

# Gorbachev, Lenin, and the Break with Leninism

ARCHIE BROWN

**Abstract:** The author examines the paradox of Mikhail Gorbachev's esteem for Lenin in combination with his growing rejection of Leninism. While Gorbachev still held the office of general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, he embraced ideas fundamentally at odds with those of the Soviet Union's principal architect. The focus of Western writers on Gorbachev's 1987 book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, as a major source has been simplistic and misleading, obscuring the radicalization of Gorbachev's political ideas from 1988 onward. Drawing, *inter alia*, on previously unused archival documents, the author demonstrates how Gorbachev's views moved closer to those of Eduard Bernstein, a democratic socialist thinker whom Lenin despised, than to Leninism. Given the institutional power Gorbachev wielded until late in the perestroika period, his embrace of concepts radically at odds with Leninism was of critical importance, opening doors which had remained firmly closed for decades.

**Keywords:** Bernstein, Bolshevik, command-administrative system, democratization, Gorbachev, Lenin, Leninism, perestroika, pluralism, socialism

In a highly authoritarian political system, with great power vested in the office at the top of the political hierarchy, the values, policy preferences, and personality of the holder of that office are liable to make a bigger difference to major policy outcomes than the personality, values, and preferences of the head of government within a democracy. The constraints on the latter will be far greater—not only from members of his or her party, but also from opposition parties, the legislature, the judiciary, organized interests, and public opinion, to name the most obvious. That is not to say, however, that the power of the top leader in an authoritarian system is entirely unconstrained. If the authoritarian system is a) highly institutionalized and b) highly ideologized, then there are likely to be quite serious obstacles in the path of major innovation of even the topmost leader. In particular, it will be very risky for him (I do not add “or her,” for male leadership is ubiquitous in totalitarian

---

Archie Brown is emeritus professor of politics at Oxford University and emeritus fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford. This article draws, in part, on a section of the final chapter of Archie Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Copyright © 2007 Oxford University Press. By permission of Oxford University Press, <http://www.oup.com>.

and authoritarian regimes) to attempt to change the basic tenets of the system's legitimating ideology or its institutional norms.

These factors all apply to the case of Mikhail Gorbachev and the transformation of the Soviet system. When Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, he attained the office which commanded greater institutional resources than any other within the country. Yet this was in a thoroughly consolidated authoritarian regime—in the classification of Linz and Stepan an example of “post-totalitarianism”<sup>1</sup>—in which the top leader was accorded great authority provided he played by the rules of the game. There was an important precedent in the post-Stalin Soviet Union illustrating the potential vulnerability of even the supreme leader. Although Nikita Khrushchev did not challenge the norms of the system to anything like the extent to which Gorbachev was subsequently to do, his frequent reorganizations of the party and state structures and an unwillingness to work through the established bureaucratic channels led to his removal from the leadership in October 1964 on the instigation of the leading members of the Politburo,<sup>2</sup> backed up by the Central Committee as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Gorbachev was always conscious of the fate of Khrushchev and of his need, therefore, to *persuade* other members of the ruling oligarchy to embark on far-reaching reform. He could not simply introduce radical change by fiat, although he had a power of appointment which enabled him gradually to change the composition of the top leadership team. Even that power was by no means unconstrained. Promotion to the highest executive committee within the system, the Politburo, was by a process of collective co-option, in which the pool of talent was restricted to people who were already members of the Central Committee (chosen at five-year intervals at party congresses). Sweeping changes to the Politburo, especially in the early stages of a new general secretaryship, were likely to meet with resistance from the existing membership. In fact, Gorbachev was far bolder in making personnel changes than Leonid Brezhnev had been during his eighteen-year reign following Khrushchev's removal, but, even so, he never had a majority of like-minded reformers on the Politburo.

There was also a convention, however, that the general secretary was the ultimate interpreter of the official ideology. This did not, in the eyes of the professional guardians of Soviet ideology, give that person a free hand to modify the already highly codified Marxism-Leninism, which was treated as if it were holy writ. Lenin had long been elevated to a godlike figure before whom the authority of even a general secretary paled. Yet, such was the importance attached to the ideology, especially as a justification of the monopoly of power of the Communist Party and of its rigidly hierarchical internal structure, that theoretical change had profound political implications. A general secretary willing to take the risk of embracing new concepts could play a vital part in altering the terms of political argument and in opening doors which had remained firmly closed for decades.

There is no doubt that in the last years of the Soviet Union—the period between March 1985 and December 1991—a conceptual revolution occurred. The break with ideological orthodoxy came, decisively, from the top of the political hierarchy. The emphasis from the outset on *glasnost* (transparency or openness) broadened the limits of the possible in public discourse even between 1985 and 1987. In 1988 and 1989 this went much further. By the spring of the latter year the officially sanctioned *glasnost* had blossomed into a virtually untrammelled freedom of speech, as was evidenced by the debates (seen by

tens of millions on Soviet television) at the First Congress of People's Deputies, a working legislature which, for the first time in Soviet history, had been chosen in contested elections.

In an early concrete example of the importance of ideological innovation, Gorbachev broke the taboo on speaking positively about pluralism when he embraced in 1987 the notions of "socialist pluralism" and a "pluralism of opinion," although it was early 1990 before he endorsed a fully-fledged "political pluralism."<sup>4</sup> Gorbachev's political beliefs evolved dramatically during his period of fewer than seven years in power. However, many observers have failed to understand either the scope or the significance of the development of his ideas. In some cases that is because they treat Gorbachev's well-known book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, published in 1987, as if it were the last and definitive word on his political thinking. In other cases, the evolution of Gorbachev's ideas is missed by scholars who focus on the fact that until the end of his period in office he not only declared his allegiance to socialism but also continued to speak positively of Lenin.

Until very late, indeed, in the Soviet era, the way in which to legitimize concepts and policies was to invoke Lenin. By 1990–91 that was less effective. Boris Yeltsin, during that period, had ceased to cite Lenin, and by then Gorbachev may have lost as much as he gained by continuing to do so. This is notwithstanding the fact that as late as December 1989, according to a survey by the most reliable opinion polling organization of that era, the All-Soviet Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), far more Soviet citizens (75 percent) proposed Lenin than anyone else when asked to name the ten most outstanding people of all time and in all nations.<sup>5</sup> Even well into post-Soviet Russia Lenin came second only to Peter the Great when citizens were posed the same question by VTsIOM in 1994 and 1999.<sup>6</sup>

Gorbachev, after he became general secretary, was very ready to quote Lenin, although he employed the term, "Marxism-Leninism" (coined after Lenin's death) less than did his predecessors. Marxism-Leninism, from Stalin's time onward, had been used as an ideological battering-ram against any manifestation of independent thought. Many of Gorbachev's formulations and actions were radically at odds with what had become orthodox Soviet Marxism-Leninism. That was especially so from 1988–89 when Gorbachev's views about the scale of the transformation required in the Soviet Union became much more radical than they were immediately after he succeeded to the general secretaryship. It was in 1988 that he moved beyond being a reformer of the Soviet system to become a systemic transformer. Much of the development of his views can be traced in the public record—from his numerous speeches, not least his breakthrough speech to the Nineteenth Conference of the Communist Party, held in the summer of 1988.<sup>7</sup>

However, new archival sources throw additional light on the stages of development of Gorbachev's thinking. How ridiculous it is to cite as the definitive statement of Gorbachev's political philosophy his 1987 book, *Perestroika*, becomes evident when it is realized that Gorbachev wrote a sequel to that work which he completed in 1989 and then did not publish because he felt that both events and the further development of his own views had already made it out of date. That book manuscript, which is unmentioned in the literature on Gorbachev and perestroika, had the provisional title, *Perestroika Tested by Experience: Diary Notes*.<sup>8</sup>

When Gorbachev did speak of Marxism-Leninism, it was often to chide those who used it as a cloak for their selfish interests. Thus, for example, in his unpublished book manuscript of 1989, he writes: “How many mourners for socialism and for Marxism-Leninism have multiplied among us! And in fact . . . they are defending their own interests. And what they are weeping for is not socialism, it is a perverted representation of socialism.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Gorbachev frequently cited Lenin. In his unpublished manuscript he said that if Marx and Lenin had seen the political and theoretical activity in communist states (meaning pre-perestroika), they would have been horrified, which was doubtless true.<sup>10</sup> Gorbachev writes of “returning to Lenin” but adds that “now the country is different and democratization is proceeding in a different context.” He observes that “the last works of Lenin were permeated by anxiety.”<sup>11</sup> In his unpublished book, Gorbachev makes a sustained attack on Stalin and Stalinism and refers to the Great Terror of 1936–38 not as the *Yezhovshchina*, the name it was given after Stalin’s NKVD chief, Nikolay Yezhov (who was himself executed shortly thereafter), but as the *Stalinshchina*.<sup>12</sup> Gorbachev much more occasionally refers to Leninism than to Lenin, and his “Leninism” is selective and used as an argument for changing the Soviet system. Thus, for example, he writes: “I never cease to repeat: we are children of our time. And we need to overcome the past in ourselves, if we are to be party people, if we are to be Leninists.”<sup>13</sup>

In his unpublished book, Gorbachev is still defending a one-party pluralism rather than a competitive party system, which he had accepted by 1990. At this stage in his thinking Gorbachev presents the issue of one party or more than one as not a decisive criterion of democracy. There are, he says, multiparty countries which are not democracies and there is not a direct link between democracy and a multiparty system.<sup>14</sup> In principle, he argues in 1989, a one-party system may serve democracy and the harmonization of interests in society and be a guarantor of socialist pluralism. For that to happen, however, it is necessary to have “glasnost, political culture,<sup>15</sup> and a mechanism of control by the working people over all the processes underway in the country.”<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, Gorbachev has said that, in essence, he had accepted the principle of a multiparty system by 1989 with the inauguration of the new legislature (even, indeed, by 1988 when the decision was taken to have competitive elections for an assembly with real power), since that was in the logic of its development.<sup>17</sup> It is impossible to say for sure whether his more cautious public defense as late as 1989 of a “socialist pluralism,” with the Communist Party holding the ring, was based on his true preference at the time or on a prudential need not to inflame the nomenklatura unduly. That it may well have been primarily the latter is suggested by his response to Aleksandr Yakovlev when Yakovlev proposed to Gorbachev as far back as 1985 that he divide the Communist Party to create two-party competition. Gorbachev accepted with equanimity this proposal, but said it was “premature.”<sup>18</sup> To call Yakovlev’s suggestion “revisionist” would be a colossal understatement. However, it was indeed “premature” and quite unrealistic in terms of the practical politics of the Soviet Union of 1985.

Although Gorbachev’s 1989 book project was soon to be overtaken by the pressure of fast-moving events and the development of his own thinking, the manuscript already goes further than Gorbachev’s endlessly-cited 1987 book.<sup>19</sup> Gorbachev is scathing in his March 1989 text about the practice hitherto in the rubber-stamp Supreme Soviet. He cites as a positive example the way in which in the United States Congress presidential nominees are

examined “with a fine tooth comb.”<sup>20</sup> Gorbachev notes that there were attempted reforms under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, but that they failed “because the structures of power remained untouched,” and the reforms were smashed by “group interests.” He also refers to the critical speech made at the Nineteenth Party Conference by the director of the Institute of Economics of the Academy of Sciences, Leonid Abalkin, who had attacked the lack of progress in improving the economy. The speech had irritated Gorbachev at the time, and he still disagreed with its pessimism, but, reflecting on that speech just a few months later, he praises Abalkin for his courage and openness and cites it as a good example of the new public pluralism of opinion.<sup>21</sup>

Gorbachev’s frequent citations of Lenin were partly to legitimize innovation which was deviating sharply from past Soviet theory and practice. However, they were also more than that. Gorbachev believed that there were parallels between what he was doing and what Lenin was engaged in during the last years of his life, the period of concessions to private property, together with market reform, which characterized the New Economic Policy (NEP). He identified his own view of the need for fundamental reform of the Soviet system with what he took to be Lenin’s second thoughts in his last years about what had been constructed in Russia during the period of “war communism.” In 1987 Gorbachev could claim, whether or not he completely believed it, that the party leadership was united in its support for perestroika. To the extent that it was, this was because they meant different things by “perestroika.” That had become very evident in early 1988 when the “Nina Andreeva Letter,” an article under the name of a hitherto obscure Leningrad lecturer, was published in the newspaper, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, with the strong backing of a section of the Central Committee apparatus. The article, which was not simply conservative in its tone, but downright reactionary and neo-Stalinist, enjoyed the initial support of more than half the members of the Politburo. When Gorbachev mounted a strong counterattack, both inside and outside the Politburo, with Aleksandr Yakovlev as a key ally, the Andreeva episode backfired on the party conservatives.<sup>22</sup>

Although Gorbachev succeeded in bringing the rest of the Politburo into line behind the policy of radical reform, following the defeat of those who had hoped to use the Andreeva letter as the start of a counter-reformation, by 1989 the divisions had become impossible to overlook. Gorbachev had already described perestroika as a “revolution” in his 1987 book,<sup>23</sup> and in his 1989 book manuscript he observes that many had regarded it as such from the outset. However, he argues, 1988 was the year in which the revolutionary character of the process underway was confirmed.<sup>24</sup> While still defending a socialist pluralism (rather than political pluralism) in 1989, Gorbachev stressed that the Communist Party must be subject to the law and that it should be providing leadership rather than wielding executive power. The “command-administrative system,” he said, had “strongly deformed the function of the party as a political force.”<sup>25</sup>

The adoption of the term, “command-administrative system,” was, as one of the most perceptive specialists on Soviet politics, T. H. Rigby, has argued, a departure from the past of some significance. Rigby writes:

The year 1988 saw the emergence of the phrase “command-administrative *methods*,” its speedy adoption by Gorbachev himself, and then its extension to characterise the whole traditional Soviet socio-political order as a “command-administrative system.” . . . This pejorative labelling of the fundamental structuring principle of the existing order was the

first unambiguous signal that Gorbachev was resolved to move from restructuring *within* the system to restructuring *of* the system, and its implications struck at the hallowed “leading and guiding” role of the Party.<sup>26</sup>

The archival evidence suggests, indeed, that Gorbachev may have been leading rather than following in this regard. In a small group discussion on February 12, 1988, of the ideas that should go into the theses being prepared for the forthcoming Nineteenth Party Conference, he remarked that “almost everywhere we still feel the imprints of the administrative-command *system* and of stagnation” (emphasis added).<sup>27</sup>

Alongside his frequent positive invocation of Lenin, Gorbachev, in the course of perestroika, embraced more and more ideas which would have been anathema to the Soviet Union’s principal architect and first leader. These included Gorbachev’s acceptance of the desirability of checks and balances and of separation of powers within a political system.<sup>28</sup> He came also to believe that a social-democratic conception of socialism provided the basis for a more just, more humane, and more economically efficient system than the political and economic model that had been adopted in the Soviet Union. The contested elections, held in the spring of 1989, were both a reflection of Gorbachev’s changing ideas and a stimulus to move further in the direction of social democracy. As he put it in conversation with his good friend Zdeněk Mlynář<sup>29</sup>:

In 1989, after the elections, when we saw what attitude the people really had toward the CPSU and the *nomenklatura*, what it really thought, and what its attitude was toward democracy and glasnost, there began a period of accumulation of experience that brought us to the conclusion that it was necessary to arrive at a new conception of socialism. Since that time I have been occupied more and more with the question: What are the criteria for calling something socialist? It seemed to me that the main one had to do with: What is the position of the individual in society? From that moment on, you might say, the road I have taken has essentially been the Social Democratic conception of socialism.<sup>30</sup>

This was not just a position taken retrospectively. As early as June 1989 the Politburo discussed the possibility of abolishing or amending Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which enshrined the monopoly of power of the CPSU in the fundamental law of the USSR.<sup>31</sup> A majority in the Politburo were against the change and Gorbachev was cautious about pushing for it. However, when the scrapping of Article 6 was pressed by Academician Andrey Sakharov at the Congress of People’s Deputies in December 1989, just before Sakharov’s sudden death on December 14, a willingness to remove the offending article became a test of commitment to democratization. Gorbachev supported the deletion of Article 6 just two months after he had resisted its removal at that Congress. Even if, as his aforementioned answer to Yakovlev in 1985 appeared to suggest, Gorbachev had privately accepted that the Communist Party’s monopoly of power must come to an end, he could not even at the end of 1989 simply yield to Sakharov’s advocacy on the floor of the legislature. The agreement of the Politburo and Central Committee for the abolition of the party’s constitutionally guaranteed “leading role” had still to be obtained. Sakharov’s death, however, added to the emotional thrust of the campaign to remove Article 6, and in the changed atmosphere Gorbachev secured the party leadership’s agreement for this in February 1990. The following month the existence of other political parties was legalized.<sup>32</sup> By the time of the Twenty-Eighth Party Congress in the summer of 1990, Gorbachev’s acceptance of other political parties was unequivocal. In a televised speech on July 2 he said: “In place

of the Stalinist model of socialism we are coming to a citizens' society of free people. The political system is being transformed radically, genuine democracy with free elections, the existence of many parties and human rights is becoming established and real people's power is being revived."<sup>33</sup>

By the summer of 1991, the draft program which Gorbachev espoused and presented to the Central Committee had much more in common with social democracy than with anything remotely like traditional Soviet Communism. The enunciated principles included "the affirmation of freedom in all its diverse manifestations," a "democratic federation of sovereign republics," a state based on the rule of law and on the basis of separation of powers, and support for "transition to a mixed economy and recognition of the diversity and equality of different forms of ownership—state and private, joint-stock and co-operative."<sup>34</sup> Gorbachev, in his speech commending the draft party program to the Central Committee on July 25, 1991, continued to turn Marxism-Leninism on its head. The "previous theoretical and practical model of socialism" had proven to be bankrupt. Socialism and the market were "not only compatible, but indivisible in essence"(!).<sup>35</sup> On the "ideological basis" of the CPSU, he declared:

In the past the party recognized only Marxism-Leninism as the source of its inspiration, whilst this doctrine itself was distorted to the extreme to suit the pragmatic purposes of the day and was turned into a kind of collection of canonical texts. Now it is necessary to include in our ideological arsenal all the riches of our and the world's socialist and democratic thought. Such an approach is dictated by the fact that the realization of the socialist idea and movement along the path of economic, social and spiritual progress can be successfully implemented today only in the channel of the common development of civilization.<sup>36</sup>

Gorbachev openly addressed the accusation by "representatives, I would say, of communist fundamentalism" concerning the "social-democratization of the CPSU." This was evoking some fears, he acknowledged, but they were based on ideological differences that belonged to the years of the revolution and civil war when communists and social democrats found themselves on opposite sides of the barricades. They had "lost their former meaning."<sup>37</sup> Gorbachev also raised, and accepted, the possibility that the party might in the future be in opposition. It was necessary to use political methods, to persuade people to vote for the party's representatives, and "where this is unsuccessful, to make up a constructive opposition, supporting the authorities' sensible measures and opposing them when this is necessary for the defence of the interests of the working people."<sup>38</sup>

This was a far cry from even the "new thinking" of Gorbachev's 1987 book, *Perestroika*. Indeed, the sentiments expressed in his July 1991 speech would have been perfectly acceptable to the leadership of the British Labour Party, the German Social Democrats, or the French or Spanish Socialists. Their practical impact on Soviet society was another matter. It was by now incomparably less than that of Gorbachev's decisions and pronouncements as recently as 1988. The Communist Party was speaking with many voices and a majority of the *apparatchiki* in Gorbachev's audience had no intention of following social-democratic precepts. Some of them were already thinking about ways to remove him from office. The polarization in the society was increasingly that of a nationalist-separatist character against the federal authorities, accompanied by a growing anticommunism whose adherents made little or no distinction between Communism and a variety of socialisms. They had, after all, spent decades being told that the system—now so thoroughly

castigated by Gorbachev—in which they had spent their lives was socialist. That, however, does not mean that Gorbachev’s ideological break with Soviet Marxism-Leninism was anything other than fundamental.

Increasingly, while continuing to cite Lenin with great respect, Gorbachev had used “Bolshevik” as in a “Bolshevik approach” or “Bolshevik tradition” as a term of reprobation. Thus, while Lenin is still cited in a favorable context even in a book that Gorbachev published in 2006, in that same volume, Gorbachev writes: “We strove to be finished with the old Bolshevik tradition: to create an ideological construct and afterwards to strive to introduce it in the society, not taking into consideration the means or the opinion of the citizens.”<sup>39</sup> Yet Lenin had been the number one Bolshevik and contributed more than anyone else to Bolshevik doctrine and distinctive patterns of thought, including the way of thinking aptly rejected by Gorbachev in the passage just cited. Nevertheless, in that same book, Gorbachev writes that perestroika “began under the sign of the late Lenin.”<sup>40</sup> Whatever the limitations of that source of inspiration, and of the extremely dubious grounds for differentiating Lenin from Bolshevism, it remains an important fact that an idealized view of Lenin helped both to inspire and to legitimize the break with six decades of Soviet history. That was true not only of Gorbachev but also of a number of the leading progenitors of perestroika. Yet, when perestroika ended, Gorbachev’s political beliefs were closer to those of Eduard Bernstein (a point to which I will return) or of a German social democrat of more recent vintage, Willy Brandt, than to those of the founder of the Soviet state.<sup>41</sup>

In his support for religious tolerance and respect for religious believers, for the idea that there were universal values and interests which transcended class interests, and in the high priority he came to place on political freedom, Gorbachev departed radically from the outlook of Lenin. If he had expressed the views he put forth after consolidating his position as General Secretary in the years *before* he became party leader, he would have been a prime candidate for expulsion from the CPSU as a “deviationist,” if not imprisonment as a dissident. Indeed, at a meeting of the Secretariat of the Central Committee in April 1988, over which Gorbachev presided,<sup>42</sup> Yakovlev remarked: “Three years have passed since the April [1985] plenum. If we had spoken then as we have spoken today, we would have been considered dissidents.”<sup>43</sup>

From 1988 onwards, although neither his life-long regard for Lenin nor political prudence allowed him to put it in such terms, Gorbachev had clearly rejected *Leninism*, and he had made a major contribution to creating a new political climate in which other members of the top leadership team felt free to depart from the verities of the previous seven decades. Anatoly Chernyaev<sup>44</sup> has written of Gorbachev and Lenin:

Lenin wasn’t quite his icon, although he admired him greatly and said that he always “consulted” with him. Gorbachev would make an example of his actions in “analogous” situations arising during perestroika. But unlike Lenin apologists, he sought out in Lenin not what the others used to prop themselves up. For example, he valued highly Lenin’s readiness to dispense with any dogmas if a real-life situation warranted it.<sup>45</sup>

We know that Gorbachev, from his university days, had taken Marxist and Leninist thought seriously. His friend Zdeněk Mlynář is a reliable witness to the fact that whereas other students engaged in rote learning of parts of the required texts, Gorbachev fully engaged with the arguments of Marx and Lenin.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, reading their theories and their



involvement in vigorous debate helped to free Gorbachev from the Stalinist dogma he had grown up with. As he put it in conversation with Mlynář:

Before the university I was trapped in my belief system in the sense that I accepted a great deal as given, as assumptions not to be questioned. At the university I began to think and reflect and to look at things differently. But of course that was only the beginning of a prolonged process.<sup>47</sup>

When Gorbachev saw for himself Western countries with their higher standards of living and, to put it mildly, more democracy than existed in the Soviet Union, he could have given up both on the idea of socialism and his admiration for Lenin, but he did not. For Boris Yeltsin it was enough to see an American supermarket for the first time to be converted to a belief in capitalism (although he fought shy of using the word). Aleksandr Yakovlev was different again. He continued to speak reverently of Lenin as late as 1989,<sup>48</sup> when, for example, he said: “And though Lenin did not live long enough to work out all the conceptions of socialism that we need, we are returning to his basic perceptions. In this sense, Lenin is a living adviser in our analysis of present-day problems.”<sup>49</sup> However, the more Yakovlev learned in detail about the Soviet past, including the Lenin years, the more comprehensively he turned, internally, against Lenin. In his memoirs, Yakovlev describes Lenin “as the most outstanding representative of the theory and practice of state terror of the twentieth century. . .” and goes on: “In other words, Vladimir Ulyanov Lenin emerges as the initiator and organiser of mass terror in Russia [and] eternally indictable for crimes against humanity.”<sup>50</sup>

Gorbachev has never spoken of Lenin in remotely similar terms. However, one can hardly overstate just how different Gorbachev was from Lenin—tolerant where Lenin was intolerant; abhorrent of violence, in contrast with Lenin’s readiness to use it ruthlessly; aware that the ends do not justify the means, whereas for Lenin the ends justified destroying all who barred the way of the Bolsheviks; seeking a reasonable middle-way solution in any major political impasse, whereas Lenin, although ready to make short-term tactical compromises, was implacable in the pursuit of his goals. Gorbachev was a reformer, whereas Lenin was a revolutionary. Gorbachev spoke of perestroika having a revolutionary character, but it was a “revolution” to be achieved by evolutionary means. In terms of Soviet orthodoxy, it was, indeed, a “counter-revolution,” for it was a rejection not only of Stalinism but of the Leninist ideological foundations of the Soviet state. While convergence between the Soviet Union and the West was (very prematurely) said by some scholars to be taking place in the 1960s, Gorbachev was ready to seek a real convergence, especially between the “new thinking” and West European social democracy. The doctrine of *kto kogo* (who will dominate whom) was being replaced by the goal of ever-closer East-West relations, in which both sides in the great divide would learn from the other and act cooperatively to tackle threats to the entire planet, whether that of nuclear war or environmental catastrophe. Putting the Lenin-Gorbachev comparison on a normative level, one can say that Gorbachev had little need to look up to Lenin, for his understanding of politics was both more humane and more enlightened.

There is, nevertheless, a paradox which has to be addressed. How do we account for Gorbachev’s continuing high esteem for Lenin at the very time he was moving further and further away from anything remotely resembling Leninism? Gorbachev, after all, was embracing a form of socialism against which Lenin had waged ruthless ideological war,

namely social democracy of the kind espoused by the German socialist theorist, Eduard Bernstein.<sup>51</sup> Bernstein's ideas, as summarized by Neil Harding, come close to those toward which Gorbachev's thinking evolved:

Socialism, in Bernstein's account, came not to destroy, but to complete liberalism—to press it to the limits of its liberatory possibilities. . . . It had to be integrationist rather than separatist. It built upon what already existed rather than a nebulous and unknowable future. It was rational, pacific and developmental, rather than elemental, violent and abrupt.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, Bernstein's thought had practically nothing in common with Lenin's. For Lenin, indeed, it represented "all that was rotten in European socialism."<sup>53</sup>

---

***“Gorbachev spoke of perestroika having a revolutionary character, but it was a ‘revolution’ to be achieved by evolutionary means.”***

Unlike many in the Soviet Communist Party, Gorbachev was not ready to abandon overnight either his heroes or his principles (although his flexibility has often been misinterpreted as absence of principle). Thus, he remained loyal to socialism but only by redefining socialism fundamentally, so that it became different in kind from the practice of Brezhnev's Soviet Union, not to speak of Stalin's. He remained attached to Lenin by seeing in him what he wanted to see and projecting

on to Lenin his own zeal for reform. This was Gorbachev's way of dealing with cognitive dissonance—the discomfort and potential stress involved in holding beliefs inconsistent with one another or inconsistent with the way one is behaving. He was able to move further away from Lenin while believing that he was moving closer. The vast literature on the theory of cognitive dissonance has shown that people have a tendency to screen out information that is not congruent with their existing beliefs and attitudes.<sup>54</sup> Although Gorbachev had, in fact, changed his thinking on many matters—demonstrated, indeed, an unusually open mind—his degree of emotional attachment to, and identification with, Lenin meant that he dealt with cognitive dissonance by, unsurprisingly, focusing not on Lenin's writings and actions which were at odds with his own values, but on those which seemed to be offering a relevant, reformist example.

Lenin laid the foundations on which Stalin built although he was a true believer in a future utopia involving a withering away of the state.<sup>55</sup> Even though Lenin's character was very different from that of Stalin, he was extremely intolerant. As Adam Ulam put it: “[Lenin's] fury was aroused by any concept, any postulate, any phenomenon that in some circuitous way could reflect the mentality of the intelligentsia: liberalism, independence of the judiciary, parliamentarism.”<sup>56</sup> Although Lenin had studied law (of all Soviet leaders, only the first and the last had a legal education), he had an “almost insane” hatred of lawyers.<sup>57</sup> While Lenin embarked on NEP in 1921, and made major overtures to the peasantry, he simultaneously cracked down on dissent and opposition, telling the Tenth Congress of the party in that year that it was necessary to “put the lid on opposition.”<sup>58</sup> The very real limitations on Lenin's reformism in the last years of his life are noted by Robert Service, the author of the most recent major biography of Lenin, when he writes that Lenin “did

not challenge his own political creation: the one-party state, the one-ideology state, the terrorist state, the state that sought to dominate all social life, economy and culture.”<sup>59</sup>

In contrast, Gorbachev was moving from 1988 onward to make elections, rather than an ideologically ordained monopoly of power of the Communist Party, the basis of legitimacy of the Soviet system. To an audience likely to be far from receptive to such heretical thoughts, a gathering of obkom secretaries, Gorbachev, as early as the first half of 1988, said: “The question is posed not only in the West: on what basis do twenty million [members of the CPSU] rule 200 million people? We awarded *ourselves* the right to govern the people!” (emphasis added).<sup>60</sup> Gorbachev was preparing party officials for the first serious step of democratization—contested elections for a new legislature—and had moved away from the idea that Marx and Lenin had provided the theoretical equivalent of a divine right to rule for the Communist Party. Taken together with his radical rejection both in principle and in practice of many of the central tenets of Lenin’s thinking, Gorbachev’s frequent positive invocation of Lenin cannot, in common sense, be equated with fealty to Leninism. Part of the explanation of the apparent contradiction is political—Lenin remained the source of legitimacy for changes of policy within the CPSU. I have suggested, however, that for Gorbachev it also had a significant psychological component, in which his long-standing respect for Lenin led him to read into Lenin more genuine reformism than was there. What is important, however, is that this respect for Lenin did not hold back the evolution of Gorbachev’s own political ideas. He not only accepted the pluralization of Soviet and Russian politics, but also—thanks to his institutional power as general secretary—played the most decisive role in bringing this about.

## NOTES

1. See Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), esp. 42–51. These regimes, among them the Soviet Union between Stalin’s death in 1953 and the coming to power of Gorbachev in 1985, should more precisely be described as cases of “post-totalitarian authoritarianism.” Mikhail Gorbachev, from 1990 onwards has made clear distinctions between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, on the one hand, and pluralist and democratic regimes, on the other. He has been less concerned with making fine distinctions between totalitarianism and authoritarianism. In his latest book, *Ponyat’ perestroyku . . . pochemu eto vazhno seychas* [To understand perestroika . . . why it is necessary now] (Moscow: Al’pina, 2006), he moves freely between describing the unreformed post-Stalin Soviet system as “totalitarian” and as “authoritarian.”

2. The Politburo was known in Khrushchev’s time as the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). New light was thrown on its proceedings by the publication of transcripts of many of its sessions, together with detail on its decisions, in A. A. Fursenko, ed., *Presidium TsK KPSS 1954–1964: Chernovye protokol’nye zapisi zasedaniy. Stenogrammy*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004).

3. On Khrushchev’s ouster, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (London: Free Press, 2003), 3–17, 620–22.

4. “Prakticheskim delami uglublyat’ perestroyku,” *Pravda*, July 15, 1987, 2; “Vstrecha M.S. Gorbacheva s predstavitel’yami frantsuzskoy obshchestvennosti,” *Pravda*, September 30, 1987, 1; and “O proekte platformy TsK KPSS k XXVIII s’ezdu partii. Doklad M. S. Gorbacheva na plenum Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS 5 fevralya 1990 goda,” *Pravda*, February 6, 1990, 1.

5. *Obshchestvennoe mnenie v tsifrakh*, January 2/9, 1990 (Moscow: VTsIOM), 6.

6. Boris Dubin, “Stalin i drugie. Figury vysshey vlasti v obshchestvennom mnenii sovremennoy Rossii,” *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya* 63, no. 1 (2003): 13–25. The answers were heavily

Russocentric. The only non-Russian, apart from Karl Marx, to make it into the top ten (and then only in 1994 and 1999) was Napoleon. Alexander Pushkin came third in all three surveys.

7. “O khode realizatsii resheniy XVVII s”ezda KPSS i zadachakh po uglubleniyu perestroyki: Doklad na XIX Vsesoyuznoy konferentsii KPSS 28 iyunya 1988 goda” in *Izbrannye rechi i stat’i*, Vol. 6, ed. M. S. Gorbachev, 323–97 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989).

8. *Perestroyka—ispitanie zhizn’yu. Dnevnikovye zapisy*. I discuss this manuscript in *Seven Years that Changed the World*. I am grateful to the Gorbachev Foundation for giving me access to this hitherto unknown work.

9. Gorbachev, “Perestroyka—ispitanie zhizn’yu. Dnevnikovye zapisy,” unpublished book manuscript (1989), 20. Clearly, the notes of what Gorbachev said in the Politburo, in small group meetings and in conversations with Chernyaev were used in the compilation of this unpublished book. The passage quoted here follows practically verbatim the words used by Gorbachev in conversation with Chernyaev in early 1988. See “Zapisi pomoshchnika general’nogo sekretarya TsK KPSS, Prezidenta SSSR, sdelannye na zasedaniyakh Politbyuro, drugikh razlichnykh soveshchaniyakh, uskikh i shirokikh, s uchastiem M. S. Gorbacheva, 1986–1990 gg.,” Chernyaev notes of February 11, 1988, Gorbachev Foundation Archives.

10. Gorbachev, “Perestroyka—ispitanie zhizn’yu,” 18.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 56.

13. *Ibid.*, 48.

14. *Ibid.*, 397.

15. In common with a number of Russian politicians, Gorbachev in this instance is using “political culture” not as a neutral term of political science for something whose content—in the sense of people’s fundamental political beliefs, values, perceptions of history, and expectations—is a matter for empirical investigation, but rather as a synonym for political knowledge and understanding, i.e., “being cultured politically.” Even Brezhnev on occasion used the term in that prescriptive way, but for him “political culture” evidently meant thinking along the lines of *Pravda* editorials. At all stages in the development of his ideas during the perestroika years Gorbachev’s notion of political culture went well beyond that.

16. Gorbachev, “Perestroyka—ispitanie zhizn’yu,” 397.

17. For example, Gorbachev has written that the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies who emerged at the first Congress of People’s Deputies (and were highly critical of the Communist Party leadership from a radical democrat standpoint) began to form an embryonic political party which would be in competition with the CPSU. See Gorbachev, *Ponyat’ perestroyku*, 182. For further evidence that even in 1988 Gorbachev had accepted, in principle, that within a few years the CPSU (or the social democratic part of it) should become a parliamentary party in a competitive party system, see Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia’s Revolution from above: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime, 1985–2000* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 2002), 120, 152.

18. Aleksandr Yakovlev, *Sumerki* (Moscow: Materik, 2003), 383.

19. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (London: Collins, 1987). For the Russian original, see M. S. Gorbachev, *Perestroyka i novoe myshlenie dlya nashey strany i dlya vesgo mira* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987).

20. Gorbachev, “Perestroyka—ispitaniya zhizn’yu,” 94.

21. Gorbachev, “Perestroyka—ispitaniya zhizn’yu,” 174.

22. See Nina Andreeva, “Ne mogu postupat’sya printsipami,” *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, March 13, 1988, 2; “Printsipy perestroyki: revolyutsionnost’ myshleniya i deystviy,” *Pravda*, April 5, 1988, 2; “O stat’e N. Andreeva i ne tol’ko o ney (Obmen mneniyami na Politbyuro TsK KPSS 24–25 marta 1988 g.)” in *Gody trudnykh rezheniy, 1985–1992 gg.*, M.S. Gorbachev, 98–110 (Moscow: Al’fa-Print, 1993); A. Chernyaev, A. Veber, and V. Medvedev, eds., *V Politbyuro TsK KPSS . . . Po zapisyam Antoliya Chernyaeva, Vadima Medvedeva, Georgiya Shakhnazarova (1985–1991)* (Moscow: Al’pina, 2006), 300–9; and Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 172–75.

23. Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, 52, 74.

24. Gorbachev, "Perestroyka—ispitanie zhizn'yu," 389.

25. *Ibid.*, 396.

26. T. H. Rigby, "Some Concluding Observations," in *The Demise of Marxism-Leninism in Russia*, ed. Archie Brown, 207–23, esp. 213 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

27. "Razmyshleniya v uzkom krugu ob osnovnykh ideyakh tezisov k XIX partkonferentsii, 12 fevralya 1988 goda, Novo-Ogarevo," from "Zapisi pomoshchnika general'nogo sekretarya . . ." Chernyaev notes, Gorbachev Foundation Archives. The key word, as Rigby observed, is "system." "Command-administrative" and "administrative-command" were used interchangeably.

28. See Brown, ed., *The Demise of Marxism-Leninism in Russia*, 21–24.

29. As I know from my own conversations with Mlynář, who was born in 1930 and died in 1997, he regarded Gorbachev as his closest Russian friend when they studied together in the Law Faculty of Moscow State University between 1950 and 1955. Gorbachev fully reciprocated this friendship. In an interview with Olga Kuchkina for *Komsomol'skaya pravda* in 1994, he said of Mlynář: "He's probably the person I'm closest to. He always has been." The interview is republished in Valentin Tolstykh, ed., *A Millennium Salute to Mikhail Gorbachev on his 70th Birthday* (Moscow: Valent, 2001), 253–59, esp. 255–56. Mlynář was one of the leading reformers in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and the principal author of its 1968 Action Program. He was later expelled from the Communist Party and became active in the Czech opposition of the 1970s.

30. Gorbachev and Mlynář, *Conversations with Gorbachev*, 79.

31. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 482.

32. *Ibid.*, 483.

33. BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), SU/0807, C1/1–C1/18.

34. Draft program of CPSU, *Nezavisimyya gazeta*, July 23, 1991, 2.

35. BBC SWB, SU/1135, C1/1–C1/7.

36. *Ibid.*, C1/4.

37. *Ibid.*, C1/5.

38. *Ibid.*, C1/7.

39. Gorbachev, *Ponyat' perestroyku*, 27.

40. *Ibid.*, 16.

41. As early as April 1988, indeed, Gorbachev gave an enthusiastic report to the Politburo of a meeting he had had with Brandt in the latter's capacity of chairman of the Socialist International, the organization of social democratic parties (including the German Social Democrats, the French Socialists, and the British Labour Party). Gorbachev told the Politburo that 120 million people voted for these parties in Western Europe. Their support for perestroika was, accordingly, important. See "Politbyuro, 14 aprelya 1988 goda" in "Zapisi pomoshchnika general'nogo sekretarya TsK KPSS . . ." Chernyaev notes, Gorbachev Foundation Archives.

42. Normally the secretariat would have been chaired by Yegor Ligachev, but this was an especially important meeting to consider issues related to the upcoming Nineteenth Party Conference.

43. "Sekretariat TsK, 23 aprelya 1988 goda (zapis' Medvedeva)" in "Zapisi pomoshchnika general'nogo sekretarya TsK KPSS. . ." Gorbachev Foundation Archives. Although Vadim Medvedev was not an aide (*pomoshchnik*) of Gorbachev but, rather, a full member of the Politburo, his notes are included in this amalgamated archival collection, along with the more numerous notes of Chernyaev and some by Shakhnazarov who, like Chernyaev, was a Gorbachev aide.

44. Chernyaev, who was a deputy head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU from 1970 to 1986, developed views that were far removed from those of the conservative Communist head of that department, Boris Ponomarev, or of the foreign minister during those years, Andrey Gromyko. In February 1986 he was appointed chief foreign policy aide (*pomoshchnik*) to Gorbachev. He was among the most influential of the "new thinkers" and someone whom Gorbachev relied on and used extensively in the preparation of his speeches, articles and books. Chernyaev, who was born in 1921, saw active service throughout World War II. As of early 2007, he is still working with the former Soviet leader at the Gorbachev Foundation.

45. Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, trans. and ed. Robert English and Elizabeth Tucker, 212–13 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000).

46. See Mlynář's, "My Fellow Student Mikhail Gorbachev," *L'Unità*, April 9, 1985, 9.

47. Gorbachev and Mlynář, *Conversations with Gorbachev*, 23. While Marx and Lenin were more intellectually rewarding than the crudities of Stalinism, also important was Gorbachev's introduction to a far wider variety of ways of looking at the world, especially in the lectures on the history of political and legal thought delivered by Professor S. F. Kechekyan—a favorite teacher of both Gorbachev and Mlynář—who had received his own university education, including study in France, in pre-revolutionary times. (By coincidence, Kechekyan was my research adviser when I made my first study visit to Russia from January to April 1966.)

48. See, for example, Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers* (New York: Norton, 1989), esp. 39–40.

49. *Ibid.*, 40.

50. Yakovlev, *Sumerki*, 26. Yakovlev is here using Lenin's real surname "Ulyanov" as if it were his middle name. What is surprising in the light of such a wholesale condemnation of Lenin is that one of Yakovlev's grievances against Gorbachev was that he never invited him to give the annual Lenin anniversary speech, an occasion when a celebration of Lenin's life and work was obligatory.

51. In his conversations with Zdeněk Mlynář, Gorbachev refers explicitly to Bernstein (a contemporary of Lenin), saying: "We both should publicly acknowledge the great mistake we made when as supporters of communist ideology we denounced Eduard Bernstein's famous dictum: 'The movement is everything, the ultimate goal nothing.' We called that a betrayal of socialism. But the essence of Bernstein's idea was that socialism could not be understood as a system that arises as a result of the inevitable downfall of capitalism, but that socialism is a gradual realization of the principle of equality and self-determination for the people who constitute a society, an economy, a country" (*Conversations with Gorbachev*, 167). For Bernstein's own discussion of "the movement is everything" and his relative lack of interest in "ultimate aims," see Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 202–6. This book, which represents the classic statement of Bernstein's views, was first published in 1899.

52. Neil Harding, *Leninism* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 64.

53. *Ibid.*, 59.

54. See, for example, William J. McGuire, "Attitudes and Attitude Change" in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 2, 3rd ed., ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, 233–346 (New York: Random House, 1985); J. Richard Eiser, *Cognitive Social Psychology: A Guidebook to Theory and Research* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1980); and Charles S. Taber, Milton Lodge, and Jill Glathar, "The Motivated Construction of Political Judgements," in *Citizens and Politics: Perspectives from Political Psychology*, ed. James H. Kuklinski, 198–226, esp. 207–8, 213 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

55. While implacably opposed to political pluralism and liberal democracy, Lenin believed in an ultimate "socialist democracy" in a way in which Stalin did not, although he adopted authoritarian means to reach the illusory utopian goal. In John Gooding's admirably concise summary: "Lenin's adaptation [of Marxism] had substituted the party for the missing proletariat and the party elite for the inadequately prepared party masses. The effect was to place power at the outset in the hands of a small group; but Lenin's assumption was that, as socialist consciousness spread, so the bounds of the effective political nation would broaden until they embraced the whole population. For the time being, 'democracy' would extend no further than the party elite—but at that level it would be, and was, real enough" (Gooding, *Socialism in Russia: Lenin and his Legacy, 1890–1991* [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002], 249.).

56. Adam Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks* (London: Fontana, 1969), 275.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Leonard Schapiro, "'Putting the Lid on Leninism': Opposition and Dissent in the Communist One-party States" in *Political Opposition in One-Party States*, 32–57, esp. 32 (London: Macmillan, 1972). As Schapiro observes (37): ". . . it is arguable that, had the socialists been allowed full freedom of action during the tense and precarious years of 1921–22, the communist government would have been ousted by the force of popular discontent in favor of a socialist government—with, or more probably without, participation of the, by then, almost universally detested communists. As the self-appointed agents of the forces of history, the communists could hardly have been expected to face such a prospect with equanimity."

59. Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 470.
60. "Vstrecha Gorbacheva s tret'ey gruppoy sekretarey obkomov, 18 aprelya 1988 goda" in "Zapisi pomoshchnika general'nogo sekretarya TsK KPSS. . .," Gorbachev Foundation Archives.