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M. S. Gorbachev's Liberalism in Historical Perspective

When Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev ascended to power in March of 1985, it had been less than three years since the death of the incapacitated Leonid Brezhnev. During the interim, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko served briefly in the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), but both were too ill to accomplish very much. While virtually no one expected Gorbachev to be a radical departure from his predecessors, it was acknowledged generally that a younger, more energetic team was needed to lead Soviet society and especially the economy out of the stagnation of the later Brezhnev years.

What initially reassured the old guard was that Mikhail Sergeyevich had come up through the ranks (if a bit too quickly for some), and his credentials were solid as a long-time party activist from good working-class roots in the southern city of Stavropol. His maternal grandfather, P. E. Gopkolo, participated actively in collectivization and subsequently spent many years as chairman of the local collective farm, but also suffered through the repression of Stalinism.

The young Mikhail came to Moscow State University's Law Faculty in 1950 with one ill-fitting, coarse wool suit and a beat-up pair of shoes; he was actually slightly better off than the average provincial student arriving in the capital city. In addition to his country attire, a southern accent and slur also set him apart from the local sophisticates. But Gorbachev was quick to learn, and within a year he had developed tastes

for the exotic new worlds of the opera and the ballet, despite not even knowing of their existence before coming to Moscow (Smith 39).

The great and enduring passion of Mikhail Sergeyevich, however, was not the arts but politics. He immersed himself in student affairs and took an active role in the *Komsomol* (the Communist Youth League), rising rapidly to positions of ever increasing authority. There was nothing in his activities during these early stages to suggest heterodoxy, much less liberalism or western sympathies. On the contrary, to all outward appearances, he was very much in the mainstream with the millions of other idealistic young Stalinists who believed that their victorious homeland was superior, both materially and ethically, to the bourgeois West and its "decaying socio-economic system."

Upon completion of his university studies, Gorbachev returned to his native Stavropol where he became a full-time functionary. The next twenty years were spent in relative obscurity, as he toiled away at the tedious tasks of a provincial party secretary. During this time, however, he developed an abiding interest in ideas, both for their own sake and as instruments with which to influence human behavior. Like his hero Lenin, he became personally involved in supervising the newspapers under his jurisdiction, regularly contributing editorials and commentary.

Gorbachev's varied skills and industriousness did not go unnoticed in Moscow. The ambitious young regional secretary also benefitted from the fact that his domain happened to encompass several of the country's best rest spas where he was able to play genial host to and ingratiate himself with the party's gerontocracy. Such personal ties undoubtedly are useful everywhere, but in the Soviet Union they assumed paramount importance.

Through a combination of his own considerable talents and assiduous networking, in 1978 Gorbachev gained the big prize of a post in the capital at the Ministry of Agriculture. There was still no sign of anything unusual in his views, and it could hardly have been otherwise. As a colleague from those early days noted, "If he believed differently, he never would have become *Komsomol* secretary at the university, or first secretary in Stavropol, or found his way to Moscow" (Sheehy 105). Just two years later, Mikhail Sergeyevich became the youngest member by far of the old-boy Politburo.

Under Brezhnev, Soviet politics and society had a mafia-like quality. An individual went only as far as his godfather/sponsor pushed him. For

Gorbachev that critical role was assumed by the influential and urbane KGB chief Andropov. In later years, Mikhail Sergeevich and his wife Raisa frequently acknowledged their personal debt, and that of the country as a whole, to this unlikely Kremlin reformer. We shall never know just how far Andropov would have taken the process of renovation himself, but there were signs that he recognized the gravity of the dilemma facing the country and was prepared to undertake radical measures. He was just beginning to clean up the profound corruption of the Brezhnev apparatus when fatal illness intervened.

The even briefer interregnum of Konstantin Chernenko, Brezhnev's old crony, was seen widely as a grooming period for the heir apparent from Stavropol. Gorbachev played out his role as number two in the party hierarchy while carefully placating the old guard with reassuring statements confirming their view of the world. He directed particularly harsh language at the West in a speech on 11 December 1984, describing it as suffering from a "spiritual, ideological, and moral crisis" (Sheehy 168).

Just as most people in the Soviet Union expected no major departures under Gorbachev, the consensus in the West also stressed continuity. Writing in the *New York Times* on 3 March 1985, Serge Schmemmann asserted: "Nothing he has said or done suggests any greater degree of tolerance for unorthodox thinking than any of his colleagues . . . , [and] foreign affairs is the field of Soviet endeavour least likely to change under a new generation."

Judging by Gorbachev's speech of 30 September 1985 on French television, there was no reason to question Schmemmann's prognostication. The new General Secretary sounded all the usual Soviet themes, and gave no ground on human rights, the Jewish question, or any of the other outstanding issues. He emphasized that it was the Soviet Union, in contrast to the United States, which was really committed to peace and disarmament, as evident in its unilateral moratorium as of August 6 on all nuclear explosions. This was a theme to which he would return again and again over the next several months.

Gorbachev's six-year administration may be divided chronologically into three equal periods: 1985-87, 1987-89, and 1989-91. The first was one of reorientation and halting attempts at defining his "New Thinking" in both external and domestic policy, as the General Secretary assembled

his team which included the little-known Georgian Eduard Shevardnadze as Foreign Minister and the former Ambassador to Canada Alexander Yakovlev as main policy advisor. The second period was when the greatest liberalization and the most dramatic changes occurred. The third was characterized by retrenchment and retreat, as government policies failed to satisfy either the left or the right, and nationalist forces worked to break up the Soviet Union.

From the outset in the spring of 1985, there were indications that this was not going to be just another succession in the line of Soviet leaders. For one thing, Gorbachev had almost a Western politician's touch and manner in dealing with both the news media and the public. He was accessible and forthcoming in a way which was totally unlike his predecessors and disarmed his opponents abroad. Even such stalwart cold warriors as Britain's Margaret Thatcher and U.S. President Ronald Reagan could not resist the charm of this new Communist boss with whom "one could do business."

This, of course, did not mean that all was immediately harmonious between the superpowers. The Soviets continued to see themselves as the chief peacemakers and the West (particularly certain American military-industrialists) as the main war-makers. Moreover, Gorbachev's openness was selective. It did not initially extend to the tragedy of Chernobyl in the spring of 1986, which he tried unsuccessfully to cover up. But once the nature of the disaster became public, Mikhail Sergeevich was clever enough and courageous enough to change course. He took the unprecedented step of admitting the Soviet government's incapacity to deal with the full extent of the debacle, and asked for assistance from the West. A major public relations disaster was thus turned into a minor triumph for Gorbachev's diplomacy, and sympathetic accounts depicting international rescue and assistance efforts began to appear in the Western news media. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, the former allies were co-operating against a common danger.

If Chernobyl and its aftermath marked the turning point in Western attitudes towards the Soviet Union, it also was the real beginning of a basic reorientation of the Kremlin's foreign policy. To demonstrate good faith and move towards more co-operative relations, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze accepted the Western positions on several key aspects of

disarmament and security. But even major concessions—such as on the unequal reductions of Soviet forces deployed in Europe—were not enough to deter President Reagan from pushing his Strategic Defense Initiative (the so-called Star Wars project) through the U.S. Congress.

On the domestic scene, Gorbachev introduced his twin programs of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The former has been defined as a type of free speech or openness, with connotations of publicity and accountability. It was only possible because Gorbachev's generation (the *shestidesiatniki* or people of the 1960s) was the first in Soviet history to produce a critical, educated elite—what in the West is known as civil society—capable of defining itself as separate and distinct from the state and therefore entitled to its own opinion.

Glasnost marked the beginning of an era of intellectual and cultural freedom far more extensive than anything known previously in Russia, apart from a few months during 1917. Formerly banned plays and novels—including works which raised the most fundamental questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of the Soviet state—began to appear. At first gradually, but in a rising crescendo, serious criticisms of the state system and related Marxist-Leninist canons found a forum in several leading periodicals and newspapers. They appeared in numbers to satisfy a mass readership equivalent to that enjoyed only by the most popular pulp literature in the West. For the first time, the more controversial and overtly anti-Soviet writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn saw the official light of day (culminating with the appearance in serial form of the *Gulag* itself in the respected journal *Novyi mir*). The high point of this first stage of *glasnost* was reached in December 1987 when Gorbachev personally telephoned the banned human-rights activist Andrei Sakharov to summon him back from exile in the provincial town of Gorky.

In contrast to the impressive liberalization of *glasnost*, which opened up several significant and unprecedented vistas for Soviet society, the reform (or restructuring) of the economy associated with *perestroika* never really got off the ground. Neither Gorbachev, nor his Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov who was technically in charge of it, offered any clear strategy for how to go about revitalizing the massively moribund Soviet economy, and especially its agrarian sector. Fyodor Burlatsky, among others, was ignored when he urged that the process "begin with agrarian reform, that China's experience and the experience

of the developed countries be used, and that the food problems be solved first . . ." (CDSP, 1992, xlv.1: 25).

Part of the problem was that the ruling group around Gorbachev still very much adhered to the traditional Marxist emphasis upon heavy industry. Moreover, Mikhail Sergeyevich himself continued to believe in the inherent superiority of collective farming, attributing recent agrarian failures to arbitrariness and mismanagement, rather than systemic weakness. Thus rather than undertake the risky business of fundamental restructuring following the Chinese or Western models, he was content to repeat exhortations and platitudes: "We must overcome the estrangement between the farmer and the soil. We must make the farmer sovereign master, protect him against command methods and fundamentally change his conditions of life in the villages" (*Pravda*, 29 June 1989: 2).

Higher productivity would be achieved, according to Gorbachev, through a process of education and carefully selected incentives, such as greater autonomy for local farms and decentralization of the agrarian sector of the economy. These reforms, however, were to be made in the context of the "socialist choice." There could be no question of going back to private farming or capitalism:

Through restructuring we want to disclose the potential of socialism and impart a new quality to our society. But [that does not mean] . . . a lack of faith in our historical choice, in our people's commitment to the ideals of socialism, and in the people's ability to revitalize society on Leninist principles and on truly socialist values. (CDSP, 1989, xli.1: 7)

These were optimistic sentiments considering current realities. By the mid 1980s, the relative prosperity and productivity of the 1960s and early 1970s seemed very far away. Living standards had actually improved during the first dozen years of Brezhnev's rule. But by the end of his era, the Soviet economy had shrunk to one third the size of the American, and the trend was accelerating. Still Gorbachev believed that the true measure of the viability of Soviet socialism was its earlier pattern of growth rather than the immediate past of stagnation. The idea, therefore, was to make socialism work better, not to scrap it and certainly not to adopt capitalism in any form (Gorbachev 342-3).

Economics, however paradoxically, has never been the strong suit of Soviet leaders. Gorbachev's new programs—such as the "socialist market," cooperative enterprises, and collective land leasing—were constrained from conception by the need to be seen as politically correct within the party, and thus appeared half-hearted to those who were expecting fundamental "restructuring." Moreover, whenever there was criticism that some people were benefitting more than others from the reforms—as in the case of the more aggressive cooperative ventures—the government immediately backed off or slapped on exorbitant new taxes to discourage the entrepreneurial activity it had just permitted.

Gorbachev never could bring himself to break with the fundamental assumptions of his Marxist past in several critical areas: most notably his preference for the centralized economic planning of socialism and his antipathy towards private property (Gorbachev 23). "Private property," he stated in November 1988, "*as is known*, is the basis of the exploitation of man by man, and our Revolution was carried out precisely in order to eliminate private property and transfer everything to ownership by the people. To try to restore private property is to move backward, a profoundly mistaken decision . . ." (CDSF, 1988, xl.47: 6).

Glasnost was meant to stimulate the process of *perestroika* within the socialist framework. But the dynamic of the debate quickly overstepped all boundaries. People began to question everything, from the legitimacy of the October Revolution to the ethical viability of socialism. In May 1988, Vasily Selyunin went so far as to place the blame squarely on Lenin himself for introducing the systematic use of state terror (*Novyi mir*, 1988, 5: 169). Aleksandr Tsipko added that there was a direct line running from Marxism through Leninism to Stalinism (*Nauka i zhizn*, 1988, 11). Just a few years ago, a similar suggestion from Solzhenitsyn had aroused a fury of denunciations not only in the Soviet Union but also in the West.

Frustrated with the intractability of domestic problems, and recognizing that he would never be able to address them effectively as long as the arms race with the Americans continued, Gorbachev turned to foreign relations. In a speech at the United Nations in early December 1988, Mikhail Sergeevich extended the frontiers of his "New Thinking" beyond anything even the most optimistic Western Sovietologists anticipated: he offered to reduce Soviet military forces by half a million

men before the end of 1990 and to bring Soviet human rights laws into line with international standards.

As his reputation abroad soared, Gorbachev's domestic popularity declined. Within the party his constituency remained relatively stable, but in society at large there was a growing frustration with the endless round of academic debates sponsored by the government which never put more food on the shelves or goods in the stores. His public defenders were reduced to a small group of academics and intellectuals in Moscow, Leningrad, and Novosibirsk who seemed to be completely out of touch with the mundane travails of the common man. The op-ed pages of newspapers, on the other hand, were peppered with sharp criticisms and even ridicule of government policies in language which would have landed their authors in jail under Brezhnev.

What caused many supporters to lose respect for Gorbachev was his apparent indecisiveness, especially in the face of strong opposition. This was true both within the party leadership where he frequently acceded to pressures from the right, and in his equivocal handling of the "nationalities issue"—i.e. demands for increased autonomy from the non-Russian republics as well as inter-ethnic conflicts in southern and eastern parts of the country.

The Soviet constitution recognized the right, in principle, of the fifteen constituent republics to secede from the union, but everyone had always regarded it as a polite fiction. The formation of Sajudis as the Lithuanian nationalist party, with an agenda which was both anti-Communist and implicitly anti-Russian, changed all that. In the hotly contested elections of 26 March 1989, nationalists swept aside local Communists loyal to Moscow. Gorbachev's response was the traditional Kremlin combination of intimidation and threats when faced with unruly subjects, but now it only served to strengthen the hand of the Lithuanian nationalists who were pushing for a program of complete independence.

At approximately the same time, Georgian nationalism, with its more fiery nature, burst into violent confrontation and bloodshed in the streets of the capital Tbilisi. The sight and accounts of Soviet soldiers attacking Soviet civilians—despite official attempts to depict the latter as the aggressors—shocked and outraged public opinion, and brought great discredit upon the central government and Gorbachev in particular.

There were also waves of inter-ethnic violence in Central Asia and the Caucasus (especially between Armenians and Azeris in October and November 1988), in response to which Moscow did little beyond issuing pious statements which deplored "extremist elements on both sides." On 4 September 1989, Azerbaijan imposed a total blockade on Armenia to assert control over the disputed area of Nagarno-Karabakh. Gorbachev was reluctant to intervene lest the central government appear to be taking sides. Thus Soviet troops stood by as armed bands of Armenians and Azeris wantonly killed, burned, and maimed each other's civilian population. Eyewitnesses and commentators alike were shocked by the passive non-interference of the Kremlin's representatives (*Pravda*, 9 Sept. 1989: 2).

The conservative Communist press was quick to proclaim, and not without some justification, that nothing like this would have been tolerated under Brezhnev. They concluded that the growing civil disorder was the direct consequence of mistaken government policies (implicitly *glasnost* and *perestroika*) which undermined Soviet authority generally and that of the CPSU in particular. A few months earlier, several regional party secretaries had predicted just such ethnic conflicts if strict measures were not taken immediately to reverse the "nihilistic, anti-Soviet tendencies" (*Pravda*, 27 April 1989: 3-4).

The truth, however, was that Gorbachev vigorously, indeed at times blindly, defended the unity of the Soviet state. He ordered his party secretaries in the republics to make no concessions to the rising nationalisms of their respective regions, thus forcing many of them to choose between loyalty to the centre and political isolation locally. It became evident that Mikhail Sergeevich had miscalculated badly when the Communist parties first of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, then Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and finally Ukraine all underwent nationalist transformations followed by quick declarations of state sovereignty.

The nationalist wave in the republics precipitated a major backlash in Russia which took the ugly, traditional form of anti-Semitism. Solzhenitsyn's protégé, the mathematician Igor Shafarevich, wrote an article entitled "Russophobia" which accused the Jews of promoting hatred and contempt for all things Russian (*Nash sovremennik*, 1989, 6: 167-92). A series of supporting letters and commentaries followed in leading

periodicals like *Literaturnaya Rossiya*; some went so far as to suggest that the Jews themselves were fomenting anti-Semitism in order to gain international sympathy for their efforts to emigrate. By the spring of 1990, Jews in several of the larger Russian cities were afraid for their lives, as thugs from the super-nationalist organization *Pamyat* brazenly threatened to make a pogrom on May 5, the Feast of St. George. The atmosphere became so strained that Gorbachev took the unusual step of publicly reassuring Soviet Jews of full government protection.

Quite apart from what were in all likelihood genuine humanitarian concerns, Mikhail Sergeyeovich clearly did not want the Jewish question to interfere with his foreign policy initiatives which were transforming the international political landscape. By 1989 the initial scepticism in the West about his motivations was giving way to a grudging admission that perhaps he should be taken at his word. Moreover, the view of the Soviet Union as the great threat to Western security was being replaced by a much more realistic assessment of the country as a backward, moribund giant preoccupied with grave domestic problems and divisions which left it in no position to make war on anyone.

Even the most sacred of cold-war assumptions—that the Communists could not be trusted and that once a country was in their grasp, it could never be free again—crumbled along with the Berlin wall. Still more remarkable, the Soviet empire in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and finally even loyal Bulgaria, collapsed without so much as one word of protest from Moscow; indeed the General Secretary of the CPSU actively helped the process along (up to and including reunification of Germany). The big trade off for Gorbachev was that he would now be able not only to reduce Soviet military spending, but also look to the West for economic assistance.

As we have seen, the Soviet leader was much less liberal about nationalist tendencies within his own country, but that could hardly have been otherwise. Without making apologies for the brutal repressions visited upon Georgia, Lithuania, and parts of Central Asia by troops of the central government, it must be recognized that Mikhail Sergeyeovich was under great pressure from the military and party conservatives who were threatening to replace him with the number two man in the party Yegor Ligachev, or someone worse, if he permitted the separation of any of the Soviet republics.

Only Gorbachev's capacity to straddle the political centre while playing the left off against the right, and his genuine commitment to legal procedures, limited the use of force which would otherwise have resulted in many more deaths and might well have broken the resistance in the republics. The Baltic peoples, however, can be forgiven for not appreciating this liberalism in light of the harsh economic sanctions and physical coercion which Moscow imposed following their declarations of sovereignty in the spring and summer of 1989 (*Sovetskaya Litva*, 19 May 1989: 1).

Given the nationalist turmoil on several fronts and the dire state of the economy, it was quite remarkable that Soviet foreign policy could stay on course throughout this period. That it did, and even forged ahead with plans to extricate troops from Afghanistan, was testament to the urgency of Gorbachev's and Shevardnadze's general purpose which was to disengage from all areas of conflict with the West (including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Central America) in order to concentrate limited and declining resources on domestic priorities.

Unfortunately, for traditional Communists, conservative Russian nationalists, and others who were accustomed to regarding their country as one of the world's two super-powers, all these major policy reversals appeared to be humiliations which did not even offer any short term compensation. That view was shared by a significant portion of Gorbachev's Politburo and Central Committee. No one doubted that the lengthy letter entitled "I Cannot Forsake Principles" which appeared on 13 March 1988 in the pages of the right-wing, nationalist newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* under the name of the Leningrad school teacher, Nina Andreyeva, represented the position of senior party leaders. She attacked the "left-liberals" around Gorbachev for denigrating the achievements of Soviet socialism while promoting a pro-Western and anti-Russian "cosmopolitan tendency, a sort of nationality-less internationalism" (CDSF, 1988, xl.13: 5).

The third phase (1989-91) of Gorbachev's administration saw the General Secretary very much on the defensive, as one after another of his initiatives, especially domestically, failed to achieve the desired goals, and the economy continued to go downhill. While the outside world lionized him, awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, at home he was increasingly displaced in public esteem by Boris Yeltsin who espoused

a radical (if vague) populism which contrasted favorably with Mikhail Sergeyeovich's timid liberalism.

Yeltsin now offered himself as a candidate in the country's first genuine free vote for the post of president of the Russian Republic against the party's choice and won. It did not go unnoticed that Gorbachev, by contrast, avoided a real election, choosing to become president of the USSR through the Congress of Peoples' Deputies which itself was elected in March 1989 with a full third of its 2,250 seats reserved for the party. By the spring of 1990, it was obvious that in an open head-to-head contest, Yeltsin would beat Gorbachev soundly.

For reasons which go beyond the scope of this essay but which included outstanding qualities of his character, Yeltsin was the chief beneficiary of the grass-roots protest in Soviet society against the corruption, privileges, and abuses of the Communist party hierarchy (the so-called *nomenklatura*). This anti-Communist populist momentum had been building for some time, at least since the summer of 1989 when coal miners in Siberia, Ukraine, Vorkuta, and Karaganda *en masse* struck against the government and forced major concessions for better pay, working and living conditions, and radical political reforms. Among the latter demands were calls for a system in which the Communists would have to contest elections on an equal basis with other parties, a popularly elected president, an unrestricted press, and a genuine market economy.

Increasingly, Mikhail Sergeyeovich's response to this and similar challenges from the left was to retreat to the right where he could count on the party stalwarts to support him as the lesser of two evils. His appointment from that group of V. Pavlov as Finance Minister, B. Pugo at Interior, D. Yazov at Defense, V. Kryuchkov at the KGB, and G. Yanayev as Vice-President—all hard-liners and to a man future participants in the coup which would attempt to oust him—was a measure of the degree to which he had lost confidence in the possibility of resolving the outstanding domestic problems, especially in the economy.

Pavlov's austerity measures, which hit the most vulnerable elements of the population hardest, added to the impression of a government adrift and out of touch with its constituency. Despite all the extraordinary achievements of the past five years, the feeling among common Soviet citizens was that they had been cheated once again, and that fine words

were no substitute for sausages, fruits, and consumer goods—all of which had disappeared from the stores in Moscow, not to mention the provinces.

Following the Russian tradition, the question of whom to blame took on paramount importance, with the right quickly offering its pet theories. Aleksandr Prokhanov spoke for most orthodox Communists when he wrote that the responsibility "for the failure of [Gorbachev's] five-year-long policy lies with the liberals . . . who are spiritually and intellectually oriented toward the democratic West and have been in opposition to their own state for decades . . ." (*Literaturnaya gazeta*, 5 Jan. 1990: 4-5).

Mikhail Sergeyevich could no longer placate or ignore the implicit challenge from the right. At the Twenty-Eighth Congress of the CPSU, he made his move by gutting the all-powerful Politburo under the guise of making it appear to be more representative of all fifteen republics. While this was not enough for the reformers who were once again keenly disappointed by Gorbachev's unwillingness or incapacity to adopt their more radical agenda (indeed several of them, led by Yeltsin on 12 July 1990, resigned from the party), it was far too much for the conservatives who now saw Gorbachev as a clear threat to their *nomenklatura* privileges.

Their worst fears were realized when the General Secretary summoned his regional counterparts to Moscow and told them that article six of the Soviet Constitution—which guaranteed the exclusive role of the CPSU—would have to be abolished because of overwhelming popular demand which if unsatisfied might lead to civil unrest. Putting all his powers of persuasion to use, he was just able to win confirmation for this view at the Congress of People's Deputies, despite vigorous opposition from the *Soyuz* group (with its strong connections to the military) and other conservatives. They no longer bothered to hide their profound dissatisfaction with Gorbachev. Once again, Nina Andreyeva led the way, openly denouncing him by name:

[I]n 1989 Gorbachev shifted to right-opportunist and renegade positions by taking charge of the movement toward a market economy, a multiparty system, a presidency and social democracy in politics and ideology. (CDSF, 1990, xlii.23: 19)

It was not obvious at the time, but this was less a call to arms than the penultimate gasp of a bankrupt and dying CPSU. The municipal elections

of March 1990 were the key indicator of just how far the Communists had fallen in public esteem. In both Moscow and St. Petersburg/Leningrad, party leaders were rejected in every contested election (and even in some that were not). The winners were radical anti-Communists, many of whom did not hide their sympathies for Western social democracy and welfare capitalism as opposed to Soviet socialism. Party publications tried to accuse the opposition press of poisoning the public mind and turning the voters against the CPSU, but that did little to soften the blow of the massive repudiation administered by the voters in this first real opportunity to express their true feelings.

This smashing rebuff to the right came too late to help Gorbachev. He had become the victim of his own artful centrist dodgings, which at the end of May produced further half-measures to introduce a "regulated market economy" by tripling bread prices, while doing nothing to alter the fundamental nature of the administrative-command system. Government policy appeared to be in total disarray as the bread decree caused such a wave of panic buying that within three days Moscow's monthly supply of food was all gone.

Gorbachev's response was more of the usual Soviet formula: when faced with a crisis, concentrate still greater power in the centre. He asked the Supreme Soviet to grant him additional authority to deal with the economic emergency. But even with these new powers, which on paper exceeded those of the last Russian emperor and all preceding General Secretaries, nothing could be done to reverse the downward spiral of the economy. It was common knowledge that edicts from the centre were unenforceable and could be ignored with impunity. As the gap between the rhetorical flow from Moscow and the realities in the provinces widened, there was a palpable fear of imminent catastrophe and talk of civil war. In his speech of resignation as Foreign Minister, Shevardnadze predicted that a most terrible dictatorship was in the offing (CDSP, 1990, xlii.52: 8).

The early months of 1991 witnessed a further polarization between those urging more rapid change and others who wanted to turn back the clock. With the departure of his distinguished Foreign Minister, as well as many of the other liberals (including Yakovlev), the Gorbachev "centre" began to look more and more like a one-man show. He was at war with the majority of the party *apparatus*. In July, thirty provincial

secretaries collectively called for his removal from the top party post for having betrayed the basic principles of Bolshevism. Journalist V. Kuznechevsky, writing in *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, accused Mikhail Sergeevich of favoring "the exact program that Lenin opposed back in 1903, in the dispute with [the Menshevik leader] Martov" (CDSF, 1991, xliii.3: 8).

Despite the many warning signs, the attempted coup of 19 August still caught Mikhail Sergeevich and virtually everyone else by surprise. Its quick failure, however, should not deceive us into seeing that outcome as inevitable. Had even one reliable division of KGB or regular military troops intervened at the decisive moment to arrest Boris Yeltsin and disperse the opposition in and around the Russian government's White House, it might well have succeeded.

Assessments of the failed coup varied. Yakovlev and Yeltsin (although not Gorbachev initially) saw it as final proof of the bankruptcy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (*Izvestiya*, 4 Sept. 1991: 4-7). But hard-liners within the party and Russian nationalists charged that the coup was a provocation staged by anti-Communist and anti-state forces to discredit the CPSU and destroy the Soviet Union (*Komsomolskaya pravda*, 3 Sept. 1991: 4). While there has been no evidence to substantiate these allegations (much less Gorbachev's complicity, as some have charged), the undeniable consequences of the events of 19-21 August were disastrous for the right. The conservatives were correct in the larger sense that Mikhail Sergeevich's politics, and specifically his liberalism, undoubtedly undermined the CPSU and the Soviet state, and provide the key to understanding the course of events during 1985-91.

Alexis de Tocqueville remarked "that the most critical moment for bad government is the one which witnesses their first steps toward reform" (214). Nowhere has this description been more apposite than in Russia. Alexander II, the Tsar-Emancipator, died in 1881 at the hands of assassins, after his great reforms failed to satisfy the radical intelligentsia while at the same time alienating the monarchy's traditional base of support in the landed gentry. Alexander Kerensky at the head of the short-lived Provisional Government in 1917 was unable to combine parliamentary democracy (and especially agrarian reform) with effective conduct of the war. He survived an abortive coup from the right only to be forced out of office by the militant left (Schapiro 79-81). The great difference between 1917 and 1991, however, is that in the former time

Russia was still ninety percent a pre-modern peasant country with only a thin urban upper crust of civil society, while by the latter a liberal majority finally had reached maturity in the main cities.

Gorbachev's type of liberalism was the delayed product of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. It went underground during the Brezhnev years, but it did not disappear. While the West was aware only of the vocal dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s, there were tens of thousands of others who went about their education and careers, biding their time and waiting for the old Stalinists to die out. Without such an infrastructure within at least a segment of the party and a similar constituency in urban society at large, nothing basic would have changed under Gorbachev.

It was not an accident that *glasnost* (a term first used in the reign of Alexander II) with its emphasis upon rethinking and reviewing conventional ideas, was what worked, whereas *perestroika* failed. The former was consistent with the liberal emphasis on intellectual and political pluralism so dear to civil society, while the latter addressed social and economic issues which were more important to workers and peasants. Gorbachev's reforms were almost entirely political in nature. As he himself put it, the greatest achievement of his administration was "the creation of a socialist state based on the rule of law . . ." (CDSF, xli.25: 7).

By temperament and disposition, Gorbachev was consistently a westerner, both in the sense that he looked to the West for ways to improve the efficiency of socialism in the Soviet Union, and in that he recognized the organic connections between western-style political freedoms and economic reforms. Moreover, his strong advocacy of "a common European home" rested on an implicit assumption that Russian culture belonged to the tradition of Judeo-Christian, Western humanism.

Gorbachev's liberalism was evident most clearly in his pragmatic and non-ideological (especially for a General Secretary of the CPSU) approach to government. Under him Russia changed irreversibly and fundamentally for the better. The final paradox was that Mikhail Sergeyevich ended his administration in almost complete political isolation, while being accused of becoming "a consensus seeker [who] . . . wanted approval from all sectors of society" (Smith 527). There are far worse fates for liberals attempting reform from above, as was evident in Russia with Alexander II in 1881 and again with Kerensky in 1917.

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