

will combine the advantages of socialist planning with much greater flexibility and autonomy in management. Gorbachev will no doubt build on and develop the steps on that road initiated by Andropov, whose general approach (including a special emphasis on discipline) he is likely to follow and develop.

Gorbachev will operate initially as part of the collective leadership which was elected at the end of the Brezhnev era and whose 'conservative' characteristics might be expected to place restraints on the nature and extent of the changes that he might wish to

sis of the respective positions of the Soviet Union and the developed capitalist countries and facing up to some at least of the serious structural problems that have been holding back Soviet development.

Secondly, the congress will discuss the current 5-year plan, which is now in its final year and approve guidelines for the next (1986-90), as well as considering a longer term economic plan up to the next century. This will provide Gorbachev with an opportunity to initiate a debate on the whole question of economic organisation and reform.

Thirdly, the congress will elect a new central committee to replace the present one, the average age of whose members is now 66. The new central committee will in its turn elect a new political bureau. (The average age of the present one is 70.) We may expect Gorbachev to work for the election of many highly competent younger leaders, who have been frustrated by bureaucratic practices holding back their country and who are keen to make it modern and efficient. It is from among them that the new team will be chosen which will take over from present leaders like Prime Minister Tikhonov, who will be 80 next month.

To succeed in their plans for a thoroughgoing modernisation of the economy and the administration, Gorbachev and his new leadership team will need to mobilise wide popular support to confront at every level the forces of political conservatism and bureaucratic inertia, which have blocked the successful realisation of so many reforms initiated in the last 30 years.

To do this will require the loosening of paternalistic controls, particularly over the media. In his central committee speech, following his election, Gorbachev emphasised that a policy of open information to the people is of the greatest importance. 'The better our people are informed, the more conscientious will be their work and deeds', he said. This has, of course, often been said before, including by Chernenko. There is reason to hope, however, that Gorbachev really means it, recognising that it is indispensable for the perspective of Soviet advance to which he is so deeply committed.

Outstanding international problems for Gorbachev and his fellow-leaders include the improvement of relations with China, to which he referred in his central committee speech, and the war in Afghanistan, now in its sixth year with no end in sight. But the most important of all remains East-West relations and an ending of the arms race both because of its threat to world peace and because it seriously undermines Soviet

• GORBACHEV USHERS IN A NEW PERIOD

The election of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ushers in a period of important developments for the Soviet Union at home and abroad. It coincides with the opening of the Geneva arms talks, to the success of which the new leader has made it clear that he attaches the utmost importance. Whilst Soviet foreign policy remains the specialist sphere of Andrei Gromyko, the world's most experienced foreign minister, Gorbachev has impressed all the foreign leaders whom he has been meeting with his competence and direct involvement in the sphere of international relations.

Gorbachev succeeds Chernenko, who died on March 10, at the age of 73, after holding the post of general secretary for only thirteen months, the third top Soviet leader to die in less than three years. The appointment of the vigorous, undogmatic, well-educated and highly intelligent 54 year old Gorbachev promises to bring to a close the lack of dynamism and direction, which has characterised the Soviet leadership internally since the end of the 1970s, with the exception only of the first months of Andropov's leadership, before he was struck down by illness.

The new leader takes over at a time when the USSR faces deep-seated problems. (See my 'Back in the USSR: The Past Catches Up', *Marxism Today*, March 1985.) First among them is the serious and progressive slow-down of growth rates and the long overdue need for a radical economic reform which



Mikhail Gorbachev - new Number One in the Kremlin.

undertake. It is however fortunate that the next party congress is due within the next twelve months and could be held before the end of the year. The indications are that this 27th congress will be of exceptional importance.

Firstly, it is to adopt a new edition of the party programme, replacing the present one which dates from 1961. The new draft, to which Gorbachev will undoubtedly make an important contribution, will be published and publicly debated in the months ahead. This will involve taking stock of the whole course of Soviet development in the last quarter of a century and setting out future perspectives for the Soviet Union which, in Gorbachev's words, seek to prove the advantages of socialism 'not by force of arms, but by the force of our example in all aspects of life-economic, political and moral.' We may expect that, with Gorbachev, this will involve a much more realistic recognition and analy-

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efforts to improve their economy and raise the living standards of their people.

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