The CPSU in Congress

The 24th CONGRESS of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union brought 4,963 delegates to Moscow from all corners of the vast and varied Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Congress reached all its decisions unanimously — a remarkable achievement when one considers the weighty and complex questions before the gathering.

The period between the Congresses had seen such events as the intervention in Czechoslovakia, the armed clashes with China, war in the Middle East, big developments in Vietnam and talks on disarmament. On the home front there had been the economic reforms, clashes in the field of literature and art and the delaying of the Congress for a year beyond the term laid down in the Party rules. The Congress elected a Central Committee of 241 members and changed the Party rules to provide for Congresses every five years instead of four. Yet the Congress was able to decide unanimously "fully and completely to approve the political line and practical activities of the Central Committee of the CPSU and to approve the propositions and conclusions contained in the Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU". The same resolution, incidentally, stated that "The Soviet people wholeheartedly and unanimously support the Party's home and foreign policy".

There were present 102 foreign delegations from 91 countries. CPSU General secretary L. I. Brezhnev added a new dimension to unanimity when he stated in his concluding speech to the Congress:

We were once again able to convince ourselves that the foreign comrades unanimously approve the course of our party, its principled marxist-leninist line in the world Communist movement.

The inaccuracy of this claim is obvious without even studying the speeches of the foreign delegations, some of whom politely spelled out the fact that there were differences. But the fact that the claim was made indicates the importance attached to international support for CPSU policies and the large attendance of foreign parties. About 90 Communist Parties were represented.

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including parties not present at the 1969 International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties, such as those of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Korea and Japan.

Other parties attending generally came into the categories of socialist, nation-liberation, or nationalist parties. Some examples were the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, the Laotian Patriotic Front, Socialist Parties from Japan and Chile, the Arab Socialist League from the UAR and Ba’ath parties from Iraq and Syria. International gatherings of anti-imperialist forces can be of value, but a number of factors tended to reduce the usefulness of the CPSU Congress as an international forum. Speeches were rather formal, couched in jargon and coded remarks. Appreciated by the Soviet party leaders and delegates were condemnation of China, expressions of fidelity to “proletarian internationalism based on marxism-leninism” and pledges to fight “anti-Sovietism”. Not so well received were calls for “proletarian internationalism based on mutual respect, equality, and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs” or statements implying that the party in question had good relations with the Chinese Communist Party.

Yet justified criticisms concerned with national interest and the seeking of hegemony should not obscure certain realities about the USSR, which were reflected by the large international attendance at the CPSU Congress. At the least, the existence of the USSR as a counterweight to the United States gives much greater scope to movements for national liberation, for peace and for socialism.

Revolutionaries gain nothing by writing off the USSR as an anti-imperialist force or by seeing their way forward per medium of denouncing the Soviet Union, a diversion which, like its opposite, detracts from the central task of developing a viable strategy for socialist revolution in one’s own country. Yet the latter involves making an independent assessment of the USSR and stating one’s opinion appropriately.

The 24th Congress in general could be described as a stabilising, balancing Congress, seeking to maintain the status quo in the leadership and to curb various “extreme” trends which could upset the equilibrium of the present set-up. As such, the Congress reflected the absence of a sharp political or economic crisis within the country and indeed a certain confidence (with qualifications) of the leadership. Certainly there were no abrupt turns in policy or sensational leadership changes. The only changes in the Politburo, for example, were an extra four members raising the number on that body to 15, with no-one being dropped.
An important factor in the relative political stability of the USSR is the continuing development of the economy, with a gradual rise in living standards. The 10 year period since I had last been in the USSR, for example, had brought a number of positive changes.

There are changes which can be seen even by the superficial observer. Certainly Moscow is not the USSR but it is fair to say that the virtual absence of the previously large proportion of shabbily dressed people — particularly elderly, reflects progress which is taking place throughout the country. Evident too is the outward growth of Moscow and the replacement of old areas by modern flats. Shopping is a little better, but is still a time-consuming process. There are a number of new, apparently efficient self-service stores but not enough.

Two of the most significant changes in the last 10 years have been the change from the 6-day to 5-day working week, (hours are close to 40 per week) and a relatively large rise in the minimum wage. In the last Five-year Plan period, for example, the minimum wage rose from 40 to 60 roubles per month. (A rouble is virtually equivalent to an Australian dollar at official rates.) Prices by and large appear to have remained stable. Some obsolescent consumer goods have been reduced in price. The most outstanding price rise is that on hard liquor, with vodka going up from three to four roubles a bottle and cognac soaring to extremely high prices. This was a purely administrative measure to combat heavy drinking. Casual conversations with ordinary people indicated to me a general recognition that materially life was better, although there are complaints about shortages, prices, and the difficulties of shopping for quality goods.

Underlying the rise in living standards has been a considerable increase in the industrial level of the country. Examination of the economic statistics show that the Soviet Union has one of the highest growth rates in the world, although many targets set down in the Program of the CPSU and in the directives for the Five-year Plan 1966-70 were not attained.

But for all the economic achievements, the prestige of the Soviet Union as a harbinger of a new way of life, an inspiration for revolutionaries, has in the main declined. This has occurred in spite of Soviet aid to, for example, Vietnam and, Cuba both of which have fired the hearts of revolutionaries and progressives throughout the world. And imperialist propaganda aided by the "revisionists" do not account for the decline in attractiveness and prestige, especially in advanced capitalist countries. This aspect
is highlighted by the fact that although the United States maintains its clear lead in material production, the kind of society in that country increasingly appals people throughout the world. No longer do rightwing spokesmen point to the United States as the beacon for other capitalist countries — on the contrary it has become the world's awful example. On the other hand, masses of people in the west know that the Soviet Union has made considerable progress in living standards, science, education and social services but in general are not attracted by the Soviet model of socialism.

The external attitude to the USSR runs parallel with attitudes inside the country. Certainly in the USSR one meets many very fine people. The high level of culture among considerable sections of the population is impressive, reflecting as it does high standards of education. But the full potential of the socialist economic base is not being realised. Labor morale clearly leaves a great deal to be desired and is the subject of a big campaign in the mass media. There is a heavy emphasis on efficiency, increased sense of responsibility and improved labor discipline. Alongside the understandable and justified desire of Soviet people for better material living standards after decades of shortages there is a pre-occupation with everyday affairs, with the acquisition of consumer goods and a considerable apathy towards politics. These trends seem to be more marked among industrial workers than among intellectuals.

Within the general stability reflected by the Congress, there are clearly areas of concern to the CPSU leadership. There is a certain anxiety that the rise in living standards should continue, since this is an important factor in a general acceptance of policy. The events in Poland last December clearly made an impression in other countries and while nothing on that scale has taken place in the USSR, there are reports of relatively minor upsets in some provincial towns on economic questions. There was a considerable emphasis on consumer goods at the Congress, as well as a number of speeches from "rank-and-file" Party members thanking the Central Committee of the CPSU for their "constant concern for the welfare of the workers".

The "Balanced" nature of the CPSU 24th Congress is well illustrated by attitudes to past Congresses, notably the confirmation of the 20th Congress of 1956 and the pointed omission of specific mention of the 22nd Congress of 1961. Re-affirmation of the 20th Congress is a welcome sign and an answer to speculation that Stalin was to be "re-habilitated". But this too must be qualified. Re-affirmation of the 20th Congress was made at an
interesting point in Brezhnev’s report — in the section dealing with Soviet relations with China. He said: “It will be recalled that the Chinese leaders have put forward an ideological political platform of their own which is incompatible with Leninism on key questions of international life and the world communist movement and have demanded that we should abandon the line of the 20th Congress and the Program of the CPSU . . . Our party has resolutely opposed the attempts to distort Marxist-Leninist teaching . . .”. 

The choice of this point to re-assert the 20th Congress may indicate a certain compromise, since it arises here in a defensive way and without elaboration of the historic significance of that Congress. The trend of the present leadership is to keep the “thaw” and the ferment in Soviet politics which characterised the late fifties and early sixties within definite limits.

The CPSU Program was re-affirmed in a similar back-handed way. It was adopted at the 22nd Congress when the unmentionable Nikita Sergeivitch Krushchov was in the leadership and is very much played down these days. It might be remarked in passing that the retention of the Program, in a half-hearted way but without amendment is yet another example of the Congress policy of letting sleeping dogs lie, because there are some sections of the Program clearly requiring revision, even from the point of view of current policies. For example, the Program states:

In the current decade (1961-70) the Soviet Union, in creating the material and technical basis of communism, will surpass the strongest and richest capitalist country, the U.S.A., in production per head of population . . .

There are other similar references, as well as specific figures for production targets which have not been achieved or clearly cannot be achieved. And this is without debating the vital question of whether the emphasis should be on the quantitative competition with capitalism or on the building of a qualitatively new system of human relations.

Throughout the Congress, the policies followed under Krushchov were referred to by the code word “subjectivism” or “subjective errors”. And the complete obliteration of all traces of the person of Krushchov is little short of miraculous when one recalls the historic contribution of that remarkable man in the decade after Stalin’s death when he was THE top leader.

The name of Krushchov has been erased because, in spite of weaknesses, he was the man closely associated with “the thaw” that period in Soviet history which saw a rise of great hopes for the future of socialism, a mass stirring which was a promise for democratisation but a threat to bureaucracy. Figuratively speaking,
the former inmates whom he gave the job of dismantling Stalin’s labor camps were getting ideas that other structures too were of a restrictive character and had to go.

Although it was promised by the new leadership that his policies would be continued, changes were made. Sobriety was restored to some areas where it was needed (maize was put back into its right place) but this was accompanied by other changes. A symbolic example. The 22nd Congress decided (unanimously) on the erection on Red Square of a monument to the victims of the “personality cult”. No such monument is yet to be seen. But a granite bust of Stalin stands on a pedestal over his grave by the Kremlin wall behind the Lenin mausoleum alongside other past prominent Soviet leaders.

Literature and art are sensitive areas in Soviet politics and pronouncements on these subjects are often a guide to general policies. The key paragraph in Brezhnev’s speech in the section on literature and art was:

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that in the development of our art there have been complicating factors. There were some who sought to reduce the diversity of present-day Soviet reality to problems that have irreversibly receded into the past as a result of work done by the party to overcome the consequences of the personality cult. Another extreme current among individual writers was an attempt to whitewash past phenomena which the party had subjected to emphatic and principled criticism, and to conserve ideas and views contravening the new, creative elements which the party has introduced into its practical and theoretical work in recent years.

The first trend referred of course to such writers as Solzhenitsyn and it was no surprise that here and in other references they were condemned. But the criticism of the other “extreme current” — interpreted as referring in particular to the die-hard Stalinist Kochetov — is of interest. It is a further indication of the desire of the CPSU leadership to maintain a balance, to avoid if possible literary scandals of which they have had more than enough in recent times. Some satisfaction at the criticism of the extreme Stalinists and the “balance” is justified, but the nature of the balance must be kept in mind. That is, art and literature are obviously still to be the subject of official edict and censorship. And the line of going quiet on Stalin is part of a general trend of emphasising the continuity of Soviet history, ironing out and glossing over the sharp changes and “distortions”.

Criticism of two extremes in the Brezhnev report does not mean that both will be treated equally in practice. Ultra-conservatives such as Kochetov and Shevtsov are published, are not expelled from the Writers’ Union and are not subject to the kind of vitriolic press articles directed against Solzhenitsyn. The future may see some
curbing of the ultras in the interests of cooling debate, but not their suppression or persecution.

In addition, the comfort in the Brezhnev report tended to be iced over by the subsequent speeches of two writers Mikhail Sholokhov and Alexander Chakovsky. It was rather tragic to see a talented writer like the former acting the demagogue, including in cheap jibes against the Austrian marxist Ernst Fischer and putting in commercials about royalties on books written long ago. But his hard line did not lose him his place on the Central Committee.

Editor of Literaturnaya Gazette A. Chakovsky stated agreement with the “profound evaluation” of the situation given by L. I. Brezhnev, but went on to take a harsh, authoritarian line. He became an alternative member of the C.C. So that if these two men are to be the leaders of the literary establishment, any hopes stemming from Brezhnev’s ostensibly balanced remarks must be qualified.

What, then, has happened to the “thaw”? Certainly there is little chance of a return to full-fledged Stalinism, although the list of people imprisoned or exiled for political dissent is long and growing. Progress continues in a number of ways, despite difficulties. Solzhenitsyn, for example, was expelled from the Writers’ Union, condemned in vitriolic terms in the official press — even linked with foreign reaction. His books are not published and former works are removed from libraries. Yet he continues to write, supported by people like the celebrated ‘cellist Mstislav Rostropovitch. His works are widely read in Samizdat (typed or roneoed copies). Rostropovitch was confined to the Soviet Union for a period for his espousal of Solzhenitsyn’s cause, but as far as is known, no other reprisals have been taken.

A bi-monthly journal The Chronicle of Current Events has been coming out regularly since late 1968 in Moscow and it must be assumed that the authorities know who is responsible. Apparently the consequences of closing it down are too high a price to pay for the advantage gained. It is, of course, true that scientists get a certain latitude because of their importance in the economy, but public opinion is undoubtedly a factor. People’s hopes cannot be kindled and easily doused.

What is the future for democratic transformation in the USSR? I have yet to read or hear a coherent and convincing answer to this question. The official Soviet view that everything is being done by the Party to ensure the development of socialist democracy does not convince in view of the clashes in this area, and the fact
that the Party leadership itself is immune from public criticism.

But the lack of widespread debate in the Soviet Union among those with views different from those of the leadership has meant that only scrappy, often naive views of the future are produced. All that can be done here is to sketch some of the political, economic and social forces pressing for change and those resisting it.

Some observers place their hopes on the younger generation who are well-educated, and who it is hoped, will not fit in with bureaucracy, with restrictions, but will see that the development of their country calls for free and open discussion of all questions. Rising levels of education are not compatible with lists of banned books or grandiloquent speeches full of “unbreakables” “indestructibles” and “eternals”. In practice, bans and taboos are often ignored. As already pointed out, strict enforcement of these would lead to severe dislocation of the country's economic and social life. In particular, the sciences cannot develop within a straight-jacket of a rigid official ideology (known by the acronym of “diamat”) and shades of Lysenkoism.

Such hopes for the young generation have a good foundation, but other factors operate to take the edge off the young generation as a force for democratic change. One factor for conformism and conservatism comes from progress itself. A growing proportion of young intellectuals come from families of industrial workers and peasants, and the resultant social lift partially at least engenders acceptance of the status quo. In addition, the Soviet education system, good as it is, is not distinguished by its encouragement of independent thought and debate. Cynicism is also widespread. After all, no-one earns a good living by disagreeing with the chiefs. And even if what you learn in “diamat” lessons is not much use at chemistry lectures it is worth your while to pass in “diamat” and to be able to use the phraseology when required. This is without mentioning the strong direct pressures put on people to conform. These tend to fragment, even atomise those with dissenting views who disagree with each other on what course to take.

The censored press produces some peculiar effects among people with disagreements with the present leadership. While remaining firm socialists (it is ridiculous to suggest that the “dissidents” favor a return to capitalism or are ideological agents of the imperialists) some tend to react one-sidedly to propaganda and begin to believe the opposite of what they are told. Hence some of the naive ideas about life under capitalism, since in rejecting the exaggerations some reject much of the truth. They are thus ill-equipped to cope with the reality of the advanced capitalist countries, whether
observed directly or through the distorting lens of the BBC or Voice of America. Lack of information and debate severely hampers their ability to formulate a realistic program.

Deeply entrenched methods of working and thinking which thrive in conditions of restricted debate are a powerful conservative force. It has been suggested that this was an important factor in depriving the economic reforms of some of their force. Carrying out directives and plans handed down from a central ministry and earning a bonus for fulfilment feels safe. More responsibility and initiative in the hands of local managers and executives means venturing into the unknown. Link this feeling with the reluctance of top bodies to delegate functions and progress is difficult.

In any society the middle levels of the bureaucracy are a conservative force and this appears to be the case in the USSR. A transition to a self-managing society, free from petty controls and censorship would mean the loss of power and some privilege of an important stratum and in the meantime, the top leaders rely on this stratum for the everyday running of affairs. Some say that the power of the middle bureaucracy is decisive and cite examples of necessary, progressive decisions from on top being bogged down on the way to full enactment. While there is something in this view, I feel it is exaggerated, involving among other things the old Russian belief that the man on top is all right — it's his underlings who are the trouble.

"Bureaucracy" is often criticised in the USSR when it gums up the works, and makes blunders. Muddlers, those associated with red tape, minor or middle officials who are pompous or inhuman towards the public, petty snobs — come in for stiff criticism in the press and particularly in satirical journals such as Krokodil. Top leaders can get a round of applause at Congresses for words of criticism of the petty bureaucrat. But they themselves are immune. It is here in the Central Committee and particularly the Politbureau that the real bureaucracy — the rule of those in office — and the real power resides.

Speculation naturally arises as to whether change can be initiated from this direction. Could another Khrushchov come forward, perhaps in conditions of a difficult situation requiring serious change? No-one should wish a crisis situation on the Soviet Union in the hope of positive change, as there is no guarantee of change proceeding this way. It may be some time before the future becomes clearer. For the present, further development of the processes already under way is the most likely course. The 24th Congress of the CPSU did little to change this situation.