
The USSR after Chernobyl

HILLEL TICKTIN

The regime, through its tardy evacuation of persons and continued use of irradiated land and crops, has effectively killed a very large number of individuals. The numbers killed will only be comparable to the Great Purges of the thirties, but the effect is masked because of its "non-political" and random nature. The nuclear lobby in the West has seen to it that the real effect is not discussed. The pro-Soviet attitudes of such as the *New Scientist* have coincided with the interest of the ruling class in the West in playing down the whole affair. This, of course, is not the attitude of the elite in the USSR which has attacked the non-Soviet media for exaggeration. The first reports of the Soviet media were filled with nothing but vicious attacks on the capitalist West, which served the purpose of drawing attention away from the real failure of the USSR to save its own population.

The dilemma facing the regime has in no way been discussed only whitewashed. Gorbachev, in this respect, has acted as is to be expected of a Stalinist General Secretary. He must have been apprised of the occurrence very quickly but three things would have prevented action. First the requirement of order above all would have militated against telling the truth. The panic would not have been containable and might well have turned against the system itself. Few people believe the Soviet media so that any attempt to tell the truth would have met with despair and anger against a system which only told the truth once it had destroyed their lives. The elite therefore kept the truth to themselves but secondly did not know what action to take. Without a reasonable internal discussion they could not know the real effects of what had occurred, and probably even a month later could not admit the real result even to themselves. Gorbachev probably did not understand what had occurred and only to a limited degree understands it now. Thirdly, the factional infighting must have been considerable for it to have taken a whole week for the Gorbachev faction to inspect the site, in the persons of Ryzhkov and Ligachev. The attempt to blame local inefficiency is the obvious ploy which, however, must reflect on the Ukrainian Party and Shcherbitsky, the secretary. Since the latter belonged to an opposing faction, he must be expected to have had some support, which might well have assisted in the delay. Certainly, the failure to act lies first and foremost at his door.

As regards agriculture, they cannot disregard completely all precautions in regard to production, so that their dependence on the USA for grain must increase. In practice, we might expect that the population will become more vocal as the real meaning of the disaster for agriculture seeps through. The

elite in Kiev will find it hard to have non-local food in its special shops without everyone being aware, even if such were possible.

Faced with the awesome prospect of coming to a deal with the United States or running a crippled economy, with rising discontent and pressure for the import of non-contaminated food, Gorbachev has no alternative but to come to terms with the USA, on American terms. The continuing world depression had placed the USSR in a relatively better position, from which it has now been displaced, probably forever. The United States has read the signs well and decided to kick its apparent opponent while it is down. They are refusing to come to a deal in order ostensibly to permit the USSR to founder. Salt 2 is repudiated and the arms race can be stepped up at a time when the USSR is desperate for arms reductions. Reagan appears, at first sight, to be both mad and vicious and that may indeed be the case but it would be only a very superficial interpretation. Such a view is common among liberals and social democrats, not to speak of Soviet fellow travellers on the left but it does not correspond with reality. Whatever the subjective views of Reagan and Richard Perle, the effect of raising the stakes is not a further degree of tension so much as more shadow boxing on the terms of the coming deal between the two super-powers. Reagan's earlier evil empire policy failed because it both raised the level of internal support in the USSR and provided a mass movement for peace which became enmeshed with Soviet foreign policy. This time, a similar policy would fail for the same reasons, except that it would be more dangerous for the United States as the Soviet elite would be forced to raise its level of support for opposition movements throughout the world, just when it wants to reduce that same support. How can a deal be struck in South Africa, given the importance of the South African Communist Party, without Gorbachev?

Much more fundamentally, U.S. foreign policy has never been based on exterminating the USSR so much as containing it as a means of global stability. Were the USSR now to founder, the U.S. ruling class would be in dire trouble, for without an enemy the Cold War would be implausible, while there would be no power to control the working class elsewhere in the world. The sparring now going on represents the end game, where the USSR is in severe economic crisis, and the United States is fast losing its hegemony both in political and industrial terms. Even as the world finance power it is under threat with a net debtor position, though it is not seriously being challenged by the vanquished powers of the last two world wars. The USA needs to shore up its position, by a favourable deal with the USSR, where the latter effectively opens itself up to the world market, and withdraws support, such as it is, from the nationalist movements around the world. The USSR needs the same deal simply to deal with its discontented population, now more worried and disbelieving in the official propaganda than ever, and its internal economic contradictions. Gorbachev is well aware of his limitations and therefore has to push for negotiations now. If war is ruled out, and it is ruled out simply because the defeat of the USSR is now meaningless in military terms, success must be judged by victory around the negotiating table. Such a deal is inevitable.