

Gorby's still the life of the party

The much-ballyhooed Soviet Central Committee meeting this week turned out to be what the French call a "coup de theatre."
The Bolshoi could not have staged a grander or more dramatic production.

The world held its breath as the USSR's ruling elite met behind the closed gates of the Kremlin to argue ferociously over doing away with the party's monopoly on power. Rumors raged that Mikhail Gorbachev would be overthrown by conservatives. The meeting went into overtime as grim-faced members made dire predictions about the fate of Soviet reformers. Hard-liners delivered thunderous philippics against party "liberals."

One almost expected to see Gorbachev's head come bouncing down the Kremlin steps.

Then the momentous vote and — abracadabra! — 248 out of 250 delegates dutifully raised their hands like robots and voted *da* to Gorby's proposals. There was one abstention. The only *nyet* came from maverick Boris Yeltsin.

Some cliffhanger. Most outsiders who watched this lavish production went away convinced the USSR was tripping down the rose-strewn path to full democracy, gently guided by St. Mikhail the Good. A few cynics, myself included, were left feeling uneasy.

What we have just seen in Moscow reminded me more of the days of Brezhnev and Stalin than the new, democratic Soviet Union that's supposedly just around the corner. Yeltsin's *nyet*, in fact, was the only vote that really counted. And voting with Yeltsin was the ghost of the late Andrei Sakharov.

Before Sakharov's death, both men had issued stern warnings that Gorbachev, far from leading the nation to democracy, was amassing too much power in his hands.

wood. This week he denounced "the authoritarian-bureaucratic system" which is the best description I've yet heard of the Communist party. Gorbachev intends to promote his much-favored "creative chaos" and a process of controlled, semi-democratic ferment to break the party's grip on every phase of life in the USSR.

But note that the powerful KGB boss, a close ally of Gorbachev, warned that "non-socialist" or "extremist" parties would not be allowed in the new multi-party system. This suggests the old umbrella Communist party will break up into independent factions of the left, centre and right, the latter becoming European-style social democrats. Names and titles may change, but communists will still be running the Soviet Union.

It will be a younger generation of hi-tech communists — dapper, suave and 'progressive' — led by that consummate politician, showman and chameleon, Mikhail Gorbachev.

That is, of course, if all goes according to plan. Things in old Mother Russia have a propensity for getting out of hand. The fires Gorby has lit to burn away party deadwood may run out of control. Soviet consumers and workers are increasingly furious at the privileged fates of the party. There is a whiff of revolution in the air. And, of course, the growing problem of whole nations that want to pull out of the crumbling USSR.

All this adds up to a state of chronic instability and commotion inside the Soviet Union that promises to go on for years, if not decades. Why? Because Gorbachev is trying the contradictory and impossible task of being at the same time reformer and preserver of the system. Call it, saving communism from communism.

Or, as the brilliant Soviet poet Yevtushenko put it, Gorbachev is "half mutineer and half suppressor of the rebellion he has given birth to!"



Eric MARGOLIS

After Stalin died, subsequent Soviet oligarchs ensured that no leader would have the late tyrant's total powers. But Gorbachev has managed to quietly and patiently reassemble much of Stalin's control system.

He is now party leader, head of the government and chief of state. Just recently, in a little-noted move, Gorbachev also became leader of the newly created government of the Russian Republic, the USSR's largest component. When I was in Moscow in June, 1988, I learned from senior party sources that Gorbachev would slowly ease himself away from the unresponsive Communist party and run the USSR through a presidential system. This fact was reported then in my *Sun* column — the same news "exclusive" that CNN made such a fuss over two weeks ago.

Gorbachev's plans have been evident for a long time — if people would only look hard at what's going on in the USSR. Like Stalin, Gorbachev has found the fossilized party unresponsive to his commands and slowly strangling the country. Stalin's answer was to shoot two million party members and murder 30 million other Soviet citizens. After that, the party became highly responsive to "Uncle Joe's" wishes.

Gorbachev is going to use the multi-party system to try to burn away the vast accumulation of party dead-