

Russia: Mikhail Gorbachev: twin portraits of a failed reformer

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Mikhail Gorbachev is remembered in the West as a liberal man of peace, while in Russia he's blamed for disastrous national decline. Gareth Dale sets Gorbachev in his historical context and rejects both assessments, beginning on a personal note.

In an immediate, personal sense I am grateful that Mikhail Gorbachev was General Secretary of the CPSU in the early autumn of 1989. Living in East Germany, I was active in the wave of opposition-formation and protest that was later to topple the regime. A merciless crackdown was feared. 'Will there be a "Tiananmen solution"?' was on everyone's lips. We watched attentively for signs of unusual troop movements at the Soviet military base nearby.

With the benefit of hindsight (or, to give historians their due, of archival research), we know that a major faction of the GDR regime was itching for a bloodbath. Lists were compiled of thousands of oppositionists to be 'isolated' in internment camps. The Interior Minister, Friedrich Dickel, ordered the police to 'use any means necessary' to crush resistance. The aim was to stir up a civil war atmosphere, to furnish a pretext for a military crackdown. His greatest wish, Dickel revealed in a testosterone-pumped rant to his Central Committee colleagues, was to wade into the protests 'and beat up these scoundrels so their own mothers wouldn't recognise them. I was in charge here in Berlin in 1953. Nobody needs to tell me what those counterrevolutionary scum get up to.'

The 1953 allusion was to the [workers' insurrection](#) that, across swathes of the country, defeated East Germany's security forces. The regime was only saved thanks to intervention from Soviet tanks and troops, at the cost of dozens of lives. That this was not repeated in 1989 was due largely to the exhaustion of the Soviet model of [state capitalism](#) and to the numbers and determination of the protestors on the streets, and not to political leaders. Nonetheless, we were fortunate that a reformer was in charge in the Kremlin.

Mikhail Gorbachev died earlier this week. That his passing is painted in contrasting tones in Russia and in the West has been widely noted. For many Russians, he was the leader to blame for the empire's collapse, and for plummeting living standards and life expectancy. For the Western Establishment, Gorbachev was honest and liberal, a chum of Thatcher and Reagan and above all a peacemaker – the polar opposite of the Kremlin's current incumbent.

Both portraits are caricatures.

The second may be accurate in its appraisal of Gorbachev's personality. Unlike many of his ilk, he was candid, amiable and wry. Trawling through transcripts of discussions with his East German counterpart, Eric Honecker, I am struck by the contrast in substance and tone. Honecker's words are wooden. They clunk from one tired platitude to the next, whereas the Soviet premier speaks with urgency, if often allusively, ever alive to the severity of the problems his state was facing and the

need to listen to citizens' grievances. Honecker, Gorbachev was later to remark, was unable to connect; it was like watching someone "[throwing peas against a wall](#)."

In its substance, however, the Western portrait is inaccurate. To his marrow, Gorbachev was a creature of the [nomenklatura](#) – the Soviet ruling class. His climb to power through the 1970s and 1980s owed much to the patronage of the head of the KGB. He supported the sending of tanks to crush the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968. Arguably, what distinguished him thereafter was an ability to read the runes. When the next vassal state erupted in revolt, Poland in 1980-81, Gorbachev advised against sending the tanks. This did not, however, betoken a conversion to pacifism or even respect for the will of oppressed peoples. Barely a decade later he sent an invasion force against newly independent [Lithuania](#) – an episode that is neglected in obituaries that highlight his non-Putinesque qualities. In the same year he acceded to the US-led war in Iraq.

In gambling on fraternity from the West, Gorbachev's discernment left him. Western leaders, as his biographer [observes](#), first 'doubted Gorbachev, then embraced him, and finally abandoned him, refusing him the economic assistance he desperately needed.' Worse was to come, when the [neoliberal shift](#) that his government was beginning to steer, encouraged by western advisors, culminated in the disastrous 1990s – a '[lost decade](#)' in which the roots of many of Russia's current troubles may be found. The West's promises to refrain from expanding NATO eastwards, which Gorbachev appears to have believed, were brusquely binned.

The other, 'Russian,' reading of Gorbachev's premiership is equally misleading. For, even before he took the tiller the sinking of the USSR was all but inevitable. Soviet-style state capitalism had prospered as a growth model during a particular era of deglobalisation and war: the middle of the twentieth century when relatively autarkic and 'planned' economies were the norm worldwide. The model was poorly equipped to benefit from globalisation, and suffered from economic war waged by the vastly richer West. That the oil price slumped during Gorbachev's term in office was a further blow, given the USSR's [increasing dependence](#) on fossil fuels.

Seeking to revive Soviet economic might, Gorbachev looked to the market reforms being enacted in Eastern Europe and China, but neither route was promising. The Eastern European states were becoming heavily indebted to western banks and the IMF and showed no signs of a renewed growth spurt. Like Russia, they went on to endure the 1990s as a lost decade – with the partial exception of Poland, a beneficiary of western debt forgiveness that was never on offer to Moscow.

As to China, Gorbachev and his advisors were fascinated by its trajectory, and they experimented with [Chinese-style enterprise reforms](#). That these did not take to Russian soil lay not in their lack of skill but in structural differences. In the Chinese countryside, new opportunities for quasi-private farming in the 1970s met with a roaring response, while the administrative shake-up during the 'cultural revolution' enabled local authorities to become powerful managers of capital accumulation. For Chinese capital, virtuous circles of growth, reform and political stability ensued. The Soviet Union, by contrast, [had been locked into the command mode for longer](#); the contours of the military-industrial complex and collectivised agriculture were firmly set. Resistance to reform was therefore far greater, and it was this that prompted Gorbachev to adopt the high-risk strategy of glasnost – a liberalisation of the media and partial democratisation. Glasnost not only provoked opposition from conservatives, it spurred a politicisation manifested in campaigns, strike waves, and national rebellions. Gorbachev was forced to tack back and forth, to stall or compromise at one stage, only to be pulled forward at another. Loss of central control threatened at every turn. As the 1980s came to a close, glasnost intersected with a colonial geography quite unlike Beijing's. While China's colonialism, principally in Tibet and Xinjiang, has been brutal, these populations are comparatively small. The Soviet Union, by contrast, had been reconstructed under Stalin as a [Great-Russian](#)

[hegemony](#) atop a multiplicity of oppressed nationalities, and with an informal empire that spanned much of Eastern Europe.

Glasnost drew upon and also spurred like-minded reform projects in the states of Eastern Europe. These then lit the touchpaper under the entire edifice of domination. In 1989, regime shifts and national uprisings in Eastern Europe boomeranged to the USSR, spurring [power grabs](#) by regional leaders and a cascade of secession movements that rippled across the now terminally-disuniting Soviet space.

With Gorbachev's departure we can reflect on the historic transition from 'communism.' The command economy over which he presided manifested a class project – not of the workers and peasants that adorned its banners but the *nomenklatura*. Like most states, the Soviet Union knew some stable and prosperous years, primarily the 1950s to 1970s, and some less so, as Gorbachev's own grandfathers – chewed to pieces in the prison camps of 1930s Ukraine – could attest. The state that, following Gorbachev, evolved into capitalist Russia today is neither freer nor more equal or emancipated than it was during the command economy of the Gorbachev era – this is an outcome that western liberalism is belatedly seeing, but will it comprehend?

Gorbachev has [described himself](#) as simultaneously 'a product of the *nomenklatura* [and] its grave digger.' In a formal sense this is incontrovertible, and yet the reforms he implemented were designed to maintain the power of those same functionaries, in an alchemy that transmuted bureaucratic iron into plutocratic gold. In contributing to greater social inequality and insecurity, the market reform process that he initiated flowed into the turbulent 1990s, and precipitated a reactionary response, of authoritarian centralisation, that has defined the subsequent era. Although very different in their personalities, there is greater continuity from Gorbachev to Putin than, in West and East alike, is widely assumed.

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