

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

COMMUNIST AREA

● USSR: Internal Affairs

13 October 1965

ONE YEAR OF B AND K

Political events rarely manage to mold themselves conveniently around neat time periods, a fact which gives observances of political anniversaries a somewhat contrived character. But the Soviet people, or numbers of them in any event, will remember the 14th of October 1964 on its first anniversary and mentally take stock of the year that has passed. Without a doubt the members of the collective leadership will undertake a private, if not a public, review of achievements since the day they reached the summit of power. All those in the West who strain their meager analytical tools to peer into the closed and alien political culture of the Soviet Union will also pause to look back and forward. What has a year with the regime of Brezhnev and Kosygin taught us about its origins, its nature, and its policies? What does the year indicate for the future?

Remember, Remember the Fourteenth of October

Quantitatively speaking, their first year in office has yielded the new leaders a rather crowded record of decisions taken and policies framed. Merely having struggled through such a packed agenda is no doubt regarded by them as a notable achievement quite apart from the substance of the many new measures instituted. But it is possible that they regard their signal success to have been the successful engineering of the first coup d'etat in the history of Soviet rule. No matter how careful their preparation or strong the support on which they counted, they must surely have been plagued with the knowledge that the weight of precedent was against them. As pointed out in the 1962 History of the CPSU, there was a strong feeling at the

time of the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, the "Congress of the Victors", that Stalin ought to be gotten rid of. But the opposition never got off the ground and thereafter Stalin presided over the most massive bloodletting in the history of political intrigue. In 1957 the Presidium of the Central Committee confronted Khrushchev with an opposing majority that left him with only two certain supporting votes; but he demonstrated to his antagonists that, as he put it, "there is more to politics than arithmetic." As the conspirators of October 1964 summoned the Central Committee and called the First Secretary back from the Crimea, memories of these events were surely not entirely out of mind.

One of the most disappointing features of the new regime's first year in office has been its almost total failure to shed any light on the question of how they arranged Khrushchev's ouster. It can hardly have transpired as smoothly and painlessly as it appeared on the surface. Who took the initiative? Who lined up in support and who hesitated? How and when were lower echelons brought into the conspiracy? One can, of course, easily imagine a plausible scenario for the plot, but the real facts remain obscure. Perhaps some illumination will emanate from the next party congress, but we have no guarantee.

Only relatively less clouded is the question of which specific issue crystallized the opposition to Khrushchev. One can hardly be firmly convinced that the anti-Khrushchev movement emerged from a vague, amorphous sense of displeasure with his "subjectivism" and "harebrained scheming." The logic of politics leads one to look for a catalyst, a focal point, a straw that broke the camel's back. From the action taken immediately after the coup, at the November 1964 Plenum, it is evident that one serious source of opposition was the bifurcation of the Party apparatus into industrial and agricultural segments which Khrushchev railroaded through party councils in 1962. But this splitting of the party was a harebrained scheme from the start. Furthermore, having endured for two years, the division generated a certain body of vested interests which would have been resistant to rational arguments for a return. Thus it seems relatively unlikely that Khrushchev's lieutenants would have coalesced against him on this issue, although once assured of their own cohesion they may have mounted their offensive in the Central Committee on it.

In the absence of any firm evidence one may at least entertain the speculation that what brought the plotters together was not a past but an impending maneuver by Khrushchev which may or may not have appeared harebrained but which threatened their political careers. In any event, once the First Secretary was safely out of the way, the new leaders began to make it clear that their substantive disagreement with his policies covered very wide ground. In almost all areas of foreign and domestic affairs, the collective leadership has applied the damning epithet of "subjectivism" to previous policies and has struck some bold new courses. The new regime's tally of measures taken is indeed impressive.

Policy: Clean Up the Economic Mess

In one crucial respect, the new rulers of the Soviet Union were in complete agreement with Khrushchev. They were firmly convinced that the source of all good things is Soviet economic strength and its systematic expansion. This required that they wipe out the pervasive muddle in the national economy. The schedule of measures taken by Brezhnev and Kosygin in the economy is well known and warrants only cursory review.

The first decisions were taken in agriculture. A signal credit to their realism, the new rulers recognized that the socialized sector of Soviet agriculture will long be unable to satisfy the nation's demand for food. They thus reversed almost immediately Khrushchev's ideologically-motivated restrictions on the private plot. The next step was to work out a comprehensive "new deal" for agriculture which was presented at the March 1965 Plenum by Brezhnev. The program encompasses, essentially, a guarantee of higher farm income through what can appropriately be labeled the world's highest price supports and a promise of much needed capital investment over the next five years. It should be kept in mind that the decision of the March Plenum represented a substantial pre-commitment with respect to the next Five Year Plan.

In the industrial sector, the problems facing the regime were more complex if not more urgent. While reform in industrial planning and management had been under discussion for a considerable period, the new regime still required nearly a full year

to work out the program which was presented to the Party's recent September Plenum. The organizational side of the industrial reform accomplished the reestablishment of branch line control through the resurrection of the ministerial system. On paper this measure appears to represent a drastic recentralization of economic control. But quite apart from official protestations to the contrary, reestablishment of the ministerial hierarchy can not be called real recentralization. After all, the Soviet economy has been a command economy since 1928 which has meant a continuing high degree of centralization by definition. Moreover, the sovnarkhoz system which was instituted by Khrushchev in 1957 rapidly evolved into a top-heavy hierarchy of regional councils which, by official admission, shunted minor issues to the top for decision. The choice was thus between efficient and inefficient forms of central control. The second aspect of the industrial reform encompasses the expansion, through a variety of devices, of the operational-managerial prerogatives of decision-makers at the plant level. The aim of this measure is to lighten the load on central planners and to afford managers greater flexibility in meeting local problems. The lynch-pin of the reform is, however, the redefinition of success indicators in favor of profit, which is hoped will place on an economic rather than an administrative foundation an identity of interest between planners and managers.

The purpose of the industrial reform is to take up the enormous slack that has developed in industry in the form of inefficiently employed capital. Whether and in what measure success can be achieved remains for the future to demonstrate. It should be kept in mind that many aspects of the reform will take several years to institute much less register a result. The Soviet mathematical economist Kantorovich wrote several years ago that a regime of efficient planning and management could increase Soviet output with present capital by some 30-50 per cent. The potential of the present reform, thus, can be seen as considerable.

Policy: the Seventh Five-Year Plan

The collective leadership of Brezhnev and Kosygin has yet to take a series of crucial economic decisions in the form of allocating resources under the next Five-Year Plan, which will be the Seventh unless they consider that the one scuttled in

1958 doesn't count. While one can hardly hope successfully to second-guess Soviet decision makers on the contours of the next plan, it is inevitable that observers in the West as well as Soviet citizens will be watching closely for hints as to how the Soviet consumer will fair under it. As a result of agricultural stagnation and the general slow-down in the industrial sector, where consumer goods have long played a subordinate role, the growth of per capita consumption in the Soviet Union has slowed in recent years almost to a standstill after rather substantial gains in the early years of Khrushchev's rule. In a long list of allusions to the improper balance that prevailed in Soviet planning in the past, the present regime has issued what amounts to a promise of significant improvement on the consumption front in future. The degree to which they fulfill this promise, however, remains to be seen. As usual a number of pressing demands compete with consumption for the available resources. In order to bring a rapidly constructed industrial plant up to date, the regime must invest significant resources in expanding the so-called progressive branches such as oil and chemistry. It must expand the power base and certain underdeveloped sections of the steel industry as well. Defense remains a strong claimant. While the Soviet defense effort has tended to level off in the years since 1962, especially as the production base for the missiles was established, the deployment of advanced weaponry has continued to draw off quality human and material resources from civilian objectives. It would appear that the Soviet leaders would like to see defense spending coast along at present levels. But, as they themselves frequently point out, the revolution in military affairs refuses to come to a halt and continually faces them with new challenges. Among a number of possible new vectors in military development, perhaps the most pressing and certainly the most expensive will be the development of an anti-missile defense system. While the Soviets seem to have deployed some components of a first generation system, they seem on the whole to be in roughly the same position as the United States in this area, that is, just on the brink of the most serious commitment. If the Soviets choose to proceed with series production and deployment, it will probably cost them about the same as an optimal system would in the United States, perhaps up to 20 billion dollars. Such an effort, if the Soviets choose to undertake it, would impose an enormous strain on their resources because it would have to be brought to fruition in a relatively short period of time lest the technology become obsolete.

The Present and Future of the Collective Leadership

For the Kremlinologist, the first year of B and K has been a somewhat frustrating experience. When Khrushchev was ousted it was generally forecast that the new regime would be a caretaker government and an arena for political struggle from which a more stable rulership, some form of one-man rule, would emerge. All antennae were therefore directed to detecting the expected signs of the power struggle which the finely-honed instincts of the art insisted was inevitable. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one's point of view, the signals thus far have been faint and extremely muddled.

The overt evidence appears to indicate a remarkably pervasive unity among the present members of the Presidium. Far-reaching decisions have been taken, yet deep substantive differences on the issues at hand have not come to light. Important functionaries have been replaced in the Secretariat and new personalities have emerged at the top, but the changes fail to reveal a pattern of political infighting. In the speeches of important leaders there has been a detectable variation in emphasis, but it is impossible to say whether this comes from real political differences as opposed to the functional division of labor which the leadership has developed. Working unity seems to be the order of the day.

On the other side of the argument we have, if not evidence, at least precedent. Power struggles in the Kremlin have been the rule in the past and they have rarely been clearly signaled. In this case, the lessons of history behoove the observer to refrain from concluding that the apparent is the real. Clearly, it would be rash to make a firm forecast as to how the politics of collective leadership will evolve in the future. But it should be recalled that the key political moves which brought Khrushchev to the summit after a short period of collective leadership following Stalin's death were made in preparation for the Twentieth Party Congress of 1956. It was at this time that Khrushchev built the power platform on which his eventual pre-eminence was founded. The local party gatherings and elections leading to the next party congress to be held in March can not be without political significance for the top leaders; it may be at the local level that the collective leadership will be confirmed or undermined.

The Unfinished Revolution

What has the past year shown about the direction in which the Soviet system is evolving? The answer to such a question must come only from the perspective of time. But viewed from this perspective at the present time, the past year has manifested much more underlying continuity than radical departure. The Soviet system faces the same basic problems: generating efficient forms of centrally directed management in an increasingly complex society; relating its legitimizing ideology to a world where, even in terms of the regime's own goals, the doctrines of the past appear ever less relevant; and finally bridging the gap between "we" the people and "they" the rulers which has existed in the empire of "all the Russias" for centuries.

At the time when Khrushchev was ousted, an American publicity seeker was driving his family from Europe to Moscow in a covered wagon, informing everyone along the way of his intention to take up a personal invitation from the First Secretary to visit him in the Kremlin. Two weeks after Khrushchev had "retired", this latter-day frontiersman arrived in the Soviet capital totally unaware of the changes that had transpired. He had spoken with hundreds of Soviet citizens who had been bombarded from every side with the official version of the palace revolution; yet not one had seen fit to point out that things were not quite the same in Moscow. The legacy of suspicion and disinterest among the Soviet people toward the Byzantine political developments which transpire in Moscow is a heavy one. Despite a great deal of preaching on collectivity and reliance on the masses, one year of B and K has not appeared to lift this burden from Soviet political life. "They" still make the decisions.

Fritz Ermarth