

# GORBACHEV

## *abandons ship*

*Perestroika and glasnost began as an attempt to salvage the reputation of the Soviet Communist Party. They have resulted instead in its virtual disintegration. Tony Phillips traces the history of Gorbachev's failed attempt to rescue Soviet Communism.*

**G**orbachev began his process of perestroika as an attempt to revive a moribund economy and polity. At the time of his accession he was seen as representative of the first of the Khrushchev generation. I do not want to make too much of this but it needs to be noted since it has contributed to many in both the East and West expecting much of him. The election of a new general secretary is frequently attended by analysis and conjecture similar to those which accompany the choosing of a pope. While I would not seek an answer to Soviet events entirely in Gorbachev the man, who he is and what he represents must be borne in mind as factors with a role to play.

The initial reforms of 1985 called for little more than continued pressure on corruption within the economy and a

revamping of the planning mechanisms. In terms of precedent the first of these had been broached by Gorbachev's patron Andropov and of course the reshuffling of ministries and assorted bureaucracies had been attempted on a grand scale under Khrushchev.

What had not been challenged before Gorbachev, however, was the post-Stalin settlement of Soviet politics and economy. That is to say, the means by which, and the structures within, the Soviet people lived their everyday lives were bounded by a bureaucratic economic and political system. Not a bureaucracy based so much upon rules but upon a hierarchy of personnel whose wants and needs (structured by the inertia of relationships set during the Stalin period) continued to dictate the nature and uses of the productive forces. It was a realm of political authoritarianism without terror. If the structure of the Stalinist period was change from above administered by an iron fist the post-Stalin period settled for relatively predictable routine (known as normality) kept in check by a velvet-gloved fist which only showed signs of agitation when faced with change.

Two primary outcomes of this system were the continued stifling of information flows and thus culture creation and the consolidation of the Communist Party as the prime and reliable source of elite recruitment and general social mobility. The rituals of the Communist Party were the core routine of this routinised society and only within the inner sanctum of that core could change happen — and even there rarely.

The pre-Gorbachev, post-Stalin period might fittingly be called the age of the *nomenklatura*. Further, as this process continued over time its justification (marxism-leninism), which was also a crucial factor in economic direction, went into a steady decline in terms of its relevance to the ruling elite and to the population. It no longer drove nor explained very much.

Therefore the drive against corruption and the drive to reinvigorate the economy both had to challenge and modify the nature of the Communist Party and its ideology since the latter sit at the hub of political and economic power. In as much as the communist system was in a crisis (staring at economic stagnation and military failure) when Gorbachev came to power it was the party and the ideology which were both the cause and the possible redemption. Certainly it would not be surprising that those within the system, communists, should see it that way. What I want to examine in this article is how we might make sense of the transformation the party has undergone.

It is important to accept for this interpretation that Gorbachev was what he appeared to be in 1985: a talented member of the *nomenklatura* who had risen through the ranks of an extremely centralised and hierarchical structure to a position of power and responsibility. His subsequent actions can be seen as both an attempt to consolidate that power (which is what most of the early Western interpretations of Gorbachev concentrated on) and to address himself to the responsibility for the continuation of the 'normal' state of affairs. The tension between the two, most notably corruption, made it obvious that the 'normal' state of affairs, in order to continue, did have to change. In fact the 'normal' state of affairs has been overcome by events.

Suffice it to say that Gorbachev appeared for the most part to be trying to improve the system very much within the terms of that which already existed, in particular the ideology and the party. He has been concerned with matters of reform primarily for political reasons; that he has spoken of economics is a reflection of a reliance on the effects of economic outcomes on politics rather than vice versa. This is a position he shares with all those involved in modernisation processes. It is also a formulation which has placed the one party system under impossible pressure.

Given all this, how then should we read glasnost and perestroika? Gorbachev did not initially turn to the market though a number of his advisers (Aganbegyan, Zaslavskaya, Meshnikov) had put it forward as part of the solution. Initially the criticism concentrated on the "braking mechanism". This inertia was blamed upon bureaucratism, rules for rules' sake, corruption and above

all the promotion of incompetents on the basis of loyalty. The problem was a failure of ideology: the party was no longer pure.

Therefore perestroika, restructuring, was initially just that — an attempt to get the planning system to work by addressing its basic deficiencies. A measure of democratisation was a means to ensure accountability and responsiveness in production. Observers have noted that three basic feedback mechanisms steer modern industrial societies: democratic processes and attendant civil rights, the market, and technical inquiry (attendant to bureaucracy). Soviet society had hitherto relied almost exclusively on the latter in the incarnation of planners and the party. The processes of glasnost were part of a shift (along with cost accounting in the economic sphere) to more reliance on the others.

Apart from these economic spin-offs the emphasis on information flows as a central part of Western economies provided a good source of arguments for glasnost. Soviet science had of course already won some victories over the years but in the age of the information society the field of openness had to get larger. I do not know whether Gorbachev or Aganbegyan keep copies of work by Daniel Bell close to their beds but I would not be surprised.

Unfortunately for Gorbachev glasnost also provided for an increase in expectations in a variety of ways. Comparison with the West fuelled consumer desires and openness of debate had a similar effect on political wants and ideas. These problems were exacerbated more in the Soviet system than they would be in a simply authoritarian regime based on a developing capitalism because of the rigid fusion between politics and economics. It is virtually impossible to raise a problem in the Soviet Union that does not lead logically in most people's minds back to politics. After all, hasn't the party always claimed responsibility for everything? Much of Gorbachev's strategy since he lit the fuse of glasnost has been about attempts to separate these two. Only if the party did not have to take total responsibility for the economy could it hope to retain political dominance. It could take credit for improvements but it had to find a way, *sans* capitalist legitimisation, of avoiding blame for failures.

What role then for the Party? Under Gorbachev the party was to replace its dominance with hegemony — or, if you like, to replace its constitutionally-enforced political leadership with a kind of moral leadership. Such a notion was already implicit in the ideology, via the party's 'leading role'. The reformers have been attempting to give this a new shape. The party's leading role hitherto has found its expression within the *nomenklatura* system, giving it control over personnel in all bureaucracies and also the sole right to make and interpret ideology, the control of information.

Gorbachev appears to have believed the party could convert its leading role into an hegemony based the persuasiveness of its ideology in contest with others (not such a crazy idea when one considers there have been at least 60 years of the instillation of socialist values) and the purity

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and self-sacrificial nature of party members. Essential to this conversion has been an emphasis on democratisation of the party. He was trying to turn a power apparatus back into a social movement. By the 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union this year we could see he had abandoned this project.

The 28th Congress of the CPSU came two years earlier than scheduled and at a time of deepening fragmentation in the USSR — greater even perhaps than Gorbachev had expected when he set in train motions to bring it on early in August of 1989. With centrifugal tendencies besetting the

Union, an economic program hastily withdrawn just days after its announcement and the accession of Gorbachev's most obvious rival to head the most important new power base in the Soviet Union, the Russian Soviet, the 28th Congress promised to be a watershed in Soviet history. It wasn't. The decisive changes had already happened and the congress was just the party's last chance — a chance it was incapable of taking.

In late June 1988 the party held an extraordinary conference, its 19th, from which momentous things were also expected. However, little actually happened. The con-

ference failed, as had the 27th Congress in 1987, to get substantive changes in the Central Committee. At best it beat off conservative attacks upon glasnost. Of far more interest were the kites flown before this conference and the events following it.

Three proposals mooted before the conference stand out. The first was to do with protection for Gorbachev from removal by the party. In particular, the intention was to guarantee that his removal could only take place via some form of national vote. Such a move would have made the man greater than the party. Not surprisingly no such rule changes were made by the party. The power to remove Gorbachev remained with the Central Committee. Gorbachev could still go the way of Khrushchev. However, the separation of state and party power which was implicit in this demand was dealt with to some degree by the proposal put forward for an executive president.

The second called for a greater democratisation of the party, including the rotation of posts. This also received short shrift at the conference, unsurprisingly, given that it threatened the entire *nomenklatura* system which had grown up around Brezhnev's 'stability of cadres'. Party chiefs hadn't spent years crawling to the top only to be knocked off after a few years by something so contemptuous as a rule! Such a move would not just have challenged the Brezhnevite old guard within the system, it was a challenge to the very system which had created them. However what it also represented was both a call and a means to renew the party. It would have opened the way for younger cadres and appealed to different motivations among those seeking top posts.

Another of the many kites floated before the conference was the demands made by Latvian delegates who, faced by a choice between demands for independence at home and their membership of the Soviet Communist Party, chose to echo the call for independence. This issue was probably the most swept under the Conference's carpet; it surfaced most dramatically six months later when the Latvian branch of the Communist Party split in the run-up to the elections.

To varying degrees these issues all failed to be properly addressed at the 19th Conference. However, each has found profound expression in the period following it, often in a most dramatic manner. Gorbachev himself dealt with the reforms to the state system and took up the proposal for an expanded presidency. The third was merely symptomatic of the events bubbling up from below and found its vent in the democratic electoral reforms introduced by Gorbachev to deal (in some measure) with the first problem. The second, the renewal of the party, is still unravelling in tandem with the other two. The 28th Congress, which was specifically addressed to the general problem of the moribund nature of the CPSU, represents the final denouement of the problem.

At the end of September 1988 Gorbachev dramatically reshuffled the Politburo and restructured its duties. Approval for a new electoral law was set in train and in October 1988 the Supreme Soviet was presented with a

draft for comment. In December the Soviet virtually abolished itself and elections were called for.

The new-look Congress of Deputies and Supreme Soviet can be viewed on the one hand as providing a new fillip of legitimacy to a system still lacking economic winners and on the other, like glasnost before it, as providing new forces of criticism. However, the creation of this alternative power base gave Gorbachev considerable leverage against the party conservatives.

Nonetheless this must have been the beginning of the end of the dream of Communist Party hegemony for Gorbachev. The results in the Baltic republics in particular showed the party had no hope against national movements. Further the nationalities problems showed no sign of going away and local elections later in the year intensified the pressures on the Communist Party.

From 1989 onward the progressives have marched off into the new state structures and really only the conservatives have wrapped themselves around the party banner. Among the progressives Yeltsin emerged in June 1990 to head the Russian Soviet and Gavril Popov became mayor of Moscow. A third respected reformer Sobchek became mayor of Leningrad. All of these men have now left the party, Yeltsin during the congress, Popov after it.

In March 1990 Gorbachev began what can be seen as the final preparations for abandoning ship. Against considerable resistance from the progressives in Soviet society he pushed through sweeping reforms to the Presidency. At the same time as granting Gorbachev the new, more powerful Presidency, the Congress of Peoples' Deputies abolished Article 6 of the Soviet constitution. The leading role of the party now had no formal legal support. In a third move to outflank the party Gorbachev established on 24 March a Presidential Council which has basically garnered more and more of the important Politburo functions (and functionaries) to itself.

In June Boris Yeltsin took control of the Russian Republic, and the Congress of Russian Deputies began drafting proposals that would exclude the Communist Party from the judicial system and the workplace. A founding congress of the Russian Communist Party emerged with a firmly conservative leadership which prompted an even greater haemorrhaging of membership from the party. This, plus the continued growth of new political parties such as Democratic Russia, boded ill for any "renewal" of the party. Instead many expected a complete split at the congress.

While a major split was in fact avoided, a number of changes occurred which can only consolidate the decline of both power and influence. Firstly the new Politburo was more notable for who was out rather than who was in. The prime minister, the minister of defence, the head of the KGB and the minister of foreign affairs are among the notable omissions. All of these now centre their formal power base in the Presidential Council. The overlap between state functionaries and party officials, a key to the post-Stalin settlement, has undergone a dramatic reduction at the top.

This is not necessarily to say that the state institutions are now more powerful than the party: though the balance is obviously tilted more in their favour. However, the Soviet system still runs very much on personality and patronage rather than position. This means we could read the new constellation of power as the same people in different hats. To dismiss the situation as just this, we would have to ignore the wider significance of the move. It has sent a signal throughout the system legitimising the new state power bases. These are bases over which both the conservatives and Gorbachev's group can only exert limited control, especially in the republics. Their elected nature has brought the crowd and the demagogues back into politics.

The politburo itself was further weakened by its expansion to contain the heads of the Republican bodies. Whatever their political complexion, it is already evident that they must have more than half an eye on their volatile electorates at home. It is further something of an iron law of politics that the effectiveness of bodies tends to diminish in accordance with their expansion.

The new members of the politburo are also for the most part notable for their lack of any "renewing" qualities. On television after the congress they came across as boring and cliché-ridden. The only woman, Galina Semenova, made the notable request that former political prisoners now enjoying electoral success should let bygones be bygones with regard to their relationship with the party! Hardly the stuff of a confident renewed vanguard.

Finally we should note that the congress itself had very little to offer in the way of solution to the pressing problems of nationalities. Its all-union structure displayed a complete inability to offer anything constructive to hold the republics together. It could offer hostility but no leadership.

Since the 28th Congress events have continued to conspire against the Communist Party. The proposals of the Shatalin 500 day plan, which envisages a rapid privatisation of large sectors of state assets, will further undermine party power. Censorship in the press officially ended on 1 August and the party paper, *Pravda*, suffers declining circulation which it is only likely to overcome with a more radical editorial line. On 10 October all parties were declared equal before the law.

The Communist Party now stands in open competition with the newly emergent forces. Its capacity to manufacture any sort of hegemony now appears extremely limited. The only defenders left are apparatchiks whose links with the "masses" have been very limited indeed. Further, at the forefront of the new movements are many ex-communists who have credentials to establish - something best achieved by attacking the planning system and the party.

Does the Communist Party have any strength left? The answer for the moment is certainly yes. Those within the bureaucracy threatened by the new reforms certainly have time for it, so to do many in the repressive apparatuses of the state such as the KGB and army. In the provinces of Russia also election results and the political complexion of

Congress delegates point to a still dominant party apparatus. Many other people in substantial posts in Soviet society also owe their position to the Communist Party but the loyalty of the general rank and file must be extremely open to question.

While these factors indicate a continued bias of power in favour of the party it is for the most part negative. The conservatives have no real alternative to offer and lack the credibility to defend their position in ideological battles. The party's levers of power are also much reduced. The vanguard party has been reduced to a rearguard action.

Thus we may say that in one sense at least the post-Stalin political settlement has broken up. Ideologically marxism-leninism has broken down before a new wave of Westernisation and the central power apparatus, the CPSU, has been pushed to a more marginal position. However, as yet no new settlement has been reached. It is not at all clear just where power does lie the Soviet Union at present. Gorbachev and those around him rule as much by the positions and power they used to have as the new ones they have created. Hence Gorbachev's unwillingness to break formally with the party. However, to qualify that we must say that the presidency is powerful, not least because Gorbachev the man fills it rather than Gorbachev the General-Secretary of the party. Power is fluid and no position fully guarantees it.

Soviet politics now centres more around the conflict between those who brought the reforms into being and those who have benefitted from them. Gorbachev has recently battled for and won the right to implement economic reform by decree. This gives him important weapons against the negative power directed at him by an apparatus fearful of its future and a population threatened by price rises. In this sense he remains in a centre between the Left and Right, and between state and party. However, with regard to another centre he occupies — Moscow vis-à-vis the Republics — he is at a greater disadvantage.

The idea of a hegemonic, democratised one-party system that was a central part of the early perestroika vision no longer exists. Gorbachev's transfer of power to the Presidency and undermining of the politburo confirms this. The attempt to run the existing state of affairs 'properly' has led to the need for a new state of affairs. Power no longer lies with the party but it is not with Gorbachev either. It may well be that it is not so far from the streets.

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1. F. Feher, A. Heller & G. Markus: *Dictatorship over Needs* Basil Blackwell Oxford Ch.2 and Pp.182-86

2. See for example quotes from Gorbachev in *Pravda* 27/4/89 P.2 and 13/7/89 P.1 Also *Izvestia* 19/7/89. Others in the Party also took this up. One worth noting is Shostakovsky, former head of the Moscow Higher Party School who left the Party during the 28th Congress and was promptly sacked. For his ideas see *Argumenty i Fakty* No.3 1990

3. Over 23,000 have left the Moscow party this year, 8,000 in June. This compares to a total of 12,000 last year. *Tass* 16/7/90.