

Five Misinterpretations of the Ending of the Cold War

Archie Brown¹
Oxford University

Abstract

There are some generalizations about the end of the Cold War which are widely believed but are greatly misleading. The following five are among the most popular *misinterpretations* of the Cold War's ending: (1) The Cold War ended with the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991; (2) The Reagan Administration's military build-up forced the Soviet Union to concede defeat in the Cold War; (3) The Soviet Union's inability to compete with the West economically left it with no option but to reform; (4) A Western ideological offensive against Communism, led by Ronald Reagan with important help from Margaret Thatcher, forced the Soviet Union to change its thinking; (5) If Mikhail Gorbachev had not been chosen as Soviet leader in March 1985, some other Soviet leader would have had to pursue similar policies and the Cold War would still have ended largely on Western terms.

1. Archie Brown is Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford, a Fellow of the British Academy and an International Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His most recent book is *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (2020). His other books include *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age* (2014; Korean edition, 2017), chosen by Bill Gates as a book of the year; *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (2009); and *The Gorbachev Factor* (1996).

Introduction

Different criteria of what constituted the Cold War can produce different answers to questions about it, including its periodization. That suggests it is problematical to speak about ‘wrong’ answers to, for instance, the question, “When did the Cold War end?”. If, to take an example of special significance to readers of the *Jeju Forum Journal*, the division on the Korean peninsula between a Communist state in the North and a democracy in the South means the Cold War never did end, then millions of words have been written in vain. It makes better sense, however, to regard the Korean question as an unresolved part of *the legacy* of the Cold War². As commonly understood, the Cold War was, above all, a political, economic and ideological rivalry – an intense struggle by all means short of hot war – between the United States and its NATO allies, on the one side, and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact client states, on the other.

Misinterpretation One: Conflating the Cold War's ending with the Soviet Union's demise

If we accept that understanding of what constituted the Cold War, as I do, it is reasonable to view its most salient manifestation as the division of the European continent between a Communist East (more precisely, Eastern and East-Central Europe) and a democratic Western Europe (including the Scandinavian democracies of Northern Europe). The Communist regimes had been, for the most part, forcibly imposed by the USSR on territories Soviet troops liberated from Nazi occupation in the Second World War, leading to continuous Communist rule there from the second half of the 1940s. It was in 1989 that this major component of the Cold War was

removed when the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe peacefully ended Communist government without a shot being fired by a Soviet soldier to prevent this. Only in Romania was there large-scale violence, resulting from repression instigated by the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, who acted independently of (and with no support from) the Soviet leadership. That conflict between Romanians and Romanians ended with Ceaușescu's execution on 25 December 1989.

When the de-Communization of Eastern Europe is taken in conjunction with the transformation of Soviet foreign policy and of the Soviet political system in the second half of the 1980s, it is reasonable to argue that the Cold War was over by the end of 1989. By that time, it made little sense to describe even the Soviet Union itself as Communist. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), conservative Communists complained, had become a ‘debating society’. What, in Marxist-Leninist terms, was known as ‘democratic centralism’ had been a pillar of the Communist system. It involved iron discipline within the party, with extremely narrow scope even for intra-party debate. A united front was presented to non-party members and, still more, to foreigners.

In 1987-88, such democratic centralism was already withering away and in 1989 it was completely abandoned. Communist Party members publicly espoused different policies and competed vigorously against one another in elections for a new legislature that were held in March that year. Once the party had become openly disunited, the other major pillar of the system, the ‘leading role of the party’ – a euphemism for its monopoly of power – became

2. The Cold War's ending was not a guarantee against its resurgence. Whether the contemporary frosty relations between Washington and Moscow (even colder between Washington and Beijing) should, however, be called a Cold War is highly debatable, for there are many differences between the current relations and the characteristics of what I would call the ‘real Cold War’.

increasingly meaningless. The Soviet political system had become different in kind by the end of the 1980s.

The American administration, led by President George H.W. Bush, that took office in January 1989, was, however, unconvinced that the Cold War had ended. Bush, his Secretary of State James Baker, and especially his National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft believed that Reagan and George Shultz had been too trusting of Gorbachev. They rejected the outgoing Secretary of State Shultz's view that by December 1988 the Cold War was over. But by the end of their first year in office, events had moved so fast that it made no sense, even to such sceptical 'realists' as Bush, Baker and Scowcroft, to continue to believe that the Soviet Union's relations with the West amounted to Cold War. That ended concretely with the de-Communization of Eastern Europe and it ended symbolically with the Malta summit meeting in December 1989 when Bush and Gorbachev, as the American and Soviet leaders, gave a joint press conference. That had never happened before. Soviet relations with Bush and Baker had become at least as warm as they were in the last year of Reagan and Shultz. The Berlin Wall was demolished with impunity in November 1989, and this clearly presaged the reunification of Germany which occurred the following year.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in the last months of 1991, culminating in December that year, should not, then, be conflated with the end of the Cold War. That ended two years earlier. Moreover, breaking up the USSR was not a Cold War aim of the United States and its partners. On the contrary, they shared Gorbachev's hope that he would be able to preside over a voluntary federation embracing most of the existing union republics. They made an exception for the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, whose forcible incorporation in the USSR in 1940, had always been regarded as illegitimate by the Western powers. But they did not try to exploit Gorbachev's difficulties with these or other nations that made up the USSR. Bush

and Baker were worried about the possibility of civil war on Soviet territory and especially about the danger of nuclear weapons coming into irresponsible hands.

The Soviet breakup had numerous causes and antecedents, but it was, above all, an unintended consequence of (a) the pluralization of Soviet politics, (b) the transformation of Soviet foreign policy, and (c) the ending of the Cold War, the first two of these having facilitated the third³. When relations with the West became better than ever before, and a new tolerance prevailed in the Soviet Union itself, previously suppressed desires, including those of various national groups for greater autonomy, could now be turned into political demands.

Misinterpretation Two: A Triumphalist Explanation – The Reagan Military Build-Up

The argument that the Soviet Union, in effect, conceded defeat in the Cold War because they were intimidated by the increased military expenditure of the Reagan administration is widely held but highly misleading. In the mid-1980s the Soviet Union enjoyed an approximate military parity with the United States. Each side had the capacity utterly to destroy the other and, indeed, to endanger life throughout the entire planet. Yet until the early 1970s the United States had a clear military superiority over the Soviet Union, and in the second half of the 1940s it possessed nuclear weapons when the Soviet Union did not.

At a time, however, when the Soviet Union was clearly

3. Archie Brown, 'The End of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2015 pp. 158-165.

inferior in military strength to the United States, Communism expanded. Eastern Europe and a substantial part of Central Europe became part of a tightly controlled Soviet bloc during years when the United States alone had nuclear arms. Communism expanded also in Asia when the USA was the world's strongest military power and even in the Caribbean when Cuba turned Communist. The 1961 overthrow of the corrupt Batista regime in Cuba was not in itself a Communist revolution, but Fidel Castro welcomed Soviet economic help and political support, and before long adopted the institutions of a Communist state. Cuban foreign policy also became broadly aligned with that of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the period in which the Americans possessed military superiority, the Soviet leadership made no concessions to the US. They signed agreements only when they were of clear mutual benefit for both the USSR and the US. Examples were the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 (banning tests in the atmosphere and under water) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, ratified in 1972, which put strict limits on the missile defence systems that could be built in order to combat intercontinental ballistic missiles, thereby maintaining deterrence – what was known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

The response of the Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko – and of Defence Minister Dmitri Ustinov and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko – to the Reagan military build-up, including his Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), was to agree that the Soviet Union should build still more missiles. SDI involved massive investment in anti-missile defence to an extent which seemed to the Soviet Union, and to many objective outside observers, to be leading to contravention of the ABM Treaty. Less than two months after President Reagan announced his SDI initiative in March 1983, Soviet Defence Minister Ustinov told the Politburo that all planned missiles must be delivered, that

“Everything we are doing in relation to defence we should continue doing” and that the Soviet Union must actively oppose the “imperialist intrigues of our enemies⁴”.

For Mikhail Gorbachev, ending the Cold War was a priority, both because he wished to focus on domestic reform, and not spend ever more resources on the Soviet military-industrial complex, and because he took seriously the danger of catastrophic nuclear war resulting from political misunderstanding, human error or technical malfunction. Yet, there was a reason why all previous Soviet leaders were content with a continuation of the Cold War in which the USSR was recognized as one of the world's two military superpowers. They took pride in the international prestige this status accorded them, and it also helped to maintain their hegemony at home. If Soviet citizens believed that there was a foreign threat, then it was not difficult for the regime's leaders and propagandists to portray criticism of the system, or even of particular policies, as a form of treachery.

Moreover, the military-industrial complex was the most powerful institutional interest by far in the Soviet Union. Its representatives vigorously opposed some specific policies of the perestroika era, such as the unilateral cuts in the size of the Soviet conventional armed forces. They resented Gorbachev's political priorities and reforms which were undermining the influence of the army and defence industry on Soviet decision-making, and they were suspicious of the relations of trust that Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze were forming with their Western counterparts. If East-West relations were to become friendly, and there was no longer a foreign threat, this would not augur well for the gigantic size and prosperity

4. Quoted from transcript of a Politburo meeting of 31 May 1983 in Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2020), pp. 292 and 455.

of the military-industrial complex.

But Gorbachev prevailed, making full use of the fact that he was the de facto leader of the country by virtue of his position as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Accordingly, it was he who spoke for the Soviet Union in the frequent meetings with foreign heads of government, and he took every opportunity to set the foreign policy agenda. As a result of Gorbachev's domestic reforms, public opinion was also acquiring a new significance. Dread of war was a more powerful sentiment in Soviet than in American society, given that the USSR lost approximately twenty-seven million of its citizens in the Second World War, whereas the US lost well under half a million Americans. A friendly visit to Moscow by American President, and lifelong anti-Communist, Ronald Reagan in 1988 for his last summit meeting with Gorbachev, temporarily silenced critics within the political elite. Reagan's benevolent manner achieved more than his earlier belligerence. For a broader Soviet public, the Reagan visit appeared to provide tangible evidence that Gorbachev's policies had made their country – and the wider world – a safer place.

Misinterpretation Three: The Soviet Union was forced to reform because it could not compete with the West economically

For Mikhail Gorbachev, and some of those who supported him, the slowdown in Soviet economic growth was, indeed, one of the stimuli to reform. A related stimulus was the technological lag between the USSR and the West (with the Soviet economy also comparing unfavourably with the more recently industrializing countries of Asia). But the forces opposed to reform were formidable. While it was not easy to change Soviet

foreign policy fundamentally, as Gorbachev did, *to change the economic system* was many times harder. A majority of Soviet government ministries existed in order to administer different sectors of the command economy. Half of the departments of the Central Committee of the CPSU were concerned with the economy. These ministers and department heads had a strong stake in the existing system. That was true also of countless Party officials and factory managers in every part of the country. Collectively, they represented a formidable obstacle to radical economic reform.

An even clearer reason, however, why the economic determinist explanation of Soviet reform and of the end of the Cold War fails to convince is that, by his second year in power, Gorbachev was giving a higher priority to political than to economic reform. The political changes became much more radical with each passing year, and they did nothing to improve the economy. In contrast, any actual economic reform was modest in scope, and it was not until 1990, five years after he became Soviet leader, that Gorbachev was converted to the view that the country should move to an essentially market economy. Accepting that argument in principle, he did not, however, press for it to be put into practice. A fundamental economic reform would mean moving to market prices. This would have posed great political dangers. So long as prices were fixed centrally, there would continue to be inefficiencies and shortages. But though Soviet citizens complained about empty shelves and queues, they were familiar with them. They were likely to be even angrier if the state subsidies on basic foodstuffs and on the heating and lighting of their apartments were to be removed. By 1990-91, Gorbachev's popularity and that of perestroika, both of which had been high during earlier years, were declining very fast.

In an article published as recently as July 2021, Gorbachev wrote that, in retrospect, he realized that he “should have told people the painful truth” about the Soviet economy and made truly radical economic reforms

in 1987-88 which was “politically and economically the right time to undertake them⁵”. That reassessment is almost certainly correct. At that time Gorbachev’s authority within the party and state and his popularity in the country were still high. Introducing price rises, with the market making things worse for many people before they got better, would have lost him some support, but he had enough political capital in 1987 or 1988 to survive this. By 1990-91 the economy had gone from bad to worse. It was no longer a fully functioning command economy, for commands were no longer obeyed, but it was not yet a market economy. Moreover, the unity of the Soviet state was under severe threat from nationalist movements. For Gorbachev to put his full political weight behind a move to the market at a time when he was being politically assailed from multiple directions would in 1990-91 have been significantly riskier than in 1987-88. His opponents in the party, government, security organs and the army who put him, along with his family, under house arrest in his holiday home on the Crimean coast in August 1991, could have used any increase in unrest or breakdown of order as an excuse to strike earlier, and with greater chance of success.

Another major reason why far-reaching economic reform did not take place is that the person who was in day-to-day charge of the economy was Politburo member and Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikolai Ryzhkov. He had been a factory manager and industrial administrator before entering the central party and governmental apparatus, and the kind of change he favoured was both limited and essentially technocratic. He constituted a major obstacle to any move to market prices. The numerous members of the Council of Ministers who headed economic ministries reported to Ryzhkov. Like him, they clung to the traditional Soviet economic system in which they had negotiated their path to the ministerial summit.

The person who played the most important part during

1990 in persuading Gorbachev of the superiority of a market economy over the Soviet bureaucratic system was his economic aide (for that one year), Nikolai Petrakov. He found it much easier to get Gorbachev to understand and accept his arguments than he did in his meetings with Ryzhkov. When I interviewed Petrakov in Moscow in June 1991, he told me that during his first four years as Soviet leader Gorbachev had confidence in Ryzhkov. By late 1989 he realized that more drastic economic change was required and that Ryzhkov would be opposed to it. That was when he decided to ask Petrakov, a prominent economist of known pro-market views, to become one of his aides. Petrakov also told me of a conversation he had with Ryzhkov in which he argued that there was no need for a State Committee on Prices and it should, therefore, be abolished. Ryzhkov replied, “You’re right, but in a few years’ time”. Petrakov told Ryzhkov that “you talk about the market the way we used to talk about communism – it’s always sometime later⁶!”.

Misinterpretation Four: A Western ideological offensive forced the change in Soviet thinking

Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had longstanding anti-Communist and anti-Soviet credentials, and both of them were active in their support of Soviet dissidents and oppositionists in other Communist states. The Soviet army newspaper sarcastically referred to

5. Mikhail S. Gorbachev, ‘Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective’, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2021, pp. 211-238, at p. 218.

6. Petrakov was not, of course, referring to Communism in the sense of ‘Communist system’ but to the utopia of a classless communist society – the imaginary goal towards which the party, armed with Marxist-Leninist ‘theory’, was supposedly leading Soviet citizens.

Thatcher as ‘The Iron Lady’ in 1975, when she was not yet British prime minister but was Leader of the Opposition. The article was intended as ridicule, but she wore the title they accorded her as a badge of pride. It also enhanced her standing in the United States, especially in the Republican Party. By the mid-1980s there was absolutely nothing new about Reagan’s and Thatcher’s rhetorical battle against Communism, and hitherto it had met only with counter-attacks from Soviet leaders and the regime’s propagandists.

What was new was that from late 1983 and in 1984 Reagan and Thatcher were persuaded that the Cold War had become more dangerous and that it was important to try to engage with the Soviet leadership. But Soviet leaders were not convinced that Reagan had changed. In fact, he sent out mixed signals. Sometimes he emphasized his desire for peace and a willingness to engage, but when he combined this with putting vast resources into anti-missile defence, frequently accompanied by hostile comment on the Soviet system, the assumption in Moscow was that the peaceful component of Reagan’s ‘Peace through Strength’ policy was merely for domestic consumption, since Reagan would be seeking a second term in the November 1984 presidential election.

Writing after the USSR had ceased to exist, the long-serving Soviet Ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, who under Gorbachev’s leadership became head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, was dismissive of the idea that either Reagan’s ideological offensive or his Administration’s military build-up helped to end the Cold War. Dobrynin wrote:

The impact of Reagan’s hard-line policy on the internal debates in the Kremlin and on the evolution of the Soviet leadership was exactly the opposite from the one intended by Washington. It strengthened those in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the security apparatus who had

been pressing for a mirror-image of Reagan’s own policy. Ronald Reagan managed to create a solid front of hostility among our leaders. Nobody trusted him. Any of his proposals almost automatically were considered with suspicion. This unique situation in our relations threatened dangerous consequences⁷.

That was the atmosphere in the Soviet leadership when Gorbachev succeeded Konstantin Chernenko as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in March 1985. He was alone in the Politburo at that time in concluding that it was important to try to work with Reagan. Partly as a result of the great authority his position as party leader gave him, and partly through his powers of persuasion, Gorbachev succeeded in getting sufficient support from the Politburo to negotiate with his American counterpart. But there was scepticism on the part of some members of the top leadership team as well as within the military-industrial complex. At a Politburo meeting in October 1986, KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov said, “The Americans understand only strength⁸”. That view was widely shared in the Soviet party and governmental bureaucracy, not only within the military-industrial complex. Gorbachev himself was unconvinced that Reagan was serious about seeking better relations with the Soviet Union. Margaret Thatcher played a significant role in persuading him that Reagan was sincere in his peaceful intentions and also in convincing Reagan that Gorbachev was a different kind of Soviet leader and one with whom he should enter into dialogue.

In every year of his second term, Reagan had a summit meeting with Gorbachev. When they got together in Geneva in November 1985, this was the first time an

7. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)* (Random House, New York, 1995), p. 482.

8. Brown, *The Human Factor*, p. 293.

American President had met a Soviet leader since the Carter-Brezhnev meeting in 1979. Thatcher had met Gorbachev a year earlier than Reagan did. He was invited to make a week-long visit to Britain in 1984 when he was not yet Soviet leader, although he looked the likeliest successor to the ailing Konstantin Chernenko. Gorbachev arrived in London in December that year, accompanied by his wife Raisa and a large entourage. In a five-hour meeting at the Prime Minister's country residence, Gorbachev and Thatcher argued vigorously, but at the same time established relations of mutual respect. At the end of the visit, Mrs Thatcher famously said, "I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together⁹."

Gorbachev had an unusually open and receptive mind by any standards, remarkably so for someone who had risen through the hierarchy of the CPSU. He absorbed information and ideas from many sources. There is no evidence that the hard-line rhetoric of Reagan or Thatcher influenced him, but constructive and frank discussion did. He took seriously some of Thatcher's arguments about how Soviet foreign policy was perceived in the West. It was Reagan's and Thatcher's turn to engagement with the Soviet leadership to which Gorbachev responded, not their earlier ideological offensive.

Ideologically, Gorbachev felt most at home with European social democrats. He had especially warm relations with the Spanish Socialist prime minister Felipe González and the former West German Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt. Gorbachev was also very open to critical thinking and new ideas emanating from social scientists and specialists on foreign countries within the CPSU. A lot of innovative thinking had been going on in Soviet research institutes for at least a couple of decades before Gorbachev came to power, but its authors had to engage in self-censorship or publish their views indirectly to avoid getting into trouble with the pre-perestroika Soviet authorities. Gorbachev, in contrast, encouraged Soviet specialists

not only to think the unthinkable but also to say it out loud. In this changed atmosphere of free discussion, the party intellectuals' own critiques and policy ideas became more radical. Gorbachev was not only receptive to the 'New Thinking', he became its principal exponent.

It was a major speech by Gorbachev, and one into which some of the most thoughtful and innovative Soviet party intellectuals had contributed suggestions, which ended the Cold War in its ideological dimension. This was Gorbachev's address to the United Nations on 7 December 1988¹⁰. It embodied Soviet 'New Thinking' on foreign policy and went beyond what Gorbachev, not to speak of any previous Soviet leader, had said hitherto, with the announcement of both breakthrough practical measures and highly ambitious goals. What he said about imminent massive cuts in the size and composition of the Soviet armed forces caught most attention at the time. Addressing Western concerns about the superior strength of Soviet conventional forces, Gorbachev announced that they would be reduced by 500,000 personnel over the next two years. Defence officials in Western Europe were impressed by the fact that the cuts were to take place especially in the forces that would be deployed in rapid offensive operations into West European territory.

In a passage of his speech that was both an implied repudiation of previous Soviet priorities and a criticism of the rival American superpower, Gorbachev said that "a one-sided emphasis on military strength" ultimately

9. Mrs Thatcher's British interpreter in her 1984 discussion with Gorbachev, Tony Bishop, later said he had felt he was witnessing something close to "a flirtation between two people with much to gain from and offer to each other". For this, and further detail on Gorbachev's important visit to Britain in 1984, see Archie Brown, *The Human Factor*, pp. 50-55 and 124-125.

10. For a more detailed elaboration of the arguments contained in this article, see Brown, *The Human Factor*.

“weakens other components of national security”. More broadly, Gorbachev’s message was one of ‘live and let live’. He said that the people of every country had the right to decide for themselves what kind of political and economic system they wished to live in. This could be interpreted as giving a green light to the peoples of Eastern Europe to remove their Communist rulers (although Gorbachev’s hopes were for radical reform rather than revolutionary change), and the words were taken at face value by the citizens of East and Central Europe the following year. Gorbachev’s UN speech represented a radical break with Marxism-Leninism. He called for a “deideologization of interstate relations” and for priority to be given to those values that united all of humanity as distinct from those of any one class, nation or group.

Yet, a great part of the American foreign policy establishment failed to appreciate either Gorbachev’s words or the significance of the change in Moscow. That applied both to large segments of the Reagan Administration and to the incoming Bush administration. The leading Soviet specialist in the CIA Robert Gates dismissed Gorbachev’s UN speech as a “largely rhetorical flourish” and Brent Scowcroft, already chosen to be National Security Adviser to George H.W. Bush, told a television interviewer in January 1989 that Gorbachev’s foreign policy “might be secretly intended to throw the West off its guard” and that “the Cold War is not over¹¹”. The departing Secretary of State George Shultz, in contrast, was hugely impressed by Gorbachev’s UN speech. He was also worried about the loss of momentum in US-Soviet relations that looked likely to occur when Bush replaced Reagan in the White House. In his memoirs, Shultz writes that he was “apprehensive that the ‘new team’ [in Washington] did not understand or accept that the cold war was over¹²”.

The Cold War was not quite over at the end of 1988, for Europe remained divided between a Communist East and a democratic West. But it was clear that if

Gorbachev was sincere in saying that the people of every country, without exception, had the right to choose the kind of system in which they wished to live, then the days of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe were numbered. Many of the themes and ideas in Gorbachev’s UN speech were ahead of their time. They included his concern with “the worldwide ecological threats” that in many regions had become “simply frightening” and his call for a centre for ecological assistance to be set up under the auspices of the United Nations. This was in keeping with his emphasis on values and interests that should unite all of humanity and the need to seek an “all-human consensus on movement towards a new world order”. Whether that is characterized as excessively idealistic, even utopian, or – on the contrary – a higher realism, it represented a total break with past Soviet dogma. As Pavel Palazhchenko, Gorbachev’s English-language interpreter on that American visit and his interpreter and adviser to the present day, observed as recently as 2020: “Re-reading that speech today, it is difficult to find in it even traces of Marxism-Leninism¹³”.

Misinterpretation Five: Any Soviet leader would have had to do what Gorbachev did

If Western policy had left the Soviet Union with no option but to pursue a constructive and even conciliatory foreign policy, to liberalize and substantially democratize the Soviet system, and to allow the countries of East-

11. Ibid., pp. 241-246.

12. George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (Scribner’s, New York, 1993), p. 1138.

13. Pavel Palazhchenko, “On khotel vnedrit’ v politiku moral’”, *Mir peremen*, No. 4, 2020, pp. 119-124, at p. 122.

Central Europe to eject their Communist rulers and become fully independent, then the agency of Gorbachev would be immaterial. However, as I have argued here, these determinist arguments do not stand up to close scrutiny. More specifically, there is no shortage of information on the opinions, priorities and mindsets of the other surviving members of the Politburo when Chernenko died in March 1985. These men were the only people who, in the context of the Soviet system, were eligible for consideration to be General Secretary of the CPSU.

We know a lot about all ten of these Politburo members. The sources include the memoirs of several of them, interviews with them, their actions, their public and private observations, Politburo transcripts and other archival evidence. On the basis of that knowledge, it is safe to conclude that, Gorbachev apart, none of them would have undertaken radical political reform, introducing contested elections for a legislature with real powers. None of them would have dreamt of declaring that the people of every country had the right to decide for themselves in what kind of political and economic system they wished to live, thereby giving encouragement to national independence movements in Eastern Europe. Those changes, in turn, raised the hopes of the most disaffected nations within the Soviet Union itself and ultimately contributed to the breakup of the USSR. That was very much an unintended consequence of perestroika.

Western political leaders were pleasantly surprised by the restraint Gorbachev showed in the face of these fissiparous tendencies. He tried to hold the Union together through a process of negotiation between the federal centre and the republics, with the aim of turning what had been essentially a pseudo-federation into a genuinely federal state. Many of the leading figures in the party and governmental bureaucracy, the army, and the KGB were horrified by Gorbachev's commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes which called into question the very existence of Soviet

statehood. Anatoly Gromyko, the son of the long-serving Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, complained about Gorbachev's unwillingness to use "even minimal force" in order "to preserve the Soviet Union". Some senior members of the Soviet leadership (which contained people of very different outlooks) went much further in their condemnation. Vladimir Kryuchkov, who had succeeded Chebrikov as KGB Chairman in 1988, speaking just over a decade later, described Gorbachev's behaviour as the most "treasonous policy" in "human history". Oleg Baklanov, the Central Committee Secretary who oversaw the military-industrial complex, said that "the work of Gorbachev as General Secretary" and of those he promoted to Politburo membership and "who continued to support him and carried out his policy" constituted "the highest form of betrayal of the interests of the state and its leaders"¹⁴.

The dramatic change in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s cannot be understood without awareness that behind the monolithic façade which, in pre-perestroika decades, the Communist Party presented to its own citizens and the outside world there was, in private, a wide diversity of views among its members. There was a battle of ideas within the CPSU, which took an esoteric form in the pre-perestroika USSR but came out into the open in the Gorbachev era. At any time, having the party leader on your side played a huge part in determining who would win that battle. Not only the words of the general secretary had a special authority. He

14. These quotations are taken from the transcript of a round-table conference in Moscow in 1999, in which the high-ranking Soviet officials who mounted a coup against Gorbachev in August 1991 were questioned by a small group of Western scholars, including the author of this article. The conference was organized by the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Mershon Center of Ohio State University. For further details, see Brown, *The Human Factor*, pp. 293, 296, 455 and 476.

also had a substantial power of appointment – very great when it came to choosing his aides and advisers and, less absolute, but greater than anyone else’s, in engineering dismissals from and promotions to the Politburo.

Gorbachev, as noted earlier, had greater power in foreign policy than in economic policy where there were a great many veto players within the system and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers Ryzhkov wielded considerable power. Within a year of becoming general secretary, Gorbachev succeeded in replacing the Foreign Minister, the head of the International Department of the Central Committee, the head of the Central Committee Department responsible for relations with other Communist states, and the top foreign policy adviser to the party leader. That last appointment, of the well-informed and open-minded Anatoly Chernyaev, was at least as significant as the choice of Eduard Shevardnadze as Foreign Minister. Gorbachev also brought into his inner circle a strong group of ‘New Thinkers’, among them Aleksandr Yakovlev, to whom he gave very rapid promotion within the Secretariat and Politburo of the Central Committee. Yakovlev was especially influential up until 1989. In his last two years in the Kremlin, Gorbachev distanced himself somewhat from Yakovlev who had already been fiercely attacked by conservative Communists at a time when they still hesitated to berate the general secretary.

Making full use of his power of appointment, Gorbachev *changed the balance of influence* within intraparty debates. Gorbachev talked a lot and was often criticised for being too loquacious. But he was also a good listener. Since he himself was interested in ideas, and quick to assimilate information, he was influenced by those whose careers he had advanced. What does this amount to? It means that the assertion that Gorbachev did what any Soviet leader would have felt compelled to do on coming to power in 1985 is at least as gross a misinterpretation of political reality as the previous four

misleading generalizations discussed in this article. That is not just because Gorbachev had a different mindset from those with whom he sat with round the Politburo table at the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s. It is also a point about institutional power. The party general secretaryship was a repository of vast power in the Soviet Union – until Gorbachev changed that structure so fundamentally that he reduced those powers and that authority (and the new office of President he acquired in March 1990 did not replicate them).

Conclusion

I am far from arguing that all that really mattered in the process of ending the Cold War was one individual, Mikhail Gorbachev. On the contrary, the roles of Ronald Reagan, George Shultz, George H.W. Bush, James Baker, Margaret Thatcher and (on the German question) Helmut Kohl were all hugely significant. And even in the Soviet context, the special importance of Gorbachev is at least as much a point about the distribution of power within Soviet institutional structures as it is about Gorbachev’s personality and mindset. In the highly centralized Soviet system, the person who stood at the head of the party bureaucracy, chaired the Politburo, and was the highest representative of the Soviet Union in international relations was the general secretary. Every general secretary made some difference, the nearest exception to that generalization being the colourless Chernenko. A few – Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev – made a vast difference. But it was only Gorbachev, and while he was still general secretary, whose thinking evolved to the point of rejection of Marxist-Leninist ideology, to which all of his predecessors (differences of interpretation notwithstanding) continued to subscribe until the end of their days.

Thus, the transformation of Soviet foreign policy

was underpinned by profound ideational change, most eloquently expressed in Gorbachev's December 1988 New York speech at the United Nations. The 'New Thinking' itself evolved rapidly in the second half of the 1980s, encompassing both international policy and domestic politics. Pluralization of the political system was dramatically manifested in the first genuinely contested elections in the history of the USSR, held in March 1989. Systemic change and the new tolerance in Moscow stimulated and facilitated the democratization and independent statehood of the countries of Eastern Europe in the course of 1989. That metamorphosis, in turn, raised expectations among the most disaffected nations within the Soviet Union. The subsequent disintegration of the USSR into fifteen successor states at the end of 1991 was, in large part, an unintended consequence of the ending of the Cold War and of the removal within the Soviet Union of the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Gorbachev actively promoted, especially from 1988 onwards, the new

political pluralism, even though it led to a diminution of central state power and, ultimately, of his own powers, while he attempted, through persuasion rather than violent coercion, to preserve a Soviet state.

In that last endeavour he failed, but the collapse of the USSR occurred two years after the Cold War ended. It remains, therefore, a great mistake to conflate the falling-apart of the Soviet state with the Cold War's ending. The US administration led by Bush the elder, along with America's European allies, was supportive of Gorbachev's attempts to keep as many as possible of the Soviet republics within a democratized, voluntary, and genuinely federal 'renewed Union', as the Soviet leader termed it. The Cold War was over when Europe ceased to be divided into two hostile camps. Its ending was both symbolized and ratified at the harmonious Gorbachev-Bush Malta summit meeting on 2-3 December 1989. Reflecting the optimism of the time, the Soviet press spokesman Gennady Gerasimov announced, "We buried the Cold War at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea".

