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RAD Background Report/86
(Eastern Europe)
1 June 1987

SHADOW OF AN INVASION: MLYNAR ASSESSES INTERVIEW WITH GORBACHEV

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: Zdenek Mlynar, an exiled leader of the Prague Spring, has reassessed the policies of his former fellow student, Mikhail Gorbachev. He criticized the limitations to which the reform movement is still subjected.

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Two years ago, on Mikhail Gorbachev's advent to power in the USSR, Zdenek Mlynar contributed two articles¹ to the Italian Communist Party's daily *l'Unita*. Mlynar, the Czechoslovak exile who had been a CPCS Central Committee Secretary in 1968 and a leading ideologist of the Prague Spring, studied law with Gorbachev at Moscow University from 1950 to 1955. On the basis of that acquaintance, Mlynar suggested that Gorbachev was a pragmatist who could be expected to see the need both for reforms in the Soviet system and for different communist regimes to follow their own paths of development, "a reformer who considered politics a means and the needs of the people the end." There was, he admitted, no guarantee that the reform efforts he expected his old acquaintance to make would succeed. "Nevertheless, I believe that the very choice of Gorbachev has brought something new: socialism has been offered a new chance."

Mlynar recently took a four-page interview that the Soviet leader gave to *l'Unita* as an opportunity to re-examine his assessment.² He began, though, by taking credit for the insights in his original articles, since "at that time there were very few in the West, including the Left, who nurtured that kind of optimism." Since then, however, Gorbachev had "shown that he is a person who is capable of arousing spontaneous trust and that his policies evoke justified hopes." Some of these policies, above all his initiatives in the field of international affairs, had met with the unequivocal support of left-wing forces in the West, which also gave their complete support to his emphasis on democracy in socialism.

Support and criticism, however, went together:

The support given by the Western Left to these conceptions [of democracy], as well as to Gorbachev's policies as a whole, cannot but be a critical support. In this respect, I must say that I sometimes have the impression that this is not quite clear even to the new Soviet leadership.

"Political Arrogance." Soviet statements sometimes, for example, overstressed the novelty of ideas and actions concerning international affairs or Soviet domestic problems that had long been the subject of reflection by many people including Western Leftists. In Soviet relations with such forces in the West, "there is a need for mutual respect, reciprocal understanding, and tolerance but no place, on the other hand, for unilateral subordination or any act of political arrogance." Gorbachev himself did not escape the criticism that came from that general principle:

It is precisely political arrogance and the [Soviets'] attempt to exploit the Western Left as a mere instrument for legitimizing their own often profoundly mistaken and harmful political acts that have created relations of mistrust between Soviet policies [sic] and the Western Left. From certain remarks of the General Secretary in the interview given to *L'Unita*, I got the impression that he himself is not always aware of how things really stand, of that profound mistrust that derives from the past.

As an interesting example of this unawareness of the mistrust caused by the past, Mlynar asked how Gorbachev could say in the interview that he could not understand "the reason for so much caution about the aspiration to organize a world meeting of Communists in Moscow." He went on:

Is it really so incomprehensible? Is it not clear that this is the result of practical experience? How often in the past has the CPSU leadership used conferences in Moscow to justify its own dubious acts: from the conflict with Yugoslavia to that with China, the military intervention in Czechoslovakia, and so forth. Moreover, in the past these conferences were systematically used to proclaim certain forms of social organization that had developed for specific historical reasons in the Soviet Union binding on all countries that wanted to follow their own path toward socialism. Criticism of this behavior was branded as revisionism or downright counterrevolution, with all the well-known political consequences.

Too often in the past, he went on, all that had mattered to Moscow was that the mere presence of many participants at a conference should be taken as an expression of their support for Soviet policies. "On the other hand, their opinions, especially if they were critical, were never made known to Soviet Communists, let alone ordinary citizens." Mlynar mentioned,

among many other examples of this Soviet attitude, the fact that *l'Unita* itself had sometimes been impounded in Moscow when it published something at odds with Soviet policies. In what seemed a reference to himself, he added: "Even today one cannot read in the Soviet party press the opinions of one who, within the framework of the Western Left, has been publishing reflections on the new reformist policies of the USSR for two years."

Limitations. There had, however, been progress. Mlynar welcomed the fact that a journalist on the staff of *Kommunist*, Otto Lazis, had been able to contribute an article to a four-month "debate" in the PCI's weekly *Rinascita*: a series to which Mlynar himself contributed five introductory articles and a closing interview.³ Again, however, criticism followed promptly. Mlynar deplored the fact that in Moscow

it is still considered normal that the Soviet press should not publish a line about that discussion in *Rinascita*, [which gave] the opinions of some 15 authors on the problems facing the reform movement in the USSR.

For Mlynar, in fact, *glasnost*' was fine as far as it went; but it did not go far enough.

Until it becomes current practice to have solidarity and collaboration on the basis of equal rights [between the Soviets and the Western Left]; until, for example, the opinions of certain communist parties and also the representative views of important tendencies in the Western Left are made available both to Communists and to ordinary citizens in the USSR--until then, the Western Left and Soviet leaders will be increasingly isolated from each other, instead of collaborating.

As an example of current practice, he mentioned Soviet exploitation of the presence of the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Duerrenmatt at the recent Moscow peace forum to strengthen the appeal of Gorbachev's foreign policy initiatives.

It is not honest at the same time to say nothing to Soviet citizens about the fact that this same person has explicitly declared himself in favor of the ideas of the Prague Spring and, naturally, condemned the Soviet military intervention.

Czechoslovak Criterion. Czechoslovakia is, naturally, an important criterion for Mlynar. He noted that in a speech published in Prague on the very day that Gorbachev's interview appeared in *l'Unita* the CPCS spokesman Vasil Bilak

rejected the possibility of any criticism of the political course followed in that country after 1968 and repeated the old insults about foreign-paid traitors with whom there would never be discussions.

Bilak added that on his recent visit to Czechoslovakia Gorbachev had totally approved of the post-1968 policy, so that there was no ground for criticism. In his interview, the Soviet leader had indeed said that the assessment of 1968 was "primarily up to the Czechoslovak comrades." Mlynar commented sourly:

One could perhaps agree, if it were possible in that country to have a frank, democratic discussion about the historical events of 20 years ago. As Bilak has demonstrated once more, however, this is not possible. All those who do not think as Bilak does are excluded in advance from any discussion as "traitors."

This criterion, he suggested, would become more important with the approach of the 20th anniversary of the Prague Spring in 1988. In the Western Left the dominant conviction was that

it was a positive attempt to democratize socialism, not an attempt at counterrevolution, and that the violent crushing of that effort through Soviet military intervention was a blatant example of the negation of every country's right to take its own way to socialism.

This whole question would be discussed again in detail over the coming year, and it would then be difficult for Mikhail Gorbachev to keep asserting that it was "a matter for the Czechoslovak comrades." Mlynar concluded:

The tanks that stifled the Prague Spring were not sent by the CPCS against itself but by the Brezhnev leadership of the CPSU. What happened at that time has political repercussions for the present Soviet leadership, even though it does not bear responsibility for it.

Compared with the basic if cautious optimism of his initial comments about his former fellow student's accession to power two years ago, his reassessment is characterized by a tone of recurrent criticism. For Zdenek Mlynar, it seems, structural reform and openness in Soviet society will have to be taken beyond their present limitations before the shadow of the invasion is finally dispelled.

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- 1 See Kevin Devlin, "Some Views of the Gorbachev Era," RAD Background Report/57 (World Communist Movement), *Radio Free Europe Research*, 28 June 1985.
- 2 Zdenek Mlynar, "From Prague '68 to Gorbachev," *l'Unita*, 24 May 1987.
- 3 See Kevin Devlin, "Four-Month *Rinascita* Series on Soviet Reforms: Mlynar Sums Up," RAD BR/69 (Eastern Europe), *RFER*, 30 April 1987.