 1,500 will be thus replaced and transferred."

The automation reported for the tractor plant is totally suited for tank and military vehicle production, to name but one military application. With the prioritization of the war economy, the heavy rates of automation in the civilian sector are dwarfed by what is ongoing in the military sector.