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 c Sir Robin Butler

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MR POWELL

Soviet Union: Leadership Divisions

There are now clear signs of a split in the Party over 'perestroika', which reaches up to the highest level in the Soviet leadership.

2. On 13 March, one day before Gorbachev left Moscow on a visit to Yugoslavia, the Soviet newspaper "Sovietskaya Rossiya" published a "letter to the editorial office", supposedly from a university teacher in Leningrad. While including a couple of brief quotes from Gorbachev, the author, Andreeva, devoted the great bulk of her "letter" to criticising the effects of 'glasnost' and democratisation - in particular, the (to her) excessively negative treatment of the past and the freedom of debate which, she claimed, had allowed "left liberals" and "peasant socialists" to come out with their programmes. These were confusing for young people. She concluded that the whole process of discussion raised the fundamental question of whether or not the leading role of the Party and the working class was to be recognised in socialist construction and in 'perestroika'. The article as a whole was a visceral reaction against 'perestroika'. It contained no specific recommendation about political or economic reform. It was also strongly anti-Semitic.

3. "Pravda" replied authoritatively on 5 April. In a full-page unsigned editorial (a clear indication of high-level backing), the newspaper took issue with Andreeva's "letter", saying that it could only be described as "providing an ideological platform and manifesto for anti-restructuring forces". "Pravda" claimed that the "letter" virtually advocated a return to "the system whereby bureaucratism, lack of control, corruption, bribery and petty bourgeois degeneration flourished lavishly".

4. It is virtually inconceivable that "Sovietskaya Rossiya" would have published the "letter" without high-level approval. It filled a full page, and, despite flying in the face of major elements in Gorbachev's reform policy, was not accompanied, or even followed, by any comment or "alternative view". It may not even have been a letter at all (or may, at the least, have been heavily reworked). "Pravda" described it as "an article, written in the style of 'a letter to the editorial office'".

5. Having been published, however, it was clearly given a fair wind. "Izvestia" on 10 April noted that no sooner had it appeared than it was hastily reprinted in other newspapers, and local Party organisations began to organise large-scale meetings to express support for the ideas contained in it.

6. We do not know who, in the higher levels of the Party, was behind the publication of the "letter". The only obvious candidate, however, is Ligachev, the senior Party Secretary, and the number two to Gorbachev in the Party hierarchy. Supervising the press is part of his job as Secretary in charge of ideology: one unconfirmed report suggests that he may even have called editors together to commend the "letter" to them. While he outwardly (and probably genuinely) supports many aspects of Gorbachev's reforms, he is notably more conservative in some areas (especially culture) and may have doubts about the pace of change. Bearing in mind the timing of the "letter", it may also be indicative that Ligachev has something of a track record for making his moves in Gorbachev's absence. He made a strikingly hard-line speech while Gorbachev was on holiday last summer.

7. The "Pravda" response, on the other hand, was in part drafted, we believe, by Party Secretary Yakovlev, a close associate of Gorbachev, and was formally endorsed by Gorbachev in a speech a few days later.

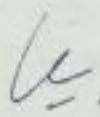
8. It does not seem likely that the "letter" was printed for the express purpose of being demolished, as some sort of effort to re-emphasise the importance of reform. "Pravda" criticised not only the "letter" but "Sovietskaya Rossiya" for showing a lack of responsibility in publishing it.

9. The Soviet press machine has now swung into line. Even "Sovietskaya Rossiya" is now publishing letters from its readers attacking the "letter" and supporting the "Pravda" line.

10. We do not know what further steps Gorbachev will now take. If Ligachev was responsible (and if it was not he, then there is clearly some other centre of high-level opposition within the Party), he has clearly lost this particular battle. It remains to be seen whether Gorbachev will try to paper over the cracks, or look for a chance to remove Ligachev from his influential position. But the hard-line approach clearly has many supporters in the Party. "Izvestia", having noted how quickly people initially rushed to support the "letter", asked "What is the state of public awareness if the slightest test could have produced such confusion of mind and fecklessness of action?". An article by a prominent reform economist in "Sovietskaya Kultura" on 7 April, supporting the "Pravda" editorial, warns that, unless people can see some benefits from restructuring, and can become actively involved in it, then they could become a breeding ground for the resurrection of the "command system", enabling the opponents of restructuring to defeat its supporters and grasp the levers of power.

11. Gorbachev clearly has major problems to solve before the Soviet Party Conference in June.

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PERCY CRADOCK