GORBACHEV AT THE HELM

A New Era in Soviet Politics?

R. F. Miller, J. H. Miller and T. H. Rigby

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R.F.Miller, J.H.Miller
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Introduction

Robert F. Miller

Following the lead of General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet media have been seeking to portray the policy decisions taken at the 27th Congress of the CPSU in February–March 1986 as a major 'turning point' in Soviet history. Such an impression is undoubtedly desired by Gorbachev and his colleagues, and it is probably true that a significant proportion of the Soviet is ready for major changes. Whether or not the policies actually announced or introduced during and after the congress represent a real turning point, however, remains to be seen. The essays assembled in the present volume, some of which were presented at a workshop on the 27th Party Congress at the Australian National University in April 1986, consider this question for a number of policy areas and from a variety of perspectives. The authors seek to examine the degree to which the policy initiatives and associated personnel changes brought forth by Gorbachev and his lieutenants in certain key areas — domestic politics, general economic policy and administration, agriculture, ideology and foreign policy — constitute substantial innovations. Proceeding from their analyses, the authors also attempt to evaluate the potential of Gorbachev's proposals for achieving the intended transformational impact.

As Gorbachev himself suggested at the time, the rather vague principles and decisions enunciated at the congress were merely the beginning of the major 'reconstruction' (*perestroika*) he had in mind for the revitalisation of Soviet society and its performance at home and abroad. Gorbachev has travelled incessantly throughout the country to build support for the concrete policy changes that have issued forth continuously since the congress. The disaster at Chernobyl' proved to be no more than a temporary interruption in this process of directed 'acceleration'. Nor have predictions that the USSR under Gorbachev would be so immersed in domestic problems as to have little time or energy for foreign adventures proven accurate. Like N. S.

Khrushchev, with whom he is often compared, Gorbachev evidently considers aggressive policy initiatives and tactical flexibility to be a more effective strategy for the attainment of Soviet international objectives than a defensive, ideologically rigid approach, such as has often been practised in the past during periods of enforced internal socio-economic change and stress.

Gorbachev's heavy reliance on mobilisation and the centrality of the 'human factor' for the implementation of his policies mean that early evidence of success will be vital for his particular mode of leadership. So far the record has been mixed in a number of the areas examined by the authors. The central focus of the individual chapters is on the congress itself and the period leading up to it. By the time most of the contributions were completed for the present volume, however, enough evidence of early performance had accumulated to permit some informed preliminary judgements on the direction and likely outcomes of policies in certain key areas.

The organisation of the book is broadly thematic. The first four chapters deal with the crucial political and ideological aspects of policy-making in the new Gorbachev era. The following three chapters are concerned with major elements of economic policy and the continuing debates for and against structural reform. The final two chapters examine the regime's early orientations in international relations with respect to both the communist and non-communist worlds. Here, perhaps even more than in domestic policy-making, the situation since the 27th Party Congress has been marked by exceptional fluidity, although here, too, the basic directions are already apparent. The aim of the book is to set forth and examine these basic directions, rather than seek to encompass all of the latest developments in each area.

In Chapter 1, T. H. Rigby considers the symbolic functions of communist party congresses in the Soviet political system and the ways in which the 27th Party Congress differed from past congresses in both form and substance. He also analyses changes in the personnel composition of the leading party and government bodies since the end of the Brezhnev era and emerging from the 27th Congress. Rigby concludes that the congress bore Gorbachev's personal stamp and reflected a degree of consolidation of personal power that is unusual so early in the career of a General Secretary.

Graeme Gill's analysis of the new party Program and party

Rules in Chapter 2 underlines the substantial difference in the level of generality of the new Program as compared with the Khrushchevian edition of some 25 years earlier. The Gorbachev version is characterised by a more pedestrian concern for general principles, rather than specific goals, and a recognition of the unpredictability of the contingencies involved in 'communist construction'. The new edition of the party Rules contains few substantive changes. As in the party Program, the major emphasis of the amendments adopted concerning the role of the party is on the principle of collectivity of party leadership and the personal responsibility of individual communists for the implementation of new initiatives — both important Gorbachevian themes.

In Chapter 3, John H. Miller examines the 'top fifty' politicians at the apex of the party-state machine and the 'top five hundred' middle-level executives represented in the Central Committee and the Central Auditing Committee to establish just where Gorbachev's widely publicised personnel changes have actually taken place. His analysis shows that although the new corps of policy-makers and executives differs substantially from its predecessors in such characteristics as generational cohort and the variety and locale of their experience, the basic patterns of their recruitment and promotion have remained remarkably unchanged. If Gorbachev is indeed committed to a fundamental transformation of the socio-economic system, this fact does not augur well for his ultimate success.

Continuing his analysis in Chapter 4, John Miller examines the changes in the basic membership of the CPSU since the last party congress in 1981, as recorded in the official data published four months after the 27th Party Congress. Against the general slowdown in party recruitment during the five-year period, he finds evidence of greater selectivity in terms of region, profession and gender. Miller advances several hypotheses to explain these patterns and link them with Gorbachev's express concern for quality of leadership and the 'human factor'.

In Chapter 5 Robert F. Miller considers the problems of the Soviet economy on the eve of the Gorbachev era and the solutions currently being proposed to address them. In general the problems can be categorised as of either a resource allocation and utilisation or an organisational and managerial nature. In the real world, of course, the two categories are deeply intertwined, whereas the Soviet approach — under Gorbachev, as

under his predecessors — is to try to treat them as quite separate. Without attacking the basic political and organisational problems of the Soviet system as it has evolved over the past half-century, the author argues, it is doubtful whether the radical shifts in resource-allocation strategy being promoted by Gorbachev will have the intended effect.

Victor Zaslavsky examines in Chapter 6 the unusually vigorous debates on economic reforms that have been taking place in the Soviet Union since the end of the Brezhnev era. If proposals for radical, market-type reforms are not yet quite legitimate, it is already clear that demands for a return to rigid centralisation are no longer welcome to the new leaders. Most of the proposals with a chance for adoption in the short run are what Zaslavsky calls 'within-the-system' changes, which do not threaten the basic political structures of the system, but he does not exclude the possibility of a more radical reconstruction in future if the present changes do not produce the desired results.

In Chapter 7 Stephen G. Wheatcroft compares the current administration of the USSR Food Program favourably with that under Brezhnev. Although agricultural investment projections announced at the 27th Congress represented a slight decline over recent years, Wheatcroft is relatively optimistic on the prospects for improvement in certain key sectors because of what he sees as a commitment to a more rational use of existing agricultural resources, such as the expanded acreage under clean fallow. The dramatic increase in the grain harvest of 1986 would appear to lend support to this evaluation.

Geoffrey Jukes examines in Chapter 8 some of the foreign policy and military aspects of the changes announced by the new leadership. He notes some important shifts in the official perception and ideological interpretation of current world events, particularly with respect to the main capitalist opponents, who, although characterised as moribund and riven with internal contradictions, are fated to survive in coexistence with the socialist world for a long time to come. The military implications of this assessment, he points out, may not be to the liking of the Soviet defence establishment, and Gorbachev will have to attend carefully to the maintenance of discipline and efficiency in a context of a relatively stagnant military budget. Jukes presents evidence of just such an emphasis in current party-military relations.

In Chapter 9 Robert F. Miller discusses the impact of the Gorbachev team on Soviet relations with the East European

bloc countries. From the outset Gorbachev let it be known that he considered the recent deterioration of economic performance to be a bloc-wide phenomenon, requiring a transnational solution within the COMECON framework. As in the Soviet economy he has sought to break institutional and psychological barriers to closer co-ordination and integration, in this case across international frontiers. There is evidence of continuing resistance to Soviet pressures for integration, but Gorbachev shows no signs of weakening his resolve to bring it about.

From these brief summaries it will be apparent that the authors do, indeed, diverge somewhat in their assessments of the Gorbachev era and the likely success of the new leader's reform efforts. All agree that he is trying to introduce major changes in a broad range of Soviet policies and in the efficiency and effectiveness of their implementation. What is less clear and more debatable is whether Gorbachev will be willing and able, for reasons of domestic politics and ideology, to make the revolutionary political and structural changes that most of the contributors agree will be necessary for the kind of systematic performance breakthrough he correctly regards as essential to maintain the USSR's status as a genuine superpower.

1

Old Style Congress — New Style Leadership?

T. H. Rigby

At 10 am on Tuesday 25 February 1986 over 5,000 men and women thunderously applauded General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev as he strode briskly to the podium in the great marble and glass Hall of Congresses within the ancient walls of the Kremlin to declare the 27th Congress of the CPSU open. And there, right up to the morning of 6 March, this great assembly, which included the leading figures in all walks of life both in the Soviet capital and in every constituent republic and province, was to sit for many hours each day (with the exception of the Sunday, when they rested from their creative labours) listening to scores of speeches, before finally endorsing the resolutions of the congress and the new composition of the party's Central Committee. What was there about this gathering that required all the top-echelon officials of a mighty but troubled superpower to devote to it over a week of their busy time? Surely Soviet party congresses cannot be the empty formality they are sometimes imagined.

CPSU CONGRESSES — RITUAL AND POLICY

About their *formal* importance there can be no doubt. Article 31 of the revised party rules defines the congress as the 'supreme organ of the CPSU', while the CPSU itself is described in the preamble as 'the highest form of socio-political organisation, the nucleus [*iadro*] of the political system, the leading and directing force of Soviet society' — formulas which are echoed in the state constitution of the USSR. CPSU congresses are thus

empowered to make decisions binding not only upon all subordinate bodies, officials and ordinary members of the party itself, but on every governmental and non-governmental organisation in the country, on all organised social groups with a legal right to exist.

Is this, then, why the elite of Soviet society sat for over a week at the 27th Congress — because they were weighing and deciding great issues in every major sphere of national life? This, indeed, is how the Soviet media and party spokesmen represent the matter. But even a cursory reading of the congress proceedings makes it plain that 'weighing and deciding' was not what was going on there. One must go back six decades, to the 1920s, to find congresses which did 'weigh and decide', which debated and voted on alternative approaches to great policy issues, and at which the incumbent leaders were subjected to sharp criticism and obliged vigorously to defend their records and their programs. This ended with the establishment of Stalin's dictatorship, and although Stalin's successors revived the practice of holding regular congresses, which had lapsed in his later years, they have never, despite their protestations, conducted these meetings according to those 'Leninist norms' which had permitted criticism of top leaders and open policy debate.

The simple explanation why all those powerful and busy people were gathered in the Hall of Congresses from 25 February to 6 March 1986 lies in the unparallelled symbolic importance of party congresses in the political life of the Soviet Union. Does this mean, then, that they have no *practical* importance? Not at all, and to assume this would be to ignore the enormous potency of symbol and ritual in reinforcing and perpetuating any established system of power and authority, and in legitimating its current leaders and their policies.

Let us consider policies. Congresses, as we have seen, are not occasions for deciding policy, but they *are* occasions for periodically stating in the most authoritative and solemn setting just what policy actually is in major areas of domestic and foreign affairs, occasions for national stocktaking and for setting national goals. The recent practice of synchronising CPSU congresses with the adoption of the five-year economic plans has reinforced this stocktaking and goal-setting function. But its main vehicle remains the so-called accountability report (*otchetnyi doklad*) of the Central Committee, presented by the General Secretary. Furthermore, the particular formulas used by

the latter in referring to various long-standing problems and pressing issues have great practical force, as they indicate to subordinate officials the current assessments and priorities of the leadership, the boundaries of admissible action and opinion, and the directions in which the highest rewards and severest punishments are likely to be forthcoming. Thus the *ukazaniia, otsenki, soobrazheniia* (indications, assessments, evaluations) voiced by the General Secretary will largely set the parameters for the behaviour and public utterances of party and government officials for some time ahead. At the congress itself, other speakers will no doubt trim the texts of their speeches, and in particular the wishes and criticisms they express, to harmonise with them.

The 27th Congress, then, like other congresses before it, was of major practical importance in providing the policy definitions, targets, priorities and behavioural guidelines in terms of which those entrusted with managing the manifold affairs of society were to exercise their responsibilities in the ensuing period. The actual content of these policy definitions, targets, priorities and guidelines will be the object of analysis in subsequent chapters. Their force derives, as noted above, precisely from the symbolic centrality of party congresses in Soviet political life. In this respect a CPSU congress is somewhat analogous to the speech from the throne at the opening session of a British parliament.

But this symbolic function also operates on a more fundamental level of political life than that of current policy and administration; for CPSU congresses have a ritual, ceremonial aspect through which they proclaim and celebrate the achievements and might of the USSR, the unity of the party and the nation and the loyalty of the various divisions of the Soviet elite and the population at large to the party, the state, and the current leadership. Congresses display and solemnise the existing distribution of authority within the latter and particularly the primacy of the incumbent General Secretary, they seek social catharsis by articulating grievances and heaping them on scapegoats, and while identifying the chief evils and enemies to be combated, they rededicate the party and the nation to the struggle. In short, the party congress is the Soviet regimes' supreme legitimacy ritual.[1] A Soviet party congress, then, is a carefully contrived political event serving primarily those two symbolic functions outlined above: that of giving force and authority to the leadership's current policy orientations, and that of a legitimacy ritual.

Of course the essence of a political symbol or ritual is that it displays or acts out a familiar pattern. It derives its force by repetition. But by the same token any departure from the familiar will make a special impact, sometimes out of all proportion to its intrinsic significance. Important signals may be given at a CPSU congress, as in the celebration of a church liturgy, through the contrived interplay between established patterns and selective innovations. Let us now consider Gorbachev's first congress with these points in mind.

THE 27th CONGRESS — TRADITION AND INNOVATION

In most respects the 27th Congress followed very closely the patterns inherited and subtly adapted by the Brezhnev regime. Here are the most important of them.

Size

CPSU congresses had become substantial gatherings even in Lenin's time, and their growth thereafter went hand in hand with the withering away of their deliberative functions. The number of delegates remained limited, however, to a little over 2,000 by the seating available in the largest suitable hall in the Kremlin, until Khrushchev, who had a liking for mass audiences, commanded the new Palace of Congresses to be built, with its capacity of over 5,000. Since the 22nd Congress in 1961 the norms of representation at the congress have been progressively adjusted neatly to fill this venue, and the 27th was no exception.

Duration

About a week has been standard for post-Stalin congresses. The slight increase (from seven and a half to eight and a half days) between the 26th and 27th Congresses served to accommodate the extended 'debates' discussed below.

Seating arrangements

As in all important political assemblies in the USSR, the top leadership (in this case the full and candidate members of the

Politburo) sit up front, immediately behind the rostrum, facing the mass of the delegates, and backed by a 'Presidium' of several score members, who comprise the cream of the central and provincial political elites and a scattering of lesser mortals 'representing' major social and occupational groups; and towering above the latter, also facing the ordinary delegates, stands a great effigy of Lenin, in heroic pose, with a vast Soviet flag as backcloth. Whoever speaks from the rostrum, therefore, does so directly under the eye of the ruling oligarchy, and in the name, as it were, of a consensus claiming the unqualified authority of Lenin himself. It is an arrangement that blankets out differences, except those between the more and the less powerful.[2]

Effective agenda

Traditionally this consists of two main items, namely the General Secretary's 'accountability' report on behalf of the Central Committee and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers' report on the draft economic plan, the presentation and discussion of the former taking about twice the time given to the latter. The Chairman of the party's Central Auditing Commission also gives a brief report on mundane housekeeping matters which is supposed to be discussed along with the General Secretary's report, but which is virtually ignored. And then, of course, there is the election of the new Central Committee and Central Auditing Commission at the end of the congress. At the 27th Congress the formal agenda included two further items, namely the new version of the CPSU Program and changes in the Party Rules. However, 'a proposal was received' not to have separate reports on these but to 'set out their essentials' in the main Central Committee report.[3] In practice there was no substantial discussion of these items at all, and the traditional shape of the congress proceedings was thus preserved.

Pattern of speeches

The General Secretary's report, which takes some hours to deliver, is followed by relatively brief speeches by the party first secretaries of each of the constituent republics[4] and of the most important regional committees of the RSFSR, in approximate

order of seniority, interspersed with those of delegates representing all major fields of activity and social groups — economic administrators, workers, collective-farmers, the Academy of Sciences, the Komsomol, the Armed Forces, and so on. The Chairman of the Council of Ministers' far shorter report is followed by a smaller number of speeches from a similar mix of delegates; and at each session there are a few short addresses by leaders of foreign communist parties and other friendly parties, most of them showering praise on the Soviet Union and its leaders. This pattern was also followed faithfully at the 27th Congress.

Content of delegates' speeches

Here again Gorbachev's first congress followed time-hallowed precedents. With minor variations speeches contain the following components, usually in the order listed here. First, there is a salute to the General Secretary, normally by reference either to the excellence of his report or to the fundamental importance and correctness of the decisions of the April (1985) CC Plenum, the first presided over by Gorbachev and currently used as his 'brand-name' (just as the October 1964 Plenum was once used as the 'brand-name' for the post-Khrushchev Brezhnev-Kosygin regime). It is noteworthy that this and the other components discussed below are generally found in the speeches ostensibly 'debating' the plan report and not only in those explicitly on the report of the General Secretary himself.

Second comes the declaration of unconditional support, in the form of a statement that the regional delegation or other organisational or social category represented by the speaker totally approves the main report and the other documents before the congress.

Third, the delegate moves to his *samootchet*, his outline of the achievements and shortcomings of his organisation, focusing on those task-areas for which the latter is primarily looked to by the party leadership, and usually including a passage of 'self-criticism' (which in cases where the speaker has recently taken over the leadership or the organisation — quite frequent at the 27th Congress — amounts to criticism of his predecessors).

And finally come the requests, complaints and suggestions; and this calls for a balancing act no less hazardous than that

between self-praise and self-criticism. For along with the opportunity to make a mark in the eyes of his superiors, his peers, or his 'constituency', the speaker may risk suspicion of 'immodesty' (asking for too much), 'localism', 'departmentalism' or other variants of sectional interest, or even, Lord forbid, of 'demagogy' (courting personal popularity by voicing justified popular grievances). The requests (described as 'demands' or 'claims' by those who believe that interest-group pressure is the engine of Soviet political life, though 'humble petitions' might better reflect the power realities of the situation) usually ask for the allocation of resources for some project of local importance or for the expediting of some decision of special concern to the region or group concerned. The complaints (or 'criticisms') never, of course, touch on the incumbent leadership or their policies, but only on the way intermediate-level officials carry out the leadership's policies. Often they have a self-exculpatory twist; *we* would have done better if only ministry X or region Y had done *their* job properly. In such cases (particularly if consumer goods or services are involved) it may be understood by all concerned that X or Y failed to meet their commitments simply because they lacked the resources to do so, and a pattern of scapegoating is discernible here. Suggestions are expected to be 'businesslike', to be confined, that is, to minor structural or procedural improvements aimed at carrying out the leadership's programs more efficiently.

As already indicated, political scientists differ in the significance they attach to what I have termed the requests, complaints and suggestions voiced in the course of congress delegates' speeches, and the questions at issue cannot be seriously explored in the present context. The concern of Soviet officials to protect and promote the reputations, resources, and 'turf' of their organisations is undoubtedly an important factor in Soviet bureaucratic politics. While its pursuit is mostly subterranean, it can overflow into public speeches or writings, which may even, conceivably, influence outcomes.[5] We should not, however, make the elementary error of underestimating the asymmetrically vertical structure of power in the USSR, which makes it the chief interest of every Soviet official to please his superiors. This and the political functions served by congresses, should be borne in mind when analysing the content of delegates' speeches. The chief point to be made here, however, is that the requests, complaints and suggestions voiced at the 27th Congress again

conformed to the norms and constraints entrenched in recent decades.

The fealty rituals

These have a distinctly tribal aura, in sharp contrast with the generally 'businesslike' tone of most of the congress proceedings, and hence my name for them: the ceremony of youths and maidens, and the ceremony of the warriors. They likewise conformed closely to precedent. On the evening of the fourth day 'it was as if spring itself, bright and sunny, reigned in the Palace of Congresses',[6] for the hall was filled with the banners of the Komsomol and Young Pioneers, and Pioneers and tiny Young Octobrists presented flowers to every number of the congress Presidium. One after another four young men and one young woman representing worker and peasant, youth, budding scientists and creative artists, and technical trainees, made their declarations of gratitude and loyalty. Then the Pioneers and Octobrists chorused *their* declarations in ringing verses, the greatest applause being evoked by the lines 'And we shall strive to live/ in such a way to earn/ our Komsomol badge/ then a party card!' The hall burst into a further ovation as young men and women from every republic, and others with outstanding production records, approached the Presidium and solemnly handed General Secretary Gorbachev the Komsomol's duty report (*raport*) to the 27th Congress, against chants of 'Lenin! Party! Komsomol!' And finally the 'young successors' march out to the tune of 'And the Battle Continues Anew', which resounds both as a 'parting injunction' to them and 'youth's oath of fealty to the cause of the older generations — the cause of the party of Lenin'.

The second fealty ceremony came four days later. 'Under their battle banners clothed in glory', in march columns of troops representing all ranks and branches of the Armed Forces. 'The Congress participants stand and greet the Soviet warriors with prolonged applause.'[7] A fanfare of trumpets, then tank commander Major-General V. S. Mikhailov makes his solemn declaration 'to the Communist Party and to the whole Soviet people, that the warriors of the Armed Forces reliably defend the sacred borders of our Motherland'. Pointing out that the troops now standing in the Palace of Congresses include men

decorated for 'gallant deeds performed in our present days in the execution of their international and patriotic duty' (i.e. veterans of the Afghanistan war), he declared that 'warriors of the Armed Forces stand ever ready, along with soldiers of the fraternal armies of the socialist commonwealth to deliver a crushing blow to any aggressor'. Roars of 'Long lives' for the Motherland, the people, and the CPSU, chants of 'Glory! Glory! Glory!' and the warriors march out, banners aloft.

In all these ways, then, the liturgy of the 27th Congress conformed to time-hallowed precedent. There were, however, some novelties which stand out all the more against this background of overall conformity to tradition. Four of these deserve special comment.

Title of the main report

For the first time since the 16th Congress in 1930, it contained the word 'political', as it had in Lenin's day.[8] This probably reflects, in part, the evolving concept of party bodies as 'organs of political leadership', but was perhaps also intended to signal the high seriousness and historical significance of this particular congress, and the great issues of power and policy now confronting the Soviet regime.

More speakers

The number of speakers to the General Secretary's report was 61, compared with 40 at Brezhnev's last congress, while those speaking to the plan report increased from 14 to 25. As noted above, the core speakers in both cases consisted, as always, of regional party bosses and the heads of such bodies as the Trade Unions, the Komsomol, the Academy of Sciences, the Writers' Union, and so on. What is interesting is that their numbers did not significantly increase at the 27th Congress. On the other hand, the total number of manual workers and farmers speaking rose only from six to nine. Most of the increase was, in fact, made up of party, government and other leaders and administrators at various levels and in various fields. It would be misleading, therefore, to see this widening of the range of speakers outside of the ranks of central and provincial bosses as populist

in intent. Its thrust was towards not so much a rallying of the masses around the new leadership as a rallying of the elites.

More top leaders speaking

In recent congresses the practice has been that, apart from the rapporteurs, Politburo members and candidates do not speak unless they are serving as first secretaries of a republican, provincial (Leningrad) or city (Moscow) committee, in which case they figure as the latter's spokesman (the spokesman for the RSFSR is the Chairman of its Council of Ministers). This tradition was broken at the 27th Congress, where, apart from the rapporteurs Gorbachev and Ryzhkov, and the 'local representatives' Vorotnikov (RSFSR), Shcherbitskii (Ukraine), Kunaev (Kazakhstan), El'tsin (Moscow), Solov'ev (Leningrad) and Sliun'kov (Belorussia),[9] five other full members and two candidate members also spoke in the 'debate' on the General Secretary's report. They comprised second-ranking CC Secretary Ligachev, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet Gromyko, KGB Chairman Chebrikov, Chairman of the Committee of Party Control Solomentsev, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, Defence Minister Sokolov and Minister of Culture Demichev. Is this simply to be placed in the context of the 'rallying of elites' discussed above? Quite likely, but one should perhaps ask whether it does not also reflect, or is intended to suggest (perhaps misleadingly) a change in power relationships within the Politburo, a greater level of equality in the 'collective leadership'. Such an interpretation would be difficult to escape if *all* Politburo members, or at least all full members, spoke, but they did not. Two full members, namely First Deputy Premier Aliev and CC Secretary Zaikov, and two candidates, namely First Deputy Premier and Gosplan Chairman Talyzin and CC Secretary Dolgikh, failed to address the congress. If the intention were to stress collegiality, then one would expect either *all* members to speak or *no* members to speak unless they were rapporteurs or regional representatives (as in recent practice). Thus the evidence is ambiguous, but it seems possible that, in addition to giving a voice, as it were, to various elite groups, the inclusion of these additional Politburo members among the speakers was intended to display the new leadership as men of individual talent and ideas all firmly aligned behind their General

Secretary. As Ligachev put it, 'we have all been given a single mandate, namely to support, strengthen and develop the line of the April Plenum of the CC'.[10]

Tone and style

The three breaks with tradition so far discussed are demonstrable facts, however we interpret them, but the last is relative and impressionistic. While this is far from applying across the board, many of the speeches had a greater than usual freshness and individuality of style and, in particular, a greater boldness in their criticisms and suggestions. It should be stressed that not one of them transgressed the long-standing taboos on criticising, however indirectly, the incumbent leaders or their policies, and on engaging in polemics with other speakers. But they lent a touch of life and drama to the proceedings which has not been seen at a CPSU congress for a quarter of a century — since the 21st in 1961, with its attacks on Stalinism and the 'anti-party group' of Molotov, Malenkov and Co. This comparison immediately invites the question: are we not dealing here simply with the practice usual to incoming Soviet leaders of scapegoating their predecessors by attributing to their failings evils which are in fact inherent in the system? This practice is observable after the change of top leaders or the resolution of factional struggles not only in the Kremlin, but also at republican and local levels, as illustrated by the recent examples of the Rashidov regime in Uzbekistan and the Grishin machine in Moscow. It is always a time for relatively plain speaking and for 'frank' revelations about inefficiency and corruption in high places. Undoubtedly the touches of liveliness at Gorbachev's first congress compared with the blandness of Brezhnev's last three are largely explainable in these terms. There appears, however, to be an extra flavour, most evident in the speech of El'tsin on the second day, and compounded, perhaps, of a heightened awareness of the daunting problems facing the Soviet system and a realisation that the party will never be mobilised to tackle them simply by parroting stereotyped formulas.

THE DELEGATES

The extraordinarily low turnover in the Soviet elite throughout