

The Movement for Socialist Renewal: A New Soviet Dissident Movement?

by
G.P. Armstrong

Over almost 70 years, the social-political system existing in the Soviet Union has been unable to achieve economic superiority over the capitalist countries either in the development of economics, science and technology, or in the well-being of its people; to guarantee the inviolability of its state borders and the safety of the Soviet people, or to secure the international authority appropriate to a great power. — Manifesto of the Movement for Socialist Renewal¹

In July 1986 the British newspaper *Guardian* published a document claimed to be a manifesto by a group calling itself the "Movement for Socialist Renewal." A copy of this manifesto was passed to the *Guardian's* Moscow correspondent and thereby reached the West.² It has two sections. The first constitutes a severe criticism of the Soviet economy and the poor, even desperate, prospects for the future:

. . . our country has reached a limit beyond which lies an insurmountable lag in economic and scientific-technical development behind the advanced industrial nations; a reverse of the present US-Soviet military parity in favour of the USA, and an intensification of the military threat to our country . . .

The second section puts forth the authors' solutions for the reversal of these developments. The tone of the manifesto is brisk, straightforward and naive. The authors state that they are "a group of Soviet citizens with access to objective information" and offer to reveal themselves in public debate.

What possibilities suggest themselves as to the authorship of this document? One is that it is a fake produced by some group inside the USSR which wishes to discredit Gorbachev by showing that talk of reform can lead to anti-Soviet thoughts. However, this seems an unlikely possibility for three reasons. Gorbachev has excellent relations with the KGB which is the organization most capable of manufacturing frauds and passing them to Western reporters. Second, the manifesto is written in a spirit of loyalty to Leninism and uses the assumptions of Marxism-Leninism. A fake would likely be more direct. Third, the manifesto is not a criticism of Gorbachev but of his predecessors. The document may have been manufactured by external emigrés and designed to stir up the pot in the USSR. This possibility cannot be ruled out; only further events can tell. It is worth observing, however, that on the evidence of the *Guardian* correspondent, the manifesto is already in the USSR, even if it is an external emigré document, its circulation in the USSR may create a real "movement for socialist renewal." A third possibility is that the document

is what it purports to be—the product of people inside the system who have come to believe that the USSR is heading for disaster and who wish to avert it. In this case, there is no reason to believe that the authors of the report are especially high up in the Soviet establishment as the manifesto contains no information which is not well-known in the West.

It was reported that Gorbachev, when he was the Central Committee Secretary responsible for agriculture, had a team of researchers look into the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921.³ Given that the one thing which the authors of the manifesto do seem to know something about is the NEP, given that a new NEP represents the economic half of their proposals, it is possible that some of the authors of the manifesto have heard of or took part in this particular exercise. The NEP period is not especially well-known in the USSR. To a group of Soviet researchers its success, let alone what Lenin stated when he introduced it, may have seemed the answer to the USSR's economic problems. Unfortunately, the authors of the manifesto do not seem to know very much about the other half of the NEP—the time that the USSR enjoyed the greatest amount of economic freedom was also the time that the state constructed its political control apparatus. Therefore, although the possibility of a provocative fake cannot be ruled out, it seems a reasonable hypothesis that the manifesto is the product of some junior and middle-level Soviet civil servants who got excited about Gorbachev's talk of reform and have now become disappointed with what he is actually doing. In this connection it may not be a coincidence that the document is dated 21 November 1985. The next day the government announced the formation of GosAgroProm.⁴ GosAgroProm is a super-ministry for agriculture; as a new form of centralization, it is the antithesis of the NEP's program for agriculture. It is therefore possible that the announcement of this solution to the agricultural problem dashed the hopes of the authors that the kind of reform that they felt necessary was going to come from the top.

In simple terms, the manifesto of the Movement for Socialist Renewal is a counter Communist Party Program.⁵ Countering official boasting is the grim assertion that socialism has failed, and failed according to its own standards. One of the most interesting parts of the manifesto are the quotations from Lenin about what the young Soviet state must do to survive and the failure, seventy years later, of the system to have undertaken these steps. Lenin stated that Soviet Russia must catch up with and overtake the advanced countries or perish; Lenin boasted that socialism would produce a new labor productivity. Lenin stated that Soviet trade must not depend on "colonial" trade goods. In failing to accomplish these goals, the regime has failed. The authors go on to enumerate the social and spiritual decay of citizens' lives, the lies that they are forced to live, the loss of the USSR's position as the leader of the socialist part of the world, the failing military position, and the failed foreign policy. These failures are inevitable unless the economic system is revived. "Politics are the concentrated essence of economics" and economics has failed. All this is put in bald terms and is somewhat exaggerated; the actual 1985 position was not as bad as that.

Nevertheless, the authors are correct in assuming that a continuation of the "brezhnchenko" style would be disastrous for the USSR. These statements are a blunter version of many of the things which Gorbachev is saying publicly. Most of the remarks contained in the manifesto could be supported by quotations from his speeches and the other frank admissions which are part of "glasnost," making these criticisms all the more telling as they are largely drawn from public knowledge.

The Movement for Socialist Renewal also offers solutions to the problems facing the USSR. Briefly, the manifesto calls for: the licensing of factions within the CPSU; genuine freedom of expression within the population at large; and a return to the New Economic Policy. In these solutions, however, the authors begin to betray an imperfect knowledge of Soviet history. The Tenth Party Congress in 1921 was the congress which approved the NEP. It was also the congress which approved a resolution prohibiting the formation of factions within the Party and the congress which sent many of its delegates out to suppress the Kronshtadt revolt. The NEP did not come out in a vacuum.

The tone of the manifesto is that of faithful Leninism—or perhaps "fundamentalist late Leninism." The Lenin the authors are quoting is the Lenin who defended the NEP, not the Lenin who invented "democratic centralism," press censorship, or the political police. They seem to believe that things were going well in the USSR until 1924 when Lenin died and Stalin began to take over. This is naive in the extreme as all the necessary mechanisms by which Stalin seized control were in existence in Lenin's time. However, such a belief may have its attractions for those who are trying to make a new coat from the rags of Marxism-Leninism.

The word "faction" rather than "political party" is used because the authors of the manifesto are not calling for different parties. Instead, they want "the creation in the USSR of different political organizations, all with the ultimate aim of building a socialist society," that is, factions within the CPSU which differ on tactics and debate openly. But, again, the Bolsheviks had factions in the 1920s and found them too dangerous. In any case, free and open factions are hardly commensurate with the essence of Leninism as expressed in "What Is To Be Done?"

It is difficult to determine exactly how their political program would operate. It seems to be based on their statement, "Now that the full and final victory of socialism is complete, the dictatorship of the proletariat has fulfilled its historic mission . . .," and the authors actually seem to believe that the citizens of the USSR are all agreed that socialism is the aim. Certainly the authors are not very good Marxists—the small traders and independent farmers for which they are calling would not, in Marxist terms, be supportive of socialism. So, while clearly attempting to pass themselves off as good Marxists, the authors do not seem to be as well-versed in the subject as they might be.

So what is one to make of the manifesto of the Movement for Socialist Renewal? Again assuming that it is not a fake but was produced

by low- and middle-ranking people in the USSR, it is a very interesting document. Reform in the USSR is a difficult and dangerous undertaking. In 1956 Khrushchev criticized some, though not all, of Stalin's actions. Partly as a result, there were problems in the satellite countries and there were dissidents. If it is lawful to criticize Stalin's persecution of certain Party members, why cannot one mention his persecution of millions of other people or his prosecution of the war or even the bungles and crimes of the present generation of Soviet leaders? It took a good deal of effort to crush the dissident movement. Now, thirty years later, the USSR has another General Secretary who is talking about reform.⁶ By the summer of 1987 it was clear that, after two years of trying to form public opinion by convincing the people that the USSR was in a perilous state, Gorbachev was now taking action. "Glasnost"—more properly translated as "publicity" rather than "openness"—was necessary for "perestroika"—reconstruction—because Gorbachev has genuinely to convince the population that the old ways could not continue. But, "glasnost" has also raised a lot of hopes that, finally, some profound reforms are going to be implemented. The manifesto of the Movement for Socialist Renewal may be the first sign that Gorbachev has not gone as far as some wish. Possibly a new dissident movement has been born.

If this manifesto should be the first signs of a new dissident movement, a movement which embeds its demands in such criticisms will pose a serious moral (and morale) challenge to the Soviet government. The dissident movement which arose after the Khrushchev revelations about Stalin was concerned largely with the issue of the Stalin past. However, Stalin is long dead, his henchmen are out of power and, for Soviet citizens who had no direct experience of them, the Stalin years must seem old hat. The Movement for Socialist Renewal, if it indeed exists, has an altogether more challenging message: socialism, according to its own standards, has failed. Thinking along these lines can indeed have serious results.

A year after the publication of this document, nothing more has been heard of the "Movement for Socialist Renewal," though there have been other signs of dissatisfaction, including disturbances which have national overtones: the riots in Alma-Ata in December 1986; the refusenik demonstration in Moscow in February 1987;⁷ the Crimean Tatar protest in Moscow in July 1987;⁸ and coordinated protests in the Baltic capitals in August 1987.⁹ That is a lot of demonstrations by Soviet standards. Meanwhile, "glasnost" continues its revelations. In the last year the Soviet public has learned that prostitution was not eliminated by the Revolution seventy years ago; officials have admitted to a substantial drug addiction problem; youth gangs have turned out not to be a product of the decadent West after all; alcohol is evidently an immense and intractable failing; gargantuan Party corruption has been uncovered in the Kazakh republic; it appears that infant mortality rates are higher than they should be. Indeed, it must be becoming uncomfortably clear that socialism may not have been such a success after all.

Gorbachev continues his reforms and they are reforms which, while not exactly those called for in the manifesto, are not altogether unlike them. It is clear that Gorbachev is serious about making the Soviet system work more efficiently. However, as all Marxists know, thesis engenders antithesis. Everyone is aware that the reforms meet opposition from the old "Brezhnevites" and it is also clear that many bureaucrats resist Gorbachev's threat to their comfort and leisure. Even the average Soviet factory worker has reason to be disgruntled. He hears a number of speeches blaming him for the stagnancy, he hears rumors about price rises and widespread layoffs,¹⁰ and Gorbachev's insistence on quality means that his productivity bonuses have been reduced.¹¹ Thus, many of the Soviet work force see Gorbachev as the man who has cut their pay, blames them for "the old rut" and may have grimmer news for the future. Worse, perhaps, they cannot even get a drink to relieve their anxiety because the new anti-alcohol laws treat them like hopeless alcoholics.

It still cannot be determined what the manifesto was all about—indeed, since Gorbachev does have a habit of floating his ideas before he commits himself to them, it may even be that the manifesto was published with his encouragement. Certainly, his reforms, especially "self-financing," do resemble elements of the New Economic Policy and the program of the manifesto, but it is still early times. It can now be said that Gorbachev is serious about reforming the system, though not that he wants to really change the Marxist-Leninist system itself. There is considerable opposition to him, yet most of it is passive and resentful and, so far, not very powerful. Perhaps most important, it can be said that the USSR really is in serious economic and structural difficulties. Whether this leads to revolt, as reform has done before in Russia, remains to be seen.

Endnotes

1. The full text of the manifesto is given in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 3 August 1986, p. 9.
2. *Ibid.*
3. G. von Rauch, *A History of Soviet Russia* (4th ed.; New York: Praeger, 1965), pp. 124-54 gives a general overview of the period.*
4. See R.G. Kaiser, "Accelerated Pace of Decay faces USSR," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 7 October 1984.
5. A new one was promulgated in draft form (1985) and passed in 1986.
6. See Z.A. Medvedev, *Ten Years After Ivan Denisovich* (Penguin, 1975).
7. *Ottawa Citizen*, 13 February 1987.
8. *Toronto Sunday Star*, 26 July 1987.
9. *Toronto Star*, 24 August 1987. They were apparently demanding complete independence from the USSR.
10. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a rather widely-read newspaper, published an interview with a major Soviet economist on 2 June 1987. In it he said: "So far as state subsidies [on food] are concerned, they should have been added long ago." Four days later Tatyana Zaslavskaya, an important "radical" economist, was interviewed by *Vienna Neue AZ*. She stated: "The transition to a new system of economic management will unavoidably lead to the disappearance of the vacant jobs and, subsequently, to laying people off." There have been other heavy hints dropped.

11. On 1 January 1987 a new institution - GOSPRIEMKA (the State Acceptance Program) - came into effect in 1500 industries. State appointed quality control inspectors were introduced into these factories. They replaced factory-appointed inspectors who, because their pay was dependent on the factory's success in meeting the plan, were not very ruthless. At least some of the new inspectors have been rejecting very large percentages of the output as below par. On the other hand, *Pravda* (16 June 1987) published an entertaining letter from a factory worker who complained that the inspector who now harangued the workers was the former Party secretary who previously praised their work.