

The Other Side of Perestroika

The Hidden Dimension of the Gorbachev Era

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Mikhail Gorbachev played an important role in the history of our troubled twentieth century. But that role was not the one attributed to him by Western public opinion while he was in power; nor was it the role he had claimed to be fulfilling.

His policy was resumed in two Russian words that soon passed into all languages: *glasnost*, meaning “publicity” but mistranslated as “openness,” and *perestroika*, meaning “restructuring.” His tactical objective was to reform the image of the Soviet system, and thus to persuade the rich countries of the capitalist world to help the USSR financially and economically. His strategic objective was not new: it was to drain the West economically while disarming it, so that, in due course, communism could take over the world. In effect, this amounted to a delayed response to the theory of convergence—a concept propagated by, among others, John Kenneth Galbraith.¹ Gorbachev preferred to speak of a “common European home,” which offered the advantage of appearing to exclude the United States from Europe, and therefore from NATO.

This was a very Leninist idea, and appropriately, especially in his first few years in power, Gorbachev never tired of proclaiming his allegiance to the founder of the Communist state in and after 1917. Tributes to Lenin abound in Gorbachev’s first book, *Perestroika*.²

The fatal flaw in Gorbachev’s strategy lay in the unreformable nature of communism. Instead of becoming poorer, as Karl Marx had forecast, the working class in the capitalist countries had become richer. Where communism was supposed to provide abundance for all, it had yielded poverty for the masses, while guaranteeing privilege and comparative wealth for the rulers, the *nomenklatura*.

Gorbachev was the first pure “product” of the Soviet system to achieve supreme power in that he was the first Soviet leader born after the Revolution: on 2 March 1931. Thus he had never lived under any other system; there was no way to the top except through the party apparatus and allegiance to the accepted (i.e., imposed) ideology.

It is generally accepted that Gorbachev’s rapid rise to supreme power as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) rested on the patronage of two key Soviet leaders: the party’s top ideologist,

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Mikhail Suslov, and the chairman of the KGB, Yuri Andropov.³ It is also known that, as a student in the Law Faculty of Moscow State University, Gorbachev was a KGB informer.⁴

What, then, was meant by the key words of Gorbachev's new policy of perestroika and glasnost? It was widely assumed in the West that the main thrust of perestroika was to be economic and social. By his own account, the idea was first aired during the Central Committee Plenum of March-April 1985, when he was elected general secretary. The idea became a policy a year later at the Twenty-Seventh Congress of the CPSU in February-March 1986, when he called for "far-reaching, radical and uncompromising" measures, specifically "broad and genuine democratization, the resolute struggle against red tape and violations of law and the active involvement of the masses in managing the country's affairs."

Shortly after came a Law Against Unearned Income designed to penalize corruption; a resolution by the Moscow Soviet obliging citizens fit for work to produce a certificate of employment, designed to target those living off the black economy; and a campaign against alcoholism. The latter, in particular, by raising prices 25 percent and slashing production, soon created a black market in home brewing, with predictably undesirable consequences, including a dramatic rise in deaths from poisoning, while the statistics of deaths from alcoholism fell roughly by the same proportion.

In July 1988, Leonid Albakin, director of the Economics Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, declared that since the launching of perestroika, the USSR's gross national product had fallen to below its level during Leonid Brezhnev's eleventh Five-Year Plan, which Gorbachev had described as the period of "stagnation."⁵ Nor was this necessarily surprising, since Gorbachev's proposed remedies to the "stagnation" he had denounced consisted of increasing the degree of state (that is, party) supervision of all industrial enterprises. In other words, the "restructuring" of the state, as envisioned under perestroika, consisted of more of the same.

Perestroika and "Active Measures"

There was, however, a hidden dimension to perestroika, which passed largely unnoticed by the Western media and by Western political leaders: the restructuring of the "active measures" (*aktivniye meropriyatiya*) apparatus. In contrast to the "restructuring" of the economy, the perestroika of the overt and covert propaganda apparatus of the Soviet Union was considerably strengthened and made more sophisticated under Gorbachev. Active measures by their nature were unknown to the general public, but constituted the hidden heart of the Cold War on the Soviet side. A rough Western equivalent would be "dirty tricks," including *dezinformatsiya* or disinformation—the deliberate spreading of falsehoods or distortions of events by planting of stories in the media or other means, not least by forgeries of allegedly Western official documents.⁶ Another technique was the use of "agents of influence" who might be witting (that is, aware that they were spreading disinformation for Soviet ends), or—the ultimate subtlety—unwitting (persuaded that the falsehoods they had been fed were in fact true).⁷

A major dissemination channel for Soviet propaganda was international "front" organizations directed by the CPSU International Department (ID), of which perhaps the most effective and best known was the World Peace Council, designed to propagate the view that only the Soviet Union and its

allies aimed at peace, while the NATO powers threatened it. In this secret domain, Gorbachev's perestroika was most effective, designed to further Soviet policy objectives by concealing them and damaging Western policies. In March 1986, Gorbachev removed long-serving ID chief Boris Ponomarev, and replaced him with Anatoly Dobrynin, who for twenty-four years had been Soviet ambassador in Washington. Even at that late date, many Western journalists and congressmen or members of parliament would have found it difficult to define the role of the ID, although many of them would have known about the Comintern, Lenin's organization for rallying and controlling Communist parties worldwide. "Disbanded" by Stalin in 1943 to reassure President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the Comintern was secretly revived immediately after World War II as the ID.⁸ In 1947, Stalin pulled off a major deception ploy when he launched the Communist Information Bureau or Cominform, a restricted body designed to deceive the West into thinking that it was a reduced version of the Comintern. Most, if not all, Western observers (myself among them) fell for this disinformation.

The conventional wisdom in Western chancelleries was that the ID merely liaised with foreign Communist parties, whereas in reality it determined the whole foreign policy of the USSR, leaving it to the Foreign Ministry and the KGB's First Chief Directorate to execute its policies. The transfer of the highly experienced Dobrynin to run the ID was thus a master stroke on Gorbachev's part. At the same time, Gorbachev abolished the International Information Department (IID) created by Brezhnev in 1978, and sent its head, Leonid Zamyatin, to London as ambassador: a demotion greeted by the then Labour government as a flattering promotion. In lieu of Zamyatin's department, Gorbachev expanded the functions of the Central Committee's Propaganda Department to cover foreign as well as domestic audiences. His choice as head of the expanded department was Alexander N. Yakovlev, whom Brezhnev had sent to Canada as ambassador to rid himself of a political nuisance. Yakovlev had acquired a degree of influence over Gorbachev and is credited with having converted him to the idea of glasnost as a device to persuade the outside world that the Soviet Union was abandoning its coercive monopoly of the public means of information.

These major changes were implemented by sweeping media appointments, including new heads of the State Committee for Television and Radio (GOSTELERADIO), the State Committee for Publishing Houses, Printing Plants and the Book Trade (GOSKOMOZDAT), the Novosti Press Agency, the All-Union Copyright Agency (VAAP), and new chief editors of a wide range of publications, including the CPSU's theoretical organ *Kommunist*, the approved or tolerated satirical organ *Krokodil*, the state-controlled trade union newspaper *Trud*, and *Ekonomicheskaya Gazeta*, *Sovetskaya Kultura*, and other publications.

Gorbachev completed his sweeping changes in the organs of propaganda and disinformation in September 1988, when he appointed his close advisor Yakovlev to head the newly created International Policies Commission, charged with overseeing the work of the ID. The head of the ID, Dobrynin, was transferred to Gorbachev's office as special adviser. At the same time, Gorbachev created the Ideological Commission, to be headed by Vadim Mevdedev, the former deputy head of the Propaganda Department; and the Legal Policy Commission, to be headed by former KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov, whom Gorbachev had replaced with Vladimir Kryuchkov. (The

latter would become the main author of the failed coup of August 1991, which signaled the end of the Soviet system.)

Thus, after three years in office, Gorbachev had completed his overhaul of the propaganda and active measures apparatus: the real purpose of perestroika. Not unexpectedly, active measures were intensified.

Techniques of Active Measures During Perestroika

One of the favored techniques of international active measures was to plant an anti-United States story in one of the Third World publications either created or merely supported by Soviet secret funds; the planted story is then picked up in an official Soviet outlet and disseminated internationally. KGB defector Ilya Dzirkvelov revealed that one of the KGB's most successful outlets was a New Delhi daily named *Patriot*, which surfaced a particularly damaging piece of disinformation in October 1985 (some months after Gorbachev's advent to power, though prior to the overhaul of the disinformation apparatus).⁹ The gist of it was that the virus that causes AIDS had been developed by the Pentagon in experiments conducted by U.S. Army specialists at Fort Detrick, Maryland, together with scientists at the Center for Disease Control.

Initially reproduced in the Soviet weekly *Literaturnaya gazeta* of 31 October 1985, the story was revived and sustained, so that by the end of 1987 the United States Information Agency (USIA) monitored ninety-one pick-ups of the disinformation around the globe. By then, even the Soviet side had decided to drop the campaign, for on 29 October 1987, Roald Z. Sagdeev, a space specialist of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, dismissed the AIDS allegations, commenting that "the Academy has never had anything to do with such accusations."

Forgeries had long been a major activity of the KGB's First Chief Directorate, and continued as such during Gorbachev's reign. KGB officers were tasked to collect specimens of handwriting of public figures, and especially of their signatures, together with headed notepaper from Western government departments. An interesting example, among many, was a forged letter allegedly from the late William J. Casey, at that time director of Central Intelligence, to Heritage Foundation President Edwin J. Feulner. The letter, dated "10 December 1986" (instead of the customary American style: December 10, 1986) alerted Feulner to impending turmoil in India. It was later splashed across the front page of *Blitz*, a pro-Soviet Indian weekly, and in fact stirred up anti-U.S. riots.¹⁰

Although the wording of the letter was cleverly done, two lapses exposed it as a forgery. One was the dating; the other was that the letter began, "Dear Edwin," whereas friends of Dr. Feulner (of whom I am one) always call him "Ed."¹¹

Two Taboos

During the lifetime of the Soviet Union, there was a tacit conspiracy of silence among Western foreign ministries, including the U.S. State Department and Britain's Foreign Office, never to mention two taboos: Soviet involvement in drugs and terrorism. Yet there was no lack of evidence on either count,¹² and the involvement continued during the Gorbachev period, as Russian journalists have confirmed with documents from the CPSU Central Committee.¹³

I do not exclude the possibility that Gorbachev may have tried to reduce the drug activity he inherited from his predecessors. That it continued while he was in power is, however, demonstrable, as shown by the Dutch police raid on the Soviet merchant vessel *Kapitan Tomson* in Rotterdam harbor on 2 June 1986, when 200 kilograms of heroin from Afghanistan valued at \$20 million were seized.¹⁴

Soviet involvement in terrorism was of long standing, and continued under Gorbachev. So rigorous was the (tacit) ban on mentioning it officially that even President Ronald Reagan, a lifelong anti-communist, omitted any mention of the Soviet role in Libyan and Syrian terrorism in a statement after the May 1986 summit in Tokyo. There were good diplomatic reasons for his reticence, since any anti-Soviet remarks by the president at that time might have compromised his own second summit with Gorbachev. CIA Director Casey was less inhibited, however, and in an outspoken speech on the eve of the Tokyo summit, minced no words about Soviet support for international terrorists—to the chagrin of the State Department.¹⁵

One of the most specific instances of Soviet-supported terrorist outrages during the Gorbachev period was a series of bomb attacks in Pakistan in 1987. These attacks were reported by the *Washington Post* on 9 and 11 November. Causing heavy casualties, the attacks had been mounted by the KhAD, Afghanistan's secret police, which had been created and trained by the KGB and in effect acted as a KGB surrogate.

The other half of Gorbachev's new policy, glasnost, is by definition better known than the concealed active measures campaign. The Soviet leader's own practice of glasnost was not exactly open. My favorite example is Gorbachev's reference to the horrors of Stalin's collectivization of agriculture, mainly in Ukraine. In *Perestroika*, Gorbachev writes:

. . . collectivization was a great historic act, the most important social change since 1917. Yes it proceeded painfully, not without serious excesses and blunders. But further progress of our country would have been impossible without it.¹⁶

The words "not without serious excesses and blunders" referred to the 14.5 million deaths through famine or massacre, now officially admitted in Russia as the human cost of Stalin's collectivization policy.

As the distinguished French sovietologist Françoise Thom pointed out,¹⁷ a major advantage of glasnost to Gorbachev's policy was that it would render unnecessary the systematic jamming of Western radio services such as the Voice of America, the BBC's Russian service, and Radio Liberty in Munich. Indeed, by beaming back to the Soviet public what they could now read and hear freely at home, foreign broadcasts could in effect be harnessed to the cause of the new thinking.

Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of relative freedom of speech and of the media was devastating. Although glasnost never fully amounted to freedom of speech as practiced in Western democracies, it probably did more inadvertently to accelerate the collapse of the Soviet system than anything else during the Gorbachev period. Perestroika did nothing to save the system; glasnost revealed the extent of the failure.

Notes

1. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).
2. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
3. Arkady N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 185.
4. Martin Ivens, "How Gorbachev 'Greased' His Way to the Top," London *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 March 1988.
5. Brian Crozier, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: 'Peace' and the Secret War* (London: Claridge Press, 1990), 48.
6. Soviet active measures under Gorbachev were chronicled by a U.S. government interagency task force led by the United States Information Agency (USIA). Congress required the State Department to publish annual reports of Soviet active measures during the perestroika period. For examples, see: U.S. Department of State, *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1987); U.S. Information Agency, *Soviet Active Measures In the Era of Glasnost* (Washington: USIA, June 1988); and USIA, *Soviet Active Measures in the 'Post-Cold War' Era, 1988-1991* (Washington: USIA, June 1992).
7. *Politicheskaya Razvedka s Territorii SSSR: Uchebnoye posobiye* ["Political Intelligence from the Territory of the USSR: Training Text"] (Moscow: Krasnoznamennyi Institut KGB CCCP imeni Yu. V. Andropov/NIRIO, 1989).
8. For a detailed coverage of the CPSU International Department, see Clive Rose, *The Soviet Propaganda Network* (New York and London: 1988).
9. Ilya Dzhirkvelov, *Secret Servant* (London: William Collins, 1987), 303.
10. Ref. Crozier, 134-38.
11. This and other forgeries are reproduced in Crozier, 126, 128, 134, 136, and 140.
12. The Institute for the Study of Conflict in London documented Soviet support for terrorism in books, articles, and regular reports from 1970 to 1979, as have Christopher Dobson, Joseph Douglass, Rachel Ehrenfeld, Samuel T. Francis, Randall Heather, Ian Greig, Herbert Romerstein, Claire Sterling, Uri Ra'anana, and others. See Michael Dobbs, "Russian Says Soviets Aided Terrorists: Party Reportedly Sent Funds, Arms," *Washington Post*, 26 May 1992, A1, A14; Dobbs, "Yeltsin Aides Seek to Link Gorbachev to Terrorism," *Washington Post*, 6 June 1992, A19.
13. See Yevgenia Albats, *The State Within A State: The KGB and Its Hold on Russia Past, Present and Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994); Vladimir Isachenkov, "Archives: KGB Gave Millions to Terrorists for Stolen Art," Associated Press, 10 June 1992.
14. "£13m. Heroin Landed in Soviet Ship," *Daily Telegraph*, London, 19 August 1986. Also see Rachel Ehrenfeld, "Narco-Terrorism: The Kremlin Connection," *Heritage Lectures* 89, 4 December 1986; and Ehrenfeld, *Narco-Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
15. For more details and sourcing, see Crozier, 171-191.
16. Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, 40.
17. Françoise Thom, *Le Moment Gorbachev* (Paris, 1987), 27.