MIKHAIL SERGEEVICH GORBACHEV AND THE MORAL REVOLUTION*

An image of the Soviet Union as an authoritarian welfare state with considerable staying power predominated in Western academic writing when Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. For this reason, when the language of academic discourse first treated the new leader it tended to cast doubts on his sincerity or ability to effect systemic change. Much of the literature on the early transition period framed the challenges facing the post-Brezhnev leadership in terms of "dilemmas," "paradoxes" and "crises." Despite the widespread caution of Western prognoses, the process of reform in the Soviet Union had dealt a death blow to the command-administrative system by 1990, creating crises and dilemmas that went far beyond what Western observers had discussed back in 1985-86. Thanks to the one reform that could claim to be a resounding success—glasnost'—the country, in the estimation of Geoffrey Hosking, had "awakened."

It is not surprising that Gorbachev's engaging persona soon fascinated the Western media; he seemed dynamic and more agreeable than the emphysemic, celluloid-like Konstantin Chernenko; he symbolized the coming to power of a new generation of leaders and therefore represented hope; and he appeared to speak a language the West understood. But did it really matter who replaced the dying dozen on the Brezhnev Politburo? It mattered in the sense that, owing to the enormous power he wielded, Gorbachev was quickly able to leave his personal imprint on his country and set the tone for the reform program. At the same time, however, Gorbachev and

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Gorbachevism—his political program and call for social activism—must be placed within the context of the circumstances the country found itself in at the time of his accession. They dictated the agenda of reform and to a significant extent determined the reforms' outcome—as well as Gorbachev's fate.

To be sure, a more historically conscious line of reasoning suggesting perestroika would have come about even without Gorbachev countered the simplistic media hype that portrayed him as all-powerful. According to this view, the system itself, ironically enough, generated the social transformations that were the sources of reform and change (a judgment articulated years ago by Isaac Deutscher and more recently by Moshe Lewin, Basile Kerblay and, for that matter, Andrei Sakharov). This argument shifts historical focus away from Gorbachev and onto his generation or, more broadly, onto the society produced by industrialization, urbanization and expanding educational opportunities, especially in the decades of peace following World War II. It acknowledges reformist currents within the system from the 1920s onward, with emphasis on the long-term consequences of the ferment of the Khrushchev years, the intelligentsia's role as surrogate civil society and the cautious reconsiderations of official ideology under Gorbachev's immediate predecessors. As Basile Kerblay admonished, we should not be misled into thinking that the reforms "sprang up spontaneously at the wave of Gorbachev's magic wand." Implicit in such assessments is the sense that Gorbachev is more of a cultural construct, a product of the changes described above and a representative of that generation of Soviet citizens that was too young to benefit from the turmoil of the 1930s or to fight in World War II, but old enough to have N. S. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 serve as the formative experience of their early adulthood.

This generation, coming to power in the aftermath of Brezhnev's death, faced a set of problems so urgent that it can be argued that any representative of the new generation of Party leaders would have had to address these concerns. As it turned out, Gorbachevism emerged from a drawn-out crisis, the exact nature of which is open to debate. Although it disagreed over the specifics, the rising generation of Party leaders perceived economic reform as its top priority. Economic stagnation and technological backwardness had stifled the improvement of living standards at a time when expectations, often owing to greater knowledge of the outside world, were on the rise. Many Party leaders feared the chasm between popular expectations and reality, realizing that the system's legitimacy rested on bridging this gap.