

“Gorbachev Revisited” - The 2006 Alexander Dallin Lecture on Soviet and Post Soviet Affairs

By Archie Brown, Emeritus Professor of Politics at Oxford University and Emeritus Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford

On Tuesday, April 18, 2006 Professor Emeritus of Politics, Oxford University, Archie Brown delivered an address entitled: *Gorbachev Revisited*. Following is a summary of his presentation:

“First of all, let me say that it is a great honour and special pleasure to be giving a lecture which is in memory of Alex Dallin. My own memories of Alex are of a superb scholar of great perception and fine judgement and of a warm-hearted, hugely impressive human being. The first of three visits I have made to Stanford (though the last one was fifteen years ago) was at the invitation of Alex Dallin. He wrote to me on November 20th 1987 to say that the Center for Russian and East European Studies had inaugurated an annual lecture series on Soviet affairs and that the first series had been given by Alec Nove. I was not surprised to hear that it had been, as Alex reported, ‘a great success’. Alex asked me if I would be willing to give the second series of lectures. The subject would be up to me, but he hoped that Gorbachev would fit somewhere within the definition, given your recent work.”

That is how I came to give four lectures at Stanford exactly eighteen years ago. The first, entitled “The Making of a Reformist General Secretary”, was delivered on April 18th 1988. The overall title of the series was “The Gorbachev Factor in Soviet Politics” and these lectures were the origins of my book, The Gorbachev Factor, although what I thought would be a short book turned out to be 230,000 words and it was 1995 before I finished it for publication by Oxford University Press ten years ago. However, a lot more sources on the politics of the perestroika period became available in the 1990s, so the delay had some advantages. No theme was suggested to me for the Dallin Memorial Lecture this evening, but given the origins – thanks to Alex Dallin – of my first acquaintance with Stanford, it seemed appropriate to call my lecture ‘Gorbachev Revisited’. The other good reason for doing so is that, after writing quite a bit on post-Soviet Russian politics, I have lately been working once again on the perestroika period.”

Professor Brown went on to divide his lecture into four parts – first, providing context for the reforms which produced such dramatic change in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s, leading ultimately to the demise of the Communist system and the Soviet state, and then addressing the following questions: (1) Would the Soviet

system and the Soviet Union have disappeared at much the same time as they did if someone other than Gorbachev had become leader in 1985? (2) What was Gorbachev’s mindset when he became Soviet leader and how did his views evolve?; and (3) Was Gorbachev a success or failure as political leader?

Archie Brown stressed at the outset that he was not arguing for a “Great Man” interpretation of history whereby it is the unique charisma of an individual that is all-important. Gorbachev was not lacking in charisma as a politician, but the push he gave to reform within the highest echelons of the Soviet system, and his intra-elite manoeuvring, were more important in getting liberalization and democratization underway than his popular appeal (even though, contrary to widespread myth, he was a popular leader during the greater part of his time at the top of the Soviet political hierarchy).

In terms of getting the reforms off the ground, Brown stressed a factor which has been accorded little attention – a phenomenon labelled “institutional amphibiousness” by X.L. Ding in the context of studying change in Chinese politics. As Ding had put it: “An institution can be used for purposes contrary to those it is supposed to fulfil, and the same institution can simultaneously serve conflicting purposes”. That was true of many of the policy-oriented institutes which came under the supervision not only of the Academy of Sciences but also of departments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most surprising example of institutional amphibiousness was none other than the International Department of the Central Committee. Gorbachev took a lot of his better aides and advisers from there – people who contributed significantly to what became known as the “New Thinking” – of whom the best example was his principal foreign policy aide, Anatoliy Chernyaev, a long-standing deputy head of the International Department.

Before answering the first of his three questions – how much it mattered that Gorbachev, rather than someone else, became General Secretary in 1985 – Brown noted that “if a political system is highly authoritarian, with great power vested in the holder of the top political office, the personality, values and policy preferences of that officeholder are liable to make a bigger difference than

the personality, values and preferences of the head of government within a democracy”. He went on, however, to modify that generalization by pointing out that if the authoritarian system is (a) highly institutionalized and (b) highly ideologized, then there may be quite serious constraints upon the scope for innovation of even the topmost leader.

Answering his first question, Brown said: “In fact, we know the views of the aging members of the Politburo who were still extant when Chernenko died. We hardly need to speculate about whether any possible successor – and the long short-list could be no longer than the ten full members of the Politburo – would have pursued transformative change, as Gorbachev did. They have all made their views known, whether in interviews or memoirs, and it is clear that they would not have made these radical changes. Viktor Grishin, the most plausible short-term successor to Chernenko, is among those who published memoirs in which he utterly condemned the policies Gorbachev pursued.”

Professor Brown noted that some Realist international relations scholars had cited statements by conservative Communists saying, retrospectively, that in 1989 they would not have used force either to prevent the East European countries becoming independent, and they have interpreted this to mean that neither ideas nor the personality of the Soviet leader were decisively important. What mattered was the changing ratio of material resources between the Soviet Union and the West, particularly those of the United States.

“That”, the speaker continued, “is open to at least two objections. The first is that the policies pursued by Gorbachev had changed the whole climate both of Soviet politics and of international politics. The norms of Soviet politics had been altered fundamentally by Gorbachev’s endorsement of glasnost and a whole range of freedoms. At least as crucial, the expectations of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe had been raised by the change in Soviet foreign policy and in Soviet ideology. Especially important in that respect was Gorbachev’s statement at the Nineteenth Party Conference in the summer of 1988, repeated in his December 1988 United Nations speech, that in every country people had a right to choose their own form of government.” No other leader from the ranks of the Soviet Politburo in 1985 would have allowed those expectations to be raised in

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first place, and they would have been fully backed in their caution by the conservative majority within the Communist Party apparatus, the military-industrial complex and the KGB.

Second, those who took at face value what conservative Communists said retrospectively were guilty of failing to take due account of what those whom Gorbachev had displaced (and many of those who remained in place) were saying in private at the time of the transformation of the political landscape of Central and Eastern Europe. Andrei Gromyko's son, Antatoliy, quotes his father expressing astonishment at Gorbachev's unwillingness "to use force and pressure to defend state interests".

On the second question – what was Gorbachev's mindset when he became General Secretary and how did his views evolve? – Archie Brown began by saying: "I have been looking at a lot of unpublished documents from the perestroika period over the past eighteen months – transcripts of Gorbachev's meetings with his advisers and transcripts of Politburo meetings. I was surprised by how often Gorbachev cited Lenin." Moreover, he did not believe that Gorbachev was doing this purely for tactical reasons. "Even", he continued, "if most of us here take an extremely negative view of Lenin (as I certainly do), it is important to note that an idealization of Lenin and the belief that Stalin was the evil genius who had distorted purer Leninist norms was one of the strands of thought important to the emergence of perestroika and important, certainly, in Gorbachev's worldview at that time".

Nevertheless, Gorbachev retained a respect for the historic figure of Lenin while becoming less and less of a Leninist even while he still held the office of General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Professor Brown elaborated on the changing meanings of perestroika, glasnost and democratization between 1985 and 1988 in respect both of Gorbachev's understanding of those concepts and in Soviet political discourse more generally. In a one-to-one meeting with his aide, Georgiy Shakhnazarov in June 1988, Gorbachev mentioned that the leader of the West German Social Democratic Party, Fogel, had told him that what he (Gorbachev) was saying about international relations had "much in common" with social democracy. Gorbachev said to Shakhnazarov: "I didn't raise an objection". By 1989 Gorbachev was telling Shakhnazarov that he felt close to social democracy. He could only, however, "come out" as a social democrat after he had ceased to be General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.

Addressing his final question – was Gorbachev a success or a failure? – Archie Brown said that the answer obviously depended on one's criteria

for evaluation and partly on one's own values. In a book published last year, *Perestroika dvadtsat' let spustya*, a wide variety of different judgements appeared. Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian nationalist, attacked Gorbachev severely as a Westernizer. What was needed, he said, was "modernization without Westernization". What was required also was will and harshness. Never in history, Dugin maintained, had reforms been carried out without bloodshed, force and excesses. The morality of an ordinary person was different from the morality of a ruler. Gorbachev, Dugin insisted, had no historic right to allow the abolition of the Warsaw Pact and he should have destroyed Yeltsin.

Somewhat similar views were expressed by another Russian nationalist writer, Aleksandr Prokhanov, when he was asked to evaluate Gorbachev in connection with the latter's seventy-fifth birthday on March 2nd this year. Prokhanov said: "He is guilty of smashing to smithereens a great, weary, still developing state which required treatment and rebirth, not death. Gorbachev is the assassin of the Soviet state".

The range of opinion on Gorbachev is remarkably wide. Two very different Russian writers gave their views of Gorbachev to the same issue of the newspaper, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, as had Prokhanov. Vasily Aksenov concluded his highly positive



Nancy Kollmann, Archie Brown and Gail Lapidus at his April lecture.

assessment by saying: "In short ... I consider that there was no greater person in the history of the Soviet Union than Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev". And Vladimir Voynovich wrote: "Gorbachev is a historic individual. He played an enormous role. It is said that he destroyed the Soviet Union. For that I am personally prepared to put up a statue to him".

In Gorbachev's own terms, Archie Brown noted, the breakup of the Soviet Union was a failure. The transformation of the Soviet system was intentional from 1988, but the dissolution of the Union

was something that Gorbachev strove to the end to avoid. His other great failure was with the economy. Gorbachev was as unlucky as Putin has been lucky with the price of oil. The price was falling during the second half of the 1980s, sharply contrasting with what has happened so far this decade. But that was a relatively small part of the problem. Much more fundamentally, there was a contradiction and tension between trying to get the existing economic system to work better and moving to a system based on different operating principles.

Elaborating on Gorbachev's substantive successes, Professor Brown noted:

- the release of dissidents from prison and the resumption of rehabilitations of those unjustly repressed in the past
- the introduction of *glasnost* and its development into freedom of speech and publication
- freedom of religious observance
- freedom to travel
- the introduction of competitive elections for a legislature with real power
- the development of civil society – a result of perestroika, not a precursor of it
- progress toward a rule of law, subjecting the Communist Party to the law and moving supreme power from party to state institutions
- allowing the East European countries to become independent and non-Communist
- playing a more decisive role than any other individual on either side in ending the Cold War

There was even a success amidst a failure: the dissolution of the state at the end of the perestroika period was not accompanied by civil war as in Yugoslavia. Gorbachev refused to use the force that would have been necessary to restore the kind of 'order' that was being urged by many in the party hierarchy, the military and the KGB.

The case of Gorbachev suggests it is wrong to think that politicians, even major power-holders, are all in the business of power-maximization. If Gorbachev had wished to maximize his power, he had no need to change the system. As the youngest member of the Politburo he could gradually have placed within it people of his own choosing and, given the norms of the system, would have increased still further his power and authority over time. The Soviet Union would doubtless have continued its relative decline vis-à-vis the West, but its sophisticated control mechanisms – from party discipline to censorship to the KGB, and its pattern of rewards for conformist behaviour and hierarchy of sanctions for nonconformism – would have kept things ticking along. Professor Brown added: "After all, in the hybrid regime of Yeltsin's Russia there was a lower GNP in the 1990s than in the last years of the Soviet Union. Even today, just as

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Soviet times, Russia relies overwhelmingly on the export of natural resources, especially oil and gas. Yet Putin's position seems secure enough, although he has nothing like the formidable defences of it that the General Secretary in the unreformed Soviet system could command".

A lot didn't work out the way Gorbachev intended, though the evolution of his views was such that it is inadequate and misleading to evaluate his achievements and failures, taking as a base-line his aspirations when he took office in 1985 or, for that matter, the ideas set out in his book, *Perestroika*, in 1987. The turning-point in Gorbachev's own political evolution came in 1988. Even the late Aleksandr Yakovlev, with all his ambivalence towards Gorbachev over the last fifteen years of his life, concluded: "I consider Gorbachev to be the greatest reformer of the century, the more so because he tried to do this in Russia