

Mikhail Gorbachev and the Origins of Perestroika: A Retrospective

Mikhail Gorbachev was the leader of the Soviet Union for less than seven years, but his tenure resulted in profound domestic and international changes, culminating in the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR. Having come to office in March 1985 determined to strengthen the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, Gorbachev instead presided over the end of both.

This essay by Gorbachev, who turned 90 in March 2021, explains the policies he pursued as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) from 11 March 1985 to 24 August 1991 and as President of the USSR from 15 March 1990 to 25 December 1991. Although Gorbachev has discussed the same topics at great length in his memoirs and in countless interviews over the years, the essay provides a valuable reassessment of why he acted as he did and what he was trying to achieve. The passage of three decades has altered his perspective on numerous issues, and the essay deepens and enriches our understanding of the dissolution of the USSR.

Several points are worth noting about the essay.

First, Gorbachev argues here (as he has many times in the past) that the Soviet Union was in dire shape when he took power and that drastic changes were therefore needed. He insists that “leaving things as they were was not an option. That was the unanimous opinion of the Soviet leadership.” There was undoubtedly widespread sentiment among Soviet policymakers that some changes were needed to make the economy work better, but perspectives were considerably more varied than Gorbachev suggests. He himself acknowledges that on economic policy, in particular, he encountered staunch resistance almost immediately. The very fact that Gorbachev began undertaking major changes of personnel in the CPSU’s ruling organs and central party apparatus at an early stage indicates he was aware that opinion in 1985 was not as “unanimous” as he claims here.

Second, Gorbachev emphasizes the enormous pressure he was coming under in the spring and summer of 1991 from hardliners, on one hand, and from radical reformers and separatists, on the other. He briefly recounts two serious challenges he faced from hardliners in the months leading up to the attempted coup in August 1991. The second of these challenges, the so-called “constitutional coup” in June 1991, became known almost immediately and has been discussed at length in various memoirs. But the first challenge, in April 1991, has been much more obscure. Gorbachev maintains that at a CPSU Central Committee plenum in late April 1991 a group of hardliners demanded that he either clamp down forcefully or resign. Gorbachev says that he fended off the challenge by resigning and leaving the hall. The Central Committee as a whole was not yet willing to accept this outcome and voted by a large margin to have Gorbachev stay as party leader. He withdrew his resignation and remained General Secretary, but he now believes this was a mistake.

Third, Gorbachev sheds light on what spurred the plotters of the failed August 1991 coup to act. The plotters themselves — Vladimir Kryuchkov, Anatoly Lukyanov, Valentin Pavlov, Gennadii Yanaev, Dmitry Yazov, Valentin Varennikov — argued both in August 1991 and in their post-1991 memoirs that they had imposed a state of emergency on 19 August 1991 because they feared that the draft Union Treaty, which was slated to be signed the next day, would result in the disintegration of the country. Gorbachev contends that this explanation was mostly window-dressing. He argues that their main motivation was concern about their own political fates. According to Gorbachev, his deliberations with the various republic leaders in the spring and summer of 1991 had led to consensus that figures like Kryuchkov, Pavlov, Lukyanov, and Yazov would be omitted from “the new leadership, to be formed after the signing of the Union Treaty.” Presumably, the coup plotters had learned about these impending leadership changes from one of the republic leaders, or Kryuchkov had discovered the plans from eavesdropping and wiretaps the KGB maintained. Whatever the case may be, Gorbachev is justified in highlighting this factor. Although both motivations played a role in

sparkling the coup (and the relative weight of them is hard to evaluate), the coup plotters' motivations were undoubtedly more self-interested than they claimed.

Fourth, Gorbachev says that "if given a chance to start anew, [he] would have done many things differently." He wishes, for example, that he had moved much more boldly on economic reform, that he had acted much earlier to try to restructure the multiethnic Soviet federation, and that he had realized much sooner that the CPSU was "incapable of transforming itself and unwilling to participate in reforms." Gorbachev's willingness to acknowledge key mistakes has increased over the years, and he seems to have developed much greater understanding of ethnic issues and the problems caused by the harsh suppression of ethnic minorities by previous Soviet leaders.

However, on economic issues, Gorbachev still does not seem aware of the severity of his mistakes. For example, he probably could have earned strong public support early on if he had created opportunities for small-scale private activity. Instead, he did just the opposite. In the spring of 1986 he led the Soviet Politburo in adopting a resolution "On Measures to Combat Non-Labor Income" (*O merakh bor'by s netrudonymi dokhodami*), which prohibited all private economic transactions, including even the most innocuous activities such as the sale of fruit, vegetables, and flowers grown on tiny private plots. Gorbachev in his essay makes no mention of small-scale private entrepreneurialism and the benefits it could have brought for bolder economic change.

Nor does Gorbachev make any mention of agriculture. Most likely, he would have benefited a great deal if he had moved promptly ahead with sweeping agricultural reform, giving land to farm workers and eliminating the stultifying role of collective farms. Deng Xiaoping experienced great success with this approach in China in the late 1970s and 1980s. Deng's strategy could not have been directly replicated in the USSR — which had a much larger share of its population in urban areas and a much smaller share employed in agriculture — but it is surprising that Gorbachev did so little to try to rectify the grossly inefficient Soviet agricultural sector, which he oversaw as a CPSU Secretary during Leonid Brezhnev's final few

years. To be sure, if Gorbachev had embraced de facto privatization, he would have encountered fierce opposition in the CPSU, which was in a much stronger position in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s than the Chinese Communist Party was in China in the late 1970s after the purges and destabilization of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. The challenge for Gorbachev would have been daunting, but by all indications he never even considered emulating Deng's strategy, despite the prospect of achieving rapid increases in food supplies and generating public support for other reforms.

Fifth, Gorbachev does not comment here about the way he has been viewed in Russia over the past thirty years. Opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center and other organizations have consistently shown that only a small minority of Russians view Gorbachev favorably. Given the way the Russian government under Vladimir Putin has tendentiously shaped the narrative of Soviet history for schoolchildren, Gorbachev's image in Russia may remain negative for a long time to come. Nevertheless, at some point in the future, a more balanced assessment of Gorbachev will likely be feasible in Russia. His record in office was one of monumental achievement and epic failure, and assessments that focus on only one or the other are misleading. Gorbachev argues in his essay that his program of perestroika and glasnost "was comparable in its importance to the reforms under Czar Alexander II in the second half of the 19th century." Alexander II's reforms were certainly important, but Gorbachev is selling himself short. The changes he enacted in the Soviet Union were far more important both domestically and internationally. Gorbachev was instrumental in the end of the Cold War, and he brought freedom and democratization to Russia, giving the country a chance to become truly democratic. That opportunity was subsequently squandered, but Gorbachev's achievements ensure that, for all his flaws and failings, he will someday be remembered in Russia more with gratitude and admiration than with contempt.