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The Gorbachev Moment – and Why It Was So Brief

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Abstract

The essay describes the anti-Stalinist tradition as a source of reformist thinking in the USSR and the policies of Nikita Khrushchev as precedents for Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. It identifies promoters of reform within the Communist Party, among dissidents, and among their foreign supporters. It claims that those who supported Gorbachev were fewer and less influential than it appeared at the time, and that their ideas for economic reform were less developed and coherent than those for democratization and foreign policy. The essay describes the New Economic Policy of the early 1920s advocated by Nikolai Bukharin as an example of what at the time seemed to serve as a precedent for Gorbachev's reforms, but had little actual impact. The essay discusses how opponents of Gorbachev's reforms at home and abroad sought to undermine his initiatives. It considers the role of the United States in bringing the Gorbachev Moment to an end, by highlighting US rejection of Gorbachev's vision of a nuclear-free, demilitarized world; insistence on promoting "shock therapy" for the Russian economy and support for Boris Yeltsin's antidemocratic means of doing so; and policies that undermined democratic opposition to Yeltsin, even as his brutal war against Chechnya helped set a precedent for Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords

Nikolai Bukharin – Mikhail Gorbachev – Nikita Khrushchev – perestroika – nuclear weapons

Mikhail Gorbachev served a relatively brief time as leader of the Soviet Union, from March 1985 to December 1991. Among his predecessors, including during their initial periods of "collective leadership," Iosif Stalin ruled some 30 years, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev around nine and 18, respectively. With

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the possible exception of Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture and rapid and costly industrialization, no other Soviet leader produced such dramatic changes in such a short period as Gorbachev did, although Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies and Brezhnev's détente constituted important initiatives. Gorbachev's accomplishments were of a different order. They included bringing the Cold War to a peaceful end and the liberalization and eventual disintegration of the USSR, also carried out with little violence. With the hindsight of over three decades, the changes Gorbachev wrought appear no less impressive. Yet, in the wake of Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine and his steady transformation of Russia into an authoritarian police state, another aspect of Gorbachev's legacy emerges: some of the most profound changes associated with his name have not endured. Where did the Gorbachev Moment come from, and why was it so brief?

There are many elements of Gorbachev's reforms that have survived the intervening years, including, among others: internally, the elimination of Soviet central planning of the economy; and, externally, the fall of communist rule in Eastern Europe, the demise of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, the unification of Germany, and the formal dissolution of the USSR. This essay focuses on two elements that witnessed both substantial changes and gradual reversals: internal democratization and external rapprochement with Western Europe and the United States. It addresses a third element – economic reform – that represented perhaps the primary motivation for Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the main cause of his ultimate failure. Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost'* allowed the emergence of a free press, and his campaign of *demokratizatsiia* saw the development of competitive elections and the demise of the political monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). His "New Thinking" in foreign policy entailed the end of the Cold War and two of its key components: the highly militarized confrontation of armed alliances in central Europe and the nuclear arms race. Gorbachev's attempts at economic reform produced no such beneficial results. They led to a dramatic decline in living standards for ordinary citizens and exacerbated the fissiparous tendencies that led the fifteen constituent republics of the USSR increasingly to challenge Moscow's hyper-centralized control.

George F. Kennan – historian, former State Department official, US ambassador to Moscow, and progenitor of the Cold War "containment" policy – was once asked how someone like Gorbachev, a product of Soviet ideology who advanced through the ranks of the Communist Party to become its top leader, could have emerged as such a radical reformer. He considered it "a miracle."[1]

1 Quoted in Marilyn Berger, "Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Reformist Soviet Leader, is Dead at 91," *New York Times*, 30 August 2022. See also the many other expressions of the improbability

Seeking less divinely inspired explanations, many observers have pointed to a strong reformist tradition within the Soviet Communist Party and intelligentsia that had long favored "within-system" change and top-down democratization of Soviet-style socialism. Reformers typically associated their efforts with a rejection of the legacy of Stalinism, and the "Stalin question" played a key role in the fate of reforms ever since the dictator's death.

My argument for the emergence of the Gorbachev changes in both domestic and foreign policy focuses on the people who promoted the reformist ideas that he embraced: anti-Stalinist members of the Communist Party, dissidents sympathetic to democratic socialism, and their contacts abroad. Although the Soviet tradition of centralized Party discipline gave an impression of consensus in favor of Gorbachev's reforms, at least for the first years of his tenure, he never really enjoyed the full backing of the Party apparat or the state bureaucracy. Nor did a mass popular movement of ordinary citizens emerge to support his reforms. Among the public, there were varying degrees of enthusiasm for particular initiatives, but mainly a preoccupation with material well-being and at points even basic economic survival – that *perestroika* actually put at risk.

Despite the tumultuous nature of Soviet developments in the second half of the 1980s, foreign specialists familiar with the reformist wing of the Party could reasonably understand Gorbachev's initiatives as grounded in past Soviet and international experiences. Thus, even if conservative forces resisted Gorbachev's reforms, the fact that *perestroika*, *glasnost'*, and New Thinking echoed and built upon earlier precedents gave reason to hope that, once the policies had been implemented, their effects – democratization of the USSR and the end of the Cold War – would endure. In seeking to explain why they did not endure, I suggest that in retrospect the socio-political base for the reforms was narrower and weaker than it appeared, and the forces promoting the *status quo ante* broader and stronger.

Moreover, the logic, coherence, and success of the reforms differed within each domain. Democratizing Soviet society proceeded quickly and in steps that made sense and that reformers had long advocated – from loosening press restrictions, to distributing previously banned books and films, to organizing competitive elections. Changes in foreign policy depended on a certain ideological transformation (downplaying class conflict and highlighting common global interests) and specific concessions and unilateral initiatives of restraint. Here again, the changes followed a certain logic and conformed to recommendations that reformers had long advocated, sometimes in transnational

of Gorbachev's emergence as a reformer in William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: Norton, 2017) Apple Book version, 37–39.

collaboration with like-minded foreign counterparts.[2] In the domain of economics, however, there was no plan, and a real hesitation on Gorbachev's part to implement changes that would clearly threaten entrenched interests and would raise controversial ideological issues – such as the status of private property – that he had not managed to resolve within his own mind.

All of Gorbachev's reforms met resistance, from the so-called Nina Andreeva affair of 1988 that nearly derailed *glasnost'* and the anti-Stalinist initiatives to the August 1991 attempted putsch. External support for and positive responses to *perestroika* and New Thinking varied from country to country and over time – and at key points the absence of support might have contributed to Gorbachev's failures. In any case, it is difficult to identify a specific point at which what I call the Gorbachev Moment ended, the point at which his policy innovations failed or were reversed. In some cases the reversals were gradual, but punctuated by key events. Boris Yeltsin's use of armed force to disband the Russian parliament in October 1993 is one such event, as it led to imposition of a new constitution that concentrated power in the executive and paved the way for Putin's increasingly dictatorial rule. The failure of Gorbachev's half-hearted economic reforms was reflected in the dramatic collapse of the post-Soviet Russian economy, whose output declined by almost half between the late 1980s and mid-1990s; even as the economy revived it became nothing like what the reformers had envisioned, with its oligarchical control and continuing emphasis on raw-materials exports as the main source of growth.[3] In foreign policy, Gorbachev's vision of a "common European home" received its first blow with the enlargement of NATO in 1999 over Russian protests and its total demise with Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The essay begins with discussion of the anti-Stalinist tradition as a source of reformist thinking in the USSR and the domestic and foreign policies of Khrushchev that could be understood as precedents for Gorbachev's reforms. The second section describes the supporters of reform from within and along the fringes of the Communist Party and the foreign promoters of peace and disarmament who were the natural constituency of Gorbachev's New Thinking. I argue that in retrospect these supporters were too few to sustain Gorbachev's reforms, especially in the face of the disastrous results of his economic initiatives. The third section focuses on one particular model or precedent that

2 Matthew Evangelista, "Sources of Moderation in Soviet Security Policy," in Philip Tetlock, Robert Jervis, et al., eds., *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

3 Ted Hopf, "Common-sense Constructivism and Hegemony in World Politics," *International Organization* 67, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 317–354.

seemed at the time to be inspiring Gorbachev's economic reforms: the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the early 1920s, whose continuation was advocated by Nikolai Bukharin but rejected by Stalin with the introduction of forced collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization. The case of Bukharin deserves particular scrutiny because it represents my general argument – that those who supported Gorbachev were fewer and less influential than it appeared at the time, and that their ideas for economic reform were far less developed and coherent than those for democratization and foreign policy. The fourth section describes the ways opponents of Gorbachev's reforms, both at home and abroad, sought to undermine his initiatives in the face of inadequate and sometimes ambivalent defense by his supporters. The final section considers the role of the United States in bringing the Gorbachev Moment to an end. It highlights US rejection of Gorbachev's vision of a demilitarized Europe free of military alliances and his advocacy of abolition of nuclear weapons; US insistence on promoting "shock therapy" for the post-Soviet Russian economy, and support for Yeltsin's antidemocratic means of doing so; and US policies that undermined the democratic opposition to Yeltsin, even as his vicious war against Chechnya helped set a precedent for Putin's warfare by war crime carried out against Ukraine.

1 Anti-Stalinism as the Source of Reformist Thinking

A longstanding theme of historians of the Soviet Union has been the alternative paths that might have been taken in the wake of Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924.[4] When Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in the so-called Secret Speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, he opened up space for discussing those alternatives and helped foster a generation of reformers who would go on to create Gorbachev's brain trust.[5] With the publication of Roy Medvedev's

4 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982); Stephen F. Cohen, Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985).

5 Many of them have written memoirs describing these formative experiences. See, for example: Georgi Arbatov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Anatolii Cherniaev, *Moia zhizn' i moe vremia* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1995); Georgii Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody: reformatsiia Gorbacheva glazami ego pomoshchnika* (Moscow: Rossika Zevs, 1993). Archie Brown has discussed the influence of these advisers in *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98–101. For an excellent account of their impact on Gorbachev's foreign policy, see Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Let History Judge – circulating in *samizdat* in the USSR in the late 1960s and then available in foreign editions in the early 1970s – the theme seemed to take on a new importance and become relevant to current and future Soviet policy. The "Stalin Question" lay at the center of debates about Soviet reform.[6]

From this perspective, Stalin represented many things: forced-draft industrialization that emphasized military production over civilian needs, destruction of the peasantry through collectivization, hyper-centralization of the economy as a whole, ruthless suppression of dissent (and mass murder even of loyalists), tight censorship and control of the press and culture, the elimination of internal Party democracy and none for the greater society.

Anti-Stalinists pointed to the roads not traveled. In the wake of the ravages of civil war and the forced requisition of grain from the countryside carried out under the policy of War Communism, the Bolsheviks realized they could not feed the growing urban population through coercion alone. They introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) – essentially the old economic policy of allowing peasants to produce for local markets – as a temporary expedient. The policy brought a welcome respite, and leading figures such as Nikolai Bukharin advocated its continuation. Stalin and his allies denounced and defeated them as the Right Opposition. Soviet reformers inspired by Khrushchev's Thaw – the so-called *shestidesiatniki* or children of the 'sixties – sought to rehabilitate Bukharin and promote NEP as a model of market-based socialism.[7] Meanwhile some prominent intellectual figures advocated a program of Party-led democratization as a means of economic revitalization by appealing to the top leadership.[8]

Stalin left behind a legacy in foreign policy also open to criticism, although somewhat more tentative and circumspect. Some, such as Aleksandr Nekrich, denounced the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, unpreparedness for Hitler's attack, and the conduct of the war, whereas others gave Stalin credit for the ultimate victory.[9] Regarding postwar policy, imposition of what became known as "Stalinist" systems of rule in countries liberated by the Red Army came in for

6 Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, trans. by Colleen Taylor (New York: Knopf, 1971); Stephen F. Cohen, "The Stalin Question since Stalin," in his edited volume, *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union* (New York: Norton, 1982), 22–50; and Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7 Nikolai Shmelev, in Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers* (New York: Norton, 1989), esp. 145–147.

8 Andrei Sakharov, Roy Medvedev, and Valentin Turchin, "A Reformist Program for Democratization" (March 1970) in Cohen, *End to Silence*, 317–327.

9 A. M. Nekrich, *"June 22, 1941": Soviet Historians and the German Invasion*, trans. and ed. by Vladimir Petrov (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1968).

criticism, as did a certain xenophobia that contributed to the excessive military burden as well as suspicion of foreign "elements" and anti-Semitism at home. Yet, well into Gorbachev's tenure, prominent figures continued to defend Stalin in both domestic and international policy. Not surprisingly, one of them was Andrei Gromyko, who had carried out the foreign policies of Stalin and all of his successors until Gorbachev "promoted" him from foreign minister to the then-ceremonial post of president (chair of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet). In a 1987 Politburo discussion of Stalin's legacy, Gromyko asserted that "it must honestly be said that Stalin advocated socialism. And in international affairs, he fought like a lion for the interests of the Soviet Union."[10]

Khrushchev's Thaw had opened the possibility to changes in both domestic and foreign policy. A key initiative – and a plausible precedent for Gorbachev's efforts at democratization – was abandoning the concept of "dictatorship of the proletariat" in favor of the "state of the entire people."[11] In economic policy, Khrushchev's reforms generally sought to weaken control of the Moscow-based industrial ministries and in the agricultural sector to provide meaningful incentives to produce – but they never came close to what one could consider "market socialism" or even the Yugoslav model of workers' self-management.

In foreign policy, Khrushchev provided some precedents that Gorbachev and his advisers could adopt, although whether they should all be characterized as anti-Stalinist is less clear. Khrushchev sought to reduce tensions with the United States and Western Europe, an evident contrast to the approach of Stalin's postwar policy, but arguably an attempt to revive the spirit of the wartime anti-fascist coalition that was also Stalin's policy (at least in the wake of the German invasion of June 1941). Yet Khrushchev's embrace of the Non-Aligned Movement, with overtures to Yugoslavia, India, Indonesia, Egypt, and elsewhere, came seemingly at the expense of US interests, even if it too represented a break with Stalin's suspicion of revolutionary movements that were not subservient to Moscow.[12] Khrushchev's loosening of the Stalinist grip on Eastern Europe produced more reformist initiatives than he was willing to accept and led to Soviet military intervention in Hungary, conflict with Poland,

10 A. Cherniaev, *Sovetskaia politika 1972–1991 gg. – vzgliad iznutri, 1987 god*. Washington, DC: National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1987.pdf, entry for 31 October 1987, 99 (hereafter, Cherniaev diary).

11 Jerry F. Hough, *How the Soviet Union is Governed*, revised and enlarged edition of Merle Fainsod's *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 226–227.

12 Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities, and Foreign Policies, Moscow 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

the loss of Albania as an ally, and a deterioration of relations with Maoist China, which strongly opposed the denunciation of Stalin and his legacy.[13]

In the military realm, Khrushchev initiated a substantial unilateral reduction of the conventional armed forces that Stalin had deployed in Europe. He toyed with plans for a militia-based system of territorial defense that would impose fewer opportunity costs on an economy perennially short of labor than the large standing army did.[14] Although Khrushchev seemed to view nuclear weapons as a shortcut to both savings on manpower in the military budget and to foreign-policy successes, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 revealed the limits and risks of that strategy. In the aftermath, both the US and USSR became more open to negotiating constraints on the nuclear arms race, starting with the Moscow Treaty of 1963 banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere, under water, and in outer space.

Although Khrushchev's successors sought to rehabilitate Stalin's reputation in many domains, they continued the process of US-Soviet nuclear arms control that their anti-Stalinist predecessor had initiated – along with major quantitative and qualitative improvements in conventional and nuclear forces. Yet the Brezhnev-era arms negotiations faced criticism abroad for codifying rather than halting an on-going arms race, and, in the view of hawkish US critics, allowing Soviet pursuit of military superiority.[15] Gorbachev's nuclear policy sought to break the stalemate inherited from the Brezhnev leadership. Early on he drew upon Khrushchev's precedents of unilateral reductions and moratoria on testing and deployment of weapons, and ambitious plans for general and complete disarmament.[16] Cheered on by foreign disarmament activists, he carried out substantial reductions in conventional and nuclear forces – some by unilateral initiatives, others by signing treaties highly favorable to his negotiating partners – and he agreed to unprecedented measures of

13 Ted Hopf, *Reconstructing the Cold War: The Early Years, 1945–1958* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

14 Jutta Tiedtke, *Abrüstung in der Sowjetunion: Wirtschaftliche Bedingungen und soziale Folgen der Truppenreduzierung von 1960* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1985).

15 Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976); Charles Tyroler II, ed., *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger* (McLean, VA: Pergamon Brassey's, 1984).

16 *Zaiavlenie General'nogo sekretariia TsK KPSS M. S. Gorbacheva, 15 ianvaria 1986 goda* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1986); on the origins of and US reaction to the proposal, see Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., *Gorbachev's Nuclear Initiative of January 1986 and the Road to Reykjavik*, Briefing Book 563, 16 October 2016, National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nuclear-vault-russia-programs/2016-10-12/gorbachevs-nuclear-initiative-january-1986#_ftnref1.

on-site verification.[17] Soviet reformers, encouraged by Gorbachev's initiatives and emboldened by *glasnost'*, increasingly criticized the stranglehold of the military-industrial sector on the Soviet economy.[18]

2 How Representative Were the Reformers?

During Gorbachev's first years as General Secretary, he appeared to be carrying out the preferred polices of the reformist wing of the Communist Party as a kind of continuation of Khrushchev's anti-Stalinist program. As Stephen Kotkin writes of Gorbachev, "his cohort hailed him as the long-awaited 'reformer,' a second Khrushchev. They were right. Belief in a humane socialism had reemerged from within the system, and this time, in even more politically skillful hands, it would prove fatal."[19] My own argument is less deterministic. Gorbachev was indeed inspired by the vision of a humane socialism, and he assembled a group of like-minded advisers. Yet to implement his vision he had to contend with the Communist Party apparat and state bureaucracy that did not share his vision, and, particularly with a Soviet public preoccupied with more mundane concerns for their material wellbeing.[20]

Gorbachev's advisers included such figures as Aleksandr Iakovlev (whom Gorbachev met when Iakovlev was serving "in exile" as Soviet ambassador to Canada in retaliation for criticizing the Brezhnev leadership's partial rehabilitation of Stalin), Georgii Shakhnazarov, Anatolii Cherniaev, Gennadii Gerasimov, and others. All had continued working within the Communist Party throughout the Brezhnev era in support of at least some policies with which they had ostensibly disagreed, but in a kind of "intellectual oasis," as Robert English described it – first on the staff of the journal *Problemy mira i sotsialzma* in Prague, where they interacted with foreign reform communists and social democrats, and later as consultants to the Central Committee International Department.[21] They entertained visions of what could be improved in Soviet

17 Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), part 4.

18 Georgii Arbatov, "Armiia dlia strany ili strana dlia armii?" *Ogonek*, no. 5 (1990): 4.

19 Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), Apple Books version, 101.

20 On internal opposition within the Politburo, see Vadim Medvedev, *V komande Gorbacheva: vzgliad iznutri* (Moscow: Bylina, 1994); on popular attitudes, see Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. by Bela Shayevich (New York: Random House, 2016); and Christopher Cerf and Marina Albee, eds., *Small Fires: Letters from the Soviet People to Ogonyok Magazine, 1987–1990* (New York: Summit Books, 1990).

21 English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, esp. 70–74; Cherniaev, *Moia zhizn'*, 225–226.

economics, culture, politics, and foreign policy, but developed no plan per se that Gorbachev could implement.

There was, however, a figure close to the reformist, anti-Stalinist wing of the Communist Party who did have a plan of sorts. Roy Medvedev had been expelled from the Party upon publication of his biography of Stalin in *samizdat* and then abroad. Medvedev continued writing and publishing – his own and others' – historical exposés, critiques, and proposals for reform. Between 1964 and 1970 he circulated a compendium of articles on a range of topics – first in *samizdat*, and then in *tamizdat*, published in Amsterdam in two volumes.[22] At first it was untitled, but later became known as the *Political Diary*. Stephen F. Cohen, who published a selection of its contents in English in 1982, referred to it as "Party samizdat, edited and read mainly by members of the Soviet Communist Party or by Establishment intellectuals close to it."[23]

In 1970–1971, taking a break from the demanding work of publishing the *Political Diary*, Medvedev devoted his attention to drafting a monograph. Titled *Kniga o sotsialisticheskoi demokratii*, it was published in Russian in Amsterdam in 1972 and in English translation in 1974 as *On Socialist Democracy*.[24] With chapters on the soviets, the judiciary and security forces, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, economics, and foreign policy, it reads almost as a program for comprehensive reform of the USSR – a blueprint held in reserve in anticipation of a top leader who would carry it out. A few years into Gorbachev's term, a US State Department specialist on Soviet politics made the connection:

> On both domestic policy and diplomacy, it was astonishing to reread dissident historian Roy Medvedev's *On Socialist Democracy*, written in 1970–71, and to discover the expanse of common ground between what Medvedev then advocated and what the Gorbachev leadership now appeared to be putting into place.[25]

In a Norton paperback edition, *On Socialist Democracy* was widely adopted in courses on Soviet politics in the second half of the 1980s and it did sometimes

22 *Politicheskii dnevnik*, vol. 1, 1964–1970 and vol. 2. 1965–1970 (Amsterdam: Fond imeni Gertsena, 1972 and 1975); Barbara Martin, "Roy Medvedev's *Political Diary*: An Experiment in Free Socialist Press," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 67, no. 4 (2019): 601–626.

23 Cohen, preface to *End to Silence*, 9.

24 Roy A. Medvedev, *Kniga o sotsialisticheskoi demokratii* (Amsterdam: Fond Gertsena, 1972); Medvedev, *On Socialist Democracy*, trans. by Ellen de Kadt (New York: Knopf, 1975).

25 John W. Parker, *Kremlin in Transition*, volume two, *Gorbachev, 1985–1989* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 97.

seem that each chapter anticipated a new initiative that Gorbachev would then announce. In retrospect, it seems evident that Gorbachev was not relying on Medevdev's work as a guide to his reforms and was following no blueprint. His approach to democratization relied heavily on improvisation and exhibited a trial-and-error quality.[26]

There was no specific blueprint for reform of Soviet foreign policy either, although some scholars recognized early on that Gorbachev was drawing from the repertoire of Khrushchev's initiatives of the mid-1950s. He was motivated by a similar desire to reverse the excessive militarization of the Soviet economy and foreign policy in favor of improving consumer welfare and reducing the risk of war.[27] His friendship with Zdeněk Mlynář since their student days at Moscow State University in the 1950s made Gorbachev sympathetic to the reforms that the Czechoslovak communist supported during the Prague Spring in 1968, and skeptical of the Soviet military intervention that crushed it. In that respect, Gorbachev was naturally drawn to the "Prague group" of reformers – Arbatov, Cherniaev, Shakhnazarov, and the others. William Taubman referred to the group as "'Team Gorbachev' in training," given how close their values and ideas aligned with those of the future Soviet leader.[28]

In the early 1980s, even before Gorbachev came into office, some European scholars and activists managed to make contact with reform-oriented academics, including retired military officers, as well as dissidents concerned about the East-West arms race. These foreign interlocuters were well-positioned to understand the dramatic initiatives in the sphere of military policy and disarmament that took most mainstream observers by surprise.[29] Activists associated with the European Nuclear Disarmament movement began to forge relations with East bloc dissidents and human-rights activists, many of them initially skeptical that the West Europeans would be sufficiently critical of Soviet military policy and human-rights abuses.[30] Eventually the two

26 I owe this point to Archie Brown.

27 Matthew Evangelista, "The New Soviet Approach to Security," *World Policy Journal* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 561–599.

28 Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 255–256; see also Archie Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161–163.

29 See especially Stephen Shenfield, "The USSR: Viktor Girshfeld and the Concept of 'Sufficient Defense,'" *ADIU Report* 6/1 (January/February 1984): 10; "Colonel X's Warning: Our Mistakes Plus Your Hysteria." *Détente* 1 (October 1984): 2–3; "Colonel X's Peace Proposals." *Détente* 2 (February 1985): 2–4; and his memoir, Shenfield, *Stories of a Soviet Studier: My Experiences in Russia* (Kindle ed., 2016).

30 US Congress, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust between the US and the USSR*, Washington DC, 22 May 1984; Everett Mendelsohn, *A Dialogue with the Soviets: Nuclear Weapons, Disarmament,*

sides established a dialogue to promote common initiatives that seemed utopian at the time: a Europe, whole and free, demilitarized; elimination of the military blocs; and respect for universal human rights and freedom.[31] Many of the human-rights and peace activists on the Eastern side emerged from counterculture and feminist movements and later became officials in the post-communist governments.[32]

In retrospect we recognize that there was never anything like a mass movement for Soviet reform with anything like a coherent program. Most Soviet citizens seemed to accept the social compact of the Brezhnev era, characterized by the aphorism, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us." As Grigorii Iavlinskii, the erstwhile economic adviser to Boris Yeltsin, remarked of those times, "only a miniscule number of people were fighting for freedom, while even fewer believed that this was actually possible."[33] On foreign policy, the public's interest seemed limited to a fervent wish to prevent a major war, a goal to which they assumed Soviet military strength contributed, although the toll of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to some discontent by the early 1980s.[34] Disillusioned "within-system" reformers, such as Andrei Sakharov, gave up on appeals to the top leadership and directed their dissident activities toward the outside world. Sometimes, as in Sakharov's case, they expressed support for US military programs, such as the MX missile and increases in US conventional forces, measures necessary in his view to convince the Soviet side to negotiate reductions.[35]

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and Nuclear Energy (Philadelphia, PA: American Friends Service Committee, 1979); Jean Stead and Danielle Grünberg, *Moscow Independent Peace Group* (London: Merlin Press, 1982).

31 E. P. Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Ferenc Köszegi and Thompson, *The New Hungarian Peace Movement* (London: Merlin Press, 1982); Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

32 Ed Vulliamy, "1989 and all that: Plastic People of the Universe and the Velvet Revolution," *The Observer*, 6 September 2009; Mary Kaldor, "Who Killed the Cold War?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 51 (July 1995); Rob Cameron, "Thirty years since birth of Charter 77 human rights initiative," *Inside Central Europe*, 15 December 2006; Patrick Burke, "A Transcontinental Movement of Citizens? Strategic Debates in the 1980s Western Peace Movement," in Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney, eds., *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

33 Grigorii Iavlinskii, "Gorbachev and the Many Directions He Proffered to the World," 31 August 2022, https://eng.yabloko.ru/gorbachev-and-the-many-directions-he-profferred-to-the-world/.

34 Roy A Medvedev and Zhores A. Medvedev, "Letter to the West: A Nuclear *Samizdat* on America's Arms Race," The *Nation*, 16 January 1982: 38–51; Matthew Evangelista, "Soviet People Support Arms," *In These Times*, 31 March–6 April 1982.

35 Andrei Sakharov, "The Danger of Thermonuclear War: An Open Letter to Dr. Sidney Drell," *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 5 (Summer, 1983): 1001–1016.

The group of reformers in and around the Communist Party, proponents of a reformed "socialism with a human face," was never large. Roy Medvedev's *Political Diary*, which did not even have a name when it circulated in the USSR, was, by his own account, produced in no more than five typed copies and read by no more than 40 to 50 people.[36] He later told one researcher that he intended it "for friends only."[37] Reviewing *Let History Judge* in 1972, the conservative historian Robert Conquest claimed that Medvedev's campaign to free Soviet-style socialism from its Stalinist deformations in favor of a purer Leninist version was a minority project. "Medvedev's Leninist position," he speculated, "is by no means typical of the Soviet liberal intelligentsia. These intellectuals are mainly, like Sakharov himself, in some sense socialist, opposed in the abstract to the system they believe to exist in the West, with its totally unrestrained exploitation, absence of free education, of social services, and so on."[38] But that did not mean that they could agree upon a plan to reform what in the 1970s was sometimes called "real," "actually existing" or "developed" socialism.[39] Even Stephen Cohen, an enthusiastic chronicler of the within-system socialist reformers, described Medvedev in 1982 as "an increasingly solitary voice," someone "stranded between a conservative Soviet leadership and a dissident community that has lost its reformist hopes."[40] Nevertheless, the combination of Cohen's promotion of Medvedev, and the fact that the editors of the *New Left Review* in Britain published him regularly, gave Medvedev a higher profile than his actual influence warranted. His proposals for reform seemed striking to foreign readers when they appeared as *samizdat* during the Brezhnev years, but they were actually more moderate than the positions taken in *published* works by the Czechoslovak reformers of the mid-1960s.[41]

Stephen Cohen played a role not only in promoting Medvedev, but also in fostering the notion of an anti-Stalinist reform of Soviet socialism. It would draw on the example of Stalin's enemy Nikolai Bukharin – the subject of

36 Roy Medvedev "How *Political Diary* was Created," in Cohen, *End to Silence*, 18–20.

37 Interviewed by Martin, "Roy Medvedev's *Political Diary*," 606.

38 Robert Conquest, review of *Let History Judge*, by Roy A. Medvedev, *Commentary* (June 1972). Probably unknown to Conquest was a group of self-defined Marxists who favored a stronger anti-Stalinist line and greater democratization than Medvedev, and who published their own *samizdat* journal, *Varianty*, but they were not particularly numerous either. See Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State from 1917 to the Present*, trans. by Brian Pearce (London: Verso, 1988), 282–288.

39 Rudolf Bahro, "The Alternative in Eastern Europe," *New Left Review* 1/106 (November-December 1977); Bahro, *Die Alternative: zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus* (Hamburg: Europaische Verlagsanstalt, 1977).

40 Cohen, *End of Silence*, 12.

41 Zdeněk Mlynář made this point to Archie Brown in a visit to Oxford in 1979, summarized in an email message from Brown, 24 February 2023.

Cohen's highly regarded biography – and Bukharin's supposed advocacy of NEP as a long-term model of mixed socialist-market economy.[42]

3 Bukharin as "Forefather of *Perestroika*?"

In retrospect, those who imagined Soviet reform communists of the 1970s poring over the writings of Bukharin to develop a program for democratic socialism and a mixed economy in anticipation of the miraculous appearance of a Gorbachev were mistaken. There was, however, a long history of attempts at reforming the Soviet economy, including ones pursued even in the wake of Khrushchev's ouster and the end of de-Stalinization. Reforms inspired by the work of Evsei Liberman and promoted by Premier Aleksei Kosygin in 1965, for example, focused on enhancing autonomy of enterprises and profitability as a stimulus instead of directive norms of production. The reforms were introduced on an experimental basis but did not outlast the decade. Among other problems, it was difficult for managers who were accustomed to underestimating their firms' production in order subsequently to "overfulfill" the plan quotas, instead to report high production for the sake of providing bonuses to their workers.[43] In any event, none of the reforms came close to curbing the system of central planning or introducing meaningful prices as indicators of production targets. In other words, they were far from attempts to create a mixed economy with market mechanisms. Some of Gorbachev's economic advisers and foreign admirers thought Bukharin and NEP might provide the inspiration for such a system.

Gorbachev's memoirs and the accounts of his biographers describe the communist official's intellectual curiosity from early in his career, and his eagerness to read the various works provided in limited editions to the CPSU élite, especially by foreign communists: Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Giuseppe Boffa's *History of the Soviet Union*, Palmiro Togliatti's commentary on the Soviet 20th Party Congress, all translated from Italian, and the French communist Louis Aragon's *History of the USSR*.[44] Yet, the influence on Gorbachev or his circle of Bukharin is more uncertain: publication of Bukharin's writings

42 Stephen F. Cohen *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

43 On the history of Soviet economic reforms, see Ed A. Hewett, *Reforming the Soviet Economy: Equality versus Efficiency* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1988); and Philip Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy: An Economic History of the USSR from 1945* (London, UK: Longman, 2003).

44 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Novosti, 1995) 1: 144–145, 256.

in the USSR was arguably a consequence rather than a cause of *perestroika*, as they only appeared starting in 1988.[45] The first biography of Bukharin published in the Soviet Union was a Russian translation of Cohen's.[46] Gorbachev claimed to have been influenced by Cohen's work, rather than to have been inspired directly by Bukharin's ideas.[47] In February 1988, a commission chaired by Gorbachev formally rehabilitated Bukharin and the other members of the Right Opposition, and exonerated them of the charges of treason that led to their execution. "The repeal of Bukharin's conviction is a radical act of anti-Stalinism," Cohen told a US journalist when the decision was announced. "There is an implication in all this that Bukharin was Lenin's programmatic heir," Cohen said, "that he was the forefather of perestroika."[48]

There are reasons to question whether Gorbachev and his colleagues considered Bukharin as a source of their reforms. According to Cherniaev's detailed diary accounts, when Politburo members discussed Bukharin's rehabilitation in the context of Gorbachev's speech commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, they endorsed Boris Yeltsin's claim that Bukharin mainly deserved credit for having joined Stalin in defeating Trotsky. Gorbachev mentioned that Bukharin was concerned about "authoritarian methods of leadership" in the Party, but he did not celebrate him for promoting the continuation of NEP.[49] Rather he faulted Bukharin for not embracing collectivization of agriculture soon enough: "It turns out that in relation to the peasantry, Trotsky appeared too early, and Bukharin was late, or rather 'delayed' with his ideas and policies," Gorbachev argued.[50] Egor Ligachev claimed that Bukharin "was very mistaken on the question of collectivization," that he "proposed to greatly reduce the pace of industrialization" and incorrectly "focused on light industry" – although, according to Ligachev, Bukharin later acknowledged these policies as mistakes (under torture?). Gorbachev agreed.[51]

There is no doubt that in the late 1980s, Soviet reformers sought to link Bukharin's rehabilitation to support for market reforms. They claimed that Lenin in his final writings, often known as his "testament," had also favored

45 N. I. Bukharin, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988); *Problemy teorii i praktiki sotsializma* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989): *Put' k sotsializmu* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1990).

46 S. Koen, *Bukharin: Politicheskaia biografiia, 1888–1938* (Moscow: Progress, 1988).

47 Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Gorbachev's Legacy," *The Nation*, 31 August 2022; Nadezhda Azhgikhina, "He Taught Gorbachev," *The Nation*, 25 September 2020.

48 Philip Taubman, "50 Years After His Execution, Soviet Panel Clears Bukharin," *New York Times*, 6 February 1988.

49 Cherniaev diary, entry for 15 October 1987, 63, 67.

50 Ibid., 74.

51 Ibid., discussion on 31 October 1987, 94–96.

the continuation of NEP, and that Bukharin, not Stalin, was Lenin's true intellectual heir in opposing rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. As economist Nikolai Shmelev claimed, "the rehabilitation of Nikolai Bukharin is so important to our economic reforms today. We have rehabilitated the Bolshevik leader who was the last one to defend NEP and Lenin's real economic ideas publicly."[52] Even Cherniaev, who had faithfully recorded the doubts of Gorbachev and his colleagues about the merits of Bukharin's economic policies in the 1920s, nevertheless claimed that "Bukharin's rehabilitation turned into a powerful impetus for the rapid growth" of *perestroika*. Yet it did not yield a blueprint for the kind of democratic socialist economy Medvedev and others had advocated. In fact, for Cherniaev, "very soon the question arose – did we have socialism at all and do we need it (even 'with a human face')?"[53]

The attempt to link *perestroika* to the "true Lenin" of NEP was in any case founded on shaky historical ground. In a close reading of both Lenin and Bukharin, Lars T. Lih (one of Cohen's PhD students) has demonstrated that Lenin's "testament contains no deeper, wider vision of NEP" beyond that of a necessary expedient to increase the food supply. "Lenin defends NEP on the basis of the need for economic recovery and as a justifiable concession to the peasants' backward outlook, but otherwise his attitude seems negative." He considered it the economic equivalent of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty that ceded historic Russian territory to end the war with Germany. Lenin associated NEP "with bureaucratism, a low level of economic productivity," greedy "NEPmen," and a "Brest retreat."[54] Nor did Bukharin view NEP as a long-term economic solution or a model of a mixed economy:

> When we understand the underlying structure of Bukharin's argument, we see that it is incorrect to assert that he was moving towards a conception of a "socialist market" or "socialist pluralism." On the contrary, in 1925 as in 1920, Bukharin looked forward to an economy that would be a "single organized whole" under the direction of a centralized state.[55]

52 Nikolai Shmelev, in Cohen and vanden Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost*, 146. See, for example, the discussion of Bukharin in the interviews with Georgii Smirnov and Iurii Afanasiev in ibid.

53 Cherniaev diary, 1987, 119.

54 Lars T. Lih, "Political Testament of Lenin and Bukharin and the Meaning of NEP," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 241–252, at 245.

55 Ibid., 247.

Despite its dubious historical basis, many Soviet reformers seized on the Bukharin-NEP "precedent" for Gorbachev's reforms. Yet how much could the short-term, emergency measures of the struggling, mainly agricultural Soviet economy of the early 1920s contribute to revising the stagnant, heavily industrialized economy of the late 20th century?

4 Reforms versus Reality: Gorbachev's Opponents at Home and Abroad

Although Gorbachev was aware of the work of proponents of economic reform, such as the sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaia, he concentrated most of his efforts on democratization and improving the international atmosphere.[56] He hoped that personal freedom would inspire individual initiative and that ending Cold War tensions and increasing foreign trade would introduce advanced technologies and boost economic welfare. As Ronald Suny put it, "Gorbachev and his closest associates did not seem to have a clear idea what socialism would entail, other than liberating the pent-up energies of ordinary people." He harbored "a lingering Leninist aversion to private property and spoke about combining state property with cooperatives."[57]

Gorbachev's economic reforms were half-hearted and tentative, and they met resistance from powerful institutional interests. The introduction of cooperatives in 1988 promised improvements in consumer welfare in the form of shops and restaurants. But the central ministries still controlled supply of basic materials, necessary, for example, even to renovate a building, let alone produce goods. Cooperatives enjoyed no access to foreign currency, and some key goods, such as computers and photocopy and fax machines, were inaccessible because of US export restrictions. Successful cooperative ventures came to depend on connections, corruption, and criminality, thereby defeating efforts to create a law-governed, market economy. Some of the most successful entrepreneurs emerged out of the already privileged Communist Party élite,

56 Tatiana Zaslavskaia, *The Second Socialist Revolution: An Alternative Soviet Strategy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); in the early 1980s she headed a project that produced the so-called Novosibirsk Report, proposing certain reforms to the agricultural sector based on Siberian evidence. See Zaslavskaia, "The Novosibirsk Report," *Survey* 28, no. 1 (March 1984): 83–109.

57 Ronald Grigor Suny, "Mikhail Gorbachev's Project Was a Noble Failure Thwarted by Forces Beyond His Control," *Jacobin*, 6 September 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/09/mikhail-gorbachev-ussr-reform-collapse-us/.

especially the Komsomol, thereby tainting market reforms in the eyes of the citizenry, who faced increasing shortages of basic goods.[58]

If Bukharin and NEP provided only superficial and historically inaccurate precedents for reform, there were actual models that Gorbachev might have adopted. Particularly promising were the measures undertaken in Hungary and in China, whereby agricultural cooperatives were encouraged to produce light goods for the consumer market.[59] Yet Gorbachev made no effort to learn about those initiatives. He waited until 1990 even to appoint an economic adviser with some knowledge of market mechanisms: Nikolai Petrakov.[60]

When Petrakov collaborated with Iavlinskii (then working with Yeltsin's Russian government) and Stanislav Shatalin to produce the so-called 500-Days plan for transition to a market economy, Gorbachev was initially enthusiastic. Rallying the opponents of market reforms, however, Nikolai Ryzhkov, Gorbachev's prime minister, presented a more conservative alternative plan. Unable to reconcile the two, Gorbachev settled for an unsatisfactory statement of "basic principles," in the absence of a workable plan.[61] Gorbachev's hesitation provided an opportunity for his rival, Yeltsin. After securing the Russian Supreme Soviet's approval of the Iavlinkskii plan, Yeltsin attacked Gorbachev for reneging on his commitment. He declared that the Russian Republic would now follow its own economic policies, including guarantees of private property, independently of the central government. The failure of Soviet economic reform contributed to the fissiparous tendencies that ultimately led to the breakup of the USSR. Russia rushed to the exits, along with the Baltic states and Georgia, and Yeltsin ultimately conspired with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus to end the union and disrupt Gorbachev's project to reconstitute it as a looser, more democratic confederation.[62]

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58 A. Craig Copetas, *Bear Hunting with the Politburo* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

59 Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 373–374; Péter Vámos, introductory essay to *China and Eastern Europe in the 1980s: A Hungarian Perspective*, Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, e-Dossier no. 69 (January 2016), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/china-and-eastern-europe-the-1980s-hungarian-perspective. On Gorbachev's opposition to Chinese-style reforms, see Shmelev in Cohen & vanden Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost*, 148–149.

60 Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 720.

61 Ibid., 825–835; Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insiders' History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 234–238.

62 Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Gorbachev's successes at democratization – particularly the weakening of the Communist Party's control, the institution of a genuinely deliberative legislature established by elections, and the lively media coverage unleashed by *glasnost'* – paradoxically contributed to undermining his agenda: they made possible outspoken opposition to his policies by conservative forces no less able to organize to promote their interests than the reformers were.[63] In the case of the 500-Days plan, "powerful lobbies – the party apparatus, the military-industrial complex, and the collective farm/state farm hierarchy – warned of rampant inflation, unprecedented unemployment, chaos in the marketplace," and Gorbachev succumbed to their pressure.[64]

In the wake of seeming successes in foreign policy Gorbachev faced equally strong opposition. Leading figures in the military-industrial sector criticized Gorbachev's unilateral reductions of the army and its reorientation to a "non-provocative" defensive structure – initiatives that helped secure the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe.[65] Agreements such as the Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) of 1987 also came in for criticism for the disproportionate reductions required of the Soviet side.[66]

On 3 October 1990, the former East Germany dissolved itself into the Federal German Republic – a direct consequence of Gorbachev's acquiescence to the peaceful overthrow of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall – and Gorbachev's critics lodged charges of treason. Less than two weeks later, Gorbachev "won the world's biggest consolation prize," as a British journalist put it: the Nobel Peace Prize. Another journalist reported the reaction of a man waiting in a long line outside a near-empty Moscow shop: "What does the Peace Prize have to do with me, when I can't find any milk?" Even

63 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*.

64 Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 835.

65 Maj. Gen. G. Kirilenko, "Legko li byt' oborone dostatochnoi?," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 21 March 1990; Maj. Gen. Iurii Liubimov, "O dostatochnosti oborony i nedostatke kompetentnosti," *Kommunist vooruzhennykh sil*, no. 16 (August 1989): 21–26; Gen. M. A. Moiseev, "Eshche raz o prestizhe armii," *Kommunist vooruzhennykh sil*, no. 13 (July 1989): 3–14; Oleg Baklanov, "Ob itogakh obsuzhdeniya v komissii TsK KPSS po voennoi politiki partii khoda razrabotki kontseptsii voennoi reformy i perspektiv razvitiya Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR," 8 January 1991 (memorandum reporting on a meeting of 12 December 1990) and "Ob itogakh obsuzhdeniya v komissii TsK KPSS po voennoi politiki khoda peregovorov po sokrashcheniyu vooruzhenii," 6 February 1991, both in *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii* (*RGANI*), the former Communist Party Central Committee archive. Moscow, *f.* 89, *op.* 21, *d.* 63.

66 Sergei F. Akhromeev, and Georgii Kornienko. *Glazami marshala i diplomata* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1992).

Gennadii Gerasimov, Gorbachev's foreign ministry spokesperson, quipped: "We must remember, this certainly was not the prize for economics."[67]

In retrospect, within Russia both Gorbachev's democratizing reforms and his contribution to ending the Cold War were accomplishments desired and appreciated by a smaller constituency than the one that suffered from the economic crisis his reforms produced and the consequences of the disintegration of the USSR that he failed to prevent. Outside Russia, Gorbachev evinced great affection for the German and Scandinavian social democrats and Italian communists whose commitment to a social market economy in a democratic context he admired.[68] He embraced notions of Common Security promoted by Swedish prime minister Olaf Palme that had been circulating within the top Soviet leadership already in the early 1980s.[69] He coined the phrase "common European home" and shared with the activists of the European Nuclear Disarmament movement and informal peace and human-rights groups in Eastern Europe the vision of a demilitarized, united Europe, free of military blocs.

5 The Role of the United States in Ending the Gorbachev Moment

Yet it was the United States, not social democrats and END activists, that Gorbachev needed to please. When Chancellor Helmut Kohl pressed for incorporating the German Democratic Republic's *Länder* into the Federal Republic on his terms, the Soviet foreign ministry insisted that "German reunification come only after NATO and the Warsaw Pact transformed themselves from military to political alliances and disbanded by mutual agreement" – the longstanding END vision. The United States backed Kohl, and at the Malta

67 Jonathan Steele, "Gorbachev wins Nobel peace prize," *The Guardian*, 16 October 1990; Copetas, *Bear Hunting*, 74.

68 Jacques Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Antonio Rubbi, *Incontri con Gorbaciov: i colloqui di Natta e Occhetto con il leader sovietico* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990).

69 "Ob itogakh besedy L. I. Brezhneva (12 iiunia) s predsedatelem Mezhdunarodnoi komissii po razoruzheniiu i bezopasnosti U. Pal'me," from the transcript of a Politburo session, 18 June 1981, *RGANI*, *f.* 89, *op.* 42, *d.* 44; G. Arbatov, "Otchetobuchastiivzasedanii Mezhdunarodnoi komissii po razoruzheniiu i bezopasnosti ('Komissiia Pal'me') sostoiavsheisia v Vene v period s 13 po 15 dekabria 1980 g.," *RGANI*, *f.* 89, *op.* 46, *d.* 63, and other reports in the same folder. "Common security" is discussed in the report on the eighth meeting of the commission, 28 December 1981, 2–3. For Palme's report, see Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, *Common Security: A Blueprint for Survival* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

summit with George H. W. Bush in December 1989, Gorbachev received no assurances of demilitarization or disbanding of military blocs (although he thought he received a commitment foreswearing NATO's expansion).[70] The Soviet leader seemed satisfied that the US side no longer considered the USSR an enemy, and his foreign policy aide Cherniaev claimed that the Americans had even "made a commitment to give economic support to perestroika."[71] A bitter Gorbachev later complained:

> The moral of the story – and in the West morals are everything – is this: under my leadership, a country began reforms that opened up the possibility of sustained democracy, of escaping from the threat of nuclear war, and more. That country needed aid and support, but it didn't get any. Instead, when things went bad for us, the United States applauded.[72]

Perhaps Gorbachev misunderstood the US reaction to Soviet economic distress as applause, but it is clear that the Bush administration was not inclined to bail out the Soviet economy. As Suny put it, "Bush rejected all the suggestions of his European allies to soften the economic transition in the Soviet Union. The neoliberal Washington Consensus had to be accepted unconditionally."[73] It didn't help that two of Bush's top advisers, Brent Scowcroft and Robert Gates, the latter ostensibly an expert on the USSR, seemed incapable of appreciating the profound nature of the changes Gorbachev had brought to Soviet domestic and foreign policy.[74] Gates declared in October 1988, for example, that "the dictatorship of the Communist party remains untouched and untouchable." Meanwhile, Gorbachev was actively seeking to undermine it – a goal he achieved sixteen months later, when the Party itself voted to give up its monopoly on power.[75]

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70 V. I. Vorotnikov, *A bylo tak … Iz dnevnika chlena Politbiuro TsK KPSS* (Moscow: Sovet veteranov knigoizdaniia Si-Mar, 1995), 319–320; Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post–Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

71 Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 790.

72 Katrina vanden Heuvel and Stephen F. Cohen, "Gorbachev on 1989," *The Nation*, 28 October 2009.

73 Suny, "Mikhail Gorbachev's Project."

74 Robert Gates, "Gorbachev's Gameplan: The Long View," memorandum, 24 November 1987, in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010).

75 Quoted in Bill Bradley, "Judging Robert Gates: Dialogue – Farewell to the Old CIA; Now, Questions About Iraq," *New York Times*, 16 September 1991; Michael Dobbs, "Soviet Party Votes to Drop Monopoly on Power," *Washington Post*, 8 February 1990.

To the extent the US did eventually provide economic aid to post-Soviet Russia, it did so without regard for the fact that the economic reforms it required as a condition were deeply unpopular. Faced with a recalcitrant parliament unwilling to pass the laws necessary to implement the "shock therapy" advocated by his US advisers, or to countenance his rule by presidential decree, Yeltsin sought to resolve the crisis by dissolving the parliament in violation of the constitution. Confronted with violent street protests organized by his opponents, Yeltsin ordered tanks to shell the building, known as the White House. President Bill Clinton offered Yeltsin his full support and US Secretary of State Warren Christopher lauded Yeltsin's "superb handling" of the situation. Yeltsin then pushed through a new constitution, establishing the strong executive powers that Putin, Yeltsin's designated successor, would later use to implement his police state.[76] In the contest of "market Bolshevism" against democracy, as two critics called it, the Clinton administration supported the former.[77] Many ordinary Russians continued, however, to support democracy through the "growing pains" of the economic reforms – a wave of inflation and a problematic campaign of privatization of state property. Yet when their elected representatives opposed the rigid prescriptions of the Washington Consensus, Yeltsin sided with Washington and undermined people's faith in democracy.[78]

A summary assessment by two United Nations economists described the consequences: "In Russia, output fell by 45% during 1989–1998, as death rates increased from 1% in the 1980s to over 1.5% in 1994, equivalent to over 700,000 additional deaths annually." It was a disaster without precedent for a modern economy: "The huge collapse in output, living standards and life expectancy in the former Soviet Union during the 1990s without war, epidemic or natural disaster was unprecedented. During the Great Depression, GDP in western countries fell by some 30% on average in 1929–1933, but then recovered to pre-recession levels by the end of the 1930s."[79]

76 "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, US Praised 'Superb Handling,'" National Security Archive, 4 October 2018, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling.

77 Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2001). For subsequent developments in Russia's regions, see Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *Political Consequences of Crony Capitalism inside Russia* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

78 Reddaway and Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*. I thank Svetlana Savranskaya for helping to clarify this point.

79 Vladimir Popov and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, "What Explains the Post-Soviet Russian Economic Collapse?," 10 June 2017, https://thewire.in/economy/post-soviet-russian-economic-collapse.

Many factors contributed to the failure of Gorbachev's efforts at economic reforms: the dramatic drop in oil prices, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, the Armenian earthquake of 1988, and fact that the United States continued to deny most-favored-nation trading status until 2012, when the Jackson-Vanik Amendment was replaced by the Magnitsky Act, with its own restrictions.[80] Moreover, the institutional legacy of the Soviet Union played a key role: "excessive militarisation and over-industrialisation, 'perverted' trade flows among the former Soviet republics and with Eastern European countries, excessively large industrial enterprises and agricultural farm sizes – as well as efforts to correct them."[81]

Vladimir Putin's regime has emphasized the chaos, crime, and corruption that the post-Soviet economic crisis engendered, and it has downplayed – and reversed – many of the freedoms that the era made possible.[82] The individuals involved bear the main responsibility for the corrupt nature of the privatization of the economy – including the "loans for shares" program that led to asset-stripping of Soviet-era industrial facilities and concentration of ownership of the lucrative energy sector – that soured the Russian public on capitalism. The United States also played a role here. Through the US Agency for International Development, for example, it probably did more to discredit market reforms than establish a foundation to sustain them: "While running the Harvard Institute for International Development's advisory program in Russia in the early 1990s, Harvard economics professor [Andrei] Shleifer and attorney [Jonathan] Hay had conspired to defraud the US government, engaged in self-dealing and violated conflict-of-interest regulations," according to a 2004 ruling by a US district court in Boston. Harvard agreed to pay $26.5 million on their behalf to settle the lawsuit.[83]

US inattentiveness to Russia's backsliding on democracy held implications for international affairs as well. Yeltsin had depended on the armed forces to defeat the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev and to support his own in October 1993. It would not be unreasonable to assume that he considered himself somewhat beholden to the high command and allowed them a

80 Kotkin *Armageddon Averted*, points out that revenue from high oil prices in the 1970s allowed the Brezhnev leadership to forestall economic reforms, whereas low ones in the 1980s helped undermine the reforms that Gorbachev attempted; on the effect of oil price declines on foreign trade balances, see Nikolai Ryzhkov, *Perestroika: Istoriia predatel'stv* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), 228–230.

81 Popov and Sundaram, "What Explains the Post-Soviet Russian Economic Collapse?"

82 Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Russia's struggle over the meaning of the 1990s and the keys to Kremlin power," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 592 (May 2019).

83 David McClintick, "How Harvard Lost Russia," *Institutional Investor* (January 2006). For other examples see, Janine Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe, 1989–1998* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

certain deference.[84] In effect he reversed many of Gorbachev's military initiatives and abandoned his predecessor's commitment (not always successful) to nonviolence.[85]

In the early 1990s Yeltsin pushed to revise the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe to allow deployment of armed forces beyond the regional limits, particularly in the North Caucasus military district. The objective was apparently for military units stationed there to put pressure on the breakaway republic of Chechnya and eventually to carry out a highly destructive invasion without violating the treaty. Eager to gain Yeltsin's acquiescence to NATO expansion, the Clinton administration approved a revision of the treaty and generally averted its eyes to the Russian massacres of Chechen civilians.[86] Meanwhile the United States continued to support international financial aid to Russia, contingent only on compliance with economic policies, not standards of democracy or human rights. Six months into the war, for example, Moscow received a $6.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, followed by a further $10.2 billion in early 1996. The two loans combined exceed most estimates of the total cost of fighting, leading some observers to argue that the West actually paid for Russia's war.[87] Russia's aggressive actions against Chechnya had played a role in stimulating interest in joining NATO on the part of the former Warsaw Pact states, even ones governed by erstwhile dissidents who had heretofore supported Gorbachev's vision of a demilitarized Europe.[88] NATO expansion, in turn, undercut the position of the pro-democracy forces in Russia, already worried about their ability to preserve the democratic achievements of *perestroika*

84 Peter Rutland, "The Domestic Foundations of Russian Foreign Policy," *Journal of Peace and War Studies*, 4th ed. (October 2022), 16–31, at 19.

85 Svetlana Savranskaya, "The Logic of 1989: The Soviet Peaceful Withdrawal from Eastern Europe," in Savranskaya, et al., eds., *Masterpieces of History*. See also Mark Kramer's contribution to this volume for Gorbachev's inconsistent use of force against nationalist movements within the USSR.

86 For a detailed chronology of negotiations up to 1997, see Federation of Americans Scientists, CFE Chronology: Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty; for Clinton's position on Chechnya, see "Chechnya, Yeltsin, and Clinton: The Massacre at Samashki in April 1995 and the US Response to Russia's War in Chechnya," National Security Archive Briefing Book #702, ed. by Svetlana Savranskaya and Matthew Evangelista, 15 April 2020.

87 Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 147–148.

88 Dean E. Murphy, "Chechnya Summons Uneasy Memories in Former East Bloc: Ex-Soviet satellites look warily on the Russian offensive. Their fears create a new urgency for membership in NATO," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 January 1995.

and defend the benign intentions of the United States in the face of xenophobic assertions of Russian nationalist sentiment.[89]

Outside of Russia, Yeltsin's armed forces intervened in several states of the former USSR, from Moldova to Tajikistan, setting precedents for Putin's wars against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine from 2014 to the invasion of February 2022.[90] US-led wars, such as the 78-day bombing campaign that NATO carried out against Serbia in 1999, in defense of Kosovar Albanian separatists, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq provided Putin with ample opportunities to engage in "whataboutism." Like Russia's military interventions, those wars were carried out without authorization of the United Nations Security Council, and they violated international law.[91]

Ronald Suny has argued that "Gorbachev never fully appreciated that international politics really is a self-help game. He would have failed a freshman exam in realist international relations theory."[92] Indeed, Gorbachev was an idealist, even a utopian, rather than a realist. In his vision of a nuclear-free world and a demilitarized Europe he found common cause with the scientists of the Pugwash movement, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), the European disarmament activists, and, in his retirement, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, winner of Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 (Pugwash and IPPNW were previous winners).[93] But Nobel laureates are not the sort of people who run the world, any more than democratic socialists with a human face govern countries.

The United States helped undermine not only Gorbachev's vision of a nuclear-free world, but even the more modest achievements in nuclear arms control dating to the 1970s. In 2002, for example, the administration of George W. Bush withdrew from the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty, considered the cornerstone of strategic arms control. The United States then pursued a bipartisan policy to install ballistic-missile defense systems in new East

89 Matthew Evangelista, "Why Russia Opposes Expansion: NATO Stay Away from My Door, *The Nation*, 5 June 1995; Andrei Kozyrev, *Preobrazhenie* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994), 13–14; Andrei Grachev, *Kremlevskaia khronika* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1994), 409–410.

90 Matthew Evangelista, "Historical Legacies and the Politics of Intervention in the Former Soviet Union," in Michael E. Brown, ed., *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

91 Matthew Evangelista, "How the 'end of the Cold War' ended," in *Uses of 'the West': Security and the Politics of Order*, Gunther Hellman and Benjamin Herborth, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

92 Suny, "Mikhail Gorbachev's Project."

93 Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces*; "Ex-Soviet leader Gorbachev welcomes decision to award Nobel Peace Prize to ICAN," Russian News Agency TASS, 6 October 2017.

European member states of the NATO alliance – an effort that Russia decried and then used as an excuse to neglect its obligations to remaining arms restrictions. Complaining of Russian violations, the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019, and Russia followed suit. The treaty had led to the elimination of 2,692 US and Soviet nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, along with unprecedented measures of onsite inspection.[94] The Treaty was the first to entail genuine disarmament of nuclear weapons, and its demise signaled the end of the Gorbachev Moment in this domain – at least from the standpoint of the nuclear-armed states.

The rest of the world still held to Gorbachev's vision. In 2017, 122 countries voted to endorse a treaty declaring nuclear weapons illegal. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons entered into force in January 2021. Yet the nuclear-armed states refused to join and the nuclear-armed members of NATO went one step further: In a joint press statement, the United States, United Kingdom and France vowed never "to sign, ratify or ever become party to" the nuclear ban treaty. The overwhelming majority of the world's countries had just decided that their security would be better served by the abolition of nuclear weapons than their possession. What reasons did the nuclear powers offer to oppose that decision? "This initiative clearly disregards the realities of the international security environment," they intoned. "Accession to the ban treaty is incompatible with the policy of nuclear deterrence, which has been essential to keeping the peace in Europe and North Asia for over 70 years."[95]

While in office Gorbachev had engaged in lively polemics with Margaret Thatcher on precisely this point. In a meeting in Moscow in 1987, for example, the British prime minister insisted that Gorbachev's efforts to achieve nuclear abolition were misguided: "We do not believe that it is possible to ensure peace for any considerable amount of time without nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are the most powerful and most terrible guarantee of peace that was invented in the XX century. There is no other guarantee."[96]

94 Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Deploys Missile, Violating Treaty and Challenging Trump," *New York Times*, 14 February 2017; Pavel Podvig, "Nuclear Weapons in Europe after the INF Treaty," Deep Cuts Issue Brief #10, June 2020; Shannon Bugos, "US Completes INF Treaty Withdrawal," *Arms Control Today* (September 2019).

95 https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/07/561122-un-conference-adopts-treaty-banning-nuclear-weapons.

96 Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher, 30 March 1987, Moscow, in Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, eds., *The Thatcher-Gorbachev Conversations*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 422, 12 April 2013, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB422/docs/Doc%201%201987-03-30%20Gorbachev-Thatcher%20memcon.pdf. In subsequent discussions over the next few years

Although Ronald Reagan shared Gorbachev's desire to abolish nuclear weapons, his successors did not. Bush and James Baker, his secretary of state, were wary of even Gorbachev's initiatives to reduce Soviet nuclear weapons unilaterally. At a meeting in Moscow in May 1989, "Gorbachev's idea of reducing short-range nuclear forces in Europe 'blindsided' Baker because it would encourage West German opposition to planned deployment of new American Lance missiles."[97] Despite substantial cuts negotiated in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties, none of Reagan's successors sought to go beyond arms control to genuine nuclear abolition, insisting, for example, on continued deployment of hundreds of so-called tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.[98] Barack Obama, who advocated a world without nuclear weapons in a speech in Prague in 2009, left office after approving a nuclear "modernization" program estimated to cost $348 billion by 2024. It included funding for a modification and upgrade of the B61 nuclear bomb, intended for deployment with aircraft in five NATO countries.[99]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked the demise of the key elements of the Gorbachev reforms. With his political rivals either assassinated or jailed, and citizens banned from even calling the "special military operation" a war, let alone protesting it, Putin fully destroyed the democratic and press freedoms that Gorbachev championed. Without reintroducing Soviet central planning, he nevertheless consolidated major industries under state control, run by so-called oligarchs beholden to him. Dependence on state employment contributed to the docility of the Russian middle class.[100] Ostensibly reacting to the steady encroachment of the NATO alliance – a policy Gorbachev had opposed in favor of demilitarization and a pan-European security arrangement – Putin's actions served to strengthen the Atlantic alliance and orient it specifically against the threat from Russia. Even Finland and Sweden, two historically neutral states emphasizing territorial defense,

Thatcher continued to resist Gorbachev's arguments for nuclear disarmament. See Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), Apple Books ed., 636–640.

97 Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 753–754.

98 Podvig, "Nuclear Weapons in Europe."

99 William Burr, ed., "NATO's European Nuclear Deterrent: The B61 Bomb," Briefing Book #790, National Security Archive, Washington, DC, 28 March 2022.

100 Bryn Rosenfeld, *The Autocratic Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

clamored to join NATO. Putin also helped to destroy Gorbachev's dream of a nuclear-free world, by siding with the leaders of the other nuclear powers and against the majority of countries renouncing nuclear arms. Sounding much like Thatcher, Putin claimed, at a meeting of the Valdai Club in October 2016, that "nuclear weapons constitute a factor of deterrence and a factor guaranteeing peace and security throughout the whole world."[101] In fact, the existence of nuclear weapons failed to prevent the most destructive war in Europe since World War II. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, if nuclear deterrence was working at all, it worked on behalf of Putin. His reckless threats of nuclear use limited foreign states' willingness to come to the aid of Ukrainian defenders for fear of triggering a nuclear holocaust. Whatever role US policy contributed to ending the Gorbachev Moment of democratization, economic reform, and foreign-policy change, one can hardly imagine a more thorough repudiation of Gorbachev's legacy than Russia under Vladimir Putin.

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101 Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba "Valdai," 27 October 2016, quoted in A. G. Arbatov, "Ukrainskii krizis i strategicheskaia stabil'nost'," *Polis: Politicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 4 (2022): 10–31, at 27.