

THE SOVIET COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS REFUSES TO JOIN THE NEW REVOLUTION

The 28th Extraordinary Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which ended in Moscow this week, dispels the last hope that the Party can be reformed. The Party could have joined the reform movement. It did not. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev could have resigned as the General Secretary of the Communist Party and led the Soviet Union down the path of accelerated free market and democratic reforms. He did not. By staying on as Party chief he chose to remain at the helm of a ship that surely is sinking. By refusing to surrender the Party's power and immense wealth, the Congress has guaranteed further civil unrest and, possibly, has moved the country a few steps closer to civil war.

In sharp contrast to Gorbachev's clinging to his red Party membership card, Boris Yeltsin, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic, resigned publicly from the Party. This was followed almost immediately by resignations from the Party by the mayors of Moscow and Leningrad. The result of these dramatic actions is that a national opposition to the Soviet Communist Party is coalescing around Yeltsin. Ever more clearly, the lines are being drawn and the sides are being taken in what could be a gargantuan (and perhaps bloody) battle for control of the Soviet Union.

The Congress allowed the Party Stalinists to blow off steam by declaring their hatred of capitalism and democracy; beyond this it accomplished very little. Refusing to weaken its grip over the economy and national security, the Party rejected demands to remove Party organizations from workplaces, the armed forces, the police, and the KGB. The Soviet communist hardliners even ruled out a token concession of cosmetic change: they balked at changing the name of the Party from "communist" to "socialist" or "democratic socialist," as did all communist parties of Eastern Europe last year.

Rejected by the People. The Party's resistance to free markets and democracy flies in the face of Soviet public opinion. According to a poll conducted last month by the Siberian newspaper *Sibirskaya Gazeta* and quoted in the newspaper *Moscow News* on June 24, the Party's "Draft Platform" for the Congress is overwhelmingly rejected by students and workers. Workers are the most disillusioned, with 79 percent saying they do not support the Platform "at all." Another poll, cited by the popular newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on June 27, reveals that the Party's authority is rated "almost non-existent" and "non-existent at all" by 57 percent of young workers and students. Most telling of all, according to a *Moscow News* poll released on July 5, only 19 percent of the respondents say they would vote for the Communist Party in multi-party elections.

For a political party supported by less than one-fifth of the population, to insist on ruling is a sure recipe for violent civil unrest, particularly if demonstrations are allowed and a political opposition is permitted to organize further. Perhaps the most telling sign of coming civil strife is the rapid politicization of the labor movement. A year ago the Soviet miners struck for soap, shoes,

meat and milk (most of which is yet to be delivered to them). This year, their 24-hour warning walk-out of July 11 is far more radical. They demand, for example, that the government resign and the Party give up control of shops and factories, the army, and the KGB. The slogans held aloft by the striking miners in Kuzbass in southwestern Siberia this week attest to their alienation from communism. Placards and banners read: "Leninism is an ideology of darkness"; "72 years of lies"; and "The armed forces and the people are one – without the Party!"

Notwithstanding the Congress's resistance to deeper reforms, Mikhail Gorbachev put in a masterful tactical performance at the Congress. He weathered the attacks by such hardliners as Egor Ligachev, got himself elected to the top post again, prevented an open split between the social-democratic and Stalinist wings of the Party and, to his credit, offered a passionate, if belated, defense of the reforms. "There is no way of bringing yesterday back," he said, and that "no dictatorship, if someone has this crazy idea, can resolve anything."

Judging Gorbachev. The many speeches of Stalinist hardliners at the Congress made Gorbachev look progressive, even radical. But the pressing question today is not how Gorbachev compares to party hardliners like Ligachev, but how fast he moves to satisfy the popular demands for a legitimate democratic government and a working economy. While not denying Gorbachev's role as an instigator of political reform in the Soviet Union, the time has come to judge Gorbachev not by how well he conducts intra-party maneuvering, but by how well he responds to the hopes of the society at large.

A democratic alternative to Gorbachev, in fact, already exists and is growing stronger every day. A democratic reform caucus called the "Inter-regional Group" was formed last year within the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies to press for more radical reforms. Free market and democratic reformers gained control of the Moscow and Leningrad city councils in democratic elections last spring. And on May 29, Boris Yeltsin was elected Chairman of the Russian Republic's Supreme Soviet.

A leading Soviet democratic activist, Yuri Afanasiev, put it best in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on July 4: "The today's world sees that Marxism-Leninism is dead, that the ideas of communism can no longer provide an alternative to Western democracy....A real perestroika will not start until the Party becomes aware of all its sins against the people and relinquishes power." Gorbachev's true test as a political reformer and leader of the revolution occurring in the Soviet Union today will be his ability to break his life-long association with the Communist Party, step over its political dead body, and finally allow the country to have what it desperately needs and wants: an institutionalized multi-party democracy and the end of the state's economic monopoly. He has very little time left. The revolution he started is leaving him behind.

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