The Past Strikes Back

The obstacles to Gorbachev's program remain strong, but the past doesn't speak with one voice. Anthony Barnett, recently returned from Moscow, assesses the continuing resistance to the reform program, and its chances of success.

One day, in circumstances that my Moscow friend Nikolai declined to describe in detail but which he insisted were not improper, his cousin noticed that a stranger had dropped his passport. It was a red passport, full size and not the little card-sized wallet for Party membership. On the front it stated it was issued by the Central Committee.

The cousin had been wanting to buy some foodstuffs for his mother who was in hospital. He kept the passport. Then he went to a large food store, showed it and asked to see the manager. He flashed the passport at the manager who immediately sold him some excellent supplies that were not available for the public. No one dared check the photograph in the passport! Later, he was stopped by the police when driving and drunk — a very serious crime in the USSR even before the clamp-down on vodka. He showed the officer his new passport. Then he went to a large food store, showed it and asked to see the manager. He flashed the passport. He showed the officer his new passport. It was a red passport, full size and not which he insisted were not.

What a substantive conversation it was, what problems people raised! I was really pleased to see them so zealously supporting the Central Committee line. And then I realized how bitter the people are ...

In my experience, it is impossible to go to the Soviet Union for even a week without hearing how bitter people are. That a senior Party member with exceptional perspicacity has to become General Secretary in order to be able to break through the barrier of officialdom to realise this is an astounding confirmation of the effectiveness of the elite cocoon.

The story of the magic passport brought home to me the massive human scale of the resistance to Gorbachev's reform program. Hundreds of thousands of officials want to keep their jobs, in municipalities, in agro-industrial centres, as Party full-timers, as people who check up on those who check up. Quite understandably, they do not want perestroika for themselves.

At one stormy meeting, my friend Sergei told me he pressed for perestroika in his workplace. He was asked to the Party cell to explain himself. "Gorbachev has called it a revolution," he told the comrades, "and every revolution is met by a counter-revolution." An older member agreed, and stated bluntly, "I am a counter-revolutionary".

In May 1987 Anatoli Strelyanyi, an editor of Novy Mir, had a hair-raising discussion with the Komsomol aktiv at the Moscow State University. Strelyanyi declared dramatically, "There are already two parties in the Party". And he argued for the rapid acceleration of reform.

The revolutionary nature of perestroika resides in the fact that the people should have freedom. The opponents of perestroika have remarkable feel for developments. Administrators and bureaucrats are against a free press and for preliminary censorship. They are afraid of freedom, and they have us by the throat ...

He concluded on an even more apocalyptic note, with an image that was doing the rounds in Moscow the following month: "You can't cross an abyss in two steps. We are standing before an abyss". Such declarations may belong to a national tradition of impatience that has caused as many problems in Russian history as sloth and conservatism: the best way to cross an abyss is to build a bridge ...

A one point Strelyanyi was asked, "What is the social base for perestroika?" — the marxist way of saying, "who is for it?" He replied: "Gorbachev is being slow about expanding the social base for perestroika, and this will lead to the defeat of our cause and of Gorbachev himself. It is necessary to take sides openly, from the top to the bottom. The social base of perestroika consists of highly qualified workers, parts of the scientific-technological intelligentsia; parts of the creative humanitarian intelligentsia; and parts of the lower-level Party apparatus and economic managers.

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Weak though the sum of such forces may be, the reformers have momentum on their side, and if they can keep the conservatives off balance, the latter, without a political rallying cry, may find it hard to accumulate their numerically stronger support.

Overall, Gorbachev's reform program is a powerful package. Economically, it demands self-financing of enterprises, use of market forces, and dismantling of the command economy. Legally, it seeks to establish greater rights and safeguards for citizens. Politically, it is pushing openness in the media and democracy in elections. Internationally it aims to shift Soviet strategy to sufficient deterrence — and disarmament — alongside an important accord with China.

Their affairs looked into or publicised. But they are enthusiastic about the economic measures that decentralise decision making and weaken the power of the Moscow ministries over their zones. This distinction points to the crucial question: since all want economic change, but the more conservative wish to back-pedal on political change, can these two aspects be separated?

There are at least three wings to the opposition, each belongs to a different species even if all are hostile to "western" freedoms. There are the pterodactyls, the corrupt dealers in office and supplies, as old as ages past; there are the ostriches of orthodoxy, with their lovely feathers and their inability to fly; and there are the ominous great skuas of Russian nationalism.

The first group has been routed since the last years of Brezhnev. The "nomenklatura revolution" instigated and invigilated by Andropov after he replaced Brezhnev laid the basis for Gorbachev's victory over Grishin. The backing of the KGB (itself transformed by Andropov) was essential to the initial cleansing of the Soviet apparat. The old corruption seems broken. The real resistance to change will come from the other wings.

The "Suslovites", for want of a better word, the ostriches of orthodoxy, are relatively clean and believe in the righteousness of the Party. They present the clearest immediate challenge. They hold leading positions within the Party...
and the military. Their bureaucratic mentality appeals to nomenklatura who want a quiet life with a bit of travel, and to the lower bureaucracies and suspicious provincials. They take comfort in passive reluctance to get the reforms to work. Their credo appeals to those who dislike risks.

This tendency within the Party faces two problems. Its leaders are not blind to the need for change in the economy; they too desire much higher levels of efficiency and a faster rate of development. Their model is East Germany — a centralised, orthodox socialism that works. (Well, it works much better than the orthodox socialism that works.

The second problem faced by those who want to slow down the rate of development. Their model is KGB. They take comfort in passive reluctance to get the reforms through, and to the lower mentality appeals to those who dislike risks.

For example, I asked an English colleague about a Soviet official with whom she had negotiated. She dismissed what I thought was his rather creative and imaginative style. "He told me that it took him a year to understand that Gorbachev wanted him to think for himself," she laughed. "He is completely a man of the apparatus, if they tell him to stop thinking for himself, he will."

I doubt this. It will be true of some, but not all. Ian McEwan, the English writer, has argued that glasnost is a "permission". Not only is it easier to grant a permission than withdraw it, it becomes steadily harder to withdraw it over time. As people succeed in the effort of thinking for themselves, they will become increasingly reluctant to relinquish such a gain. The longer people "learn" democracy, the harder it is to stop them from keeping it. It is far from impossible, mind. It is just that the more you wait, the greater the force needed to reverse such a change.

So the time for the old guard to defeat Gorbachev is now. This year or next, at any rate before 1990. Now is the time when he may still be overthrown by those older than himself, the "honest monoliths". At present they are bending to the assault of the new men that Gorbachev leads. Are they bending all the better to recuperate and lash back, like a strong reed that is rooted in its place; or are they finally being bent out of the way?

One key figure in their struggle is the second-ranking Politburo member, Yegor Ligachev, generally held to be the leading "hard-liner". Born in 1920 — he is just over ten years older than Gorbachev — he spent eighteen years in Tomsk, Siberia, after he fell foul of Brezhnev, and was brought back to Moscow by Andropov. According to Zhores Medvedev, in his biography of Gorbachev, Ligachev is known to be uncompromising, with a strong character and unflattering convictions, and not reluctant to express his views ... He tried, for example, to expel some Moscow raikom secretaries who were linked to corruption cases ... without getting Grishin's permission.

In his recent statement, Activating the Human Factor — the Main Source of Acceleration, Ligachev signals his low-key attitude towards glasnost:

Some people understand openness in a lop-sided way, as the exposure of shortcomings and their eradication. Openness is also popularisation and affirmation of what is advanced and progressive.

And he went on to insist that openness must "encourage the sprouts of the new", but without any stress on the need for an open argument. By contrast, this is something advocated with respect to science by Ligachev's politburo colleague, Alexander Yakovlev, who argues:

We cannot endure an official monopoly of the truth — a situation in which the last word in the work of thought belongs not to truth but to the office ... Science can develop only in the process of constructive discussions and clashes of opinions ... it should be realised that no one has a monopoly of the truth, either in formulating new questions or in providing answers to them.

Ligachev too stresses the need for individuals to become aware of themselves as an "active personality". But he takes a relatively uncritical approach towards Stalin's economic strategy. When emphasising the need "to activate the human factor" he criticises as inadequate for today the "kind of technological determinism, which was quite justifiable when the country was building the material and technical foundations ..." (my emphasis).

In these muted debates a central issue is encoded in "the role of the individual". Although he discusses agriculture at length, Ligachev declines to mention the high productivity of private plots. Early in 1987 he was quoted in Newsweek as asserting that "individualism" is among "phenomena alien to socialism", an attitude that has its roots in more virulent times (the word "alien" being another alarm signal). The following, for example, was the sort of thing published in the Literaturnaya Gazeta back in the 1950s:

The socialist revolution has eliminated the question of freedom for creative work. What sort of reasons can anybody have in our socialist conditions to pine for "freedom of creativity"?... The reason can only be sought in philistine individualism, a mortal sickness distinguishable from the plague perhaps only in that outbreaks still occur. Anybody who feels himself restricted by his part in the common cause should look deep within his own heart: he will probably find a wretched individualist lurking there.

In July 1987, by way of contrast, Izvestia quoted Lenin's view that, "One should not see an intrigue in those who think differently, but value individuals who think and act for themselves".

In public all Soviet leaders smile...
upon the dignity of the individual, and frown only upon the "ism". One need not be obsessed by Kremlinology to grasp that an absolutely fundamental disagreement is registered in the superficially reconcilable shades of emphasis; a basic antagonism that must be won or lost, on which there cannot be a compromise in the long run. Either socialists have their right to argue different points of view in public or they do not. I say socialists to get round the problem (for the moment!) of the question of the expression of "anti-socialist" views.

It may be true that there is little experience of granting legitimacy to the existence of perspectives opposed to one's own. Dmitri Likhachev, the eminent Soviet philologist, interviewed in a recent Literaturnaya Gazeta, argued:

I believe that glasnost is a poor substitute for democracy. When we enjoy all the fruits of democracy we will not want to replace a free exchange of opinions by settling accounts and exposing one another ... we must learn democracy, learn to be more considerate of listening to dissenting opinions. We must learn to listen to both sides with equal impartiality.

But what if the other side does not agree that there should even be an equal exchange of views? Before you can argue about Stalin, say, you need to agree that disagreement about such a central matter is legitimate. Some feel that there can only be one correct view, the Party must draw this up in private and then publish its conclusions so that everyone knows what to think, or at least what they have to say. Others accept that radically different analyses and assessments of the Stalin period can co-exist in the open among Party members and let the best argument win — not by command but thanks to its quality.

There is, therefore, a clear, fundamental point of disagreement in principle between the logic of reform and orthodox resistance to it. It concerns the nature of Soviet politics itself. Either debate on major topics should be free or conclusions should be pre-ordained. For glasnost to retain its credibility over the next few years, politically it needs to move towards a situation in which people exercise a legal right to say what they wish to say and, scientifically, in terms of research and publication, it must do so.

Such a development will challenge at least two Soviet and one-quarter of the million-strong Moscow Region Communist Party is over sixty. Either the orthodox break the political momentum gathering behind the reforms or they will be obliged to retire in favour of those who insist that an open exchange of views is essential to progress. Totally different attitudes lie behind these positions. As life throws up contention after contention, one view or the other will prevail. One of the problems about writing a piece like this at such a time is that, even as it moves towards publication, the two sides of this historic conflict are gathering their forces.

In from the cold. Andrei Sakharov, for years a non-person in the Soviet Union, officially launches glasnost crusader Yuri Afanasyev's new book, No Other Way, before the recent party conference.