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THE SOVIET UNION IN MARCH, 1987

SUMMARY

1. THE TITLE OF THIS SNAPSHOT OF THE SOVIET UNION ON THE EVE OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT IS DELIBERATELY CAUTIOUS: APRIL MAY OR JUNE COULD BE QUITE DIFFERENT. GORBACHEV'S COMMITMENT TO 'PERESTROIKA' (RESTRUCTURING) IS NOT IN DOUBT BUT HIS POSITION IS BY NO MEANS IMPREGNABLE. IN BOTH POLITBURO AND CENTRAL COMMITTEE THERE ARE RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE PACE HE IS SETTING. HE NEEDS - BUT MAY NOT GET - A PARTY CONFERENCE TO CONSOLIDATE HIS AUTHORITY. 'GLASNOST' CONTINUES TO GATHER MOMENTUM: PERHAPS TOO MUCH. BUT IT EXCITES THE INTELLIGENTSIA MORE THAN THE MASS OF THE PEOPLE, WHO WOULD BE MORE IMPRESSED BY WELL-STOCKED SHOPS. BASIC ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, EXACERBATED BY AN UNLUCKY START TO 1987, REMAINS VIRTUALLY UNTOUCHED BUT WILL BE RE-ADDRESSED AT A CENTRAL COMMITTEE PLENUM IN JUNE FOR WHICH THE PREPARATORY DEBATE IS ALREADY UNDER WAY. IN EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, GORBACHEV HAS - APART FROM HIS INF INITIATIVE - TEMPORARILY PAUSED FOR BREATH. THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT - FOR WHICH THE PROGRAMME IS UNPRECEDENTEDLY COMPLIMENTARY - PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO DRIVE HOME THE TRUTH THAT IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AS IN INTERNAL 'RESTRUCTURING', WORDS WILL BE CREDIBLE ONLY WHEN ACCOMPANIED BY DEEDS.

DETAIL

THE LEADERSHIP

2. AFTER SETTING A HECTIC PACE DURING THE FIRST TWO MONTHS OF THE YEAR - THE JANUARY PLENUM, VISITS TO LATVIA AND ESTONIA, A MAJOR SPEECH AT THE TRADE UNION CONGRESS - GORBACHEV HAS BEEN ON A FORTNIGHT'S 'WORKING VACATION'. HE IS LIKELY TO HAVE DEVOTED THIS IN PART TO PREPARING BOTH FOR THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT AND FOR HIS OWN FORTHCOMING VISIT - BEGINNING ON 6 APRIL - TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA: BUT HE WILL ALSO HAVE BEEN TAKING STOCK OF HIS OWN POSITION AND PROGRESS DURING HIS FIRST TWO YEARS IN OFFICE.

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3. OSTENSIBLY, GORBACHEV'S POSITION IS SECURE. THE SECRETARIAT OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE, WHICH IN TERMS OF RUNNING THE COUNTRY IS OF AT LEAST EQUAL IMPORTANCE TO THE POLITBURO, NOW CONSISTS ALMOST ENTIRELY OF HIS OWN APPOINTEES. IN THE POLITBURO, HE HAS BEEN CAREFUL TO PICK OFF HIS OPPONENTS ONE BY ONE, AFTER THOROUGHLY PREPARING THE GROUND IN EACH CASE: ROMANOV, GRISHIN AND KUNAIEV HAVE DEPARTED IN VARYING DEGREES OF DISGRACE AND THE CURRENT UNDERMINING OF SHCHERBITSKY'S AUTHORITY THROUGH A SUCCESSION OF DISMISSALS OF SENIOR UKRAINIAN PARTY OFFICIALS IS EVIDENTLY THE PRELUDE TO HIS EVENTUAL OUSTER.

4. IN THE POLITBURO AS IT NOW STANDS, THERE ARE CLEARLY DIFFERENCES OF VIEW AND EMPHASIS BUT THEY PROBABLY OWE MORE TO DIVERGENCES IN PERSONAL STYLE AND TEMPERAMENT THAN TO MORE FUNDAMENTAL DIVISIONS ON POLICY. ALL ITS MEMBERS ARE PUBLICLY AND MORE OR LESS ENTHUSIASTICALLY COMMITTED TO - AND MOST DOUBTLESS GENUINELY BELIEVE IN - ''PERESTROIKA''. BUT GORBACHEV'S NATURAL IMPATIENCE, TASTE FOR THE COLOURFUL PHRASE AND APPARENT SELF-IDENTIFICATION WITH LENIN AND HIS ACTIVISM, PUT HIM AHEAD EVEN OF THE RADICAL WING OF THE POLITBURO. LIGACHEV, CAST IN A MORE TRADITIONAL PARTY MOULD, HAS RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF ''GLASNOST'' AND ''PERESTROIKA'' FOR THE PARTY'S AUTHORITY WHICH PUT HIM AT THE OPPOSITE END OF THE POLITBURO SPECTRUM: HIS CAUTION IS PROBABLY SHARED BY CHEBRIKOV, GROMYKO AND, OF COURSE, SHCHERBITSKY. GORBACHEV CAN COUNT ON SHEVARDNADZE AND RYZHKOV. BUT THERE ARE RISKS IN HAVING TO LEAD FROM A FLANK RATHER THAN FROM THE CENTRE. IN A CRISIS, ESPECIALLY IF IT WERE DIRECTLY OR EVEN INDIRECTLY ATTRIBUTABLE TO HIS OWN POLICIES, GORBACHEV COULD FIND HIMSELF IN A MINORITY IN THE POLITBURO: TO BE SECURE, HE BADLY NEEDS THE SUPPORT OF FELLOW RADICALS LIKE ELTSIN, WHOSE PROMOTION TO VOTING STATUS HE SIGNIFICANTLY FAILED TO SECURE AT THE JANUARY PLENUM.

5. ALTHOUGH HE HAS PRESIDED, DURING HIS TWO YEARS OF OFFICE, OVER THE REPLACEMENT OF 69 OBKOM (REGIONAL) PARTY FIRST SECRETARIES (PLUS 41 GOVERNMENT MINISTERS AND 15 CHAIRMEN OF STATE COMMITTEES) GORBACHEV STILL FACES SIGNIFICANT OPPOSITION WITHIN THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE, AS THE RECENT PLENUM CONFIRMED. GORBACHEV CAN AT PRESENT COMMAND A MAJORITY BUT THIS COULD QUICKLY DISAPPEAR IN THE EVENT OF A POLITBURO SPLIT. THE FACT THAT GORBACHEV'S POLITBURO COLLEAGUES KNOW THAT, UNLIKE KHRUSHCHEV IN 1957, HE CANNOT WITH CONFIDENCE MOBILIZE THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE AGAINST THEM IN ITSELF MAKES A SPLIT MORE POSSIBLE. HENCE HIS PROPOSAL FOR A PARTY CONFERENCE, THE PURPOSE OF WHICH WOULD BE BOTH TO UNITE THE WHOLE PARTY UNEQUIVOCALLY BEHIND THE BANNER OF ''PERESTROIKA'' AND TO REMOVE OPPONENTS FROM THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE. BUT IT IS NOT YET CERTAIN, BY ANY MEANS, THAT GORBACHEV WILL GET HIS PARTY CONFERENCE OR, IF HE DOES, THAT IT WILL HAVE THE POWERS WHICH HE WOULD LIKE TO GIVE IT: THERE ARE BOUND TO BE APPREHENSIONS AMONG THE MORE CAUTIOUS ELEMENTS IN THE LEADERSHIP THAT, PARTICULARLY IN THE ERA OF ''GLASNOST'' AND ''DEMOCRATISATION'', A CONFERENCE COULD NOT EASILY BE STAGE-MANAGED AND THAT IT MIGHT GET OUT OF CONTROL.

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6. NEVERTHELESS, I BELIEVE THAT IF GORBACHEV CAN WEATHER THE PERIOD UP TO A PARTY CONFERENCE, THAT EVENT COULD ENABLE HIM TO SECURE HIS POSITION BEYOND DOUBT. BUT HE IS NOT A 'LUCKY GENERAL'. HE HAS HAD MORE THAN HIS FAIR SHARE BOTH OF MAN-MADE AND OF NATURAL DISASTERS. HIS AUTHORITY IS AT PRESENT UNCHALLENGED BUT IT IS BY NO MEANS UNCHALLENGEABLE.

INTERNAL

7. INTERNALLY, THE PROGRESS OF 'PERESTROIKA' IS NOTABLY UNEVEN. THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN THE SPHERES OF CULTURE AND THE MEDIA IS DRAMATIC. THE BOUNDARIES ENCLOSING WHAT CAN BE WRITTEN AND READ ARE DRIVEN BACK WEEK BY WEEK. IN THIS LAST WEEK OF MARCH, FOR EXAMPLE, THE LITERARY JOURNAL 'OKTYABR' HAS PUBLISHED AKHMATOVA'S MOST POWERFUL ANTI-STALINIST POEM, 'REQUIEM': 'STARS OF DEATH STOOD ABOVE US, AND INNOCENT RUSSIA WRITHED UNDER BLOOD-STAINED BOOTS, AND UNDER THE TYRES OF BLACK MARIAS'. 'PRAVDA' HAS REPORTED, AT LENGTH, A SERIOUS CASE OF FINANCIAL CORRUPTION IN THE SOVIET ARMY AND THE EXPULSION FROM THE PARTY OF THE LIEUTENANT-GENERAL RESPONSIBLE: THE ARMED FORCES HAVE HITHERTO BEEN VIRTUALLY IMMUNE FROM INVESTIGATORY 'GLASNOST', BUT NO LONGER. AND THE CHAIRMAN OF THE HISTORICAL INSTITUTE OF THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCES HAS PUBLICLY CALLED FOR OBJECTIVE APPRAISALS OF THE PERIOD OF LENIN'S 'NEW ECONOMIC POLICY', OF THE STALINIST ERA AND OF THE KHRUSHCHEV YEARS. NONE OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS WOULD HAVE BEEN CONCEIVABLE EVEN A YEAR AGO. THE FACT THAT THEY DO NOT NOW SEEM CATAclysmic TESTIFIES TO THE PACE OF CHANGE IN THE INTERIM.

8. TO LET THE INTELLIGENTSIA OFF THE LEASH IS, OF COURSE, A RELATIVELY EASY MATTER: THEY COULD BE REINED IN AGAIN - ALTHOUGH WHAT HAS BEEN PUBLISHED, READ AND REMEMBERED CAN NEVER ENTIRELY BE ERASED. MOST OF THIS ASPECT OF 'PERESTROIKA', HOWEVER, PASSES THE MASS OF THE PEOPLE BY. THE LATEST EXTENSION OF THE FRONTIERS OF 'GLASNOST' MAY CAUSE AN EXCITED BUZZ IN MOSCOW BUT MAKES RELATIVELY LITTLE IMPACT IN OMSK. FOR GORBACHEV, THE MOST DISTURBING ASPECT OF THE PRESENT SITUATION MUST BE HIS APPARENT FAILURE, FOR ALL HIS RHETORIC AND HIS WALK-ABOUTS, TO GENERATE ANY REAL ENTHUSIASM TO THE GRASS-ROOTS FOR WHAT HE IS TRYING TO DO. AND THE MORE HE INTENSIFIES THE DRIVE FOR 'PERESTROIKA', AND INCREASES THE DECIBELS OF EXHORTATION, THE GREATER THE POLITICAL RISKS BECOME. THE WEIGHT OF APATHY WHICH HE HAS TO OVERCOME IS FORMIDABLE. WITH THE PROFOUND SCEPTICISM BORNE OF BITTER EXPERIENCE, ORDINARY SOVIET PEOPLE WATCH HIS EXERTIONS WITH CAUTIOUS INTEREST: BUT THEY WILL SUSPEND JUDGEMENT, AND BE SPARING WITH THEIR EFFORTS, UNTIL 'PERESTROIKA' PRODUCES VISIBLE RESULTS IN THE MARKETS AND IN THE SHOPS. MEANWHILE, THE THRILL OF BEING ABLE TO ELECT THEIR PLANT MANAGERS IS AN INADEQUATE SUBSTITUTE FOR THE SHORTAGE OF ALCOHOL AND AN UNREMITTING DIET OF BAD NEWS (TO WHICH THEY ARE NOT ACCUSTOMED) IN THE NEWSPAPERS AND ON TELEVISION.

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(THE ECONOMY

9. 1986 WAS A PROMISING BEGINNING TO THE 12TH FIVE YEAR PLAN (ALTHOUGH SOME WESTERN EXPERTS DISPUTE THE SOVIET STATISTICS ON WHICH THE CLAIM OF A GROWTH RATE OF 4.1% IS BASED). 1987, HOWEVER, HAS GOT OFF TO AN APPALLING START. IN THE ECONOMY AS A WHOLE, THE RESULTS FOR JANUARY WERE ABYSMAL AND THOSE IN FEBRUARY, ALTHOUGH AN IMPROVEMENT, WERE NOT NEARLY GOOD ENOUGH TO MAKE UP THE SHORTFALL. THIS WAS PARTLY DUE TO THE WEATHER - TWO WEEKS OF EXCEPTIONAL COLD - AND IMMINENT FLOODS IN THE SOUTHERN UKRAINE WILL NOT HELP THE HARVEST. ANOTHER CAUSE, HOWEVER, HAS BEEN THE BUILT-IN CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THE NEWLY-ESTABLISHED QUALITY CONTROL MECHANISM IN INDUSTRY (THE 'STATE ACCEPTANCE CENTRES') AND THE RECENTLY INTRODUCED ECONOMIC INDICATOR WHICH ASSESSES THE OUTPUT OF AN ENTERPRISE BY COMPLETED DELIVERIES (I.E. ACCEPTABLE GOODS) RATHER THAN BY VOLUME CONTAINING A HIGH PERCENTAGE OF RUBBISH. THE SOVIET UNION'S ONLY PLANT MANUFACTURING PHOTOCOPIERS PRODUCED 176 MACHINES IN JANUARY: OF THESE, ONLY 2 WORKED. IN THE FIRST 9 DAYS OF FEBRUARY, NOT A SINGLE PHOTOCOPIER PASSED THE QUALITY CONTROL TESTS. IN THE SOVIET UNION AS A WHOLE, ONLY 77% OF ALL ENTERPRISES MET, LET ALONE EXCEEDED, THEIR CONTRACT COMPLETION TARGETS.

10. IT WILL TAKE 'PERESTROIKA' A VERY LONG TIME TO MAKE ANY VISIBLE IMPACT ON PROBLEMS OF THIS SCALE. THE INDICATIONS ARE THAT THE LEADERSHIP, HAVING GOT AS FAR AS IT CAN FOR THE TIME BEING WITH THE REPLACEMENT AND INVIGORATION OF CADRES (THE MAIN THRUST OF THE JANUARY PLENUM), IS NOW TRYING TO GET TO GRIPS WITH THE MORE INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS OF ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT AND REFORM (THOUGHT TO BE THE AGENDA FOR THE NEXT PLENUM IN JUNE). HOW, FOR EXAMPLE, CAN THE ECONOMY AFFORD NOT TO ADOPT A TWO OR THREE-SHIFT SYSTEM? BUT, EQUALLY, HOW CAN IT AFFORD THE WAGE DIFFERENTIALS WHICH WOULD MAKE THIS POSSIBLE? BATTLE BETWEEN THE RADICALS AND THE TRADITIONALISTS HAS ALREADY BEEN JOINED: THE VETERAN RADICAL ECONOMIST, ZASLAVSKAYA, HAS ALREADY SUBJECTED THE NEW DRAFT LAW ON STATE ENTERPRISES TO VIGOROUS PUBLIC CRITICISM FOR ITS TIMIDITY. THE ESTABLISHED SOCIALIST ORTHODOXY ON PRICES IS BEING QUESTIONED. LIMITED CONVERTABILITY OF THE ROUBLE UNDER ACTIVE CONSIDERATION. MEANWHILE, THE SOVIET ECONOMY IS LUMBERING THROUGH ANOTHER BAD WINTER AND HARVEST PROSPECTS CANNOT BE GOOD.

EXTERNAL

11. AFTER AN ACTIVE BUT LARGELY UNPRODUCTIVE YEAR OF FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVITY IN 1986, GORBACHEV HAS SO FAR THIS YEAR CONCENTRATED ON DOMESTIC CONCERNS, LEAVING THE OVERSEAS LEG-WORK TO SHEVARDNADZE AND OTHERS. THE 28 FEBRUARY INITIATIVE ON INF HAS BEEN THE ONLY SOVIET GAMBIT AS YET: WESTERN, AND PARTICULARLY EUROPEAN, RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE ZERO-OPTION AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF WARSAW PACT SUPERIORITY IN SRINF AND CONVENTIONAL FORCES HAVE BEEN DISMISSED WITH IMPATIENCE AND EXASPERATION AS ARTIFICIAL ATTEMPTS TO BLOCK OR 'LINK': GORBACHEV NEEDS A FOREIGN POLICY SUCCESS

TO LEAVEN THE DAILY CATALOGUE OF WOES AT HOME, AS WELL AS FOR LONGER-TERM AND MORE SUBSTANTIVE REASONS, BUT IT CONTINUES TO ELUDE HIM. THE IMAGE-BUILDING CAMPAIGN, HOWEVER, CONTINUES. SHEVARDNADZE, YAKOVLEV, ZAGLADIN AND OTHERS HAVE PREACHED THE GOSPEL OF 'PERESTROIKA' IN ASIA AND IN EUROPE TO ENCOURAGE A SHIFT IN TRADITIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN BEAR. THEIR PROTESTATIONS CAN CARRY LITTLE CONVICTION, HOWEVER, WHILE THE WOUNDS OF AFGHANISTAN CONTINUE TO BLEED.

12. THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT IS, IN THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT, THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT OF THE YEAR SO FAR. THE PROGRAMME ARRANGED FOR HER OUTSHINES THOSE PROVIDED FOR ANY VISITING HEAD OF GOVERNMENT, OR EVEN HEAD OF STATE, IN GORBACHEV'S TIME. FOR HIS PART, GORBACHEV WILL BE SEEKING (AND WILL CERTAINLY GET) A CLEARER AND MORE HONEST READ-OUT ON CURRENT WESTERN ATTITUDES AND PREOCCUPATIONS THAT HE HAS BEEN ABLE TO OBTAIN FROM OTHER WESTERN INTERLOCUTORS SINCE THE CONFUSION OF REYKJAVIK; AND HE WILL HOPE TO CONVEY BOTH THE REALITY AND THE DEPTH OF THE CURRENT PROCESS OF CHANGE IN THE SOVIET UNION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOVIET RELATIONS WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD - THE SO-CALLED 'NEW THINKING', AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF 'INTERDEPENDENCE' IN PLACE OF CONFRONTATION. THE VISIT WILL PROVIDE AN OCCASION TO BRING HOME TO HIM THAT, JUST AS 'PERESTROIKA' WILL MEAN LITTLE TO THE SOVIET PEOPLE UNTIL IT PRODUCES THE GOODS, SO THE REST OF THE WORLD IS LIKELY TO BE UNIMPRESSED BY THE 'NEW THINKING' UNTIL THAT IS TRANSLATED INTO PRACTICE NOT ONLY IN THE EAST/WEST DIALOGUE BUT IN AFGHANISTAN, THE MIDDLE EAST, CAMBODIA AND OTHER TROUBLED REGIONS OF THE WORLD IN WHICH THE SOVIET UNION COULD, IF IT CHOSE, EXERT AN INFLUENCE FOR CONCILIATION INSTEAD OF CONFLICT.

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