

John Lloyd on Soviet depression
Deep Freeze

The Lithuanian murders of January 12 and 13, around the Vilnius tv station, direct us to make a particular kind of inventory. It is particularly important that this be done in the pages of *Marxism Today* - both because of its origins, and because in these pages there has been much praise for Mikhail Gorbachev, and some belief that he could reform the Soviet Union while still keeping it facing in a direction which might be described as socialist.

The first inventory is of what has *not* been achieved after six years of Gorbachev's leadership during most of which period the twin watchwords have been *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

First, civil society does not have any effective institutions of power which can prevail against that of the Communist Party, or of the military and the KGB acting in the name of what they interpret to be its true interests. The Soviets controlled by nationalist and/or democratic political forces, including even that of the Russian Republic, have not gained or been granted powers over armed force, or expenditure, or the law, which can effectively stand against those of the central authority. Vytautas Landsbergis, president of Lithuania, was constrained to propose - on the aftermath of the tv station massacres - a government in exile, since his own was incapable of protecting itself. The declarations of independence have been shown to be... declarations.

Second, the formal declaration, a little less than a year ago, of the ending of the Communist Party's monopoly of power is also just... a declaration. Though other parties have been created, and in some of the republics actually command a majority of support, the Communist Party still disposes through its agencies of force. No other writ runs effectively. Marxism-leninism has not yet given up the fight.

Third, the destalinisation of society turns out to have been more superficial than many thought or hoped. In part, this is because the

Friend of the Toilers has proved to retain a certain enduring popularity in many quarters of society - the more so, as far as can be discerned, as reform ends in chaos and shortages. But it will not do to simply blame the people Soviet institutions remain leninist-stalinist in most essential features, and these remain as bases round which reaction can regroup. Though it is true that some parts of the Soviet state - particularly the foreign service under Shevardnadze - were enthusiastic destalinisers, most were not.

Fourth, flourishing of free opinion in reformist and anti-communist publications is now shown to lack the power to withstand a tightening of the reins on which it has been allowed to play. The Latvian independent news service has been closed. The weekly central tv programme *Vzglyad* was stopped from airing programmes about Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation, and it, too, may be closed. The press has never been 'free': it operated under a tolerance much greater than hitherto. Once the tolerance is withdrawn, there is nothing the reformists and radical editors and journalists can do about it. There remain plenty of hacks to put out the propaganda.

Fifth, a market system has

never been established. This is largely because one has never been attempted, in spite of the vast economic debate of the past five years. That debate had, by the middle of last year, seen the leading lights among presidential economic advisors propose plans which would have turned the Soviet economy far towards the market. But they remained... plans. Though they have never been explicitly junked, it is evident that Gorbachev no longer wishes to, or is able to, support them. The command economy rules still, though much less efficiently than before much more ridden by corruption and crime rings. The distribution system is now reaping the harvest of lack of investment: this will mean that even if the command system can get an extra lease of political life, it will not be able, literally, to deliver.

The market is, as far as one can tell, unpopular. Certainly the co-operatives, which are the closest most Soviet citizens come to their own form of market, are deeply unpopular - largely because they allow some people to get rich and because they buy or acquire scarce goods cheap and sell them dear. In a deficit economy, there is no possibility of co-operatives, which lack established lines

of supply, operating at all without graft: they suffer the odium which black marketeers did in Britain during the war.

These facts provide the backdrop against which Vilnius was possible, and against which more of the same remains possible, even likely. One cannot, reasonably, however, talk of a reversion to the days when that kind of thing was decreed from the centre, and operations continued until the source of the trouble was removed. There remains an important doubt as to whether the centre knew and wanted the mur-

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ders - important not because it can escape ultimate responsibility, but important because it is in these ambiguities that the prospect of further crackdown, or a lurch back to some form of reform will be detected.

Gorbachev cannot save socialism, and he remains what he always has been - a non-elected dictator, albeit one who appeared to want a society in which dictatorship was no longer the norm. There may still be a chance that he can return to that road: we cannot afford to be cavalier about that possibility, even after Vilnius, since the West and East have so much to lose if the conclusion must be drawn that it is a possibility no longer.

He promised so much: now, as we make the inventory, all we are sure of is that he has let eastern Europe escape, and this is probably irrecoverable short of a war.

Nothing beside remains, or will remain if reaction continues. In the name of socialism, he is crushing independence movements which are accused of the crime - it is still a crime - of seeking to restore 'bourgeois rule'. Socialism, we have to recognise it, is the route of reaction.O

