

By Michael E. Urban

THE GROUNDWORK OF A POLITICAL *perestroika*—much heralded, long-awaited and, ultimately, rushed through—has been laid in the collection of constitutional amendments just adopted in the USSR. The term "amendments," however, misrepresents what Mikhail Gorbachov and company have wrought. It would be far more accurate to regard what was ratified at the Nov. 29-Dec. 2, 1988, session of the Supreme Soviet as a reconstitution of the country's political-governmental machinery.

"Democratization" has been the theme song of the project from start to finish. But like so many things in this land where the unacknowledged chief architect seems to have been Lewis Carroll, that word assumes only a distant and, often enough, ironic relation to both the finished product and the process through which it was developed. The slogan "democratization" midwifed the constitutional project at the 19th Communist Party Conference in June and July. Sketchy—if not enigmatic—resolutions on constitutional reform adopted at the conference thereafter became the raw material for a number of "working groups" composed of law professors, legal consultants in government and "responsible people" from the Central Committee apparatus.

These groups labored under the fictive tutelage of a subcommittee of the Supreme Soviet (its members described by one who sat on the principal working group as "quite stupid and prepared to adopt whatever we present to them") and the direct supervision of A.I. Luk'yanov, candidate member of the Politburo, newly elected first vice president of the USSR and close associate of Gorbachov. By late October, the subcommittee, cum working groups, cum Central Committee staff, cum Politburo (where the project was eventually initialed) had cobbled together a long series of "proposed" constitutional "amendments" that were duly printed in almost all newspapers for public assessment.

Popular indifference: Most people took small interest in all of this. Imagine a Bush-Dukakis debate on CBS while ABC is carrying the seventh game of the World Series and NBC, "The Greatest Soap Opera Ever Told." Then visualize, on the one hand, the daily obtuseness of *Pravda* commentary, courtesy of some legal specialist or "responsible person," and, on the other, a two-hour queue for cosmetics or vodka, and you'll have a reasonably accurate idea of Soviet citizens' attention to the process. Of course, hundreds of thousands of letters on the project were sent to the Supreme Soviet and the newspapers. But as one top party official lamented, a sizable portion (he didn't specify a number) of these were pre-printed for the convenient affixing of a signature endorsing in full the entire enterprise.

But the remarkable thing about the process of public assessment is that *glasnost* has enabled an active public—however small at the moment—to emerge, to argue, to act. In Moscow dozens of meetings were held on the constitutional project, some organized by the authorities, others by the so-called "informal groups" (discussion clubs, political movements and, in some cases, political parties in embryo). I attended 11 of these. No one, with the excep-

Through the looking glass of Soviet democratization

tion of those who authored the amendments and a few folk who simply trust Gorbachov implicitly, expressed support for the project. Quite the contrary. Speaker after speaker railed against the constitutional changes, and the more strident the criticisms the more robust the expressions of agreement from the audience. Unmistakably, a political class now exists in the Soviet Union, and aside from the reactionaries (*Pamyat* and other groups), its members take democratization dead seriously.

Schematically, here are the major points of contention in the constitutional amendments and my reading of the consensus among the politically active with respect to each of them.

Elections: Changes in the electoral system smack of a compromise within the ruling group. Moving in the direction of democracy, we have elections that involve mandatory competition among two or more candidates for each seat (or, for soviets at the local level, a system whereby the number of candidates exceeds the number of seats under contention in each district). Voting is by secret ballot and nominations are unrestricted. From the opposite direction, however, we find two new institutions, emplaced at strategic points, that can be used to switch off the democratic current.

First, in order to appear on the ballot one must be registered by the district electoral commission. Should more than two nominations be put forward, a "pre-electoral district meeting" is held wherein the candidates are appraised and recommendations are forwarded to the district electoral commission. Critics of the project are quick to point out that this procedure enables the local bosses—who dominate the electoral commission—to register only those whom they please and at the same time to hide behind the recommendations of the "pre-electoral district meeting." In this way, the power to nominate can be confined to the same small circles of influentials who currently run things. The only assured change is that the apparatus must now put up two of its candidates instead of one.

Second, what are called "social organizations"—namely, the Communist Party, its youth league, the trade unions and so forth—have reserved for themselves one-third of the seats in each soviet. These "people's deputies" are not elected by the people at all. They are chosen at conferences or central committee meetings of these organizations. The reaction to this provision among those involved in the debate has been overwhelmingly negative, for it appears to assure the party apparatus an automatic one-third representation in the nominal legislature. Combined with the changes in the machinery of government, this aspect of the reform, most fear, amounts to an automatic majority for the apparatus in the effective legislature.

Governmental reorganization: The Soviet legislature will hereafter be a tripartite body with three legislative tiers (a Congress, Supreme Soviet and Presidium), atop which sits a president who, among other

things, legislates by decree. The lower (or, if you've been listening again to Lewis Carroll, "higher") body, the Congress, is composed of 2,500 members, a third of whom have been elected in districts, another third elected according to a federal principle whereby the national and subnational republics and regions have formal equality, and the remainder are designated by the "social organizations." This organ meets for three days each year. Its work amounts to electing a Supreme Soviet of some 450 members, which is to function as a full-time legislature, and the president and first vice president of the Supreme Soviet. No one now knows how the work of the Congress or the elections it conducts will be organized, but the "working group" is currently working on a procedure for this that, assumedly, the Congress will simply accept as its own.

This "South African Parliament," as one prominent critic on the faculty of Moscow University points out, is the tail on the dog of whatever electoral procedures and nominations lists are presented to it. The general concern is that the 450 deputies elected to the Supreme Soviet will disproportionately be drawn from among the 750 Congress deputies chosen by the "social organizations." In the three days of its session, the full complement of deputies elected in districts across the length and breadth of the USSR will essentially be strangers to one another and will sit amid a predictably well-organized contingent of deputies chosen by the apparatus, who will dominate the proceedings, and therefore dominate the composition of the Supreme Soviet.

Constitutional court: The theme of democratization also sounds a leitmotif called "government of law." Hopes were high before the amendments were unveiled that a constitutional court, however vaguely defined, would be included in the package. Its conspicuous absence in the proposed amendments engendered both bitter disappointment and spirited arguments on behalf of a court that would safeguard the law. Even among those critics who were prepared to accept the other unattractive features of the compromise—unequal and indirect voting for a real legislature—a constitutional court remained a fundamental matter guaranteeing that a compromise, rather than another hoodwinking, had been achieved.

Their arguments, naturally, could only be countered from official quarters with shrugged shoulders and the poor mouth: "Of course, it's not perfect, it's only a step." This "step"—whether forward, backward or, perhaps, straight off the cliff—involves the invention of a unique body, the Committee of Constitutional Oversight, whose 23 members are appointed by the president, with the confirmation of the Congress, from among the country's "specialists in the fields of politics and law." Rather like the Congress, for whom more (members) means less (power), this committee is charged to inspect all legislation, "acts," and draft laws from the point of view of their constitutionality and to recommend

appropriate legislative changes to would-be offenders or to their superiors (the Congress, the Supreme Soviet or the Council of Ministers). The force of any challenged legislation or "act" is suspended while the committee appeals to the legislative or executive branch to reconsider its action.

Since the committee has the power to review legislation passed in the republics, a real din emerged in the Baltic, where political and economic *perestroika* is miles ahead of the rest of the country. Should a republic legalize small-scale private holdings—as Estonia recently has—this measure can be struck down as unconstitutional. Should the popular front in Lithuania, *Sąjūdis*, become too influential in that republic's politics, its charter might be suspended by Moscow on a committee recommendation that it has failed to honor the constitution's strictures regarding the "leading role" of the Communist Party (which, as everyone knows, it already has). The bone tossed to the Baltic republics, a stipulation in the final version of the amendment that the committee must include at least one member from each of the country's 15 republics, has done nothing to allay fears in the Baltic that the broad-based movement for regional control of the economy and ecological security will be doused by cold water from the committee in Moscow.

The long haul: An observer cannot help but be warmed by the flickers of democracy that have been kindled throughout this heretofore frozen political landscape. Nor can he be but charmed by the quiet assurance of democratic leaders such as those in Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, with whom I chatted while the amendments were being duly approved by the Supreme Soviet in Moscow (albeit not without a handful of negative votes and two handfuls of abstentions). They smiled the smiles of the long haul, regarded the day as a definite setback, but looked at the half-opportunities contained in the amendments as theirs for the taking and the future as theirs for the making.

As this round of *perestroika* has been chiseled into the granite of constitutional change, the clarity of the project stands out in bold relief. Power. Execution. Control. Gorbachov is effectively marching an army of bureaucrats out of their offices in party headquarters across the street (or, sometimes, merely across the corridor) to governmental offices where he and his can watch them, where decisions are taken by government bodies (hence the relevance of the currently resurrected "all power to the soviets") instead of coughed up from a confounding collusion of actors operating in the party-government nether world. Professional legislators, competent officials, results—these, rather than democratization, are the core values of the reform.

Moreover, none of these can be lightly dismissed. Yet aside from the question of whether these things can be reasonably expected without a dose of democracy far larger than that called for in the Politburo's present prescription, constitutional change has restimulated *perestroika* from below. In this respect democratization inches forward.

Michael E. Urban's latest book, *An Algebra of Soviet Power*, is scheduled for publication later this year.

Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media

By Noam Chomsky and
Edward Herman
Pantheon Books, 412 pp., \$14.95

By John O'Kane

TOTALITARIANISM IS A 20TH-CENTURY malady that arose from the ashes of failed experiments in democracy. Stalinism came in the wake of the democratization of the arts and social life marking Lenin's first decade after the revolution; Nazism blossomed from the dangerous excess and polarization of Weimar, Germany's first democratic government. Intellectuals of the past two generations have been obsessed with the soil that germinated these diseases, in part because its workings have helped us understand better those of democracy itself in the West, consumer democracy as a form that gives lip service to freedom while demanding—mostly unconsciously—conformity.

We know that the absence of freedom and impediments to action are built in and legislated into a totalitarian political system, but a totalitarian *mentality* is something else again. Visionaries of the intellect in the West, from Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno and Wilhelm Reich of the earlier European generation, to the likes of Norman Mailer and Lewis Mumford on American soil, claim to have isolated the totalitarian mentality nesting in the lethargy of consumer self-interest. Every precondition of democratic culture, the enlightened awareness of consequences beyond one's immediate domain, the free flow of information and the social communication of ideas among others, is threatened with extinction. New dimensions of apathy create a void that could be filled by the orchestrators of conformism.

⁴ Noam Chomsky begins where the poetic visionaries trail off into abstract irrelevance. For years now he has been documenting—in painstaking and scrupulous fashion—the mechanics of politics, and especially the instinct for manipulation and repression. His recent installment comes as a collaboration with Edward Herman, political economist at the Wharton School of Finance. Together they document the role of the mass media in propping up the totalitarian mentality.

Deconstruction zone: Chomsky and Herman argue that the mass media are manufacturers of consent, not dispensers of the vital information necessary to energize a democracy. In theory, a free press is the linchpin of democracy, preserving freedom of expression and the right of the people to know. It can help citizens maintain control over a potentially threatening government.

CENSORS

Noam Chomsky: As always, painstaking and scrupulous in his critique of political mechanisms.

Chomsky and Herman show how things work in the consent factory

But Chomsky and Herman deconstruct this self-image of the American media, and see it falling into a "propaganda model." The reality is that the media serve a "societal purpose," but only for restrictive segments of society. Its purpose is to "inculcate and defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state."

The authors stress repeatedly that the media do not function as the propaganda system does in a totalitarian state, but actually encourage spirited debate and dissent. This goes to the very heart of the type of insidious totalitarianism we in the West might recognize: criticism that remains faithfully within the system of "presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus." And the media can manufacture—as opposed to enhancing the natural unfolding of—consent so effortlessly because this powerful system is so thoroughly internalized.

How, we might ask? Roughly one-third of *Manufacturing Consent* is spent clarifying the workings of various measures of selectivity and exclusion in media institutions. The remainder is devoted to rereading the dominant media events of the past two decades: the Vietnam War; elections in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua; the plot to kill the pope; the killing of Polish priest Jerzy Popieluszko by Polish police in 1984. This rereading is an exhaustive re-

search effort that examines the commentaries in virtually every tabloid that covered these events.

All the news that filters through: Chomsky and Herman trace the routes by which money and power are able to "filter out" the news that's unfit to print, marginalize dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public. The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass media firms dictate what is newsworthy, leaving little opportunity for "alternative" ideas to reach a forum for mass exposure. Dependence on advertising revenues pressures editors and directors to print or telecast what sells, limiting messages that could potentially undermine their power.

Mostly for reasons of timesaving—and reflecting the profit-maximizing vision—the media relies on information provided by the government, business and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power. Those who refuse to package the packaging get "flak" and are disciplined in the form of negative public relations responses on a large scale through organizations occupying the center stage of political consciousness. The ideology of anti-communism is a control mechanism successfully used (especially during the "new cold war" of the '80s) to intimidate pundits into towing the line (since

it's a vague notion, the authors argue, that taps into a very real fear of property appropriation in the U.S., elites and others can be kept continuously on the defensive in a cultural milieu in which anti-communism is the dominant religion.)

The authors' most effective demonstration of how these news filters come to bear collectively to select and frame the news is their chapter devoted to a comparison of the Jerzy Popieluszko case with similar murders in Latin America. If this has only the status of a faint echo in our political imaginations, the point is nearly proven: it wasn't given the sort of coverage that would sustain our ongoing interest. The media automatically creates a distinction between "worthy" and "unworthy" victims as a way of falling into line, of servicing, in the authors' words, a form of ter-

The authors argue that the mass media are manufacturers of conformity and consent.

rorism "protected in a propaganda mode." Jerzy Popieluszko, as a victim in a state antagonistic to the U.S. at the pinnacle of Cold War xenophobia, was "worthy" of repetitive treatment proving a self-evident point: the evil of communism. The pervasive sensationalism of this coverage (the *New York Times*, *Time*, CBS News and other moguls of information pelted the public day after day with the same foregone conclusion) contrasted with the superficiality of attention to real causes, the story in all of its complexity.

A view to a kill: The authors document a number of other treat-

ments of killings in "client states," like El Salvador and Guatemala (Bishop Romero's killing is the principal focus), where "unworthy" victims abound. Scant, if any, coverage, and usually on a one-time-only basis, characterizes attention to the "unworthy," those whose lives and deaths personify the absence of democracy in countries bankrolled by the U.S. precisely for the purpose of staging some progress toward it.

Their discussion of Vietnam is one of the most thorough counterreadings of this media event. Common parlance, developed through a majority of tomes on the media's role in the war's policy outcomes, has indicted a "liberal" press for skewing the facts toward a position of dovish defeatism. Media attention to the major events of the conflict (the Tet Offensive, Paris Peace Talks, etc.), however, generally supported the elite interests to the very last. Cliches persisted well through the termination of the conflict, that we were winning the war, that we were fighting aggression in the interest of creating "democracy." The Tet Offensive, for example, was predominantly discussed in the media as a sign that the enemy was on his last legs. There was a stubborn refusal of what we now know as fact, that this event constituted a turnaround in fortunes for the U.S. that would never be reversed. The fringe, alternative press saw it differently, but their message was never publicized to any great extent until much later (helped by the release of *The Pentagon Papers*). The authors show that the mass media reports on the Tet Offensive and its aftermath essentially mirrored the tenor and content of the pronouncements passed down by Johnson's high-level advisers. They arrive at this striking conclusion: "The manner in which the media covered the events had little effect on public opinion, except perhaps to enhance its aggressiveness and, of course, to instill ever more deeply the basic and unexamined tenets of the propaganda system." The turnaround in the public's attitude toward Vietnam, the suggestion seems to be, occurred as the reality of the conflict, transported ever more intensively and visibly over the years back to our shores, overflowed the media frame.

But still, how? The influence of intractable beliefs, unconsciously held, induces obedience in the face of a manufactured mandate servicing the totalitarian mentality. "Elemental patriotism," Chomsky and Herman offer, the "overwhelming wish to think well of ourselves, our institutions and our leaders," can't be neutralized. Benevolent intent is matched in intensity only by the belief that "we, the people" rule, a central principle of our system of indoctrination shared by media and citizens alike.

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