



THE AMERICAN
SPECTATOR
EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

Happy Birthday to Mikhail Gorbachev

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March 4, 2021

The last Soviet leader — who kept the Red Army in the barracks.

Mikhail Gorbachev turned 90 on March 2. Few Americans think of him, or his country, the Soviet Union, these days. Most people barely remember his name, which seems lost to the mists of time.

He became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party 36 years ago this month, the fourth man to hold that position within a 28-month period. He took control of the once-vaunted Evil Empire, whose domains stretched from Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Gorbachev lasted little more than six years. Still, his tenure was more notable than those of his longer-serving predecessors Leonid Brezhnev and Nikita Khrushchev. Gorbachev lost his job because his government and country dissolved — due to forces he set in motion.

By March 11, 1985, when he took over as general secretary, the Soviet Union was in obvious decline. It remained a military colossus but had suffered from sclerotic stagnation for years under the aging Brezhnev, who died in November 1982. The latter was succeeded by two ailing men who each lasted little more than a year. Gorbachev was younger, more vigorous, and suspected of harboring liberal ideas.

His original intention was to revive and reinvigorate the USSR. He failed, but through his efforts he became the perfect partner for Ronald Reagan in ending the Cold War. Ironically, Reagan's efforts also occasioned criticism from American hardliners, including committed Cold Warriors like neoconservative Norman Podhoretz, who accused Reagan of appeasement. Why seek a peaceful settlement, the neocons always seemed to wonder, when you could spark a nuclear conflagration instead? Their attitude remains the same today.

But as the Left only reluctantly acknowledged over the years, Reagan was genuinely horrified by the prospect of nuclear war and the fact that both the United States and Soviet Union relied on MAD, or Mutually Assured Destruction, for deterrence. His fears were intensified by the 1983 Able Archer exercise, which Moscow believed might presage an offensive nuclear attack. After that he sought to reduce tensions, even as he pressed forward with a military build-up and challenged the moral and philosophical foundations of communist rule, famously calling for the Soviets to tear down the Berlin Wall.

These efforts culminated shortly after he left office, with the serial end of communist rule throughout Eastern Europe in 1989, dramatic opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and dissolution of the Soviet Union itself on Christmas Day 1991. This was a moment of liberation like no other in history, the peaceful end of what was truly the “Evil Empire.”

Reagan deserved the enormous credit that he received, but he needed a partner to succeed. Brezhnev did not want war but was willing to hold hundreds of millions of people in bondage. His successor was Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB — who had served as station chief in Budapest during the Hungarian Revolution. Andropov was sophisticated and worldly, but no friend of humanity and liberty. He was briefly succeeded by Brezhnev factotum Konstantin Chernenko, who was uninspiring and unimaginative, and not long for this world.

The man who then stepped forward, ready to change the Soviet Union and even allow its peaceful collapse, was Gorbachev. He was of Russian and Ukrainian blood, born in Russia to a peasant family. He lost relatives in the terrible famine that resulted from Stalin's collectivization and industrialization program; a grandfather was imprisoned during Stalin's Great Terror. Nevertheless, Gorbachev surmounted such obstacles. He excelled academically, joined the Communist Party, and studied law, while occasionally revealing unorthodox political opinions to close friends.

He steadily rose politically — he proved adept at convincing superiors of his loyalty and reliability while hiding his heterodox views, such as dismay at treatment of critics of Soviet policy. Indeed, he got along well with many senior figures, including Brezhnev and Andropov, which sped his rise to the Central Committee, Politburo, and general secretaryship. Among his perks was foreign travel. He later said that a trip to France, in which he and his wife, Raisa, witnessed the openness with which people criticized political leaders, “shook our a priori belief in the superiority of socialist over bourgeois democracy.”

It was obvious to Western leaders that Gorbachev was different. He visited the United Kingdom in December 1984. Then–Prime Minister Maggie Thatcher famously observed, “I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together.” She impressed her views on Reagan, who also proved ready to work with Gorbachev after the latter took over as general secretary. Reagan noted the “warmth” in the Soviet leader's “face and style.” Reagan also discerned “a moral dimension in Gorbachev.”

After taking control, Gorbachev abjured self-adulation, highlighted his wife's role, and encouraged frank debate. He launched *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reform), which failed to achieve their objectives of reforming the Soviet Union. But they did something more important: they humanized the system. This reflected the “moral dimension” cited by Reagan.

In 1980, Brezhnev had exiled Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov, a noted physicist who had become perhaps the USSR's most famous dissident, to Gorky, a “closed” city from which foreigners were barred. Six years later Gorbachev dramatically called Sakharov to invite the latter back to Moscow. The Soviet leader also helped bring closure to Stalin's crimes, rehabilitating victims of the communist state decades before.

A succession of ever more stunning changes occurred during Gorbachev's tenure. Unsurprisingly, there also were controversies and failures galore, such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April 1986, which intensified Gorbachev's criticisms of the Soviet system's manifest and manifold infirmities.

His changes internationally were equally significant. Gorbachev decided to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan. He agreed to a ban on intermediate nuclear weapons. Most important,

he told the Eastern European governments that they had to resolve their own problems and reform their own societies. Out of this policy came the famous “Sinatra Doctrine.”

Gorbachev uttered words that few in the West had ever expected to hear from a Soviet leader. Reported the *New York Times* in October 1989, just a couple weeks before the Berlin Wall was opened:

President Mikhail S. Gorbachev declared today that the Soviet Union has no moral or political right to interfere in the affairs of its East European neighbors, and held up neutral Finland as a model of stability in stormy Europe.

His spokesman embroidered the theme jokingly, saying that Moscow had adopted “the Sinatra doctrine” in Eastern Europe. “You know the Frank Sinatra song, ‘I Did It My Way?’ said Gennadi I. Gerasimov to reporters. “Hungary and Poland are doing it their way.”

“I think the Brezhnev doctrine is dead,” he added, using the Western term for the previous Soviet policy of armed intervention to prevent changes in the Communist governments of the Warsaw Pact. In talks with Finland’s President, Mauno Koivisto, at the beginning of a three-day state visit, Mr. Gorbachev was reported to have said that the current political upheavals in the East bloc must be allowed to run their course.

The rest, as they say, is history.

The geopolitical dominoes toppled. Most of Eastern Europe’s communist governments were headed by bland bureaucrats, apparatchiks who believed in little beyond their own careers and comfort. And they knew, even if they could not publicly admit it, that they could not rely on their own security forces to face down protesters demanding freedom. When Gorbachev announced that these governments were on their own, their fate was sealed.

In November 1989, it was East Germany’s turn. Long-time party General Secretary Erich Honecker had wanted to shoot to halt the burgeoning protests in Leipzig and found himself “seeking other opportunities” when the rest of the shaken Politburo voted to retire him. Only in Romania was the regime willing to kill, and that did not end well when the troops favored the people. On Christmas Day, in the only violent upheaval that incredible year, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu found themselves before a firing squad whose members did not wait for orders to begin shooting. It was a dramatic coda to a regional revolution that freed a half dozen nations from tyrannies that accompanied the Red Army on its drive westward against Nazi Germany at the close of World War II.

Then the forces unleashed by Gorbachev brought down the USSR. Although not his intention, the result was foreordained once he lifted the Soviet Union’s totalitarian controls. He first resisted separatist campaigns — for a time with force in the Baltics — but yielded as support for the Evil Empire dissipated even at its core. Gorbachev survived an attempted coup in August 1991, but the vaunted communist union was effectively over. Four months later a system born in war and revolution, solidified through purge and brutality, expanded in war and paranoia, and sustained through repression and stasis was dead. A horrid, monstrous example of man’s depravity and inhumanity that many of us feared would survive years more was gone. Swept into history’s proverbial dustbin.

The list of those who contributed to the Evil Empire's demise was long: Reagan, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Pope John Paul II, Sakharov, George H. W. Bush, Imre Nagy and other Hungarian revolutionaries, Vaclav Havel, Lech Wałęsa and Solidarity, East German protesters who flooded Leipzig, Poland's first noncommunist Premier Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and many, many more in whom the light of liberty burned bright.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev's name should head the list. His original intentions were limited. He never wanted or expected the ultimate result. But that doesn't matter. He had a humane core that animated Soviet policy at the most critical moment. Communism might have been destined for death, but a largely nonviolent burial was not certain. Gorbachev ensured that result. And he did so even when realizing the fate that likely awaited his nation and career.

So happy birthday, Mikhail. You might be reviled in Russia for having allowed the imperial dominions to flee. But you responded to a higher call. And for that your people, along with the rest of us around the world, should be grateful. Thank you, and may you enjoy many more happy years with your family and friends.

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