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BREZHNEV ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS

Summary: The portions of Brezhnev's speech at the 24th CPSU Congress dealing with cultural affairs are a restatement of the "middle-of-the road" position that has been a hallmark of the general Party line thus far. Balancing criticism of liberal tendencies with a warning to dogmatic elements, it appears the regime is not prepared to tolerate experimentation in either direction. As could be expected, the primary emphasis is still on ideological control, with the secret police serving as an important guardian of ideological purity.

Since Brezhnev's presentation of the Central Committee report at the 23rd CPSU Congress five years ago, many of the practices of the Stalin era have come under increasing criticism "from below," with a corresponding attempt by many Party and government agencies at all levels to contain or suppress this tendency. The phenomena of dissent, trials and demonstrations have now become part of Soviet life, publicized by means of samizdat. While reluctant to draw attention to this fact, official publications have had to admit to the existence of such unorthodox tendencies among "individual members" of Soviet society. At the end of last year, it was even found necessary to publish an authoritative article in Pravda (17 December 1970) criticizing dissidents by name.

In keeping with the regime's predisposition toward controlling rather than allowing the free interplay of ideas, it is not surprising that Brezhnev's speech at the 24th Party Congress contains virtually no proposals that hint at a liberalization of the present attitude toward the creative elements in society. Simultaneously, however, there is also a certain degree of restraint from either the crude attacks against the liberal intelligentsia such as those that have characterized the speeches of Pyotr Shelest, a dogmatic member of the Politburo, or from an overt "rehabilitation" of Stalin and his methods. (1)

Without referring to any persons by name, Brezhnev censures those who gravitate in either direction. The first to be criticized, perhaps an indication of his order of priorities, are those "who have sought to reduce the diversity of present-day Soviet reality to problems that have irreversibly receded into the past as a result of the work done by the Party to surmount the consequences of the personality cult," undoubtedly a reference to Solzhenitsyn and other members of the intelligentsia who consider it necessary to re-examine the Stalinist past, examine its causes, and prevent its reoccurrence in the future. On the other hand, Brezhnev also takes exception to those extremist writers "who are trying to whitewash the phenomena of the past which the Party has decisively and principally criticized." In a section of his speech dealing with foreign policy, Brezhnev refuses to agree to a Chinese demand that "the line of the 20th Congress," famous for Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalin, be rejected. Indirectly, therefore, a decision has been taken against the formal rehabilitation, or "whitewashing," of the Stalin era. Both, according to Brezhnev, are "attempts to belittle the significance of that which has already been accomplished by the Party and the people... The Party and the people have not and will not be reconciled with attempts, no matter from which side they originate, to blunt our ideological armament, to soil our banner. If a writer slanders Soviet reality, if he assists our ideological enemies in their struggle against socialism, then they deserve only one thing -- public scorn." Hence, he clearly equates further attempts, not sanctioned by the regime, either to expose more fully the crimes committed during Stalin's rule or to exhume the man and his policies, with "slander" against "Soviet reality" -- a crime punishable under existing Soviet law.

From subsequent remarks, it is apparent that Brezhnev would prefer that the embarrassing episodes of the past be entirely disregarded as subjects for further discussion.

Conveniently, he sweeps critical issues aside by affirming, without elaboration, that the shortcomings of the past have already been adequately analyzed and surmounted. "The experience of the last few years has convincingly confirmed that the overcoming of the vestiges of the cult of personality [Stalinism] and likewise the subjectivist errors [Khrushchev-ism] have beneficially influenced the general political, and first of all, the ideological situation in the country." Without resolving the question, Brezhnev would like to dismiss it by dictate, yet the question of Stalin and the anxiety felt by many persons over what they perceive to be a gradual re-emergence of Stalinist methods continues to exist as a major theme in samizdat that reaches the West. Significant in this regard is the text of an open letter reportedly sent by the well-known dissident Pyotr Yakir to the 24th Congress in which he warns against "the reappearance of Stalinism in the political, social and cultural life of our country... For the last few years a dangerous tendency towards the rebirth of Stalinist methods of government has become apparent in culture, artistic and historical literature and memoirs, and towards the rehabilitation of Stalin himself, one of the biggest criminals of the 20th century." (2) Far from diminishing as a topic of concern, Yakir reportedly states that alarm at this tendency is felt by "a huge, if not overwhelming, part of our creative, scientific and technical intelligentsia."

While not elaborating on the existence of ideas independent of and frequently contrary to the Party line, Brezhnev's emphasis on the need for continued ideological vigilance is tantamount to an admission that heterodox notions have not been eradicated. The Soviet citizen, according to Brezhnev, lives "in a situation of an unflagging ideological war" which is being conducted against the socialist world by "imperialist propaganda." "All methods affecting the mind that are at the disposal of the bourgeoisie -- the press, films, radio -- are mobilized in order to mislead people, in order to inculcate a feeling that life under capitalism is almost paradise, in order to slander socialism. The airwaves are literally saturated with all kinds of fabrications about life in our country and in the fraternal socialist countries." The youth of the Soviet Union continue to be among those, according to Brezhnev, who still require ideological regimentation. "It is our duty ... to direct the ideological education of youth, to do everything in order that they properly continue the work of their fathers, the work of

the great Lenin." Although Stalin's use of mass terror is not likely to be reimposed, it appears that the administrative methods of the secret police will continue to be applied, although in a somewhat restrained and selective fashion, as a means of opposing conflicting ideas. Brezhnev admitted that police agencies will continue to serve the function of guarding ideological purity. "In the conditions of a continuing subversive activity of imperialism, the organs of state security play an important role. During the period under review, their ranks were strengthened by politically mature cadres. The Party consistently educates these agencies in the spirit of the Leninist principles of the strict adherence to socialist law, in the spirit of unflagging vigilance in the struggle to guard Soviet society from the activities of harmful elements, from the intrigues of imperialism intelligence agencies." The perpetuation of such a system casts doubt on the veracity of Brezhnev's assurance that "each Soviet person, apparently, senses an improvement in the moral atmosphere in our Party and in our society."

G.v.D.

- (1) See RFE Research report #0953, "Lessons of the 24th Ukrainian Party Congress," 29 March 1971.
- (2) Reuter/UPI, DPA, 29 March 1971.