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Stalin's Ghost Walks Again

FEW events arouse more speculation than a political upheaval in Moscow. Nobody in the West knows exactly what has happened, for the Russians themselves say nothing, or indulge in "double talk" which is intended to confuse and mystify. The most recent changes have been interpreted—with some assistance from Communist reports of doubtful value—as the result of an attempt to depose Mr Khrushchov. There may indeed have been a conflict within the Presidium, the policy-making committee of the Communist Party, but it could have arisen from Mr Khrushchov's desire to remove potential rivals or lukewarm colleagues. A bid for power by Mr Molotov, Mr Malenkov and Mr Kaganovich sounds more dramatic than convincing. (Mr Shepilov, the fourth member of the group, was not a voting member of the Presidium.)

Three of the four involved were already out of favour, and although men who feel their positions to be insecure will sometimes take drastic measures they will not act out of character, and it is hard to see Mr Molotov as anything but the cautious diplomat. (Old Stone Bottom, the Americans called him.) Mr Malenkov was forced to resign the Premiership in 1955, and since then has been somewhat in the background. Mr Molotov is 67—not a good age for a conspirator—and has been on the outer edge of the ruling group since June of last year, when he had to give up his post as Foreign Minister. It is true that both these men remained in the Presidium, the most powerful body in the Soviet Union, and were therefore able to oppose Mr Khrushchov on matters of policy. If they were supported by Mr Kaganovich they could well have become a dissident group which Mr Khrushchov had reason to fear. But the "rebels" were men of wide experience and exceptional ability. Mr Molotov would surely understand that the balance of power could not be shifted in the Presidium without Red Army support, and there is no evidence that this was

available. Further, Mr Khrushchov's supporters have given him majorities in the Central Committee and the Party Secretariat since the 20th Party Congress (which repudiated Stalinism), and they are also numerous among the candidate members of the Presidium. Unless the "rebels" had won rapid support in these influential bodies, an attempt to defeat Mr Khrushchov in the Presidium would have been an operation in a vacuum. It seems most unlikely that Mr Molotov and Mr Malenkov could have gained adherents while they were both palpably on the way out. In Soviet Russia the struggle can only be between equals: a statesman who loses ground will instantly lose friends as well, and when the landslide begins there is no way back to the centre of power.

A "revolt" may be the official version, but the events are more credibly an extension of the policy against Stalinism. Mr Molotov, Mr Malenkov and Mr Kaganovich were all close to the dictator for many years. It may well be that the immediate target was Mr Kaganovich (Stalin's brother-in-law), and that his dismissal was made easier by linking him to three men whose influence had already been weakened. So far the Presidium has survived the upheaval. It has been purged of Stalinism, and the new members stand with Mr Khrushchov. The question to be asked now is whether committee rule can remain effective under a dominant personality or whether it will be replaced gradually by a dictatorship. Edward Crankshaw, a shrewd observer of the Russian scene, believes that the Presidium cannot remain in a state of uneasy balance. Sooner or later, he thinks, it will have to move either towards one-man dictatorship or a more democratic regime. Mr Khrushchov may have the answer. In making his stand against Stalinism he seems to have committed himself to collective leadership, and may live to establish it firmly—if Stalin's ghost will let him.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 26, 1957.