Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization 29: 3 (Summer 2021): pp. 265-274.

Gorbachev's Non-Violence Revolution

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The further the Gorbachev era (the period from March 1985 to December 1991, during which Mikhail Gorbachev was the supreme leader of the USSR), moves away from us, the more obvious becomes the completely unique nature of this historical phenomenon.

A simple listing of the most important steps taken by Gorbachev in the spheres of Soviet domestic and foreign policy during this six-and-a-half-year period shows how unprecedented was the Gorbachev era in the sweep of Russia's millennium-long history. Indeed, these steps radically and irrevocably changed the lives of hundreds of millions of people in three dozen countries around the world.

Gorbachev's Revolution

In what was by any measure an extremely short period of time, changes were made that even the most radical dreamers of the day could not have believed would happen until well into the future. The reforms carried out under the slogans of "acceleration," "glasnost," "perestroika," and "New Thinking" together comprise what can rightly be called Gorbachev's revolution.

The most important of these reforms were: the destruction of the USSR's totalitarian political system, which had been based on the Communist Party's monopoly of power; the release of Andrei Sakharov and other political prisoners; the rehabilitation of citizens and peoples repressed by the communist regime; the radical liberalization of intellectual, social, economic, and political life; the granting of unprecedented civil, economic, and political rights to Soviet citizens; the restoration of religious freedom and renewed celebration of Christmas; the beginning of radical economic reforms, including the legalization of private property and a market economy; the opening of international borders; the integration of the Soviet economy into the global economy; the end of the war in

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Afghanistan and the withdrawal of Soviet troops therefrom; the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact Organization and the USSR; the relinquishment of control over Soviet satellites around the world, which led to political revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe and Mongolia and the withdrawal of Soviet and then Russian troops from these countries; the recognition of Soviet leaders' responsibility for the massacre of Poles in Katyń; a significant reduction in the arms arsenals of the two nuclear superpowers; the end of the Third World (Cold) War; and the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany.

The listing of these results does not mean, naturally, that Gorbachev did not make many mistakes, including very painful ones. Nevertheless, weighing what Gorbachev accomplished and achieved against his mistakes, failures, and costs leaves an unbiased observer of Russian and world history in general, and of the history of the twentieth century in particular, in a state of boundless amazement: *How did this happen at all?*

Even a superficial understanding of the scale of what Gorbachev did during his six-and-a-half-year tenure as the head of the state—a period significantly shorter than Boris Yeltsin (a little over eight years), Leonid Brezhnev (18.5 years), or Vladimir Putin (21.5 years at the time of this writing)—raises the question: *How and why did Gorbachev manage to do all this?*

At first glance, the answer seems completely obvious: because these actions corresponded with Gorbachev's goals, guiding principles, and worldview (which he termed New Thinking).

But we could also break the main question formulated above down into at least two complementary sub-questions:

> 1. How did Gorbachev—with his New Thinking and unconventional views, approaches, and ideas—find himself at the top of the party and state power in the totalitarian USSR?
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> and
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> 2. What are the key features of Gorbachev's worldview? How was Gorbachev able to form his views, approaches, and ideas—to develop his own New Thinking—in the totalitarian USSR?

The following reflections try to formulate a possible answer to the second sub-question.

A convenient starting point for understanding what Mikhail Gorbachev

has done and his own perception thereof is his article "Perestroika and the New Thinking: A Retrospective" in this issue. In it, Gorbachev offers his view of both what he was dealing with and how he reacted to the challenges he faced:

- The lack of a ready-made reform plan;
- His fundamental worldview and strategic goals;
- The evolution of his understanding of the problems;
- The evolution of his understanding of the suitability of various instruments for reform;
- The evolution of his understanding of who were his allies and opponents with regard to these reforms;
- A rare willingness to relatively objectively analyze his own actions and publicly admit his own mistakes.

Since this article was prepared almost three decades after Gorbachev's departure from power, it combines a memoir approach to what he did and how he did it with a post-event analysis of what happened. The presentation of this version could be influenced, of course, not only by his own ideas of that time, but also by recently acquired ideological and ethical standards. Therefore, it is impossible to completely exclude the impact of conscious and/or unconscious attempts to "modernize" and "angelize" his past—his thoughts, plans, and actions. Be that as it may, this article helps illuminate what Mikhail Gorbachev has in common with many other persons who have found themselves at the top of state power and what makes him a unique leader in Russian history of the last century.

What Did Gorbachev Have in Common with Other State Leaders of the USSR and Russia?

The first issue Gorbachev mentions in his article is the *absence at the time that he came to power of a program of actions ready for immediate application*. Despite the frequent criticism of Gorbachev for lacking such a program, this is a common problem for almost any leader who finds himself at the top of state power in a country with weak or non-existent institutions for the transfer of supreme state power. The USSR and post-Soviet Russia provide a vivid example of such a country: for more than a century, almost all leadership changes have taken place in the context of a coup d'état, a special operation, or both simultaneously.

Reaching the pinnacle of state power as the result of victory in a coup d'état or the success of a special operation is not certain until the very last moment. Since the likelihood of victory in the struggle for power is critically dependent on myriad random factors, a person striving for power

concentrates practically all his forces and the resources of his allies to achieve this goal. In this context, it makes no sense to prepare any elaborate program of action before power is actually attained. Thus, Gorbachev's lack of a ready-made program of action at the time that he came to power does not fundamentally distinguish him either from his predecessors or from his successors.

A significant part of the content of Gorbachev's article in this issue, as well as his writings elsewhere, is an exposition of the *historical evolution* of his reaction to the events that took place, the problems and challenges faced by the state leadership, and how he responded to them—that is, how he chose certain political tools, found allies, fought opponents, won victories, made mistakes, suffered defeats.

This part of the narrative is of obvious factual interest, and due to the author's unusual readiness to admit his own mistakes and engage in self-criticism, it arouses natural sympathy for him. At the same time, this part of Gorbachev's experience—and his subsequent commentary—differs little from that of others who found themselves in a similar position. Boris Yeltsin's memoirs, for example, also outline an endless stream of events, challenges, problems, and crises to which he had to react and during which it was necessary to take new approaches, support allies, defeat opponents, etc. Of course, Gorbachev and Yeltsin faced different events (with the exceptions of the period from June 1990 to December 1991, during which they both faced the same or similar challenges, and the struggle for supreme power with each other), but the nature of the evolution of their political activity was fundamentally the same.

In his article, Gorbachev more than once names the *main goal* of his activities as leader of the USSR. This work, he says, is for the people:

> From the very beginning, perestroika had an overarching theme, a guiding idea that defined it at every stage and provided the framework for our thinking. Perestroika was meant for the people. Its goal was to emancipate the human being, to give people ownership of their lives and of their country […] We believed that giving people freedom would unchain their initiative and creative energy […] I can assure you that the members of the country's leadership—the Politburo—were far from naïve. Each of us had a proven record of experience. We had arguments, which later grew into principled differences, but all of us supported the founding concept: perestroika for the people. (p. 212)

Moreover, Gorbachev goes even further, characterizing his own

activities using a term with a special historical and philosophical connotation—*humanism*:

> Hence, perestroika was a wide-ranging humanist project. It was a break with the past, with the centuries when the state—autocratic and then totalitarian—dominated over the human being. It was a breakthrough into the future. This is what makes perestroika relevant today; any other choice can only lead our country down a dead-end road. (p. 212)

At first glance, Gorbachev's approach seems to stand in clear opposition to the preceding communist totalitarianism. In reality, however, it does not. The traditional communist approach simply emphasized its theoretical commitment to human values. The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism, adopted at the XXII Congress of the CPSU in 1961, stated this definitely:

> Rejecting the class morality of the exploiters, the communists oppose the perverted selfish views and customs of the old world with communist morality—the most just and noble morality that expresses the interests and ideals of all working mankind.

Even more famous is the wording from the introduction to the CPSU Program, approved at the same Congress, which later became, thanks to Leonid Brezhnev, the talk of the town in the USSR:

> Everything in the name of man, everything for the good of man.

Thus, Gorbachev's reference to human beings as such, to the protection of his interests, even to humanism itself, can be understood as yet another manifestation of the hypocrisy characteristic of practicing communists—the formal proclamation of noble goals and principles that are not borne out in practice. Nevertheless, Gorbachev's actions were in fact significantly different from those of his predecessors and successors. What is the key reason for these differences?

What Makes Mikhail Gorbachev a Unique State Leader in Russian History?

The main difference between Gorbachev and the other Soviet and Russian state leaders of the last century is *his attitude toward violence*. Or, more precisely, *his deep personal rejection of violence*—and, consequently, his almost complete refusal to carry out violent actions.

There were any number of occasions when another leader might have used violence:

- During the struggle for power in 1987, when the ambitious Boris Yeltsin threw down the gauntlet
- During the collapse of the "fraternal regimes" in the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe
- To attempt to prevent the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, which contributed significantly to the security of the USSR's western flank
- To attempt to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union, headed by Gorbachev personally

As we can see, Gorbachev was unwilling to use violence or coercion even when the loss of his own power was on the line. Indeed, he declined to do so twice: during Kryuchkov's coup d'état of the State Emergency Committee (GKChP) in August 1991 and during Yeltsin's coup d'état in December 1991. In his article in this issue, Gorbachev describes these two events—the violent actions of his former colleagues and partners against him—as the fatal blows to his policy of perestroika:

> Two blows proved fatal to perestroika: the attempted coup d'état organized by the reactionary forces, including elements close to me, in August 1991 and the collusion of the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia in December, which cut off the age-old history of our state. (p. 233)

What he does not say, however, is that his use of violence to suppress the putschists—both in August and in December—would surely have eliminated those threats and saved perestroika, which was dear to his heart and mind. It would also have saved him personally as the leader of the state. But even for the sake of the perestroika he loved so much, as well as his personal power, Gorbachev did not resort to violence.

Gorbachev's rejection of violence was so deep that he refused to use it even when it would seemingly have been indisputably justified, such as

when Kuwait was liberated from Iraqi occupation:

> Nevertheless, from the very beginning, without delay or vacillation, I condemned the aggression and called for joint efforts to end it and restore Kuwait's sovereignty. At the same time, we took a firm position in favor of achieving this goal by political rather than military means.
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> Overall, we were able to hold to that line [although] the president of the United States did resort to force in order to push Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. (p. 228)

Likewise, Gorbachev refused to use limited violence even when it could have prevented greater violence and bloodshed, as in Baku, Osh, and Fergana, among others.

When U.S. Secretary of State James Baker informed Gorbachev that the United States would not mind if the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies intervened in Romania in order to prevent bloodshed as the Ceaușescu regime collapsed, Gorbachev refused.

It was in relation to the possibility and necessity of using violence that Gorbachev's real greatness and his incredible naïveté manifested themselves. Even after more than three decades, according to his article in this issue, he continues to believe in the possibility of resolving centuries-old inter-ethnic problems in a peaceful manner with a voluntary agreement of the parties to the conflict:

> In early 1988, when the Nagorno-Karabakh problem exploded, we understood that its roots were deep and that it had no quick solution—which, by the way, is still the case. Although some people tried to persuade me that re-carving the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan would solve the problem, the country's leadership unanimously agreed that this was unacceptable. I believed that it was up to the Armenians and Azerbaijanis to reach an agreement; the central government was there to help them normalize the situation and, in particular, solve the economic problems. I remain convinced that this was the correct course. (pp. 219-220).

Such an incredible rejection of coercion—especially for a Communist official who had reached the pinnacle of state power and especially in comparison with other Soviet and Russian leaders of the last

century—naturally raises the question of the reasons for this feature of Gorbachev's outlook and political activity.

Why Was Gorbachev Such a Strenuous Opponent of the Use of Violence?

Certain features of Gorbachev's personal life seem to point in the opposite direction.

First, Gorbachev was and remains an adherent of leftist ideology: communism at first, social democracy in recent years. He became a candidate member of the CPSU rather early (at the age of 19); at the age of 21, he became a full member. For most of his career, he climbed the steps of the communist power pyramid. Communists in general and in the USSR in particular were not known for their adherence to non-violence.

Second, Gorbachev graduated from the Faculty of Law (Moscow University) and began his career in the prosecutor's office. Gorbachev's education in the field of Soviet jurisprudence and experience of working in the Soviet prosecutor's office do not favor a systematic rejection of violence. Indeed, the activities of other law graduates in positions at the top of state power—Vladimir Lenin, Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev—support precisely the opposite conclusion: that domestic lawyers in positions of power tend to use violence with few or no limits.

So what gives?

It seems that at least four factors could have played a role in shaping a feature as important to Gorbachev's worldview as his *strong rejection of violence*.

First is *his very special attitude toward women*, which is completely uncharacteristic of the overwhelming majority of today's Russian officials, politicians, and statesmen. Suffice it to recall Boris Yeltsin's and Vladimir Putin's attitudes toward their spouses and daughters. Gorbachev's affection for his beloved wife Raisa is well-known, not least because Gorbachev himself has never tried to hide it in any way. Nor is his special relationship with women limited to his wife. The number of pages in his memoirs dedicated to his mother, Maria Panteleevna, and to his grandmothers, Stepanida and Vasilisa Lukyanovna, is comparable to the number of pages dedicated to his father and grandfathers. His marriage to Raisa added to the circle of his respected and regularly mentioned relatives her mother, Alexandra Petrovna, and her sister, Lyudmila Maksimovna. His daughter, Irina, came to occupy a very special place in his life, as did his granddaughters, Ksenia and Anastasia, all of whom enjoy the sincere attention and respect of the head of the family clan. Such an attitude toward women could hardly have been fostered in young Mikhail were it not for the example of his father and, possibly, of his two grandfathers. It is obvious that the elders in the

Gorbachev family treated their women with special attention and respect and instilled this respectful attitude in him.

Second is *the lesson of the repression of the communist regime*. It so happened that both of Gorbachev's grandfathers, Andrei Moiseevich and Pantelei Efimovich, were subjected to repression and torture. One of them was sentenced to death; the Gorbachev family was declared a family of enemies of the people. Alas, this story was all too typical among Soviet citizens of the older generations: millions of people were repressed and tens of millions subjected to persecution and humiliation.

As the fate and actions of Boris Yeltsin as Russian president show, the mere fact of members of a family having been repressed guaranteed neither that the younger generation would become opponents of the regime nor that they would reject the use of violence. Significantly, however, in the Gorbachev clan, one of Mikhail's grandfathers turned out to be a principled enemy of Soviet power and collectivization and the other an organizer of a collective farm, then its chairman, and then one of the regional Soviet leaders. But although the two men were on opposite sides of the political divide, they both suffered at the hands of the Soviet regime. Such an experience naturally made the teenager think that no matter what position he took in the raging civil war (principled or conformist), no matter which side (red or white) he aligned himself with, it might not save him from possible repression or even death. Therefore, under no circumstances is one's personal fate—life or death—the result of personal choice. It depends, crucially, on the unpredictable behavior of the regime. This leads to the conclusion that something in this power is fundamentally wrong—that unlimited state power over ordinary people should not be permitted.

Third, *the lesson of the occupation*. For almost half a year, from August 3, 1942, to January 21, 1943, the Stavropol village of Privol'noe, where the Gorbachev family lived, was occupied by German troops. Mikhail's grandmother, as the wife of the collective farm chairman, a communist, and the mother of a front-line soldier, was subjected to a new series of humiliations and open threats of reprisals. Then came the executions of Jews, followed by the executions of the families of communists. A miracle saved the grandmother and the whole family—including Mikhail himself—from death, yet the occupation forever left in his memory a feeling of absolute helplessness in the face of the unlimited violence of the totalitarian power.

Finally, *the lesson of starvation organized by the communist regime*. In 1933, in the village of Privol'noe, 40% of the inhabitants died as the result of a famine orchestrated by the Bolsheviks. Of the six children of Stepanida, Mikhail's grandmother, three died. Although Mikhail himself, who was then a year old, naturally could not remember the famine, the memories of relatives, friends, and neighbors about the catastrophe that

struck the village could not but infuse his childhood and adolescence.

The next starvation arrived when it was impossible for Mikhail not to realize it. "In the winter and spring of 1944, famine began," writes Gorbachev in his memoir *Alone with Myself*. In other words, during the German occupation of 1942-43, he and his relatives had faced the very real threat of being killed by the occupiers, but they had not faced famine. Then came the Soviets: the threat of execution seemed to have receded for the Gorbachev family, but then the famine began. The pages of Gorbachev's memoirs on starvation are some of the most terrifying. On these pages, for the first time, appear mentions of God, to whom the people who were starving to death next to Mikhail turned in prayer.

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Mikhail Gorbachev has never written directly on the question of why he so strongly rejects violence carried out by the state authorities. When I asked him outright whether his personal experience during the occupation influenced the formation of his worldview and the principles to which he adhered in his political activities, he, after a pause, replied, "Yes, perhaps." He added, "I have not seen anything more terrible in my life."

Perhaps it was this terrible experience of realizing the total defenselessness of an ordinary person in the face of the blind force of a totalitarian state, along with the memory of the unpredictable repressions of the communist regime, the monstrous famines regularly organized by the government, and his deep and sincere respect for women, that helped Mikhail Gorbachev to form the foundations of his New Thinking. Guided by this approach, he was able to conduct the most grandiose revolution of liberation in the history of Russia, accompanied by reasonably low violence by historical standards.