

Builder and Destroyer: Thoughts on Gorbachev's Soviet Revolutions, 1985–1991

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Abstract: Twenty years ago, Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader. In his dramatic six years at helm, he aimed at accomplishing a transformation of Soviet domestic life and a revolutionary transformation of USSR foreign policy. This article reviews his record as a leader, taking account of the specifics of the Soviet institutional context in which he began to exercise choices no previous Soviet leader had, and examines specifically: (1) political-institutional reforms aimed at weakening the CPSU apparatus and building up state structures; (2) economic reform (perestroika), its objectives and ultimate failure; (3) Gorbachev's grappling with two varieties of nationalism—those of the East European “bloc” peoples, to whose aspirations he readily conceded, and those of secessionist and independence-oriented peoples of the USSR itself, to which he counterposed the project of a reformed “Union state” that proved unattainable; and (4) his critical role in the high politics that brought the cold war to a peaceful end—but proved insufficient to save his own political career.

Key words: foreign policy, Gorbachev, perestroika

The lapse of twenty years generally suffices to justify reexamination of statesmen's legacies—hence, Mikhail Gorbachev is due those that are now emerging, including the contributions in this issue. More specifically, it is roughly fourteen years since the Soviet collapse, and the extraordinary events and developments of 1985–91 are receding. Among them, one of the most extraordinary was the way Gorbachev exercised leadership. In the Soviet system, the degree of insulation of the top leadership from outside pressures was extraordinary, and that of the top leader, the General Secretary, even more pronounced. The Gorbachev drama, with its mix of successes and ultimate failure, involves a

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leader who went beyond that insulation, and *chose* to act in ways, and in pursuit of objectives, that radically distinguished him from his predecessor and most of his colleagues.

The many accounts that trace his thoughts and political moves, and the unfolding developments of 1985–91 indicate that Gorbachev, over time, became more convinced that Soviet economic and political structures required radical surgery. Initially, he wanted to reform a Soviet socialism that he saw, in some sense, as an historic “choice” made in some manner by “the Soviet people.” He would use formulations like this, somewhat confusingly, late into a political game that had seen him continually redefining what socialism actually meant—rhetoric would lag behind reality.

His general mindset, initially, was not one much attuned to the coercive (the October coup, the civil war) elements of that choice. Lenin remained the iconic founder, and the performance of the system and the people in World War II was confirmation of the historical “correctness” of the choice under the sternest of tests. Again, there is the continuing thread of discrepancy between the language Gorbachev used, including its ideological tint, and the content and tendency of his actions. To a degree, this was tactical—he could not show his hand to the party. But it also highlights the deficiency of the political vocabulary available to him in the mid-1980s, which made it difficult for him to express how far he was willing to go, or perhaps even to understand it, before the fact, himself.

At first, he was not that dissimilar from the Dubček of 1968, who had worked on the smaller canvas of Czechoslovakia. On the domestic scene, Gorbachev reduced censorship, reformed the one-party system’s operations to broaden the scope of political discussion and bargaining, opened elements of the system to new talent and, a bit later, introduced some market elements into the socialist economy. All of this may not look like much now. But for a Soviet leader, it was extraordinary. No predecessor had gone this far. None of his Politburo colleagues gave any indication that they might have done the same.

Leaders before Gorbachev kept a firm grip at home. Khrushchev was no liberator, although he introduced a post-Stalin era that saw no return to Stalinist terror. But those leaders sat atop not only the USSR, but the “external empire” of the Soviet bloc as well. They did tolerate some “variations” within the bloc. Since 1956, Poland had effectively mixed a New Economic Policy (NEP)-like modification of Soviet economics model with a consciously resistant society and the omnipresence of the Catholic Church. Long before the Solidarity years of 1980–81, Poland was a deviant case, endured by the Soviet leaders after Khrushchev because they, like he, found the prospect of dealing with Poland too daunting. In Hungary, a quiet moderation of the harshest methods had gotten underway earlier in the 1960s, and since 1968, it had operated with the most effective in-system reform—the “New Economic Mechanism”—of any satellite country. Mostly, the Kremlin had left Hungarians alone, just as they themselves downplayed the broader consequences at home, and implications abroad, of economic liberalization.

But in the end, if the Kremlin deemed it necessary to intervene forcefully, prior examples (Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968) indicated that they would, and

that the West would live with it. There was, however, no larger state or system to reimpose order from the outside on the USSR *itself*, should things get out of hand through “ill-advised” attempt at liberalization. Gorbachev’s predecessors “knew” that they could not afford to slacken controls at home. He, as it turned out, did not.

What he knew of did not at the outset is an important question, and though we cannot expect to ever have a full answer, posing it prompts a brief excursion into the conceptual matter of “totalitarianism” and the light it can throw on Gorbachev’s performance as (reforming) Soviet leader. Did Gorbachev understand that just as his intent was reformist, the system he inherited was rooted in the totalitarian intent that shaped Soviet institutions in Lenin’s and Stalin’s time? The common answer is, probably not.

The “syndrome of interrelated traits” that made up the classic Friedrich-Brzezinski totalitarian model¹ worked as a description of Soviet reality in Stalin’s time, and as a proximate characterization of Soviet institutions, their general tendencies and intent (if not actual performance) in the post-Stalin period. A frequent objection all along had been that the model made no analytic allowance for the possibility of change, but outlined some kind of *perpetuum immobile*. Yet, as Rasma Karklins argued in a 1994 article,² the possibility of change was there—conceptually inherent, if implicit, in the model all the time: “while it is true that the model is constrained in explaining change as long as all system traits are in place, it also implies that radical change will follow if one or more system traits are undermined.”³ One of those six traits was that of the “top leader,” who, even after Stalin, was a figure powerful enough to manipulate his colleagues. Although he had “controls over popular forces, *he also is strong enough to weaken those controls*.”⁴ The totalitarian model further contained an unstated assumption, “that Soviet leaders understood the [totalitarian] logic of their own regime and would prevent it from being undermined, but as it turned out they did not.”⁵ At least, *Gorbachev* did not.

Evidently, Gorbachev failed to foresee the consequences of his policies of regime liberalization, because, like many Westerners, he did not see the Soviet system as totalitarian and therefore dichotomous to other systems. . . . He envisaged the Soviet regime on a continuum with democratic regimes and tried to make it more liberal while at the same time retaining its core traits. He aimed at a regime hybrid where elements of democracy such as partial press freedom would be grafted onto the old-style Soviet polity without altering its nature.⁶

Possibly, Karklins underestimates how far Gorbachev may have been willing to go. But it is fair to say that he kicked off the reform project without projecting how far events might go, and underestimated how perverse the Soviet systemic design was. In Karklins’s reading, then, the system was structurally totalitarian in 1985. The “leader”—himself element of the syndrome—tinkered with two other elements—controls on ideology and communications. In doing so, he eviscerated the single-party control that was the system’s core ordering principle, and the system collapsed. Although objections to it are not lacking, this perspective underlines the scale and drama of the Gorbachev era. His successes and failures will provide grist for the mills of analysts for decades to come.

This article addresses a number of problems and issues that Gorbachev faced. Although they remain familiar subjects for specialized audiences, the passage of time since 1985—or even 1991—has surely diluted the popular perceptions of some of these remarkable events and how Gorbachev placed himself at the center of them. First I offer some thoughts on the combination of destruction Gorbachev's attempt to open and democratize the Soviet political system—a process of cutting back prerogatives and the institutional strength of the hypertrophic ruling party, while simultaneously building up the powers and capacities of *state* institutions—a serious national legislature and strong governmental executive—of which the USSR had been bereft for most of its existence. Second, we then move to the restructuring (*perestroika*) of the Soviet economy Gorbachev's attempts to deal with the massive problems of Soviet economic institutions and their performance in the 1980s were fated to be as dramatic—and even more of a failure—than his grappling with political institutions. It would be for his heirs to deal in their own ways, however controversial, with the legacy of “socialism in one country.”

Third, we examine two kinds of nationalism that came to occupy Gorbachev's efforts. The Soviet extension of control and imposition of its own designs on Eastern Europe that had given rise to the cold war, and fed the nationalisms of the subject but largely unreconciled peoples of the Soviet bloc. Gorbachev would engage, creatively and decisively, with this nationalism. The second variety would prove more difficult for Gorbachev, involving some of the peoples of the USSR itself. Their national aspirations involved more political and social energy than many—including Gorbachev himself—had suspected, and ultimately assumed a scale and intensity incompatible with the continued existence of the USSR.

Fourth, and finally, I address Gorbachev's role in the global politics and the great power dealings that engaged him, and two American presidents, in the geopolitical drama of the cold war's end, and the transformation of the post-1945 world.

Running Down the Party

Critical in the definition of the USSR and Soviet-type regimes as a subspecies was the single ruling party, as something distinct from, yet controlling or overlapping, the executive institutions of the state. The Soviet case was the “original article.” The party structures there were embedded deeper and longer than in any of the other states, operating as the locus of concentrated power in the only military superpower in the communist world.

Revolutionary rhetoric had become largely empty ritual by the time Gorbachev came to Moscow and became a Central Committee Secretary in 1978. But it was in the service of this vanguard party that Gorbachev made his career. By impressing those above him (Suslov, Andropov, et al.), as they visited and took the measure of the Stavropol party head, he came to the capital. The party made him: as its leader, he would unmake that party in the pursuit of a different vision of what the USSR might be.

One of the core questions about Gorbachev, as noted earlier, involves his initial and evolving intent with respect to reform and change, and the development of his own views of the system he had inherited. We have, recorded in numerous sources,

the general notion that "it is simply impossible to go on this way any longer," shared by Gorbachev and many close to him, from the time of the Brezhnev twilight. Archie Brown, as Gorbachev's most comprehensive biographer, emphasizes that the Gorbachev of 1984 and beyond chose to pursue reform (however he defined it at that time) instead of reform being forced upon him. The Soviet people, though given to quiet grouching, did not reject the system nor see "going on" longer as impossible. Gorbachev would launch a revolution from above—the post-1985 changes would not be "the result of massive pressures from below."⁷

Nor at the Politburo level was there any consensus on a need for radical change. This would hardly need restating, were it not for a tendency of retrospective commentary to slight the "human factor" and assert that, had Gorbachev not pushed radical change, another general secretary would have been compelled to do so by internal factors and, perhaps, pressures imposed by the United States. By all evidence, no one else on the 1985 Politburo would have behaved as general secretary in the way Gorbachev did. They would not have started out that way. Nor would they have been convinced, had they been engaged in moderate adjustments that fell short of the desired results, that that the problems and solutions ran deeper than initially understood.

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While Gorbachev was undoubtedly *right* to attempt to reform the system and to accept in due course that that the task was not so much to secure its *recovery* or *renewal* as its *transformation*, this course of action was not forced upon him. [Other Politburo members] . . . saw no need for far-reaching reform. . . . [T]he Soviet Union would have postponed facing up to the fundamental problems of the system. The regime had, after all, been politically repressive and economically inefficient for the greater part of seven decades.⁸

Gorbachev grew during his time in office. The reformer who initially saw the party as a restructuring tool was not yet the person who would characterize (and still somewhat understate) the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) nature differently in his *Memoirs*.

The Party . . . was no longer an ordinary social and political organization but had turned into a mechanism to rule society, and it had become a key component in a command and bureaucratic system. Any attempt at changing that role was regarded as an attempt to "undermine the foundations."⁹

He encountered the reality of this institutional unfitness early (1985–86) and as he recruited collaborators he found them wanting. He was "still under the illusion that we could successfully solve new problems and produce radical reforms while keeping the same leaders." No wonder that it took him time to realize this—"I myself had come from this environment and had suffered its diseases."¹⁰

Gorbachev did rely on the tendency of these vessels of clay to follow the leader. It worked up to a point, but it failed him in the end. By August 1991 it was no longer Gorbachev versus the party; it was a *Gensek* and president operating in—thanks largely to his own efforts—a vastly altered political arena.

He did remove the CPSU from its constitutional status and got the Central Committee to agree to this in February 1990. He gutted the central party apparat (the departmental structure of the Central Committee secretariat). He pushed through the redefinition of the Politburo as an *ex officio* body whose reach was limited to the party. Then he mostly declined to convene it.

In the end, the CPSU manifested itself mainly in the remaining *gorkom*, *obkom*, *kraikom*, and apparats, who held onto their desks, offices, and perks (before August 1991), but were largely bereft of effective guidance and backing from the center. They were limbs of various sorts without a central heart or brain. Neither the dramatic public aspects of the 1990–91 Union Treaty negotiations nor those of the GKChP's August coup explicitly involved the CPSU. Still, many hardline "true believers" especially in the regional apparatus did support the coup, presumably in anticipation of the restoration of the old order against the challenges that both Gorbachev and Yeltsin had posed.¹¹

Gorbachev recalled the October 1990 Central Committee plenum, held after the new state authorities, president, and legislature had considered alternate plans for exiting the economic crisis, and committed the country to a transition to a market economy:

The speakers were unsparing in their criticism of the 500-day programme. Followers of the old ways simply could not reconcile themselves to the changing role of the Party and the *loss of its right to determine every step in political and economic life*. This was the source of their unwillingness to recognize that the Central Committee and the Politburo could no longer play the roles they had played before. It is not by chance that a number of speeches asked the same question: why is the Central Committee debating the market reform programme *after* it has been discussed in the USSR Supreme Soviet, and not *before*?¹²

Building Up the State

Moderating the abnormality of the Soviet system by reducing the CPSU implied a parallel bulking up of the underdeveloped state institutions. Even the staunchest of Gorbachev's critics had to take him seriously when in 1988–89, he fostered the creation of (something like) genuine legislative authority deriving its legitimacy—albeit partially—from the voice of the people. The qualifier here has less to do with any reservations on Gorbachev's part about entrusting important matters to these new fora than with the barren ground for Soviet "parliamentarism." After so many years of bleak institutional history and a state-society relationship that gave people neither voice nor exit, a parliamentary form shaped for the Soviet peoples and their republics (whose willingness to stay together would soon become the issue) would not have time to work before events overwhelmed it. But Gorbachev, in instituting competitive elections for two-thirds of the 2,250 seats in the USSR Congress of People's Deputies (CPD), had departed radically from the Leninist rationale of the system.

The convocation of the CPD in 1989 altered the “public space” decisively and aired issues whose mention was once inconceivable, notably the secessionist ambitions of many delegates from the Baltic republics. A year later, the elections to new republic-level legislatures demonstrated in two ways how the political landscape had changed. First, they posed the question of potential secession directly. For practical purposes in the Baltics (and Georgia, too) national independence movements dominated the new legislatures, forcing many “realist” communists, hitherto loyal to Moscow, to declare themselves in favor of sovereignty. In these republics, the CPSU was no longer the ruling party. Second, the elections showed a vast gulf between the emergent civic cultures in the Baltics and their near-total absence in the manipulated electoral process in the Central Asian republics (with Russia and Ukraine occupying middling positions). Gorbachev had created a situation wherein the new state structures emergent from these elections left him less able to exert central control than before. But this had to a large degree been his intent, even if the result occasionally left him uncomfortable.

Gorbachev sought to enhance more than the legislative side of state authority and power. Moving toward a more normal executive arrangement, he persuaded the USSR legislature to change the constitution to create a Soviet Presidency. Gorbachev filled this significant post at approximately the same time as the republics' legislative elections took place. But the Presidency (and the USSR Federation Council, organized to reflect new relationships between the republics and the center) could not provide him with the wherewithal to manage or manipulate the political process as he had previously.

He was, it should be stressed to his credit, the author of his own problems. As Brown notes, by 1990–91, he was less in control than two years before, and “fewer levers of power by that time were concentrated in the office of General Secretary.” But all this was because of “far-reaching changes pushed through by Gorbachev himself, as a consequence of which the Soviet system had become different in kind.”¹³ Indeed, his reluctance to leave the *Gensek* post, even after the presidency legitimized his authority independent of the party, was fully consistent with his state-building objectives. The party's obstructive power and the opposition to Gorbachev's policies made manifest by 1990 in the development of an antireform Russian Republic party organization remained too great for Gorbachev to vacate the position from which he could block or persuade the recalcitrant. He could not afford to leave the post vacant, given people who might aspire to be the next CPSU leader.¹⁴

Perestroika: The Dynamics and Limits of Economic Change

Marshall Goldman's 1991 book *What Went Wrong With Perestroika* is a lively treatment of Gorbachev's policies and their outcomes and—were a question mark to be appended to its title—a question to which the right answer would be, “just about everything.” It, and numerous other works covering the Soviet economic experience between 1985 and 1991,¹⁵ narrate the failure of attempts to modify standard Soviet economic practices (1986–90) and to “escape forward” into the market (1990–91) as the old system proved unsalvageable. Looking back reminds us of how the odds ran against Gorbachev.

As in the political sphere, as time went on, he went further in the pursuit of economic change than he had initially intended. He was never quite ready to abandon the *word* socialism, even after he had embraced the concept of the market economy. But by this time its meaning had changed, and Gorbachev had largely become a social democrat in his convictions. His legacy had been the world's first industrial civilization built on explicitly antimarket principles. It was more than a half-century old in the 1980s, good at a few things, bad at most, and removed in its design and trajectory from the leading economies of the day. Khrushchev had projected in 1961 that the Soviet Union would overtake the United States in steel, meat, and milk production by 1980. In steel, it succeeded, but by 1980 gross steel production was no marker of economic success. For meat and milk, the promises of 1961 remained a sad joke. After March 1985, the joke was on Gorbachev.

By comparison, his accomplishments in the political sphere, however dramatic, appear easy. Institutionally, bringing about the massive changes in foreign policy Gorbachev's dealing with the foreign and defense/security ministries—powerful but functionally defined elites and bureaucracies. Economic change required that he persuade a much broader audience: in Archie Brown's enumeration, "the Council of Ministers, the large number of ministries with their vested interests, the party secretariats at all levels of the administrative hierarchy with a strong stake in the status quo, and the industrial managers, many. . . dominant figures in Soviet-style 'company towns.'"¹⁶ He might have added the millions of Soviet workers as well. In their world of full state employment, in the altered political life that let them voice their gripes in the street and at the ballot box, they were potential players as well.

It is not surprising that Gorbachev failed in the end—that the economy imploded, and contributed, independent of the ethnonational problem, to the general collapse of the political system. It was not all that surprising as it was happening; the surprise was the attempt to restructure the economy at all. Soviet citizens, long used to the denial of political freedom, accurate information, or real elections, lived without a sense of civic deprivation. But economic reform, from Gorbachev's early tubthumping rhetoric about *uskorenie* (acceleration) and "mobilizing hidden reserves" to the later talk about radical price reform, "flexible" employment, and other changes confronted people with profoundly unfamiliar ideas implying massive adjustments for which people were unprepared.

Gorbachev was no economist, and as a politician he could only make so much of the mix of good and bad advice that he received from a number of sources. What he laid out from 1987 on was a mix of measures. Putting teeth in the quality-control process via the new state acceptance program (*gospriemka*) was tough, but directed at the wrong end of the production process. The havoc it raised by denying workers and managers plan-fulfillment bonuses led to its abandonment. Differentiated wage increases to reward skills and performance required financing by the factories themselves (rather than from branch-ministry wage funds), either by shedding excess labor or improving product quality to justify price increases. Managers—like the state as a whole—avoided the former and slapped new, "improved" labels on old product lines, passing the bill on to state procure-

ment bodies, which paid up. This unleashed major inflationary pressure in core sectors of the state economy.

In 1988, the new Law on the Socialist Enterprise brought forward measures aimed at making enterprise managers behave as if they were operating in a market. The new state order (*goszakaz*) system ostensibly mandated only a portion of the factory's output and allowed flexibility to decide on new product lines. But few knew how to behave "as if," and those who tried soon found they were *not* in a market economy, but in one that lacked wholesale market mechanisms to allocate the necessary inputs for new products. With few exceptions, managers sought state orders on the scale of the old plan targets, and proceeded to meet them, thus reproducing past patterns.

In retrospect it all seems too little, too late but, as a matter of political economy, Gorbachev's efforts have to be judged against what came before—and that was precious little. The issues that Gorbachev opened for discussion and the measures he implemented went well beyond anything previous. Comparing his agenda with the package of reforms that Andropov had announced in summer 1983 is instructive. Andropov's policies were the last in what Gertrude Schroeder called the Soviet economy's "treadmill of reforms,"¹⁷ a formulation wherein the emphasis belongs on treadmill rather than reform. Gorbachev went immeasurably beyond all this—his moves, given the turn away from repression and administrative measures, left managers free to misbehave, no longer under control of the state that nonetheless still owned and was responsible for their plants.

Finally, there were three bitterly controversial reform measures—one implemented and two discussed, but never acted upon. The first was the authorization of cooperative enterprise, proscribed along with all private activity since the end of NEP sixty years before. The visible enrichment of all people, from the enterprising to the marginally criminal, with state license, fed egalitarian resentment and raised volatile issues of social justice. People were almost as exercised over the state's entertaining notions of a "certain amount" of (frictional, short-term) unemployment in the interests of efficiency, and of retail price "reform" (i.e., increases) on food and other items whose long and uneconomic subsidization was a burden the economy could no longer bear. As the general performance of the economy declined, Gorbachev and his team absorbed tremendous public relations blows for measures not yet implemented. Only in the spring of 1991, too late to have any salutary effect, did the state raise retail prices—and then by decree—resulting in public disorder. The full employment "legacy" from the first five-year plan (FYP) endured unaltered: the Soviet economy died at the end of 1991 in full-employment mode.

Gorbachev was a politician of a new sort by 1989, operating in a new political context that had not yet hardened into a system. Thus, in late summer 1990, President and legislature agreed that the economy was indeed in terminal crisis and that, however little they really understood it, the market system that worked in other countries was necessarily their destination. They entertained two plans—the "government" plan and the more radical Yavlinsky-Shatalin 500 days plan. Economically incompatible (and with different perspectives on how much power would remain to any central government as the union treaty process heated up),

they each had elements of appeal. Gorbachev called on the veteran economist Abel Aganbegyan to combine “their best elements.” The result of that process was a document, not a real plan. But Gorbachev had behaved as many politicians in other lands, with less excuse, had before him—lacking any obvious choice better than the one he made.¹⁸

Letting Go: Eastern Europe Released

One does not get the impression from his writings that Gorbachev thought too much about Eastern Europe specifically, or was given to contemplating the diversity that ran from Kádár’s Hungary to Ceaușescu’s Romania. His preoccupations early on were simultaneously domestic and global rather than regional in the “bloc” sense. But in the end, Eastern Europe was the beneficiary of a logic driven by those preoccupations. Without projecting mid-1980s Western-analytic viewpoints onto him, what he did by 1989–90 arguably shows that he understood that the Soviet bloc was “none of the following:”

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- an ideological/political asset (revolutions from above and abroad had created it, not domestic political forces; Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and [many times] Poland, had revolted against or managed to subvert critical elements of the Soviet model)
- an economic asset (Soviet–East European terms of trade had, after the early years, amounted to Moscow’s subsidization of the colonial economies it had distorted, rather than their efficient exploitation)
- a military asset (the non-USSR Warsaw Pact militaries were not impressive, not really reliable from Moscow’s view, and, located in a geographic buffer zone of dubious utility in the thermonuclear age, not really worth much to Soviet security, especially when the economic costs of the USSR’s position in Eastern Europe were taken into account).

Realism dictated that Gorbachev be ready to liquidate that position. Doing so would be in accord with the will of the peoples of the area, which was very useful in his dealings with the West, but less so with most of his colleagues at home. By May 1987, he was arguing to the politburo the necessity of reductions in armaments in Eastern Europe, framing this in economic terms and in a broader political context that involved coming to terms with the West’s judgments and their foundation. Margaret Thatcher did not mince words—the USSR had invaded Hungary and Czechoslovakia and typically lied about the degree of its dominance in conventional weapons in the European theater. Gorbachev felt it was time to admit these invasions, come clean about the arsenal in Eastern Europe, and

acknowledge that the Americans and the West as a whole had real reasons “for worrying about a Soviet threat.”¹⁹

Gorbachev's evolution up to 1989 ultimately made him a friend of democratic change in Eastern Europe, in principle as well as pragmatically. What had arguably begun with a desire to see the bloc's leaders adopt their own programs of *perestroika* in imitation of him²⁰ became something more. By late 1988, when it was obvious that the Jaruzelski regime's not-quite-clandestine talks with representatives of Solidarity were headed toward some kind of concordat that would involve an opening of the regime, Gorbachev had opted for nonintervention. He held this line through 1989, as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Bulgaria, and finally, Romania, went through their diverse transitions. Western analysts sometimes mused about whether, despite their origins, some of the Eastern European regimes had rooted themselves sufficiently to survive in the absence of the Soviet guarantee. Gorbachev provided them with the test. He withdrew the guarantee; they did not survive.

By his own account he was not an advisor, much less an order-giver: heading for the (ironic) fall 1989 celebration of forty years of the GDR, he was resolute that “we would not dictate to the East German leaders how they should run their affairs at home.”²¹ But the effect of his appearance in East Berlin next to the unregenerate Honecker was immense. His host could not have mistaken where his guest's views ran. “I had met Honecker on some seven or eight occasions since 1985. . . . My cautious attempts to convince him not to delay the necessary reforms . . . had led to no practical results whatever. It was as if I had been speaking to a brick wall.”²²

The year 1989 had begun in Poland, and ended in Romania: it had ended well; a Soviet leader with unpredictable positions had made that result possible. Not a single one of the Politburo members who elevated Gorbachev to leadership in March 1985 could conceivably have behaved in the same manner. Gorbachev would be more confused and conflicted later, in facing the independence demands of border peoples who had been added to the USSR itself—the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians—forty years before his watch. But in dealing with the bloc, he consistently got it right.

In concluding this discussion of Eastern Europe, we can probably do no better than to take Gorbachev's own words (from a later essay, reflecting a bit of the *post-factum* statesman's perspective) that combine a certain idealism on regime change with a realist assertion that East Europe's peaceful liberation was in (Russian, former) Soviet interests as well.

Critics at home have also charged that we lost our allies in Eastern Europe, that we surrendered these countries without compensation. But to whom did we surrender them? To their own people . . . [who] chose their own path of development based on their national needs. The system . . . was condemned by history, as was the system in our own country. . . . Any effort to preserve [it] would have further weakened our country's positions, discrediting the Soviet Union in the eyes of our own people and the whole world. Moreover, this system could have been “saved” in only one way—by sending in tanks, as we did in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The consequences of such unjustified action could have included a general European war.²³

The Ethno-federal Pseudoempire

With respect to the critical ethnopolitical question, the “nationality problem,” the conventional wisdom has found Gorbachev wanting in imagination, conceptualization, and even realism. Gorbachev’s exposure to nationalities *in situ* likely was weak. Although he makes much of the ethnic diversity of Stavropol krai, where he spent his whole pre-Moscow career, long and successful years there were not the same as service on non-Russian turf that Brezhnev had served in the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Moldavia, and he, of course, was not given to experimenting with structures of power. We cannot say what role such exposure by itself played in inoculating Brezhnev and most of his colleagues against any notion of loosening the center’s reins on the ethnopolitical periphery.

Clearly, Gorbachev underestimated the implications of what glasnost and democratization would do in a multiethnic super-state with an imperial heritage wherein a “fake” federal structure nevertheless expressed the realities of historic location, of ethno-linguistic and cultural boundary lines that defined more than one hundred peoples, fifteen of them in nominal possession of republican homelands. He would go beyond testing whether looseness of the sort that marked the Polish and Hungarian regimes could hold in a much larger system, one that—unlike them—was anything but ethnically homogeneous.

Gorbachev’s tragedy, if such it were, was well explored early in the wake of the Soviet collapse by Roman Szporluk, who wrote about an agenda “only marginally concerned with nationality matters”²⁴ at the outset. To go further, asserting especially that “he hoped gradually to diminish *the importance of the republics* and of the nationality factor altogether”²⁵ (emphasis added) may be a bit of a stretch, given all the other items on Gorbachev’s political-institutional agenda. But Szporluk is on very firm ground when (dealing with a Gorbachev who, in retrospect, we know was evolving politically in a social-democratic direction) he says that Gorbachev sought

the downgrading of the “nationality question” to the to the level of an “ethnic” minority-rights question—one of the many specific and secondary problems Soviet society had to deal with as it was preoccupied with the fundamental task of perestroika.²⁶

Ethnic concerns came under the general if unarticulated notion of civil rights: “individuals, regardless of their ethnic identity or place of residence, were to be protected throughout the state, that is, the USSR.”²⁷ Gorbachev surely conceived of a Union state (different from the old USSR and along the lines of the March 17, 1991, referendum’s language on a “renewed union”), one fully *able* to do these things, a fitting instrument of reform. But “once aroused, the nationalist movements represented a new vision of political space and national organization . . . not analogous to . . . the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s.”²⁸

For Gorbachev nationalism remained a problem to be managed, in the context of a group or individual rights framework, a genuine internationalism allowing people of all the nationalities to “feel comfortable in any part of the Soviet Union.”²⁹ Nearly a decade later, he reasserted that his aim had been “to respect

the rights of the different nations and republics, ensuring them maximum satisfaction . . . [and] to strengthen the Union thoroughly and transform it into a genuine federation."³⁰ But the nationalist republican leaderships rejected the framework as well as the policies that might derive from it. They instead "engaged in the work of a 'national construction of social space.'" Nationalism might be Gorbachev's "problem," but for them "it was a *solution*, or a different way of approaching the problem of Soviet society and politics." Thus, if "Gorbachev and the center wanted to downgrade or 'ethnicize' the national question, the alternative view in the republics transformed it into a question of relations between states—it *etatized* and *internationalized* the nationality question."³¹

And so the process devolved, with Gorbachev less the master and more a player in a game where he did not hold the best hand. He dealt with the ominous implications of the 1989 and 1990 elections in the new, measured manner, like a civilized leader. USSR President since 1990, the first and only incumbent of that office, and still reluctant *Gensek*, he had fewer resources to deploy in the 1 + N game of constructing a new Union Treaty. His capital city was simultaneously Yeltsin's, but Russia itself was increasingly the latter's territory. Gorbachev faced a range of entities, from the clearly secessionist Baltics (and Georgia) to the more opportunistic (and pro-Union) but still power-hungry elites of the "stans." But more and more, before the August 1991 coup, it was the secessionists—along with Russia and Ukraine added to them after the coup—who would make the running and who would explicitly deny the center "any right to be a participant."³²

It is to Gorbachev's credit that he "let it happen," rather than trying to use coercive resources, limited although they were, to hold the union together. The Gorbachev who acquiesced in the ongoing Novo-Ogarevo process,³³ who sought a Union Treaty draft among fractious republican leaderships, who dealt rather gamely with his own effective marginalization at home even as he enjoyed the plaudits of the international community as a global celebrity-statesman, behaved well. No other *Gensek* would have let the situation develop as Gorbachev had. He was consistent in not turning to methods hitherto rejected against an eventuality—the Union's dissolution—which he loathed. The possible exceptions of the early 1991 violence in Vilnius and Riga, though troubling to many observers, seem less a panicked half-turn backward, than examples of Gorbachev's faulty oversight of organs of power irreconcilably opposed to any kind of independence. He did not help the situation with an unrealistic proceduralism, insisting that the Baltic republics follow a complicated (and only recently established) set of steps toward disconnection from the USSR. But, on the whole, he went with much better grace than he might have.

Ending the Cold War

The broader world is now forgetting—and likely never cared much anyway, about what the old Soviet domestic order was like. Gorbachev's successes and failures in transforming the system at home will be increasingly the concern of specialists, such as the typical readers of this journal.

It is the international drama in which Gorbachev was a major (or perhaps the major) player that is unlikely to be forgotten. The peaceful end of the cold war,

the conclusion of complex territorial and political issues, and the reunification of Germany in a transformed Europe, were accomplishments unwinding many of the problems of a half-century.

Gorbachev came to office in 1985 in a political context vastly altered from that of 1978 when he made the journey from Stavropol to Moscow. Ronald Reagan's military buildup was moving forward, politically secured by his 1984 second-term landslide. Reagan was not alone. The ensemble of critical Western leaders—notably the steely Margaret Thatcher, but also Helmut Kohl and François Mitterand—were a tough-minded lot. It was a West vastly different from that of the divided—and unlucky—Carter administration, with its fraught relations with allies (especially Helmut Schmidt), its confusions about anticommunism, and its post-Vietnam malaise. A transformation of the Western posture, involving changes in personalities and policies, had taken place as Brezhnev sunk deeper into senility and as Andropov and Chernenko made their brief transits across the Soviet stage.

It had not been a good time for the Soviet Union. The U.S. reaction to the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan had been far more pointed than those of other Western states—the familiar European lag in security perceptions. But Soviet stonewalling on a number of other security issues, especially nuclear ones, had become less effective in dividing the West. By the end of 1983, United States deployment of intermediate-range missiles on European NATO soil had moved the markers, underlining the failure of Soviet diplomacy in this critical area. The global economic dynamic, altering the terms of trade since the late 1970s and bringing a decline in oil prices, left the Soviet economy far less flush than it had been after 1973 and the OPEC-driven quadrupling of prices. The chronic political-economic problems of the Soviet bloc, most pronounced in, but not limited to, Poland, would belong to Gorbachev.

March 1985 did not catch him flat-footed. As number two under Chernenko, he had had contacts and had formed impressions of the West in general and of some of its leaders, especially Thatcher. He came to the top job with a sense that his general desires to reform the USSR required a whole new policy abroad as well. By summer, he literally put a new face on foreign policy with the appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze as foreign minister—a move just as important in its removal of the old, familiar face of Andrei Gromyko as in the presentation of the Georgian to the world (an appointment made against Gromyko's advice and preferences).³⁴

Public face and private process in Soviet diplomacy diverged in the early years—the reassessment of policy was underway, but well shielded from curious gaze. At first, Washington saw Gorbachev as a tough bargainer, given to trying to use the Western allies as a wedge against the United States, similar to Brezhnev's tactics. This seemed to lie behind dramatic proposals, such as an early call for the wholesale elimination of nuclear weapons. (Although it actually fell flat with America's nuclear allies, such as Thatcher, this was an idea that would resonate with the viscerally antinuclear Reagan in a manner that the Soviets barely suspected. This proved a partial key to the later evident willingness of Gorbachev to

deal with the American president directly.) But the public story, up to and for a while after the 1986 Reykjavik summit (whose billing as “an opportunity nearly grasped, but missed” obscured its significance), looked disappointing. As Jack Matlock noted, the positive trends developing at the time would be “apparent only in retrospect.”³⁵

The Gorbachev who later emerged as global statesman had been better briefed than his predecessors. He sought more, and less conventional, information from people like Aleksandr Yakovlev and others he himself had brought closer to the seat of power. Some were young, but many were older, drawn from the ranks of the Khrushchev-era *shestidesiatniki*. All this made for new content, as well as the developing new “look” of foreign policy. Well before he could do major surgery on the Soviet Union’s internal balance of power, he changed the balance of *influence* though the policy aides and advisors, the staffers he selected on his own.³⁶

“Gorbachev had engaged in the ‘hard sell’ earlier, and deserves major credit for the pattern-breaking path he outlined to the top elite.”

Gorbachev’s job of selling the new thinking and policy to the Soviet elite constituency was both eased and complicated by changes he had brought about. Early on, he benefited from the fact that foreign policymaking was a very closed process, even within the tight constrictions of the system. He was the leader; he brought the Politburo along with him, as practice said he should. Used to deferring to the *Gensek* in such matters, his Politburo colleagues went along, as practice and habit said they should. (Many would have been horrified if they knew where he—and emergent developments—would put them by 1990.)

By the time developments had gone well beyond Reykjavik, the composition of the elite constituency had changed. Although far from universal, there was more support for the “new thinking” and for a more cooperative relationship with the West (the part of the world that, as the Soviet people were now learning, actually worked and was worthy of emulation). Although their impact should not be overestimated (since even in the later Gorbachev period foreign policy remained very rarefied and elite), the new state institutions (whose birth was largely Gorbachev’s doing) also helped normalize the broader political context. The fruits of the ongoing Reagan-Gorbachev summits were no longer as hard a sell to much of the elite at home.

Gorbachev had engaged in the “hard sell” earlier, and deserves major credit for the pattern-breaking path he outlined to the top elite. Thus, to the Politburo before the 1986 Reykjavik summit, he combined assurances that Soviet security remained at the center of his attention with warnings that the United States was not likely to be receptive any longer to self-serving positions. He reminded his colleagues that what the Soviet Union could afford was finite.

[W]e have to realize that if our proposals imply weakening U.S. security, then there won't be any agreement. . . . If we don't back down on some specific, maybe even important, issues . . . we will lose in the end. We will be drawn into an arms race that we cannot manage.³⁷

However improbable it might have seemed in his first term, Reagan found Gorbachev to be someone with whom (reiterating Thatcher's comment) he could "do business." Gorbachev also wanted to do business and was fit to do so (unlike his predecessors who, as Reagan had observed, "keep dying on me"), and after a certain amount of skirmishing and testing, found Reagan to be someone receptive to a vision that distinguished this Soviet leader from all that preceded him. In a sense, the cold war ended as the two developed what Matlock labels a "common agenda."

Thus it was that, during the Moscow summit in May 1988, someone asked Reagan during a photo-op in the Kremlin whether he still thought the Soviet Union was an "evil empire." In his *Memoirs*, Gorbachev recounts the moment: "[His] reply was short: 'No.' I was standing next to him and thought to myself: 'Right.'"³⁸ Another witness has Reagan responding at greater length: "No. . . . That was another time, another era."³⁹ He then credited Gorbachev, rather than U.S. pressures, for the changes that had occurred since 1985, which transformed the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev had to be credible to get the foreign policy results he wanted out of the new thinking, even though it tilted heavily toward concessions to the West. Along one dimension, credibility came easy: much editorial commentary in the United States (caught in a "Gorbymania" not totally unjustified given both his substance and style) attributed to Gorbachev depths of intelligence and sincerity, generally withheld from their treatments of Reagan. (Matlock notes that *Time* named Gorbachev "Man of the Year" for 1987, but had little praise for Reagan):

Apparently the American president deserved no credit for achieving an agreement he had sought since his first year in office, one that set the United States and the Soviet Union on a course that soon brought an end to the arms race and, indeed, the Cold War itself.⁴⁰

Certainly these were (and are) convictions widespread in much of academia and left-liberal circles, rooted in something beyond judgments on the dynamics of East-West diplomacy and foreign relations.

What ultimately underlined the authenticity of the new thinking in foreign policy, were actions and events both inside and outside the international arena. First, from Khrushchev on, through freeze and thaw, "peaceful coexistence" as slogan had always been defined by Soviet insistence that there could be no abandonment of the "class principle" in international affairs, no relaxation of the ideological struggle. Changing such a formula would thus be revolutionary, and the theses for the XIX Conference of the CPSU, released shortly before Reagan went to Moscow in 1988, did precisely that, with as much explicitness as Gorbachev could be expected to provide before the high councils of the party he could still not afford *not* to lead.⁴¹

Second were the *domestic* changes that had transformed Soviet political, intellectual, and economic life (in the last instance, without bringing any actual improvement). As Reagan had implied, it was not simply that the foreign policy of the “evil empire” had changed, but that its *essence* had. Gorbachev's Soviet Union was a different entity; in a sense, his creation. The new foreign policy was, in large measure, constructed by Gorbachev and his collaborators around a new view of the world and around the objective of serving domestic reform. The abundant evidence that domestic reform, underlined the fact that the new thinking was genuine as well.

Gorbachev had come a long way, leading many with him on the Soviet side into a new, albeit short-lived, era. Reagan also had made a journey, bringing along with him some on the American side who had still feared Gorbachev, seeing in him a leader whose reforms only indicated a desire for a stronger, and therefore naturally more menacing and dangerous, Soviet Union. By the time the Reagan phase of the Gorbachev drama was nearing its end, the deeply anticommunist president whose favorite—and only—Russian phrase was “trust, but verify,” was still the focus of some fears (determined to be unfounded by the first Bush administration's 1989 policy review) that he might, in negotiations with Gorbachev, be prone to give up *too* much.

It was, of course, on the Bush administration's watch that the release of Eastern Europe—the end of the Cold War—was accomplished. It went further and faster than anyone could imagine when the new president took office. Certainly, Washington understood already that Polish exceptionalism was a reality—one that Gorbachev was willing to cut a good deal of slack—and saw that the slow but steady evolution of the Hungarian situation was continuing with no Kremlin criticism. But the revolutionary transformation elsewhere in the bloc by the end of 1989 was not on the horizon.⁴² To that outcome, Gorbachev and Bush each made contributions that, different as they were, signaled a new alignment of the heads of two superpowers, and a world transformed.

Further evidence of the transformation came in the spring of 1991 as Bush signed on to Gorbachev's project of maintaining some kind of “union state” at home. Bush's appearance in Ukraine and the address unkindly characterized as the “chicken Kiev” speech were, in retrospect, perhaps poorly timed, but that perspective was only supplied later, by the August coup and its aftermath. At the time, a visit to a republic other than the RSFSR, and an address offering a combination of sympathy and realism to its parliament, were not inappropriate. Nor was American support for a reforming leader who, however difficult he found it to face the prospect of the dissolution of the union, had shown rather clearly that he would not face it with force. But none of this was enough. The Soviet Union, with Gorbachev at the head, would die, peacefully, in December 1991, as a union of twelve republics (Baltic independence having been generally recognized after August, and the three states having entered the United Nations General Assembly in September). But it died as an ally—certainly not an adversary—of the United States, and, arguably, *despite* the end of the cold war, and not because of it. The world would soon relegate the term “bipolar” to psychiatric use.

Conclusion

Gorbachev is now an elder statesman, member of a small global club, a figure with an eponymous foundation, an individual well into his second decade of high visibility at international conferences, a commentator on and sponsor of global issues and initiatives. There are many ways to achieve that status in the civilized world. Most are respectable, but not all of these are voluntary. Reagan's was; he won his two-term maximum. Bush and Gorbachev were each terminated by the voters, the former by Americans in 1992, the latter by the Ukrainians whose vote on December 1, 1991, for full state independence ended the (extremely small) prospect of any kind of union state that might have given an official role to Gorbachev.

No other Soviet leader, given the nature of the system, could have graduated to the "normality" of elder statesmanship (leaving aside the fact that all except Khrushchev died in office). That system, rooted in totalitarian impulses it never "evolved out of," stood squarely against most of the positive developments of the twentieth century. Gorbachev attempted thus—however "faulty" his understanding of that system—to connect the Soviet peoples with what they had missed. His preference surely would be to have achieved his elder statesman status *after* a term or two as president of the "Union of Sovereign States." That circumstances and forces denied him this, indeed probably made his whole project impossible, in no way invalidates his membership card in the club.

NOTES

1. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1965), chap. 1.
2. Rasma Karklins, "Explaining Regime Change in the Soviet Union," *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 1 (1994): 29–45.
3. *Ibid.*, 30.
4. *Ibid.*, 31 (emphasis added).
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90. One of the most comprehensive treatments of Gorbachev's "project" and its outcomes, dealing in illuminating detail with the institutional or organizational aspects, is Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Revolution from Above, 1985–2000: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime* (New Brunswick, CT: Transaction, 2002).
8. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 90 (emphasis added).
9. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 111.
10. *Ibid.*, 177.
11. On the stance of party organizations in the August days, see Hahn, *Russia's Revolution*, 399–446, esp. 420–27.
12. *Ibid.*, 384–85 (emphasis added).
13. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 178.
14. See Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 193–96, on Gorbachev's reasons for staying on as *Gensek*.
15. See Marshall I. Goldman, *What Went Wrong with Perestroika* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992); see also Ed Hewett, *Reforming the Soviet Economy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1988); and Anders Åslund, *Gorbachev's Struggle for Economic Reform* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
16. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 213.

17. See Gertrude Schroeder, "The Soviet Economy on a Treadmill of 'Reforms,'" U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *Soviet Economy in a Time of Change* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979), 313.

18. Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 372–97, esp. 383–97, on the attempt to synthesize the plans.

19. See Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), 254, citing notes by Gorbachev's adviser, Anatoly Chernyaev.

20. See the brief and informative account in Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 247–51. It is worth noting, as well, that in successfully pushing political-institutional reform at home, he made it effectively impossible for the Soviet Union, in its modified 1989 version, to crack down forcefully on Eastern Europe. See Fredo Arias-King, "Soviet Domestic Politics and the Collapse of the Outer Empire, 1989," *Demokratizatsiya* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 279–96, esp. 292–93.

21. Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 523.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Mikhail Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 206.

24. Roman Szporluk, "The National Question," in *After the Soviet Union: From Empire to Nations*, ed. Timothy J. Colton and Robert Legvold, 84–112 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

25. On Gorbachev's plans to promote the autonomous republics (ASSRs)—the majority of them within the Russian Federation—to union-republic status for negotiating purposes, and, thus, diminish the status of the, then, fifteen Union Republics (SSRs), including Russia, see Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 247–48 and chap. 12.

26. Szporluk, "The National Question," 92.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 93.

29. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 257.

30. Gorbachev, *On My Country*, 92–93, 83–133 (emphasis added).

31. Szporluk, "The National Question," 93–94.

32. *Ibid.*, 94

33. See the reminiscence of a late-July meeting by Gorbachev (later Yeltsin) adviser Yuri Baturin, "Chess-like Diplomacy at Novo-Ogarevo: An Eyewitness Account of the Drafting of the USSR Union Treaty of 1991," *Demokratizatsiya* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 212–21.

34. Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 180–81.

35. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 178.

36. *Ibid.*, 135–37, and Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 97.

37. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 212.

38. Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 457.

39. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 302.

40. *Ibid.*, 283.

41. *Ibid.*, 295–96 (emphasis added).

42. Along with a number of others—academics, journalists, and government officials—I was involved during autumn 1989 in a set of periodic meetings in Washington (the venue provided by the government via the U.S. Institute of Peace) to discuss (in the aftermath of Poland's spring 1989 elections and Hungary's pacted transition) further potential East European lines of development still well below the horizons of policymakers and those who served them directly. We were encouraged to speculate quite freely, up to and including the near-inconceivable possibilities of German reunification. Before the year was out, and to our continuing wonder, virtually everything speculated on had happened.