

Perestroika, Glasnost, and Peremena k Lychshemy

(Translated as: Reconstruction, Openness, and Change for the Best)

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In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and ever since then the world has been shrinking. The Old World and the New World, which could have been on separate planets for all anyone knew, collided and history was forever altered. As the years passed, transportation grew more efficient so that a journey that used to take months could be accomplished in a matter of weeks, and then hours. Information that formerly had to be written out by hand was later distributed by printing press, and eventually computer. The leaps and bounds in how people interact over the past millennia has shrunk the world even more, and centuries of colonialism (and two world wars) have left webs of involvement that tightly bind countries and continents together. In such a world, a country as small as Israel can be a key player on the international stage, a minority on some long-forgotten island can receive support from any number of worldwide campaigns and organizations, and a single person can put into motion a chain of events that alter the destinies of nations.

Unfortunately, this chain of events leads to war and injustice just as often as it leads to peace and liberation. While it is possible for a man like Mahatma Gandhi to peaceably lead his people toward independence, it is also possible for a man like Adolf Hitler to lead his country into rejecting ethics as the “means” to a glorified “end.” The question, then, is not so much “can one person create change,” but “can one person create *positive* change?” This question is significantly more difficult to answer, as an action’s merit, like its beauty, depends on the person beholding it. Nonetheless, I believe that it *is* possible for one person to create significant, positive change in the world if he is globally minded, purposeful about building relationships and setting

realistic expectations, and able to learn from mistakes. The effect of these actions (or lack thereof) is best demonstrated through the life and leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary of the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gorbachev was born and raised in the Stavropol Krai, just north of the Caucasus Mountains in present-day Russia. In his small agrarian town the quality of life was determined by two things: the weather, and the politicians in Moscow. When he was twelve his father was drafted for The Great Patriotic War, so he left school for a year to help with the collective farm work (but kept up with his studies well enough to be one of the top students when he returned). His grandfather saw to it that he attended high school, where he was secretary of the Komsomol Youth, a position that today would be akin to senior class president. He went on to study law at the University of Moscow, where he met his wife Raisa and gained full membership in the Communist party (Smith 36-47).

After school he went back to Stavropol for 18 years, where he spent some time over the Stavropol Komsomol Youth, and later as the first secretary of Stavropol City (Steele 87). From there he became first secretary over the krai, which provided him with opportunities to meet visiting politicians such as Yuri Andropov. When Andropov moved up in Moscow, he recruited Gorbachev to be Brezhnev's new Secretary of Agriculture, a position that led to his acceptance into the Politburo. In 1982 Andropov became General Secretary, and Gorbachev became his right-hand man, travelling or delivering speeches for him when his health would not permit it (Smith 62-76).

Three years (and two secretaries) later, Gorbachev himself took over the office. He is most famous, especially in the West, for his policies of Perestroika and Glasnost,

which led to the fall of the Berlin wall, the end of the Cold War, and, eventually, the collapse of the Soviet Union. On December 25, 1991 he resigned, and the Soviet Union soon followed suit (Kengor 299). Although his influence in the world is on-going (he has since established several political parties and non-profit organizations), it was as leader of the Soviet Union that made his most significant contribution to the world.

How did he go about this? First and foremost, he was globally minded. To be globally minded is to view oneself as a citizen of the world. In order to create change in the world, awareness of that world is needed. This does not mean that a man has to be the best educated or most “cultured” so much as it requires him to being conscious that the effects of his actions will affect others. When he was younger, Gorbachev gained an awareness of the world by reading and explaining newspaper accounts of WWII battles to the older people of his village (Smith 39). By the time he arrived in Moscow he was more world-aware than most provincial Russians would be, but didn’t stop there. The students he lived and learned with opened his eyes to different perspectives, and diplomatic trips under Andropov allowed him see the world beyond the iron curtain (Smith 48, 67). By the time he addressed the United Nations in 1988 he had come to the conclusion that a “closed” society, which had been the Soviet ideal for so many years, was impossible (Gorbachev 13). Instead, he claimed, nations should benefit from other nations’ successes and mistakes, and that can only happen when there is effective, international communication (Gorbachev 7).

Communication like this is exactly what he strived for. While building relationships can be done by talking nuclear policies behind closed doors, this is not the only way to go about it. The simplest, and most disregarded, method is taking the time

to talk with others. The second-simplest is respecting their opinions. Gorbachev did both, with varying degrees of success.

In taking the time to talk and hang out with others, Gorbachev and his wife were very successful (especially when the “others” were important men with strong wives, such as Ronald Reagan and Yuri Andropov). Within the Communist Party his personal connections with Andropov (and others) were the main reason he rose to power at such a young age (Smith 67). In foreign affairs his nuclear summits with President Reagan evolved from meetings to chats, and they reached a point where, though they might not agree, they could still respect each other and enjoy the visit (Kengor 303). In domestic policy Gorbachev’s practice of talking with the “common man” off the street (and genuinely asking what he was dissatisfied with) was many folks’ first realization that change was coming to the USSR (Otfinoski).

However, Gorbachev was a far cry from “Mr. Congenial-all-the-time.” When his foreign minister resigned, he made some unfavorable comments that would have been wiser to make in private, and his constantly shifting policies made his fellow party members feel like they were excluded from his inner circle, or part of the wrong one. In reality, he never had one set of close friends in whom he confided everything. While this allowed him tremendous flexibility in policy-making, it also made him seem unpredictable and untrustworthy. This could partially be attributed to his early ascension into the Politburo; he was drastically younger than the other members, and drastically more important than those politicians of his own generation, which made it difficult for him to relate to others his early years on the national scene (Steele 26, 33).

As for respecting opinions, Gorbachev was a great diplomat, especially within the system. As a member of the Politburo, he was aware of the split between “hard-liners,” who wanted the system to remain the way it was, and reformers, who were in favor of change. Although he fell into the latter category, he found a way to strike a balance between the two factions that gathered universal support for his advancement within the Party (Brown 84-85).

This tactic of keeping a balance between the two sides worked well at the beginning of his term, when he was still in need of support. However, the longer he was in office, the less advantageous it was. Many policies that should have been passed earlier (such as calling the nation a “confederacy,” not passed until 1991) were avoided to keep the hard-liners’ support. Instead of uniting the Politburo, however, it divided it even more: hard-liners felt that things were happening too fast (and ended up staging a coup that weakened the Party even more), and reformers wanted things to happen even faster (Steele 19). International events such as the Chernobyl meltdown, or the uprising in Latvia require swift, decisive action, but Gorbachev was too focused on his balancing act and missed the opportune timing (Steele 19).

Besides being globally minded and building relationships, Gorbachev also set out mostly-realistic expectations. Having realistic expectations saves a leader from disappointment, but it also encourages the other people on his team in two ways: their input is taken into consideration (they are listened to), and they are able to meet the goals set out (they are successful). As Secretary of Agriculture under Brezhnev, Gorbachev had consulted with economists and agrarian experts on what course of action should be taken (they suggested localizing farms and offering financial

incentives), and came up with a plan that followed their advice. Brezhnev, however, rejected the plan and instead implemented a ten-year Food Program that was too optimistic, and too micromanaging. It died soon after Brezhnev did (Smith 71).

By the time Gorbachev took leadership of the Soviet Union, no one had much of a plan, especially him. Everyone seemed to know what to be against, but hardly anyone had a clear vision of what to be for (Steele 21). Gorbachev was for making the nation “richer, stronger, better,” so he tried a little bit of everything and kept what worked (Kengor 223). He was a pragmatist, and his policy of *perestroika*, or reconstruction, changed depending on what was working at the moment, or what was felt to be needed at the time. This was not only a good political tactic (especially for someone who was improvising as he went), but also emphasized *perestroika* as “a process, not a fixed and finite objective.” Instead of being about reconstruction, it was about *reconstructing* (Smith xvii).

He started with the government. Instead of working through the system that the Soviet Union had operated under for the past half century, Gorbachev sought to reform it in ways that would localize agriculture, reward people taking initiative, and remove inept politicians. This removal took place in the election of 1989, the first election in the Soviet Union where candidates did not have to be aligned with the Communist Party (or any party, for that matter) to run. He expected the incumbents who won, but did not receive a majority, to resign. However, the majority of communists either lost, or only won a plurality. Although the results of the 1989 elections were not what he had anticipated, he let the peoples’ choice stand, and would do the same in 1991 as the Soviet Union dissolved (Steele 109-112).

Perhaps the most important characteristic of a leader is to be able to learn from mistakes- both his own, and the mistakes of others. In the past, Soviet leaders were inclined to sit stone-faced in meetings and would be unwilling to even consider a compromise. Gorbachev realized that the world was changing too quickly for that to be effective (Steele 185). Of the three General Secretaries before Gorbachev, not a single one had met face-to-face with President Reagan, despite the fact that the two nations were nearing the end of a “cold war.” Gorbachev made it a point to meet with Reagan every year of Reagan’s second term, and relations between the US and the USSR drastically improved (Kengor).

This was a part of the Communist party’s “New Thinking,” which also involved arms reduction (and a shift toward agriculture), and withdrawal from the war in Afghanistan. Withdrawing from the war was seen as Gorbachev’s “greatest achievement,” as the war was almost universally viewed as a waste of money and resources (Brown 85). Similarly, the Soviet retreat from East Germany was also not seen as a failure so much as a willingness to let another country work out its politics (in this case, rebuilding the country post-fascism) on its own. Both of these actions were the first steps of non-interventionism, which would continue to be practiced throughout Eastern Europe, and eventually within the Soviet Union itself (Steele 149-154).

Although Afghanistan was not considered Gorbachev’s mistake, he made plenty of his own, such as an anti-alcohol campaign. Instead of treating alcoholism as a social issue, it was implemented in much the same way any other law would be: instead of being incentive-based like the agricultural programs, it was based on disciplinary action for those who did not comply. Not only did the campaign itself lack popular approval,

much like Prohibition in the United States, but it made Gorbachev appear out of touch with the common man and his needs. Although he learned from this mistake, there were plenty of others that he didn't learn from until it was too late (Steele 44).

To conclude, Gorbachev failed. His goal had been to preserve and strengthen the Soviet Union, but he instead implemented the processes that would destroy it- and it unraveled in less than a decade. To many western countries this was a positive change; the nuclear stockpiles and elaborate alliances were no longer necessary now that the Union had split. From a political standpoint, the fact that there was no WWII or other massively violent rebuttal (despite there being 14 or so countries involved) is also positive, and can be attributed to the way Gorbachev handled the situation. If the Soviet Union was a stalled airplane, Gorbachev was the pilot who managed to land the plane safely, though not in one (functioning) piece.

If there is anything to be learned from Gorbachev's life and leadership, it's that success does not look the same in the end as it does starting out. Gorbachev failed to make the Soviet Union "richer, stronger, better," but he did reconstruct. He gave the people choices, and honored their decision, even if he did not approve. Too often leaders will start toward an "end," only to realize that it was how they handle the "means" that will determine their success- and often the initial "end" is not what was needed, in the first place.

Thankfully, it isn't on our own that anything of lasting value is accomplished, but through God. Though the average Joe is not going start a hunger strike in the cities of India, or initiate a world war with his propaganda, he can still make a difference in the world. While it's good to be globally minded, nice to build relationship, smart to set

realistic expectations, and great to learn from mistakes, it's even better to be following a God whose ways and thoughts are bigger than anything a shrinking world could ever come up with.

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