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The USSR: Oligarchy or Dictatorship?

By the summer of 1971 Leonid Brezhnev had apparently become effective head of state of the Soviet Union and its spokesman. When Chancellor Brandt visited the Soviet Union in September he conferred with no one else, and *Pravda* reported (September 19) that “responsible members of the Secretariat of the General Secretary” participated in the conversations. One is reminded of the power obscurely exercised by Stalin’s personal secretariat, especially the mysterious Poskrebyshev during the later years of his rule, and of the role of Hitler’s secretariat, headed by Martin Bormann. Yet Brezhnev is certainly not the despot implied by these analogies. Officially, he has assumed no new powers. More important, no one has been ousted from the top circle since 1965, when the regime seemed to be truly a plural leadership in which no individual was clearly dominant. Yet it is practically the first task of a new tyrant to replace with his dependents those who were formerly his equals or at least potential rivals.

This raises anew the question whether a plural-oligarchic or a single, more or less dictatorial leadership may be considered the more normal one in the Soviet system. History does not give a clear answer. About two-thirds of the fifty-four years since 1917 have seen individual, although not necessarily autocratic, rulership; but this proportion is distorted by the very long dictatorship of Stalin, which is unlikely to be repeated without systemic change. Stalin was forty-two when he became general secretary, but Brezhnev was fifty-eight on attaining the top party post, and the apparatus continues to age. After the demise of each leader—Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev—collective rule has lasted five to seven years, long enough to seem well grounded; and dictatorship seems successively more difficult to impose. Probably the best answer is that neither collective nor single leadership can be permanent in the Soviet way. Neither is institutionalized, both are necessary, and both in the long run deteriorate.

Dictatorship evidently can be built up only by a long accretion of power. Stalin was a member of the Central Committee from 1912 and of the Politburo from its founding in 1917. He was a member of the Orgburo and head of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate from March 1919, and held various other strategic positions well before his nomination as general secretary in April 1922. Yet it still took him many years of maneuvering to make himself complete boss. Despite the blossoming of Stalin’s “cult of personality” in 1929,

“rightists” such as Bukharin and Rykov were on the Politburo until July 1930; and only in the purges of 1936–38 was he finally able to get rid of all who might dare oppose him.¹ Khrushchev’s uphill struggle was equally arduous and less successful. If his opponents had not forced a showdown in 1957 (which they very nearly won), he might well have had to live indefinitely with an unfriendly Presidium.² In 1961 Khrushchev was still trying to secure expulsion from the party of leading members of the “anti-party group.” Brezhnev was Khrushchev’s heir apparent, and from the day of the leader’s removal he occupied the strategic basis of power from which both Stalin and Khrushchev had built up their positions. There has never been an open challenge to his position as front runner. Yet for several years Brezhnev made no marked progress. Only with the Lenin celebrations of April 1970 did he assume pre-eminent visibility, leaving his former peers in the shadows. Since that time a moderate Brezhnev cult of personality has developed. He appears much more often on television (a medium Soviet leaders had largely denied themselves) and in the press. His works, and only his, have been published in various languages. He is the only living leader to be quoted often, sometimes almost ritually. Yet he still seems to be more leader than boss of the Politburo.

One reason for the difficulty in establishing a personal supremacy is the reluctance of the party elite to countenance dismissal of leading figures. The party represents a total dedication, outside of which there is no status and no life for its faithful. With its sense of transcendent importance it is like a church, whose bishops cannot lightly be sent away. They are rarely dismissed except for grave charges of heresy. The top rank of the party might also be compared to an elite club, membership in which, as in an aristocratic guild, becomes indefeasible. As long as one is loyal to the club, he cannot be expelled. The party boss can check nominations, but firing anyone is an overt and offensive act which generates insecurity. Both Stalin and Khrushchev (and probably Brezhnev as well in the case of Shelepin) had to tolerate for many years persons around them whom they disliked. Trotsky was on the Politburo until October 1926. As great issues recede, it becomes less practical to brand anyone a heretic; the weapon of ideological anathematization has fallen out of use since the removal of Beria. Under Khrushchev, expulsion of even local party secretaries required months of maneuvers, procedures, and excuses;³ and stability has markedly increased since then. Only in an atmosphere

1. See Robert V. Daniels, “Stalin’s Rise to Dictatorship, 1922–29,” in Alexander Dallin and Alan F. Westin, eds., *Politics in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1966).

2. For a full discussion see Roger Pethybridge, *A Key to Soviet Politics: The Crisis of the Anti-Party Group* (New York, 1962).

3. Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the U.S.S.R.* (London and New York, 1961), p. 75.

of purge, which the leader cannot create until he has raised himself to supremacy, can men be freely ousted. Toward the end of his life Stalin apparently intended to get rid of some of the old oligarchs in a new purge (as Khrushchev averred in his Secret Speech), but did not feel he could simply discharge them without a major and potentially disruptive scandal. Changes made by the post-Khrushchev leadership have been few indeed and mild. The departures of Podgorny, Andropov, and Shelepin from the Secretariat were presumably beneficial to Brezhnev, but these men were consoled with headship, respectively, of the state, the police, and the trade unions, and they retained places on the Politburo.

It is only to be expected that men near the top will resist the power of a leader to disgrace them. Moreover, a single ruler draws power away from many; and one can assume that the bosses of today, unlike the revolutionaries whom Stalin bested, have a clear idea of the stakes involved. There may even be some continuing fear that a new dictatorship might be physically dangerous. Khrushchev was inhibited by his commitment to de-Stalinization and restoration of "socialist legality"; a successor might conceivably be less restrained. Khrushchev told the Twenty-second Congress that his beaten opponents feared for their lives. Even if the apparatchiks do not fear physical liquidation or political disgrace, they must be apprehensive that a new dictator will surely shake up their comfortable positions. Khrushchev attempted as much in his repeated reorganizations and attempts to limit re-election.

The emergence of a single leader is also harmful to the interests of the ruling party, because he will certainly wish to reduce his dependence upon it, as Stalin did. A new dictator would wish to become head of the government as well as of the party; and if the head of government is supreme leader, there is less need to refer questions to party organizations. Government departments might have to secure assent for appointments from the leader, not the supervisory departments of the Central Committee, to the detriment of the basic party prerogative.

It is more difficult for the would-be supreme leader to secure the acquiescence of his colleagues in the absence of any sort of constitutional definition of his position and powers or limitation of his term. There is no monarchic office in the name of which a ruler can demand deference and obedience.⁴ It is more humiliating to bow to a former colleague who has become boss than to an anointed king. The general secretary has a title to distinguish him from other secretaries of the Central Committee and first secretaries of republics and oblasts, but no specific powers are publicly vested in the office, and it has little of the aura and mystique of kingship. Stalin was often called "leader" (*vozhd*),

4. As noted by Carl A. Linden, *Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership, 1957-1964* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 15.

but this did not carry the ring of "Duce" or "Führer." Khrushchev and Brezhnev have both been called occasionally "head" of the Presidium-Politburo, but this is quite informal. Soviet ideology and the spirit of the Communist movement are not propitious for overt dictatorship. The democratic pretenses are important, and the legally legitimate supreme authority is the Supreme Soviet. Marxism tends to de-idealize and desanctify by emphasizing the material and economic forces in history, not the great personalities. It downgrades the individual in relation to the masses and classes. Only after the leader has attained full power can he incorporate the cult of his personality into the ideology and overlay Marxism with Stalinism or a bit of Khrushchevism (or elsewhere Maoism, Castroism, etc.). Leninolatry, of course, exalts the role of a genius-leader. It may be partly for this reason that the Lenin cult was heightened so much during the years of Brezhnev's rise. On the other hand, the canonization of Lenin diminishes the need for a man who can serve as symbol of Soviet authority and unity. Lenin has no frailties and cannot err; and he is more acceptable to all, including non-Russians, than a living leader would be.

Dictatorial power in the Soviet Union is consequently strictly personal, based on the character of the leader, his charisma, his ability to maneuver, and the aura of success with which he can surround himself. Each supreme personage has had to build his own power and exert himself to maintain it. Stalin sought to do so by promoting himself as Lenin's executor, by undertaking radical transformations and modernization, by playing off different sectors (party, state, police, etc.), and by terrorizing. Khrushchev used de-Stalinization to attack his chief rivals, made himself spokesman for the revival of Leninism and the party, and forwarded modernization and renewal. He proposed grand schemes, one after the other, to cure the ills of the economy, especially agriculture. He juggled his subordinates in the Presidium and Secretariat. Of the Presidium formed after Khrushchev's victory in 1957, only the harmless Mikoyan, the insignificant Shvernik, Brezhnev, and Suslov were still on hand in 1964.

In order to justify his power, the leader seems driven to assume responsibility for more than he can humanly handle. Lenin was interested in an endless number of details, from educational policy to individual housing allotments and even a device for keeping food warm,⁵ while he was leading the party and state, directing the Comintern, and writing abundantly. He was not above such fatuous schemes as renting Kamchatka to an American adventurer. Stalin pronounced himself on ideology, party organization, foreign affairs, literature, music, economics, military strategy, linguistics, various scientific theories, and so forth, and inevitably fell into foolishness. The proposal in his

5. Louis Fischer, *The Life of Lenin* (New York, 1964), pp. 430-34.

last work, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, that collective farmers exchange their produce directly for industrial wares, is an example. One of Khrushchev's prime rebukes to his deceased master was that he did not know his job in various fields. Khrushchev himself laid down policy in diplomacy, industrial priorities, electric projects, chemicals, art, and agriculture, as well as acting as party and government boss. He made and was ultimately held accountable for egregious errors.

At the same time, the personal, inherently illegitimate ruler has not been able to secure very strong loyalty from his aides. Those whom Khrushchev raised up turned upon him and not only expelled him from office but practically made him a nonperson. Stalin was feared and respected, but only Molotov is said to have wept at his funeral. If some opposed de-Stalinization, it was less from love of the departed master than from well-founded fear that the authority of the party would be shaken thereby. The oligarchs were not even faithful to the hero of the Revolution. He was heard with little respect at the Eleventh Congress in 1922, and the Politburo was quite ready to flout the will of the ailing Lenin.⁶ They disregarded his Testament even while sanctifying his memory and putting his corpse on display. As the leader builds his power toward absolutism and comes to hear only the echo of his voice, he tends to lose touch with the realities of the nation, to become more overbearing, arbitrary, and careless of the feelings of his subordinates. This was obvious in the case of Stalin, but Lenin also became arbitrary. His remedy for even minor failures was to "shoot" or "threaten to shoot"—even a man who failed to keep a telephone in order.⁷ He ordered a sanitarium director imprisoned for cutting down a spruce tree.⁸ He grew more and more irritable and intolerant of criticism. Khrushchev in his later years increasingly neglected his colleagues, and formulated policies with minimal or irregular consultation. His self-celebration, especially in connection with his birthday in April 1964, showed a serious overestimation of his strength.

For such reasons, the dictator's lieutenants probably become weary of him, perceive that the state would be better run without him, and are ready to rejoice at his departure. As elsewhere, dictatorship in the Soviet Union leaves a bad taste.

The demise of the ruler cannot be announced with the cry, "The king is dead, long live the king." There is no rule for designating a successor or transferring power to a new monarch, and none is desired. The oligarchs,

6. Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks* (New York, 1965), pp. 556 ff.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 422.

8. Fischer, *Life of Lenin*, pp. 430–31.

released from servitude, turn back to collective leadership, resolved to maintain it forever. "Collectivity is the highest principle of party leadership," proclaimed *Pravda* a few weeks after Stalin's death (editorial, May 16, 1953). It is seen as a talisman against errors like those of the departed leader.⁹ A conscious effort was made after both Stalin and Khrushchev to maintain a secure balance and avoid a renewal of dictatorship.

Collective leadership functions fairly well while the memory of the past dictator is vivid and the oligarchs' understanding for mutual protection prevails. But there is no fixed distribution of power within the regime, either among persons or among organizations—no written or unwritten constitution. Whatever understandings the oligarchs may reach concerning their respective positions lack legal effect and lose moral effect in altered circumstances, as new issues arise and outlooks change.¹⁰ Memories of the excesses of dictatorship wear off. On the contrary, after a period of dull committee rule, people may begin to look back to the previous era as a time of firm direction and decisive action. Oligarchy, at best, is inherently instable, and the inevitable swirl of politics tends to break it down. It is harder to halt the rise of a boss, because the accretion of power is gradual and in the first crucial stages inconspicuous. He achieves his power mainly by forwarding his friends and making it most important to stand well with him.

A special cause of instability of collective leadership in the Soviet state is the imbalance between party and government. *Prima facie*, one would expect the political center of gravity to lie in the governmental apparatus, which has charge of the police, the armed forces, national revenues, and the economy. But party domination is necessary, because the party represents a political will much better than the government. The government must respond to the multiple demands of the society which it administers. The party, not burdened by administrative responsibilities, is much better able to override special claims, regional or professional, in the interest of power over the whole. In order to function properly the government must be guided by law and rules; the party can act arbitrarily. The government must make concessions to pluralism and the façade of democracy; the party can stand unequivocally for the supreme desideratum of unity. For example, the govern-

9. Leonard Schapiro, "Collective Lack of Leadership," *Survey*, Winter-Spring 1969, p. 193.

10. T. H. Rigby, "The Soviet Leadership: Towards a Self-stabilizing Oligarchy?" *Soviet Studies*, 22, no. 2 (October 1970): 175. Rigby believed that the post-Khrushchev oligarchy had come to an agreement to maintain the separation of headship of government and party, to reduce patronage, to distribute place in the main organs suitably, and to maintain a balance among leaders; but he foresaw (p. 191) no stability for this arrangement.

mental system formally concedes sovereignty to the Soviet republics; the party places republic committees frankly under the orders of the Central Committee.

The party, as incarnation of the will to unity, presupposes concentration of authority. To leave power with any large or representative body would mean to invite faction and pluralism and to jeopardize the fundamental role of the party. But the concentration of authority can hardly come to a halt in a Secretariat and Politburo of equals; sovereignty should come to a single focal point, a single unequivocal will and place of decision. Order in fundamental anarchy, as in Hobbes's theory, requires monarchy.

It is consequently difficult for the sovereign party, whose rule is essentially arbitrary, to escape placing itself under a chief. For their own comfort, high party officials would like to prevent sole rulership without inviting dispersal of power.¹¹ But they have no means of doing so. If any multiple body is given real power or if independent offices are established, political contest can no longer be excluded, and there is no surety that it may not spread indefinitely and permit the divisions in Soviet society to find expression.¹²

Questions of personnel especially require an individual judge. A committee has difficulty reaching decisions when many intangibles are involved, and is reluctant to choose between men of its own circles. To penalize them is almost impossible. Soviet collective leaderships have shown this inability. The post-Stalin Presidium of July 1953 lost no members up to June 1957, and admitted only two new ones. But Khrushchev in July 1957 succeeded in replacing ten of fifteen members of the Presidium, and turnover continued high for the remaining years of his tenure. Since Khrushchev's time the twenty-five man group of the Politburo and Secretariat has enjoyed exemplary stability, with fewer changes than accidents of health might be expected to cause in an aging group.

This inability to bring in new blood and expedite the departure of the exhausted would suffice to make the authoritarian oligarchy untenable in the long run. Becoming more calcified and immobile and doubtless more fearful of advancing forceful young men to their midst as the need becomes greater, the collective leadership must gradually stagnate and age. In the Soviet Union it has not lasted long enough to break down from superannuation, but resistance to single leadership has visibly ebbed. A number of pressures might combine to put more and more power in the hands of the individual who can make decisions: the need for policy changes and the renewal of

11. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

12. The successors of Stalin apparently tried to pluralize the headship of the party, because the post of general secretary lapsed with the disappearance of the incumbent; but by September 1953 it was decided to make Khrushchev first secretary.

high-level personnel; fears of self-assertion of other sectors of Soviet society or of the party itself if the center seems incapable of action; the discontent of powerful groups, such as the military, which might enable a leader to claim power in order to forestall a threat to the system as a whole.

If the preceding analysis is realistic, the Soviet system must ordinarily drift or be pulled toward single leadership—partly to secure renewal, partly because in the nonconstitutional system the power tends to gravitate toward one leader and there is no legal means of checking his authority. Yet autocracy is not and cannot be institutionalized because of the commitment of the regime to legal and democratic forms, libertarian ideological goals, and modernism. On the other hand, because of the basically arbitrary nature of Soviet rule, collective leadership apparently cannot be given institutional forms which would secure its strength indefinitely. It is as though popes reigned without formal sanction and after each papacy the College of Cardinals exercised power until one of its number could become pope not by formal election but by accumulation of authority. The alternation of oligarchy and more or less absolute dictatorship seems inherent in the Soviet system and closely related to its other ambivalences.¹³

It is also notable that these alternations have been accompanied by little turmoil and practically no institutional change. The ideological and organizational continuity since 1917 is striking. Each leadership has been raised up by the previous one. The contrast to the turbulence following the British and French social revolutions is so marked that it suggests a deep qualitative difference. In effect, the top has changed but the apparatus has continued to rule for its own benefit, much as the bureaucracy was able to carry on through changes from tsar to regency to new tsar.

Each swing, however, must be different from the preceding one, for several reasons. These include changes that result from modernization and education, the wearing out of revolutionary and ideological drives, the growth of an accepted bureaucratic order with stable positions and of vested interests with *de facto* authority, an awareness of the past which leads to efforts to forestall the rise of a new tyrant by the means used by a past one (and also the awareness of a candidate for supremacy of the means and errors of his predecessors), and the existence of a system in which those on top seek to forward men who will be no threat to them. In accord with these factors, the character of Soviet leaders has changed consistently from Lenin, the revolutionary intellectual, through Stalin and Khrushchev to Brezhnev, the consummate apparatchik. Their ability to remake society has likewise dimin-

13. See Robert G. Wesson, "Soviet Russia, a Geopolitical View," *Survey*, Spring 1971.

ished from Lenin's fashioning of the party and the state, to Stalin's transformations in pursuance of Leninist directions, to Khrushchev's relatively modest panaceas and Brezhnev's immobilism (to date). Similarly, successive collective leaderships have shown themselves better organized, more aware of the problem of checking dictatorship, and more sedate.

It is easy to extrapolate that if the Soviet system retains the basic political characteristics of past decades, this pattern is likely to continue. Dictatorship would become even less revolutionary and forceful—partly because of the stabilization of the elite, partly because great efforts would probably be made to place a harmless man at the head of the party. So far as the Soviet state has a single ruler, he may come to resemble the traditional Latin American dictator—usually a trustee of the ruling families or the officers rather than a self-willed despot. On the other hand, collective leadership, so far as it can maintain itself, may come to resemble more closely the closed corporate rulership of states such as Renaissance Venice. But prediction in Soviet affairs is a venturesome pastime.