**GORBACHEV AND THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM**

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Mikhail Gorbachev's period as President of the Soviet Union, 1985-91, was truly revolutionary. But Steven Morewood argues that he failed to understand or control the forces he unleashed.

When Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev came to power as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on 11 March 1985 drastic reforms were demanded if the faltering USSR was to remain a superpower still able to compete with its arch-rival, the United States. Enmeshed in Afghanistan, threatened by the 'New Cold War', with a hawk (Ronald Reagan) in the White House, the economy was in free fall and living standards were plummeting. Gorbachev's predecessor, Yuri Andropov, had already concluded that reforms were needed, but he fell fatally ill before he could initiate them.

Under Gorbachev, political, economic, social and foreign policy changes became the order of the day. Each fed off the other, so that reform gained a momentum of its own, and, in the end, control over policy was wrested from the centre. Ultimately, the limited transformation which was intended to salvage the socialist system brought its collapse – in the Eastern European outer empire in 1989 and the USSR itself in December 1991, when Gorbachev fell from power and 15 independent states emerged.

**Gorbachev: motives and interpretations**

There are differing interpretations of Gorbachev's original objectives, Some western academics see him as a pragmatic reformer learning as he went along; others think be was driven reluctantly by popular pressure down the road of more radical reform; a third group believe he was a stooge of the KGB, a conspiracy theory widely credited in Eastern Europe because of the widespread return post-1989 of communists to power under new guises; Archie Brown, on the other hand, portrays him as a secret social democrat who could only gradually realise his true ambitions.

Brown notes that, even when he was in office, Gorbachev's motives were subject to differing interpretations in the West. In 1985-86 he was regarded with some suspicion, as a technocrat who had changed the style but not the substance of the Soviet system. Certainly British intelligence viewed Gorbachev as a resolute Marxist-Leninist with a flair for public relations stunts to mask his true intentions. From 1987 to 1989, both within and outside the USSR, Gorbachev's image was that of the great reformer introducing genuine political and economic change. If confirmation of his ‘New Thinking' in foreign policy were needed, it came with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989. Finally, in his last two years in office (1990-91), Gorbachev's reputation declined, especially at home, where Boris Yeltsin grasped the nettle of reform and made the General Secretary look positively conservative, a convinced Leninist unwilling to jeopardise personal power through introducing true democracy.

The historiography on Gorbachev began when he was in power and continues to accumulate. There is already a clear divide between the hagiographical accounts written during the Gorbachev era when the end result of his reforms, then clouded in his over-optimistic rhetoric, remained to be determined, and more recent accounts like Jonathon Steele’s Eternal Russia (1994) or David Pryce Jones’ The War That Never Was: The Fall of the Soviet Empire 1985-1991 (1995) which, in the light of events, generally adopt a much more critical tone.

Martin Walker’s *The Waking Giant* (London, 1987), Moshe Lewin’s The Gorbachev Phenomenon (California, 1988) and Anders Aslund’s *Gorbachev’s Struggle for Economic Reform* (London, 1990) are good examples of contemporary histories leaning towards a pro-Gorbachev line. They naturally reflect the great optimism which his reforms generated in the West. Yet the tide of criticism began to grow – Dusko Doder and Louise Branson’s *Gorbachev: Heretic in the Kremlin* (London, 1990) being an early fusillade – as the reforms got bogged down and popular protest grew in tandem.

Anatoly Lukyanov, the speaker of the Congress of People’s Deputies, and one of the instigators of a failed coup against him, said that Gorbachev envisaged perestroika (economic restructuring) as ‘a modernising and deepening of socialism, not its destruction’. Promoting his memoirs in 1996, Gorbachev conceded that the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe had not been his original intention:

*‘When I became General Secretary, I admit that I was not free from the illusions of any predecessors. I thought we could unite socialism and democracy and give socialism a second wind. But the totalitarian model had relied on dictatorship and violence, and I can see that this was not acceptable to the people…I wanted to change the Soviet Union, not destroy it. I started too late to reform the party, and I waited too long to create a market economy.’*

Gorbachev equated communism, in its pure form, with Christianity (brotherhood, justice, equality , world peace) and naively believed that by returning to these ideals the system could be saved. In truth, the system was so corrupt and decayed as to be unreformable.

**Rise to Power**

Gorbachev was not a typical Soviet leader. He was young (55 on coming to power when the average age of Politburo members was 70), was not part of the generation which fought in the Second World War, and had visited the West on informal trips in the 1970s, marvelling at the higher living standards and relaxed attitudes he encountered. He considered himself ‘a man of the sixties’, favourably influenced by the 1968 Prague Spring whose pioneering reforms have been seen as the progenitor of his own. Gorbachev feared that radical political reforms in the beginning would unnerve the communist old guard and like, Khruschev before him (1964), force his removal. In his memoirs, Gorbachev recounts how Andropov declined his invitation to dinner as it would only generate suspicion: ‘tomorrow, there would be all kinds of loose talk – who, why, where, what was said?’ So he paid lip service to Marxist-Leninist dogma to secure power – although the depth of Gorbachev’s ideological commitment to the communist system remains a matter of controversy.

What is beyond dispute is that when Gorbachev came to power change was necessary to save the system even if, in the end, his reforms sowed the seeds of its destruction. The rate of economic growth had fallen to zero, corruption was endemic with the black economy growing, worker productivity was falling, the neglected services sector contributed to a shortage of consumer goods and falling living standards, the social infrastructure was decaying and the technological backwardness widened the performance gap with the West. The Soviet bloc as a whole suffered from these problems to a lesser or greater extent.

**‘What is to be done?’**

Something had to be done and quickly. But Gorbachev’s solution perestroika (economic restructuring) And glasnost (openness), the main planks of his reforms, unlocked a Pandora’s box. Mark Almond has suggested that ‘a different approach by Gorbachev himself could have had significantly different results’. In retrospect, he would have been wiser to have followed the Chinese model of liberating the economy while keeping a tight grip on political change. Instead the two types of reform got out of kilter: while the economy floundered, political reform took an a life of its own and became unstoppable. Gorbachev soon faced calls for true democracy and religious freedom, while his lessening grip impelled nationalist movements into life. He explains the combination of economic reform and democratisation as rendered necessary by the need to appeal over the heads of the resistant socialist bureaucracy to the population at large.

Glasnost, with its emphasis on the political dimension, involved allowing criticisms of past and present governments and came to mean a freer press, multi-candidate elections and a commitment to world peace. Perestroika embraced the reform of the economy, including efforts to stamp out corruption at the management level, more stringent labour discipline, a greater role for the market and more consumer goods. The grandiose goal was the doubling of output by the year 2000, with the emphasis moved from the quantity to the quality and diversity of goods. Humanising the political system and delivering higher living standards were key objectives.

**Results of reform**

What seems clear is that, despite Brown's and Gorbachev's attempts to prescribe a retrospective rationale to them, there was no overall strategy surrounding the reforms. The fact was there was no road map to follow. There was also the need to deceive the conservatives lest they depose Gorbachev before his agenda took firm enough root. He thus began cautiously: a slogan, 'Acceleration', to revitalise the economy; an anti-alcohol campaign intended to improve worker productivity, new superstructures, like Agroprom, to inject life into the command economy's over-bureaucratic system More significant reforms only began in 1987 after the early initiatives were deemed to have failed. The anti-vodka campaign, example, proved a disaster: it served only to fuel the black economy which produced illicit liquor to meet demand and led to Gorbachev being derided as 'Lemonade Joe' and 'the Mineral Water Secretary.' The campaign, however, was only abandoned in 1990. Nor were consumer goods becoming more available. In fact they became scarcer and queues at shops lengthened.

In 1987 Gorbachev embarked on a series of visits to the capitals of the outer empire to try to persuade other communist leaders that his path was the right one. In his memoirs he explains the tolerance of change in the Soviet bloc in terms of conforming to overall policy objectives: since he was trying to reform his own country, he could hardly object to changes elsewhere.

Gorbachev met with a mixed reception, enjoying most success m Poland and Hungary, already well on the reformist road since 1968 and the New Economic Mechanism, lip service from Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, and the least accommodation from hardline East Germany and Romania. Gorbachev described East Germany as akin to an 'overheated boiler with the lid tightly closed'. At the heart of the Cold War confrontation, the Berlin Wall alone served to keep the restless east German population separated from the envied Federal Republic of Germany.

**The USSR and eastern Europe**

A combination of reasons ultimately persuaded the Soviet leadership to allow Eastern Europe to break free. They included: the enormous economic cost involved in continuing to sustain unpopular regimes (it has emerged, for instance, that the military regime of General Jaruzelski in Poland was subsidised to the tune of $2 billion and many billions of roubles from Moscow); the impossibility of competing with the United States in a renewed arms race which now included ‘Star Wars’ technology unavailable to the Soviets; and the need to attract Western investment and high-tech equipment.

For decades the strategic imperative of dominating Eastern Europe, with its corollary of sustaining undemocratic communist regimes in power, had persuaded the USSR to make available its vast natural resources (especially oil) at knock-down prices and to accept sub-standard manufactured goods from their ramshackle command economies. The mechanism for doing so was the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), founded in 1949 as an antidote to the Marshall Plan. Now Gorbachev made it clear that the arrangement was no longer satisfactory. As well as paying substantially more for the USSR’s natural resources, its satellites must produce western standard products, an edict which proved impossible to achieve, leading to the diminution of the CMEA’s importance and its eventual collapse in 1991. Growing Soviet trade with the West, in terms of oil exports and imported western technology, reflected both a thawing of the Cold War tensions and the USSR’s inability to modernise its economy unaided.

Previous attempts by East European countries to break free had been ruthlessly crushed by military means (Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 were invaded, while Poland, in 1981, put its own house in order after the Warsaw Pact forces massed menacingly on its borders). The stationing of Soviet forces in strategic parts of the bloc served as a visible reminder of what happened to malcontents.

**The end of the Cold War: revolutions in Eastern Europe**

In foreign policy, Gorbachev can be seen as revolutionary. His capacity to spring surprises became legendary. At the November 1985 superpower summit in Geneva he staged an impromptu press conference. In May 1986 he delivered a secret speech to the staff of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which he criticised the prevailing foreign policy doctrine of viewing Europe ‘through the prism of its relations with the United States of America’. Gorbachev established warm relations with western European leaders – Margaret Thatcher, Francois Mitterand, Helmut Kohl – and talked of ‘a common European home’. His genial relationship with President Reagan also bore fruit in arms reduction treaties. In short, the old Cold War confrontation gave way to a new détente.

As early as 1985 he had conveyed in private to Soviet bloc leaders that they could no longer expect military intervention to support them. They, quite naturally, did not disclose to their populations the end of the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’. The public signal for revolution came in December 1988 when, addressing the United Nations General Assembly, Gorbachev announced a unilateral withdrawal of 500,000 troops and 10,000 tanks from Eastern Europe. The interference was clear: Moscow was no longer intervene in the affairs of its satellites, a fact confirmed by Gorbachev’s spokesman in June 1989, who said that, like Frank Sinatra, bloc countries were free to do things 'their way'. Hungary and Poland broke away first, but the real turning point came in the autumn of 1985 when Gorbachev allowed East Germany to leave the Soviet bloc and reunite with its western half. The domino effect continued into Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and finally, Romania, where the hated neo-Stalinist dictator, Nicole Ceausescu, met a bloody end.

**Collapse of the Soviet Union**

Underlying all the reform initiatives was the continuing and worsening internal economic crisis in the USSR. The falling world price of oil and gas did not help matters, and western leaders correctly perceived that Gorbachev's radical proposals for arms reductions largely stemmed from his economic difficulties. While Eisenhower had spoken of a 'military-industrial complex' in the United States, this was even more true of the USSR, where the lion's share of resource' was devoted to defence purposes.

Gorbachev was convinced that disarmament would free enormous resources which could then be devoted to the civilian economy to provide consumer good. Yet in the short term this proved impossible. The war in Afghanistan (the USSR's 'Vietnam') continued until a belated pullout (completed in early 1989) and the nuclear confrontation with the West never reached a 'zero option' stage. Rising consumer prices – as subsidies were cut and hidden inflation emerged – together with growing shortages of basic commodities reflected the continued imbalance in resource allocation, deepening the growing unpopularity of the regime.

In many ways, Gorbachev became the victim of his own reforms as they spiralled out of control. What had held Soviet communism together for so long was its portrayal of the West as the decadent enemy and the crushing of internal dissent. Under Gorbachev, these two main pillars of the system crumbled away. Friendship with the West blossomed, increasing the receptiveness to western culture (stopping the jamming of western radio broadcasts helped) and its affluent lifestyles. The positive welcoming of debate at home with no punitive consequences marked a fundamental break with the past. Sooner or later the edifice was doomed to collapse.

A watershed came on 7th February 1990 when, at Gorbachev's instigation, Article 6 of the USSR Constitution was repealed, thereby ending the CPSUs monopoly on power. No longer was it a one party state. In his memoirs. Gorbachev recognises this as a decisive ‘break with Bolshevism’, while regretting that ‘it proved impossible to maintain a more or less reasonable pace…of reform’.

While political reform took on a life of its own, economic reform only served to make the situation worse, thereby-feeding discontent. The state budget deficit, which stood at three per cent of national income when Gorbachev came to power, had shot up to 14 per cent by 1989. This reflected the failure of economic reform to modernise the command economy and enormous government subsidies on sensitive items such as bread, milk, meat, tents and electricity.

Gorbachev himself was happy, especially in his early years, to walk the streets and visit factories and mines to converse with citizens and workers about their problems. But increasingly his constant mantra of 'glasnost and perestroika' came to be seen as empty slogans bereft of any real meaning.

Contradictions also emerged. Gorbachev represented himself as a social democrat yet remained steadfastly loyal to the CPSU and to keeping the USSR in one piece-until events forced his hand. Once rivals emerged, not least Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Federation, Gorbachev was made to look conservative and his reforms too limited. The logic of his reforms was the dissolution of the USSR, but only Yelsin was prepared to tread that road.

Between October 1990 and March 1991 Gorbachev fatally turned to conservatives as he attempted, unsuccessfully; to steer a 'middle course', thereby losing much radical support. He then lurched in the opposite direction, ringing alarm bells in conservative circles: countenancing Yeltsin's ban of the Communist Party in Russia, contemplating the break-up of the union in the Novo-Ogarevo process and even recommending to the Central Committee that the goal of communism was unattainable.

In the summer of 1991, Gorbachev was invited to attend the annual G7 summit, proving to him that the Cold War was finally over. Whilst there, he finalised with President Bush the details of the START Treaty to reduce the number of nuclear weapons each superpower bad targeted on the other. But he also brought a begging bowl, seeking massive western aid, which remained empty. Subsequently there was some regret among western leaders at turning a deaf ear to Gorbachev's pleas, but in truth the tide of events at home had already turned decisively against him and spectacular successes on the world stage could not have saved him.

Gorbachev had gone too far for some conservatives who wanted to preserve the old USSR. The conspirators ousted him in a coup of August 1991 while he was recuperating from illness in the Crimea, only for Yeltsin to lead a people's revolt by standing on a tank, rallying the crowd and persuading the security service to back him. But Yeltsin was acting as much for his own interests as Gorbachev's. Much weakened, Gorbachev thereafter was always beholden to Yeltsin, who deliberately humiliated him in the Congress of People's Deputies. With rebellious parts of the inner empire, like Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia already breaking away, the dissolution of the USSR itself became inevitable. It came at the end of 1991 when the conglomerate Commonwealth of Independent States replaced the old order and the Hammer and Sickle was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time.

**Conclusion**

Gorbachev is. arguably, the most important postwar Soviet leader. He is also, perhaps, the most controversial. Although his standing overseas remains high, he is now held in contempt by communists, democrats and nationalists alike in the former USSR (polling a paltry one percent of the vote in the 1996 presidential elections). Many blame him for the present endemic corruption which they argue sprouted wings in his time, while others yearn for the old certainties of the communist system, like the fixed price of a loaf of bread, which he is held to have destroyed.

Gorbachev’s reforms failed lamentably in their objective of saving communism and instead brought an eastern version of freedom and democracy, pallid imitations of the western variant. Today's Russia has been equaled with the gangster era of Al Capone. His fall iron from grace sprang from a variety of sources, including the detested anti-vodka campaign, his attempted suppression of nationalism in the Baltic (when many died horribly from poison gas or the use of sapper shovels) and Kazakhstan, and especially his refusal to expose himself lo a popular mandate for the new presidency in March 1990, relying instead on the communist-dominated Congress of People's Deputies to secure his position, thereby making a mockery of his alleged support for democracy. No doubt he will continue to generate-controversy and debate for years to come.

**Further Reading:**

* M Almond '1989 without Gorbachev' in N Fegruson (ed) *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, 1997)
* A Brown *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, 1996)
* M Galeotti*Gorbachev and his Revolution* (London, 1997)
* M Gorbachev *Memoirs* (London, 1996)
* H Miller *Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of Soviet Power* (London, 1993)
* D Pryce-Jones *The War That Never Was* (1995)

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