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Notes and Comments

Renewal and Dead Souls: The Changing Soviet Central Committee

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For a Soviet General Secretary presumably committed to the collectivist principles of Marxism–Leninism, Mikhail Gorbachev has been peculiarly insistent upon the decisive importance of individual leadership. In speech after speech it was not only the socio-economic order that Gorbachev held to be the source of the Soviet Union's problems: the quality and style of its political leadership were also crucial factors.

For years, Gorbachev told the 27th Party Congress in February 1986, party and government leaders had lagged behind the needs of the times, not only for objective reasons, but also for reasons 'above all of a subjective nature'. A curious attitude – 'how to improve things without changing anything' – had prevailed at local as well as national level.¹ The party and its leadership, Gorbachev explained at a meeting of the Central Committee (CC) in January 1987, had failed 'primarily for subjective reasons' to grasp the significance of the changes that were required in Soviet society. The principle of collective leadership had been violated; leaders had placed themselves beyond the reach of criticism, and some had become 'accomplices in – if not organizers of – criminal activities'. Whole republics, regions and ministries had been affected.² In July 1989, once again, the outbreak of the most serious industrial unrest since the 1920s was held to be the fault of leaders – leaders who in this case had failed to associate themselves with popular concerns and who were less than wholeheartedly committed to *perestroika*.³

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Especially remarkable is the new CC publication, *Izvestia TsK KPSS*, which began to appear in January 1989. It contains as a regular feature 'Sostav Tsentral'nogo Komiteta KPSS' ('Composition of the Central Committee of the CPSU'). The January issue (no. 1, pp. 9–31) gave biographical details of CC members who were in the Politburo or were CC Secretaries, the February issue (no. 2, pp. 43–114) the other full members, the May issue (no. 5, pp. 45–53) new full members, and the June issue (no. 6, pp. 21–70) candidate members and members of the Central Revision Commission. Later issues gave information on further changes; biographies of new Politburo members published in the October issue (no. 10, pp. 7–13) broke precedent by providing details about wives and children.

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¹ *Materialy XXVII s'ezda KPSS* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988), p. 4.

² *Materialy plenuma Tsentral'nogo komiteta KPSS 27–28 ianvaria 1987 goda* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), pp. 11–15, 24–5.

³ *Pravda*, 27 July 1989, p. 2.

The Gorbachev administration, for these and other reasons, has placed an unusually heavy emphasis upon the renewal of political leadership at all levels of the Soviet system. The party's most senior personnel were rapidly changed: nearly half the members of the Politburo and Secretariat elected at the 27th Congress had not served in either body before Gorbachev's election to the General Secretaryship just a year earlier, and by January 1990 only two of the twenty members (Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze) had served in either Politburo or Secretariat during the Brezhnev period. There were scarcely less extensive changes of the party leadership in the Soviet Union's republics and regions. Two-thirds of the secretaries of regional, territorial (*krai*) and union-republican party organizations had been replaced by late 1988, and all of the fourteen republican party leaders had been replaced by November 1989.⁴

There was a still more rapid turnover in the Soviet state structure: no more than twenty-two of the 115 members of the Council of Ministers elected in 1984 were still in their posts five years later, and only ten of these were nominated to the new government in 1989.⁵ Similarly, over 88 per cent of the members of the Congress of People's Deputies elected in March 1989 had not been members of the outgoing or any previous USSR Supreme Soviet.⁶ And in the economy Gorbachev reported in early 1989 that more than two-thirds of the country's industrial managers and farm directors had been replaced over the previous three years.⁷

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Personnel renewal, however, has so far proved a more difficult process in one crucial institution: the CPSU Central Committee.

The CC is an obvious focus of research because it is a key institution mediating relations between the leadership and the party as a whole. It is true that there has been a difference between the party's *Rules* and the reality of Politburo-centred power. It is also the case that the CC meets in full session, on average, only three or four times a year and then only for a day or two (although there are more plenary sessions per year than in some earlier periods). Nevertheless, the CPSU *Rules* state that the CC 'guides the entire activity of the party and of local party bodies, selects and appoints leading functionaries, directs the work of central government bodies and public organizations of working people' and 'guides the activities' of other party bodies, institutions and enterprises (Rule 35).⁸

The CC also has great importance because it formally 'elects' the party's top leadership, the Politburo and Secretariat, and also the General Secretary (Rule 38). Entry into the top layer of the party hierarchy has in reality involved a large element of co-option; 'election' took on a new meaning in some spheres of Soviet politics in 1989, but even then this was not the situation at the top of the party. All the same, the influence of the CC really can be decisive. Khrushchev, in 1957, successfully appealed to the CC against a hostile Presidium (Politburo), but in 1964 it was the CC that confirmed his resignation. Gorbachev, in March 1985, was elected by the CC, but in turn it was a CC substantially inherited from the Brezhnev years, and later it would limit his ability to advance the process of *perestroika*.

⁴ *Kommunist*, no. 13 (1988), p. 11.

⁵ *Pravda*, 8 May 1989, p. 3; 11 June 1989, p. 4.

⁶ *Pravda*, 26 May 1989, p. 4.

⁷ *Pravda*, 31 March 1989, p. 2.

⁸ A new development here is the election of 139 CC members to be People's Deputies of the USSR (*narodnye deputaty SSSR*) (*Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, no. 10, pp. 104-5).

Crucial to the present authors' research is another important aspect of the CC: it has included the senior members of the Soviet elite, Politburo members, CC secretaries, regional party chiefs, ministers and other senior central and regional state officials, senior diplomats and military men.

Members are not in the elite because they are in the CC; they generally become CC members because they *already* hold elite posts. One shortcoming of the CC as a measure of the elite is that it has been renewed only at intervals of about five years (since 1952). Under the party *Rules* as they stood in the mid-1980s, the CC was elected by the Party Congress. Vacancies that arose among CC full members could be filled only by promoting (non-voting) candidate members; there was no mechanism for introducing new members between congresses.⁹

In effect the CC elected by the Party Congress has provided a 'snapshot' of the elite, but this picture has become progressively less accurate as appointments in the Soviet working elite have led to new people, outside the CC, entering key jobs. Under the party *Rules* such new members of the elite have had no opportunity to enter the CC until the next Party Congress. Likewise officials who had been replaced in their party or state jobs have normally remained members of the CC until the following congress; these have been called 'dead souls', individuals whose demotions since a congress made their CC status no longer appropriate.¹⁰ This has been a problem for students of Soviet politics. It has been even more of a problem for Soviet reformers.

Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the CPSU CC in March 1985, and ideas of reform and renewal were influential in the 27th Party Congress which took place a year later. The congress duly produced a CC in which there had been substantial turnover, certainly in contrast to the last two congresses of the Brezhnev era (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 *Renewal of CC Membership at the 25th–27th Congresses*

	1976		1981		1986	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
New full members	40	9	45	10	101	21
Promoted candidate members	46	11	44	9	33	7
New candidate members	70	16	90	19	115	24
Total 'new'	156	37	179	38	249	52
Total CC	426	100	470	100	477	100

⁹ The terms 'full members' and 'candidate members' are used for the Russian terms *chleny* and *kandidaty v chleny* respectively; the term 'members' refers to both.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Teague, "Dead Souls" in the Central Committee, RL 17/87, *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin*, no. 2(3415), 14 January 1987. The idea of 'dead souls' is, of course, originally based on Gogol's 1842 novel of the same name; the hero tries to make his fortune by mortgaging dead 'souls', male serfs who had died since the previous census but who were formally liable to tax until the next one.

TABLE 2 *Old and New CC Members, March 1986, by Sector*

	Old members		New members		All members	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Central party	23	10	20	8	43	9
Central state	54	24	48	19	102	21
Regional party	62	27	85	34	147	31
Regional state	16	7	20	8	36	8
Military	19	8	17	7	36	8
Foreign affairs	17	7	7	3	24	5
Workers/managers	11	5	32	13	43	9
Other	26	11	20	8	46	10
Total	228	100	249	100	477	100

Renewal affected different types of members in different ways (see Table 2). The two most notable contrasts between old and new members in 1986 were the relatively greater weight among new members of regional party officials (mainly *oblast'* committee first secretaries) and of men and women who were 'representative' workers, collective farmers or industrial managers. (Two contrasting representatives of the latter group are the General Director of the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical *Kombinat*, Ivan Romazan, and a 36-year-old (ethnic German) state-farm machine operator, Natal'ia Gellert.) However, it must be said that overall there was no drastic change in the profile of CC personnel in 1986.

The problem for Gorbachev was that, given existing party practice, he then had no apparent alternative but to work with this CC for the next five years, *perestroika* or no. This is where the issue of 'dead souls' arose, and it was presumably one of the reasons why Gorbachev proposed at the January 1987 CC plenum to convene an All-Union Party Conference, the first such gathering since February 1941. Expanding upon the purposes of such a conference at a further plenum in June 1987, Gorbachev noted that conferences had met much more frequently in the past and that they had often decided questions that were far from tactical. Some had even considered changes in the party's *Rules* and in the composition of leading bodies.¹¹ The Conference, in the event, made no such changes, although it did make provision for drastic changes in personnel selection in future.

There was no precedent for the next development: a mass resignation from the CC of ninety-eight full members and candidate members, which took place at a CC plenum on 25 April 1989.¹² This was based to a large extent on the advanced age of those who

¹¹ M. S. Gorbachev, *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Izd. politicheskoi literatury, 1988), p. 156.

At the little-studied 18th Party Conference (February 1941) six full members and fifteen candidate members were dismissed from the CC (and a number of members were warned of possible expulsion). Six new full members and seventeen candidate members were elected; two of the new full members (M. A. Suslov and O. V. Kuusinen) and all of the new candidates had not been elected to the CC at the 18th Congress two years before. The CC elected in February 1939 comprised only seventy-one members and sixty-eight candidates so these changes were, in percentage terms, substantial. See *Rezoliutsii XVIII vsesoiuznoi konferentsii VKP(b)* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1941), pp. 21-2.

²¹ Four other members had been dismissed between March 1986 and April 1989.

TABLE 3 *Changes at the April 1989 Plenum*

	Whole CC 1976		Retiring CC April 1989		New full members April 1989	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Central party	43	9	12	12	1	4
Central state	102	21	26	27	1	4
Regional party	147	31	27	28	4	17
Regional state	36	8	9	9	2	8
Military	36	8	11	11	1	4
Foreign affairs	24	5	4	4	1	4
Workers/managers	43	9	1	1	10	42
Other	46	10	8	8	4	17
Total	477	100	98	100	24	100

resigned. General Secretary Gorbachev stressed in his speech that on the eve of the plenum eighty-three full members and twenty-seven candidate members were already retired (*'na pensii'*) from their other party or state posts, and the same point was made in the joint letter (*obrashchenie*) of the members who expressed a wish to resign.¹³ At the same plenum twenty-four candidate members were promoted to full-member status.

The most notable trend in the resignations (see Table 3) was the relatively high rate of resignations among state officials (primarily USSR-level ministers). The low relative decline of regional party officials perhaps reflected earlier turnover at the time of the 1986 congress. The most remarkable feature of the promotions was the relatively large number of workers and managers, reflecting the current political agenda of *perestroika* (the four promotions in the 'other' category were all full members of the USSR Academy of Sciences).

The final result of renewal has been considerable, and as the CC may serve as a political ratifier of *perestroika* or even of the present General Secretary, it is particularly important to examine the proportion of new personnel among *voting* (i.e. full) members after the April 1989 plenum (see Table 4).

Personnel renewal, as Table 4 makes clear, has had a major impact. Some 60 per cent of CC full members have assumed full membership in the last three years – at the 1986 congress, in promotions between 1986 and 1989 or in the group promotion of April 1989.¹⁴ The proportion of new full members is especially strong among regional party officials, and the growing weight of workers and managers is an interesting new development.

¹³ *Pravda*, 26 April 1989, p. 1. The *obrashchenie* was signed by 110 people: ninety-eight CC members, plus twelve members of the Central Revision Commission. However, those who resigned from the CC and the CRC did not include all people who were already retired from their other party or state posts; some retired officials evidently decided to stay on in the CC or the CRC.

¹⁴ Seven candidates were promoted to full member status between the 27th Congress and the April 1989 plenum.

The situation changed little at CC level after April; full membership as of October 1989 was 249; this reflected a further promotion from candidate to full member at the September 1989 plenum and several deaths (*Izvestiia Tsk KPSS*, 1989, no. 10, pp. 104–5).

TABLE 4 *CC Full Members, by Sector, after the April 1989 Plenum*

	New full members	All full members	New members (%)
Central party	16	26	62
Central state	28	58	48
Regional party	42	58	72
Regional state	9	14	64
Military	9	15	60
Foreign affairs	6	20	30
Workers/managers	28	37	76
Other	14	25	56
Total	152	253	60

The process of change, however, has not been as rapid as it might have been. At the 1986 Congress eighty-three members continued from the previous CC who would in fact 'resign' from the committee three years later. At the 19th Party Conference in 1988 Gorbachev was not able to achieve the promotions and demotions he had evidently intended. At the April 1989 plenum, notwithstanding the unprecedented number of resignations, no additional members were appointed.¹⁵ On the other hand, the June 1988 conference did approve a resolution on political reform which provided for the replacement of up to 20 per cent of the membership of the CC and other party bodies between the congresses or conferences.¹⁶ The September 1989 CC plenum resolved that the next (28th) Party Congress would be held in October 1990, some months earlier than normally due; the March 1990 CC plenum advanced this to July.¹⁷ Between the spring of 1989 and October 1989 a further twenty-six full members and fourteen candidate members retired from their party or state posts – creating forty more 'dead souls'.¹⁸ The forthcoming congress was likely to provide Gorbachev with an opportunity to make still more far-reaching changes in the Soviet 'electorate' than those he had so far been able to achieve. It would also expose to a still more searching scrutiny his assumption that the qualities of leadership were a decisive factor in the achievement of *perestroika*.

¹⁵ As of this date six republic-level first secretaries and eighty-eight regional first secretaries were not members of the CC (*Pravda*, 27 April 1989, p. 3).

In September 1989, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* (1989, no. 9, pp. 51–85) gave biographical details of regional leaders who were not CC members. These included six first secretaries at republic level (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania and Uzbekistan) out of a total of fourteen. Also not on the CC were eighty-seven first secretaries at *krai* and *oblast* level – out of a total of 144 – and all ten first secretaries at *okrug* level.

For a recent critical survey of the pace of change in the CC see V. Sazonov, 'TsK KPSS i perestroika', *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 5 (1990), p. 6.

¹⁶ *XIX vsesoiuznaia konferentsiia KPSS: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988), vol. 2, p. 143. For further discussion of the party rules and the importance of changes in them see Graeme Gill, *The Rules of the CPSU* (London: Macmillan, 1988) and Stephen White, *Soviet Communism: Programme and Rules* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁷ *Pravda*, 20 September 1989, p. 1, and 17 March 1990, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, no. 10, p. 107.