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MIKHAIL
GORBACHEV

1931 -

The most important political event of the last forty years has been the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communism. That movement—which for decades threatened to engulf the whole world—has declined with startling speed, and now seems to be headed for the “dustbin of history.” One man stands out as the pivotal figure in that astonishing decline and fall: Mikhail Gorbachev, the man who headed the USSR during its last six years (1985–1991).

Gorbachev was born in 1931 in the village of Privolnoe, in the Stavropol region of southern Russia. His childhood coincided with the most brutal period of the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin, one of the bloodiest tyrants in history. Indeed, Mikhail's own grandfather, Andrei, spent nine years in Stalin's prison camps and was not released until 1941, only a few months before Germany invaded Russia. Mikhail himself was too young to serve in World War II; but his father served in the army, his older brother died in action, and Privolnoe was occupied by the Germans for about eight months.

None of this, however, delayed Gorbachev's career. He got excellent grades in school, joined Komsomol (the Young Communist League) when he was fifteen, and then worked for four years as the operator of a combine harvester. He entered Moscow State University in 1950, studied law there, and graduated in 1955. It was there (in 1952) that he became a member of the Communist party, and there that he met his future wife, Raisa Maximovna Titorenko. They married shortly before his graduation, and have one child, Irina.

After receiving his law degree, Gorbachev returned to Stavropol and commenced his gradual rise through the party bureaucracy. In 1970, he became First Secretary of the regional party committee, and the following year he was appointed a member of the Central Committee of the Communist party. He got a big promotion in 1978, when he moved to Moscow to become a secretary of the Central Committee, in charge of agriculture. In 1979, Gorbachev became a candidate member of the Politburo (which was, effectively, the ruling body of the Soviet Union), and in 1980, he became a full member.

All these promotions occurred during the period (1964–1982) when Leonid Brezhnev headed the Soviet Union. Brezhnev's death was followed by the brief reigns of Andropov (1982–1984) and Chernenko (1984–1985), and it was during those years that Gorbachev became a prominent member of the Politburo. Chernenko died on March 11, 1985, and the very next day Gorbachev was named to succeed him as Secretary General. (The Politburo voted



Gorbachev and Reagan sign arms limitation agreement at summit meeting in Washington, D.C. (December 8, 1987).

in secret, but it is rumored that Gorbachev's election was by only a small margin over Viktor Grishin, a quite conservative figure. How different history might have been if only two or three persons had voted the other way!

Unlike most Soviet leaders, Gorbachev had traveled abroad (France, 1966; Italy, 1967; Canada, 1983; England, 1984) before he became party leader; so when he was elected, many Westerners hoped that Gorbachev would be a more modern and liberal leader than his predecessors had been. This turned out to be the case, but nobody anticipated the speed and magnitude of the reforms that he would make.

The Soviet Union faced many serious problems when Gorbachev took office, but all were exacerbated by the financial crunch caused by the enormous government spending on armaments. Hoping to end the arms race, he quickly accepted the proposal of the American president, Ronald Reagan, for a summit meeting. The two leaders met on four occasions: in Geneva (1985), Reykjavik (1986), Washington (1987), and in Moscow (1988). The most dramatic result was the arms limitation treaty signed in December 1987. This was the first treaty that actually *reduced* the number of nuclear weapons which the great powers had. In fact, an entire class of medium-range missiles was eliminated entirely!

Another action that reduced international tensions was Gorbachev's decision to remove the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. The Soviet army had invaded that country in 1979, during the Brezhnev era, and at first had considerable military success. But after Reagan's decision to supply the Afghan guerrillas with Stinger surface-to-air missiles (which greatly reduced the effectiveness of Soviet air power), the tide shifted, and the Soviets got bogged down in a long, inconclusive war. The outside world had always severely criticized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the war was costly and unpopular at home; but Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko (and, at first, Gorbachev too) had all been unwilling to pull out, fearing a loss of face. Finally, though, Gorbachev decided to cut his losses, and early in 1988 he signed an agreement providing for the withdrawal of all Soviet forces. (The withdrawal was completed by the agreed date in February 1989.)

These changes in foreign policy were dramatic, but the bulk of Gorbachev's efforts were devoted to domestic matters. From the beginning, he saw that a major program of *perestroika* ("restructuring") was needed in order to deal with the poor performance of the Soviet economy. As one aspect of this restructuring, the power of the Communist party (which formerly had been in virtually complete control of the Soviet government) was greatly reduced under Gorbachev. On the economic level, the restructuring included the legalization of private enterprise in some fields.

It should be noted that Gorbachev always insisted that he was a loyal follower of Marx and Lenin, and a firm believer in socialism. His goal, he said, was merely to *reform* the Communist system so that it would work better.

Perhaps the most revolutionary of his reforms was the policy of *glasnost*, or "openness," which Gorbachev instituted in 1986. One aspect of *glasnost* was more openness and candor by the government concerning its activities and concerning events of public interest. Another aspect was permitting private individuals or publications to discuss political matters freely. The publication of views whose expression, just a few years earlier, would have brought a prison sentence (perhaps a death sentence during the Stalin era!) became commonplace under *glasnost*. It became possible for Soviet journals to criticize government policies, the Communist Party, high government officials, even Gorbachev himself!

Another important step in the democratization of the USSR occurred in 1989, when *popular* elections were held for a new Soviet parliament, the Council of People's Deputies. These were certainly not free elections in the Western sense: 90 percent of the candidates were members of the ruling Communist party, and no other political parties were allowed. But the elections were held by secret ballot; they did involve a choice of candidates; and the votes were counted honestly. They were certainly the closest thing to free elections since the Communists took power in 1917.

The results of the election came close—as close as the rules allowed—to a vote of "no confidence" in the Communist party. Many old-line party leaders (including a few who ran unopposed!) were defeated, and several outspoken dissidents were elected.

Despite these impressive reforms within the USSR, nobody anticipated the cataclysmic changes that occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989–1990. That entire region had been occupied by Russian troops at the close of World War II, and in the 1940s Communist regimes—reliably subservient to the Soviet Union—had been established in six countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. These regimes were generally unpopular; but their leaders, backed by the secret police and the army, had held sway for over forty years. Even when a popular revolt succeeded in overthrowing one of the Communist tyrants—as had occurred in Hungary in 1956—Soviet troops soon restored the Communists to power. Although elections in Poland in June 1989 had clearly shown how little popular support the Communists enjoyed in the region, as late as September 1989 it seemed that Communist—and Russian—control of Eastern Europe was secure. By the end of the year, however, the entire system had collapsed like a house of cards in a hurricane.



Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa, visiting Riga in 1987.

The troubles started in East Germany. Ever since the erection of the infamous Berlin Wall in 1961, many East Germans had wished to escape to the West, and many had been shot in a vain attempt to cross the Wall to freedom. For years, the Wall had been a grim symbol that East Germany—and, in fact, all Communist regimes—were little more than enormous prison camps. Nor could the East Germans cross over to the West at other points, as their government had sealed the entire border and had erected an extensive set of barbed-wire fences, alarms, military patrols and minefields to catch would-be escapees. However, in 1988 and 1989 many East Germans had succeeded in escaping by an indirect route, by first going to another East European country (which was legal) and from there going to the West.

In October 1989, Erich Honecker—the tough, hard-line Communist who had ruled East Germany for many years—tried to shut down this alternate escape route. A few days later there were large demonstrations in East Berlin, protesting Honecker's action. In this crisis, Gorbachev visited Berlin, urged Honecker not to delay reforms, warned him not to suppress the demonstrations by force, and made it clear that Soviet troops (there were 380,000 in East Germany at the time) would not be used against the East German population.

Gorbachev's remarks forestalled a bloody crackdown by the East German police and army, while boosting the confidence of the protesters. Within a few days, a series of massive public demonstrations began in various East German cities. Within two weeks, Honecker was forced to resign. However, as his replacement (Egon Krenz), was also a Communist, and since the borders were still closed, the mass demonstrations continued. Finally, on November 9, Krenz announced that the Berlin Wall would be opened and that East Germans would be allowed to cross over freely to the West!

Few announcements have caused such jubilation, and few have had such swift and profound consequences. Within a few days, *millions* of East Germans streamed across the border, to see with their own eyes what life in the West was really like. What they saw

convinced them that forty-four years of Communist rule had robbed them of both their freedom and their prosperity.

The opening of the Berlin Wall provided remarkable confirmation of the philosopher's dictum that it is not the facts themselves that really matter, but the way that people view them. In the first few days after Krenz's announcement, the Wall was still physically intact, and in principle the East German government could have re-closed the border at any time. But people behaved as if the border was permanently open; and since *everybody* reacted this way, the effect was the same as if the Wall really had been physically removed!

Throughout Eastern Europe people reacted to the destruction of the Berlin Wall much as the French population, two centuries earlier, had responded to the destruction of the Bastille: It was a dramatic indication that the tyrants had lost their power to oppress. In country after country, the people rose up against their masters and swept aside the Communist regimes that had ruled them for so long.

In Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, who had ruled that country with an iron hand for thirty-five years, was quickly forced to resign (November 10, 1989).

A week later, massive demonstrations began in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia. By December 10, these resulted in the resignation of president Gustav Husak and the relinquishment of power by the Communist party. Husak was soon replaced as president by Jaclav Havel, a prominent dissident who had spent the first few months of the year in jail as a political prisoner!

The changes were even more rapid in Hungary. There, the government had legalized opposition parties in October 1989. Then, in free elections held on November 26, these new parties decisively defeated the Communists, who relinquished power without bloodshed.

In Poland, events moved faster still and, late in the year, the victorious anti-Communists decided to completely scrap socialism and install a thoroughgoing free-market economy starting January 1, 1990.

Egon Krenz, in East Germany, had perhaps hoped that by opening the border he would placate the opposition and end the protests. It did not work out that way. The protests continued, and Krenz resigned as head of state on December 3, 1989. Four days later the government agreed to hold free elections (in which, not surprisingly, the Communists were badly defeated).

The last holdout was Romania, where hard-line dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was determined not to relinquish his power. When demonstrations against his rule occurred in Timisoara on December 15, he had the army fire on the crowds. But the enraged populace would not be suppressed. The demonstrations continued, then soon spread to other cities. On December 25, Ceausescu was overthrown, captured, and executed. The last domino had fallen in Eastern Europe.

These events—momentous in themselves—soon led to: (1) the removal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia and Hungary; (2) genuine elections in the newly-freed states (in general, the Communist parties have done very poorly); (3) the abandonment of Marxism in several other countries that had been Soviet client states (for example, Mongolia and Ethiopia); (4) the reunification of Germany (completed in October 1990).

More important than any of these changes, however, was the rapid growth of nationalist movements *within* the USSR. Despite its name, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was never a voluntary union. Rather, it was the successor to the old Russian Empire ruled by the czars: an assemblage of peoples brought together by conquest. ("The prison-house of nations," was how Westerners used to describe the czarist empire.) Many of those peoples had continued to desire their independence, just as the inhabitants of the old British, French, and Dutch empires had wanted freedom. It had been impossible to publicly express these yearnings under the iron rule of Stalin, or under the less brutal but still firm hand of his successors. But under Gorbachev's *glasnost* these nationalist desires could be mentioned, and it was not long before organized movements arose. There was unrest in Estonia, in Latvia, in Moldavia, and in several other Soviet republics; but it was in tiny little

Lithuania that matters first came to the breaking point. On March 11, 1990, following general elections in which the question of secession had been the principal issue, the Lithuanian parliament boldly declared that country's complete independence from the USSR.

Technically, the Lithuanians were within their rights: For decades, the Soviet constitution had included a provision permitting any republic a right to secede. However, before Gorbachev, it had always been understood that any attempt to exercise that right would be firmly suppressed, with grievous consequences to those who made the attempt.

Gorbachev's response was interesting. He promptly denounced the Lithuanian action as illegal, threatened dire consequences if it were not reversed, imposed an economic embargo, and paraded Soviet troops through the Lithuanian capital in a show of military force. *But* he did not crush the breakaway province by direct military force; nor did he shoot, or even imprison, the Lithuanian leaders (as Stalin surely would have done).

Lithuania is a small country and in itself was neither economically nor militarily important to the Soviet Union. However, the *example* set by Lithuania was very important. When the Lithuanian attempt at secession was not promptly crushed, nationalists in all the other Soviet republics gained hope and courage. Within two months, the parliament of Latvia also passed a declaration of independence from the USSR. Then on June 12, 1990, the *Russian* SSR (the largest republic in the Soviet Union) declared its "sovereignty"—not quite a declaration of independence, but pretty close to that. By the end of the year, there were declarations of either independence or sovereignty in every one of the fifteen Soviet republics.

Quite naturally, these enormous changes unleashed by Gorbachev's actions (and *inactions* at critical stages) were viewed with great misgivings by many of the old-line leaders of the Communist party and the Soviet Army. In August, 1991, some of these staged a coup d'état. Gorbachev was arrested, and it appeared that the coup leaders might succeed in reversing many of his reforms. How-

ever, other prominent leaders within the Soviet Union—most notably Boris Yeltsin, the head of the Russian republic—opposed the coup, as did the bulk of the Russian population, and the coup collapsed in a few days.

After the failure of the coup, events moved with astonishing speed. The Communist party was promptly thrown out of power, its activities banned, and its property seized. Furthermore, by the end of the year, all the component republics of the USSR had seceded, and the Soviet Union was formally dissolved. Those leaders who had wished to merely reform the Communist system were quickly pushed aside by those, such as Yeltsin, who wished to eliminate it entirely. Gorbachev himself resigned from office in December 1991.

This leads us to the next question: Just how responsible is Gorbachev *personally* for the changes which occurred during his years in office?

Various economic reforms were made in the USSR under his leadership. However, it seems to me that he deserves rather little credit in this respect. In general, reforms were forced on him by the obvious failures of the Soviet system, and the reforms that he did make were too little and too late. In fact, the poor performance of the Soviet economy was a leading cause of Gorbachev's eventual downfall.

On the other hand, Gorbachev deserves a good deal of credit for his role in the freeing of Eastern Europe. Six countries have been liberated from Soviet control, and this change is unlikely to be reversed. Nor can Gorbachev's personal influence in what occurred be doubted. The movements for reform in Eastern Europe had all been stimulated by the liberalization within Russia itself, and had been heartened by his repeated statements that he was willing to let the East European countries go their own way. Furthermore, at the crucial moment—in October 1989, when the mass demonstrations in East Germany began—Gorbachev intervened personally. In similar circumstances, previous Soviet leaders had always called out the troops and used whatever brutality was needed to suppress the rebels. However, in October 1989, Gorba-

chev stepped in to persuade the Honecker regime *not* to repress the demonstrations by force. We have seen the consequences of that decision. Similarly, Gorbachev's decision not to use military force to crush the Lithuanian revolt led fairly quickly to the secession of the other Soviet republics.

Also important was Gorbachev's influence on arms limitation and on ending the Cold War. Many people have suggested that Ronald Reagan deserves a good deal of the credit for this. In the first place, by demonstrating that the United States was far better able than the Soviet Union to bear the costs of the arms race, he played an important part in convincing the Soviet leaders that they had to bring an end to the Cold War. Furthermore, they argue, since it necessarily takes two parties to make an agreement, credit for the arms limitation treaty should at least be shared equally between Gorbachev and Reagan.

Such a view would be correct if the Cold War had been equally the fault of the United States and the Soviet Union. However, that was not the case. The Cold War was caused by the military expansionism of Stalin and his successors, and the American response was basically a defensive reaction. As long as Soviet leaders clung to their dream of imposing Communism on the world, the West had no way (other than surrender) of ending the conflict. When a Soviet leader appeared who was willing to abandon that goal, the seemingly interminable Cold War soon melted away.

Gorbachev deserves even more credit for the political changes he caused within the Soviet Union. The lessening of the power of the Communist party, the growth of *glasnost*, the remarkable advances in press freedom and freedom of speech, the general democratization of the country: none of these would have gone nearly as far as they did, had it not been for Gorbachev. *Glasnost* was not something forced on him by popular pressure; nor was it a policy which the other Politburo members were insisting on. It was Gorbachev's idea, and he promoted it and continued to support it despite considerable opposition.

It was *glasnost*, perhaps, more than anything else, which permitted the final overthrow of the Soviet system. That this revolu-

tionary change has taken place without significant violence (at least so far) is truly remarkable, and is surely due in no small part to Gorbachev's policies and conduct in office.

It has been remarked that some of the most important results of Gorbachev's actions (such as the reunification of Germany, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the demise of Communism) were never intended by him. That may be so, but it does not diminish his importance. The influence of a political leader—or anyone else—is determined by the *effect* of his actions, not by his intentions.

Many other persons, of course, (most of them fervent anti-Communists) contributed to the defeat of Marxism: ex-communists such as Arthur Koestler and Whittaker Chambers, who alerted the West to the true nature of the Communist system; Soviet dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitzen, who risked their lives to speak out within Russia; guerrilla fighters such as the rebels in Afghanistan, Angola, and Nicaragua, who fought bravely to prevent Communist governments from securing power in those countries; and political leaders in the United States, such as Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, who used American arms, American financial resources, and the example of American freedom and prosperity to resist the spread of Communism and to ultimately defeat it.

Still, despite the efforts of all those persons (and many more), when Gorbachev took office in 1985 no one anticipated that the demise of the Communist empire was close at hand. Indeed, had someone like Lenin or Stalin been selected in 1985 to head the Soviet state, that repressive government might still be standing, and the Cold War still continuing.

However, it was not a Stalin, but rather Mikhail Gorbachev who was chosen in 1985 to head the Soviet Union. Though he never intended to dismantle the Soviet Union and the Communist party that had ruled it since its creation, the policies that he adopted and the forces that he set in motion had that result. Regardless of his intentions, he has changed our world irrevocably.