



The Long, Lame Afterlife of Mikhail Gorbachev

A cautionary tale about what happens when you fail to see the revolution coming.

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM | JULY/AUGUST 2011



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In the most notable of the many photographs snapped at the gala held to mark his 80th birthday, Mikhail Gorbachev seems shorter and rounder than he did in his prime, back when he was one of the most important people in the world. He is inscrutable, only half-smiling; he also looks disheveled, and perhaps unsure of himself. Those impressions may of course be exaggerated by the fact that in this particular [picture](#), the onetime general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has his arm around Sharon Stone. Stone is wearing a

slinky, champagne-colored dress and bright red lipstick. She is grinning widely. In heels, she is a good 6 inches taller than Gorbachev, which certainly takes away from his aura of authority.

But then, it has been a very long time since Gorbachev actually had an aura of authority. In fact, everything about his garish birthday party screamed "B-list celebrity." Stone hasn't starred in a hit movie for a good while; neither has Kevin Spacey, who co-hosted the event alongside her. Also in attendance were Goldie Hawn, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ted Turner, Shirley Bassey, and, I'm sorry to say, Lech Walesa. The gala was ostensibly a fundraiser for the **Raisa Gorbachev Foundation**, which helps raise money for the care of children with cancer. But mostly the evening served to underline the strangeness of Gorbachev's fate. Here was the man who had launched glasnost and perestroika, who had presided over the dismantling of the Soviet empire and then the Soviet Union itself, one of the founding statesmen of modern Russia -- and yet his birthday gala was held in the Royal Albert Hall, in London, among people who hardly knew him.

This was not an accident: Twenty years after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia is ambivalent, at best, about Gorbachev. Far from being hailed as a hero, he is mostly remembered as a disastrous leader, if he is remembered at all. Yes, he launched a new era of openness with previously unthinkable freedoms in the 1980s, but in Russia he is also held responsible for the economic collapse of the 1990s. Most Russians don't thank him for ending the Soviet empire either. On the contrary, the current Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, has described the dismantling of the Soviet Union as "**the greatest geopolitical catastrophe**" of the 20th century. An opinion poll released in March, at the time of his birthday, showed that some 20 percent of Russians feel actively hostile toward Gorbachev, 47 percent of Russians "don't care about him at all," and only 5 percent admire him. And this was an improvement: Another poll, in 2005, found active hostility toward him in 45 percent of Russians. The word "perestroika" in Russia today has almost purely negative connotations.

In London and Washington, Gorbachev's reputation is of course more positive. He is regarded with affection -- he was invited to Ronald Reagan's funeral and to George H.W. Bush's own 80th birthday party -- and frequently hailed as a "symbol" of peace and the Cold War's welcome end. But he tends to be paid rather bland and even inappropriate compliments. At his birthday party, Paul Anka **sang a duet** with a Soviet-era rock musician. The chorus: "One day we'll recall, he was changing the world for us all." Stone then lauded him with a **rhetorical question**: "Where would Russia be if it weren't reaping the benefits of a free democracy?" I wish I'd been there to see the embarrassment on the faces of the spectators at the Royal Albert Hall -- for Russia has not actually reaped the benefits of free democracy, as every Russian in the room knew perfectly well. Even Gorbachev himself recently described Russian democracy as **a sham**: "We have institutions, but they don't work. We have laws, but they must be enforced."

Of course, Gorbachev is not to blame for the absence of political transparency in today's Kremlin, the weakness of political parties, the return of the former KGB as a source of influence and power, or the violence that Russian authorities intermittently use against dissenters of all kinds. The true causes of the 1990s economic collapse -- low oil prices, 70 years of bad economic policy, and the rapacious greed of the communist-educated Russian elite

-- were not his doing either. Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president, bears far more responsibility for Russia's corrupt economy, and Putin is surely more to blame for Russia's stagnant politics.

In fact, Gorbachev did not intend for things to end up the way they did. But then, Gorbachev never set out to become one of the founding fathers of modern Russia either. He was a reformer, not a revolutionary; his intention, when he became leader of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1985, was to revitalize the Soviet Union, not undo it. He knew that the system was stagnant. But he didn't understand why. Instead of abolishing central planning or calling for price reform, he announced a drastic anti-alcohol campaign: Perhaps if the workers drank less, they would produce more. Two months after taking power, he put restrictions on the sale of alcohol, raised the drinking age, and ordered cuts in production. The result: enormous losses to the Soviet budget and dramatic shortages of products, such as sugar, that people began using to brew vodka illegally at home.

Only after this campaign failed -- and only after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster brought home to him the real dangers of secrecy in an advanced industrial society -- did Gorbachev make his second attempt at reform. Like the anti-alcohol campaign, glasnost, or openness, was originally meant to promote economic efficiency. Open discussion of the Soviet Union's problems would, Gorbachev believed, strengthen communism. He certainly never intended his policy to change the USSR's economic system in any profound way. On the contrary, not long after taking power, he told a group of party economists, "Many of you see the solution to your problems in resorting to market mechanisms in place of direct planning. Some of you look at the market as a lifesaver for you economies. But, comrades, you should not think about lifesavers, but about the ship, and the ship is socialism."

Of course, Gorbachev later wound up changing his ideas, in economics and many other areas. Indeed, this pattern would repeat itself many times. Determined to save central planning, he told people to talk openly about it -- as a result of which they concluded that it didn't work. Determined to save communism, he let people criticize it -- as a result of which they decided they wanted capitalism. Determined to save the Soviet empire, he gave Eastern Europeans more freedom -- which they used to wriggle out of the empire's grasp as quickly as possible. He never understood the depth of cynicism in his own country or the depth of anti-communism in the Soviet satellite states. He never understood how rotten the central bureaucracies had become or how amoral the bureaucrats. He always seemed surprised by the consequences of his actions. In the end he wound up racing to catch up with history, rather than making it himself.

In fact, all of Gorbachev's most significant and most radical decisions were the ones he did not make. He did not order the East Germans to shoot at people crossing the Berlin Wall. He did not launch a war to prevent the defection of the Baltic states. He did not stop the breakup of the Soviet Union or prevent Yeltsin's rise to power. The end of communism certainly could have been far bloodier, and if someone else had been in charge it might have been. For his refusal to use violence, Gorbachev deserves Anka's corny serenade.

But because he did not understand what was happening, Gorbachev also did not prepare his compatriots for major political and economic change. He did not help design democratic institutions, and he did not lay the foundations for an orderly economic reform. Instead, he tried to hold on to power until the very last moment --

to preserve the Soviet Union until it was too late. As a result, he did not politically survive its collapse. Since leaving office he has tried three times to found new political parties. All have flopped.

Timing is everything in politics, as we are learning once again this year with the political upheavals in the Middle East. If Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had called for free elections a year ago, he would be remembered as a magnanimous statesman. If Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi had graciously abdicated in favor of his son Saif al-Islam, he would right now be the toast of every boardroom in Europe. If Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali had only started planning his retirement a little earlier, he'd be living quietly in a suburb of Tunis, not evading an Interpol arrest warrant in Saudi Arabia.

By the same token, if Gorbachev had carefully planned the dismantling of the Soviet Union from 1988, instead of angrily accepting it only after the fact in 1991, his birthday this year might have been celebrated by grateful Russians, instead of American actresses mouthing platitudes. As we will also learn in the Middle East, an orderly transition from dictatorship to democracy has two crucial elements: an elite willing to hand over power, and an alternative elite organized enough to accept it. Thanks partly to the reluctant and shambolic nature of Gorbachev's final years in power, Russia had neither.

It may well be that he could act no differently. Gorbachev knew nothing of real democracy, and even less of free market economics. Brought up and educated in Soviet culture, he was simply unable to think his way out of that system. He didn't prevent change, and he didn't shoot the people who finally made change happen. But at such a historic moment, ignorance is no excuse.

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