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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

The Soviet Leadership: The Winners and the Losers

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3 August 1967
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 August 1967

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 6-67

SUBJECT: The Soviet Leadership: The Winners and the Losers*

NOTE

There has been more political maneuvering within the Soviet leadership in recent months than there has been for quite some time. To make matters more interesting, some of it has apparently been associated with Soviet policy toward the Middle East. Western press accounts have suggested in this connection that there was a contest last month between the Moscow Hawks and the Moscow Doves and that the Doves won. This memorandum, after reviewing events, deals in part with that possibility and in part with the whole question of stability at the top in the USSR. Its principal conclusions are:

a. There has been a strong (and successful) move against a group apparently headed by Politburo member Shelepin;

b. Matters of policy, including Middle Eastern policy, have unquestionably been involved;

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c. But a clear cut distinction between doves and hawks should not be made, in part because there is nothing very dovish about Brezhnev, who is probably the principal beneficiary of Shelepin's defeat;

d. All this activity may stir things up and there may be further major personnel changes -- relations between Brezhnev and Kosygin may be strained -- but specific predictions in this area simply cannot now be made.

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> "It has been noted that a series of the thought-provoking changes in personnel have taken place recently in the Soviet Union ... These dismissals show that the internal conflicts within the Soviet revisionist ruling clique are becoming increasingly acute." -- Peking Radio, 30 June 1967

1. As suggested by this interesting passage from Peking, the question of the moment about Soviet domestic politics is whether the post-Khrushchev leadership -- after almost three years of publicly unblemished collectivity -- is beginning to fall apart. There have been signs aplenty that this is indeed what is now taking place, including indications of factional maneuvering among leading figures and hints of serious high level disagreements over important national policies.

The Losers

2. The strongest suggestion of unusually severe political infighting at the top has come from a series of recent personnel shifts -- demotions, transfers, and rumors of more to come --

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involving men who seem to have been gathered around Aleksandr Shelepin, a forceful, ambitious, and once very powerful member of the CPSU Politburo and Secretariat.*

-- In May, the head of the Soviet secret police, Vladimir Semichastny, was suddenly removed from his job and from Moscow. (He now serves in Kiev as a deputy premier of the Ukraine.) Semichastny may not have been a very good KGB chief, but his removal was surely the consequence of more than mere discontent with his performance in grade. In any case, Semichastny, [redacted] 25X6 25X6 [redacted] has also had a long and close relationship with Shelepin.

-- In June, another well known party militant, Nikolai Yegorychev, was summarily dismissed from his sensitive and important job as chairman of the Moscow City party committee.

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* Shelepin, whose political fortunes seem to have been on the wane since late in 1965, may have made a bid for top power in the summer of that year and been blocked by most of the other members of the collective. At that time, Shelepin (then 47) was a member of the Presidium, the Secretariat, and the Council of Ministers, and was also Chairman of the Party-State Control Commission. He was widely considered a leading ultimate contender for the First Secretaryship. He had extensive experience in the Komsomol, the party apparatus, the KGB (as its chief), and apparently also served as a member of Khrushchev's Higher Military Council.

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Yegorychev, once the most conspicuous rising star in the party apparat, was clearly a hard-line type, perhaps even a neo-Stalinist. (It was he who last year loudly demanded an end to the campaign against Stalin.) Yegorychev's possible tie-in with Shelepin can only be guessed at, but both men are in their forties, seem to hold more or less similar political views, and share an early background in the Komsomol apparat in Moscow (as, indeed, did Semichastny).

-- Since late last year, a number of other officials with a background of Komsomol leadership and apparent associations with Shelepin have been pointedly passed over for promotion, have actually been demoted, or, according to persistent rumors, are soon to be fired. Though not at the very top, the men concerned have been prominent and influential officials of the police, press, and state radio.

-- Finally, early in July, Shelepin himself seems to have been caught in the expanding web. He was given a job he almost certainly did not want, the chairmanship of the Soviet trade unions council, replacing Viktor Grishin (who had been assigned to take over Yegorychev's Moscow party job). Shelepin's new position is -- and surely was intended to be -- an obvious

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comedown, in part because it lacks political stature and in part because it will require his departure from the Secretariat. It may be, as someone has observed, that Shelepin has been "demoted with honor," but it would not be surprising if the honor proved fleeting. (Years ago, Malenkov too was demoted with honor, after losing a round with Khrushchev; later, after he had lost the war, he was banished to an electric power station in Siberia.)

An Issue of Policy

3. There have not as yet been any rumors about a specific incident, or even issue, which precipitated Shelepin's demotion. Not so with Yegorychev; indeed, one of the more interesting aspects of Yegorychev's removal was that it evidently involved an issue of foreign policy. Somehow, Yegorychev, speaking to a June meeting of the full Central Committee, summoned up enough nerve to express vigorous criticism of Soviet policy in the Middle East. Given his general political coloration, it seems likely that Yegorychev was unhappy about the caution displayed by the top leaders during the Arab-Israeli war. The mystery is, whatever possessed this man -- a seasoned and successful politician -- to go against Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Podgorny? These three men, we think, were united in their views, at least to the extent of clearly favoring a prudent course once the war broke out.

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4. It does not seem plausible that Yegorychev would be willing to stand up before the Central Committee and attack high national policy if he felt that he were alone in his views; this is not the kind of body which applauds individual acts of political heroism. It is probably a safe guess, at any rate, that Yegorychev was convinced that he had some friends in the audience, perhaps including Shelepin and maybe even a few marshals. Nor does it seem plausible that Yegorychev's attack reflected only a certain embarrassment over the Triumvirate's timidity in the Middle East. Much more likely, we think, is a broader kind of opposition, born of political intrigue and ambition and of discontent with the leadership's policies and impatience with its style. To those of the opposition, already under fire (as witness Semichastny's removal the month before), the Middle East crisis may have seemed a good issue on which to base a counter attack. They may have considered that the Triumvirate was vulnerable to changes of blundering into the crisis, and, after the war began, showing irresolution and undue concern for US attitudes. In any case, the crisis may have seemed to offer a last chance for political survival to an opposition group in deep trouble; if so, Yegorychev's extraordinary behavior before the Central Committee could be seen as a simple act of desperation.

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5. The issues which both contribute to and arise from political discord at the top are varied in content, ranging from Stalinism to ABM's. Moreover, the line-up of opposing sides is surely not constant; the advocates of a strong ABM defense may not see eye to eye about Stalin. But it is true nonetheless that there has long been a rough cleavage in Soviet politics between those who respond to issue in a traditional mode, i.e. with ideological rigor and bureaucratic conservatism, and those who are willing to stretch doctrine and entertain unorthodox departures in policy. Such a cleavage was apparently manifested again in the recent maneuvers affecting the distribution of power at the top. It is by no means certain, however, that the defeat of the apparently conservative Shelepin should be counted as a triumph for moderation.

The Winners

6. While Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Podgorny were probably in fundamental agreement during the height of the Middle East crisis, there is no reason to credit them with unanimous views in all areas of policy or to assume their relations are cordial at all times. On the contrary, there is good reason to think that personal relations between them are frequently strained and that disagreements over policy are not uncommon.

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7. There appear to be four or five major areas of debate and discontent within high Soviet councils. One concerns economic policy, especially the pace and character of the economic reform program, with which Kosygin is strongly identified. Another concerns the direction (or lack of direction) of cultural policies; here arguments tend to revolve around party control over the arts. More generally, controversy still swirls around the question of Stalin and Stalinism, an issue which runs like a red thread through virtually all debates. The proponents of change cite Stalin's 'mistakes' as evidence of the need for new policies, the opponents cite Stalin's 'contributions' as evidence that change is undesirable.

8. In the military sphere, the most important current issue probably concerns the nature and extent of future ABM deployment; articles in the military press suggest, among other things, indecision on the part of the political leaders and, given the complexity and importance of the subject, probably some dissension as well. In foreign policy, disputes probably tend to focus on specific issues as they arise, but there may be, in addition, a more generalized division between hard and soft liners, perhaps with the BKP Triumvirate somewhere in between or split within

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itself. In any case, the charges made by Yegorychev concerning the Middle East crisis almost certainly stemmed in part from broader fears that Soviet foreign policy has lost mementum.

9. A concern of at least some of the Soviet leaders -- one apparently shared, oddly enough, by Tito of Yugoslavia -- is that a US-Imperialist tide is sweeping over the face of the earth. Seen in the half light of doctrine, everything from Israeli "aggression" in the Middle East, to the bombing of Hanoi, to the military coup in Greece becomes a part of a gigantic imperialist plot. Those who are so persuaded are, of course, particularly sensitive to Soviet setbacks, as in the Middle East, and are especially anxious for Soviet victories. The Triumvirate is probably well aware that it is in danger of building up a record of impotency -- in China, in Eastern Europe, in Vietnam, and now the Middle East -- and it would be delighted to silence its critics with successes. At the same time, it is certainly not inclined to go to extreme lengths, such as risking a major confrontation with the US, in order to achieve them. On this, at least, the Triumvirate probably think and acts as one.

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10. But this, obviously, is not a comfortable position for Brezhnev and company to be in, i.e. caught somewhere between domestic critics and the realities of international politics. Thus, perhaps, its anxiety to move so quickly against Yegorychev and Shelepin. But silencing the critic and demoting the presumptive successor will not solve the problem, nor will it necessarily insure solidarity within the Triumvirate.

Impact on Policy and Stability

11. The visible effects of the defeat of Shelepin and his coterie on Soviet policies are likely to be few. If the contest had simply been a case of the good guys vs. the bad, we might indeed now stand at the threshold of a new era of Soviet moderation. But this, of course, was not the case. If Shelepin's voice is no longer listened to, this may make it easier for the other leaders to arrive at certain decisions. But opposition points of view are likely to persist with or without his presence. In any event, Soviet policy has long reflected the oligarchy's need to compromise -- this no doubt was one of Shelepin's complaints -- and the influence of any one man or one group on policy was therefore tempered by the views of others.

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12. Further, specifically concerning foreign policies, it would almost certainly be a mistake to assume that, even if Shelepin and his associates were hawks, the Triumvirate must consist of doves. Not so. Brezhnev, clearly the senior chief, is most unlikely to try to play a conspicuously dovish role. We do not, in fact, know precisely what Brezhnev's inclinations in this regard are, but his background, his public speeches, his style, and his leadership of the party suggest a man who is conventional in his opinions and cautious in his politics. If, indeed, there has been strife between militants and moderates in the Politburo, Brezhnev was likely to be found somewhere in the middle (or first on one side, then the other) preserving or expanding his leadership. In any case, Brezhnev was probably moved much more by alarm over Shelepin's ambition and power than by concern over his views.

13. Podgorny may be a somewhat more flexible man than Brezhnev; there is some reason to think, for example, that he has displayed more interest in consumer welfare. But Podgorny would not now appear to be in a strong position to challenge Brezhnev; probably in part for this reason, he seems to be making an effort to align himself with Brezhnev, perhaps at the expense of Kosygin.

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14. Kosygin is, of course, the most interesting man of the three. He is tough, able, and (relatively) pragmatic. Because of his apparently overriding interest in improving domestic economic performance, he may be more concerned than his colleagues to reduce international tensions. Certainly he is well aware of the impact of military spending on the development of the civilian economy. But, even if left to his own devices, Kosygin would hardly prove to be much more agreeable to the US. There is no reason to doubt his genuine attachment to Soviet Communism or to hope that he would prove to be anything other than a hard and demanding bargainer.

15. Aside from questions of policy, what are the likely effects of the Shelepin-Yegorychev-Semichastny demotions on the overall stability of the leadership (assuming, as we do, that the actions stick)? Are any other top leaders likely to suffer as a consequence? Has Brezhnev so strengthened his hand in this episode that he will now feel free to move against Kosygin (assuming he wishes to)? Have the political scales shifted enough to endanger the collective balance? That is to say, as we did at the beginning of this paper, is the collective finally starting to fall apart?

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16. None of these questions can really be answered. But the mere fact that they can legitimately be asked is, as the Chinese Communists have observed, "thought-provoking." It could well be that the old gang is at long last breaking up, that Brezhnev will be able to emerge as truly Number One, and that other major figures on the Politburo or Secretariat will soon be "transferred to other work." One has for some time wondered just how long committee rule could survive in the Soviet system. We may soon get a definitive response.

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