



Mikhail's Moment of Truth

The Soviet coup marked the end of Mikhail Gorbachev's valiant attempt to reform communism from within. Tony Phillips looks at the process by which the initiative shifted subtly but irreversibly to the republics.

The coup in the Soviet Union on 19 August caught most observers unawares. However, analysis of the situation in the USSR over the last two years always indicated that such a move might be expected.

For at least the past twelve months, Western analysts have proposed four possible scenarios for the future of the Soviet Union. The first was that of a return to pre-Gorbachev communism, perhaps even a return to stalinism, beginning with the overthrow of Gorbachev and a terrorist crackdown.

The second consisted of a turn to the Right, but not one resulting in a return to the command economy. Party officials and other conservatives could be expected to clamp down on democratisation, which was pushing the reform process too quickly for their liking. The market would be introduced, but along the lines of the South Korean, or, at worst, the Chilean model. This clampdown might well have come constitutionally (through the conservative Supreme Soviet), via a coup, or even electorally, as the populace vented its resentment at a decaying economy on the democrats.

The third possibility was simply that the political and economic mess might continue for quite some time. Only in the breakaway republics was real change likely, and even there it was by no means certain. A combination of delaying strategies by unco-operative bureaucracies and

uncertainty as to where legitimate power lay might allow perestroika to stumble on. Gorbachev would continue to dodge and turn in the political wind.

The fourth, and most optimistic, scenario — but possibly the one that people held out the least hope for — was the East European road. Somehow the democratisation process and the market reforms would continue in tandem to give the Soviet Union a more Western character. The problem, however, was that this seemed to be such a perilous balancing act. Grave doubts were often raised by academics, particularly economists, that early capitalism and democracy were incompatible. Since great sacrifices would have to be made by the population, an electorate given the chance to interfere in the economy to prevent this would probably do so. Therefore there would be little or no logical choice but to suspend democracy during this period.

This argument against what I have called the East European road was buttressed by another which stated that the Communist Party and communist culture were far more deeply embedded in the USSR than in the former satellite states, firstly because they had been there longer and secondly because of the 'passive Russian temperament'.

Yet it is this fourth scenario which now appears the most likely. The Soviet Union after the coup is now almost certainly also post-perestroika in its original form — which is to say the attempt to reform communism rather than replace it. How did this come about? Possibly the best way

to begin to answer this question is to examine the contradictory nature of perestroika itself.

Perestroika began as a program for making communism run properly, above all in the realm of the economy. The command administrative system was running out of steam. Its capacity to perform a transition from an extensive to an intensive economy (or, if you like, from producing more to producing better), to continue to provide the military with hardware to match the Americans, to provide consumers with goods of any quality and sophistication, or even to keep growing at all, was seriously in doubt.

It was from the need to reform the economy that Gorbachev first chose the strategy of glasnost, then democratisation and finally market reforms. Each new strategy did not just reduce the control of the old system, but also the ability of Gorbachev and his allies to control the pace of events. A process which began as an attempt to root out the corrup-

A civil society is definitely now alive and well in the USSR

tion of the old guard in the name of the system has left the system itself, and the man who would still stand with it, Gorbachev, friendless and isolated.

That Gorbachev himself did not foresee that this course of reform could not succeed can be attributed to a number of factors, of which three seem to me to be seminal. Firstly, Gorbachev was fundamentally out of touch with life in the Soviet Union. In this he was probably no different to most other highly placed apparatchiks, but under conditions where democratic and demagogic politics have become more and more important, this was increasingly important.

The second has to do with his status as a true believer. Gorbachev did actually believe that communism could be made to appeal to and rally the people. The ideology of Lenin was still credible if the perversions perpetrated by Stalin and Brezhnev could be swept away. How a holistic, rationalistic theory of knowledge that claimed to have the single truth about everything social, political and economic could be reconciled with democratic politics was a postmodern question which Gorbachev did not even appear to have considered. In short, Gorbachev hoped to replace structures organised by the discipline of democratic centralism with a network of power generated via culture and ideology, and in this he was simply naive about both the intellectual and social material he was working with.

The third factor was Gorbachev's weakness in the field of economics: again a weakness he shares with most other apparatchiks brought up in a culture focused solely on decrees and production. Questions relating to distribution, demand and co-ordination receive scant attention in the Soviet world. This meant firstly that Gorbachev had no real understanding of the fact that corruption was the logical outcome of unarticulated and choked demand within the communist system.

Corruption and the collapse of moral life were a clear example of a leakage of the economic system into the cultural world. Furthermore, corruption played a vital role in allowing the official economy to actually work, probably helping the system as much as hampered it. Some realisation of this slowly seeped through to the leadership as advice to adopt market reforms more quickly, but this was something they patently refused to do.

This weakness in economics also came through in simple fiscal policy. The Soviet leadership since 1988 has pursued the contradictory policy of half a market. They expect some sectors to operate as if money is a means of exchange related to supply and demand and the other sectors as if money is still a form of indirect ration cards. As a result the government has continued to print money, causing massive underlying inflation which has considerably weakened the economy and thus their legitimacy.

The threads leading to the August coup really began to be drawn together with Gorbachev's decision to introduce democratic elections in 1989. The restoration of the republican parliaments ultimately led to the reintroduction of dual power in the USSR — Lenin's coup of 1917 in reverse. Reconstructed as a base from which to mount a fresh reform assault upon a recalcitrant CPSU, the Supreme Soviet became a forum for a breakdown in Party unity and a platform for opposition groups out of all proportion to their actual numbers in the Soviet. Glasnost had given them some voice, but the parliaments had amplified it.

The Republican parliaments in particular often provided a clear voice both outside the Party and outside the apparatus. The system did not now just face reform; it faced alternatives.

After the 28th Congress in 1990, two issues emerged which set the reformers and the hardliners on a collision course. The first was the future of the Union. Here Gorbachev continued to align himself with the preservation of the central state, even though he was clearly at a loss as to exactly what this strategy should be. The second was the future of the command economy, or more particularly the personnel whose interests were bound up in it. The pace of reform, and the Shatalin 500-day plan in particular, threatened to wash vast numbers of careers away. In November 1990 Gorbachev yielded to the conservatives. Pavlov was appointed prime minister and Yanayev vice-president; Shevardnadze resigned in disgust.



Graphic: David Bromley

Gorbachev had a minor win with the success of his Union referendum, but continually falling economic production and Yeltsin's march towards the Russian presidency forced him to make a deal. The Union treaty, which would necessarily result in a massive loss of authority for the apparatchiks, was agreed to in April — but the old guard struck on August 19, the day before it was due to be signed.

While it is a little early to embark on a full-scale explanation of the circumstances surrounding the failed coup, a number of features can be noted. First, the politicisation of Soviet society has been proceeding at a number of levels and at an accelerated rate over the last three years. The Communist Party, now divided and bereft of much talent, was now not only a plural political entity in its own right; this willingness to think and act politically had also penetrated the apparatus, including the military and security forces. It is particularly notable that the middle-level officers in the armed forces, always crucial in coup, appear to have been lost to Yanayev's group.

The coup was always hesitant: not just because its leaders appeared to have no actual positive vision, but because its chain of command was extremely shaky. The leaders could never be quite sure that when they pressed a button it would really work. The military and security forces were at best doubtful, and in some cases actually swapping sides.

Again, the republican parliaments had achieved a massive amount of legitimacy. The position of people's deputy had been an important springboard for the opposition from the very beginning (witness the way radical deputies swept into Georgia in 1989 to investigate the Tbilisi massacre, despite attempts by Interior Ministry troops to close off the area). All over the Soviet Union the republican parliaments remained more or less in charge. Even where they were run

by conservatives they were reluctant to hand over power. It was the People's Deputies in Leningrad and Moscow who, proudly wearing their official emblems, approached the tanks and demanded to speak to the commanders. Four years ago the republican parliaments were mere ciphers of Party power; their actions in August 1991 clearly stamp them as independent political actors in their own right.

Finally, it is impossible to ignore the talents of the opposition movement. Yeltsin, Rutschak, Sobchak, Popov and their supporters scarcely put a foot wrong, which perhaps indicates that they, at least, were well prepared for this eventuality. Yeltsin in particular used his charisma in a way which highlighted fully the complete alienation from the people of the conservatives (who apparently froze out their own potential demagogues, the Soyuz movement).

Lastly, the Soviet people, and especially the Russians, by moving to the barricades gave a complete lie to their 'passive nature', and laid to rest what was now no more than the myth of Soviet terror. The last vestiges of the power of Stalin were swept away in the streets of Moscow and Leningrad during the coup and its aftermath. A civil society is most definitely now alive and well in the Soviet polity, and able to defend itself.

Ultimately, Gorbachev's dream of reform was just riding too many contradictions to stay upright. The coup's overall effect appears to have been one of accelerating reform and consolidating its gains. Gorbachev at least got one thing right when he said that its defeat showed that perestroika had taken root in society. Not only has it taken root, it is now leading a flourishing life of its own.

TONY PHILLIPS is a researcher in the Centre for Soviet and East European Studies at Melbourne University. This article was written in the days following the August coup.