

# HOW COMMUNIST IS GORBACHEV'S COMMUNISM?

By

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## 1. Is He or Isn't He?

"We cannot join the world economy without a steady transition to a free market," declared Gorbachev before departing for the G7 meeting in London. But then, giving his audience a bad case of double bind, he added that the anticipated transition to a free market

does not mean, though, that we are departing from socialist ideals. On the contrary, through democracy we'll assert the principle of socialism.<sup>1</sup>

So, is Gorbachev a communist, a "reform communist,"<sup>2</sup> bent on preserving the party even at the price of giving it a human face, or is he a new politician whose mission is to destroy the party, as some of his party comrades seem to suggest? And what does it mean to say that he is or is not? These questions are crucial not only because of their immediate policy implications but, more important, for understanding the longterm ideological dynamic of perestroika and the postcommunist Soviet Union, whatever name and shape it will eventually assume.

If speeches are a guide, Gorbachev sees himself as a communist in three different ways. First, he is a communist as one who is in the employ of the Communist Party:

It so happened that my professional employment did not last very long. Soon [after graduation from the University], I was recommended for a post in the Communist Youth

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<sup>1</sup>As reported by David Remnick, Washington Post, 13 July 1991 (reprinted in The San Francisco Chronicle, 13 July 1991).

<sup>2</sup>Martin Malia, "A New Russian Revolution?" NYRB, July 1991. For a review of recent interpretations of Gorbachev by American Sovietologists, see George Breslauer, "Understanding Gorbachev: Diverse Perspectives," Soviet Economy 7, no. 2 (1991):110-120.

organization. Since that time, I have held only Komsomol and Party posts.<sup>3</sup>

Second, Gorbachev is a member of the Communist Party. This fact, as the saying goes, must speak for itself. Yet, even a cursory examination indicates that the designation is problematic. For even though Gorbachev does acknowledge publicly his membership in the organization he happens to head, he does so not without quite a bit of hedging. Take, for example, his appeal to a gathering of Byelorussia's scientific and artistic intelligentsia this past February [my italics]:

I can repeat to my dear fellow party members: I have never no matter before what audience experienced any shame in saying that I am a communist and *committed to the socialist idea*.<sup>4</sup>

Does commitment to the "socialist idea" define one as a communist? Or is the socialist idea something that Gorbachev is committed to in addition to being a communist? Even more remarkable is that Gorbachev's commitment is not to socialism as such, but to a socialist *idea*. These are striking ambiguities, coming as they are from the head of the Communist Party.

Indeed, such terms as communism and socialism have progressively been displaced in Gorbachev's statements by the *socialist idea* and, coupled with it, the *socialist choice*, allegedly made by the people of the Russian empire in accepting the Bolshevik Revolution. Now, an idea is ordinarily associated with something rather dreamy and nebulous, and, for a Marxist especially, something suspiciously insubstantial. The *socialist choice* does not quite fit with the Marxism scheme either, substituting for the virile dialectic of class struggle, the nambypamby notions of contingency and choice, implying that the people, having decided one way in 1917, may yet change their mind and make a different selection.

That such an idea can be implied by the General Secretary of the Communist Party should not be entirely surprising. Back in 1987, in a speech commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution, Gorbachev renounced the Party's old Leninist claim to absolute control over public discourse. Towards the end of the speech, when the attention of his hardy comrades must have begun to flag, Gorbachev all of a sudden declared that nobody possessed a monopoly on truth, that individual and groups were entitled to see the world differently, according to their knowledge and experience, and, adding insult to injury, that truth itself could be arrived at only in the course of a dialogue among a variety of perspectives. Prior to this astonishing statement (ignored, incidentally,

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<sup>3</sup>The statement was made in May 1989. See M.S. Gorbachev, Izbrannye rechi i stat'i (Selected Speeches and Essays), vol. 7 (Moscow, 1990), p. 498 .

<sup>4</sup>Gorbachev, Izvestiia, 1 March 1991.

by the American press), truth used to be identified with the Party line at any given historical moment, exceptional deviations notwithstanding. Even Khrushchev at his most radical, as he was debunking Stalinism at the Twenty Second Party Congress, could not give up this essence of the Soviet communist creed. But on 2 November 1987, the party in the person of Gorbachev, and very probably in a manner surprising to most of its members, renounced its monopoly on the meaning of words, which is to say gave up its ghost. In ideological terms, everything that has happened since, including the abandonment of the constitutional guarantee of the Party's monopoly on power, is an epilogue of party history.

When Gorbachev thus put to rest the party's monopoly on truth, communism ceased to be used as a positive term, and socialism, for its part, metamorphosed from a term designating a *mature, incomplete, objectively functioning, barracks*, or an evolving form of social organization into, well, an idea. From then on Gorbachev was no longer under any compulsion to build socialism; a "commitment to the idea" alone would do just as well.

## 2. Communist, *faute de mieux*

Third, Gorbachev has been presenting himself as a communist for apparent pragmatic reasons, for until recently one could not realistically expect to engage in bigtime political activity outside party channels. And since there was no other developed party around (one is being set up only now by Shervadnadze and Yakovlev<sup>5</sup>), Gorbachev became a communist *faute de mieux*. Gorbachev's interview with The Washington Post's Robert Kaiser in May, 1988, affords a glimpse of this *faute de mieux* communist. Trying to explain to the American correspondent why he kept maintaining his commitment to socialism (an oddity in Kaiser's view given the general drift of perestroika), Gorbachev let down his guard and complained about the human material he was obliged to work with in his line of duty: [emphasis is mine]:

Our country is such that today nine tenths of its population consist of the people who were born and grew up during the socialist period. And look at the present leadership: *there is simply nothing they know how to do except build socialism,...*

And pulling back, he concluded the sentence with a qualifier reminiscent of contemporary Soviet absurdist prose: "which has opened for us a great road in all spheres of life."<sup>6</sup> One cannot help recalling the proud tirade of Yegor Ligachev that rang out at the Nineteenth Party Conference (May/June 1988):

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<sup>5</sup>See David Remnick's report in The Washington Post, 30 June 1991.

<sup>6</sup>Gorbachev, Vol. 6, p. 249.

They ask: and what were you doing during the stagnation period? Building socialism! That's my reply.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Specter of Alexander Herzen: Peasant Commune and Russian Socialism

Gorbachev's elliptical equivocations notwithstanding, it would be too simplistic to paint him as a political opportunist, who has taken advantage of his party career merely for personal or some other unworthy aim. For Gorbachev is a patriot of the Soviet Union, the heir of Imperial Russia, which, according to him, was exceedingly generous, unlike its Western fellowimperialists, with the peoples it incorporated into its realm:

Just think: this country of ours has a thousand yearlong history as a multinational state. We all bear the imprint of this history. We all, the Russians in particular, have this history in our genes, yes, we do very much so. And unlike other empires, this state did not emerge as a result of pillaging others (although we had that, too).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, according to Gorbachev, the statehood of the Soviet Union should be traced, not to the October Revolution, not even to the Imperial Russia of Peter the Great, but to that hallowed moment a millennium ago, when St. Vladimir, the sovereign of Kievan Russia, baptized his subjects in the Dnieper. Whether Gorbachev addresses his home audience or foreign public, as in the March 20, 1991, interview with Der Spiegel, he never tires of emphasizing that "our state has been shaped as a multinational one throughout the entire millennium."<sup>9</sup>

Picking Kievan Russia at the moment of conversion to Christianity as the symbolic starting point for the presentday Soviet Union Gorbachev offers his compatriots a vision of a holy center, a pure and fabulous source in which the tarnished institutions of the Russian state, Russian "multinational" nationalism, a.k.a. RussianSoviet imperialism, and the Russian Orthodox Church could redeem their erstwhile sanctity and authority. This conjuring up of continuity between Russia's holy past and the presentday Soviet Union, however questionable it may be as history, loudly proclaims Gorbachev's patriotic, nationalist credentials. A sensitive rhetorician, he avoids using the word *Motherland* when speaking about the USSR, choosing Fatherland (*Otechestvo*), a term far more preferable in the patriarchal tradition and a key shibboleth of the *true patriots* of the Russian State. Gorbachev's nationalism should help explain his continuing emphasis on the "socialist choice," for it was made, according to his scheme, by the *people*, the source of the

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<sup>7</sup>XIX Vsesoiuznaia konferentsiia Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz: 28 iunია-1 iulia 1988 goda: stenograficheskii otchet v dvukh tomakh. Moskva : Izd-vo polit. lit-ry, 1988.

<sup>8</sup>Gorbachev, Izvestiia 1 December 1990.

<sup>9</sup>Gorbachev, Izvestiia, 25 March 1991.

sovereignty of a nation state, and not, as a true Bolshevik would insist, by the messianic *class*, the proletariat.

These claims allow us to reconstruct what might be called Gorbachev's philosophy of Russian history. In a manner similar to the construction of a classical novel, with its obligatory associations and mutual determination of ideas, characters, and events, Gorbachev paints the history of the Russian state in accordance with the principle of intergenerational continuity based on the belief in a particular historical predestination of Russia and its special role in the history of European civilization. Aware that this aspect of Russian messianism plays a significant role in his understanding of Russian history, Gorbachev goes out of his way to emphasize its nonaggressive nature:

We must enter the new democratic form of existence, reach out for the humane democratic socialism. How? Should we once again begin hacking with an axe? Should we once again herd the people into these democratic forms? First of all, this would mean a total lack of respect for the people, and, second, nobody has a right to claim to be a messiah.<sup>10</sup>

As to the messianic claims themselves, Gorbachev does appear to be protesting a little too much, and his protestations tend to reveal rather than conceal his proud Russian "multinational" nationalism. One such protestation slipped into his recent interview for Der Spiegel. Insisting that the Soviet Union is ideally suited to play the role of an international mediator in conflicts between the "rich and the poor," Gorbachev, in a nonsequitur, warned his potential critics against accusing him of messianism:

This approach is perceived as a claim to a messianic role, as an illusion, that is, negatively. But let us not forget that many [movements] which began as a heresy subsequently conquered the world.<sup>11</sup>

According to Gorbachev, the key events of Russian history, and certainly the October revolution, are not accidental but are determined, as in a myth or a novel. Gorbachev's determinism has little in common with that of Marx or Marxist philosophers of history, who see history as a story of class struggle; rather, it is based on certain collective characteristics of the Russians as a people, in particular their alleged commitment to the ideals of social equity and, consequently, their predisposition to a socialist revolution. As Gorbachev himself has acknowledged, if indirectly, on more than one occasion, this predilection, married to the utopian illusion and Bolshevik lust for power, has led to catastrophic failures. "We must continue to be grounded in reality and not abandon ourselves to illusions," he pleaded with Polish intellectuals in Warsaw in July of 1988,

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<sup>10</sup>Gorbachev, Izvestiia 1 December 1990.

<sup>11</sup>Gorbachev, Izvestiia 25 March 1991, p. 4.

To do otherwise would be most dangerous. Again I emphasize, we have learned this lesson on the basis of our own experience. Sometimes, what we know about our own history has such an effect that we get practically thrown out of kilter.

These catastrophes occurred, above all, because in the intraparty struggles; the "party of power," to use Alexander Yakovlev's formula, has vanquished the "party of the idea." Speaking to members of "Democratic Unity," a group of liberal delegates to the Twenty Eighth Party Congress last July, Yakovlev explained:

[From the beginning] there have existed two parties: the party of the idea and the party of power. For a long time, the leadership was in the hands of the party of power. If only we can transform the party into the party of the idea, then we will have accomplished a historical feat. I wonder if we can do it.<sup>12</sup>

As to the *socialist idea* itself, it has still retained considerable historical energy, and not just because it allegedly made such a nice fit with the alleged, deeplyrooted aspirations of the Russian people, or, in a less charitable version of the same argument, because the Russians were alone gullible or *oriental despotic* enough to take seriously the fairy tales of Western utopian sages. No, Gorbachev requires a more disinterested, preferably Western guarantee of the *idea's* viability. And what better proof can there than the conviction and experience of a Western Social Democratic leader currently in power the Prime Minister of Spain, Felipe Gonzales, for one:

I have recently had a discussion on this subject with Felipe Gonzales, also a committed socialist, who has his own ideas, his own approach, his own arguments. And I see: this idea is alive. I am not defending it merely out of duty as the General Secretary [of the Party], no, but out of conviction, because I reason: if it is socialism, then it is, above all, democracy. If it is democracy, then it is, above all, freedom. Or, perhaps, freedom comes first, and democracy follows from it, [I mean] political freedom, human freedom, spiritual, and economic. And, of course, increasing [social] justice.<sup>13</sup>

A form of European humanism, the "socialist idea" has been developing not only in the Soviet Union and the countries of what unabashedly used to be called the socialist

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<sup>12</sup>Cited from the original tape recording of the meeting; transcribed and translated into English by the author.

<sup>13</sup>Gorbachev's speech of 28 November 1990. *Izvestija*, 1 December 1990, p. 4.

*camp*, but, more important, in the SocialDemocratic movements of the prosperous and irresistibly attractive Western Europe.

Gorbachev's belief in the historical predisposition of the Russian people to socialist ideologies has an eminent pedigree in Russian intellectual history: the Russian socialism of Alexander Herzen and his followers among the Russian Populists, who tended to see in the egalitarian practices of the Russian peasant commune a form of "organic socialism." Invoking the pathos of Russian Populism, Gorbachev is able both to advocate a transition to a market economy and to retain a nominal, if only emotional, link to socialism. The following exchange between Gorbachev and a group of writers and artists was reported in Izvestia on 1 December, 1990:

While I am in favor of the market, I cannot stomach, however, private ownership of land do what you wish, I cannot. Leasing, even if it is a hundredyear lease with the right to sell the lease or bequeath it, that I can accept! But private property on land with the right to sell land that I can't stomach. This is, by the way, the tradition of our peasant commune.

Boris Mozhaev (writer): We have stood on this for a thousand years

Gorbachev: You mean the peasant commune?

Mozhaev: Yes. Our peasant commune developed before the state.

Gorbachev: Comrade Mozhaev, I offer you my hand. Just as I have always thought, we are with you.

Gorbachev's hundredyear lease, which can be bought, sold and inherited, does not conflict with a market economy, and sounds like an eminently reasonable formula for the present period of transition. In fact, all that it has in common with socialism is an idea, and, as Gorbachev and Mozhaev point out, a Russian idea at that. Capitalist wolves need not fear such a socialism. Whether the sheep will be able to go on feeding and enjoying the relative tranquility of a "socialist" economy is quite another matter.

The intertwining of such concepts as the "socialist idea" and the "socialist choice," combined with a particular understanding of Russian history and patriotic feelings, constitutes the ideational, background plot of Gorbachev's political narrative. His reference to the peasant commune can be seen as an ingenious attempt to expiate before the god of Russian history the unforgivable sin of collectivization and mass persecutions by associating collective farms with the indigenous tradition of the peasant commune. Such a link, if established, would at the same time create a framework which would allow Gorbachev and his compatriots to reconcile in their minds the surviving shreds of the now

defunct faith of the fathers, the catastrophes which have resulted from it, and those apparent achievements which past generations can still claim to their credit.

The alternative plot, one of return to the old Stalinist ways, is not taken seriously by Gorbachev. Nor does Gorbachev accept a picture of Russian history painted by Solzhenitsyn, in which the period between 1915 and the transformations of today is presented as a yawning gap, as non or antihistory.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Gorbachev seems to have learned well the lesson of the Russian thinker, Peter Chaadaev, who a century and a half ago remarked on the Russians' destructive tendency to let their recent memory be supplanted by every shift in the trade winds of history. After seventy years of a different kind of forgetting, Gorbachev is in no mood to repeat this error. Given the fact that "nine tenths of the Soviet population were born under socialism," not to mention the seventeen or so million members of the communist party, some in mufti, some in uniform, a repressed the memory of the Soviet period may return with a vengeance. And in order to avoid the repetition of the postOctober utopia, Gorbachev insists on maintaining, at least, a partial symbolic continuity between Soviet power and the indigenous form of *Russian* socialism, with its alleged roots in the peasant commune.

#### 4. Just Like In Spain

The heart of Gorbachev's story may consist of the peaks and valleys of Russian history, but his master plot, which his story reënacts, belongs to the West and would gladden the heart of the proponents of *Western Civilization* courses. He refers to it as simply "the civilization," meaning the Western European strand of the modern period European humanism, in short. Speaking before Byelorussian artists and scientists in late February of this year (politically, the gloomiest February in the history of perestroika), Gorbachev offered an interpretation of socialism as a totality of "socialist movements that are powerfully developing throughout the world."<sup>15</sup> "The socialist idea," Gorbachev went on, anticipating his opponents who refuse to take his socialism seriously (e.g., the editor of the liberal Moscow News, Yegor Yakovlev), "is not just words intended to provide some sort of a symbolic link with the past, but an altogether clear representation of the future." What this socialist future holds was understood by Gorbachev as follows:

When we speak about it, we mean, above all, the humanistic values, the rights and freedoms, the focus on man as the chief value. We also mean a democratic structure of society, a parliamentary system, the principle of separation of powers, creation of a state based on the rule of law, the triumph of law. Finally, we have in mind a mixed economy,

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<sup>14</sup>A. Solzhenitsyn, Kak nam obustroit' Rossii, Literaturnaia gazeta 38 (18 September 1990).

<sup>15</sup>Gorbachev, Izvestiia, 1 March, 1991., p. 2.

a variety of forms of ownership under the conditions of social equity and solidarity.

If this is the basis of the socialist idea that Gorbachev is committed to the ideals of Erasmus, the French and American revolutions (manrights freedoms); the British political arrangement (parliamentary system); political theories of Locke, Montesquieu, Madison (separation of powers); the AngloAmerican tradition of the lawabiding state, champion in Russia by the Constitutional Democrats before the revolution and, more recently, by the dissident advocates of human rights, Chalidze, Tverdokhlebov, Sakharov, the institutions of mixed economy, common in Western democracies, and finally, the no less common systems of social security and guarantee of the rights of organized labor then the political position Gorbachev is advocating must be placed on the continuum somewhere between the Socialism of Francois Mitterand and the American Republicanism of George Bush.

Gorbachev's aim was not only to neuter socialism, by extracting from it the notion of class struggle, but also to establish a direct kinship between socialism, as it had been experienced in Russia, and Western European civilization. In other words, if we are to follow Gorbachev's reasoning, by adopting the prescriptions of socialism *in this world*, the Russians, at least in part, were trying to cash in one of the biggest promissory notes of that same civilization. Like Peter's westernizing reforms of nearly three centuries ago, the socialist scheme may have endowed Russia with the status of a great power, as Gorbachev likes to emphasize, but at the price, as he also acknowledges, of catastrophic repression.

Crucial to Gorbachev's reasoning, this experiment in realizing the socialist dream was not accidental, but occurred because the Russian people, he assumes, are organically predisposed to socialist ideals. In this sense, Russia, and its modern incarnation, the Soviet Union, turn out to be linked to the WesternEuropean humanistic tradition and values in more ways than one organically, as it were, thanks to the Russians' alleged innate predisposition to social equity, and by elective affinities, as the "socialist choice" made in 1917 should plainly indicate. Thanks to this conception of Russian national character, the "socialist values" to which Gorbachev pledged his allegiance in the first years of perestroika could be painlessly grafted onto the tree of "common human values" of the European civilization, including ... the institutions of a market economy:

First of all, I think that for us a market economy means the same as it means to all. This institution was not invented by the Germans, the Russians, or the Chinese, but is the achievement of civilization. In this sense our transition to a market economy is a normal phenomenon. We cannot go on living the way we have. We have been suppressing the stimuli, initiative, we have lacked freedom of economic activity. This was a dead end.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Gorbachev's Interview for Der Spiegel (Izvestiia 25 March 1991).

Given such a capacious interpretation, there is no longer any need to denounce the "socialist idea." First, because there is nothing particularly socialist about it. Second, because it appears fused with the entire body of Western humanistic values, which are no easier to denounce than the institution of motherhood and, related to it, apple pie. And finally, how can one denounce an idea that has such deep roots, as Gorbachev would have it, in the native Russian soil! Like Herzen and the Russian Populists, Gorbachev "backdates" socialism in Russian history, thereby rendering rejection of socialism tantamount to the rejection of Western humanistic heritage *and*, God forbid, one's own blood ties the Fatherland. What can be more unconscionable than that! And who cares that this sort of "socialist idea" has no content of its own, expanded to contain the time-honored forms of Western-European democratic polity and social organization. What is important is to preserve the word, to hallow with it the continuity of generations, to create a basis, however illusory, for a national reconciliation: "Just like in Spain," where "there is a monument to all those who have clashed in the civil war, when they fought one another, brother against brother."<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Prince Hamlet and King Lear on the Kremlin Stage

Gorbachev's mental universe can be imagined as a series of concentric circles. The outermost circle represents the values of Western-European civilization, including what is loosely referred to as *humanism* and, of course, the "socialist idea." Closer to the center is the circle of Russian history, which in its own way has dramatized, has been acting out the ideas of European humanism. The center is formed by Gorbachev's own fate, the personal fate of the grandson of a "dekulakized farmer" and of a peasant who took active part in the collectivization of agriculture. When Gorbachev descends into that innermost circle, his narrative becomes personal, his style acquires the tone of a confession. The following is from his speech before the members of Soviet cultural elite delivered on 28 November 1990:

Take my two grandfathers. One was tried and convicted for failing to fulfill the sowing quota in 1933, when half of his family starved to death. He was shipped to Irkutsk [in Siberia] to cut timber, leaving behind in 1933 the surviving half of his tormented family. And my other grandfather was organizing collective farms as a representative of the Chief Grain Procurement Authority. In those days, such a representative cut a big figure. He came from a farming family and was a "middle peasant." He, too, was imprisoned and spent fourteen months under interrogation: confess that you've done what you haven't done. Well, thank God, he survived the ordeal. But he lived in that "plague" house, the house of "the enemy of the people," and his relatives, our kin, could not visit him there. Otherwise they would have

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<sup>17</sup>Gorbachev's speech of 28 November, 1990 (*Izvestiia*, 1 December, 1990).

followed him to jail. So we, too, have had our share of everything, saw it from the inside, knew and know that life, and we can judge for ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

Choosing between these two legacies is something that Gorbachev finds humanly impossible. And he bids his audience to perform a dialectical mental leap, as it were, to renounce renunciation ("it is dialectical and clear all in all") in the hope that it would help to overcome the trauma, born virtually by everyone in the Soviet Union the trauma of an inner split between a victim and victimizer, between an expropriator and the expropriated, the trauma of one who does not merely straddle but for generations has been rooted on both sides of the barricade. It is worth noting that in an autobiographical interview given to a new Central Committee journal in May 1989, Gorbachev traced his lineage to the grandfather who was a peasant activist, passing in complete silence over the other grandfather's fate.<sup>19</sup>

Few have described this split in individual consciousness with greater poignancy and frankness than Alexander Yakovlev, one of Gorbachev's closest allies and chief strategists of perestroika. As he spoke informally about the party's past before the members of "Democratic Unity," he kept insisting on the fundamental duality of the postStalin generation. His chief example was Khrushchev: on the one hand, one of the most cruel members of Stalin's Politburo, on the other, an exceptionally courageous politician who was risking everything with his famous deStalinization speech of 1956. Brezhnev and his cronies, such as Azerbaijan's Alyev, also appear to Yakovlev in an ambiguous light: victimizers and criminals, but at the same time themselves victims of the system. Remarkably but not unexpectedly for this man, Yakovlev presented himself as a member of this generation:

I, too, went into battle holding my rifle and crying "For Motherland, for Stalin!" Yes, I did. I was a believer, I was an honest believer. Such were the circumstances in those days. This is why I always ask: and who are we we ourselves? We are victims. We, those who have managed to survive we, too, are victims. As I have said once, both we and the party are victims.<sup>20</sup>

Gorbachev's own Hamletic duality, which he intimately disclosed to an audience of Soviet artists and literati, reached its culmination at the end of 1984 during what is by now a wellknown nighttime conversation between him and Edward Shervadnadze. It is then that these two men, among the most powerful in the empire, acknowledged to each other that "everything was rotten." The decision to begin perestroika was made by Gorbachev in Moscow after his appointment as the General Secretary early on the morning of March 11 1985, as he himself indicated with pointed precision: "having served in Moscow over

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<sup>18</sup>Gorbachev, *Izvestiia* 1 Decemeber 1990.

<sup>19</sup>Gorbachev, *Selected Speeches*, vol. 7, p. 498.

<sup>20</sup>From the original taperecording, transcribed and translated by the author.

seven years, I have come to the conclusion: we cannot live like this any longer." Following this series of admissions, Gorbachev and his comrades in arms began to act on their words, with each passing day increasing the tempo of dismantling the Stalinist political edifice. The original plan involved a complete restructuring of state and society. Apart from its other obvious functions in the sphere of economics, social development, and foreign policy, this undertaking was supposed, on the one hand, to redeem the party's historical guilt, shared, among others, by members of the party leadership, and, on the other, to revitalize the "socialist values" which had shaped the thinking and imagination of the Soviet people for generations, not the least of it, the party leadership. The consequences of this policy, as is often the case, were not altogether anticipated (one may argue to what extent, but the strong democratic propensity of the early perestroika leaves little doubt that the unanticipated was itself anticipated and was not, on the whole, unwelcome). As it has turned out, perestroika was merely the first stage of a complete dismantling of the building, which at this point cannot be stopped, no matter what. Any moment now, Gorbachev remarks with increasing apprehension, the time may come out of joint, and the new generations will begin renouncing their predecessors. Judging by his speeches made between November, 1990, and March, 1991, this apprehension is Gorbachev's real nightmare.

The irony of the historical moment goes far beyond a stock interpretation of Hamlet, for Gorbachev is not merely a victim of the fast approaching break with the past. He is at the same time one of the more vigorous initiators and champions of this process. Herein lies the internal logic of perestroika: after chanting yet another incantation meant to revive if not socialism, than, at least, the pathos of its *idea*, Gorbachev bends over its lifeless body and, plunging into it the lancet of a sober observer, begins the dissection, recording for the public the causes of socialism's demise. Gorbachev's speech before the cultural elite in late November, 1990, reaches its highest emotional peak precisely at the point when his own discourse on the horrors of forced collectivization leaves him without any argument that could rescue the Soviet experiment in socialism. The exposures and demystifications of the last few years, which have saturated the consciousness of every Soviet citizen, and especially Gorbachev, lead to the inevitable conclusion: the horrific sacrifices of Soviet history could not be justified. If this is so, then the people building socialism in one country, however wellintentioned, have indeed lived their lives in vain and caused irreparable damage to their country and mankind. This dreadful conclusion, reached by the rational observer Gorbachev cannot be accepted by Gorbachev, the sentimental socialist:

Who or what are we supposed to renounce? In his day, my grandfather served as a collective farm chairman for seventeen years. And I never heard him express any doubt regarding what is happening in this land of ours [...] I cannot go against my own grandfather. I cannot go against my father, who stood ground at the Kursk encirclement, who crossed the Dnieper, which was all filled with blood, who reached the border, crossed into Czechoslovakia and was wounded there. Must I, then as I am purging myself, as I am

renouncing all this barracks [socialism], Stalinist rabble  
renounce my grandfather, father, what they had done? Must I  
renounce these generations? Or did they live in vain?

Balancing at this emotional brink, the Kremlin Lear regained his composure by switching to the wornout patriotic argument that Russia became a great power only following and therefore (so goes the magical reasoning) because of the Bolshevik revolution: "You and I, as I've said before, did not grow up in a swamp: what we stand on is pretty much firm ground."<sup>21</sup> Pretty much, indeed.

## 6. Balancing the Books

Hardly three months had passed since Gorbachev's November 28 meeting with the "cultural workers," but these three months were long enough for the argument based on the *socialist choice* to lose much of its alleged power. As Gorbachev somewhat torturously concluded with the benefit of historical hindsight, socialism had a rather limited potential as political and economic system. "It often happens," he admitted wistfully to his interviewers from *Der Spiegel* in late February, 1991, "that not every choice is realized in the context of civilization as a whole."<sup>22</sup> Any regrets? Not really. For the values of that same civilization, which he has in mind here (and he means WesternEuropean civilization), have been firmly woven into the public discourse of the perestroika Soviet Union. The man who is responsible for this transformation in public consciousness more than anyone else is Gorbachev himself, even if he accomplished it in the course of elaborating the *socialist idea*. A rose by any other name...

Indeed, Gorbachev's *educational* activity of recent months involved a careful balancing of two key elements: on the one hand, the incantatory communist vocabulary of socialism in one country, which still retains its power over the consciousness of many of his compatriots and, very likely, of Gorbachev himself, and, on the other, the rational political language of the "New Thinking," which does not assign priority to the notion of class struggle and, therefore, avoids the conventional communist dualism of "bourgeoisvs.socialist," "friendsenemies," and similar shibboleths of the Manichean Marxist vision. I would even venture to suggest that Gorbachev set before himself the task of bringing the magical vocabulary into the service of perestroika. This was accomplished by gradually replacing its ritual, incantatory function with a rational referential one, that is, by endowing a central symbol of the Soviet civic religion, socialism, with a specific set of meanings, transforming it into a term of WesternEuropean humanism. By resorting to a gradual approach and eschewing, by and large, the sharp rhetoric of demystification, Gorbachev was aiming at a smooth transition from the ritualized to a rational political discourse; the care, subtlety and patience paid off, enabling Gorbachev to retain the

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<sup>21</sup>Gorbachev, *Izvestiia*, 1 December 1990.

<sup>22</sup>Gorbachev, *Izvestiia*, 1 March 1991.

sanction of the very same state religion that the New Thinking was designed to demystify. The fundamental incompatibility of these two languages rendered the task impossible *a priori*, but the goal pursued by Gorbachev involved not so much a final solution to the postcommunist philosophical paradox, but precisely the careful balancing of these two discourses. As a result, the magical vocabulary of socialism was lending its legitimacy to the New Thinking at the same time as the ritualized incantations themselves were being gradually demystified by coming into contact with a rational political ideology.

The obsessive repetition of the "socialist idea" served Gorbachev as a pretext and a cover for the task of reorienting public consciousness away from the communist utopia and in the direction of the "common human values." Crucial for Gorbachev was the recently diminished authority of the Russian language, diminished, in part, because of the diminution in stature of the Party, the habitual arbiter of public meaning for the seventy or so years. Gorbachev hastened to take advantage of the few magical embers that are still glowing in the smoldering ruin, forcing himself, despite all of the New Thinking, to conjure up circuitous mental labyrinths in which he himself gets lost all for fear of offending the tender hearing of his compatriots used to the siren song of Soviet socialism.

Gorbachev's efforts at reconciling the two discourses may no longer be necessary. Judging by the results of the June, 1991, elections, most voters do not experience a deep psychological conflict in renouncing the socialist choice, the socialist idea or other oldfashioned magic incantations meant to mollify the specter of Hamlet's father. And if this is so, they no longer require complex epistemological schemes which Gorbachev has habitually constructed in order to assuage the pangs of conscience disturbed by communism's demise. Indeed, what better proof can there be than the comfortable, but not outrageously comfortable, victories of Yeltsin, Popov and Sobchak in this summer's direct, truly popular elections. Today, the majority of the electorate favor action over words and results over promises. Reconciled, by and large, to a transition to a market economy, they care precious little for such "accursed questions" as continuity in the consciousness of the public born and raised under socialism. And while the problems of historical identity may sooner or later return to haunt Gorbachev's compatriots, what people want now is a leader who is not distracted by a search for positive meaning in the nation's communist past, one who is not preoccupied with the dilemma of whether or not "he must renounce his grandfather and father." How to lay one's hands on some sausage or chicken that is the question people are forced to address, poised as they are between the *nothingness* in the shops and their future, imagined capitalist *being*.

Berkeley, July 1991

#### POSTSCRIPT

Now that the failed coup d'etat has crossed many *t*'s and dotted the *i*'s, it is becoming clear that Gorbachev was willing to tolerate an extraordinary degree of risk in order to preserve the ambiguity of his position which had enabled him for a long time to

safeguard the process of reform. In a strategic sense, this risk has turned out to be justified: the new political mentality and political institutions, in particular those that were based on the separation of powers, did what they were supposed to do. The constitutional requirement for the state of emergency to be approved by the Supreme Soviet *and* the republic involved empowered the people in the "White House" to fight the junta according to the letter of the law. As I myself have witnessed, Yeltsin's people put this legal point to good use in conducting propaganda among the military both in the streets and when the deputies of Russia's Supreme Soviet were sent into the military units to speak to the troops on the 20th of August (Russia's Supreme Soviet Session was to begin on the 21st).

In the tactical sense, however, Gorbachev had overplayed his hand. The expulsion from the Party of Aleksandr N. Iakovlev, his chief ideological mentor, on August 15 was the first direct blast, or the last warning, that the plotters aimed directly at Gorbachev (Central Committee Secretaries, Oleg Shenin and Iurii Manaenkov, both among the key plotters, attended the meeting of the Central Committee's Control Commission, which "recommended" Iakovlev's expulsion). The Party apparatus, which had been resisting Gorbachev ever more actively since the fall of 1990, had finally become desperate enough and decided to deal its nemesis a blow, no-holds-barred. For his part, by not offering an immediate public response to the news of the expulsion of one of his closest allies, the General Secretary may have emboldened the plotters, perhaps, even given them hope that he himself could be pressed into joining the plot. On the day before the coup, there was no way of knowing how miserably they had miscalculated.

On August 18, in a frontpage report on the purging of Iakovlev, Vladimir Todres wrote in Nezavisimaia gazeta: "Iakovlev's expulsion is an action directed against Gorbachev; next is the General Secretary himself as the 'leftmost.'" An even graver foreboding was expressed by Iakovlev in his letter to his local Party cell (cited in the same article): "Party leadership, contrary to its own declarations, is jettisoning the democratic wing of the Party, and is actively preparing for a social *revanch*, for a Party and state coup [perevorot]."

Was it all over for socialism, then, Todres put this question to Iakovlev? The reply is a fitting conclusion to this essay, and I shall cite it at length:

It depends on what kind of socialism you are talking about. That's the crucial issue. After all, Marxism did not invent the socialist idea. It emerged much earlier. And before that, Christianity used socialist ideas as its foundation: equality, fraternity, goodness, justice. And so forth. What is the socialist idea? It is the idea of justice as it was originally understood. How, then, is it possible for us to reject it as such? Eventually, all mankind will accept it. What I object to, however, is that any idea should achieve predominance through force. And that our unfortunate [historical] experience has alienated our people from the idea that is quite another matter... We have never had any socialism

anyway. What we did have was the purest kind of deception and travesty.

Gorbachev echoed Yakovlev both in his press conference on August 22nd and, especially, on the following day, as he was addressing Russia's Supreme Soviet, when some inquisitive deputies demanded that he explain what he meant by *socialism*. His response shows that with respect to ideology, the coup was not a conversion experience for him. He had abandoned his faith in *Communism* long before that. Still, what we saw was a different Gorbachev, one liberated from the compulsion (born of his inner need as much as political expediency) to display Learlike remorse or Hamletian hesitation. When he stepped onto the stage following the farcical interlude of the coup, he did so not as a protagonist of a tragic plot but as a diminished character in an open-ended historical play.

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#### NOTES