

# Soviets brawl before June party meeting

by Konstantin George

On June 28, the first "All-Union Party Conference" since the spring of 1941 is to be held in the Soviet Union, and yet, as Soviet television reported on May 6, the election of delegates has not even begun. The daily *Izvestia* said April 30, "The party conference is essentially already under way," an allusion to the brawl raging within the Soviet leadership. It portends dramatic shifts in policy and personnel that cannot be predicted with certainty.

In March, the Soviet media reported that "during April and May," the election of delegates would occur. As of May 6, nothing had happened, and based on the reporting in the Soviet press through May 9, the delegation selection process had still not begun.

The failure to even begin selecting delegates underscores the brawls of April, when an unprecedented series of three Soviet Central Committee "mini-plenums" took place in Moscow April 11, 14, and 18. As TASS reported on April 20, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov met with party leaders of all "republics, regions (oblast) and territories (krai)." The term "mini-plenum" is a precise description. Present at such meetings would have been some 120-130 Central Committee members, i.e., more than one-third of its membership. That there were bitter fights at these meetings was clear from the terse TASS dispatch, calling them "an exchange of views" on "preparations for the All-Union Party Conference."

It is precisely in the "republics, regions, and territories," that the bulk of delegate elections was supposed to be going on.

The pre-conference deadlock forms the immediate background to the latest wave of "letters" to *Pravda*, "letters" which have introduced the theme that the June conference must conduct a massive purge in the leadership. There is a lot of ridiculous speculation in Western newspapers that these letters somehow prove that Gorbachov is preparing to wipe out his foes. They are missing the point. The "letters" definitely indicate a purge in the making, but all bets are off concerning personalities.

The "letters" are constructed in such a manner that they can be interpreted any way one chooses. The best example was an ostensibly "pro-Gorbachov" letter, demanding a thorough purge of the bulk of those Central Committee members elected in 1976 or earlier. That definition, "1976 or earlier," could just as easily apply to Gorbachov himself or any other Soviet leader whose membership pre-dates the 1981 Party Congress.

One sign of changing policy directions occurred in the military. Gen. Col. Dmitri A. Volkogonov, who exemplified the *glasnost* current in the military, as the author of a forthcoming book denouncing the crimes of Stalin, has been quietly downgraded. Volkogonov, 60, was ousted from his post of deputy chief of the military's Main Political Directorate (MPD) in February, and placed in a dead-end slot at the Institute for Military History. His demotion was engineered by the MPD's chief, General of the Army A.D. Lizichev, who leaped ahead of Volkogonov in 1985, when he succeeded the MPD's then aging head, Alexander Yepishev, straight from a field assignment. Lizichev has now consolidated his team, by replacing Volkogonov with Gen. Lt. G.A. Stefanovsky, who from July 1985 to February 1988, was chief political officer for the Turkestan Military District. Volkogonov will continue to be heard, in the Soviet civilian press, as seen from his interview in *Izvestia* at the end of April. Even amid *Izvestia's* praise, however, his demotion could not be concealed. He ruefully admitted, "Yes, I have opponents."

## The economic crisis

Underlying the frictions within the leadership is the story of what is happening in the Soviet economy. There is ample evidence that the effects of the economic catastrophe in the Eastern European satellites are spilling over into the U.S.S.R. Shortages of food and other vital consumer items have grown more severe.

In a May 7 speech to editors, Gorbachov said that food shortages were a pressing problem for the U.S.S.R., which required "cardinal measures." The Politburo meeting of May 5, according to its published minutes, found "the existing state of affairs in the provision of food to the population in particular regions of the country to be inadmissible," and "deemed it essential" that measures be taken in each area "to improve the supply to the population of all kinds of food products."

The Soviet media have begun to link the shortages to the overthrow of a general secretary. A May 6 letter to *Izvestia* from a "Comrade Karlov" in the city of Kuibyshev, warned that it was a combination of real and contrived food shortages that led to the fall of Nikita Khrushchov in 1964. The letter called those shortages "similar" to those now occurring. The "reader" demanded the removal of "braking forces from key positions" in the party leadership, to prevent a similar fate from befalling Gorbachov. "Passivity and tolerance" could set off a "catastrophe," engineered by the "opponents of reform."

"Of course," there were "objective causes" as well, including the 1964 wheat harvest failure, but there was also "economic sabotage." "Suddenly," goods became scarce, with the aim of discrediting the general secretary. In 1964, the "dark forces" were successful. One week after Khrushchov fell, the "shelves in the shops were again full."