

Homo Sovieticus Gorbyus: Was Mikhail Gorbachev responsible for the collapse of the USSR?

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We tried.

Gorbachev's self-proposed epitaph¹

When the USSR emerged from the bloodbath of the Russian Civil War, one of the main goals of Soviet leaders was creating a *homo soveticus*: a new breed of human.² That New Soviet Man was to be a fierce believer in communist values, an educated and passionate humanist attentive to the plight of the disadvantaged, someone who has the interests of all humankind in mind.³ Some 68 years after the October Revolution, such a man was finally leading the USSR: Mikhail Gorbachev. His first order of business? Restructure the very system that created him.

“Was Mikhail Gorbachev responsible for the collapse of the USSR?” is one of the most important questions facing modern historians. Answering it would tell us a great deal about how geopolitics operates. Is history a “biography of great men,” or is it a tectonic process moved not by individuals but masses? In this essay, I run through Gorbachev's biography and analyse his approach to policy, drawing from interviews and scholarship. Through doing so, I make my argument that Gorbachev, rather than being the reason for the Soviet collapse, was a key hegemon in creating the liminal space necessary for anti-Soviet forces to prevail. This distinction is subtle but crucial. I also argue that Gorbachev's legacy should be considered through a lens of what he *didn't do* rather than what he *did*.

It is a great irony that the man who envisaged the seismic change of Soviet society was the only truly “Soviet” leader of the USSR. He was the first General Secretary to have been born in the Soviet Union and not in the Russian Empire, and therefore he knew no other world before coming to power and travelling outside of the USSR.⁴ His family survived repression, Nazi occupation, and a famine living in the Russian *glubinka*⁵. Young Mikhail was the pride of his village. He excelled in his studies and got involved in political activism, becoming a Communist Party member in his final year of school. He tirelessly worked on the land, helping his father with an industrial combine harvester. For his extraordinary work, Gorbachev's father was awarded the medal of labour — the highest Soviet civilian

¹ (“Meeting Gorbachev” n.d.)

² (Podchinenov and Snigireva 2020)

³ (Milaeva and Penza State University 2017)

⁴ (Gorbachev 2007)

⁵ Literally “depth”, meaning a faraway provincial countryside, usually rural

honour. He demanded to share it with his son, but it was not allowed. Young Mikhail went on to study law in the extremely prestigious Moscow State University on a full scholarship and excelled there as well.⁶ His degree is another one of the ironies that litter Soviet history: the only other lawyer at the helm of the USSR was Vladimir Lenin.⁷ This biography highlights one thing: Gorbachev was not only a product of the Soviet system; he was, in many ways, the pinnacle of it.

Gorbachev's desire for reforms should not be attributed to extant western factors, but the Soviet discourse. Many western scholars like to point at Gorbachev's overtures towards social democracy and "the West" in general.⁸ But instead of looking for western influences, be it Nordic Social Democracy or Reagan's "moral candor," I propose to look at how Gorbachev's Soviet background shaped him as a leader. Consider Gorbachev's behaviour prior to his visits abroad. As a young politician, he would travel for hundreds of kilometres to meet with peasants in remote villages and work on improving their lives. Sometimes there was no car or even a proper road, and he would travel on foot - something the Soviet *nomenklatura* seldom did.⁹ His candour and honesty singled him out amongst the Soviet elite. When he moved up the career ladder and travelled to the Eastern Bloc states, Gorbachev was largely uninterested in bribes that local officials showered on him.¹⁰ This behaviour demonstrates that Gorbachev was already a different breed of a Soviet politician before being introduced to the West.

The overused stereotype of thieving elitist bureaucrat is a staple in western scholarship for a good reason. The unequal distribution of resources and omnipresent corruption caused the *nomenklatura* to emerge: a class represented by well-to-do high-ranking Party members who couldn't care less for the plight of average Soviet citizens. The *nomenklatura* saw through the official propaganda, which is evident when we consider how many of them thrived in the capitalist world once the USSR collapsed.¹¹ Gorbachev, on the contrary, was a grade-A product of the *official* Soviet discourse — the discourse that, for all its faults, emphasised peace, prosperity, and hard work.¹² Gorbachev himself repeatedly said that he identified as a *Shestidesyatnik* — a child of the 60's.¹³ This is a very specific demographic often characterised by communist romanticism and unshakeable faith in a communist future coupled with the post-Thaw appreciation of political freedoms.¹⁴ It's important to note here that the *Shestidesyatniks* were not

⁶ (Gorbachev and Taubman 2019)

⁷ (Legvold and Robert Service 2000)

⁸ (Brown 2013)

⁹ ("Meeting Gorbachev" n.d.)

¹⁰ ("Meeting Gorbachev" n.d.; Gorbachev et al. 2003)

¹¹ (Robinson 1995)

¹² (Shenfield 1988)

¹³ (Pons 2009)

¹⁴ (Kochetkova 2009)

inherently Marxist-Leninist, as quite a lot of Soviet 60's discourse was largely detached from the orthodox Marxism-Leninism.¹⁵ When faced with the rotten Brezhnevist underbelly of Soviet existence, it is unsurprising that a man of Gorbachev's background sought to reform it. And it shows Gorbachev's belief in the Soviet project, that despite its apparent corruption, Gorbachev was initially willing to work within the Soviet system, keeping much of its institutions in place, as Archie Brown notes in *The Gorbachev Factor*.

This leads us to another question — was the implosion of the USSR inevitable? Some might argue that the *Perestroika* was just the icing on an already burning cake.¹⁶ But in every state there exist several ticking bombs that could lead to a full collapse given the right circumstances. If tomorrow the USA exploded into civil war, political scientists would be quick to point out several fatal flaws from, say, gun control to racism that made American collapse inevitable. Similarly with the USSR, it is easy, in hindsight, to point towards factors like stagnation, nationalism, and disillusionment in the Communist ideology and say that the “bewildered giant” of the 20th century was doomed. However, other communist states went through similar issues, yet, came out standing —namely China and North Korea. While these comparisons aren't precise, they help in understanding the fact that the Kremlin potentially could have avoided the USSR's collapse if it had made different decisions on key issues. After all, the USSR went through two of the bloodiest wars in human history, famines, and various other crises, and emerged firmly standing. By the time of its collapse, the USSR was certainly in a crisis, yet it wasn't necessarily an existential one. The economy was stagnating, but not in free fall.¹⁷ There was rising nationalism in the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, yet the overwhelming majority of the separatists lacked the means and dedication to wage a violent campaign against the Soviets.¹⁸ International pressure was mounting, yet the Warsaw Pact mostly maintained its military parity with NATO.¹⁹ There is a view popular in American political discourse that the Soviets were “outspent” by President Reagan, having to fold completely, unable to keep up with the mighty American military-industrial complex.²⁰ Pundits often add that Reagan was able to call the Soviets out on their moral failings —whatever this means. This assumption is not reflective of reality. The increase in the US military spending did not provoke a sharp rise in Soviet spending, and Soviets learned to shake off western rhetoric since the USSR's inception.²¹ The suggestion that the US dealt a final blow to the USSR is, undoubtedly, flattering to many in the Beltway, but appears

¹⁵ (Kochetkova 2009)

¹⁶ (Cohen 2004)

¹⁷ (Hanson 2003)

¹⁸ (Beissinger 2002)

¹⁹ (Brown 1997a)

²⁰ (Engerman 2008)

²¹ (Brown 1997b)

to be almost delusional. Some argue that the USSR was simply unreformable, but that, too, seems like a shaky claim. The Soviets pulled off drastic reforms, be it *detente* in the 1960s and 70s or the New Economic Policy of the 1920s. Communist China, a similarly rigid state, saw a wave of reforms after Mao's death.

How were Gorbachev's reforms different? I argue that the answer lies in deterioration of state power -- something that a more conventional Soviet leader would have avoided at all costs. Consider the Soviets' track record in dealing with national crises. Under Lenin, peasants would often rebel against grain seizures. How did Lenin respond? With violence. Hundreds of peasants were hanged on his direct orders.²² Under Stalin, attempts by ethno-nationalists to consolidate their power endangered the stability of the Stalinist unitary state. Stalin responded by brutally deporting entire peoples.²³ Under Khrushchev, workers in Novocherkassk rebelled over inadequate working conditions. The state responded by suppressing the revolt, arresting leaders, and sentencing them to death in a show trial.²⁴ Under Brezhnev, Soviet tanks in Czechoslovakia crushed the liberalisation that the Communists viewed as a threat to their regime.²⁵ The USSR emerged from its crises in large part because Soviet leaders were willing to use devastating amounts of violence to exercise their control over the state. Violence and repression was the normal Soviet response to instability. In fairness, that is the normal response of many regimes. Even the democratic USA has a long history of using intense violence against forces perceived as a threat to the state's cohesion. Under Franklin D. Roosevelt, for instance, America saw Japanese internment and brutal suppression of the Puerto Rico independence movement.²⁶ Decisive violence is the often popular tool in states' arsenals when it comes to their cohesion.

But Gorbachev always makes a point of the peaceful character of his leadership. He highlights that he avoided violence whenever he could, proclaiming "My hands are not bloodied!" in several interviews.²⁷ This checks out—it would be hard to find an instance of Gorbachev willingly using the Union's enormous capacity for violence. The January Events in Lithuania is one of the very few instances of Gorbachev's usage of force, but is still incomparable to the violence that old Soviet leaders were willing to deploy.²⁸ The lack of violence under Gorbachev is well-understood through the *homo soveticus* thesis. Contrary to western tropes, Soviet propaganda often emphasised the importance of peace and harmony. If

²² (White 2001)

²³ (Fitzpatrick 2000)

²⁴ (McCauley 1976)

²⁵ (Huberman and Sweezy 1968)

²⁶ ("War against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony" 2016)

²⁷ (Gorbachev et al. 2003)

²⁸ ("Ex-USSR President Gorbachev May Be Questioned over 1991 Crimes in Lithuania - Report" n.d.)

Gorbachev was guided by the “anything but war” mentality, then his avoidance of violence was second nature.²⁹ Another clue pointing to Gorbachev’s aversion to violence is in his foreign policy. Gorbachev, according to himself as well as many scholars, gave an utmost priority to the question of nuclear war.³⁰ When listing his achievements, Gorbachev always emphasised his steps toward nuclear disarmament. Gorbachev’s foreign policy gives the impression that he rose above his counterparts, who at the end were merely interested in strategic placements guided by realist doctrines. Gorbachev seems to have been guided by a supra-national doctrine, having the interests of humanity as a whole at heart. This would explain the emphasis on disarmament and ending the Cold War through military withdrawal, rapprochement and New Thinking.³¹

This relaxation of the state’s capacity for violence exacerbated another important factor that began coming into play even under Brezhnev: discourse deterioration. By the 1980’s there were fewer true believers in the USSR, and once the threat of violence dissipated, the Soviet discourse became overrun with ideas that challenged the integrity of the common Soviet narrative. That was an enormous blow to the party’s control over discourse: something that they excelled in earlier. The Soviet paradigm shifted from repression victims degrading themselves in their own private diaries, to many people becoming utterly disillusioned with the Kremlin’s *ancien régime*. Emerging Soviet rock musicians sang “we want change,” and this demand echoed across the country.³²

In light of Gorbachev’s reluctance to use violence, I assess Gorbachev’s importance through the lens of what he *didn’t* do rather than what he *did*. Gorbachev reformist initiatives were essentially hollow because he couldn’t be brought to use violence — despite many urging him — to maintain the USSR’s cohesion. This affinity for peace made him lose power within the party as well. As George Breslauer notes in *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders*, Gorbachev was gradually losing control closer to the collapse of the USSR.³³ By the end of Gorbachev’s reign, he was surrounded by opportunistic actors who would benefit more from a dissolved Union than a united one. Boris Yeltsin is the prime culprit here. It was first Yeltsin's exit from the Party, then his elevation of Russian law over Soviet law, and finally, the Belavezha accords that brought a decisive end to the USSR.³⁴ Here is where “*did vs didn’t*” comes up again. Gorbachev *didn’t* fire Yeltsin, even when the party hounded the unruly politician. Yeltsin was so unpopular that he even tried to stab himself to death with blunt scissors after a criticism session he

²⁹ “Anything but war” was a common refrain in soviet domestic propaganda

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³¹ (Hippel and von Hippel 2017)

³² (Sakwa 1991)

³³ (Breslauer 2002)

³⁴ (Robinson 1995)

received at a Party conference.³⁵ Gorbachev himself took full blame saying “Yeltsin was my mistake” in an interview.³⁶ Gorbachev was indecisive about firing Yeltsin, and this indecisiveness cost Gorbachev his country.

All in all, the Soviet Union was a deeply ironic and poetic phenomenon. Built through terror, it was also a genuinely inspirational project that was centred on the uplifting human spirit in many ways. Gorbachev is not to blame for the collapse but is partially to blame for creating the conditions for it. He believed in the Soviet project till the last day: it was the new elite that dismantled the USSR willingly. And it is incredibly poetic that a perfect Soviet became the stone in the Soviet machine that allowed for the new elites to grasp unto power, deposing Gorbachev and making him forever powerless within moments. Gorbachev might be considered a failure. However, as he said himself, he “tried”: a truly fitting epitaph.

³⁵ (Zlotnik 2003)

³⁶ (Zlotnik 2003)

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