

SOVIET STATE POWER, DOWN FOR THE COUNT

By bungling their August coup d'etat, the plotters will accelerate precisely those changes they sought to avoid.

BY PAUL MARANTZ

THE ATTEMPTED SOVIET COUP WAS MUCH like an earthquake in an active seismic zone: its eruption was a shock, even though the quake itself had long been predicted. Indeed, the coup was a shock precisely because it had been discussed so often without actually occurring – most notably in December 1990 as part of Eduard Shevardnadze's speech resigning as Foreign Minister – that people had become complacent about the powerful subterranean pressures that were obviously building up along well-recognized fault lines.

Since the mid-1980s, a conflict had been intensifying between two antithetical political forces, the reformers who wanted to transform Soviet totalitarianism into a democratic, pluralistic and free-market society; and the ultra-conservatives who were desperate to defend the old order and all the privileges and power that it accorded them.

THIS CONFLICT BETWEEN THE REFORMERS AND the hardliners was grounded in their diametrically opposed world views. The policy of the reformers was built upon several key assumptions and principles:

- The Soviet Union's excessive reliance upon military strength ultimately weakens the nation's security. It fuels the arms race, overburdens the Soviet economy, and impoverishes the Soviet people.
- The Soviet Union can overcome its present crisis only by moving towards a market economy within the country and toward full integration with the world economy.
- The ideological approach to international politics must be abandoned. Capitalist countries should not be regarded as "the enemy." The Soviet Union must end its self-imposed isolation and avail itself of the greatest achievements of world civilization, such as democratic political institutions, legal norms for protecting fundamental human rights, and the free market.
- The USSR should recognize the many constraints that limit its global power, and accept a sharply diminished role in the world.

Initially, in the period 1986 through 1988, when Gorbachev first set out the "new thinking" about international politics – a develop-

ment which gave the reformers the political elbow room to elaborate their own more far-reaching ideas – the "old thinkers" were stunned into silence. Life-long habits of obedience to the party line were slow to die among conservative forces within the military and party bureaucracy. However, by 1990, the traditionalists began to challenge the Soviet government's new orientation. The traditionalists disagreed fundamentally with the key tenets of the new thinking. They asserted:

- The Soviet Union must not neglect its military power. The Soviet Union can deter an enemy attack and command the political influence it deserves only if its military forces are second to none.
- Socialism must be protected against the domestic and foreign foes who would like to see it dismantled. The introduction of a capitalist market would lead to chaos and increased suffering. Rapid integration with the international economic system would allow foreign corporations to buy up the Soviet Union's natural resources and to despoil the natural environment.
- There are powerful elements in the United States and other capitalist countries that remain deeply hostile to the Soviet Union. They are intensifying their efforts to subvert the Soviet system. The Soviet people must remain vigilant against foreign intrigues.
- The Soviet Union must preserve its status as a great power. Its leaders must not humiliate the nation by abandoning long-time allies and grovelling before the West for foreign loans and aid.

THE JUXTAPOSITION OF TWO STATEMENTS, ONE by reformers and the other by a militant conservative, indicates just how wide the gulf is between these two warring camps. Writing in the August 1989 issue of *International Affairs*, two liberal scholars, Radomir Bogdanov and Andrei Kortunov, forcefully reiterated the reformist agenda:

As to our status in world politics, it is objectively bound to decline irrespective of whether or not we preserve a surplus of nuclear arms. This is because we fall short of a highly developed country on very many

counts, including economic structure, living standards, life expectancy and the environment. Our weakness will come out more and more as the cold war system disintegrates and international relations are demilitarised, with new, non-military components of national power coming to the fore. Of course, we could delay this inevitable process, but hadn't we better give up obsolete symbols of international status and concentrate on catching up with countries which have surpassed us in recent decades?

In contrast, Colonel Viktor Alksnis, who had emerged as one of Gorbachev's most vocal critics, stated:

By cutting the military budget, we're ruining the country. We are now trying to destroy everything that it took us decades to create, everything that we could rightfully be proud of. Whereas we used to be called an "Upper Volta with missiles," soon we'll be called simply an "Upper Volta."

BY MID-1990, IT BECAME FASHIONABLE IN SOME circles in both the Soviet Union and the West to write off Gorbachev and to portray him as a relic of the past who had been overtaken by events and could no longer control the rising tide of popular opposition to the communist system. However, developments in late 1990 and early 1991 demonstrated that this verdict was premature. With the intensification of the battle between the party conservatives on the right and the radical reformers on the left, Gorbachev remained a potent and pivotal force, manoeuvring between these two political camps.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, there has been much discussion of what the West might have done in the past to strengthen the reformist course in Soviet politics and what should be done now to preclude a future coup. Unfortunately, this discussion has been marred by an inadequate appreciation of the primacy that internal forces within the Soviet Union have in determining the politics of that country, and of the consequent difficulty of trying to influence Soviet politics from outside the country. The heated controversy in August over External Affairs Minister Barbara McDougall's handling of Canada's response to the coup is symptomatic of this.