

July 17, 1968

Speech by P. Shelest at the CPSU CC Plenum

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Summary:

First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party Petro Shelest speaks at a CPSU Plenum on the situation in Czechoslovakia, characterizing the Prague Spring as "a grave, right-wing opportunist danger in a fraternal Communist party and the growth of anti-socialist, counterrevolutionary forces in socialist Czechoslovakia."

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Speech by Cde. P. E. Shelest at
the CPSU CC Plenum, 17 July 1968[1]

Comrades![2]

The issue being discussed by the CPSU CC Plenum[3] is of exceptionally great importance for the whole international Communist and workers' movement and for the cause of socialism.

What we are considering today is not merely some minor difficulties or complex processes, as some of the leading officials in Czechoslovakia keep on trying to convince us. Instead, what we are considering is a grave, right-wing opportunist danger in a fraternal Communist party and the growth of anti-socialist, counterrevolutionary forces in socialist Czechoslovakia.

What is especially troubling is that the leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia are paying lip service to the existence of a serious danger, but at the same time are making no effort to wage a decisive struggle against it.

Why not? Can it be that they are spineless, wishy-washy liberals?[4] Hardly! Dubček, Černík, and certain other leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia know no equal when it comes to the struggle against so-called "conservatives," even though these "conservatives" do not pose the slightest threat to anyone.

But with barely a murmur during this struggle they have dismissed hundreds of senior party officials and subjected them to groundless attacks, harassment, and outright persecution. This has affected not only officials in the center, but nearly all the secretaries of regional, municipal, and district party committees.

The KSČ leaders failed to take into account that these officials included many hard-working and devoted Communists who created the party, worked in the anti-fascist underground, and bore the entire burden of establishing a workers' and peasants' government and of building socialism in that country.[5]

At the same time, the KSČ leaders have failed to hold even a single member of the nefarious right-wing opportunist group strictly accountable before the party, and have not even voiced any criticism of the rightists.[6] By now these rightists can be regarded as an organized group. Under the guise of a phony democracy, they are displaying what for Communists is an unacceptable degree of tolerance for the statements of anti-socialist and counterrevolutionary elements, and they are thereby essentially betraying the interests of the working class and of socialism.

At the April Plenum of the CPSU CC it was said that the CC of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had lost control over the mass media - the press, radio, and television.[7] The Czech leaders acknowledged this, too.

Since then, more than three months have passed. But has the situation changed? No, not at all. If anything, it has deteriorated further.[8] And the point to be stressed here, as you understand, is that the whole matter could have been resolved within hours if they had simply restored order and reasserted control over everything. But nothing of the sort has been done. As before, these supremely powerful levers of ideological influence are under the control of opportunist and anti-socialist elements, who are actively using them to carry out political terror, deceive the working class, and strike at the party's healthy forces. In the press, on radio, and on television, they openly purvey hostile, counterrevolutionary, anti-Soviet propaganda. They have

exerted great pressure on the ongoing district and regional party conferences, and they are continuing with their unfounded persecution and vilification of devoted party cadres.[9] They are pinning the label of "conservatives" on these honest cadres and are extolling the so-called "progressives," that is, the members of the right-wing opportunist and revisionist group.[10]

Only in these circumstances could a patently counterrevolutionary manifesto appear in the central newspapers under the title of "2,000 Words." [11] Despite the KSC CC Presidium's formal condemnation of this document, the press, radio, and television are giving wide and positive coverage to it. Moreover, this disgraceful document has become a lively topic of discussion at district and regional party conferences. At some of the conferences, through the connivance of the CC and regional party committees, the document has been endorsed by some of the delegates.

This shows how demagoguery about freedom of speech can be exploited by counterrevolutionaries. This is where the game of "unlimited" democracy and a Czechoslovak "model of socialism" has brought us!

The Czechoslovak comrades babble on about their wholehearted support for "democratic socialism." But they disregard the fact that our country, the first country in the world in which socialism triumphed, has already been living and prospering for more than 50 years in accordance with socialist laws. What sort of "democratic socialism" are they promoting? If you examine their statements closely, you can see that the word "democratic" is a cover for a transformation of the socialist order, depriving it of its class essence.[12] As you know, no such thing as abstract democracy exists in nature. Democracy always was and is class-based. Anyone who fails to recognize this cannot be called a Communist.

Some people in Czechoslovakia are urging that the Communist Party should become an elite party, not a party of the working class. This "theory" is alien to Marxism-Leninism insofar as Communists always have totally defended and continue to defend the interests of the vanguard element of our society - the working class.

But this, unfortunately, is not the only problem. All sorts of hostile groups are taking shape in the country. The former right-wing Social Democrats are resurrecting their party, something that no self-respecting Communist Party should ever permit.[13] In Czechoslovakia, however, these groups are encountering no resistance at all. Moreover, the leaders of the KSC claim that the CPSU and other fraternal parties are supposedly dramatizing and exaggerating the situation in their party and country. They are saying this to gloss over the urgency of the situation and to make us let down our guard.

For this reason we can say, with full responsibility, that by losing control [of the mass media], abandoning the principles of democratic centralism, and failing to punish the increased activity of the right-wing opportunist group, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia is deviating from the principles of Marxism-Leninism and a class-based, proletarian assessment of the processes and events under way in the party and country. How can it be that a "permanent" session of the Prague municipal party committee is being allowed to carry out subversive work against the decisions and measures of the KSC CC, attacking the CC from right-wing opportunist positions? [14]

Undoubtedly there are healthy forces in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. But if they are not soon mobilized and do not adopt decisive measures in the near future to destroy the enemies of socialism, and if we fail to provide them with comprehensive support, it cannot be excluded that the Communist Party will gradually be transformed into a social-democratic entity and the country will lose its socialist gains. This is something that we, the Soviet Communists, cannot permit.[15]

The other fraternal parties that took part in the Warsaw meeting also will not permit this. Our means and capabilities, and the efforts we have exerted in connection with the changing situation in Czechoslovakia, have probably[16] been inadequate thus far. That is why we must act quickly to use every possible means of halting the counterrevolution.

In his report Comrade Brezhnev convincingly gave a comprehensive analysis of the situation in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and in the country. His report showed what enormous work the CC Politburo of our party and the CC Politburos of the other fraternal Marxist-Leninist parties have been carrying out to help the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia objectively and correctly comprehend the situation and to prevent them from abandoning socialism or taking steps that will be inimical to their party and to socialism.

It must also be said that they [the Czechoslovak leaders] have listened closely to our arguments and agreed with our points. They have even thanked us for our advice and claimed that all the negative things happening in their party and country can supposedly be explained by the fact that they, as new leaders, have not yet fully gained control of the situation and have not yet been able to embark on a struggle against the enemies of socialism.

Life has shown that some of these leaders are only masquerading under revolutionary phrases and are pretending to support friendship with our party and country and devotion to the cause of socialism. In reality they are playing a double game - saying one thing and doing another.

As you know, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia adopted an important document, the so-called "Action Program," even though a better program had already been laid out in the resolutions of the KSČ's 13th Congress.[17] We did not express open criticism of the[18] "Action Program," but we candidly told the Czechoslovak comrades about its shortcomings, particularly that it deviated from a Marxist-Leninist conception of the leading role of the party. We warned them that their enemies might exploit the weak points in this program. Unfortunately, that is precisely what happened. With the connivance of the KSČ CC, the rightist elements are disseminating their propaganda by seizing on the weak points of the "Action Program."

It is not by chance that forces hostile to socialism exploited this "program" when composing their own counterrevolutionary manifesto, the "2,000 Words," which was aimed at discrediting the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and inciting anarchy and a fundamental change of the social order.[19] The document was an attempt to bring about the ideological destruction of the Communist Party and to push it onto a bourgeois-liberal path, placing Czechoslovakia in opposition to the commonwealth of socialist countries.

Obviously we must now speak openly about and voice Marxist-Leninist criticism of this "Action Program" so that we can help the healthy forces in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia understand how far they have been dragged into an opportunistic morass by certain leaders of the party.

It is impossible to understand why the Czechoslovak comrades have displayed such complacency when faced with the intensifying propaganda of Western imperialist circles, particularly the U.S.A. and West Germany. The point here is not only that with the advent of new leaders this propaganda has not been given a necessary rebuff, but that in Czechoslovakia itself the propaganda is being featured prominently in the newspapers, on television, and on radio. The only thing this accommodating approach by the KSČ CC Presidium has achieved is to play into the hands of the counterrevolutionaries.

Has this situation arisen by chance? No, it is not by chance. This is evident from the unusual interest that the imperialist circles of the United States of America and West Germany have shown in the events in Czechoslovakia, and the elaborate promises they have made that they will extend large-scale credits once a government of right-wing opportunist elements[20] has come to power and broken away from the Soviet Union. The West German revanchists are especially delighted by these events. They have even put forth the notion of a "united Europe." [21] They are claiming that "the hour of truth, having arrived in Czechoslovakia in various spheres of social and state activities, is creating an important basis for a united Europe."

These designs of our class enemies must induce caution among all Communists.[22] Indeed, at the Warsaw meeting of the leaders of parties and governments of the socialist countries, it was said, with all the candor one would expect of Marxist-Leninists, that a mortal danger is hanging over the Communist Party and socialism in Czechoslovakia, and that all necessary assistance must therefore be given to that country to extirpate the forces of counterrevolution, uphold the unity of the party on a Marxist-Leninist basis, and defend socialism - the great achievement of the working class in Czechoslovakia.

Every party bears responsibility first and foremost before its own working class and its own people. At the same time, each party bears responsibility before the international forces of socialism.

In fulfilling our internationalist duty, our party and people bore enormous sacrifices to destroy the dark forces of fascism and liberate the occupied peoples. Our relations with the Communist Party and people of Czechoslovakia have been sealed with the blood of our joint struggle against the common enemy, reinforced by our fraternal alliance relations.

As a result, we are unable - and do not have the right - to stand idly by while all this is happening so close to our western border, in socialist Czechoslovakia. And if the Czechoslovak leaders do not want to mobilize the party and people in a sustained struggle against the counterrevolution to defuse it and then deal it a decisive blow, we must openly tell them that we have a different view and might end up on the opposite side of the barricades.[23]

They must also know that the Soviet Union and its friends in the Warsaw Pact will never permit the counterrevolution to tear apart the Communist Party and people of Czechoslovakia. In this respect, we have every right to do whatever is needed to fulfill our alliance obligations and defend the socialist gains of the Czechoslovak people.

In the dangerous situation that has unfolded, we must act in a well-conceived way, but also boldly and decisively, since time is slipping away. The threat to the great cause of socialism does not give us the right to behave in any other way.

As a participant in the Dresden and Warsaw meetings and also in meetings with the leaders of the Communist Party of Slovakia, I want to emphasize the profound unease that the leaders of the fraternal parties and governments of the socialist countries and the KSČ's own healthy forces feel about the situation in Czechoslovakia and the unanimity of their views about recent events and about measures that must be carried out to protect the gains of socialism in Czechoslovakia.[24] The letter sent by the participants in the Warsaw meeting to the KSČ Central Committee unquestionably will help the party's healthy forces launch a decisive attack against the opportunist group and mobilize the workers and all laborers to destroy the counterrevolution and defend socialism.

The conclusions of Comrade Brezhnev's report are very serious and totally correct. The steps he mentions there are absolutely essential. The Communists of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are well aware of what is going on in neighboring Czechoslovakia and are assessing it properly. They ardently and unanimously support the measures carried out by the CPSU Central Committee and will do everything to provide urgent assistance to the Communists and Czechoslovak people at this trying hour.[25]

[1]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This plenum was convened on 17 July to endorse the Soviet delegation's actions at the recently-concluded Warsaw meeting. For the declassified transcripts, see "Iyul'skii Plenum TsK KPSS (17.VII.1968)," in RGANI, F. 2, Op. 3, Dd. 108-119, as cited above. The plenum was designed to convey the CPSU Politburo's views and to affix the Central Committee's imprimatur on the Politburo's stance. Despite earlier speculation by Western analysts, the transcripts and other newly declassified materials show that the plenum was not convened as a way of responding to pressure from below or of seeking advice from the Central Committee. On the contrary, the plenum was merely an element in the top-down process that characterized Soviet decision-making throughout the crisis. Brezhnev and his Politburo colleagues determined the outcome of the plenum in advance and used it to ensure that the Politburo's position would be binding on all lower-level party organizations. Brezhnev opened the plenum with a lengthy speech highlighting the results of the Warsaw meeting and the events that led up to it. Shelest spoke immediately after Brezhnev. The Ukrainian leader had taken part in the Warsaw meeting (as he did in the Dresden conference), and, aside from Brezhnev, he was the only member of the Soviet delegation in Warsaw who spoke at the 17 July plenum. The marked-up version of Shelest's speech, before it was published in the final stenographic account (stenograficheskii otchet) of the plenum, is stored in RGANI, F. 2, Op. 3, D. 112, Ll. 41-51. The version in the stenographic account is in RGANI, F. 2, Op. 3, D. 114, Ll. 9-9ob. The version of the speech stored in the Ukrainian archives (as translated here) is the typescript that Shelest actually used at the plenum. It contains the markings he made before delivering his remarks. The marked-up typescript is nearly identical (though not quite) to the version of his speech in the "author's copy" (avtorskii ekzempliar) and stenographic account of the plenum transcript. The transcript incorporates the changes that Shelest made in handwriting on his typescript, but the paragraph formatting is different, and in one or two places the wording is very slight different. The mark-ups on the "author's copy" were designed mainly to bring the uncorrected copy into line with the original typescript that Shelest used. The changes that Shelest made in the typescript, and the mark-ups that he made on the "author's copy" of the plenum transcript on 18 July (according to a date Shelest added next to his signature on the final page of the speech), will be noted here.

[2]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the plenum transcript, the exclamation point was deleted, and a comma was inserted, linking the "Comrades" with the next sentence.

[3]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the plenum transcript, this was changed from "CPSU CC Plenum" to "Central Committee Plenum."

[4]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the typescript, the word translated here as "spineless" was beskharakternye, but Shelest changed it in handwriting to beskhrebetnye. The two words mean roughly the same thing (spineless, weak-willed, unprincipled).

[5]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest added the words "in that country" in handwriting at the end of this sentence.

[6]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The typescript included "of Kriegel, Císař, Šik, and others" after the word "group," but Shelest deleted that portion and ended the sentence there. He then added the brief sentence immediately after it.

[7]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: See Shelest's report on this plenum in Document No. 4 above. See also the text of his speech at the plenum in my accompanying article in this issue of the CWIHP Bulletin.

[8]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest added the word "further" (eshche bol'she) in handwriting.

[9]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The "district and regional party conferences" to which Shelest is referring here are the sessions that were being held throughout Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968 to elect delegates for the KSČ's Extraordinary Fourteenth Congress. Soviet leaders had been hoping that the conferences would support the KSČ's "healthy forces" at the expense of radical reformers, but these hopes were sorely disappointed. A popular backlash in Czechoslovakia against the Soviet, East German, and Polish condemnations of the Prague Spring helped reform-minded KSČ officials garner an overwhelming share of votes at the party conferences - precisely what the Soviet Politburo feared most. Candidates who openly supported the "Two Thousand Words" manifesto did particularly well. By early July 1968 it was clear that ardent reformers in the KSČ were going to dominate the Fourteenth Congress, gaining ample leeway to remove orthodox, pro-Moscow officials en masse. This prospect accentuated the time constraints that Soviet leaders believed they were facing, and it spawned even greater anxiety in East Berlin and Warsaw about a possible spill-over from Czechoslovakia.

[10]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest added the word "right-wing" by hand before the word "opportunist."

[11]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the typescript, the word "political" appeared right after the word "counterrevolutionary" in this sentence, but Shelest crossed it out.

[12]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the typescript, this paragraph ended here. Shelest moved the next paragraph up to this one, adding the words "As you know" at the beginning.

[13]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Social Democratic Party was forced to merge with the KSČ after the Communists seized power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. For the next twenty years the Social Democrats ceased to exist as an independent entity. Some of the leaders of the disbanded party (e.g., Zdeněk Fierlinger and Evžen Erban) were given senior posts in the KSČ, but other officials had to work in menial jobs or, in certain cases, were arrested and imprisoned. In the early spring of 1968, numerous journalists, political commentators, and former Social Democrats called for the party to be restored as an independent force. Dubček brushed aside these proposals, and the KSČ Presidium and Central Committee consistently reaffirmed the Communist Party's leading role and condemned attempts to revive the Social Democratic Party. Fierlinger and Erban both joined in the denunciations of the "anti-Communist" proposals to reestablish the Social Democrats. Despite these obstacles, a preparatory committee was set up in Prague in March-April 1968 to pave the way for a revival of the Social Democratic Party. Similar committees were soon formed in Brno, Ostrava, Plzeň, and other cities. By the summer of 1968, more than 150 such groups had been established. The KSČ discouraged the formation of these committees, but did not take concrete action to disband them. However, pressure for some sort of crackdown gradually increased, as senior party officials warned that after the 14th KSČ Congress the Social Democrats might reemerge as a full-fledged political party with a program attractive enough to Czechoslovak citizens that the party would become "a real opposition force." Cited from "Zpráva o současné politické situaci Československé socialistické republiky a podmínkách činnosti Komunistické strany Československé (srpen 1968)," report by the KSČ Secretariat, August 1968, in SÚA, Arch. ÚV KSČ, F. 02/1, LI. 25-26, 44. The Soviet invasion in August 1968 put an end to any further prospect that the Social Democrats would be revived as an independent party. The Moscow Protocol, signed on 26 August by Soviet and Czechoslovak leaders, specifically prohibited the formation of a Social Democratic Party and other "anti-socialist organizations."

[14]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The KSČ's Prague municipal committee, headed by Bohumil Šimon, was arguably the most radical organization within the Communist Party. Almost every member of the committee strongly advocated comprehensive reform and democratization. Starting in early July 1968, the Prague committee established a "permanent session," which Soviet leaders construed as an attempt to forge an alternative power structure alongside the KSČ Central Committee and Presidium. In a top-secret report prepared after the invasion, the Soviet KGB alleged that "the Prague municipal party committee, which assumed the role of an underground CC of the KSČ, became the counterrevolutionary core of the party organs. The top posts in the Prague municipal committee were long ago taken over

by right-revisionist and extremist elements . . ." The report also alleged that after Soviet troops marched into Czechoslovakia, "the [KSČ] leadership used the Prague municipal committee and an operational staff within the Interior Ministry to form a network consisting of underground radio stations, the press, television, armed counterrevolutionary groups, and supplies of weapons, ammunition, and equipment. The KSČ's Prague municipal committee played a key role in organizing protests against the five socialist countries," in "convening the '14th KSČ Congress,'" in "organizing hostile activities on the radio," and in "fomenting anti-Soviet hysteria in the ČSSR and confusing the majority of the population, causing them to oppose the USSR." Cited from "O deyatel'nosti kontrrevolyutsionnogo podpol'ya v Chekhoslovakii," LI. 117-118.

[15]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest changed this from "will not permit" to "cannot permit.," though in the process he made a slight grammatical error that was corrected in the plenum transcript.

[16]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest added the words "vozmozhno i" (probably) here in handwriting. It sounds somewhat awkward in English, but in Russian it is a way of softening the statement.

[17]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The 13th Congress of the KSČ took place in May and June 1966. No reforms of any sort were proposed there, and the Congress merely approved an orthodox Marxist-Leninist program for the "construction and development of socialism." For the official proceedings and related documents, see XIII. sjezd Komunistické strany Československa (Prague: ÚV KSČ, 1966 and 1967).

[18]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the "author's copy," Shelest inserted the word *etu* here, changing "the" to "this."

[19]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest's allegation is accurate in one minor respect. Almost all of the language in the 2,000 Words article was based directly or indirectly on the Action Program.

[20]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest changed this word in the typescript from "forces" to "elements."

[21]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: These remarks were first cited in "Na chto nadeyutsya v Bonne: Podozritel'naya voznya na stranitsakh zapadnogermanskoi pechati," *Izvestiya* (Moscow), 15 May 1968, p. 2. Similar comments were reported in A. Butenko, "Pod fal'shivym flagom 'navedeniya mostov,'" *Izvestiya* (Moscow), 16 May 1968, pp. 2-3 and V. Stepanov, "Vedushchaya sila stroitel'stva kommunizma," *Izvestiya* (Moscow) 11 May 1968, pp. 2-3, which noted that "imperialists" and "revanchists" believe that "any signs of liberalization . . . will lead to the evisceration of Communism." The notion of forging a "united Europe" through increased contacts with the East-Central European states underlay the West German government's initial conception of Ostpolitik, including its approaches to Czechoslovakia in 1968. This early version of Ostpolitik was similar to the U.S. policy of "bridge-building." The goal of both policies was to establish a web of direct links with the East-Central European states - outside Moscow's auspices - to encourage internal liberalization and a gradual loosening of ties with the Soviet Union, leading over time to the erosion of the East-West divide in Europe. On the logic of West German policy in Europe before and during the Czechoslovak crisis, see Adolf Müller and Bedřich Utitz, *Deutschland und die Tschechoslowakei: Zwei Nachbarvolker auf dem Weg zur Verständigung* (Freudenstadt: Campus Forschung, 1972), pp. 203-298; James H. Wolfe, "West Germany and Czechoslovakia: The Struggle for Reconciliation," *Orbis*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1970), pp. 154-179; Libor Rouček, *Die Tschechoslowakei und die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1949-1989: Bestimmungsfaktoren, Entwicklungen und Probleme ihrer Beziehungen* (Munich: Tuduv, 1990); Eric G. Frey, *Division and Détente: The Germanies and Their Alliances* (New York: Praeger, 1987); Boris Meissner, ed., *Die deutsche Ostpolitik 1961-1970: Kontinuität und Wandel - Dokumentation* (Koln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1970); Klaus Hildebrand, *Integration und die Souveranität: die Aussenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1949-1982* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1991); and Lawrence L. Whetten, *Germany's Ostpolitik: Relations Between the Federal Republic and the Warsaw Pact Countries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). The notion that increased contacts with the East-Central European states would eventually lead to a "united Europe" was very different from another conception of a "united Europe" that had long been associated

with Franz Josef Strauss, the conservative nationalist leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU) in West Germany. Strauss and other CSU politicians emphasized West European unity against the Soviet bloc. In their view, it was misguided to seek improved relations with the Communist states as a stepping-stone to larger goals. They argued that the FRG's policy in Europe should focus predominantly on building increased cohesion among the Western capitalist countries. Policy toward the Soviet bloc, they contended, should remain as it had been in the 1950s.

[22]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest crossed out the words "us and" after the word "among."

[23]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest made two small changes in this sentence that toned it down slightly. First, he changed the perfective verb *podnyat'* to the imperfective *podnimat'*, giving it the sense of a more sustained struggle. Second, he changed the final part to "might end up on" instead of "are on."

[24]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the typescript, the last part of this sentence read: "must be adopted to protect socialist gains." Shelest changed it by hand.

[25]TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In the plenum transcript, a parenthetical "Applause" (Aplodismenty) was inserted by the stenographer at the end of this paragraph.