

The USSR is confronted with far more profound problems today than it was 25 years ago. The key is democratisation. But the prospects for this are uncertain.

BACK IN THE USSR: The Past Catches Up

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A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AGO the socialist countries were making an impact on the world with their impressive rates of economic and social progress. Extrapolating from them the 22nd Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1961 adopted a new programme which stated that by 1970 the USSR would surpass the USA in production per head of population. By 1980 Soviet labour productivity would exceed that of the USA by roughly 100%, there would be 'an abundance of material and cultural values for the whole population' and 'a communist society will in the main be built in the USSR.'¹

Since then, the socialist countries, in most cases preserving full employment in contrast to the capitalist countries, have continued on the whole to advance more rapidly than the latter and to expand rather than cut their social services and education. However there has been a pronounced decline in rates of growth in the European socialist countries from 10% in the 1950s to 7% in the 1960s, 5% in the 1970s, down to a planned rate for 1981-85 of around 3.5% annually. The share of the socialist countries in world industrial production, which rose from 20% in 1950 to 36% in 1960, has since then only risen to its present level of 40%. Soviet industrial production has only risen since 1970 from 65% to 67% of the US level. Labour productivity in Soviet industry has since 1976 been officially listed each year as 'more than 55%' and in agriculture as 'about 20-25%' of the US level. The heady targets of the 60s have long since been consigned to oblivion.

The Soviet Communist Party has now indicated that the most important feature of its next congress, due in 1986, will be the adoption of a new edition of the party programme. Avoiding reference to the present programme's concluding words of 24 years ago - 'The party solemnly proclaims: the present generation of Soviet people shall live in communism'² - General Secretary Chernenko now says that 'experience shows- that before tackling the tasks directly connected with the building of communism, it is necessary to pass through a historically long stage of developed socialism, a stage which our coun-

try is now beginning.' This formulation of the issue, he claims, 'enjoys unconditional support' from the Soviet public. To the question whether this is not postponing the communist perspective, he says somewhat confusingly: 'The answer is a simple and unequivocal: of course not.'³ However his perspective now appears blurred and distant. Whilst Chernenko speaks in general terms about the importance of developing a 20-year economic-technical programme for the USSR for 1986-2005 and looks forward to 'ultimate' success in 'peaceful economic competition' with capitalism, he does not give any dates for this, remarking that 'it is not desirable to overburden it (the re-edited programme) with details.'⁴ No self-critical analysis is made of the previous perspective unanimously adopted by a party congress - as the new draft will no doubt be at the next - and for many years proclaimed by its leaders past and present to be the 'blueprint of communism'.

Unfulfilled expectations and the contrast between promise and performance in the USSR and other socialist countries have led, internally, to growing signs of apathy, malaise and dissatisfaction, which have from time to time in different countries assumed critical proportions. Externally, they have invalidated the conception of the socialist countries exerting 'an ever-increasing influence on the struggles of the peoples in the capitalist countries' and 'by the force of example. . . revolutionising (their) thinking.'⁵ Paradoxically, after a decade of world capitalism's worst economic crisis for half a century, the attractive power of the socialist countries has diminished. Every socialist in Britain who is not completely isolated or blinkered knows this from his or her own experience. In the case of France statistical confirmation has come in a survey which shows that in the last decade the proportion of the population holding a negative opinion about the functioning of the socialist system in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has risen from 43% to 69%, whilst those expressing a positive one has declined from 28 to 11%. Among young people the negative view is even higher.⁶

A variety of factors have contributed to



Joseph Stalin.

this worsened image. They include the detention of dissidents in prisons and psychiatric hospitals, the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, the Sino-Soviet conflict, and martial law and the suppression of trade union freedoms in Poland, along with growing economic problems. These things were not created by anti-communist propagandists, although they certainly play into their hands. They are structural rather than conjunctural and arise from an authoritarian and bureaucratic form of socialism, whose roots lie in the Stalin period.

Stalinism

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 blazed the trail that has led to the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism in 15 countries. But the character of that socialism has been deeply marked by the condition of backwardness in which it had to be built first of all in the Soviet Union and later in most of the other socialist countries. This backwardness contrasted strikingly with the high levels of economic, social and cultural development which Marx considered the prerequisites for socialism and which he saw in his time only in the advanced Western capitalist countries. For the USSR the conditions were particularly unfavourable. Firstly, it was isolated and forced to carry through an industrial and cultural revolution with its own limited resources and with enormous material shortages, condi-

tions in which, as Marx and Engels wrote, war is generalised and 'all the old crap' is restored.⁷ Secondly, until three years after the revolution it was forced to wage war against counter-revolutionary forces and invading armies from 14 capitalist states, and after that to prepare itself for another invasion, which inflicted the most enormous losses on it from 1941 to 1945. Thirdly, under conditions of Tsarist absolutism, which existed until 1917, Russia had only developed a 'primordial and gelatinous' civil society (Gramsci), in contrast to Western countries where voluntary organisations can play an autonomous role and give expression to a diversity of democratic and social aspirations.

Despite everything the Soviet Union performed the tremendous task of carrying through its plans of socialist industrialisation, becoming the world's second industrial power and driving back the invading armies. But the conditions under which this had to be undertaken favoured the development of an extremely centralised political and economic state system with a high degree of bureaucratisation and militarisation. Effective power at a national level came to be concentrated more and more, after Lenin's death in 1924, in the hands of Stalin, whose mass terror caused the deaths of many millions of Soviet citizens, including a very high proportion of the communists who had built up the Soviet state in its early years. Repressive methods of a similar character were also



used after the Second World War in the new socialist states of Eastern Europe under the influence of Stalinist ideology and sometimes under the direction of 'instructors' from the Soviet secret police. Dissent, real or suspected, was equated with treason and links with hostile foreign powers, and was dealt with by prison or

execution, sometimes after confessions extracted by torture.

The Khrushchov years

Stalin's death in 1953 opened up a new period in the history of the Soviet Union and most other socialist countries. As Isaac Deutscher, the most perceptive Marxist analyst of Soviet development, showed

Brezhnev. . . was even awarded a prize for literature

already at that time, Stalinism had been undermined by its very success in carrying through a major industrial and cultural revolution. The needs and aspirations of a great industrial state with an expanding planned economy, an increasingly educated population and an avowed commitment to Marxism conflicted with despotism, arbitrary mass terror and the 'primitive magic' of Stalinist ideology.⁸

Deutscher's prediction that this would set in motion a process of de-Stalinisation was amply borne out in the period from 1953 with the restoration of socialist legality, the dismantling of the apparatus of terror and the return of vast numbers of political prisoners from Stalin's labour camps. It also involved the replacement of Stalin's one-man rule by a collective leadership, which showed itself more responsive to the needs of the people. A more realistic appraisal was publicly made of the lag in Soviet industry and particularly agriculture in comparison with the West, steps were taken to stimulate more initiative from below, a much greater emphasis was placed on the production of consumer goods, and very important material concessions were made to the peasantry. Three years after Stalin's death, at a closed session of the 20th Congress of the Party in 1956, Khrushchov was to reveal some of the most shocking aspects of the last 20 years of Stalin's rule. However his explanation of what went wrong in terms of the cult of Stalin's personality diverted attention from the structure of power and social relationships, of which the Stalin cult was only one expression. It also encouraged the illusion that, with Stalin gone and collective leadership restored, the whole problem belonged to the past.

The process of de-Stalinisation proceeded fitfully and unevenly. This partly reflected the style and limitations of Khrushchov, who as party first secretary from 1953 to 1964 was more responsible than anyone else for pushing it through.

Partly it resulted from resistances at all levels in the party and state apparatus, which were checked but not eliminated with the ousting in 1957 of the 'anti-Party group' of Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov, who had sought to remove Khrushchov as first secretary.

Although calling for democratic initiative, Khrushchovite de-Stalinisation cannot be seen as proper socialist democratisation, since the working people remained excluded from the decision-making process. (Nor indeed, as we shall see, was it a full de-Stalinisation.) From being effectively exercised by one man who could not be removed even by the Political Bureau or Central Committee of the Party,⁹ central political power now came to be exercised collectively by the Political Bureau answerable to the larger Central Committee. However the unanimity, which had been the hallmark of congresses of the Party, the Soviets and the trade unions under Stalin, continued as before. This precluded the open debate which had characterised congresses in Lenin's time, even when the young Soviet state's internal and external position had been extremely precarious, and without which it is not possible to speak of genuine democratisation. Thus no dissenting voice was heard at the 20th Congress and the Party was not informed until after the defeat of the 'anti-Party group' that its members had since 1953 been arguing against many of the Party's new policies.

Although in this period there was wider involvement at most levels of the Party and state apparatus, the mass of the people were never brought out of the passive support role, which had been allotted to them under Stalin. They were given neither the encouragement nor the opportunity

¹ *Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* Moscow 1961 pp 61-64. Emphasis in original.

² *ibid* p 128. By communism the programme understands a society of abundance implementing the principle 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.'

³ K Chernenko 'Assert Life's Truth and Socialism's Lofty Ideals', *Information Bulletin* Prague 22/1984 p 34.

⁴ *Pravda* 26 April 1984.

⁵ *36 Million Communists say. . .* (Statement of World's Communist Party, November 1960*) p 4.

⁶ *Revolution* Paris 23 November 1984 p 12.

⁷ K Marx/F Engels *Werke* Berlin 1958 Vol 3 pp 34-35.

⁸ I Deutscher *Russia after Stalin* London 1953.

⁹ Khrushchov, in the closed session of the 20th Congress, quoted another member of the Politbureau who said that when party leaders were invited to see Stalin they did not know where they would be sent to next, home or to jail.



Leonid Brezhnev.

really to exercise independent political initiative. By the summer of 1964 political apathy was replacing the interest stimulated by the 20th and 22nd Congresses, partly encouraged by the contrast between the spectacular targets proclaimed in the new party programme mentioned earlier and the big increases in food prices in 1962, followed by the bad grain harvest the next year which necessitated the import (not for the last time) of a large amount of grain from capitalist countries.

Brezhnev - stability becomes immobility

At a Central Committee meeting in October 1964 Khrushchov was replaced as first secretary by Brezhnev. It was officially announced that he had resigned because of his 'advanced age' (he was 70) and 'poor health'. Subsequently he was publicly criticised for 'subjectivism' and 'voluntarism'. He was removed by a combination in the party leadership of political hardliners worried at the possibility of further de-Stalinisation and administrators concerned at the unsettling effect of his unpredictability and continual reorganisations.

Khrushchov's departure brought to a close the period of de-Stalinisation and of the rehabilitation of Stalin's victims. It ushered in the 18-year Brezhnev period of stabilisation, in which conservative forces and habits increasingly asserted themselves. If under Khrushchov there had been a high turnover of party officials at all levels under Brezhnev exactly the opposite was the case and officials were able to enjoy a secure privileged life.

There was no return to the Stalinist terror, but from 1966 repressive action was initiated against a developing dissident movement and new legislation was introduced for this purpose.

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From 1977, when he added the post of President of the USSR to that of General Secretary of the Party, more and more of a Brezhnev cult was built up, and along with an unrivalled number of medals he was even awarded a prize for literature. However collective leadership continued to be exercised by the Politbureau, in which septuagenarians representing the major Soviet institutions were increasingly to predominate. In the absence of any provision for leadership reselection, Brezhnev retained his leading positions right up to his death in 1982, even though during his last years his failing health made his leadership increasingly nominal and led him, even in interviews on Soviet television, to read from a prepared script. In such a situation stability turned into immobility accompanied by an alarming growth of official corruption and nepotism (particularly pronounced in the Caucasian republics), shielded from exposure by the absence of any possibility of independent investigative journalism into the misconduct of senior state and party officials. In conditions of boredom and frustration, alcoholism is recognised to have assumed alarming proportions with serious effects on both productivity and personal relationships.

Andropov against 'accumulated inertia'

Andropov, who succeeded to Brezhnev's Party and state posts, lost no time in initiating measures against corruption, into which his earlier years as head of the KGB had given him considerable insight. In addition he undertook a shake-up in the Party and state, securing the replacement of about a fifth of the regional party secretaries and a not inconsiderable number of ministers on grounds of age, inefficiency, corruption or opposition to reforms. He applied his acute intelligence to the problems of the economy, emphasising the need to 'overcome the accumulated inertia' that he saw there.¹⁰ He was anxious to study the experience of other socialist countries like Hungary to find ways of overhauling hidebound Soviet methods of economic management.

Andropov stood for a more dynamic approach, authoritarian and technocratic

rather than democratic, as opposed to the bureaucratic nudge, fudge and inertia of the Brezhnev period. However for half of his 15 months as General Secretary he was seriously ill and he died in February 1984 at the age of 69, having had time to see his initial efforts rewarded by a limited improvement in economic performance in 1983.

His successor Chernenko, aged 73, a close associate of Brezhnev and apparently also a sick man, seems to represent a stop-gap. He shows neither the originality of mind nor the dynamism needed to give the kind of leadership required for tackling the deep-rooted problems now confronting the Soviet model of socialism, some of whose characteristics we shall now ex-

Party control

The Soviet model of socialism involves a great concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the leadership of a constitutionally unchallengeable and irremovable Communist Party. Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, adopted under Brezhnev in 1977, defines the Party as 'the leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organisations and public organisations.' This sanctions the exercise of party control not only over a highly centralised state apparatus, incorporating the great bulk of the economy and disposing of a strong military and police apparatus, but also over all public organisations, such as trade unions, youth and sports organisations, the press and academic and cultural institutions.

Such control is operated through the *nomenklatura* system, under which appointments to all the key posts from local to national level in party, state and social organisations like trade unions can only be filled by people whose 'candidates are previously examined, recommended and approved' by the party committee at the appropriate level." Within the party itself the system requires that candidates for election or appointment to committees and positions regarded as important have first to be approved by members of higher committees.

The party, with its 18½ million members, is in practice subordinated to a small Political Bureau, which meets at least once a week and reports every six months or so to the very much larger Central Committee. Party Congresses are held every five years and at none of them since 1927 has there been any controversy or divided vote on any major political issue. This does not

of course mean that by some metaphysical process unanimity reigns on all the enormously complex problems of home and foreign policy. Very strong differences do naturally exist but the nominally highest body of the Party - the Congress - does not hear of or decide on them. They are debated in private by the Politbureau - after consultation with relevant specialists - and, exceptionally, by the Central Committee.

Such structures nullify in fact the stipulation of Article 2 of the constitution that 'all power in the USSR belongs to the people', just as actual power relations 50 years ago made a mockery of the provision of the 'Stalin Constitution' of 1936 that 'all power in the USSR belongs to the working people of town and country.' We must distinguish between *real* power and formal, legal power which may be fictitious. Claims that power is in the hands of 'the people', 'the working people' or 'the working class' (the latter having been asserted in the Soviet Union up to 1961 when a 'state of the whole people' was officially declared to have taken the place of the 'dictatorship of the working class') need to be based on empirical evidence, not on constitutional or programmatic formulations ritualistically repeated.

It is contended that since the working people of the USSR showed their confidence in the Communist Party by following its leadership in the October Revolution, the civil war and the Second World War, their power today is expressed in and through its position as the governing party. This would, however, only be true if, *de jure* and *de facto*, the working people were in a position, if they wanted, to change the government. Such a possibility does not exist today in any of the socialist countries, since in none of them are the working people given the chance to choose between alternative parties and/or programmes.¹² This would appear to be excluded by the

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provisions in almost all their constitutions laying down the leading role of the Communist (or other Marxist-Leninist) Party in the state, even where (as in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic and Poland) there is more than one legal party. It thereby becomes unconstitutional to envisage what Lenin had described as the great advantage of the

Soviet system in 1918: 'if the working people are dissatisfied with their party they can elect other delegates, hand power to another party and change the government without any revolution at all.'¹³

Elections

The fact that for historical reasons the Communist Party finds itself as the only party functioning in the Soviet Union today should not in itself preclude the possibility of elections being contested by other candidates, sponsored by different groups of citizens, presenting alternative policies, although this might logically lead to other parties being formed. Stalin, discussing his new constitution with an American journalist in 1936, told him: 'You think there will be no election contests. But there will be, and I foresee very lively election campaigns.'¹⁴ Unfortunately, however, from that day to this no such contests have ever taken place.

Unlike in some other socialist countries, where in some constituencies there are more candidates than seats¹⁵ (though it is not at present possible to stand on alternative platforms), in all elections in the USSR there is only one candidate. Whilst initially there are a number of nominations from public organisations and work collectives, the invariable practice is for only one name to be selected from among them to go on the ballot paper. Although this candidate is not necessarily a member of the Communist Party, it is the representatives of the appropriate committee of the Party who, at a closed meeting, will have the decisive say in determining the one name to go before the electors, from whom they thereby remove the possibility of choice. An attempt in 1979 by a group of citizens in the Sverdlovsk District of Moscow a few years ago to put up the Marxist critic Roy Medvedev as a candidate was ruled out of order. Under such circumstances elections become a kind of plebiscite with a predetermined result.

The Supreme Soviet, whose composition is designed formally to reflect the social composition of the country, meets only for a few days every year to approve the budget and give unanimous support to governmental policies, although in recent years more deputies have been involved in the work of its commissions concerned with specific spheres of responsibility.

Participation

The essential hallmark of socialist democracy, as Marx and Lenin never tired of emphasising, is its involvement of the working people in running the state at all



Konstantin Chernenko.

levels. The Soviet press cites figures of millions of citizens involved as deputies and 'activists' and taking part in nationwide discussions. But if *quantitative* indices were the measure of Soviet democracy, we would have to accept that it was operating at a very high level in 1936, in the midst of Stalin's mass repressions, when it was claimed that 51.1% of the adult population took part in discussing the draft of the 'Stalin Constitution'. However it is necessary to probe behind superficial appearances and apply *qualitative* criteria to ascertain the extent to which participation is effective in *deciding* the main lines of national and foreign policy, as opposed to taking part in approving and implementing policies worked out in their essentials at the top behind closed doors.

In its controversy with *Pravda* in 1982, the Italian Communist Party leadership appositely asked: 'In what party meeting, in what trade union and production assembly, in what Soviet can the communist who dissents and the citizens who object to general political questions (apart from dis-

¹⁰ Speech by Y Andropov *Soviet News* London 17 August 1983.

¹¹ *Partiynoe Stroitel'stvo* Moscow 1971 p 283.

¹² Such a chance was given to the people of Nicaragua last year despite the extreme threat the country was under from US imperialism and the 'contras' which it backs, but Nicaragua's economic system does not allow it (yet) to be classified as socialist.

¹³ V I Lenin *Collected Works* Moscow/London 1964 Vol 26 p 498.

¹⁴ *Interview between J Stalin and Roy Howard* Moscow 1936 p 15.

¹⁵ This practice is being extended in Hungary despite the fact that, like the Soviet Union, there is only one political party.

cussion on particular aspects of a practical or organisational nature) express their disapproval, and how is this reported in public?¹⁶

The Soviet media exclude all information paternalistically deemed 'unsuitable' for the general public, although there is a special restricted service of information and translations which makes it available to the trusted few. There has of late been an increase in the number of letters and reports in the press pinpointing particular local and workshop grievances. Yet a basic distrust for the working people is shown by the fact that in recent years Soviet newspapers and statistical handbooks have stopped publishing annual grain production or infant mortality figures. In 1982 no Soviet papers published the Italian Communist Party's reply to *Pravda's* attack on its policies, any more than they carried the Czechoslovak Communist Party's reply to the Warsaw Pact parties' letter of criticism in July 1968, although the *Pravda* article and the 'Warsaw Letter' were published in full in the press of the parties criticised. In 1980, with the development of Solidarity in Poland, the Soviet authorities resumed the jamming of foreign broadcasts on a large scale.

Already early in the Brezhnev period objective information about 'sensitive' periods of Soviet history began to dry up. Access to archive material has become far more difficult. This has gone along with an increased watering down of the criticisms of Stalin. Thus the 1982 edition of the one-volume *Encyclopaedia of the Soviet Union* deletes all mention of the 'serious violations of socialist legality and mass repressions' under Stalin, quoted in the 1979 edition from a 1956 Central Committee resolution.

Whilst the number of 'prisoners of conscience' held in Soviet prisons and psychiatric hospitals - which Amnesty International has estimated at about 10,000 - is tiny compared with the millions herded into labour camps under Stalin, it is deeply disturbing that after nearly 70 years of Soviet power it should be felt necessary to meet dissenting views with repression rather than reasoned argument. Nor is it a justification to say that people are nowadays only put in prison after due process of law if the laws under which they are sentenced involve restriction or deprivation of fundamental liberties. Some are of a catch-all political character such as Article 190 (1) added to the Criminal Code of the RSFSR in 1966, under which many dissidents have been jailed for 'slandering the Soviet state and social system.'

Soviet economy

The economic advance of the Soviet Union continued at an impressively high rate up till the 1960s. It could claim that, taking 1913 as 100, its national income stood in 1960 at 2,674, whereas that of the USA stood at 348 and of Britain at 204. From this, and similar rates of growth in other socialist states, the conclusion was drawn that 'high growth rates are a law of socialism'.¹⁷ The targets that were formulated on this assumption have not been realised, as Tables A and B illustrate. These show the falling off of the impress-

ive earlier rates of progress in the production of key industrial and agricultural items targeted by the 22nd Party Congress, as well as comparing targets and attainment. Although the statistics, all taken from Soviet publications, are obviously of considerable relevance for an informed Soviet participation in the revision of the Party programme now underway, no such comparison has ever appeared in the Soviet press.

The type of highly centralised command economy, which was so successful in securing the extensive development re-

Table A USSR Industrial Production

Product	1950	1960	CPSU 1961 Estimate for		CPSU 1961 Estimate for		1980	1984
			1970	1970	1980	1980		
Electric power (thousand million Kwh)	91.2	292.3	900-1000	741	2,700-3,000	1,294	1,493	
Steel (million tons)	27.3	65	195	116	250	148	154	
Oil (million tons)	37.9	148	390	349	690-710	603	613	
Gas (million tons)	5.8	47	310-325	198	680-720	435	587	
Coal (million tons)	261	513	685-700	624	1,180-1,200	716	712	
Mineral fertilisers, in conventional units (million tons)	5.5	13.9	77	55.4	125-135	104	n/a	
Synthetic resins & plastics (thousand tons)	67.1	332t	5,300	1,673	19,000-21,000	3,637	4,800	
Artificial synthetic fibres (thousand tons)	24.2	211	1,350	623	3,100-3,300	1,176	1,400	
Cement (million tons)	10.2	45.5	122	45.5	233-235	124	130	
Textiles (thousand million square metres)	3.4	6.6	13.6	8.9	20-22	10.7	11.8	
Leather footwear (million pairs)	203	419	825	678	900-1,000	743	764	

t As given at 1961 Congress. Subsequently revised to 312 thousand tons.

Table B USSR Agricultural Produce

Product (in million tons)	1950		CPSU 1961 Estimate for		CPSU 1961 Estimate for		Target for	
	1950	1960	1970	1970	1980	1984	1980	1990
Grain	81.2	134t	230	186.8	290-310			250-255
Sugar beet	20.8	57.7	86	78.9	98-108	81.0	85.3	102-103
Meat (Slaughter weight)	4.9	8.7	25	12.3	30-32	15.1	16.7	20-20.5
Milk	35.3	61.7	135	83.0	170-180	92.7	97.6	104-106
Egg* (thousand million)	11.7	27.4	68	40.7	110-116	63.1	76.0	78-79

* Individual year's grain production not given. Average annual production for 1976-80: 205.0 million tons.

t As given at 1961 Congress. Subsequently revised to 125.5 million tons.

Sources: *USSR in Figures* (Moscow) - various years; N.S. Khrushchov, *Report on the Programme of the CPSU* (October 18, 1961); L J Brezhnev, *The Soviet Food Programme* (24 May, 1982); *Pravda*, 25 January 1985.



social involvement, which is a necessary condition for reversing the decline in economic growth rates. On the other hand they do not want to carry through reforms which are so radical as to allow independent popular initiatives which they cannot control. Yet Soviet experience in recent years has been demonstrating again and again that you cannot have one without the other. Limited reforms in the political and economic spheres are periodically introduced with great fanfares, but then run out of steam in the face of bureaucratic inertia. Critical remarks made last year in a Central Committee resolution calling for improvements in the democratic functioning of the Soviets were being made in the second half of the 1930s, and again in 1957 when similar decisions were taken. Criticisms of overcentralisation and the need for a reorganisation of the economy to encourage initiative on a regional, local and enterprise level were voiced at the time of the economic reforms of 1957, 1965 and 1979, none of which have brought the desired results. It is by no means sure that further limited reforms of this type are likely to be more successful - perhaps less so, having lost credibility over time having all been 'tried before'.

In selecting Chernenko as Andropov's successor, the party leadership has plumped for playing safe rather than for innovation. The disconcerting memory of Khrushchov could not have been far from their minds, and will no doubt weigh with them when the time comes - perhaps not so far ahead - to choose the next General Secretary. It does not seem very likely that this crucial office will once again be given to a septuagenarian. But what is certain is that the greatest care will be taken by the Politbureau to exclude anyone who might turn out to have the makings of a Khrushchov, not to speak of a Dubcek.

The best that realistically can be hoped for is that a younger person - and Gorbachov seems by far the most likely candi-

date in that category - is appointed with the resolve, as well as sufficient health, strength and time ahead of him, to mobilise wide popular support to carry through a dynamic and sustained reform of the economy and overcome the deep-seated bureaucratic forces that will try to block it. If he (no 'she' has for over twenty years been on the Politbureau, from among whose members general secretaries are chosen) is to succeed in this he will need to accompany it with steps towards loosening paternalistic control over political, social and cultural life, and particularly over the media, access to information and foreign contacts and travel. This would represent a turn towards modernisation and efficiency - no doubt with technocratic features - rather than socialist democratisation. But, unless one resorts to hope rather than analysis, it is not possible to see what forces in the Soviet Union today we could expect to be in a position to take the initiative in carrying through genuine socialist democratisation like that being undertaken by Dubcek and the Czechoslovak communists between January and August 1968, which was so tragically ended by predominantly Soviet military intervention.

After the October Revolution of 1917 the Soviet Union became and remained for many decades the main revolutionary force in the world. Despite its important peace initiatives and assistance to peoples struggling against imperialism¹⁶, the attractive power of its form of socialism has diminished, especially for the West where it is seen as denying some of the essential freedoms won many years ago in bourgeois democratic countries. Today the socialist forces in the West need to provide the world with a more attractive conception of socialism, which draws on all that is best in a long democratic tradition and in more recent democratic movements like feminism, and which is clearly distinguished from the monolithic Soviet model. In this way we could also contribute to the development in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries of a process of renewal based on freedom which, in Marx's words, 'consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it.'¹⁹

quired in the period of industrialisation, has proved quite unsuited to the intensive development required for a more advanced consumer-oriented economy. There has for years been a need to combine the advantages of socialist economic planning with far more flexibility, autonomy and market-oriented enterprises, with democratic control over decisions taken at both factory, farm, regional and national levels. Such radical economic reform, though under discussion since the 1960s, has been blocked through concern as to where it might lead. What we are dealing with here is not only well-established economic administrators with a strong vested interest in preserving the existing structures and a distrust of innovation. It is also a question of fear at top levels in the party and state of the pluralistic *political* consequences of giving greater autonomy to enterprises. It conjures up to them the spectre of economic self-management organs like the workers' councils which constituted a pivotal part of the Czechoslovak economic reform of 1968. This was bitterly denounced as 'anti-socialist' by the Soviet leaders, who ensured that it was scrapped after the invasion. Resistance to economic reform is undoubtedly reinforced by conditions of international tension. To the extent that Western imperialism pushes the USSR - against Soviet wishes and interests - into an accelerated arms race, this increases arms-related production at the expense of consumer industries and strengthens conservative attitudes and pressure groups committed to a highly centralised economy with priority given to heavy industry. A relaxation of international tension would greatly improve the prospects for Soviet economic reform.

At the crossroads

The Soviet Union today stands at the crossroads. Its needs, and those of other countries which have adopted the Soviet model, have for many years come increasingly into conflict with deeply entrenched authoritarian power structures holding back its political, economic, social and cultural development. A freer rein is needed for genuinely independent initiative both inside and outside the existing structures, including for the development of an autonomous women's movement, without which - despite important advances - women will not achieve in practice the equality which is officially proclaimed.

Soviet leaders face a dilemma. On the one hand they recognise and proclaim the need to stimulate political interest and

¹⁶ E Berlinguer *After Poland* London 1982 p 101.

¹⁷ Resolution of 21st Congress of Communist Party of the Soviet Union Moscow 1961.

¹⁸ The vital sphere of Soviet foreign policy, which deserves extended treatment, falls outside the scope of this article.

¹⁹ K Marx Critique of Gotha Programme in Marx/Engels, *Selected Works* Moscow/London 1950 Vol 2 p 29.