SOVIETS, A MECHANISM OF CONTROL

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If we ask what it is that controls persons working in the various institutions of a given country, we are confronted with a difficult question. A proper answer would require analysis developed from a variety of disciplines — law, economics, sociology, psychology — to name the most prominent. The answer would be a long one. But particular aspects of this universal question are important in their own right and can be answered more easily: this article will explore the place of local soviets as yet another control mechanism among a very broad range of control devices utilized by the Soviet government. The type of control referred to throughout should be read in the milder Russian sense of supervision or checking (kontrol') and not in the more dominating English sense of exercising directing or restraining power (which would be closer to rukovodit' or upravliat').

1. Ordinary Controls

First of all, there is in the Soviet Union a large number of controls operating in the national economy that are not different from those utilized in western countries. One may begin with the kind of control exercised in the running of an enterprise; these are controls in the sense of management procedures that regulate the operation of a business producing either goods or services. Very simply this means that the managers carry out their supervisory tasks, keeping employees working toward the goals (profits, service) that the organization sets for itself. In the Soviet case, this kind of management is carried out by national ministries and their local offices, represented by departments and administrations under executive committees of local soviets. The goals originate with the political leadership and are by and large expressed in annual plans and budgets.

Within the management framework the Soviets also employ a second kind of control mechanism, namely, control over finance of the kind exercised by banks and by internal and external auditors of enterprises. In addition, there is the kind of checking commonly called “quality control” over the production
of a given item. Such supervision (nadzor) is carried out by inspectorates within producing ministries or, in some cases, an inspectorate may set standards for the population at large — an example would be a sanitary inspectorate under the Ministry of Health prescribing rules of public hygiene.\footnote{1}

Control by agencies of the law has a perfectly normal side to it, namely, investigation of things like theft and embezzlement. However, Soviet use of police and courts reveals things that are unique to communist states. In the first place, the concept of economic crime is a broad one in the USSR (it can be punished with death). Second, the informer network of the political police is an unusual means of general surveillance of the population; the informer (stukach) is undoubtedly the ultimate instrument of control in the USSR.\footnote{2}

Briefly, then, the “government”, or the ministerial apparatus of the state, carries out a wide range of ordinary control operations in such broad and relatively normal fields as management, quality control, and criminal investigation.

2. Extraordinary Controls

A second range of controls will appear unusual to the westerner. We draw attention here to mass organizations used as control mechanisms in the economy. The three major organizations have, of course, a series of functions of which control is but one. These organizations are the Party, the Komsomol, and the labor unions. Along with other tasks, each of these has units at the work place whose primary task is to influence the fulfillment of objectives set out in the economic plan. To take one example, the Communist Party has, among its seventeen million members, close to one million primary party organizations and party groups, spread through the work force of the USSR, each one charged with contributing to labor discipline and plan fulfillment.\footnote{3} In addition, the Komsomol, with a membership of about forty one million persons, and the labor unions with another hundred and thirty million members, are organized either partly or wholly into units at the work place.\footnote{4}

The combined membership of the three mass organizations listed above has not been sufficient, apparently, to accomplish the kind of supervision of the work force that the leadership feels is necessary. Since the time of Khrushchev another mass organization of control has been expanded and given greater powers to deal with malperformance at the work place. This is the People’s Control Committee, an organization with ministerial rank at the national level, and with a membership of some nine million members divided up into groups and “posts” that, again, saturate the work places of the USSR. Their aim is not only to correct misdeeds, but also to prevent practises that lower productivity — Soviet literature emphasizes the prophylactic nature of people’s control. The members of these groups are supposed to look for ways to reduce costs of production primarily by finding economies in the use of raw materials. They also investigate mismanagement, punish malefactors with reprimands or fines, and turn over criminal cases to the procuracy.\footnote{5} The successes of