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What Did 'Mature Socialism' Mean for the Soviet Union?

"What is he thinking of? Reform, reform. Who needs it, and who can understand it? We need to work better, that is the only problem." [1]

These words of Brezhnev, reported by Fedor Burlatskii (hardly a fan) epitomise the view of the period of 'mature socialism' as the era of stagnation. Is it fair? We will look at what mature socialism[2] meant in theory and in practice: its place in the history of ideas, and its place in the history of a people. It was state policy from 1964 to 1985, the longest period of collective leadership in Soviet history. Stalin and Khrushchev had both failed to deliver the promised short transition to communism. Compared with such hostages to fortune a less ambitious programme appears as a conscious reset. So, was mature socialism a pragmatic, temporising philosophy for consolidating gains and setting realistic goals and expectations? Or was it bolder: an evolution of socialist thinking? To answer these questions, we need to consider its formulation *in* doctrine – but also how it came to *be* official doctrine. Brezhnev talked of it in 1971 but it became official quite late, in the 1977 Constitution.[3] In Brezhnev's report on the draft Constitution he states that "a developed socialist society has been created in the USSR and that the supreme goal of the Soviet state is the building of communism".[4] There are few specifics - and no vision, call to action or plan for building communism. Most significantly, the Communist Party's monopoly of power was to be enshrined in Article 6 of the Constitution. But behind this moment lies a contested history which could have turned out very differently. The idea had been the subject of debate since Burlatskii himself had in a 1966 *Pravda* article referred to debates within the Eastern Bloc states about the development of socialism.[5] The idea that *these* states had *already* built socialism and were even now carrying it forward could be seen as threatening to the Soviet regime's leadership of the internationalist socialist alliance. Even so, the idea was taken seriously that socialism was not just a stopover on the road between capitalism and communism: and its form and development were opened to debate. Reformists focussed on democracy and the stagnating economy, conservatives on the role of the party in leading change. But the challenge of the Prague Spring of 1968 moved the dial decisively in a conservative direction. The task of creating "socialism with a human face" was said to have been already met by developed or "really existing" socialism, re-asserting ideological leadership. This claim also gave backbone to the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine[6], re-asserting command of the socialist alliance under the guise of guardianship of true - that is, socialist - sovereignty. After this early pivotal moment mature socialism appears henceforth in conservative guise, and in a defensive posture.

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[1] Fedor Burlatskii, "Reflections on the Nature of Political Leadership." Tarasulo, Isaac. *Gorbachev and Glasnost: Viewpoints from the Soviet Press*. Wilmington: SR Books, 1989, pp.50-62.

[2] The terms 'mature', 'developed' and 'really-existing' socialism were used interchangeably.

[3] Sandle, Mark. "Brezhnev and Developed Socialism: The Ideology of Zastoi?" Bacon, Edwin and Mark Sandle. Brezhnev Reconsidered. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p.166. Brezhnev talked about it at the 24th Congress of the CPSU in March 1971.

[4] Leonid Brezhnev. "Report to the Plenary Session of the Central Committee, May 24 1977." *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 6 July 1977: pp.7-8

[5] Sandle, p.167

[6] Sergei Kovalev. "The International Obligations of Socialist Countries." *Pravda* 26 September 1968.

What was the fallout for politics and the economy? At the top of the regime, mature socialism exhibited this conservative, defensive face from the beginning. It was a re-assertion of the authority of the older generation, who instinctively turned to the past for inspiration. It has been given many labels, none of them good: gerontocracy, kleptocracy, clientelism. Even moderate reforms ended.[7] The slogan of 'stability of cadres' speaks for itself. But the nexus between the economy and politics made some developments hard to rein in. The economy was too big and complex to be run by the brutal methods of the 1930s, and there was no going back on raised consumer expectations. So, of necessity reform of industry and agriculture continued – but hamstrung by the old models.[8] The party and especially the managerial and specialist cadres as a proportion expanded. Party membership became a habit rather than a commitment. Official language became surreally detached from reality and "bureaucratic hypertrophy" set in.[9] Scepticism of a leadership which "commanded everything yet produced nothing"[10] manifested itself in bitter sardonic humour. The systemic problems of the antiquated industrial base and unwieldy planned economy remained unaddressed. To make matters worse, the windfall of oil revenues was squandered on the military, the war in Afghanistan, supporting the 'outer empire', and the living standards of the elite. Economic policy needed to move from *extensive* to *intensive* methods of production.[11] "Socialism's politically driven economy proved very good – too good – at putting up a rust belt; and, unlike a market economy, socialism proved very bad at taking its rust belt down."[12] Even so, seeds sown during the Khrushchev thaw were starting to germinate – if not yet to bear fruit. Consider for example the work of the economic sociologist Tatyana Zaslavskaya, one of the 'sixtier' generation set to become an important architect of *perestroika*, who had the academic freedom to formulate wide-ranging and penetrating critiques of agrarian and industrial policy under the noses, as it were of the regime.[13] But there was no fixing the system in this era. Instead, it was left to the creativity of private enterprise and the informal economy to patch it up piecemeal, for example by addressing the perennial shortages of consumer goods. Investigative journalism revealed one of the causes to be widespread theft of goods to feed a flourishing and openly tolerated black market.[14] The state habitually blamed individuals for theft, corruption and hoarding, when the root causes were the same old failings of the command economy. Although nothing new, this institutionalised black market "became a veritable pillar of the system under Brezhnev"[15] resulting in the emergence of mafia-like[16] networks upon which everyone was to some extent dependent, thus criminalising ordinary people and undermining morality and the rule of law.

So far, so bad. But did mature socialism make any room for constructive opposition? Liberal freedoms were enshrined in the 1977 Constitution, but in practice only tolerated up to a point. Andrei Sakharov characterises the liberal posture of dissent. His otherwise measured stance mounts

[7] Orlando Figes. *Revolutionary Russia*. Pelican, 2014, p.371
[8] Martin Malia. *The Soviet Tragedy : A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*. New York: The Free Press, 1994, p.387
[9] Malia, p.388
[10] Malia, p.390
[11] Malia, p.364
[12] Stephen Kotkin. *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.17
[13] Tatyana Zaslavskaya. "The Fate of the Small Siberian Village. September 12, 1980." *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1981: pp.5-6. Not literally under their noses, as the geographical dispersion of the academic community contributed to their relative freedom!
[14] Vil Dorofeev. "Investigation of a Shortage: In the Presence of an Absence." *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1981: p.13
[15] Malia, p.368
[16] The term was first used in Russian in this period.

a frontal assault on "subordination to the will of the Party or, even more specifically, to the Party's central apparatus and its officials".[17] He is calling out the hidden agenda of mature socialism, which equated the legitimacy of the system with that of the ageing ruling clique. Solzhenitsyn's ultra-conservative critique is full of rage - yet moderate in its practical proposals. He calls for religious freedoms: to "allow competition on an equal and honourable basis *not for power*, but for truth between all ideological and religious currents, in particular between all religions" (emphasis added).[18] Roy Medvedev's standpoint seems unimpeachably orthodox: "…we must make sure that all our activities are strictly within the framework of the Constitution…We must only see to it that the political struggle is waged responsibly in forms that reasonable people can accept." Medvedev's bombshell is the implication that so-called mature socialism is nothing of the sort: it is years away without major democratic reforms. Despite their best efforts to remain within official doctrinal bounds, prominent moderate dissidents were subject to reprisals for seeing past the hidden agenda of mature socialism to the true power dynamics and the Stalinist arbitrariness not yet flushed from the system. Overt dissidence was not the half of it. Mature socialism faced a crisis of opposition as non-compliance: there was a quiet revolution 'from below' in the values and habits of ordinary people. The pioneer spirit and collectivist values no longer had the pull they once did. The genie of cultural rapprochement with the West was proving difficult for mature socialism to put back in the bottle. Generational change will occur regardless of whether political change does. Capitalist liberal democracy is subject to constant generational renewal and the influx of fresh ideas – that is its default mode. By contrast the supposedly forward-looking Soviet system kept reaching back for its models. In 1961 moulding youth into the "new man" was considered as important as "the material and technical base" in building of communism.[19] A little over ten years later in 1972 a secondary school director complains of the attitudes of parents as well as children: "They do not stop to consider that youngsters sometimes go from trying on foreign fashions to trying on foreign ideas."[20] The bewilderment is oddly touching… We could call these phenomena *apolitical* rather than *oppositional* - were not this sphere of life still officially in the domain of socialist politics.

Foreign policy under mature socialism was at least consistent with its politics and economics: regressive and inflexible. Actions intended as confident projections of authority by a global superpower masked insecurity and miscalculation. Despite the binary certainty of the Brezhnev Doctrine, reform continued elsewhere in Eastern Europe – especially Poland - in more muted form. Some of the hawkishness may be construed as an attempt to unite and reinvigorate the nation by reviving the spirit and pride of the Great Patriotic War and to prove the vitality of socialism by military might. But in Afghanistan they succeeded only in provoking exactly what they had feared – an unwinnable guerrilla war with jihadists funded by the US. The moral high ground always claimed over the despotic imperialist West which had attracted third-world revolutionaries was lost in 1968 and 1979. The arms race, fuelled by bloated, then shrinking oil revenues was found to be unwinnable. Then there was the "geopolitical overextension"[21] caused by the continuing burden of

[17] Andrei Sakharov. "Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom." Sakharov, Andrei. *Sakharov Speaks*. New York: Knopf, 1974. pp.58-61, 80-81, 112-13

[18] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. "Letter to the Soviet Leaders." New York: Harper & Row, 1974, pp.19-21, 24-26, 41-43, 51-54, 56-57.

[19] Iu.V. Idashkin. "Some Deviations in the Development of Personality of the Schoolchild and Ways of Overcoming Them." Ablin, Fred. *Education in the USSR: a Collection of Readings from Soviet Journals*. New York: International Arts & Sciences Press, 1963

[20] L. Mateto. "Alienated from Himself." *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 13 June 1972

[21] Malia, p.401

material support to the international socialist community.[22] The trouble was: *mature socialism* was up against *mature capitalism*. Less hamstrung by ideology, capitalism after the war cherry picked the best bits of the command economy and the welfare state. Despite its own difficulties the West was winning: modernising its economies and cutting its losses abroad. "In Hungary, Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the only force holding back the long-term tidal pull of the West appeared to be Soviet resolve. The acquisition of an outer empire in Eastern Europe – what, again, looked like a Soviet strength – had proved to be a dangerous vulnerability."[23] Even so, when the external empire of the Soviet Union is called "the weakest link"[24] it is not in the usual geopolitical sense. Despite the many crises, the Warsaw Pact stayed largely intact - and Eastern Europe officially Communist. But physical borders were becoming less solid and important. The external empire was the weak link because it was the place where influences which progressives regarded as invigorating, conservatives as debilitating, infiltrated the Soviet system.

What about the *lived experience* of mature socialism? The picture is a complex one. Living standards in towns improved. Food and consumer goods were available through official channels or informal networks. However, the tactic of buying off the aspirational urban populace by meeting its aspirations halfway did nothing for the rural population. Nowhere was the timidity of the project of mature socialism, or the hollowness of the claim that 'really existing' socialism was right here if you looked around, more starkly illustrated than by the plight of the agricultural sector and its workers.[25] The statistics undermined the propaganda: declining male life expectancy, increasing infant mortality, unprecedented in developed societies.[26] Rampant alcoholism, yet spirits sales were 15% of state revenues – a viciously circular death spiral for the economy. Inequality and a patchy welfare state. Women's equal rights remained a curse as much as a blessing. An article from 1977 [27] shows 92% of all working-age women in either work or study, but still shouldering the overwhelming burden of domestic responsibilities. Traditional gender roles and expectations persisted, much as in the West. Two vastly different films from the period together contribute to our understanding of what mature socialism looked like from the inside. Vladimir Menshov's *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears* (1980) is a balanced portrayal of the lives of three ordinary young women friends between 1957 and 1979, and its authentic realism is a striking departure from the concocted 'socialist realism' of earlier ideology. Much of the milieu depicted would have been familiar to a Western audience. Both sides of Soviet-style social mobility and egalitarianism are depicted: the heroine Katya works her way up from the shop floor to become a factory director, yet her life is not easy. On the other hand, a skilled tool maker is seen as the professional and social equal of the scientists he works with. We see casual sexism, snobbery and alcoholism – but also female solidarity and friendship. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is an authentic masterpiece of world cinema. Set in a dystopian alternative reality, a guide leads two men through a dangerous and forbidden area called the Zone in search of a room with the power to grant wishes, which is not at all what it seems. The film and the novel on which it is based are often construed as metaphors of late Soviet reality. But there is a much more basic significance to the film, shared with Menshov's: that socialist realism was long

[22] Fidel Castrol. "Soviet Television Interview on the Occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of the October Revolution, November 7, 1977." *FBIS Daily Report* 8 November 1977. He emphasises the strong material support Cuba as 'a small and underdeveloped country' continues to receive.
[23] Kotkin, p.23
[24] Malia, p.390
[25] Figes, pp.373-5
[26] Malia, p.368
[27] M.Ia. Sonin. "Equal Rights, Unequal Burdens." *Ekonomika i organizatsiia promyshlennogo proizvodstva* 24 May 1977: pp.5-18

dead and that critical and imaginative ideas had a surprisingly extensive 'safe space' in which to develop.

Many of the formal and informal control mechanisms of earlier times were weakened. Science, academia and culture operated 'under the radar'. Accordingly, scholars have challenged as overly simplistic the equation of mature socialism with *zastoi* – stagnation. For most ordinary citizens continuities are more important than the discontinuities which attract the attention of historians and political scientists, and mature socialism offered *a lot* of continuity - alongside some freedoms. Alexei Yurchak has explored this theme to explain some seemingly anomalous features of life under mature socialism – but also to explain why, when discontinuity did come, in the shape of Gorbachev's initiatives of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, it was sudden, complete and irreversible. The end of mature socialism exhibits all the hallmarks of what the philosophy of science calls a *paradigm shift*, when a world view propped up by ad-hoc adjustments in the face of falsifying evidence is finally confronted by and overthrown by a better one. To summarise, Yurchak invented the term *hypernormalisation* to explain these anomalies during the long era of mature socialism. Drawing upon the philosopher J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts, he claims that during this era "reproducing the forms of authoritative discourse acquired a strong *performative* role"[28] (emphasis added), meaning that the verbal expressions of the state's authority became unmoored from their literal, descriptive, *constative* meaning, and became ritualised formulae.[29] So long as these forms were respected, continuity was assured, and you could get on with your life. A more recognisable form of civil society emerged than during previous Soviet eras. Even loyal, committed officials and party members felt no cognitive dissonance about this. The analysis can seem overly schematic.[30] But it helps to explain the paradox that the rigid conservatism of the system was an unintentional modernising force. Mature socialism was visibly ageing alongside the leadership which personified it, and gradually fading away from people's hearts, minds and souls.

[28] Alexei Yurchak. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2005, pp.26-27

[29] A striking example is the phrase "buried on Red Square by the Kremlin wall" used to describe the funerals of important figures. This was more than just a lazy piece of boilerplate text: the need to use this phrase even when it was manifestly not true was taken very seriously. See Yurchak, p.52, p.257.

[30] The state did often confront the influence of the West. For example, there was the earnest sociological analysis of rock music as an ideological tool (Yurchak, p.207), and the list of bands considered harmful (Yurchak, p.215).

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