

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### West can't stop Gorbachov's fall

*West German intelligence expert General Scherer's realistic prognosis is taken with new seriousness here.*

**G**en. Paul-Albert Scherer, former head of military intelligence and counterintelligence for the West German military and personal adviser to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in the 1970s, addressed a capacity audience at the National Press Club Jan. 24 on his grim prognosis for the future of the Soviet Union.

It was Scherer's third trip to Washington, D.C. in a year. Last April, his prognosis for the early demise of Soviet leader Gorbachov was met with considerable skepticism. On his return visit in October, the events in Tiananmen Square had begun to shift perceptions of events in the communist world, and Scherer's evaluations got a better hearing.

This trip, however, as Gorbachov is mired in the economic and ethnic crises unfolding daily, General Scherer's perspective has suddenly found policymakers in Washington very receptive and eager to learn more.

Now, there is a general view that Gorbachov's days are numbered. Just before Scherer began his seminar, a few blocks away President Bush held a press conference where he conceded that he "couldn't predict" the outcome of the internal crises in the Soviet Union. Concerning the survivability of Gorbachov, Bush said, "I don't know. It is serious."

Those who came to hear Scherer this time were mainly from foreign embassies and think tanks, including especially naval representatives. Foremost on their minds was what would follow Gorbachov's demise, and how the West should respond.

Stating that conditions in the Soviet Union are irreversible at this point,

Scherer provoked one attendee with a British accent to ask in a troubled tone (paraphrasing his question), "You paint a very grim picture, and you say that it is useless to try to support Gorbachov. But who should we deal with, then? Surely, we in the West prefer to deal with someone in the Soviet Union who represents some stabilizing influence there."

Scherer shrugged his shoulders and said, "Any group that follows Gorbachov into power will attempt a Beijing solution. There is nothing we can do about this. We can't change this. We are forced to stand on the sidelines and become the witnesses to a great historical tragedy."

The West should "keep its powder dry" against the tendency of a Soviet Union "caught in the vortex of self-disintegration to lash out in a military fashion, especially if a faction rises to power which views the West as a military 'paper tiger.'"

"As a 71-year-old man," he said, "I have been traveling around Europe, and am on my third trip to the U.S. in less than a year trying to fight the blinding of the Western world by Gorbachov." He said the first task of "containment" of a disintegrating Soviet empire is psychological, namely, "not to be blinded by what the enemy is up to."

Scherer said three ingredients compose the current Soviet internal situation: 1) total disagreement between the elites and the masses over questions of policy; 2) a collapse of the authority of the Soviet state apparatus; and 3) a crippling of the collective consciousness. "There is no spirit of self-sacrifice any longer," he said.

The high morale which accompanied the promises of reform when Gorbachov came to power began to vanish in 1987, and now more than two-thirds of the 18 million bureaucrats (not counting their families) who comprise the four pillars of Soviet power (the party, the political/administrative apparatus, the military, and the state security) are strongly opposed to him. Despite this low morale, he added, "a messianic outlook" still exists in the Soviet population, which "could lead to a path of military confrontation."

The crisis in the Soviet empire became irreversible, Scherer said, when the Kremlin leadership failed to move on reforms that would have had to be launched no later than 1976.

Now, he said, the Soviet Union is "an empire of economic misery that is unequaled in world history." But still, the size of the Soviet military budget "is actually continuing to increase as the emphasis is placed on modernization, while outdated systems are junked."

Only 13% of the factories in the Soviet Union operate at a profit, he said, and of 280 million people, 46 million earn less than 77 rubles a month—not counting 50 million pensioners who receive 58 rubles.

"No factories can carry out the production of consumer goods to turn this situation around," he said, noting that 75% of the 4 billion deutschemark line of credit extended by West Germany to the Soviets for building a consumer goods industry has almost all been already eaten up by direct purchase of finished goods from Western Europe.

The bottom line: "Any help to Gorbachov is now too late," and will only fall into the hands of those who will follow him with brutal repression internally, and military aggression beyond their borders.