Mikhail Gorbachev and the Politics of Perestroika

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Abstract

Archie Brown notes how the meaning of perestroika, a concept Gorbachev used well before he became Soviet leader, changed over time. The focus is on Gorbachev as a politician operating in the Soviet domestic context. Contrary to widespread retrospective belief, the USSR was not in crisis when Gorbachev became general secretary, and he was not forced to embark on fundamental change. He began with the aim of achieving economic reform and some political liberalization. However, from January 1987 onwards, he prioritized political reform. His thinking continued to evolve, and by 1988–89 he had embraced not only liberalization but a political pluralization that amounted to systemic change. Such, however, was the intertwining of party and state that abandonment of ‘democratic centralism’ and the Communist Party’s monopoly of power led to a crisis of Soviet statehood by 1990–91 and to perestroika’s major unintended consequence – the dissolution of the USSR. Through persuasion and negotiation, rather than violent coercion, Gorbachev had tried and failed to prevent this disintegration of the USSR. But, successfully overcoming entrenched conservative resistance, he had already used the authority of his office and his powers of persuasion to leave Russia a freer country than it had ever been.

Keywords

There was quite a widespread view before 1985 that fundamental change in the Soviet Communist system, especially such change emanating from within the ruling party, was impossible. It was a belief held by Soviet citizens themselves and by numerous Western commentators. After such change occurred, a fair number of the same observers declared that the Soviet system had been in such deep crisis by the time Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet leader that this dramatic change had been inevitable. The agency of Gorbachev, on that interpretation, was not of decisive consequence. It is one thing, however, to say that the ills of Soviet society were many and various and the country stood in need of radical change in 1985. It is another to say that the party leadership had no alternative to embracing far-reaching reform. The levers of power characteristic of a Communist system were fully intact in 1985, and there was no significant pressure on the leadership from below. The hierarchy of sanctions deployed to deal with any overt sign of opposition or dissidence meant that Soviet citizens continued to accommodate themselves to the existing political order, whether accepting it unquestioningly (as most did) or reluctantly. Active dissidents were few in number in the first half of the 1980s – even fewer, in fact, than in the 1960s and 1970s.

Economic growth had slowed to a trickle, but there was no crisis. A highly authoritarian regime can survive economic stringency and much more besides. It is in crisis when there is mass unrest, when anger has overridden apprehension, when people are no longer fearful about the consequences of protest, and especially when this leads to overt divisions within the political elite. Such phenomena were absent in 1985. Even under the colorless Konstantin Chernenko, Soviet society was quiescent. There were hopes of improvement when the youngest member of the Politburo emerged from the ageing oligarchy in the highest seat of power, yet expectations were modest until Gorbachev himself raised them. Neither at the elite nor the mass level was there any belief in the imminence of democratization (involving genuinely contested parliamentary elections), of Union republics openly seeking separate statehood, or of movement toward a market economy – or belief even that citizens would be granted a right openly and legally to articulate demands for any of these cardinal changes.

The accumulation of problems within an authoritarian system is no guarantee that reforms will be launched. Such regimes can be long-lasting (with ruling party regimes having greater longevity than personal dictatorships).1 Party organization, political repression, an ideology purporting to explain all social

and political phenomena, combined with control over processes of political socialization, can embed such regimes, the more so if they have been established indigenously in the first place, rather than by foreign intervention. In the latter case, longevity was much less assured. Thus, the Communist states of Eastern Europe were always potentially unstable because most of their regimes had been established by Soviet force of arms, followed by Soviet political diktat. A Kremlin leader had to be aware that any significant reform in Moscow was liable dangerously to raise expectations in Eastern Europe, stimulating opposition in those countries, as occurred with the initial post-Stalin “thaw” and, more dramatically, with Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech” to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956. Thus, while party leaders had more power than anyone else to promote reformist change, none chose to do so to anything like the extent that Gorbachev did. They could calculate that the risk of the system not surviving, if it were left to function much as before, was far less than the danger of their personal leadership not surviving if they tampered with that system and its supporting pillars. With the exception of the risk-taking Khrushchev, every Soviet leader prior to Gorbachev died in office, and the system lived on.

No-one can doubt that Gorbachev initiated what he called “perestroika” and presided over still more dramatic change than Khrushchev’s, culminating in the breakup of the Soviet state – the most dramatic of unintended consequences of his reforms. And it is a historical fact that, under Gorbachev’s leadership, the peoples of the central and east European states, after some four decades of Communist rule and ultimate Moscow tutelage, acquired independence. But Gorbachev’s precise role in these events, how and why he came to play it, the differences between his mindset and that of his Soviet predecessors, his immediate aims and ultimate goals at different times: all these issues are, in contrast, not only contested but often misunderstood, and the debate over them is likely to last long into the future.

“Perestroika” was, and remains, an ambiguous concept. It was chosen as a substitute for “reform” at a time when that word was still taboo, as it had been ever since the Prague Spring reforms of 1968 hugely alarmed the Soviet leadership. Perestroika not only meant different things to different people but different things to the same people at various times between 1985 and 1991.

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2 In this article, as in much of my previous writing on Gorbachev, I focus primarily on his reform and transformation of the Soviet political system and scarcely touch on his foreign policy. I have written about the latter in Archie Brown, The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
Those who enlarged the scope of the meanings they imputed to the concept included its progenitor and principal advocate, Gorbachev. Its very ambiguity, nevertheless, served a useful political purpose, especially in the early years of perestroika, for the Soviet leader and those in his entourage who were most committed to thoroughgoing change. They could claim, convincingly enough, overwhelming support for perestroika, since those who spoke in its favor could mean anything from a tinkering economic restructuring to major economic reform or to movement toward far greater political freedom. Thus, Communists, who were in favor of only very limited reform, found themselves, for a time at least, swept along by a perestroika movement that by 1988–89 was undermining the pillars of the Communist system.

Gorbachev himself used the term “perestroika” in numerous speeches and articles years before he reached the top of the Communist Party hierarchy, usually in the context of calling for a “psychological perestroika” in the workplace. In a major speech of December 1984, delivered with the confidence of a man in prime position to succeed the ailing Konstantin Chernenko, Gorbachev brought in a range of concepts that were to be developed and become more meaningful during the perestroika years, among them “democratization,” “the human factor,” “glasnost,” and “perestroika,” for a “perestroika of the forms and methods of economic management” had become “one of the most important questions on the agenda.”

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3 Thus, for example, in an article published in Ekonomicheskaia gazeta in early 1978, he wrote about the necessity of “a psychological perestroika of people – from machine operator to economic manager,” and in a speech in late 1982, he said that the “perfecting” (the standard, and fanciful, euphemism for reform in the discourse of the Brezhnev era) of management methods and style of work was linked “not only with organizational measures but with the necessity for a corresponding psychological perestroika.” See M. S. Gorbachev, Izbrannye rechi i stat’i, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), 159 and 315.

4 Gorbachev, as second Secretary of the Central Committee, was already chairing meetings of the Politburo when Chernenko was too ill to attend.

5 This was Gorbachev’s speech to an all-Union party conference on 10 December 1984 which, on its eve, Chernenko tried to persuade him to cancel or, at least, alter the speech after the gensek’s aides had advised him that the second secretary was veering from the path of ideological orthodoxy. Gorbachev flatly refused to change a word. See “Zhivoe tvorchestvo naroda” in Gorbachev, Izbrannye rechi i stat’i, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), 75–108, esp. 77, 95 and 98. As well as terms that were to have a continuing resonance, the speech included words that were to be much used only in the earliest perestroika years, notably uskorenie (acceleration), which Gorbachev linked with allowing initiative and taking “a creative approach to the resolution of gathering problems” (ibid., 79). On the attempt by Chernenko and his circle to prevent or expurgate Gorbachev’s December 1984 speech, see Aleksandr Iakovlev, Sumerki (Moscow: Materik, 2003), 369–370; Vadim Medvedev, V komande Gorbacheva (Moscow: Bylina, 1994), 22; and Mikhail Gorbachev, Zhizn’ i reformy, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 254.
moved from employing it mainly as psychological disposition to linking it with a change of economic structures and incentives. As party leader, his initial use of the concept indicated an aspiration to reform the existing Soviet system and improve the way its institutions functioned. It developed into something more fundamental – a desire to reconstruct the system from top to bottom. Such changes over time notwithstanding, perestroika serves also as a convenient overarching term for the period of less than seven years in which Gorbachev led the Soviet Union, and it is in that sense I use it here.

The general secretary of the Central Committee of a ruling Communist Party – and especially of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who, unlike his East European counterparts, had no external overseer – possessed vast authority within the system, extensive powers of appointment, and a greater possibility than anyone else to introduce ideological innovation. It was his bold and skillful use of that authority and those powers that enabled Gorbachev to generate a “revolution from above.” Aleksandr Iakovlev, an especially influential participant in the project, to whom Gorbachev accorded exceptionally speedy promotion to a Central Committee Secretaryship and full membership of the Politburo, was among those who characterized perestroika in those words. He noted that the idea of perestroika had been fermenting “long ago in the minds of intellectuals,” but it could not be realized in political life other than by people who “belonged to the highest echelon of the party hierarchy.”

Gorbachev made a similar point on numerous occasions. These included his last substantial article, in which he wrote that “radical changes in the USSR could only start from above, initiated by the Party’s leadership,” for after “several decades of total control and suppression of any initiative, our society was not ready for self-organization and could not produce leaders capable of assuming responsibility for reforms.” Moreover, if in the unreformed Soviet Union, any Politburo member, other than the general secretary, had tried to launch a major reform, he would certainly have been thwarted and, in all likelihood, ousted. And if anyone outside the ruling echelons had attempted an independent political initiative, he or she would have been treated as a dangerous dissident by the KGB. Gorbachev himself had learned how to operate within

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6 Aleksandr Iakovlev, *Predislovie, Obval, Posleslovie* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), 249. Boris Yeltsin – at a time when he still made the occasional positive remark about Gorbachev, along with criticism – wrote of the early years of perestroika, “A big step had been taken in the right direction, although, of course, it was a revolution from above” (Yeltsin, *Against the Grain*, translated by Michael Glenn, London: Jonathan Cape, 1999, p. 114).

7 Iakovlev, *Predislovie, Obval, Posleslovie*, 249.

the Soviet rules of the game as he rose through the party hierarchy first in his native Stavropol krai and, from 1978, in Moscow. He was still learning even after he became a full member of the Politburo (in addition to his Secretariatship of the Central Committee) in the last two years of Leonid Brezhnev’s life. Only when he became party leader did he have greater opportunities than those of any other political actor to ignore these strict conventions or to change them.

1 From Reform to Systemic Change

Gorbachev noted that during the initial period of his general secretaryship, the innovation “could only be aimed at improving the existing system” and had to be framed in that way. It was a framework that for most of 1985–86 he himself accepted, and not only for tactical reasons. Political reform was, however, placed firmly on the agenda in early 1987. At the end of his lengthy report to the January plenum of the Central Committee, Gorbachev announced that in the following year there would be an all-Union party conference to consider “the further democratization of the life of the party and of the society as a whole.” The discussion with his aides and advisers in the months leading up to that 1988 conference saw a radicalization of Gorbachev’s understanding of democratization. Most notably, he decided to move to multi-candidate elections for a legislature with real powers, very different from the old rubber-stamp Supreme Soviet. This move to strengthen the democratic component of his reforms was partly in response to a backlash from party officials against the direction he was taking. The “Nina Andreeva Affair,” as it came to be known,

9 In the early 1980s, Gorbachev phoned Yurii Andropov, with whom he had established excellent relations during Andropov’s vacations in Gorbachev’s Stavropol domain, to invite him and his wife for a meal with him and Raisa Gorbacheva at the dacha near Moscow they had recently been allocated that was close to Andropov’s. The younger man was surprised when Andropov told him he must decline the invitation because the instant such a visit was taking place, Leonid Il’ich (Brezhnev) would be informed about it. This, he said, was guidance he was offering Gorbachev for his own good. Speaking by telephone, Andropov did not need to be any more explicit on sensitivity about factionalism and fear of plotting in the highest echelons of the party. After that conversation, said Gorbachev, he and his wife invited only old friends to their dacha, never again any member of the Politburo or Secretary of the Central Committee. See Mikhail Gorbachev, Naedine s soboi (Moscow: Grin Strit, 2012), 263–264.

10 Ibid.

was not just a matter of an obscure Leningrad teacher publishing an article in the newspaper, *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, critical of perestroika,\(^\text{12}\) it was an attempt at counter-reformation, backed by large sections of the party apparatus and, as Gorbachev discovered, supported by at least half the members of the Politburo. Iakovlev called the article an “anti-perestroika manifesto.”\(^\text{13}\) There were to be times when Gorbachev, in order to appease his intra-party conservative critics and reduce the risk of overthrow and a restoration of the status quo ante, made tactical retreats. That was especially so in the winter of 1990–91. However, in 1988, when his authority in the country was still high, he did the opposite, facing down his conservative opponents.\(^\text{14}\)

Gorbachev hinted at the qualitative change that was to be announced at the party conference in a private meeting with regional party secretaries when he put to them the rhetorical question, “On what basis do 20 million [Communist Party members] rule 200 million?” He provided his own answer: “We conferred on ourselves the right to rule the people!”\(^\text{15}\) It was in 1988 that he concluded that reform of the existing political system was not enough. It needed to be comprehensively transformed. Speaking in 1996, Gorbachev said, “Until 1988 I had the same illusions as previous reformers. I believed that the system could be improved. In 1988 I realized we needed systemic reform. The system had to be replaced.”\(^\text{16}\) This was the year in which Gorbachev began to attempt a social-democratization of the Communist Party, as the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, Jack Matlock, was perceptive enough to note at the time. As he read the “theses,” published in May 1988, to be presented to the Nineteenth Conference of the *CPSU*, Matlock’s “excitement grew.” The use of the word


\(^{16}\) Gorbachev said this in answer to a questioner, following a speech he made in the Central Hall, London, on 29 October 1996. I was present and made a note of those words at the time.
“socialism” no longer seemed to connote Soviet-style “socialism.” The content of the document was already “closer to European social democracy.”

This was a process that became still more pronounced over the following three years. In conversation with his favorite foreign leader, Spanish prime minister Felipe González, in Madrid in October 1990, Gorbachev said that if by socialism was meant a “barracks-like, totalitarian regime” where the individual was turned into a “cog” in a machine, then that was the kind of “socialism” they were getting rid of. “For me,” said Gorbachev, “socialism means movement to freedom, the development of democracy, the creation of conditions for a better life for the people, and the raising of the humane individual.” With both the economy and polity in mind, Gorbachev said to González, “From a scientific and political standpoint, we in the Soviet Union have left one system and not yet arrived in another.”

We know today, what Gorbachev could not know in 1990, that neither the Soviet Union nor post-Soviet Russia ever did become a fully-fledged political democracy, still less a social democracy. Nor did the Soviet Union, even in its last two years, become a market economy, although by then Gorbachev had fully accepted in principle the need to move to market prices. In a speech on 25 July 1991, introducing the draft party program – for a CPSU that a little

18 The point is elaborated in Archie Brown, “Did Gorbachev as General Secretary Became a Social Democrat?,” Europe-Asia Studies 65, No. 2 (2013): 198–220.
21 Ibid., 253. Gorbachev made similar points in conversation with González in Moscow on 8 July 1991. The Soviet Union, he said, had departed from the one-party “administrative-command system,” with its total state property and absence of pluralism, and they were now “in a transitional stage to a different system, at which we have not yet arrived.” But they were “carrying out a revolution and reforms from above, moving to a humane, democratic society, based on social justice.” See “Iz besedy s predsedaitelem pravitel’stva Ispanii F. Gonsalesom (odin na odin), 8 iiulia 1991 goda,” in Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, Sobranie sochinenii. Vol. 26 (Moscow: Ves’ mir, 2015), 389–398, at 390 and 391.
22 Even before he became General Secretary, Gorbachev was in favor of introducing market elements into the Soviet economy. In his 10 December 1984 speech to an all-Union conference, he said that “commodity-money” relations were part and parcel of socialism (Gorbachev, “Zhivoe tvorchestvo Naroda,” in Izbrannye rechi i stati’, 81–82). “Commodity-money relations” was the established euphemism for market relations at a time when acknowledgement of the positive role which markets could play was still regarded as heretical. But Gorbachev, in the mid-1980s, was still some way off accepting that the market could be the main driver of the economy.
over a month later, in the aftermath of the attempted August coup, would cease to exist – Gorbachev noted the failures of what he called “the Stalinist totalitarian-bureaucratic system,” and went so far as to say that “socialism and the market are not only compatible but, in essence, inseparable,” adding that they were a means, not an end. Acceptance in principle and implementation in practice were, however, two different things. Gorbachev held back from taking the latter plunge. One reason was the strong opposition from party-state institutions and from successive heads of the Council of Ministers, Nikolai Ryzhkov, and Valentin Pavlov. An even larger consideration was that, in the short run, market prices were going to mean higher prices for basic foodstuffs and public utilities and, since Gorbachev’s popularity was by 1990–91 declining steeply, he could ill afford to stoke further discontent and give comfort to those within the party-state machine and the military-industrial complex who had become his political enemies. Reflecting on perestroika towards the end of his life, Gorbachev observed that “radical economic reforms and the transition to a market economy required a kind of revolution in the minds of both leaders and ordinary people,” but that it had been a “strategic misstep” not to introduce “structural transformation of the economy in 1987–88.” That (as he was surely right, in retrospect, to conclude) had been “politically and economically the right time” to undertake such measures.

Economic reform had initially been Gorbachev’s highest priority, but even after he replaced the conservative Nikolai Tikhonov with his conditional ally Nikolai Ryzhkov as Chairman of the Council of Ministers in September 1985, the kind of reforms that Ryzhkov and the industrial ministries, along with their Central Committee departmental overseers, were ready to countenance were essentially technocratic and, in important respects, counterproductive.

23 “Plenum Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS, 25–26 iulia 1991 goda. O proekte novoi Programmy KPSS. Doklad General’nogo sekretariia TsK KPSS,” in Gorbachev, Izbrannye rechi i stat’i, Vol. 27 (Moscow: Ves’ mir, 2017), 128–145, at 129 and 131. The way he clarified this point some years later (when he was engaged in a forlorn attempt to get a Social Democratic Party up and running in post-Soviet Russia) was to say that the market, however, should not dominate society as a whole: “We are for a market economy, but not for a market society,” M. S. Gorbachev and B. F. Slavin, Nekonchennaiia istoriia: tri tsveta vremenni. Besedy M. S. Gorbacheva s politologom B. F. Slavinym (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2nd enlarged edition, 2005), 122.
24 Contrary to much post-Soviet Russian and some Western commentary, it is far from true that Gorbachev was popular only in the West and not in the Soviet Union. It was as late as May–June 1990 that Boris Yeltsin drew ahead of him as the most popular politician both in Russia and the Soviet Union as a whole, according to the findings of the most professional survey researchers of that time in VTsIOM, under the leadership of Tatiana Zaslavskaya and Yuri Levada (Reitingi Borisa Yel’tsina i Mikhaila Gorbacheva po 10-bal’noi shkale, Moscow: VTsIOM, 1993).
Ryzhkov was in day-to-day charge of the economy, and until late 1989, Gorbachev retained quite a lot of confidence in him. Moreover, the big bureaucratic battalions and the military-industrial complex defended the command economy in which they had flourished. So, for all those reasons (in conjunction with the fact that Gorbachev’s agenda was already overfull), but especially because he had come to value deepening political change for its own sake, Gorbachev from early 1987 prioritized political over economic reform.

Moreover, political reform could be introduced piecemeal, whereas, with the economy, there was a contradiction between trying to get the existing “administrative-command system” to work better and moving to a system in which the market was the main driver of economic activity. At some point there had to be a radical break, and when this occurred early in post-Soviet Russia there were, certainly for a time at least, more losers than winners. But in the last two to three years of the Soviet Union’s existence, the economy, much more than the polity, was uneasily suspended between one system that no longer worked even to its previous potential and another into which the crucial leap to market prices had not yet been made, a situation that was very damaging to Gorbachev’s standing and of no help to him as he struggled to keep some kind of Union together.

2 From De-communization to Disintegration

Politically, the change already evident in the last three years of the Soviet Union’s existence was profound. Gorbachev had embraced political pluralism, manifested in competitive elections, freedom of speech and of publication, the emergence of independent groups, movements and embryonic political parties, and free intellectual inquiry. With ideational diversity having supplanted the monopolistic authority of Marxist-Leninist ideology, this was already no longer a Communist system.26 Gorbachev’s politics as the art of the possible became, however, a pursuit of the almost impossible, for the new freedoms enabled the pent-up grievances of 70 years, including ethno-national discontents, to rise to the surface of political life. The more democratic the evolution of perestroika became, with competitive elections for new legislatures at both all-Union and republican levels giving federal substance to federal forms, the more national-separatist movements combined with economic shortages to create a crisis of statehood by 1990–91 that had not existed in 1985.

26 The point is argued in Archie Brown, The Rise and Fall of Communism (London, Bodley Head; and New York, Ecco, 2009), 101–114 and 503–508.
By 1989, political reform had become systemic change. A conscious decision was taken by Gorbachev to relax, to the point of abandonment, the theory and practice of “democratic centralism,” as Communist Party members were permitted to espouse radically different policies and compete against one another in elections for the new legislature. An unintended consequence of this was that the elections provided an institutional pathway to positions of influence for candidates advocating greater national self-determination, those of the Baltic states, especially Lithuania, leading the way. By 1990–91, pleas from the most disaffected republics within the Soviet Union for greater devolution of power had given way to demands for outright independence. The radicalization of their demands owed much to the example from 1989 of the Communist countries of eastern and central Europe casting aside their Communist rulers and replacing their “limited sovereignty” by full independence, and Gorbachev’s calm acceptance of this ending of 40 and more years of Soviet hegemony.27 In the last two years of the USSR, change was being initiated from many different parts of the country and society, with Gorbachev responding to events he could no longer control. How he responded, however, still mattered immensely. While in the last months of 1990 and the early months of 1991, he made concessions to his conservative critics, he consistently refused to implement their demands for what they called “presidential rule,” amounting to martial law, to put a stop to the growing fissiparous tendencies.

The dismantling of the Soviet system was not an unintended consequence of Gorbachev’s perestroika, as is too often assumed. It had become, rather, a conscious goal for Gorbachev, as his conception of what needed to be changed became more far-reaching. Ideologically, he had embraced transformation of the political system by the summer of 1988, as he pushed through the Nineteenth Party Conference resolutions which, if implemented, would mean that the Soviet Union could never be the same again. Institutionally, the political system was transformed in 1989–1990,28 starting with the elections held in March 1989 for the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR.

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27 I have discussed “Transnational Influences in the Transition from Communism” in an article of that title in Post-Soviet Affairs 16, No. 2 (2000): 177–200, and in expanded form in Archie Brown, Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 213–237. There were others in the Soviet leadership who would have reacted very differently from Gorbachev, had they been in charge, as became evident from their later interviews and memoirs.

28 Prior to 1989–90, the highest institutions of state power, no matter what the Constitution said, had been the highest party organs – the Politburo, in particular. With the introduction of the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR in 1989 and the executive presidency in March 1990, power had moved from party to state institutions.
As scholars who studied Soviet specialist books and journals and who talked with members of the party intelligentsia in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and early 1980s were well aware, significant diversity of opinion within the CPSU existed prior to perestroika. But it was only in the perestroika era that the extent of the differences, within a party which had publicly concealed these behind its monolithic façade, came out into the open and made themselves known to the world at large. When the relaxation of discipline turned the party, as conservative Communists complained, into a debating society, it was revealed to contain Russian nationalists and a variety of other ethno-nationalisms, Leninists, Stalinists, social democrats and free market fundamentalists (not to mention many conformists and careerists), among other groupings and tendencies. The openness and depth of the divisions weakened the authority of the party in society and the power of its leader within the party. Gorbachev was an unusual leader in consciously seeking political change which would remove levers of power he previously possessed, even though, and paradoxically, it had been those traditional powers and authority of the general secretary that had enabled him to set in motion the process that was to leave him politically weaker.

Gorbachev missed an opportunity to regain political ascendency in March 1990 through choosing indirect election by the Congress of People’s Deputies for the newly created post of President of the USSR. Had he taken the risk of standing for election by the whole people, that could have been a dramatic way of strengthening democracy and restoring much of the political authority that had been seeping away from him. Party and state officials were overwhelmingly against direct election, for they would have had less influence over anyone directly elected by the whole people than by a legislature in which, alongside some radical deputies, there was a majority of sufficiently conformist or conservative Communists they could rely on. Direct election would not have been without risk for Gorbachev. His popularity was in decline

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and Yel'tsin’s was rising, but in March 1990 Gorbachev was still ahead, according to the most professional survey research. Furthermore, to become the first leader in Russian history to place his continuation in power entirely in the hands of the people would have been momentous. It would surely have enabled him to win back the support of some of those who had been turning to Yel’tsin in the (highly questionable) belief that the latter was the more thoroughgoing democrat. In retrospect, Gorbachev recognized that he should have made the choice of president a fully general election. He was confident he would have won and he believed that election by the people as a whole would have strengthened him in his attempts to prevent the disintegration of the Union.

A common way of misunderstanding Gorbachev is to compare his early speeches and writings as general secretary with what happened later and assume that he failed entirely in his endeavors. Certainly, he counted the breakup of the Soviet Union as a major failure (while regarding it as not primarily his), and most observers would assess perestroika as a failure economically. But the pluralization of the political system, Russia becoming a freer country than it had ever been, the ending of the Cold War, and the independence, as non-Communist states, of the countries of Eastern Europe without a shot being fired by a Soviet soldier were a result of Gorbachev’s conscious policy choices. Gorbachev had an unusually open mind for any leading politician, not to speak of a general secretary of a ruling Communist Party. Thus, it was not only the policies Gorbachev pursued that changed during his years in power but his ultimate goals. He is often criticized for not having a plan when he came to power, but if he had stuck to what he did plan at that time, it is likely that reform would have stopped short of political pluralism.

It was the continuing, rapid development of Gorbachev’s thinking about democracy that played a decisive role in turning reform into metamorphosis. Without the transformative political change Gorbachev embraced and pushed through in the face of resistance from hitherto powerful institutional interests, there is little reason to suppose that Communist rule would have ceased in a country where it had prevailed for 70 years, that the Soviet Union would have disintegrated, or that the countries of East-Central Europe would have made a peaceful transition to democracy. When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, it was assumed both by leaders and peoples in Communist Europe, as well as by

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30 Reitingi Borisa Yeltsina i Mikhaila Gorbacheva po 10 bal’noi shkale (Moscow: VTsIOM, 1993).
31 Mikhail Gorbachev, Poniat’ perestroiku ... pochemu eto vazhno seichas (Moscow: Al’pina, 2006), 374.
Western governments, that continued Soviet hegemony over those countries, which successive Kremlin leaderships regarded as their rightful gains from the Second World War, was non-negotiable.

It is necessary to make a clear distinction between the Soviet system, which Gorbachev came to believe required transformative change, and the Soviet state – or, at any rate, a Union state, not necessarily “Soviet” – which he devoted a vast amount of time and energy seeking to preserve. Yet, to the extent the Soviet state was democratized – and in the latter stages of negotiation about its putative future, even its name was to be changed – it is barely conceivable that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in particular, would have been content to remain its members. There is still, however, ample scope for argument about how many other republics would have signed up to a voluntary, loosely federal successor to the USSR had not Boris Yeltsin demanded Russian independence from a Union in which the Russian republic occupied three-quarters of the territory and Russians constituted half the population. This was a policy explicable only in the context of Yeltsin’s ambition to supplant Gorbachev in the Kremlin, since it would be difficult to argue it was in Russia’s national interest. Gorbachev himself, reflecting on perestroika some 20 years after its launch, acknowledged, however, that because “the USSR was a ‘party state,’” with party and state institutions interwoven, weakening the party automatically weakened the state.32

Nationalism had long been a potential threat to Soviet statehood, and the federal administrative structures, which had been given new life by Gorbachev’s reforms, provided institutional resources that could be used by those seeking independent statehood. But with a leader less willing to challenge the norms of the Soviet system than was Gorbachev, expectations of much greater national autonomy would not have been aroused in the first place.33

32 Gorbachev, Poniat’ perestroiku, 373.
33 It was not difficult to identify nationalism as a potentially disintegrative force in the Soviet Union, especially if their leaders were to abandon their traditional instruments of control. What was less easy to foresee was how far a leader such as Gorbachev would be prepared to go in doing just that. In a paper I wrote for a British government seminar in which I participated, chaired by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and held on 8 September 1983, I wrote: “All Soviet leaders seek to preserve those features of the political system (including the ‘leading role’ of the party, ‘democratic centralism’ within the party, censorship, and KGB surveillance) which they regard as bulwarks against political pluralism (for political pluralism they see as but a short step to disintegration and anarchy, a view which has much more plausibility in the vast and multi-national Soviet state than it had in 1968 in Czechoslovakia)” (italics added). All the papers written for that seminar, complete with the Prime Minister’s underlinings when she read them in advance of the meeting, were declassified in 2013 and are available online via https://www
Gorbachev’s increasingly fundamental changes provided the preconditions for breakup. That this, however, led to all 15 union republics becoming separate states, rather than a smaller Union, compromising a majority of the existing republics – including crucially Russia and, probably, Ukraine – owed much to the agency of Yeltsin. More generally, as Mark Beissinger put it, “The Soviet Union was certainly vulnerable to being overwhelmed by a tide of nationalism, just as structural preconditions have made and continue to make tides of nationalism possible in other contexts as well. But this did not necessitate that events unfold in the way they did.”

By the end of 1989 Gorbachev had succeeded in implementing policies that were inimical to the most powerful institutional interests within the country – first and foremost the party apparatus, followed by the military-industrial complex, and government ministers. There was a realistic chance, which

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34 It was only in the course of 1991 that opinion in Ukraine moved from approving much greater autonomy within a radically reformed Union to overwhelming support for separate statehood. In the March 1991 referendum Gorbachev introduced, asking citizens if they considered it necessary to preserve the USSR “as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedoms of people of all nationalities will be fully guaranteed,” Ukraine was not one of the six Soviet republics that refused to conduct the referendum. As that refusal by, for example, the Baltic republics indicates, there was no coercion, though the phrasing of the question was vague and appeared to encourage an answer in the affirmative. In Ukraine 70 percent voted in in favor of membership of such a ‘renewed federation.” In sharp contrast, in the December 1991 Ukrainian referendum on independence, over 90 percent voted to become a separate state. Much had happened in between, including the shock of the attempted hard-line coup in August, which, if it had succeeded, would have deprived Ukraine and other republics of the growing autonomy they had already attained. But as Mark Beissinger notes, in his important study of the mobilization of national identity in the USSR, as late as the early months of 1991, public opinion in Ukraine “had not yet fully consolidated around independence” and the linkage between national identity and separate statehood in Ukraine was “influenced by the events of the moment and the example of others”. See Mark R. Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 197–198.

35 Ibid., 456. Gorbachev and some of his closest associates continued to believe that a Union (as distinct from the USSR) could have been preserved, even with – indeed, as a result of – his radical reforms. See A. B. Veber, V. T. Loginov, G. S. Ostroumov and A. S. Cherniaev (eds), Soiuz mozhno bylo sokhranit’ (Moscow: Aprel’-85, 1995).

36 As indicated, in the third of these categories, by the overwhelming tacit or overt support of ministers for the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev and perestroika, in spite of the fact that, in some respects, they had gained more autonomy as a result of Gorbachev’s
Gorbachev had to bear in mind, of them joining forces to remove him, as they eventually tried to do in August 1991. Short-lived through their attempted coup turned out to be, it accelerated the breakup of the Soviet Union and, accordingly, of Gorbachev’s presidency. By 1990–91, nationalist movements were growing even where they had been dormant before – growing fast in the European republics, less so in Central Asia. Worker discontent was also growing, and manifested in miners’ strikes. Furthermore, a large proportion of the intelligentsia was transferring its support from Gorbachev to Yeltsin.

From April 1991 Gorbachev abandoned his attempt to appease his conservative opponents, a tactical retreat which had lost him the support of many natural allies but which may have averted an attempt to restore the old order at what would have been a more propitious time for conservative Communists than August 1991. By then Yeltsin had acquired the democratic legitimacy that came with his convincing victory in the June election for the presidency of the Russian republic, making hollow the putschists’ claim to be speaking in the name of “the people.” Of the many problems mounting for Gorbachev, none seemed more serious in the spring of 1991 than the fissiparous tendencies, as national-separatism gained ground. Especially dangerous for him was Yel’tsin’s pitting Russian interests against the Union, thereby having some appeal to Russian nationalists37 as well as to liberals, who appreciated his backing the marketizing zeal of young economic reformers, and radical democrats.38

In October 1988 Gorbachev abolished most of the departments of the Central Committee which had acted as overseers of the industrial ministries. Yet, as Stephen Whitefield notes in his valuable book on this understudied segment of the Soviet political system, only one industrial minister, Salambek Khadzhiev (a Chechen), publicly opposed the coup: Whitefield, *Industrial Power and the Soviet State* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 253.

37 As one of their number, Aleksandr Baigushev, acknowledged regretfully (saying that they had also erroneously welcomed the coming to power of Gorbachev in 1985). See Baigushev, *Russkaia partia vnutri KPSS* (Moscow: Algoritm-Kniga, 2005), 401.

38 Yel’tsin’s principal biographer, Timothy Colton, nevertheless confirms that when Yel’tsin endorsed the massive ‘Five Hundred Days’ program, produced in the late summer of 1990 by a team of economists jointly approved by Gorbachev and him, it was without reading as much as a page of it. The plan was for an unrealistically fast transition to a fully-fledged market economy. It became one of the dividing lines between Gorbachev and Yel’tsin, with the latter, who had little hope of support from within the CPSU structures, becoming at that stage of his career a highly successful practitioner of populist politics. Gorbachev (who had read the entire tome twice) was initially supportive of the program, but then retreated in the face of intense conservative pressures. Yel’tsin, notes Colton, “homed in on the political facets – the zippy title and the taut timetable”: Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 219–220. Yevgenii Yasin similarly noted that it was the “daring polemical slogan” that Yel’tsin liked, and that he saw “new political opportunities in Gorbachev’s being guilty for the failure of their joint program!” See Yasin, “The Parade
Gorbachev sought to reach agreement through negotiation and dialogue on a new Union Treaty which would create a voluntary Union, with many powers devolved to the republics but would, nevertheless, retain substantial revenue-raising powers and control of foreign and defence policy in the hands of the federal government and parliament. But each successive draft of the proposed Union Treaty devolved more power to the republics and weakened further the center.\textsuperscript{39} Whether, with a leader of the Russian republic other than Yel'tsin, a Union containing a majority of the fifteen Union republics might have been preserved, or created, is a ‘what if?’ question that can never be satisfactorily answered. In political reality, Gorbachev’s concessions to those with the physical means to remove him from office and restore highly authoritarian rule, while competing for support – latterly, especially with Yel’tsin – from a population with raised expectations for material improvements as well as with nationalist aspirations, turned out to be a bridge too far, even for this consummate bridge-builder.

3 The Politician

If the disintegration of the Soviet Union is viewed as an unmitigated disaster (which is the way many Russians came to view it) that dwarfs all else that happened on Gorbachev’s watch, then his political career will be judged a failure. What is more surprising is Western commentators reaching the same judgement, as some did when Gorbachev died on 30 August 2022, on the basis of that same breakup, even when it was an outcome they approved. Perestroika, however, should not be evaluated exclusively, or even mainly, by its ending. In this final section, I look at Gorbachev’s attributes, political style, and preferences, and at how, during his time in office, he was able to play a decisive role in making his country freer and more democratic than it had ever been.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{40} For my much fuller discussion of Gorbachev’s achievements during his years in power, see Brown, \textit{The Gorbachev Factor}, and Brown, \textit{Seven Years that Changed the World}, esp. 277–330.
That the push for transformative change came from the top of the political hierarchy is especially clear when the focus is on the crucial years, 1987–89. Gorbachev was still in 1985–86 consolidating his power through important personnel changes and considering his options. The new appointments were especially striking in the international policy sphere. He replaced the entire top Soviet foreign policy-making team within a year of his coming to power.41

The Soviet political system was highly institutionalized, but for the General Secretary these institutions served not only as constraints on his freedom of action but as resources and opportunities. Members of the Politburo he led who became, from conservative Communist positions, his critics, noted his political virtuosity, and especially his adroitness in intra-party politics. For Nikolai Ryzhkov, Gorbachev was “a leader of a parliamentary type,” though “God alone knows,” he added, “how he was so formed in the party-bureaucratic system.”42 Vitalii Vorotnikov, who became a full member of the Politburo under Andropov and who remained a member until 1990, was increasingly dissatisfied with Gorbachev, but said his own doubts about a policy were often overcome by Gorbachev’s persuasion.43 Vorotnikov, whose background was that of a regional party secretary and then senior economic administrator, acknowledged Gorbachev’s political skills, describing him as “a magnificent master of apparat affairs” and noting his sociability and cordiality, his ability to organize collective work, and his intuitive feeling for a situation and talent for using it.44

As many of the Western leaders with whom Gorbachev came into contact noted, this was a Soviet leader whose attributes could have brought him to the top in their own systems, even though Gorbachev had never worked under conditions of political pluralism until he paved the way for them in his own country. Within the Soviet Union, Gorbachev, as politicians do, emphasized different points for different interlocutors and each could go away thinking that he agreed with them more than he did. Preferring persuasion to fiat, Gorbachev had also a prudential reason during his first five years as Soviet leader for carrying the Politburo with him rather than simply making a decision and insisting on its acceptance. Well aware that Khrushchev’s high-handedness and

41 Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 212–223.
42 Nikolai Ryzhkov, Perestroika: Istoriia predatel’stv (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), 365.
43 Vitalii Vorotnikov, A bylo et tak ... Iz dnevnika chlena Politbiuro TsK KPSS (Moscow: Sovet veteranov knigoizdaniia, 1995), 264.
44 Ibid., 259. Vorotnikov, however, disagreed still more radically than did Ryzhkov with the direction in which Gorbachev was taking his country. For Vorotnikov, Gorbachev’s appeal to values that united all humanity, “obshchechelovecheskie tsennosti,” that were at the core of his new thinking, “intensified the ideological disorientation of the society” (Ibid., 457).
personalistic style of rule had been his ultimate undoing, Gorbachev made sure that the Politburo had an opportunity to deliberate on policies before a decision was taken. They were then obliged to take collective responsibility for it, even if at the time they had harboured doubts and, in retrospect were to criticize it strongly as, for example, did not only Ryzhkov and Vorotnikov but, among others, Andrei Gromyko, Viktor Grishin, Yegor Ligachev, and Heidar Aliev.

By temperamen
t, Gorbachev was no more a revolutionary than he was a conservative. On the contrary, he was a reformer by disposition and conviction. Although he long retained an idealized view of Lenin, he departed fundamentally from Leninism.\(^{45}\) Not even remotely tempted by Trotskyist “permanent revolution,” he exemplified, on the contrary, a proclivity to continuous evolu
tion. “Neo-bolshevism,” in his last years in power and thereaf
ter, became for him a term of opprobrium.\(^{46}\) Throughout the post-Stalin era, his views were evolving, influenced by his direct experience of the Soviet system, by his foreign travel, by his reading, and by his discussions with reform-minded social scientists and mezhdunarodniki (international affairs specialists). Although there was truth in the oft-repeated accusation that Gorbachev talked at excessive length, he was also keen to learn, and he was a good listener who could quickly assimilate ideas and information.\(^{47}\) When Georgii Shakhnazarov was first invited to join Gorbachev’s team of aides, he hesitated because he already held what at the time was an important executive position in the Soviet system as First Deputy Head of the “Socialist Countrie
s” department of the Central Committe
e, whereas “aide” (pomoshchnik) implied for him “a lifeless


\(^{46}\) Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 21. By 1992 he was publicly critical of the original Bolsheviks, with their absolutism and unwillingness to make common cause with other opponents of autocracy.

\(^{47}\) Well before he became General Secretary, observed Andrei Grachev, Gorbachev began “regularly to invite academics to his office in the Central Committee (Georgi Arbator, Evgeny Primakov, Evgeny Velikhow, Roald Sagdeev, Tatyana Zaslavskaya, Abel Aganbegyan) to brief him on matters related to foreign policy, the world economy or the Soviet strategic situation, trying to build a kind of informal intellectual ‘think tank’, which in the hypothet
Those who were already members of this group of aides, among them Anatolii Cherniaeov, unanimously assured Shakhnazarov that “it won’t be boring” and, furthermore, that the atmosphere within the group was “entirely democratic.” Members of that group, especially Cherniaeov, had great influence on Gorbachev’s thinking and on the content of his speeches and writings, though Gorbachev, as General Secretary (and also, from March 1990, President) always had the last word. It was often a more cautious word because he was balancing what seemed intellectually and ethically right with what he thought he could get away with in a system that still contained conservative big battalions in a literal as well as metaphorical sense.

48 Georgii Shakhnazarov, S vozhdiami i bez nikh (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), 285.

49 Ibid.

50 Shakhnazarov (ibid. 284–285) noted that Gorbachev in power had what could be called three teams – first, those who constituted the main government of the country, which for most of his time in power meant the Politburo; second, those with whom he tried to influence opinion in the country, partly through relations with, and personnel changes in, the mass media; and third, a group of people of like mind to him who formed a source of ideas and information. They, he suggests, were “Gorbachev’s team” in the fullest sense (ibid.). If Cherniaeov was the most influential member of that team, Shakhnazarov was to become a close second. For an interesting and substantial volume on Cherniaev, which supplements his own important books and indispensable diaries, see Dmitrii Belanovskii (ed.), “My nazyvali ego Grafom”: Pamiati Anatoliia Sergeevicha Cherniaeva (Moscow: Liubimaia Rossia, 2019). Cherniaev made compromises in his daily work, in the years before he became Gorbachev’s principal foreign policy aide, as Deputy Head of the International Department of the Central Committee, but wrote in his diary in the evenings what he really thought. His fundamental integrity and decency were greatly respected within Gorbachev’s team (as well as by foreign ambassadors, especially the US’s Jack Matlock and the UK’s Rodric Braithwaite). When, on the night of 13–14 January 1991, fourteen people were killed and many more wounded in Vilnius by Soviet troops under the command of generals who eight months later were active participants in the “August coup,” Gorbachev deplored the killings, but hesitated, during that period of tactical retreat, publicly to put the blame squarely on the siloviki. Cherniaeov, acutely dissatisfied with that muted response, came close to leaving his post, and even wrote Gorbachev a letter of resignation, but it was never sent. Initially, this was because of the delaying tactics of Cherniaeov’s secretary and close friend, Tamara Aleksandrova, who locked it in a safe after typing it. She then stayed away from the office for several days, giving Cherniaeov time to decide it would be wrong to abandon Gorbachev. Pavel Palazhchenko, Gorbachev’s interpreter, was among those who, in that “painful moment,” thought of ceasing to work with the Soviet president. In his most recent book, Palazhchenko writes that for him Cherniaeov’s position was decisive in determining that he, too, would remain with Gorbachev. See Palazhchenko, Professiia i vremia: Zametki perevodchika-diplomata (Moscow: Auditoria, 3rd expanded edition, 2022 [1st ed., 2020]), 270–272.
To the extent that the political change Gorbachev introduced was “revolutionary,” it was revolution by evolutionary means. That it was a remarkably speedy evolution did not prevent Gorbachev from being accused of “half-measures” by critics at home and abroad. There was certainly an element of truth in the accusation so far as economic reform was concerned. But in every other area, whether foreign policy, freedom of speech and publication, or contested elections and other cardinal political changes, what Gorbachev had done within five years of coming to power already exceeded the wildest pre-perestroika dreams of his critics from the democratic “left.”

Uniquely for a Soviet leader, Gorbachev thought of himself as a politician and valued the profession of politik. He used the term, “politician,” with respect when referring to his Western counterparts. In a personal message of warm tribute to Margaret Thatcher when her Conservative colleagues forced her out of 10 Downing Street, he said that the future would give its own evaluation of contemporary political figures, and “I have no doubt that you have made a huge contribution as a politician (как политик) to the history of Great Britain and the world community.”

51 A case could be made for Leonid Brezhnev as politician, although he preferred to think of himself as a benevolent boss and a “statesman.” He was a skilful operator within the limits of the extremely authoritarian post-Stalin Communist system, solicitous in displaying a paternalistic concern for the major institutional interests within the USSR and ensuring that he retained their support. However, in the broader Soviet society, he did not rely on a politician’s skills of persuasion, but on party discipline, automatic subservience to the leader in the strictly hierarchical system, Marxist-Leninist dogma as instrument of political control, and the KGB for rooting out overt dissent.

52 “Gorbachev letter to MT *(parting thoughts) *[very warm message]* [declassified 2016], PREM19/3213 f66, Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archives. The official British translation of the letter for Thatcher rendered Gorbachev’s “politician” as “political leader.” In the previous sentence, he had written that every political figure *(каждому деятелю)* is evaluated both in their own time and in the future (ибо иди). (The official UK translation of this passage where Gorbachev was speaking about politicians in general rather than Thatcher in particular, used “politician” for политических деятелей.) See also L. M. Zamiatin, Gorbi i Meggi: Zapiski posla o dvukh izvestnykh politikakh – Mikhail Gorbachev i Margaret Tetcher (Pik Viniti, 1995), 128–129. Zamiatin’s account of the Gorbachev-Thatcher relationship is unreliable in many respects; some details are figments of Zamiatin’s imagination. But he was Soviet ambassadour to London and the communicator of Gorbachev’s personal letter to Thatcher immediately following her resignation, and he reproduces the text correctly.
Foreign Secretary, remarked in informal conversation that when he was speaking with Gorbachev or with Eduard Shevardnadze, he felt he was “speaking with a fellow-politician, not a bureaucrat,” a point borne out by Cherniaev when he said that in choosing Shevardnadze as Foreign Minister in 1985 in succession to Gromyko, Gorbachev had been “categorically opposed to the appointment of a diplomat; he wanted a politician.”

The most important attribute of a politician is the ability to persuade. This applies most specifically to a democratic politician or to a politician in an authoritarian regime who aspires to democratize it. Harry Truman, reflecting on how his successor Dwight Eisenhower would find the presidency very different from command in the army, famously said, “I sit here all day trying to persuade people to do the things they ought to do without my persuading them. ... That's all the powers of the President amount to.”

The former head of Soviet space research, Roald Sagdeev, who became an American citizen following his marriage to Susan Eisenhower (the US President's granddaughter), observed that there were only a few of Gorbachev's interlocutors “who did not fall under the spell” of his “personal charm and the magnetism of his verbal talent.” In “his own weight category – politics – Gorbachev, I admit, was almost overwhelming,” wrote Sagdeev. But “while admiring his talent,” Sagdeev noted the danger of overestimating one's powers of persuasion when, for the most part, the audience consists of subordinates.

That valid reservation notwithstanding, Sagdeev believed that what was new and most important was Gorbachev's attempt “to influence people's minds by simply talking to them.” His approach contrasted sharply with that of Soviet leaders and bosses hitherto. They “never tried to change people's genuine opinions or beliefs, but simply issued an instruction and demanded that it be followed.” Gorbachev's interpreter and adviser Pavel Palazhchenko, who got to know him as well as anyone did (especially during the last 30 years of Gorbachev's life, for Palazhchenko remained with him after he lost power), wrote of Gorbachev at the end of 2022: “Personally and politically, he was never a control freak. He wanted “to give people a say in their country's future.”

53 Howe's remark was made in a conversation I had with him in Oxford on 27 October 1988, Cherniaev's, when I interviewed him in the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, on 30 March 1992.
56 Ibid.
Unusually, he was “a Russian leader, a Soviet leader, who wanted to achieve his goals politically, by persuasion.” And as John Dunn, in his reflections on democracy, has observed, there is “scarcely another contrast to which most human beings attach greater importance” than that “between being persuaded and being coerced.”

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