

END OF AN ERA

Gorbachev started a chain of events which broke the mould of Soviet politics. His rise to power marked one stage of the class struggle within the Soviet Union, the defeat of the coup marks another stage.

Those who executed the coup against Gorbachev were acting no more 'undemocratically' than those who executed the coup against Thatcher. Both were removed without the mass of the respective Party members, let alone the mass of the people being involved. But that is by the by.

The only thing that connects the two events is that in each case a Party caucus decided that the individuals concerned were incapable of resolving the problems (contradictions) facing their respective countries.

The similarity between the two events is that both are concerned with the question of national sovereignty.

The difference between the two events is that the Thatcher episode was concerned with the relationship between the British capitalist class and the EEC, a problem connected with the preservation of capitalism.

In the other case it arises out of the problems involved in determining the power relationship between the Soviet central government and the constituent republics, a problem that connected with the struggle to build a new type of society.

Capitalism is essentially production for profit, and is, from a social standpoint, unplanned. Socialism on the other hand represents a conscious attempt to match production to rational human need, a thing that has no historical precedent.

It is against this background that developments within the Soviet Union must be evaluated.

Mistakes are bound to be made during attempts to build socialist societies because there is not, nor can there be, a blueprint for such a society. It must grow out of the society which precedes it. As a consequence, it will inherit some of its 'bad' as well as its 'good' traditions, as well as its productive forces and social structure.

As Engels wrote in a letter to Starkenburg, 25 Jan. 1894.

Men make their history themselves, only in given surroundings which condition it and on the basis of actual

relations actually existing".

When Gorbachev came to power he was faced with the task of resolving a number of contradictions that had accumulated over different periods of time, the principal one being economic stagnation, a thing that was foreign to all previous Soviet experience.

A BIT OF HISTORY.

Immediately after the Bolsheviks took power in 1917 they took the decision to go for rapid industrialization throughout the whole of the Soviet Union.

Whether the pace at which it was undertaken was too fast is a matter of contention, but it happened.

The extreme hardships that resulted were due to the fact that the accumulation of capital necessary to finance it had to come from domestic sources, and that primarily meant the peasants.

By comparison, the primary accumulation of capital which made possible the industrialization of Western Europe came about through the vicious exploitation of non Europeans, the horrors of which have been expunged from British school textbooks.

Furthermore, the industrial revolution in the Soviet Union raised the cultural level of the whole of the Soviet people. The one in Europe only raised the cultural level of Europeans, and this is still true today.

It is common knowledge that the Soviet people, under Stalin's leadership, and solely by dint of their own efforts, changed what was formerly the backward Russian empire into a top ranking industrial country. That is a matter of historical fact. It is also a matter of fact that after the end of the war in 1945, (a war in which Churchill said that the Russians had torn the guts out of the German army, and had lost over twenty million of its people in the process, as well as an almost unbelievable amount of material destruction), the Soviet economy was rebuilt with such speed that pre-war levels of output were exceeded within the space of five or six years. (Without the benefit of Marshal Aid).

But the price paid for all this was a highly centralized economy controlled by a class of state and party bureaucrats.

The working class was assigned the role of increasing production, mastering and improving technique, and the role model became that of achieving output targets set by the bureaucrats.

The newly created class had power over the producers that was, under Brezhnev, embodied in a legal code, and the workers

were ideologically disarmed by propaganda that class struggle was no longer necessary because antagonistic classes no longer existed in the Soviet Union.

The Communist Party degenerated into a party of place seekers. If one wanted to 'get on' one joined the Communist party and followed the wishes of the party bosses. This was reflected in the changing class composition of the party.

At the 20th Congress, Krushchev drew attention to what he called an abnormal situation where a considerable proportion of the Communists employed in a number of branches of the national economy were not connected with the decisive processes of production.

"There are some 990,000 Communists in coal industry establishments, for example, but only 38,000 work in the mines. More than 3 million party members live in rural localities, but less than half work in Collective farms, Machine and Tractor stations, and state farms."

Albert Speransky, an electrician, had this to say in a pamphlet published by the Novosti Press Agency:-

"I joined the Party when our country was going through the difficult times of the stagnation period. The demands placed on rank and file Communists were deformed. The Brezhnev type leaders needed a Party which would justify and protect stagnation. ---- I gradually started realizing that a quiet, tractable, and easily controlled organization was an imperative dictated from above."

Unable to resist by means of organized industrial action, workers responded as they do in capitalist countries, by adopting the attitude of getting as much money as possible for doing as little work as possible. That was one of the major causes of the breakdown of the old economic system.

Stalin, shortly before his death, published a pamphlet entitled Economic Problems of Socialism, in which he described some of the economic problems that would have to be solved if the advance towards a socialist society was to be maintained. Both the Krushchev and the Brezhnev governments proved to be incapable of solving those, and other problems caused by Stalin's political methods, with the result that the economy began to stagnate. Indeed, Brezhnev's "Socialist Division of Labour" policy accentuated the problems. Under this policy, regional specialization was taken to ridiculous lengths. Probably the most well known example of this being the concentration of electric meter

production solely in one of the Baltic Republics. This policy put excessive strain on the internal transport system, and, as was probably the intention, tied the republics more firmly to the centre, so that when the system finally reached breaking point the economies of the individual republics were in such a state the feeling grew that they could do better if they had greater control over their own affairs. Because the Communist party was no longer an ideological force the legitimate national aspirations became smothered with old nationalist prejudices.

That was the situation that Gorbachev inherited.

His report to the 27th Party Congress was brilliant in terms of analysis, and his speech to the Central Committee of the Party on June 26th 1987 excellent in terms of pointing out specific shortcomings in economic work.

Although he appealed to trade union leaders to pay more attention to the needs of their members and to stop 'dancing cheek to cheek' with the bosses, there was no mention that workers, as a class should raise themselves to becoming the leading class in society.

He was perhaps constrained from doing so by the fact that, in Kruschew's time, the Party had deleted The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from its political agenda. In a supposedly classless society, who needs it anyway?

But, for whatever reason, Gorbachov placed increasing emphasis on issuing decrees aimed at freeing economic activity from central control. He was trying to undermine the power of the state bureaucracy by decree rather than by waging an ideological struggle to bring the power of the working class into play. An ideologically barren Party and an ideologically disarmed working class, left a political vacuum among the ranks of the people that has been filled by the political and ideological representatives of non working class elements who yearn for the opportunities which they imagine that 'free enterprise' will offer them. A parallel with what happened in China as the result of Deng's market reforms.

Over the past few years, 'making money' has become the most laudable kind of activity

Those who believe that their interests lie in the establishment of a capitalist society are prepared to accept mass unemployment (for others), an increasing crime rate, and the more or less permanent impoverishment of part of the population. Along with their capitalist brethren in the West, they believe that it is

a small price to pay for 'freedom'.

In Russia proper this has become intertwined with a growing Russian nationalism that has a particularly reactionary flavour to it. The popularity of Boris Yeltsin is due more to the Russian chauvinist sentiments that he expresses than to the perception that he is capable of solving the economic problems of the Russian republic.

The timing of the coup indicates that its aim was to prevent the signing of the new Union treaty which will make the Republics virtually autonomous. The proposals to freeze prices and raise pensions were window dressing, but worthy of support because they may have provided a focus for opposition to market reforms. But coup's cast people in a passive role, so 'the passive majority' were never called into action, with the result that when it failed, its leaders were more isolated from the people than before.

The attempted coup reveals principled differences within the Communist Party over the future structure of the Soviet Union. It is not a matter of 'goodies and 'baddies', but of how to construct a socialist society.

In the event, the coup foundered on the rock of Russian nationalism—not on support for Gorbachov's economic reform programme.

. How else can one explain the widespread unpopularity of Gorbachov as an economic reformer, with the demand by the crowds for his reinstatement. They only wanted his reinstatement because he would sign a new Union treaty.

When it is signed, the Republics will have gained more political freedom from the centre, only to find that Russia is now, more than ever, the top dog. There will be no constitutional checks on its behaviour in relation to other republics, and, if extreme nationalist tendencies prevail, as well they might, the smaller republics will probably find themselves in a similar position to British colonies when they gained political independence. They will then have to struggle for their economic independence because Russia will be in a position to dictate the price at which it will sell the fuel and raw materials that are abundant in Russia but scarcer in most other republics.

The locus of class struggle will shift from the centre to the republics when each is responsible for its own economic policies, then Yeltsin will be really put through the test of whether he can solve Russia's economic and political problems.