

# Introduction

GORDON M. HAHN

**M**ax Weber wrote that to be allowed to put “his hand on the wheel of history,” one should possess three essential qualities: “passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion.”<sup>1</sup> Twenty years ago on March 10, 1985, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, a politician who was willing to risk putting his hand on the wheel of history, assumed power over one of the two great superpowers as the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This issue of *Demokratizatsiya* pays tribute to that event, which many at the time failed to see as a watershed. Some denied that Gorbachev’s rise to power could make him a reformer. Even as he carried out reforms, some asserted that his moves were part of an elaborate KGB-inspired ruse to lower the West’s guard. Others, mostly in the USSR and among Western leftist and academic circles, saw Gorbachev as the savior of socialism—a reformer who would put a human face, even soul, to Soviet-style communism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Gorbachev would frustrate all such predictions and expectations, but also show that he had a passion for his reform cause, a feeling for responsibility for his country and the world, and a sense of proportion. Few suspected that his arrival to power would bring radical reforms, democratization, and ultimately, albeit unwittingly, bury socialism and bring an end to the Soviet Union and cold war.

Gorbachev undertook the unlikely cause of reforming the USSR with a passion, persisting as both the costs and risks escalated. Indeed, Western scholars still argue about whether the Soviet system was reformable at all, with many asserting that any substantive reform would destabilize the system. Gorbachev also set out to ease the strains of the cold war, which had become increasingly burdensome for his country and the world. Although there was surely some political opportunism here, particularly at the outset, it appears that Gorbachev increasingly felt a great responsibility and appreciation for what he was undertaking with his American counterpart, the late Ronald Reagan. Their work heralded the peaceful end of communism in Eastern Europe and end of the cold war, the greatest military and political standoff and global crisis in world history. Per-

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Gordon M. Hahn is a visiting scholar at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies.

estroika's destabilization of the once tightly integrated totalitarian Soviet system—which was embodied by the August 1991 failed coup attempt and the ensuing systemic collapse—testify to the amount of reform that Gorbachev achieved. The Soviet demise occurring accidentally and yet peacefully, without the end of history (in its apocalyptic and not liberalist sense), seemed implausible. This was largely the result of Gorbachev's new style of leadership. His sense of proportion and political moderation rendered him morally incapable of using imprudent coercion, but he was determined enough to moderate the Soviet political system that he rendered it institutionally incapable of mustering the force and will needed to save its power, not just in faraway Berlin, Prague, or Budapest, but also in Riga, Kiev, and ultimately, in Moscow itself. Ironically, the August coup's failure brought the demise of the Soviet state and Gorbachev's resignation from power on Christmas Eve, 1991. Here Gorbachev's sense of responsibility and proportion properly overwhelmed his passion for perestroika. To be sure, Gorbachev had his faults. He had become vain and arrogant after his years in the Kremlin (something which facilitated the August coup), but less so than most others in his position have. In some tight situations, such as the Baltic crises of January 1991, he uncharacteristically eschewed responsibility. Nevertheless, having put his hand on the wheel of history, Gorbachev produced more benefit than harm.

Eight years later, on New Year's Eve, the man most responsible for the events of August 1991 and their aftermath, Boris Yeltsin, was also forced to resign rather unceremoniously, handing over power to his handpicked successor, Vladimir Putin. The former was a charismatic figure known around the world for standing on a tank in defiance of the August coup that targeted himself and Gorbachev with hopes of sending them to a not-so-warm place in Butyrka, Lefortovo, or some other locale designed for the "deprivation of freedom." The latter was a man to whom Russians and outside observers had not given much thought only a few months earlier. He had worked in the "organs" that filled those places of deprivation, first in Leningrad and then in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In November 1989, as enthusiastic Germans dismantled the Berlin Wall, Putin decried Moscow's failure to respond to his missives and inquired about what to do, given the danger to the Soviet embassy and the KGB's operatives in the GDR. Later, as deputy mayor in St. Petersburg, Putin helped defeat the August coup. Thus, the seminal events of late Soviet history connect Gorbachev and Putin.

Moreover, there is continuity in the political institutions, economy, and culture of Russia from the late perestroika era to the early twenty-first century. Although to a lesser degree political power is centralized, the state still controls much of the economy, and official anti-Americanism is again a force to be reckoned with. On the other hand, contrasts are also striking. There is no external empire. Russia is territorially only a small portion of the former USSR. Politically, the Communist Party marches in the streets criticizing the lack of democracy and the repeal of social benefits for pensioners and students, instead of running the state overtly. Small private enterprise is everywhere, and until recently powerful oligarchs equaled the state authorities' power until Putin forced them into exile, prison, or submission to the Kremlin's will.

I attribute much of the continuity between perestroika and today to the mode of the Soviet regime's transformation and demise in the early 1990s, though it was revolution from above rather than from below or from imposed or "pacted" transition.<sup>3</sup> Even the most perceptive of Soviet and Russian observers missed this aspect of the Soviet regime's demise. Thus, Martin Malia wrote in an otherwise outstanding essay penned as Yeltsin's revolution from above proceeded apace: "(A)mong the members of the Commonwealth, only Russia has made its anti-communist revolution, effectively destroying the national organization of the party. In most of the other republics, the old nomenklatura... is still in power." In Russia, Malia added, "the force that took over from the communist regime was a relatively unstructured 'civil society' of former dissidents and democrats, moral leaders who lacked a power base in property of their own."<sup>4</sup> We now know better.

Revolution from above in Russia and elsewhere presupposes five elements: (1) the use of one or more state institutions by one group of bureaucrats and officials of the ancien régime to unconstitutionally seize power from another such group and establish a new form of rule; (2) the subsequent incorporation of many of the old régime's political, economic, and social institutions into the new régime and state; (3) the cooption of, and compromises with, many non-revolutionary and reactionary officials and bureaucrats of the ancien régime after the revolutionaries' seizure of power; (4) the limited role of organized societal forces in the transfer of power; and (5) the demobilization after the revolutionary seizure of power of those few organized societal elements that were allied with the revolutionaries above before they took power. Although Gorbachev appeared prepared for an imposed transition with his reformist allies and later a pacted transition with opposition forces such as Yeltsin and the RSFSR protostate under the new Union Treaty, Yeltsin ultimately preferred a revolution from above against Gorbachev and the remnants of the partocratic régime he sought to transform. Indeed, Gorbachev's remarkable evolution—from a minimalist reformer, to a radical reformer, to a figure willing to impose (and thus control and contain the consequences for the partocratic nomenklatura of) real transition to democracy, and, finally, to a leader willing to negotiate a transition pact with the democratic opposition to the extent it was represented by Yeltsin at the Novo Ogarevo talks on a new Union Treaty—explains many of the democratic gains made by Russia and the other post-Soviet states and much of the contrast in Russia between the pre-Gorbachev and Putin eras.

Regime change by revolution from above puts obvious limits on the development of the rule of law, civil society, political parties, and overall democratic consolidation. It also facilitates backsliding from whatever democratic gains the revolution from above may have yielded. Still, as I have noted elsewhere, revolutions occur in waves, and the post-Soviet authoritarian and hybrid régimes are susceptible to democratization (or redemocratization, as well as further "re-authoritarization," even "totalitarization").<sup>5</sup> In 1917, Russia's democratic-oriented revolution from below was followed by the Bolshevik coup and Stalin's revolution from above. In 1991, the overthrow of Soviet power was won by Yeltsin's Russian revolution from above. Putin's antidemo-

cratic “Thermidor” does not need to be the last word. Indeed, the resulting lack or deficit of democracy in most of the post-Soviet states, including Russia, still retains possibilities. As this issue went to press, Kyrgyzstan underwent an apparent prodemocracy “Tulip Revolution,” coming on the heels of Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution” and Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” in 2004. Putting aside a few violent excesses in Kyrgyzstan, these revolutions all differed from the Soviet regime change in that they came from below, having more in common with the peaceful “velvet revolutions” from below in the Philippines, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Societal elements were actively and abundantly involved and well organized. This suggests that all of the remaining non-democratic post-Soviet regimes that emerged largely as a result of the revolution from above centered in Moscow and Russia in 1990–91, ranging from near totalitarian rule in Turkmenistan to soft authoritarianism in Russia, are susceptible to democratizing revolutions from below. Only the three democratic Baltic states, Moldova, and the three post-Soviet states that have already taken the rose-orange road are likely to remain immune in the long run, assuming there is no backsliding. In the short term, the more firm authoritarian regimes of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Sipurmurad Niyazov in Turkmenistan may be safe.

There is a strong thread connecting perestroika and its outcome in 1991 with today’s peaceful “small revolutions.” So when invited to be guest editor of this retrospective issue on perestroika, an invitation for which I am eternally grateful to *Demokratizatsiya*’s founder Fredo Arias-King, I gave contributors the option of writing on a theme related exclusively to the Gorbachev era or exploring connections, contrasts, and continuities between the perestroika era and the present-day Putin era. The two choices proved equally attractive, as the authors were evenly divided in their approaches. Walter Connor and Harley Balzer focused exclusively on the perestroika era, while M. Steven Fish, Richard Sakwa, and John Willerton along with his co-authors Mikhail Beznosov and Martin Carrier chose to compare, contrast, and connect the perestroika and Putin eras.

Connor provides a perceptive and sometimes moving account of Gorbachev’s daring gambit of reforms, the political plight that ensued, and the dire consequences for the Soviet state and its external empire. It underscores the extent of Gorbachev’s break with his predecessors and the strength of the tiger he had unleashed and had to ride once his reforms unsettled the stagnant but superficially stable order he inherited from them. Connor’s article is particularly effective in highlighting the irony that it was a pyramid-like structure of power, with unprecedented power concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party’s Central Committee’s (CPSU CC) general secretary and attendant apparatus that ultimately was the system’s Achilles’ heel. It was the general secretary, as the system originated in a less-refined form under Stalin, who was supposed to provide the iron will and socialist guidance to guide the army of party apparatchiks who managed the system from day to day. Instead, with Gorbachev’s assumption of the office, it was the general secretary who removed his finger from the dike that held back the flood waters of unaddressed problems that had built up from the perversity of

the system's hypercentralized and labyrinthine party-state structure, economic irrationality and ineffectiveness, supermilitarized society and economy, and grand imperial overstretch. It was the general secretary who refused to embody socialist guidance as the sole receptacle of power and decisionmaking and began to democratize the system, and who refused to spill blood to preserve Soviet power in faraway Berlin as well as Riga, Kiev, and Moscow.

Balzer offers a compelling account of social mobilization during the August 1991 coup against the hardline police and party-state apparatchiks who sought to remove Gorbachev from power in the USSR and later remove Yeltsin from power in the Russian Federation. Arguing against the scholarly consensus that anticoup demonstrations were largely

confined to Moscow and the "second capitol," St. Petersburg, Balzer musters considerable evidence that we may have underestimated the resistance of society, in whole or in part, to the coup. Balzer's argument that further mobilization was possible had the coup survived longer is intriguing and raises interesting counterfactual

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scenarios. The following, in defense of my own previously mentioned thesis of revolution from above, hopefully can be forgiven. What might have happened, had the coup persisted longer, does not negate the actual transformation mode as it ultimately unfolded from above. Power did not fall to the streets, and those democratic leaders who did not hold office or nomenklatura posts before the coup did not soon enter the corridors of power after it or the regime's full demise.<sup>6</sup> The important implication of Balzer's argument is for today and the potential for a beryozovaya (birch), or venikovaya revolyutsia.<sup>7</sup>

Taking up my challenge to directly compare the Gorbachev and Putin era policy changes in a theoretically and analytically daring article, Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier oppose the fairly broad consensus that Putin's changes to the system nascent under his most recent predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, amount to a turn to at least a soft, if not more harsh, form of authoritarian rule. Offering a model of "state collapse" distinct from that of "state failure," the authors assert that the Russian state was on the eve of full collapse upon Putin's assumption of the presidency, akin to the condition of the Soviet state upon Gorbachev's rise to power: what Gorbachev called a "pre-crisis" condition. The authors argue that "Gorbachevian and Putin political-institutional-policy choices bear remarkable similarity, albeit the respective Soviet and post-Soviet regime arrangements within which the two leaders operated varied greatly."

Fish offers us a broad comparative overview of the current state of democratic and market transformation across the former USSR, and proposes that it is in significant part a consequence of Gorbachev's "half-measures" during the perestroika

reform process. He demonstrates the important correlations between the economic statism that survives among most post-Soviet states as a consequence of Gorbachev's very limited economic reforms compared with the low levels of democratization and corruption. This important point seems to overshadow the equally important correlation assuming reverse causality (with exceptions) between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and economic freedom and corruption. That the recent post-Soviet rose-orange revolutions have occurred in three of those seven former Soviet republics (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova) that were the most hybrid (weakly democratic or softly authoritarian) and that Fish shows had undergone "far-reaching democratization" at the time of the Soviet collapse and remained hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet period (perhaps excluding the more clearly authoritarian Belarus and the somewhat softer Kyrgyz and Armenian cases), agrees with the proposition that these types of regimes are more vulnerable to revolution (and, incidentally, to nationalist mobilization and terrorism) than advanced democratic and hard authoritarian regimes.

Sakwa takes what he refers to as a metapolitical approach to perestroika, the Soviet revolution, and the Putin era, arguing that these are stages in a restorationist project rather than a revolutionary one. However, much of his discussion emphasizes the ideology, psychology, personality, and leadership of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin and their effects on politics, state, and society. According to Sakwa's article, Gorbachev's actions were driven by ideology (socialist restorationist Bukharinism) and political necessity as he understood them. Yeltsin's Weberian charisma (greater than Gorbachev's) and his drive for power ignored and, indeed, negated institutions leading to the gutting of democratization and the restoration of a monarchical leadership rule, replete with court intrigues and the precipitous rise and fall of court favorites. Sakwa's approach differs from much of the institutionalism found in our other articles. He notes:

The development of the presidency as an institution in the whole postcommunist period has been extraordinarily interconnected with the personalities of the incumbents as individuals. While there has been an interesting debate on the perils of 'super-presidentialism,' . . . in the Soviet Union and then in Russia exaggerated leadership is an aspect that can be considered a meta-political feature distinct from the evolution of the presidency as an institution. Indeed, we could go so far as to argue that charismatic leadership is the independent variable, and the office is instrumentalised by the social power represented by the leader. . . . Charismatic leadership for Weber was the alternative to what he called 'legal-rational' forms of routinised, indeed bureaucratic, leadership, and this both Gorbachev and Yeltsin exemplified.

Putin, according to Sakwa, represents the return to a leadership form based less on negation and charisma to one of statecraft based more on strategic goals for state and society, but still lacking in democratic politics and legitimacy. He correctly notes Putin's syncreticism in ideology-formulation for post-Soviet Russia (a syncreticism of tsarist, Soviet, and provisional-republican symbols). It could be added that this syncreticism is as much a consequence of ideological and political confusion as it is of clarity regarding destination. Sakwa stresses the importance of the "ambiguities in the appropriation of civil society" and the Soviet

state's peculiar party-state and pseudo-federal structure that transformed Russia into a quasi- or "subaltern" state. "The dissolution of the [Soviet] system and the disintegration of the [Soviet] state left a vacuum that was gradually filled by personalised leadership that in time took on the contours of a peculiar post-Soviet regime" with its stalled revolutionary change and the emerging counterrestoration under Putin. Finally, Sakwa notes that the presidency has replaced the people as the source of sovereignty in post-Soviet Russia, in contrast to Gorbachev's final social democratic project enshrined in the CPSU's last draft party program: "Just as communism was built on the bones of the contemporary generation so, too, the post-communist Russian regime took on neo-Bolshevik features insofar as it appeared willing to sacrifice the needs of this generation for the good of the next." As we know, future generations in the Bolshevik case never saw the promised utopia. It remains to be seen whether future Russians will see the more modest but considerable results promised by democracy and the market.

Comparing and contrasting this issue's articles reveal some interesting points of difference and agreement among the authors in their interpretations of Gorbachev's perestroika and Putin's Thermidor. Sakwa appears to disagree fundamentally with Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier that Putin's form of rule is not authoritarian: "Putin's . . . great weakness, as with Gorbachev earlier, has been the inability to find an adequately democratic way of legitimating his politics." Also, "the original agenda of 1985 is gradually being undermined in favor of a new particularism, this time based not on revolutionary socialist principles but on Russian exceptionalism." The tempting discussion of a potential clash in the mid-to long-term between Russian and American exceptionalisms (and messianisms) is left for another observer. Whereas Connor emphasizes Gorbachev's loss of control in reforming the Soviet party-state, Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier state, "A series of institutional and policy changes simultaneously strengthened both top-down and bottom-up pressures, but institutionally it was the federal executive—with Gorbachev at the helm—that was most benefited by the reconfiguring of organizational power." However, these authors all agree, as most observers of the Soviet scene did and do, that Gorbachev seriously underestimated the depth of the Soviet nationalities problem in certain republics.

Whereas Connor, Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier agree with many that Gorbachev was a son of Alexander Dubček's 1968 Prague Spring, Sakwa notes, "While one of the theorists (and Gorbachev's interlocutor since their student days together in the early 1950s) of the Prague Spring, Zdeněk Mlynář, insisted that it was impossible to make Leninism democratic, Gorbachev remained loyal to the Bukharinist vision of a democratic Bolshevism and thereby missed much of what was important about the program of 'socialism with a human face.'" "Gorbachev's vision of perestroika was not a reprise of the substance of the Prague Spring, although emotionally he retained an affinity with its aspirations, but ultimately a rejection of the attempt to give autonomy to the socialist components of a post-capitalist vision of an alternative modernity." One might ask Sakwa whether Gorbachev's vision of perestroika remained the same from 1988 to 1991. As Connor suggests and as Sakwa would likely agree, it did not.

Perhaps the most disconcerting discovery in reading back to perestroika is reflected in a point made by Sakwa: “Concerning emancipation, it was enough for most [of Russia’s revolutionary democrats] to be rid of the communist regime, and little thought was given to what would replace it.” Lenin and the Bolsheviks gave little thought to what political institutions other than the party would build communism; the abolition of the state, private property, and the family were seemingly enough to usher in the new world. Their institutional nihilism brought anything but “land, peace, and bread.” It remains unclear what Yeltsin’s institutional nihilism will bring. One hopes it is not his successor’s dismantling of all the gains made by Gorbachev’s perestroika (and Yeltsin’s own revolution from above).

And so, as we should, we offer a range of perspectives on Gorbachev’s perestroika and its implications both for post-Soviet Russia and, to some extent, the other post-Soviet states. In this way, we endeavor to bridge the ever-widening gap between history and political science. Given Gorbachev’s role in bridging elements that seemed impossible to bridge in March 1985—East and West, the Soviet Union and democratization—our effort continues in the spirit of his endeavors begun two decades ago. We can only hope that his successors will follow his example and turn the wheel of history in the direction of greater freedom and democratization, not less.

### NOTES

1. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 115.

2. For an insightful exposition of Western academia’s and leftists sovietologists’ “neo-Menshevik view” and their tendency to see Sovietism as just another modernizing model, see Martin Malia, “From Under the Rubble, What?” *Problems of Communism* 41, nos. 1–2 (January–April 1992): 89–106.

3. Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia’s Revolution from Above: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime, 1985–2000* (Rutgers, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

4. Malia, “From Under the Rubble, What?” 92–93.

5. Gordon M. Hahn, “Putin’s ‘Stealth Authoritarianism’ and Russia’s Second Revolutionary Wave,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Regional Analysis, <http://www.regionalanalysis.org/publications/regionalvoices/en/2004/04/616B350A-D9CD-49F5-9416ECAD7F5F1EAE.asp> (accessed April 21, 2004).

6. See Hahn, *Russia’s Revolution from Above*, 498–504.

7. Beryozovaya is the adjective birch for the beryozka or birch tree. Venikovaya is the adjective for the venik, the bunch or switch of birch or oak tree twigs used in Russian banyas.