1 The Closed Letter

Tightening the reins of power

Stalin’s death in 1953 and the process of de-Stalinization which followed breathed new life not only into the societies of Eastern Europe but also into Soviet society itself. The uprising in East Berlin, which had already occurred in 1953, and the rebellions in Poland and Hungary which took place respectively in June and October 1956, marked the high points in this revival. All these uprisings were brought to a halt, in the case of the latter by the actual invasion of Soviet troops.

Evidently the events had assumed a direction and a pace which had taken the Kremlin by surprise; those in power saw in them a betrayal of socialism and therefore of their own authority. There is strong evidence to suggest that it was first and foremost the events in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Hungary, which occasioned the Soviet leadership’s decision in December 1956 to tighten the reins of power in the Soviet Union, but there were also weighty internal reasons for this shift in policy. The population’s dissatisfaction with status quo and demands for change were neither so open nor perhaps so extensive as, for example, in Hungary, but trouble was brewing.

The development of Soviet society after the groundbreaking 20th Party Congress gave rise to concern among a large section of the Party leadership. The critique of Stalin and Stalinism often turned into a critique of the system itself. There were calls at Party meetings for those who had taken part in Stalin’s crimes to be severely punished. Demands for freedom and for a firm break with the past were made increasingly boldly by all sections of Soviet society. Reports from local branches of the Party convinced the top leadership that even a modest degree of liberalization had shaken the very foundations of the system, and immediate efforts
were made to tighten up. In April 1956, less than a month after the Congress, a special letter was sent out to Party members cautioning them not to overdo their criticism of Stalin. It was followed up by an article in Pravda warning against demagogues and other pernicious elements who, under cover of criticizing Stalin, were in fact attacking the Party line itself. Evidently, however, this letter failed to produce the desired effect, for soon afterwards, in July 1956, Party members received a new letter from the Central Committee, this time warning of more severe penalties if the limits of anti-Stalinist criticism were overstepped. Individual offenders were mentioned, and it was reported that a branch of the Party at the Academy of Sciences had been closed down because of their incorrect discussion of the results of the 20th Party Congress.\footnote{1} However, there was continued unrest in society at large, and when the disturbances erupted in Hungary in autumn 1956 the Central Committee felt obliged once more to send a warning to Party members. This took the form of a closed letter to Party organizations. This letter, which will be analysed in the following section, was followed by a series of arrests and harsh sentences, under which both Party members and non-Party people were imprisoned for alleged ‘revisionism’ and anti-Soviet slander. In the first few months of 1957 there were several hundred such arrests, and in an incident in Tbilisi peaceful demonstrators were shot.\footnote{2}

The majority of members of the highest Party organ were convinced that these troubles stemmed from the 20th Party Congress. In their view, the problem could only be solved if the Party leadership beat a retreat and thereby undid the damage. There was mounting opposition against Khrushchev, who had obviously taken the lead in the revelations at the Congress. What saved him was that a majority of the members of the Central Committee did not want to see a return to Stalinist methods, and saw in him a guarantee that this would not happen.\footnote{3}

By the summer of 1957 opposition to the liberalization within the Presidium had grown to such an extent that a showdown was inevitable. The right wing, led by Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov, demanded Khrushchev’s resignation. If this wing of the Party had had its way there would certainly have been a return to Stalinist methods, writes the Russian historian V.P. Naumov. In the event this did not happen because the majority of the Central Committee understood that Khrushchev was more in tune with the prevailing mood in society than were his opponents. Naumov writes:

It was essential to take the mood of the Party and society into consideration. De-Stalinizations and certain steps in the direction of