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Khrushchev and Party Rule

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By the early 1950s a new political elite occupied the positions of power in the ministries and the party. Many of these men had cut their teeth in the crash course of industrialization and collectivization, risen as a result of the Purges, fought through the war, and then employed the policies and methods learnt in the 1930s to rebuild the heavy industrial and military sector—albeit under the watchful eyes of the NKVD and of the suspicious and ageing Stalin. Both Khrushchev and Brezhnev were of this generation. The young Gorbachev was studying law at Moscow University, and active in the Komsomol.

In March 1953 Stalin died. The most senior members of the Politburo (or Presidium of the Central Committee, as it was called at the time) closed ranks, and shared out the key offices between themselves. They were wary and uncertain: how would the population react to Stalin's death? They issued an order that there was no cause for panic, but only in some of the labour camps were there disturbances; schoolchildren wept. In a manner common to autocratic regimes, the new leadership declared an amnesty for some serving sentences for criminal offences, announced price cuts, relaxed the restrictions on private plots, and held a ball in the Kremlin for Komsomol activists.

The ten-year period that followed Stalin's death was important in two respects. First, it witnessed the reassertion of political power over the means of coercion and, second, it thereby put back on the table the question of how a system of one-party rule could or should be maintained. Terror and the war had both upset the system; now, it seemed, it could be put to rights. The party became the dominant institution vis-à-vis the secret police, army, and the ministries, and it established its control over the economy, and all cultural and social institutions. By doing so, however, it placed before itself the old problems: how was the authority of a vanguard party to be maintained in practice? How was the relationship between the political and other spheres of activity to be delineated when the party was responsible for everything? First, however, there was the problem of leadership, and of the secret police. We begin with these.

Initially Malenkov assumed both the First Secretaryship of the party and the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers, the state body, as Stalin had done, but then relinquished the party Secretariatship. This was subsequently given to Khrushchev, the most junior of the leading politicians, which tells us something of the party's lost prestige in the preceding years. Beria remained as head of the MVD, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (in 1948 the commissariat had been renamed ministries), Molotov remained as head of Foreign Affairs, and Kaganovich assumed responsibility for heavy industry. Almost immediately, as we might expect, conflicts emerged within the leadership over policy—towards the economy, agriculture, and foreign affairs. Although in name a collective leadership, there was no sense in which one could think of it as a cabinet, working together, united around a policy programme. On the contrary policy positions became identified with individuals, and individual standing within the leadership became a crucial factor in policy-making.

During the period 1953–7 the arguments and the power play went back and forth. The key developments were as follows. In 1953 all combined against Beria, head of the MVD; he was arrested, shot, and the MVD brought under political control. Malenkov, meanwhile, advocated an economic policy which laid greater emphasis on consumer durables (thus querying the Stalinist law that heavy industry had to grow faster than light) but no change as far as agriculture was concerned; Khrushchev defended heavy industry, but opened up the question of the almost total neglect of agriculture. Malenkov introduced the idea of peaceful coexistence with capitalism rather than the inevitability of war, but was opposed by Molotov. By 1955 Malenkov, although still in the Politburo, had lost on economic policy and been compelled to resign from the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers. In 1956 Khrushchev, in his Secret Speech, placed a much larger question mark over some of Stalin's policies, and spoke of countries' finding their own way to socialism. In 1957 a tussle took place over economic policy in which Khrushchev seized the initiative by proposing the decentralization of the industrial ministries; in June his
older colleagues responded by demanding his resignation. He claimed, however, that only the Central Committee, the body formally responsible for electing the First Secretary, could dismiss him and succeeded in calling a meeting at which he obtained a majority. Malenkov, Molotov, and Kaganovich were titled the Anti-Party Group, dismissed from the Politburo, and given lesser jobs in the state apparatus. Henceforth, until his ouster in 1964, Khrushchev created a Politburo which functioned as his cabinet, and of which he was the undisputed leader. In 1958 he assumed the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers to complement his party office.

The question of leadership was, therefore, decided in a less destructive manner than thirty years earlier. We now turn to the party's relationship with the police. In June 1953, at a Politburo meeting, with army generals at the ready in the ante-room, Beria was charged by his colleagues with employing illegal means of repression, and arrested. Other leading MVD officials were also tried, and executed, and the ministry put under Politburo control. The charges against the Kremlin doctors had already been denounced as false. It was not until February 1956, however, when Khrushchev made his Secret Speech to the closed XXth Party Congress, that the role of coercion and of the Ministry of Internal Affairs became a topic of public discussion. In making the speech, Khrushchev had several objectives: to undermine the power of the MVD, to restore the party's confidence and its dominance within the system, and to establish the present leadership's claim to rule and its right to replace hallowed Stalinist policies with new ones. In line with such objectives, he did not refer to the mass repression but limited himself to speaking of the arrest and sentencing of innocent party members, and of the Red Army staff. The latter was no more accidental than was his mentioning, as one of Stalin's failings, his desire to play down the generals' role in achieving strategic victories in the war. As a politician, Khrushchev was concerned to make sure the army generals recognized him as someone who would give them their due. In keeping with more practical policy considerations, Khrushchev blamed Stalin for being isolated from real life, as demonstrated by his lack of awareness of the way peasants lived and the state of agriculture; he criticized him for the persecution of national minorities within the Soviet Union, and, in the foreign field, for breaking with Tito of Yugoslavia.

A basic assumption underlying Khrushchev's line of argument was that up until 1934, i.e. after the industrialization and collectivization campaigns had been carried out, the policies pursued by the leadership had been correct, and that it was only with the period of the cult of personality, somewhere in the middle of the 1930s, that things began to go wrong. In other words, according to Khrushchev, the socialist base had been laid in a proper fashion. Yezhov and Beria, the corrupt NKVD chiefs, together with Stalin were responsible for damaging the party but, he insisted, somehow the party had retained its moral self, it was still Lenin's party. Given these assumptions, it seemed only plausible that, with Stalin and the secret police gone, socialism would show its paces. The faults and the errors were due to Stalin and the rule of terror; now the sky was the limit. We shall come back to this optimistic belief, a crucial element in Khrushchev's thinking, when we consider his political blueprint for the new socialist order, but first, briefly, the consequences of the speech.

Its impact was shattering. Some who heard it in the hall fainted, others subsequently committed suicide. The speech was not published. Marked copies were sent down to party secretaries at local level, who read it to closed meetings of party members and then returned their copy to the Central Committee. Not a single one circulated unofficially within the Soviet Union. A translation appeared in the West, either leaked on purpose or by one of the East European Communists, but the Russian original was not published in the Soviet Union until 1989. This tells us something about the environment of the 1950s compared with the 1980s when, in the age of xerox machines and computers, it would be much more difficult to prevent such a document from circulating.

In April 1956 a summary of the main points of the speech was published in Pravda in a statement from the Central Committee, which had officially discussed the shortcomings of the Cult of Personality. This was followed by a series of policy measures which further reduced the powers of the MVD. State security was separated out and given the status of a State Committee in the form of the KGB, and a party official put in charge. The labour camps were handed over to the Ministry of Justice, the economic empire of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was dismantled. Amnesties were announced for those sentenced for political crimes, rehabilitations began, and people started to return from the camps. A campaign for socialist legality was initiated.

The years 1956 to 1964 were a period in which an individual's assessment of the period of the Cult of Personality was the key to identifying his or her political stance. Recognizable political positions emerged,
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On one side were those who argued that the 1930s were a heroic period in Soviet history marred, unfortunately, by some excesses, but that excesses happen at such times. The domestic and foreign policies of the Stalin period had been correct, and the same general line should be continued. That was the position of the conservatives. The reformers, in contrast, argued that it was a horrific period which still required explanation, and one whose consequences lingered on and should be countered; economic and legal reform was required, and greater cultural freedom. The debate was still under way when Khrushchev was deposed in 1964, and gradually, quietly, the issue was pushed off the agenda, into a drawer which was closed, and kept closed, until the late 1980s.

If, inside the Soviet Union, the speech meant a wind of change, a new cultural climate, and the creation of two bodies of opinion—defenders of the Stalinist past and their critics—in Eastern Europe and within the Communist movement more generally, its consequences were more drastic and more immediate. In Poland it triggered off open protests against aspects of Communist rule, and in Hungary a direct challenge that was put down by Soviet tanks. Western Communist parties split, the Chinese expressed their disagreement with Khrushchev’s analysis. In his bid to strengthen the party’s authority, Khrushchev had perhaps won a temporary victory, but, by denouncing Stalin and some of his policies, he had opened the way for present and future Communists to query the Stalinist dogma that Soviet practices were the only true form of socialism.

In 1961, at the XXIIth Party Congress, Khrushchev returned to the theme and this time the Congress proceedings were broadcast over the radio and in the press. He talked of the wider purge and, implicating his erstwhile opponents, Molotov and Malenkov, in the arrests, asked the rhetorical question: should not those responsible perhaps be brought to trial? No action followed, nor was it clear whether Khrushchev meant it seriously. If, as we suggested in the previous chapter, it was still an difficult issue to face in the 1980s, how much more so in the early 1960s when so many active in politics, including Khrushchev himself, had been involved in the repressions. At the Congress one of the delegates, an elderly woman who had known Lenin, reported that Vladimir Ilyich had appeared to her the night before in a dream and said that he did not feel comfortable lying in the mausoleum next to Stalin. A decision was taken to remove Stalin’s body, and that night he was secretly buried in the Kremlin wall. Pravda published a poem by a young poet, Yevgeny Shishkin, which he referred to elderly Stalinists, tending their roses, but waiting for an opportunity to return to power. And it was at this time that One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Solzhenitsyn’s short story, was published. He had sent the manuscript to the editor of the most famous literary monthly, Novy mir, who took it directly to Khrushchev, who authorized its publication. From these two examples, we can see both the way in which the political authorities were directly responsible for what happened in the publishing world, and the way in which literature played a political role. The two were intertwined in a way that is rare in a society where art and politics operate, more independently of each other.

An important question is how different the reform process under Khrushchev was from that initiated by Gorbachev, and why the one ended with the entrenchment of the existing system, the other with its collapse. We shall come to this in the final chapter but, by way of introducing the theme and getting a sense of one aspect of life under Khrushchev, let us consider student reaction to political developments in Leningrad during 1961–3. What follows is based upon my observations, as a student, living in a student hostel, and studying in the law faculty. There was enormous interest in what was being said, whether at the Party Congress, in articles, or memoirs; we read everything that came out from artists, writers, and old Bolsheviks about the Stalin period, and about the present. One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was unobtainable, unless one had a subscription to Novy mir. In the public library, the reader had to ask at the librarian’s desk for the copy, sign for it, and then sit at a table in front of the desk to read it. The edges of the pages of the story were already black, and the journal simply fell open at the appropriate page. There was a performance of Byron’s Don Juan, not perhaps the sharpest of political satire, but it was staged by a liberal theatre director who, at the beginning of the preview, brought on to the stage the elderly woman, dressed in black, who had translated it from English into Russian, by memory, during her twenty-five years in solitary confinement. The student audience clapped every stanza. The renaming of Stalingrad as Volgograd caused disagreement, though, because of its wartime connotation. There were poetry readings too, but there were no student demonstrations, nor any political meetings. Such actions were unthinkable. Nor would we discuss political questions except in the open air and with close friends. As a student,
or an ordinary citizen, we were very much aware of being part of an audience, observing the actions of elite members of society engaged in a struggle in which it was very risky to participate. Isolated incidents did occur. There was a seminar one evening in the literature department on the theme of 'Fathers and Sons', a famous theme in Russian literature, in which the discussion got 'out of hand', and a few students criticized faculty members for the part that they had or had not played during the period of the Cult. A participant had written down the discussion, and a copy circulated secretly; I read it, knowing that the individual who had lent it to me would be in serious trouble if it was found out. It did not take very much, even in the period of de-Stalinization, to fall foul of the authorities. An acquaintance had just returned from three years in a labour camp, as a consequence of quoting the line from Hamlet, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark', at a student discussion in 1956.

In September 1991, in a discussion with students of the history faculty in Archangel, a city in the north of Russia, one of them asked whether discussion and the press were less free in Leningrad in 1961 than in 1991. With a sense of shock I realized that he had no conception of the environment of the early 1960s, and probably none of that which existed before glasnost set the media free. The present generation of students, then, is in a qualitatively different position from that of their parents; they have no memory of a period in which censorship existed nor any experience of political repression. But the students of 1989–91 were little disposed towards political activity. The absence of punitive constraints has not produced a generation interested in politics; even as observers, they are less interested than were their parents. The attempted coup galvanized a few into action, but only temporarily. There is now a generation who has no political memory of repression and blanket censorship; this sets them apart from all their elders, but with what consequences it is hard to say.

To return, however, to the Khrushchev period. It was still a period in which the boundaries of what was permissible were defined absolutely by the discussion going on above. The political leadership, including Khrushchev, was very clear that it was its role to define acceptable discussion and activity. It was not up to social groups, or individuals, to push the boundaries wider. This feature of the system, connected with the unacceptability of political opposition, was not questioned, but it poses problems for a reform-minded leadership convinced that some changes are necessary. Such a leadership has no way of coping with developments of which it disapproves, other than by banning them. A long-established, almost knee-jerk reaction of the leadership is to bring the barriers down. We shall come back to this, but let us now sum up the new relationship between political authority and coercion. By the late 1950s the coercive organs were under the political control of the party. The use of coercion—surveillance, arrest, and imprisonment—was still an essential element of the system but what was qualitatively different was that each citizen knew what the rules of the game were, what would or would not attract the attention of the authorities. Political rules had been established.

What then was to be the relationship between the reconstituted political authority and society? In the Secret Speech Khrushchev called for a return to Leninism. By this he meant rule by a vanguard party, an elite group making policy and controlling government institutions, ministries, and police through the party apparatus. Full-time party functionaries, they would form a chain of command from the centre to the localities, where, at the grassroots, they would be backed up by a body of committed activists. The Leninist party, that model organization, always aspired to but never realized, would lead society forward. In keeping with his belief in the ability of the party both to inspire and control, Khrushchev attacked the central state bureaucracy, cut down the number of industrial ministries, and put the regional party secretaries in charge of industry. He also engaged in a policy of rapid personnel turnover within the apparatus, bringing in new specialists, and cutting out what he considered to be dead wood. This had all the hallmarks of a strategy employed by the party leadership both before and under Stalin: a stress on personnel as the key resource, an emphasis on the importance of party mindedness, and the commitment to party values by those who were running education, culture, and the legal system. The party is seen as the shock troops, carrying out orders within a system where the objectives are clearly defined. Of key importance is the reliability of the party troops who are responsible, through their power of appointment, for the loyalty of the ministers, generals, judges, university rectors, or editors of newspapers.

It was relatively easy to ensure this aspect of party control. Simultaneously, however, the party had to be able to inspire and lead, through agitation and propaganda, and control of the media. For an organization to be able to do this, however, it has to have a clear sense of its objectives, of the values it is propagating, and its members must share a
commitment to those values. Here the Khrushchev schema ran into trouble: it was not just that the de-Stalinization campaign revealed a party divided between conservatives and reformers but that, by opening the doors again to a mass of new recruits and insisting that now the party should contain representatives of all strata in society, Khrushchev began the obliteration of any distinction between party and non-party members within society. Under Brezhnev the process continued. Although the Brezhnev leadership engaged in a 'review of party cards', as the membership purges were called, and some were expelled, this had more of the air of engaging in a time-honoured exercise than the earlier genuine concern to cut back, quite savagely, and set forth again with a purified membership. The pendulum had swung to the side of mass recruitment and stuck there. This, however, is to run ahead. Here we note that, even in the Khrushchev period, as the party regained its political authority it found it easier to control other institutions than to agree on how to educate and inspire. In the 1920s, despite the policy disagreements, and the expansion and contraction of membership, there was a shared commitment by the members, who felt themselves surrounded by alien elements, to transform social relationships in certain simple ways. That was no longer so.

What of policy under Khrushchev? As we noted earlier, political arrangements which specified a vanguard party encouraged campaigns. A campaign style was part of the system. We find Khrushchev giving special attention to agriculture, an area which lent itself to the traditional campaign strategy. Simple objectives could be set (open up the virgin lands of Kazakhstan, make maize the crop of the future), there was a relatively simple command structure in place (the regional and district party bodies, unencumbered by the complexity that characterized industrial administration), and an appeal could be made to youth, reminiscent of those calls of the early 1930s, to go out and transform the steppes. Some responded. We are not suggesting that Khrushchev's concern with the agricultural sector stemmed solely from its suitability as a campaign area but rather that the type of political arrangements that exist in a society will not merely affect the way policy is perceived and implemented (simple objectives, campaign methods) but that they will influence the identification of policy issues, and their appearance on the political agenda. Traces of the concerns that had inspired his generation—equality and 'proletarian values'—still clung to Khrushchev. He pushed for an educational reform which would have compelled school-leavers to do two years' manual work before continuing to higher education; in this we see a last flicker of the ideas of the revolution, a flicker which was extinguished by opposition from factory directors, specialists, teachers, and parents.

With his campaign style Khrushchev was harking back to his youth in the first five-year plan period, trying to realize the traditional role of the Leninist party. Simultaneously, however, he was trying to get to grips with the problem of party-rule in a new, state-owned, and administered environment, where the party was closely intertwined with the state apparatus, where its members were drawn from all strata of the new socialist society, and where, it was stated, conflicts of interests did not exist. Was the shock-troop imagery any longer relevant in such a situation? Was it not time for the party, which now contained the 'best representatives' of all social groups, to become more democratic, with more inner-party discussion, and limitations on tenure of office? In keeping with his notion of a society working together to a common future, Khrushchev emphasized the importance of participation by members of society in everyday administration—volunteer patrols to keep order on the streets, comrades' courts in enterprises to impose social sanctions for minor misdemeanours—and the replacement of full-time state 'bureaucrats' by more active soviet deputies. We should note, however, that he did not advocate any changes to the system of appointments (control by the party was essential) nor to the practice of single-candidate elections to soviets. It was for the party to identify who were the best people (they need not necessarily be party members), to act as deputies, trade union chairmen, or judges, and then for the electorate to show their approval. He did, however, perceive a need for more open discussion of policy issues, particularly by specialists, as long as it remained within the bounds that the leadership considered appropriate.

A new party programme, and party rules, presented to the XXIIth Congress in 1961, outlined a shining future. The vision and the targets were still there: communism would be built in twenty years, the Soviet Union would overtake the USA in per capita production by 1980, and the difference between town and country, mental and manual labour, would disappear. The state would wither away, but the party would grow stronger. To understand the optimism, we must recognize the strength of Khrushchev's conviction that, with Stalin gone, the Soviet socialist system with its industrial base, which had proved its military
ability in the war and was now the leader of a world Communist movement, could fulfill its potential and overtake capitalism. War with capitalism was no longer necessary, economic superiority would win the day. In 1959 Khrushchev accepted an invitation from Eisenhower to visit the United States. His account is revealing on several accounts—of how isolated the Soviet establishment still was from the world outside (neither Khrushchev nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew what Camp David was, and Khrushchev was anxious lest meeting at Camp David implied a snub), and how proud and yet apprehensive he was. There was anxiety initially lest the plane let them down (and Tupolev, the designer, offered to send his son with the delegation as a mark of his confidence), but

All sorts of thoughts went through my head as I looked out of the window at the ocean below. It made me proud to think that we were on our way to the United States in our new passenger plane. Not that we worshipped America ... on the contrary ... No, the reason we were proud was that we had finally forced the United States to recognize the necessity of establishing closer contacts with us ... we felt pride in our country, our Party, our people, and the victories they had achieved. We had transformed Russia into a highly developed country ... I won't try to conceal that subconsciously we had some other thoughts and feelings as well ... You shouldn't forget that all during Stalin's life, right up to the day he died, he kept telling us we would never be able to stand up to the forces of imperialism, that the first time we came into contact with the outside world our enemies would smash us to pieces; we would get confused and be unable to defend our land ...

Khrushchev was impressed by American technology, and agriculture, very impressed, but that in no way shook his belief that the Soviet Union could not shortly match and then outstrip capitalism. The late 1950s were a time of enormous optimism and pride in Soviet achievements. Sputnik went up. The standard of living rose. The reformers felt that socialism had a future.

Accompanying Khrushchev's optimism was impatience when failings occurred. He was baffled when policies and programmes did not work as intended, and frustrated. Despite plans to shift resources to consumer goods production, the steel-eaters swallowed them up and, even worse, growth rates of both heavy and light industry slowed down. In agriculture, after initial successes, the yields were disappointing. In keeping with the policy of greater specialist involvement in policy discussion, the pages of the press were opened to a discussion of economic reform. For the first time voices were heard arguing that the system of central planning possessed certain in-built problems (lack of responsiveness to consumer demand, and of incentives for new technology), although no one raised the question of ownership. Meanwhile, however, the greater freedom of discussion had produced open conflict in the cultural sphere. The artistic community had split into two: the more traditional writers and artists who tended to be politically conservative against those more critical of socialist realism and of the Stalinist past. Editorial boards clashed, poets as well as art were involved.

Some of the new abstract painters were offered the opportunity to hang their pictures in an exhibition mounted in the centre of Moscow, and Khrushchev was invited, by the more traditional organizers, to viewing. When he reached the abstract paintings, he exploded, hurled insults at the artists, and swept back to the Kremlin to issue a call for a reorganization of the cultural unions. A meeting was held between Khrushchev and writers and artists at which, in his speech, he struggled to resolve the problem: he made no claim, he said, to be an expert on art, although he knew what he liked; and those with expertise should make decisions, but a socialist government which paid for the education and support of its artists could not countenance works that so clearly did not deserve the name of art. When it came to it, Khrushchev was not prepared to relinquish the party's right (i.e. the political leadership's right) to lay down the truth, in whatever sphere. If opening up debate merely produced unhealthy disagreement, and undermined the notion of all marching in agreement behind a common aim, it was best to curtail it. But what was the common aim and how was it to be achieved? Khrushchev's policy-making grew more erratic and arbitrary as he resorted, in a way that was not new, to making himself personally responsible for the policy initiatives. It seemed that only an individual leader could discover the scientific way forward for socialism. And he turned, as Stalin had done before him, to personnel and organization to try to make the policies work. He shifted party and government officials around, sacking, appointing, transferring old and new in his search for the right people; and, in desperation, he reorganized the party apparatus, splitting it into industrial and agricultural committees at regional level and below. He even proposed that members of the Politburo should take responsibility for different branches of agriculture. He failed to realize that they would not follow him blindly. In October 1964
his Politburo colleagues, concerned at his erratic behaviour, and the
grumbling in the apparatus, joined ranks and forced his resignation.
Faced with a united Politburo decision, the Central Committee fell in
line and voted him out. The Khrushchev attempt to make Leninism
work had failed.

SIX

The Administrative-
Command System under
Brezhnev

The key figures in the new leadership were Leonid Brezhnev, the First
Secretary of the Communist Party, Alexei Kosygin, Chairman of the
Council of Ministers, and Nikolai Podgorny, Chairman of the Supreme
Soviet or President, the titular head of state. They emphasized that
their was to be a collective leadership; there would be an end to
Khrushchev’s hare-brained schemes, his rash erratic intervention in
the economy and in politics. One of their first measures was to restore
to the party its traditional structure, and to stress the need for the
stability of personnel. In 1965, albeit in conjunction with an economic
reform, the original ministerial structure was reinstated. In terms of
party-state structures, then, the traditional framework was back in
place. The political authorities retained their control over the army and
KGB (coercion), the centrally planned system remained, as did central
control of the media and culture.

Gradually a more conservative, bland, style began to prevail.
Khrushchev’s claim that the Soviet Union was in the first stages of
building communism was replaced by the more measured announce-
ment that it had achieved a stage of mature or developed socialism.
Those troublesome questions of the Stalinist past and its legacy dis-
appeared from discussion; literature lost its sparkle, sociological in-
vestigation became difficult. None of this happened overnight. Many
specialist issues continued to be debated fiercely and, from time to
time, critical voices were heard, but by the end of the 1960s a cloak of
caution had floated down from the Kremlin and was settling over society.

In several respects, though, Khrushchev’s heirs followed his lead. The party apparatus was clearly to be the dominant political institution, and its role in determining policy, choosing personnel, and guiding and overseeing state institutions was emphasized; the policy of increasing party membership was continued, although at a slightly slower rate. The emphasis, however, was very clearly one of the party producing sensible policy, then controlling and monitoring implementation, rather than campaigning, of acting as a vanguard which literally pulled society forward. The civic values became those of stability and patriotism; socialism’s virtues became the absence of capitalism’s undesirable features—unemployment, inflation, and terrorism—and a new phrase ‘the Soviet way of life’ suggested that the present was a satisfactory existence. The party’s role became one of defending and maintaining the status quo rather than transforming the present according to a blueprint for the future.

But could a political framework that had been constructed around an elite vanguard party of committed followers, ruling by virtue of its knowing what was best for society, and taking it towards that goal, accommodate such a change of function for its dominant institution? Khrushchev had tried to marry old party traditions and practices—targets, campaigns, orders, and personal leadership—with a more representative party, new structures, and more open discussion. The Brezhnev leadership adopted a different strategy: retain the traditional structures and rules of inner-party behaviour, but change the goals to conservative ones. Why should this not work?

Initially, it looked hopeful. With Khrushchev’s interventionist, arbitrary style replaced by a more cautious and sensible leadership there was progress on several fronts. Brezhnev continued to give high priority to agriculture: investment rose, schemes of land reclamation were initiated, incentives increased for the peasantry, and output rose substantially. Throughout the 1970s the standard of living continued to rise. It seemed that technology and incentives could solve the problem of low productivity in agriculture. But by 1980 it had become clear that the return on investment was falling steadily. Agriculture was swallowing up resources, with no prospects of being able to maintain an improvement in living standards, while the government, by keeping prices low in the shops, was subsidizing the consumer at huge cost to the state budget. The mechanism of getting the produce to the shops was still one of orders to the farms, of sending out students and workers to help bring in the harvest, of using the traditional administrative methods. Roads and storage facilities were neglected. In 1978 Mikhail Gorbachev, the party secretary from Stavropol, an agricultural region, was brought to Moscow to be in charge of agriculture, but there was little a young and energetic newcomer could do in the Brezhnev entourage.

The economic reform of 1965, which gave industrial enterprises more control over their own production-mix, some flexibility over wages, and allowed them to put a proportion of profit into their own funds, suggested a move away from detailed central planning and control from above but, by 1968, the reform had failed. For several reasons. First, once back in the picture, the ministries, anxious to defend their institutional interests, clawed back their old powers. They controlled supplies and could reward performance. Increasingly they reverted to their old ways, issuing detailed instructions to the industrial enterprises, and curtailing their freedom of action. Second, there was dissatisfaction from sections of the work-force itself. Economic reform which aimed at shaking out surplus labour, making it in an enterprise’s interest to raise productivity by tying pay to work, did not necessarily appeal to workers who would lose out. Nor was management automatically enthusiastic about schemes that might well not last. Then there was the unfortunate example of Czechoslovakia where an economic reform had developed into a quite unacceptable political reform programme which included reducing the party’s power over appointments and the media. Troops of the Warsaw Pact ended the Prague Spring, and from 1968 onwards the Soviet leadership refrained from reform at home. For the remainder of the Brezhnev period administrative reorganization and tinkering with incentive systems characterized industrial policy. The consequence was that by the end of the 1970s, with growth rates continuing to decline, the technology gap between the advanced industrial countries and the Soviet Union was falling to close. New products were not coming on the market. Industry seemed to be trapped in a vicious circle of low wages, low productivity, and poor quality output.

In contrast, the military sector, which had priority in terms of resources, could be seen as a success story: the Soviet Union achieved military parity with the United States. It was during the Brezhnev
period that the Soviet Union, its diplomats and politicians, and the United States began a cautious co-operation, as befitted the world's two major nuclear powers. The relationship was not an easy one, but it was by now one between equals. The Soviet government had to be consulted on developments in, for example, the Middle East, and was independently making its presence felt in Africa. The cost, however, was a huge drain on resources. The Soviet economy, with a GNP only half the size of that of the United States, had to devote a far greater proportion of its resources to defence if it wished to compete—and it had a larger population to feed. With growth rates slowing down, the prospects for the future began to look increasingly bleak: an even greater share of resources would need to go towards military spending in order to retain parity with the United States. It would not be long before Star Wars would pose an appalling economic threat, quite apart from a strategic one.

The twenty years from 1954 to 1974 were the best period in Soviet (and Russian) history for the ordinary citizen in the Soviet Union in terms of rising living standards, and peace. By the mid-1970s, however, the momentum seemed to go; it was as though the system had run out of steam. Problems began to mount, as growth continued to slow: the health service, education, and housing all began to creak at the seams. Crime and alcoholism increased. Corruption and cynicism seemed more prevalent. And the government simply continued to produce the same policies.

In January 1987, some ten years later, Gorbachev addressed the problem. 'At some point', he suggested, 'the country began to lose momentum, difficulties and unresolved problems started to pile up, and there appeared elements of stagnation and other phenomena alien to socialism.' He drew attention first to the economy where, he said, outdated management methods, rigid attitudes towards property (i.e. the belief that only state property was really appropriate for a socialist society), and ineffective planning prevailed. 'Day to day practical activity was supplanted by decree making, a show of efficiency and mountains of paperwork, in fact a whole system developed that slowed the socio-economic development of society.' As far as the political system was concerned, serious breaches, he suggested, occurred in party ethics, and the behaviour of personnel degenerated: law-breaking, embezzlement, corruption and report padding, departmentalism, parochialism, and nationalism were prevalent. The social consequences were an increase in immorality and cynicism, young people obsessed with consumerism, a rise in alcoholism, drug-taking, and crime. Culture and art stagnated. Why did this happen, who or what was responsible? According to Gorbachev, the leadership was at fault. It had failed to see the need for new ideas; it had failed to develop new concepts, to identify the problems, and to find new measures to deal with them. It had persisted in operating with outdated concepts and had remained blind, he argued, to the serious shortcomings in the institutions of socialist democracy.

Let us concentrate on his argument that the lack of dynamism, the stagnation, was the consequence of poor leadership, that an innovative leadership could have prevented it, and could have produced the ideas which would have resulted in economic progress, cultural and technological innovation, creativity, and change under Communist Party rule. How convincing is it? Certainly there was an ageing leadership which, with its stress upon consensus decision-making, failed to come up with new ideas. In comparison with the Khrushchev or Stalin periods, a collective leadership existed, although by the mid-1970s Brezhnev had emerged very clearly as the leading figure. He preferred, however, to operate in conjunction with his colleagues. In 1977 he added the post of President to his General Secretaryship of the party, thus allowing himself to act, formally, as head of state. Kosygin, however, remained as Chairman of the Council of Ministers and there was a division of responsibility. From this time on the Chairman of the Council of Ministers became clearly identified as responsible for economic policy, and in particular for the industrial sector. What was noticeable, however, was that Brezhnev had learnt from Khrushchev's mistakes. On the one hand, he manoeuvred carefully to get rid of any younger colleagues who looked as though they might pose a threat, and replaced them with elderly individuals (the bringing of the 49-year-old Gorbachev on to the Politburo was an exception, but this was towards the end of Brezhnev's life); on the other, he kept contentious issues off the agenda, and thus prevented policy debate from destroying the consensus in the Politburo. He allowed his colleagues to grow rich with the pickings of office, and he appointed relatives to lucrative or powerful positions. He had found, it seemed, an answer to the problem of how to make the First Secretaryship secure: maintain the status quo—and oppose any policy initiatives.

Perhaps most interesting of all though, as far as leadership is concerned, was that by the end of the period the trappings of a cult emerged
around Brezhnev. At the final Party Congress, at which his speech could no longer be televised because of his incapacity to read properly, republican after republican party secretary rose to his feet, to deliver accolades to this tireless champion of Marxism–Leninism, creative thinker, philosopher, and statesman. Some of Brezhnev’s early writings about Kazakhstan were made into an opera (the steppe music, it was said, were alive to the sound of music); more and more medals were pinned upon his chest for his achievements; the posters and pictures become huger and huger. Why did the cult recur? The breeding-ground remained the same: a party ruling by virtue of the fact that it and it alone can identify scientific truths, and the transferring of this impossible claim to the individual leader who thereby has to be wise and all-knowing. But whereas, under Stalin, the cult was for real, people believed that Stalin was all-knowing, and the cult had a social significance, under Brezhnev it was a pale shadow, a mockery. Few people told jokes about Stalin, and not primarily because they were afraid; the jokes about Brezhnev were legion. Perhaps the appearance of a cult that was a source of ridicule should have drawn our attention to the fact that something was badly wrong, that something strange was happening within the political system.

To return, however, to the argument that leadership was responsible for the stagnation. It is correct that the Leninist system was a political system that required an active dynamic leadership if it was not to sink into inertia or something worse; to that extent the Gorbachev analysis correctly identified a key feature. This is, however, not the same as saying that an innovative leadership could have maintained the dynamism. But before considering that, we must look a little more closely at the institutional arrangements between the Communist Party apparatus and the state apparatus in order to show why a dynamic leadership was crucial to the system.

By the state apparatus, we refer to all the institutions that came under the formal umbrella of the soviets, from local soviets, to republican soviets, and up to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The Council of Ministers, which included the central, all-union ministries, responsible for all spheres of activity—the different industrial branches, agriculture, culture, education, internal affairs, foreign policy, health—more than a hundred of them in all, was nominally responsible to the Supreme Soviet. The pattern was repeated at republican level, and at regional level the local departments of the different ministries administered the resources that were centrally allocated. All enterprises and institutions were, therefore, under the jurisdiction of one or other ministry, most of which were based in Moscow. During the 1970s, the number of ministries and other central institutions, such as state committees, government agencies, and research institutes, proliferated.

Relationships inside and between institutions seemed to become steadily more bureaucratic in the sense, and here Gorbachev’s comments are relevant, of increasing paperwork, documentation, sending instructions down the hierarchy to bodies below, multiplying requests for information from different institutions. A favourite phrase of the time was that all decisions required ‘a complex approach’; indeed the perceived need to consult, check, and acquire information seemed to result in a paralysis of decision-making, or to be a substitute for it. The paperwork mounted, administrative orders were issued down complex hierarchies in which no real mechanisms existed for checking their implementation, and each central institution actively defended its own interests. Each claimed that the resources it controlled should be expanded; every ministry, for example, claimed the need for a research institute where specialists could study the complex processes in society and produce new techniques. Ministries expanded, and were subdivided, but then each required extra accommodation and resources. State Committees required reorganization in order to try to coordinate the new more complicated relationships. A spider’s web of administrative structures developed, with its centre in Moscow and its tentacles spreading out over the country; millions of employees engaged in processing policies and passing instructions and information to and fro.

Such a huge bureaucratic apparatus, if it was not to act as a brake on change, clearly required a forceful and determined policy-maker standing above it and able to goad it into action. Who was meant to be making policy? Formally the Supreme Soviet, the body elected on the basis of single-candidate elections, was the legislature in the system, but it met only twice a year for a few days to rubber-stamp major legislative proposals. The actual policy-maker was the Politburo, the leading party body, elected, according to the party rules, by the Central Committee but in reality a body whose members were co-opted by the individual (Khrushchev) or group (the Brezhnev–Kosygin team) who had gained control of the key party posts. The Politburo was the
cabinet of the system, and, by the mid-1970s, its membership had been increased to include the ministers responsible for key policy areas (Defence, Foreign Affairs, and the KGB). Its weekly meetings, chaired by Brezhnev, were where all major policy decisions were taken. The Politburo was served by the Central Committee’s Secretariat (Brezhnev was General or First Secretary), whose departments, headed by secretaries appointed by the General Secretary, were second only to the Politburo in importance. Most departments had responsibility for a particular policy area; others were concerned with inner-party affairs. Policy advice and personnel appointments were the task of the Secretariat departments, staffed by the top ranks of the apparatus.

Why, then, were the departments not acting in a creative manner, providing new ideas, policy initiatives, monitoring the work of the state apparatus, and advocating the pruning of the bureaucracy? First, because they tended to identify with the interests of the sector for which they were responsible—the party department responsible for the coal industry became a champion of the coal industry, while that responsible for health sought more resources for the health sector—there was a natural tendency for party and state apparatus to work together to defend what they saw as the interests of their sector. Second, there was very little personnel change. The same individuals, many of them quite elderly, held the same jobs in the party and state apparatus for ten, twenty, even thirty years maybe. That surely worked against innovation. But there was a third and more important factor as far as the party apparatus was concerned. As an organization its members always looked up to the level above them; each level took its cue from the one above. It was a leadership-dominated organization in which policies were expected to come from the leadership. It was not an institution that was expected to act on its own initiative. If the leadership was not dynamic, or failed to call the troops to combat, no action would come from the party apparatus. It would simply continue with existing practices, maintain the status quo, and defend its position against attacks from above or below.

Party and state officials, whether at central or regional level, worked together to keep the administrative-command system running in the accustomed way. But, as they did so, the system began to degenerate. There was increasing bureaucratization, the-clogging up of the command system. Given a lax attitude by the party leadership and the absence of any mechanisms for control from below, party and state officials, the nomenklatura, increasingly misused the resources at their disposal, the funds for which they were responsible. As office-holders who controlled economic resources, political posts, and positions in all state institutions, central and regional officials were obvious candidates for corruption and bribery. They could distribute favours and benefits. Furthermore they controlled the media, which could not question their right to dispose of economic resources, power, and privileges. In the Brezhnev period, the potential for the nomenklatura to defend and further its interests increased as the party leadership simply let the system run on. It was not just that personnel remained in office but that, when appointments had to be made, long-time deputies stepped smoothly into their previous patrons’ shoes and, in the regions, local members of the elite joined a well-known circle.

In the republics too the educational and affirmative action policies to promote the titular nationalities (Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, Tadiks in Tadjikistan) began to produce new élites who were of the titular nationality. The eleven pre-war republics had grown to fifteen with the incorporation of the three Baltic states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—and Moldova, part of pre-war Romania. Russia (which itself contained a number of smaller autonomous republics, based on smaller ethnic groups) was the largest, then came the other two Slav republics—the Ukraine, and Belorussia. Georgia and Armenia, small and mountainous, and Christian, were down in the Caucasus; then there were the five Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kirgizia, predominantly Muslim, Turkic, or Persian speaking, and Kazakhistan, where more than half the population was Russian. From the middle of the 1970s major corruption scandals broke in certain of the southern republics, and in provincial Russia. In Georgia, the head of the KGB, Shevardnadze, ‘the honest policeman’, became First Secretary after one such scandal. In 1987 Gorbachev was to report that half the party apparatus in Uzbekistan had been dismissed for corruption. This tells us that although the system might appear monolithic, Moscow centred, and controlled, under the surface local élites had formed and were becoming increasingly used to acting in their own interests. This entailed defending regional or republican interests against what they perceived as an ineffective and uninspired central leadership, but one which might still intervene in a wholly arbitrary manner.

The existence of such an extensive administrative apparatus, controlling resources and communications, and the lack of policy change from
above, had two consequences for social action: First, there were no mechanisms through which social or political problems could reach the public agenda: nuclear accidents, drug-taking, abortions, or racism were non-subjects. Occasionally an issue did break through as a result of the combined efforts of a group of specialists, journalists, and a politically appropriate moment on high. One such issue, and the frequency with which it was quoted tells us just how few other such examples there were, was the industrial pollution of Lake Baikal, the world’s deepest inland lake with its priceless natural heritage. Despite the publicity and the statements, however, it was not clear that all pollution was halted. Meanwhile the Aral Sea, as a consequence of an ill-though-out irrigation scheme, became an ecological disaster and a health hazard for those living near. A group of Russian writers produced novels, in which the destruction of the Russian village and countryside featured, and occasionally an article by one of them, giving a critical account of village life, appeared on the pages of Pravda. But nothing followed.

Specialists and intellectuals discussed what they saw as the decay of their society, but even they had very limited knowledge of what was actually happening, both because of the difficulty of engaging in critical research and of raising issues in the press. Thus, even among the intellectual community, knowledge of society tended to be quite narrowly compartmentalized. Issues which had come on the public agenda in the West—racism, feminism—had no place even on the private agendas of Soviet intellectuals. The official line that nationality problems had, in all key respects if not in their entirety, been solved in the Soviet Union meant that there was no opportunity to discuss the existence, and the reasons for, stereotyped attitudes on race, as prevalent among the intellectuals as among anyone else. This situation had the consequence that neither politicians nor people had any clear knowledge of the extent of social or economic problems. In the late 1980s Gorbachev was to confess that the leadership had been unaware of how serious many of them were.

A second consequence was that the social and political organizations, such as the Komsomol, trade unions, or cultural organizations, and the elected soviets, whose membership had originally acted as mobilizers for great tasks, atomized as mass institutions. Under Khrushchev there had been a faint attempt to make them institutions through which people participated in civic duties but, even there, the flickers of activity that occurred were as a consequence of reformers engaging conservaties in a struggle to strengthen legal rights or had sprung from the leadership calling for a campaign from above. In the absence of either of these activities, the mass organizations simply became adjuncts of the administrative system. The unions participated in discussions of wage policy at central level, and administered welfare and engaged in personnel management. To the ordinary citizen it was clear that, faced with a pension or a housing problem, one went to the local government official, perhaps with a bribe, not to the local deputy because he or she had no power to affect decisions. Membership in and meetings of these organizations became ever more formal and ritualistic.

Back in the 1930s the campaign to build the new city of Magnitogorsk out in the steppe had caught the imagination of a generation. Under Khrushchev the Virgin Lands campaign could still attract and inspire a section of young people, and produce some good songs. In the Brezhnev period the campaign to build BAM, the great new Siberian railway, simply failed to inspire anything approaching enthusiasm. This tells us that an important change had occurred. The party could no longer run a campaign. The party leadership had no message to offer, nothing to inspire and take society forward. Its conservative values of patriotism and stability could not enthuse and unite the party, let alone youth. The following can serve as an example of the extent to which the ideological aspect of the party’s work had deteriorated by this time. Thousands of people were still employed by the ideological apparatus of the party and Komsomol to give lectures to audiences throughout society. A woman lecturer, who specialized on political themes, received an invitation from a provincial party committee to lecture at a factory and at the local army base. The army, as she said, always treated lecturers well, providing a good meal and a fee, and the enjoyed talking to young recruits. She decided she would give them her lecture on ‘Lenin and the Komsomol’, because it usually went down well. But, as she lectured, to the rows of boys, with their close-cropped dark hair and their dark eyes, she could not arouse a flicker of interest. She could not understand it because, as an experienced lecturer, she knew how to speak to different audiences. She tried everything, but to no avail. At the end, she turned in desperation to the commanding officer, in the hope that there would be questions, but he dismissed the class. As they went out, she said to him, ‘I can’t understand it, why
wasn't I getting a response?' To which he replied, 'That is not surprising, they are Kazakhs, and don't understand Russian.' 'Why then,' she asked in amazement, 'was I lecturing to them?' To which she received the answer, 'Oh, don't worry, they learnt what listening to a political lecture involves.' A ritual exercise. By the 1970s activities which had had a meaning had lost them. Grandparents, even those who in their youth had never been politically active or had been critical of Soviet power, made unfavourable comparisons between Komsomol activities then and now.

What did this mean for the most important institution of all, the party? What did it mean to be a party member in the late 1970s? Membership stood at more than 16 million, one in nine of the adult population. Nearly half of those with higher education were in the party. Political criteria for admission had become vaguer and vaguer; overt dissidence of course excluded anyone but, apart from that, it did not really matter. Admission was by invitation on the part of the party organization at each place of work. Its task was to raise its numbers, bring in new members of the collective who were working well, and make sure that there was a membership spread of different occupations, ages, sex, and nationality. An invitation to join could only be refused at the cost of jeopardizing one's career or retention of a job. The party therefore contained staunch Stalinists, Khrushchev-type reformers, political weathercocks, Social Democrats, Russian nationalists, Baltic patriots, and a huge contingent of people who were not interested in politics at all but for whom joining the party was simply an adjunct to a job. Given this, the party's language became emptier and emptier, more and more wooden. What kind of a language or political message could speak to all those different people, unite such a disparate group? There was not one. The old ideology, with its old phrases, was therefore repeated, becoming less and less meaningful, sounding hollower and hollower. Members assembled for the party meeting, some spoke the words, others raised their hands, and then the membership dispersed to talk in different tongues. In the 1920s or 1930s, if we could imagine lifting the roof of an apartment block, the conversations floating up from the families below would have identified the party members among them; by the 1970s, they were indistinguishable.

Solzhenitsyn, who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, after demanding the abolition of censorship, criticizing official policy, and working on the *Gulag*, suggested that in the Khrushchev period 'breathing and consciousness' returned. As we saw, two different political positions began to emerge: with the reformers pushing for change. No really radical views were expressed, nor could they have been, but the fact that alternatives existed was more significant than their content. Discussion could begin. After the reform momentum was halted in the mid-1960s, some individuals began to develop their ideas, which ranged from reform-communism, to an elitist liberalism, to Russian nationalism, and, in defending them, found themselves classed as dissidents and in trouble. Increasingly harrassed by the authorities, they joined forces in defence of human rights and individual civil liberties (over which they could agree) and to help each other when brought to trial. The authorities were far too strong for them, however. It was relatively easy to pick them off, and to prevent circulation of *samizdat* to any but small circle. By the late 1970s, it was suggested that there were more dissidents abroad than in the Soviet Union. Sakharov, an outspoken and eminent nuclear physicist, had been exiled to Gorky; and few of the younger generation were coming forward. The dissidents' political influence was minimal. Their suppression by the authorities was, however, significant in another respect. It meant there were no recognized political positions which could provide a basis for discussion. Conservatism and repression had its consequences. The ban on discussion, and the shell of official language that became more and more meaningless, produced a fragmentation of views and prevented the emergence of coherent political positions. Social opinion splintered.

In 1982 Brezhnev died. He was succeeded by Andropov, a more puritanical figure, who initiated an anti-corruption campaign, and began to produce more sober assessments of the economic situation. If the Khrushchev period was one of illusions, the end of Brezhnev's was characterized by disillusionment. Whereas the post-Stalin leadership had held a ball in the Kremlin for the Komsomol, Andropov visited a major Moscow factory and spoke of the need to raise productivity before wages could increase. But Andropov was sick and, upon his death in February 1984, was replaced by the already ailing Chernenko. In February 1985, Gorbachev, the youngest member of the Politburo, succeeded to the General Secretariatship. An anecdote told in the Brezhnev period had Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev in a railway carriage. The train stopped. Stalin put his head out of the window and shouted, 'Shoot the driver'; the train still stood. Khrushchev put his
head out, and shouted, 'Rehabilitate him.' The train still did not go. Brezhnev said, 'Comrades, comrades, draw the curtains, turn on the gramophone, and let's pretend we're moving.' Now when Gorbachev came to power an extra line was added: he joined the others, and his contribution was, 'Comrades, let's get out and push.' The question we now address is whether a dynamic, reform-minded leadership could save the system.