

IN SOVIET, CHANGE STRUGGLES TO EMERGE

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Mikhail S. Gorbachev's calls for liberalized debate and limited elections have chipped away a layer of fear, allowing the Soviet people to say in public much of what they used to say only around their kitchen tables.

The paradox is that increased freedom to criticize has been dictated from above. Historians, journalists, playwrights and others take their cues from Mr. Gorbachev's speeches and the official press, and people still instinctively feel the limits. An Explosion of Discussion

The Soviet leader's efforts have unleashed a burst of discussion on the economy, a breath of candor on social problems and a rash of unorthodox notions on politics. They have led to experimental elections in many work places and some low-level Communist Party committees.

But the policy of "glasnost," or increased openness, has not yet been translated into political change, for the society is still burdened by the weight of an authoritarian history that has endured through the centuries, from czarist times to Communist rule. As Mr. Gorbachev prepares for his Moscow summit meeting with President Reagan three weeks from now, the hierarchy of power emanating from the Kremlin remains firmly intact. 'Very Difficult to Change the Average'

"Things are changing even faster than expected," said Mikhail Gilula, a laboratory chief at a computer institute in the small city of Pereslavl, 85 miles north of Moscow, where limited elections were held recently. "In the political sphere, some choice is better than no choice. But it's very difficult to change something in people's minds. It's very difficult to change the average - that we know from mathematics."

Democracy is a truly alien culture here. Mr. Gorbachev has presented only a sketchy set of ideas bearing scant resemblance to Western concepts. And although some Russians have embraced elections with alacrity, few seem to conceive of the process as giving voice to interest groups or to a competition of ideas.

Despite Mr. Gorbachev's repeated speeches advocating multiple candidates and secret ballots, the notion of an overt contest between individual candidates causes discomfort to some Russians who prefer consensus to competition; many see nothing wrong with fielding precisely the number of candidates that there are seats to be filled, and then voting for them unanimously.

Others also find the secret ballot unsavory and regard a public show of hands as somehow more honest and conducive to bolstering the collectivist ethic.

Consequently, the elections held so far - at work places, in schools, in Komsomol committees and in some local Communist Party organizations - have been strange hybrids of openness, authoritarianism and flawed procedures, which illuminate the ambivalence many Soviet citizens seem to feel as they step gingerly into uncharted territory.

The scope of debate is also an issue. Many Russians, especially the intellectual elite, have displayed an exultant fascination in suddenly being able to explore a much broader landscape of ideas than before.

But others express profound distress in seeing old icons of belief destroyed in what seems to them a nihilistic spirit of criticism. *An Enchantment of Ideas, But a Lack of Variety*

The outcome of this struggle is far from certain, for it is being waged in the minds of a people who, while enchanted by ideas, have known no political pluralism. Many have been lulled by the certainty of control from the top and are often slow to pick up even the modicum of freedom they now get. Some people candidly describe themselves as "illiterate" in the ways of democracy.

"It is impossible to become a literate person all at once - it takes time," said Sergei Amelin, a 28-year-old member of the Pereslavl City Communist Party Committee. "People are still afraid," he said disapprovingly, and even

when invited to elect a local party official or a manager at work, "They ask questions of the type, 'Has it got approval at the top?' "

Mr. Amelin seems to be Mr. Gorbachev's kind of party official, and his city is laden with symbols of the overlapping impulses that now compete in Soviet society.

The old onion domes, walled monasteries and sagging wooden houses of Pereslavl, founded in 1152 by Prince Yuri Dolgoruky of Vladimir, convey the continuity of culture. The political atmosphere, however, has a certain freshness and excitement.

Mr. Amelin is enthusiastic and well-liked, not revolutionary but restless with a puritanical idealism and a touch of political irreverence, ready to trust the people and anxious to elevate them, at least within the existing structure of control. He has run one relatively open election here, in the city's committee of Komsomol, the Communist Youth League, and has taken part in another at the computer institute, where he works.

He says frankly that elections in the Communist Party itself are "absolutely necessary" to change a system that "doesn't allow people to display their best qualities."

"That's why the image of the party functionary is a person without a soul who strictly follows the party line," he said.

Mr. Amelin is such an avid supporter of glasnost that he is able to say, in a discussion with Komsomol leaders: "I am very unhappy that in three years I haven't heard a single word of criticism of Gorbachev. That reminds me of the Brezhnev era. Everyone should be subject to criticism."

Few other party officials agree; Mr. Gorbachev is one of the subjects that lie outside the widening circle of permitted debate. Lenin Remains Off Limits In Critical Discussions

Also off limits to critical discussion are Lenin, the virtues of socialism, political disagreements in the Politburo and current foreign policy. It is just as unthinkable today to publish criticism of the decision to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan as it was a year ago to criticize their presence there.

Since Mr. Gorbachev became Communist Party leader in March 1985, the areas of public criticism have broadened, beginning with newspaper articles and television programs on official corruption and alcoholism, then moving to drugs, prostitution, police brutality, crime statistics, homelessness, teenage runaways and other forbidden topics.

Beginning in 1987, a competition of ideas began to emerge, which now includes debates over economic policies, how to select delegates to the Communist Party conference in June and how much the power of local soviets, or nominal legislatures, should grow.

Mr. Gorbachev has also written a second, and more thorough, chapter of de-Stalinization than Nikita S. Khrushchev did in 1956. Russians have been stunned and sometimes disoriented by the ruthless honesty of the recent revelations, which have even included first-person accounts of arrest and famine and estimates of the millions who were executed and the millions more who died of starvation in the wake of collectivization.

In many cases, this reassessment of history leads to a reassessment of self, shaking loose the system of authority and belief that has instilled political discipline.

A dramatic example was a confession sent by a former secret police investigator to the weekly magazine Ogonyok. The letter was not published, an editor said, because it was signed only with the initials "K. A." The investigator wrote that he was withholding his name because "my children do not know the entire truth about my life."

"I am afraid to be shamed in their eyes," he said. "I would have preferred to be tried and sentenced, and maybe that's the way my life should have ended."

He was just 26 when he started working for the N.K.V.D., the predecessor of the K.G.B., in a small town in the south. "It sounds wild and terrible," he wrote, "but we had a certain quota of enemies of the people to fulfill."

His first target was the first secretary of the local Communist Party, who refused to confess until a tin can containing a live rat was placed upside down on his stomach.

"Fifty years have passed, but I can see this man as if it happened yesterday," K.A. wrote. "His smashed, swollen lips moving with difficulty,

he says, 'The time will come and you will be cursed by the people.' I explode with anger. 'I will be recommended for a decoration, an order for you, but you, dirty snake, won't even have a grave of your own.' "

"People, can you forgive me?" the investigator continued. "I really thought that I was carrying out my duty and that all means were acceptable in the struggle with the treacherous enemies. I trusted the wise leader, Comrade Stalin.

"But now the people in the cases I investigated visit me at night, and instead of fear in their eyes I see that they despise me. How can I tell these people I tortured, how can I explain that my damned life was a tragedy, too?"

And how does the sudden self-examination affect the everyday patterns of power and politics?

It has not led to a basic shift, and may not. But some Russians say they now feel slightly less intimidated by authority figures and are more willing to speak up. When Scientists Meet, It Could Be More Than Math

That feeling of less intimidation was evident one recent morning as the newly elected Scientific Soviet, comprising 29 computer scientists and mathematicians, gathered for its first meeting at the Institute of Programming Systems in Pereslavl. The session was also open to other employees, and about 70 people filled the rows of chairs.

The institute, in a few blue wooden buildings in a birch grove, was founded four years ago to create computer programs for schools, industry and other enterprises. It is run by the Academy of Sciences, but its driving force is its founder and director, Prof. Alfred K. Ailamazyan, an energetic man of 51 with close-cropped gray hair, who was standing at the front of the room.

He began by announcing that the Academy of Sciences had approved the soviet, or council, that had been elected from 56 candidates in March. His own election in January as director, in which he ran unopposed, had also been approved by the academy. This power of superiors to accept or reject the election results is integral to keeping the process in check, and it has led to unpleasant results.

In several cases, factory directors elected by their workers have been rejected by the Government ministries that oversee the plants. Or, the

ministries have used their considerable leverage to make life miserable for the unwanted director and the entire factory.

Not long ago, a ministry official said, when workers in a Kiev factory nominated a candidate the ministry did not find pliable enough, officials from Moscow went for a long talk with the man, after which he said he felt himself to be unqualified and withdrew.

Professor Ailamazyan's institute has no such difficulty, but he opened his remarks by emphasizing to the scientific council that it had only an advisory role and no managerial responsibilities. The meeting lasted most of the day, with heads of laboratories reporting on their work and Mr. Ailamazyan presiding as the avuncular, cajoling mentor to his staff, whose average age is 29.

Still, he had to listen to sharp criticism for some of his own failures, including poor distribution of an inadequate supply of personal computers. In return, he scolded them good-naturedly. There was a good give and take, a lot of laughter.

Mr. Ailamazyan is clearly in command, and despite his pride in running an open establishment that encourages candor and individual responsibility, he simply exuded too much seniority and authority to invite a challenge to his election, some of his employees explained. Nobody wanted to oppose a man who was respected as their teacher.

Nor did the electoral process seem to have diminished his own sense of power, even to choose a successor. "In five years, when I stand for re-election," he said, "I think my colleagues will be mature enough and there will be another candidate. One of my tasks is to create such a person."

Thus, the embryonic democratic process at the institute reflected the society's wider inhibitions.

The workers' councils being elected have such vague roles that they do not yet seem to have generated much confidence that they can become vehicles for employees' demands. Mr. Gorbachev's purpose, especially in promoting the election of directors, is to engage people in a sense of participation, hoping that they will break out of the numbing sense of powerlessness and feel a stake in the performance of their enterprises. Open or Secret Ballot: The Choice Is Tough

As Russians feel their way tentatively into this process, they find themselves debating the most basic elements of democracy.

"I think an open vote is preferable," said Professor Ailamazyan, whose election was conducted by secret ballot. "If you want to have real democracy and citizen responsibility, why should I hide my point of view?"

"I prefer a secret ballot," Mr. Amelin countered.

Nor does the concept of universal suffrage always overcome the class consciousness that permeates Soviet society. "It's not a good idea that everybody has a vote," said Aleksei Stolboushkin, a 29-year-old mathematician, speaking of the elections for institute director. "It should be only those with Ph.D.'s," he said, not clerks and secretaries.

A linguist in Moscow had a similar sentiment, turning up her nose at the notion that "ordinary workers" could make intelligent choices at the ballot box.

Mr. Gorbachev spoke plainly in April about this "disrespect for the people" that he said lay behind the resistance to his program, "the disbelief in their wisdom, their patriotism, their common sense and abilities, the disbelief in their sense of responsibility and their fidelity to socialism."

One problem is the terminology. The word for elections in Russian is "vybory," which also means "choices." But Russians have been having "elections" without choices for decades - ceremonies in which a single candidate for each position is put forward by higher authority and elected unanimously.

Furthermore, people at the middle levels long ago developed the fine art of performing charades for the benefit of their superiors, and many may arrange to hold power by holding old-style "elections" in which there is only one viable candidate.

At a Moscow institute that studies ways of prolonging the life of agricultural machinery, Galina V. Kozhevnikova was nominated by the party committee and the departing first secretary to be the next first secretary. A multicandidate election was not planned.

However, she explained, blushing, "The director of our institute, a man of a solid age and a serious view, was not sure that a woman was able to occupy

such a post." He pressed for a male candidate, Anatoly Novikov, a laboratory chief.

To cast a vote, each committee member had to take his ballot and cross out the name of the candidate he did not want.

"My competitor and I sat side by side, deciding how we should vote," Miss Kozhevnikova said, "and we decided that each of us should cross out himself, in order not to influence the result." She smiled humbly, which she could afford to do. She won, 123 to 81.

In Pereslavl, Mr. Amelin, who was first secretary of the city Komsomol committee, ran a highly competitive election last year to replace his deputy, the second secretary, who left to become editor of a local newspaper.

To get permission for the election, Mr. Amelin applied to the Communist Party committee of the city, which then asked the party committee of the oblast, or county. "They replied, 'Well, it's the fad now. Let them try it,' " he recalled.

Each Komsomol cell was invited to nominate a candidate, he explained, and each candidate then had to submit a program to the 13-member political bureau of the city Komsomol committee. The political bureau chose three of seven candidates to run. "All the rest had the right to continue," Mr. Amelin said, "but they didn't want to because they thought they wouldn't succeed."

One of the three dropped out after becoming chairman of a collective farm, and so it came down to a two-man race.

Andrei Sukin, who worked in a local museum, offered an exciting array of ideas for hobby clubs, a lighted ski track and a sports center to revitalize the Komsomol, which has lost much of its appeal during Mr. Gorbachev's liberalization. In Pereslavl, officials said, only 60 percent of 14- and 15-year-olds join, down from 95 percent or more a few years ago.

Mr. Sukin's rival was a Komsomol functionary, Leonid Sobolev, who proposed a program of increased discipline to improve political schooling, to require members to attend meetings and to get them to pay dues.

As the candidates visited Komsomol cells to campaign, Mr. Amelin was glad to see that Mr. Sukin, the innovative museum worker, was the favorite.

Sure that Mr. Sukin would win, Mr. Amelin held himself back from trying to influence the outcome.

But not all Komsomol members were entitled to vote; only the 51 members of the city Komsomol committee could cast ballots. Mr. Sobolev, the functionary, won by one vote.

A lot of people changed their minds at the last minute, Mr. Amelin said, perhaps because they were more comfortable with an insider, perhaps because of a shrewd skepticism about a candidate's grand promises.

"Before, it happened that many things that were promised were not fulfilled," Mr. Amelin said. **When the Party Line Is More Than the Party Line**

The Communist Party, which monopolizes political power and includes only about 6 percent of the population, has been slower than Komsomol and places of employment to follow Mr. Gorbachev's call for internal democracy, which he first made in a speech to the Central Committee in January 1987.

Nevertheless, some officials say that the atmosphere of "democratization," as they call it, has made them more sensitive to underlings' attitudes.

"For many years we were educated in an authoritarian system, and it was much easier," said Sergei A. Potapov, second secretary of the party committee in the Volgograd district of Moscow. "We could invite the secretaries of party organizations and say, 'You have to act this way.'

"The effects were instantaneous, but the results were negative," Mr. Potapov said. "Now we have to find ways to convince people. This way is more difficult, but the results are better."

Mr. Gorbachev is not proposing that other political parties arise to compete with the Communist Party, of course, and the subject is not considered fit for public discussion in the official press, only in some of the dozens of typescript journals issued by the array of informal political groups that have blossomed in the era of glasnost.

Valentin B. Yumashev, the letters editor of the free-wheeling official weekly *Ogonyok* said, "We get letters suggesting a multiparty system, but we haven't been able to publish them."

One such letter came recently from N. N. Myagkov, an engineer in the Byelorussian city of Gomel, who argued that Lenin once approved the idea of other parties. Mr. Myagkov wrote: "Suppose, in the present, there are just different kinds of Marxist-Leninist parties, like a Workers' Party, a Socialist Party, a Communist Party. The democratic foundations of the society won't shrink after that, and our Communist ideals won't weaken, but rather vice versa."

Not only liberals benefit from glasnost. So do conservatives, who have formed Russian nationalist and other rightist organizations to preach Russian purity, intolerance and sometimes anti-Semitism.

"There are many cases in which conservative elements use the elections to take away everything that doesn't please them," said Roy Medvedev, a Soviet historian.

The Union of Cinematographers, for example, wanted to liberalize the leadership of an institute that teaches film making. But the effort backfired, Mr. Medvedev said: "They gathered the professors and instructors, who elected an old-fashioned person worse than the one before."

The secondary-school curriculum has also remained relatively immune to the changes, according to a variety of parents, teachers and children. History textbooks are outdated, new ones have not been published and some teachers and students are confused.

A mother in Moscow recently said that in her daughter's 10th grade history class, a student asked the teacher, "How should I answer the question - according to the textbook or according to the newspaper?"

"Keep close to the textbook," the teacher replied. "In one class a boy answered according to the newspaper, and it sounded so terrible." At Vocational School No. 6, A Lesson in Democracy

A group of teen-agers who were elected to the student soviet of Vocational School No. 6 in Pereslavl listened with fascination and bewilderment as an American visitor asked why they did not nominate more candidates than they had seats to fill.

"Each group nominates one person for each position," said Olga Migachova, 16. A show of hands usually produces unanimity.

"Do you think that's a good way to do it?" the youngsters were asked by the visitor. "Or do you think there should be more candidates than there are places on the soviet so the students have a choice?"

The teen-agers giggled nervously. "That's a difficult question," said Mikhail Pinigin, 16. "Like, for 40 places, 60 candidates?" He and the other youngsters looked puzzled.

The visitor explained: "Let's say, for example, there were four people who were nominated and you could send only two to the soviet." Would that have been a better system or too complicated?"

"It would have been better to send four," Mikhail replied. "No," the visitor explained again, "to send two, but to elect from four. Whoever gets the most votes."

Laughter broke out over the novel idea. Smiling, Mikhail asked, "So all four wouldn't get the same number of votes? So whoever got the most number of votes would win?"

"Right," said the visitor. The youngsters paused.

"Well, that strikes me as also good," Mikhail conceded.

"We are studying, studying," said the school principal, Konstantin G. Malyshev. "We have to teach the children democracy." NEXT: On a Soviet farm, opposition to perestroika.