

Gorbachov's 'glasnost' bites the dust

by Konstantin George

On Oct. 13, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov presided over a meeting of the Politburo, Central Committee secretaries, and leaders of the mass media, at which he read the riot act to the media, and thereby proclaimed the end of *glasnost* ("openness") in the Soviet Union.

Gorbachov branded four people as constituting "a power-seeking fascist clique": Boris Yeltsin, who heads the populist-fascist "inter-regional group" of deputies in the parliament; Gavril Popov, a deputy belonging to Yeltsin's group; Yuri Afanasyev, an anti-Stalin historian; and "liberal" economist Nikolai Shmelyov. Those publications and their chief editors most identified as the proponents of *glasnost* in the media, were subjected to scathing attacks. The chief editor of the weekly *Ogonyok*, Vitali Korotych, was accused of violating party discipline, by publishing "ultra-radical" demands and criticisms. Gorbachov singled out Vladislav Starkov, editor of the weekly *Argumenty i Fakti*, who had dared to print an article stating that, on the basis of readers' letters, the most popular Soviet deputy was physicist Andrei Sakharov. Gorbachov didn't stop there. He demanded that all readers' letters held by *Argumenty i Fakti*, which had criticized him, be turned over to him personally. The staff of the Moscow party youth newspaper, *Moskovsky Komsomollets*, was denounced as "a nest of anti-party organizations"; the U.S.S.R. party youth paper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, as producing "incomprehensible rubbish"; even the Soviet government newspaper, *Izvestia*, was not spared.

Crackdown on the Stalin model

Gorbachov is copying the method employed by Josef Stalin in the late 1920s and early 1930s, to play off opposition groupings against one another in order to crush them, one by one. This policy has emerged clearly since the Sept. 19-20 Central Committee Plenum, at which Gorbachov removed a major bloc of Politburo opponents, including internal security czar Viktor Chebrikov, and packed the Central Committee Secretariat with four new figures totally loyal to himself. Contrary to Western press commentaries, the removal of Chebrikov was no "victory for the liberals"; it cleared the way for Gorbachov to publicly adopt Chebrikov's own tough posture.

The group now on the chopping block is that around Boris Yeltsin, Russia's would-be Mussolini. As recently as September, Yeltsin had been portrayed positively on Soviet television, shown returning from his trip to America, distributing to Moscow hospitals the disposable syringes he had procured with royalties from his U.S. speeches. That was before the Chebrikov group was eliminated.

But shortly before the Central Committee Plenum, Soviet TV began the demolition of Yeltsin, by showing him delivering a speech in America. There was no commentary; none was needed. The footage clearly showed a totally inebriated drunkard. On Oct. 16, the full storm of ridicule broke over Yeltsin's head, as Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin addressed the Supreme Soviet to deliver a report on the "strange behavior" of Comrade Yeltsin who, on Sept. 28, had turned up at a police station soaked to the skin, and claimed that he was the victim of an "assassination attempt." He said he had been thrown into a car, taken to a bridge, and forced to jump into the Moscow River. Then, Bakatin reported, after Yeltsin was told that his story was impossible, since no one could survive a 15-meter fall into a 1.5-meter deep river without serious injuries, Yeltsin said that he had only been "joking." Gorbachov demanded an "explanation."

These factional developments are but one aspect of the shift under way. On Oct. 16, the Soviet parliament passed a law heralding a crackdown on the U.S.S.R.'s 100,000 private cooperatives. The law includes strict price controls on what the cooperatives sell, giving local authorities the power to set prices for all essential goods. Profits made from "excessive" prices must be paid back to the state, along with very high fines. All cooperatives are now subjected to regular inspection by tax and banking authorities, and all those holding responsible positions in state enterprises and organizations are barred from setting up or joining cooperatives. Cooperatives may continue to import Western goods, but the prices charged must be the same as those charged by state-run outlets.

The cooperatives employ more than 2 million people, and have played a useful role in absorbing the segment of the labor force discarded under *perestroika*. Now, they will play a useful political role, becoming the internal "enemy image" that the *kulaks*, or rich peasants and traders, were in the late 1920s. That is why Gorbachov has not banned them outright. Politically, it's much more useful to blame shortages and misery on "greedy" cooperative owners, and to stage show trials of the culprits.

That such show trials are on the agenda, was confirmed by an Oct. 17 Radio Moscow interview with KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov, freshly promoted to the Politburo at the September Plenum. Kryuchkov announced that one of the KGB's main tasks is to go after "corruption" and "excesses" in "joint ventures [with Western firms] and cooperatives, which are often used by people for their own selfish ends."