

the coup, and the months that followed, finishing with the end of Gorbachev's time in office and with it the Soviet Union.

Vladislav Zubok draws our attention to a key aspect of the end of the Soviet Union – the end of the Cold War. While making clear that this is not the only explanation for the end of the Soviet Union or the Cold War, he addresses Gorbachev's personality and outlook as a major factor in this. He suggests that Gorbachev had done a great deal to ease Cold War tension before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that his relationship with Eastern European and Western politicians was instrumental in this. His contention is that this aspect has been overlooked, and only through a deeper understanding of Gorbachev the man can we hope to understand both what he was attempting to do in the last years of the Soviet Union and what transpired.

Moving beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union, Donna Bahry offers an insight into the transitional period that Russia entered between communism and post-communism. To be sure, there is recognition that Russia in some respects remains within this phase. What she displays, however, is the attempts to reshape a Russian society and political culture that was trying to break away from its Soviet past. Indicating that this was a troubled process, as alien ideas encroached on the Soviet Union and its population, she looks at the methods adopted with respect to galvanizing support for the system in the transitional period.

Eugene Huskey's article also sheds light on the post-Soviet years, though from a slightly different perspective. Published in 2001, Vladimir Putin had just acceded to the Russian Presidency, and was already setting about tackling the Yeltsin legacy. From this standpoint, Huskey offers insight into Russia under Yeltsin in terms of how it had developed to its endpoint, and the problems that were generated. Specifically, he highlights that there had been a dispersal of power away from the centre, and that Putin sought to draw it back, largely through the creation of a strong central state machinery.

This section appears to offer an endpoint, and in some respects it does. The reader should note, however, that Russia continues to develop in its post-Soviet phase, and that necessarily some conclusions cannot yet be drawn.

## Archie Brown

### THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE COUP, THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

**I**N SEVERAL RESPECTS the nationalities issue was the most intractable problem of all. There are powerful reasons for supposing that it almost guaranteed that what would *not* emerge from perestroika was a democratic and intact Soviet state, such was the legacy of historic grievances of the various nationalities. Indeed, Robert Conquest has written that to anyone 'with even a moderate knowledge of Soviet nationality problems' it had long been evident that 'a "democratic Soviet Union" would be a contradiction in terms'.<sup>1</sup> Although it was no part of Gorbachev's intention to stimulate the breakup of the Soviet Union and since he was, nevertheless, to become serious about its democratization, it is hardly surprising, then, that he failed to reconcile these two goals, not to mention harmonizing them with the other key elements involved in the transformation of the Soviet system. For those to whom the preservation of Soviet statehood (or the maintenance of the approximate boundaries of the old Russian empire) took precedence over all other values, it followed that Gorbachev should never have embarked on perestroika – or, at least, the serious democratizing element within it which got under way from 1988. There were many who held to that standpoint in the last years of the Soviet Union and who hold that position in Russia today. It is more surprising to encounter in the West the view that Gorbachev's 'decision to introduce some form of democracy to the USSR proved disastrous', since it led to the collapse of the union and, 'whatever its failings, the USSR's survival did ensure that interethnic and intercommunal violence was limited to the odd street brawl or sublimated into political or sporting rivalries'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet if that judgement is highly questionable, it is at least different from the more common over-simplification that there were straightforward answers to the national question and that nothing but Gorbachev's myopia prevented him from seeing them. Certainly, Gorbachev made mistakes in this area, but his actions must be seen in a political context in which he was fiercely criticized – and, in effect, twice overthrown (in August and December 1991) – by two opposing groups espousing mutually exclusive views. One

group insisted that he defend the union against the seepage of political power and authority from the centre to the republics and the other demanded self-rule or total independence from the union.

A common misconception was that the nationality problem could be overcome, and imperial rule replaced by democratic government, through recognition of the absolute right of self-determination of nations.<sup>3</sup> The argument was flawed in three fundamental respects. First, it generally ignored the fact that many national territories within the Russian republic were no less part of the Russian *empire* than the fourteen non-Russian union republics. Indeed, several of the latter had a longer and more harmonious association with Russia than the former and had not been subject to such recent imperial conquest.<sup>4</sup> Second, and following on from that, the absolute right of self-determination based on nationhood raised the possibility of almost infinite regress. Not only the Soviet Union, but Russia itself, was home to more than one hundred different nationalities, and within every territory named after a particular nationality – which might assert a right to independent statehood – there were ethnic minorities who could, in principle, make their own claims to sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> So intermixed were the nationalities in almost every administrative-territorial unit bearing the name of one particular nation that self-determination based on nationhood could easily become (and already, to some degree, has become – in the former USSR as well as in former Yugoslavia) a recipe for a series of civil wars. Third, there was no necessary congruence between the achievement of ‘national self-determination’ and democratic and accountable government. Political leaders in Soviet Central Asia, who had professed loyalty to Marxism–Leninism over many years and had only reluctantly gone along with Gorbachev’s reforms, generally imposed more authoritarian regimes in the early post-Soviet years than in the period 1989–91, once they were released from the constraints imposed by reformist and (latterly) partially democratic Soviet authorities in Moscow. They may by then have felt a greater need to crush all opposition as well as having a freer hand to do so with impunity. They had shown no enthusiasm for independent statehood – until in 1991 it was thrust upon them – for fear that their record as Communist placemen would make it impossible to preserve their positions in successor states which would be professedly Islamic.<sup>6</sup>

None of this suggests *either* that the answer to the ‘nationality problem’ was to preserve the union at all costs *or* that it necessitated welcoming every assertion of national independence to the point that the fifteen union republics (and Soviet successor states) would themselves disintegrate, leading to the creation of tens or even scores of purportedly independent countries. The art of politics lay in maintaining levels of integration and co-operation as high as could be made compatible with the consent of the governed and in reaching agreement on the optimal locus of decision-making for particular areas of policy. This required a willingness to argue and negotiate rather than resort to brute force. Gorbachev for his part attempted to argue, cajole, and, finally, to negotiate, and though he did not go far enough for some of the republics most committed to outright independence, he went too far for representatives of powerful institutional interests determined, whatever the cost in terms of coercion and lost lives, to maintain the integrity of the Soviet state, thus provoking the coup against him in August 1991. Ironically, it was Boris Yeltsin – seen during the last years of the USSR as the champion of oppressed nationalities (as to some extent in 1990–1 he was) – rather than Mikhail Gorbachev who resorted to force on a barbaric scale, reminiscent of a more distant Soviet and Russian past, when he lost

patience in late 1994 with the *de facto* independence which the rulers of Chechnya had asserted throughout the post-Soviet period and authorized the shelling and bombing of the civilian population, who died in their thousands, and left the Chechen capital of Grozny looking like Stalingrad after the German bombardment in the Second World War.<sup>7</sup>

[...]

### The national question in Soviet context

To ‘resolve’ the nationalities question and the boundaries of the polity in the specific context of the Soviet Union was an extraordinarily difficult task, rendered more complicated by the fact that the attempt had to be made concurrently with the processes of democratization, marketization, and, not least, the transformation of foreign policy. That last change in Soviet policy brought about a demonstration effect from Eastern Europe for nations within the Soviet Union aspiring to independent statehood, making them increasingly reluctant to accept the more gradualist approach to possible secession which Gorbachev urged upon them. At the same time the sweeping-aside of Communist regimes in the former Warsaw Pact countries, as the latter attained full political independence, transmitted danger signals to the party-state authorities in Moscow and those in the republics who depended upon Moscow’s hegemony.

Arguing in 1990 for recognition that the Soviet state needed to be turned ‘into a genuinely voluntary confederation or commonwealth’,<sup>8</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski observed: ‘The stark reality is that the Soviet Union can either remain a Great Russian empire or move toward a multinational democracy. But it cannot do both.’<sup>9</sup> While that statement was clearly true, it did not follow that an arrangement as loose as a confederation was the choice of a majority of the population – even of a majority within most of the Soviet republics. Nor was it necessarily the case that the disintegration which occurred was more in the interests of a majority of Soviet citizens than the preservation of some kind of union. To be compatible with democracy and the consent of the governed, it would, though, have had to be both a *smaller* and a *different* kind of union than that which had existed hitherto.

What was, however, beyond question was the reality of crucial disharmony on the issue of statehood. The Soviet Union spectacularly illustrated Rustow’s generalization about the problem of lack of agreement on the part of substantial minorities<sup>10</sup> concerning the legitimacy of the state borders and Dahl’s related point on the impossibility of determining boundaries of the polity which would be in the best interests of everybody.<sup>11</sup> The disagreement was convincingly demonstrated when, at Gorbachev’s instigation, a referendum was held in March 1991 on the question, ‘Do you believe it essential to preserve the USSR as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedoms of a person of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?’, and six out of the fifteen republics refused to conduct it. These were Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Nevertheless, answers in the affirmative did not fall below 70 per cent in any of the nine republics in which the question was put (even in Ukraine) and the overall proportion of the population answering ‘yes’ was 76.4 per cent.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, 80 per cent of the total adult population of the Soviet Union (over 148.5 million people) took part in the referendum.<sup>13</sup> Independent statehood, combined with confederation, was not the choice

of a majority of Soviet citizens – even a majority in most of the non-Russian republics – as late as March 1991.

Thus, Gorbachev's efforts to maintain a union on the basis of a transformed federation were not necessarily misplaced. The actions of particular politicians – including, not least, the *putschists* of August 1991 and the three leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia (Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Shushkevich) who met in December of the same year unilaterally to pronounce the death of the union – played an enormous part, in conjunction with the bitter legacy of the Soviet past, to doom those efforts to failure. It is also arguable that Gorbachev was too late in undertaking the quest for a new union treaty which would put membership of a genuinely federal (or, in some instances, consociational or quasi-confederal) state on the foundation of a freshly negotiated agreement. His other mistake – although more understandable in political context than in the abstract – was not to treat Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as special cases, at least not until too late in the day.<sup>14</sup> The West, for its part, had never recognized the forcible incorporation of these Baltic states into the Soviet Union in 1940 and there was no likelihood that they could be kept within the USSR on a voluntary basis.

It is virtually certain, accordingly, that the *entire* Soviet Union could not have been held together, in the course of liberalization followed by democratization, even had the leadership in general and Gorbachev in particular been better prepared for the development of separatist sentiments than they were. What is also, however, beyond doubt is that whereas political reconstruction and economic reform were placed on the political agenda from above – by Gorbachev and his allies – the national question forced its way on to that agenda from below. Gorbachev was not unaware that this was a very sensitive issue in the Soviet Union. A great many different nationalities lived in his native Stavropol territory and tensions among them surfaced from time to time. Yet, in common with his closest associates, he did not realize – at the time when he embarked on reform of the system – that nationalism would place fundamental strains both on the union and on the democratization process. Even Shevardnadze, who, both as a Georgian himself and as the former First Secretary of the Georgian party organization, was conscious of the strong sense of national identity of Georgians as well as that of the ethnic minorities within Georgia, has said that in 1985 he 'believed that the nationalities issue . . . had been resolved'. From the outset, said Shevardnadze, Gorbachev and his closest associates had far-reaching ideas for change, but they 'never expected an upsurge of emotional and ethnic factors'.<sup>15</sup>

In so far as Gorbachev recognized that there was a serious nationalities issue – and by 1988 he was in no doubt about it – his answer to the problem was twofold. First, that national chauvinism must be combatted and that a genuine internationalism must prevail, so that people of different nationalities could feel comfortable in any part of the Soviet Union. Second, he argued that the Soviet Union had hitherto been a unitary state which merely purported to be a federation and that they must move from pseudo-federation to genuine federalism. Later – from April 1991 – he showed still greater flexibility in being prepared to contemplate an asymmetrical relationship between the republics and the federal authorities, whereby some of the component parts of the Soviet Union (which was itself to be renamed) would have the rights accruing to a unit of a federation and others would have something closer to a confederal relationship with Moscow.<sup>16</sup>

[. . .]

One sign that the Communist Party leadership was beginning to treat the nationality question with the seriousness it deserved was the belated holding of a Central Committee plenum on the subject in September 1989, although Gorbachev's insistence then that Soviet citizens had 'not yet lived in a real federation' did not go far enough to satisfy the demands of the Balts in particular.<sup>17</sup> A more significant attempt to face up to growing demands for independence, particularly from the Baltic states, while simultaneously trying to slow down that process, was the eventual promulgation of a Law on Secession in April 1990. This fulfilled a promise Gorbachev had made on a three-day visit to Lithuania in January of that year which, however, achieved little in the way of mutual understanding.<sup>18</sup> The law's provisions included the need for two-thirds of the electorate of a republic to vote for secession in a referendum, a five-year transition period, and, finally, the endorsement of the Soviet legislature.<sup>19</sup> The fact that national sub-units (so-called autonomous republics or regions within the union republics), such as Abkhazia or Southern Ossetia in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, were to be given the right to opt out of secession and remain in the USSR if they so voted, raised the possibility of secession leading to loss of territory by a republic seeking independent statehood, as did a provision in the law that 'the status of territories not belong[ing] to [the republic] when it became part of the USSR' must be agreed between the parties. The Presidium of the Belorussian Supreme Soviet was quick to announce that it would demand the return of lands which had formerly been part of Belorussia should Lithuania leave the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> The following year republics, in fact, became independent following the enormous stimulus of the failed *putsch* and none of them did so with as much as a glance at the Law on Secession – nor, accordingly, with loss of territory. But for Gorbachev the Law on Secession had been, on the one hand, an effort to provide a legal mechanism for a paper right which had long existed in the Soviet Constitution and, on the other, a vain attempt to provide him with 'more time to create the kind of Soviet Union that no one would want to leave'.<sup>21</sup>

The last thing Gorbachev wanted was to lose any part of the Soviet Union following the loss – as his domestic enemies on 'the right' certainly saw it – of Eastern Europe. Gorbachev's refusal to use force to keep the Warsaw pact countries under Soviet hegemony had produced one non-Communist regime after another in Eastern Europe, and the Soviet leader had survived in office, despite the increased ferocity of the attacks on him from sections of the military and other conservative forces. Yet he believed that if he were to stand idly by while parts of the Soviet Union dropped off, he would be forgiven neither by his contemporaries nor by future generations of Russians.<sup>22</sup> So far as the contemporaries were concerned, those fears were not misplaced. Within a very short time after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was for the disintegration of the Soviet Union that Gorbachev was criticized most of all, and by no means fairly. As Alexander Yakovlev pointed out on the tenth anniversary of Gorbachev's coming to power (even though by that time Yakovlev's relations with Gorbachev had become strained): 'Now Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] is blamed for the breakup of the Union. This is unjust. He did everything possible to keep the country united, but renewed.'<sup>23</sup> Gorbachev had striven to maintain a union while trying to avoid the use of force (or to avoid escalating it on the rare occasions when troops were used). Since he was, however, attempting to keep the union intact while being unwilling to use the crude methods of repression employed in the past, his policy inevitably disappointed both those who claimed an absolute right to independent statehood and those who believed that any means were justified so long as they preserved the unity and integrity of

the Soviet state. Although Gorbachev, even after he had lost office, continued to stress his genuine belief in the desirability of maintaining the union, he had also been well aware of the real danger of his being overthrown if he did not keep intact the state boundaries he inherited.

While both Gorbachev himself and his critics are agreed that he was too slow in attempting to deal with the nationality problem, the latter are divided between those who believe that he should have sought a new and voluntary union treaty at an earlier stage of his leadership and those who hold that the problem was that he did not crack down soon enough on manifestations of nationalism. In attempting to prevent secession, Gorbachev was reacting to events rather than anticipating them, but responding, nevertheless, within the terms of the Soviet Constitution – which, unlike his predecessors, he took seriously – and by political means rather than by violent repression. Thus, for example, the Politburo (including Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and Yakovlev, but excluding Ligachev and Slyunkov, who were absent) voted for a series of measures designed to counteract the attempted secession of Lithuania from the union.<sup>24</sup> These included safeguards for the property of the USSR on the territory of Lithuania and proposals to use the mass media (a relapse into somewhat traditional Communist practice) to emphasize the ‘economic and other negative consequences for the population of Lithuania’ which would follow their exit from the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup>

The retrospective blame placed on Gorbachev for failing to preserve the union increasingly rarely focused on the occasional resort to force by Soviet troops during his years in office – rather the reverse, his failure to use sufficient force to prevent secession. Thus, the journal of the Russian parliament – in a series of articles marking the ten years from the official launch of perestroika at the Central Committee plenum of April 1985 – in the spring of 1995 gave most space to an article complaining that, faced by a declaration of sovereignty by Estonia in late 1988, Gorbachev merely stated that this was contrary to the Soviet Constitution and did not follow these words up with further censure or action.<sup>26</sup> Even authors who see themselves, and are generally seen, as belonging to the democratic camp in post-Soviet Russia increasingly blame Gorbachev for using insufficient coercion to hold the Soviet Union together. Thus, at a meeting at the Gorbachev Foundation to mark the tenth anniversary of the April 1985 plenum, the prominent political analyst Andranik Migranyan directly attacked Gorbachev along these lines, saying: ‘Why did you not stop the disintegration? You were general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party – why did you not use force if you had to? Why did you not see it would come to this – wars everywhere, refugees, people without a homeland. I, as an Armenian, know this very well.’<sup>27</sup> To this Gorbachev simply responded: ‘Well, thank God Andranik Migranyan wasn’t general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.’<sup>28</sup>

### Gorbachev’s ‘turn to the right’

What has become known as Gorbachev’s ‘turn to the right’ refers to the period from October 1990 to March 1991, the winter during which he changed the balance of influence within his leadership team in a more conservative direction both through personnel change and by becoming less accessible to those of his associates who had been the strongest advocates of political and economic transformation. Gorbachev’s own account of this shift

has varied somewhat, partly reflecting the political climate at the time of his pronouncements. Thus, in an interview in the autumn of 1991, after the August coup but while he was still in office as Soviet President, Gorbachev referred to the political events of the winter of 1990–1 and said that ‘on both sides, the behaviour was certainly not impeccable, let me put it this way’ and that ‘democratic forces, those who really wanted change, sometimes regrettably found themselves on different sides of the barricades’.<sup>29</sup> He had been ‘trying to steer a middle course’, but had missed his chance when he should have come down firmly on one side. Contrasting this with the period from April 1991 onwards, he said: ‘Of course later I did, but that’s life. You can’t edit it afterwards.’<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, while disclaiming responsibility for the acts of violence of Soviet troops in Vilnius and Riga and accepting also that he had been mistaken in several of the appointments he had made, he defended, nevertheless, his emphasis on enforcing the law and his attempt to hold the Soviet Union together during that winter. By the time of the publication of his memoirs in 1995 Gorbachev was responding, to some extent, to the mood of nostalgia within Russia both for the Soviet Union and for order, and was somewhat less critical of much of what he did during the winter months of 1990–1 than he had been in late 1991 in the very different political atmosphere following the failure of the hardline coup.<sup>31</sup>

For the outside observer, it seems fair to say that Gorbachev’s ‘turn to the right’ was a tactical retreat, an understandable one, given the pressures he was under, but mistaken, since it left him with fewer political allies than he had before. The ‘500 Days Programme’, discussed earlier, had been seen by its opponents within the government, the army, the KGB, and the party apparatus – and ultimately by Gorbachev himself – as a threat to the continued existence of any kind of union, not least because it largely deprived the all-union authorities of their revenue-gathering powers. Since Gorbachev did not at that time see the ‘left’ – the radical democrats and the Baltic nationalists – as an immediate threat as great as that posed by the conservative and pro-union ‘right’, he felt the need to make concessions to the latter. These came the more naturally since he was a genuine believer in preserving the Soviet Union intact (including the Baltic states), although not at any price. It was his unwillingness to turn the clock back to maintaining the Soviet Union by use of the full apparatus of repression – which would simultaneously have destroyed both the democratization process and all the changes for the better in the international arena that he had played a decisive part in achieving – which distinguished Gorbachev from his pro-union allies of late 1990 and early 1991.

In moving closer to more conservative forces, Gorbachev was in danger, however, of becoming their prisoner, especially as this very shift led to a further deterioration in his relations with the democrats. He did not believe that there was a risk of him becoming a hostage to any group, and indeed his launching of the ‘Novo-Ogarevo process’ in the spring of 1991 was an example of his remarkable ability to free himself from the constraints which a majority within the party-state high command endeavoured to place upon him. But, in the mean time, Gorbachev had paid a price in terms of loss of confidence in his leadership on the part of the democrats and, crucially, he had inadvertently ceded the position of Number One Democrat to his most dangerous rival, Boris Yeltsin.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, the intense pressures within an increasingly polarized society made all political choices difficult ones. Gorbachev was fiercely attacked at meetings he held with defence industry managers and army officers, whose demands were for a return to more traditional Soviet norms, not for more democracy. Moreover, by late 1990 the people as a



whole were taking for granted the gains of the Gorbachev years – among them, freedom of speech, assembly, and publication, contested elections, and the end of the Cold War. They now had other concerns. During 1990 the nationalities issue had become more acute and economic problems had worsened as the instruments of the command economy were ceasing to function, while those of a market economy had scarcely begun to emerge.

The interconnectedness of the various aspects of the transition from the traditional Communist order was such that even democratization exacerbated the economic difficulties. Since regional officials had become more dependent on their local electorates than on the centre for their survival in office, they became increasingly unresponsive to the economic demands of the political authorities in Moscow, and would hoard goods locally rather than supply other areas, including the major cities. Whereas, under the command economy, Moscow had always been better served than the Russian provinces, by 1990–1 goods and foodstuffs were more readily available in some provincial towns than in the capital. During this time Gorbachev's popularity declined steeply. Although Gorbachev, while still in office (even six and a half years after coming to power), never reached as low a level of public support as that accorded Yeltsin in early 1995 – some three and a half years after his election as President and a little over three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union – the period between May 1990 and December 1991 was one in which Yeltsin overtook Gorbachev in popularity and left him far behind. Whereas in December 1989 49 per cent of respondents in Russia (52 per cent in the Soviet Union) wholly approved of Gorbachev's activities and an additional 32 per cent (in both Russia and the USSR) partly approved, this support dropped sharply during the summer of 1990, and by December 1990 had gone down to 14 per cent of complete support in Russia (17 per cent in the union as a whole) and 38 per cent partial support in Russia (39 per cent in the USSR).<sup>33</sup> Following the failed coup, the leading public opinion polling institute in Russia surveyed opinion only in Russia, for the USSR was already well on the way to disintegration, and the September poll (their last while Gorbachev was still in office) indicated some recovery in Gorbachev's position, although his popularity then was much less than Yeltsin's. Following the failure of the August coup, the survey conducted in September 1991 showed 18 per cent wholly approving of Gorbachev's activity and 45 per cent partly approving.<sup>34</sup>

Those who thought of themselves as democrats and who, for the first four or five years of Gorbachev's years in power, had seen his leadership as the most important guarantee of movement in a democratic direction, increasingly deserted Gorbachev for Yeltsin. The latter's views were being influenced meanwhile by his new friends in the liberal and democratic wing of the intelligentsia, with whom he had little contact until he was elected to the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989. One reason, accordingly, for Gorbachev's 'turn to the right' was the feeling that he had been deserted by the 'left'. Of course, to the extent that he made concessions to more conservative forces, he exacerbated that problem by increasing the alienation of his former supporters. Thus, the tactical retreat during this winter of discontent turned out to be a strategic error. It satisfied neither one side nor the other. Gorbachev was never willing to be as ruthless and single-minded in pursuit of preservation of the union as a majority of the power-holders in Moscow wished. Many of them were disillusioned with Gorbachev even before he returned to the mainstream of reform in April 1991 and left his conservative colleagues still more in the cold than the radical reformists had been over the previous six months.

### Tranquillizing or encouraging the hardliners?

These zig-zags may have been necessary up to a point, given the fundamental disagreements among power-holders and contenders for power both on the appropriate boundaries of the Soviet state and on what kind of political and economic system should emerge. There were grounds also for uncertainty as to whether the democrats were strong enough to prevail against the apparatus of Soviet power should it act increasingly independently of Gorbachev. By making such concessions as he deemed politically necessary at different times to powerful institutional interests, Gorbachev may have 'tranquillized the hardliners' long enough to render them almost impotent by the time they chose to strike. Thus, a case can be made even for Gorbachev's 'turn to the right' – in so far as it was both tactical and temporary – as being in the interests of a Soviet transition from Communism which proceeded without violent confrontation between the bastions of the old order and the forces of change within Russia itself. The personnel changes and policy compromises of the winter of 1990–1 also, however, offered some encouragement to the hardliners, who began to see for the first time significant concessions by Gorbachev in the face of their pressure. The tactical retreat, moreover, did not help Gorbachev personally, for his abandonment of the conservatives the moment winter turned to spring meant that they would never forgive him. Yet by that time only a minority of democrats retained the warm feelings and the gratitude towards Gorbachev which they had harboured during the greater part of his leadership.

Splitting the Communist Party at its Twenty-Eighth Congress in the summer of 1990 would have been a risky alternative but almost certainly a better one. Gorbachev, in fact, assumed that a split in the party would occur at the Twenty-Ninth Congress of the CPSU, which had been brought forward by several years and was due to be convened in November 1991.<sup>35</sup> As a result of the coup and the subsequent suspension of the Communist Party it was never held.

Gorbachev argued that the essentially social democratic draft programme that had been prepared, with his full approval, by the summer of 1991 would have provoked a fundamental division. One group (numbering, he believed, several million members) would have been ready to support the programme, while another would have adopted a different programme, 'and then, naturally, they would be different parties'.<sup>36</sup> Since the Communist Party of the Soviet Union no longer existed by November 1991, it is evident enough in retrospect that Gorbachev had left it too late to force the membership of the party to choose quite clearly between a socialist party of a social democratic type and one which adhered to traditional Communist norms. But 1990 had been the time to force the issue. If from 1985 until 1989 Gorbachev was, on the whole, in the vanguard of political change – until 1988, in particular, its decisive initiator or facilitator – in 1990–1 he fell behind the pace of events. Postponing the party split – a division which would have been one of the more promising ways of introducing a competitive party system – until late 1991, and to what turned out to be a non-Congress, was one of several examples of excessive caution at this stage of his leadership when greater boldness was called for.

As well as the very real political pressures which would, however, have prevented any reformist leader from pursuing wholly consistent policies, there were personal attributes of Gorbachev which played their part in increasing his difficulties. Even if at times he was over-cautious, one of his characteristics was great self-confidence – his belief that he could

both outmanoeuvre all his opponents and win any argument. Shakhnazarov, a sympathetic, close collaborator, has alluded to Gorbachev firmly believing 'in his ability to convince anyone of anything'.<sup>37</sup> The fact that he had achieved so much – what was already taken for granted by democrats had, after all, seemed like utopian hopes for a distant future even to dissidents a mere five years earlier – made his over-confidence understandable, but optimism and self-belief were (and remain) important traits of Gorbachev's personality. Taking the years from 1985 to 1991 as a whole, this was for the good. A leader lacking in confidence or courage or one who leaned towards pessimism would never have embarked on the reform of the Soviet system or dared to move beyond that to undertake truly transformative change when he came up against the limits of the system.

Gorbachev believed also that people whom he had appointed would serve him loyally. Some did, but – as August 1991 demonstrated most dramatically – some did not. His appointments have already been discussed in Chapter 4, but with particular reference to his earlier years in office. It was then that such key reformers as Yakovlev, Shevardnadze, Chernyaev, and Shakhnazarov were elevated to positions which enabled them to exert great influence. Although others of a more conservative disposition were also promoted between 1985 and 1988, these were the years of Gorbachev's best appointments.<sup>38</sup> Some of his worst appointments were made in the winter of 1990–1. This half-year was perhaps the only period of Gorbachev's leadership when he was a centrist, in the sense of occupying a position roughly equidistant between that of the radical democrats and nationalists and that of the forces within the party-state machine which wanted to restore a more traditional order. He had previously not only been the main instigator of radical reform in the earliest years of his General Secretaryship and the person who took the decisive steps in 1988 to break with the traditional Communist order, but also 'left of centre' throughout 1989 and the greater part of 1990. His position in the political spectrum was that he remained more reformist than the party apparatus and government as a whole, even if less so than the new radicals who had gained a foothold in the system and a voice in Soviet politics as a result of the elections for the all-union and republican legislatures. While Gorbachev was often depicted as a centrist long before the autumn of 1990, that was a misperception of his position within the leadership, although he was happy to obfuscate the point, both because he genuinely tried to build a consensus, whether within the Politburo or the Presidential Council, and for tactical reasons, since it was to his advantage to appear even-handed and ready to listen to the views of both the liberal and the conservative wings of the leadership.

In the winter of 1990–1, however, Gorbachev did, indeed, occupy the centre ground. There were times when his position appeared to be on the 'centre-right', but this period of his leadership was marked by zig-zags, as he manoeuvred between increasingly polarized political forces. With the exception of the months between the August coup and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, it was probably the most stressful and difficult phase of his tenure of the Kremlin. He was under intense pressure from both 'left' and 'right' – from, on the one hand, radical democrats and national separatists, and, on the other, from the government, the party apparatus, the army, the KGB, a conservative majority in the Supreme Soviet, and all those who felt that the pluralization of Soviet politics had gone too far and that the threat of disintegration of the union had got to be countered before it engulfed them all.

The relatively short-lived period of co-operation with Yeltsin, which began in August when Gorbachev supported the work of the Shatalin–Yavlinsky team on the '500 Days

Programme' for rapid transition to a market economy, ended with Gorbachev's retreat from some of the starker implications of that strategy for radical change. Listening to the criticisms of the marketizing economists of the government programme of Ryzhkov and Abalkin and from the government side of the '500 Days' approach, Gorbachev shifted his position not only for reasons of political prudence – since the entire executive, including the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, the economic ministries, the army, the KGB, and most of the party apparatus were opposed to the fast-track 'Transition to the Market' – but also because he became genuinely convinced of weaknesses both in the government proposals and those of the economic radicals. In retrospect, even a number of marketizing economists through the '500 Days' programme unrealistic. Pavel Bunich, one such economist by no means well disposed towards Gorbachev, described it in 1995 as 'not a programme, but an introductory lecture', adding that, if it had been implemented, the results would 'probably have been worse than today'.

It was, according to Bunich, a kind of marketeers' equivalent of the campaigns in Stalin's time to 'fulfil the 5-year plan in three years'.<sup>39</sup> Gorbachev undoubtedly vacillated both on the pros and cons of the programme and on the relative weight of the political forces gathered on each side. What may have been crucial is that the preponderance of power appeared to be on the side of the state authorities rather than the Shatalin–Yavlinsky team. Fierce opposition came not only from within the executive but also from the parliament which was now a body to be reckoned with. Gorbachev believed that the '500 Days Programme' would not be accepted by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.<sup>40</sup>

[...]

### From coup to collapse

[The] coup began for Gorbachev and his family on 18 August [1991] and for Yeltsin and the rest of the country on 19 August. The plotters attempted to intimidate Gorbachev into declaring emergency rule and, having failed to do so, kept him in segregation and lied to the world that he was too ill to be able to continue to carry out his presidential duties.

The idea of emergency rule was not new. Gorbachev had earlier taken part in numerous discussions with the harder-line members of his administration in which they had urged upon him the declaration of 'presidential rule' or a state of emergency (each intended to imply resort to repressive measures to restore 'order'), but, to the dismay of Kryuchkov and the others, he had always refrained from doing so. In fact, while prepared to talk publicly about such a possibility in Lithuania as a way of attempting to slow down the movement towards complete independence of the Baltic states and of 'tranquillizing the hardliners', Gorbachev was opposed in principle to the implementation of emergency rule.

Just a few days before the coup occurred, Gorbachev had, with the help of Chernyaev, who was with him in Foros, completed a long article he intended to publish shortly after the signing of the Union Treaty in which, *inter alia*, he observed: 'The introduction of a state of emergency, in which even some supporters of *perestroika*, not to mention those who preach the ideology of dictatorship, see a way out of the crisis, would be a fatal move and the way to civil war. Frankly speaking, behind the appeals for a state of emergency it is

not difficult sometimes to detect a search for a return to the political system that existed in the *pre-perestroika* period.<sup>41</sup>

Gorbachev's first intimation that something untoward was happening was when the head of his bodyguard, KGB General Vladimir Medvedev (who had not been part of the plot and was as surprised as Gorbachev by the arrival of uninvited guests) informed him at ten minutes to five on the afternoon of 18 August that a group of people had arrived at Foros demanding to see him.<sup>42</sup> When Gorbachev asked why he had let them inside the gates, he was told that Plekhanov (who, as noted earlier, headed the department of the KGB responsible for the personal security of the leadership) was with them.<sup>43</sup> Gorbachev was working in his office at Foros at the time. A little earlier he had telephoned Shakhnazarov, who was on holiday a few miles further down the coast, to discuss the speech he was preparing for the Union Treaty signing ceremony on 20 August and to ask him if he would join him on the plane to Moscow the next day.<sup>44</sup> Wishing to find out who had sent visitors he was not expecting, Gorbachev went to the array of telephones in his office, which included a special government line, a line for strategic and satellite communications, a normal line for outside calls, and the internal line for the Foros holiday complex. All were dead.<sup>45</sup>

Gorbachev told first his wife and then his daughter and son-in-law what the situation appeared to be and that it was clearly very serious. Although this event, when it happened, came out of the blue so far as Gorbachev was concerned, he had thought often about the fate of Khrushchev and had been well aware of the possibility (especially at an earlier stage of his leadership before a wider public had been politicized) of an attempt to overthrow him. He informed his family that he would 'not give in to any kind of blackmail, nor to any threats or pressure'.<sup>46</sup> The fact that, indeed, he did not, Chernyaev later remarked, meant that the coup failed on day one. The plotters were able to bring tanks onto the streets of Moscow, but did not know what to do next.<sup>47</sup> Their favoured scenario had been to intimidate Gorbachev into endorsing emergency rule, leaving them free to do the 'dirty work' for a time, after which (or so they told him) he could return to Moscow.<sup>48</sup>

The person who made that remark was Oleg Baklanov, Gorbachev's deputy head of the Security Council and the most important representative of the military-industrial complex in the leadership, who acted as if he were the senior member of the delegation.<sup>49</sup> The others in the group were Politburo member Oleg Shenin, Gorbachev's chief of staff, Valery Boldin, the Deputy Minister of Defence, Valentin Varennikov, and Plekhanov. Since Gorbachev had issued no instruction for the group to come up to see him, they spent some time waiting. Gorbachev used it, first, in the unavailing attempt to make telephone calls and then in speaking with his family. Eventually the group made their own way to his office and arrived at the door uninvited – 'an unheard-of lack of respect', as Gorbachev later put it.<sup>50</sup>

Gorbachev began by ordering Plekhanov out, a command he obeyed, and asked the others who had sent them. He was told that they had come from the State Committee for the State of Emergency. Gorbachev pointed out that neither he nor the Supreme Soviet had set up such a committee, but in response was informed that he must either issue a decree establishing a state of emergency or hand over his powers to the Vice-President. Later in the conversation Varennikov demanded his resignation, to which Gorbachev responded: 'You'll get neither one thing nor the other out of me – tell that to the people who sent you here.' At the end of the conversation, Gorbachev recalled, 'using the strongest language that the Russians always use in such circumstances, I told them where to go. And that was the end of it.'<sup>51</sup> Varennikov actually saw fit to complain to the legal investigator of his case

that Gorbachev had used 'unparliamentary expressions' in addressing him and the other members of the delegation.<sup>52</sup> Gorbachev's own account of his conduct during the meeting with Baklanov and the others was confirmed during the individual questioning of the coup participants by the Russian procuracy, even though later the conspirators' predictable – although absurd – defence tactic was to claim that Gorbachev was a willing participant in the coup against himself!<sup>53</sup>

Both in the course of the investigation of the coup and, indeed, in the conversation the delegation which visited Foros had with Gorbachev, it was made abundantly clear that the timing of the unauthorized declaration of emergency rule was designed to prevent the Union Treaty from being signed on 20 August. A number of concrete steps, which would have included governmental changes, were due to follow rapidly. Gorbachev had already arranged a session of the Federation Council for the day after the Union Treaty ceremony. If the imminent signing of the Treaty, combined with the fact that Gorbachev was out of Moscow, determined the date of the coup, it was far from the only cause of the action. Each member of the State Committee for the State of Emergency had his own particular interest in either ending Gorbachev's presidency or bringing him under the control of their self-empowered group (which, given their view that he had been destroying both the Soviet system and the Soviet state, would have been only a temporary and partial reprieve for Gorbachev on the way to total ousting and almost certain imprisonment or worse).<sup>54</sup>

[ . . . ]

Gorbachev, with his usual resilience, survived the ordeal of the coup psychologically and physically unscathed, but it took him some time to realize what a devastating blow it had dealt him politically. Yeltsin had not only been the person who was in contact with world leaders during Gorbachev's detention, but he had strengthened further his standing with the Russian people. Even deputies in the Russian parliament who were not particularly well disposed towards him and who had voted against Yeltsin as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet in 1990 and were to be in open revolt against him in 1993 recognized him as a victor to whom they had better offer obeisance in the weeks after 21 August. Yeltsin and his closest supporters were ready, what is more, to press home the advantage this great political victory had given them. Even if Gorbachev had adapted himself to the changed atmosphere in Moscow more quickly than he did on his return from Foros, it is doubtful if a struggle for power – which, in the new circumstances, Yeltsin was likely to win – could have been avoided.

It was still the case in these last months of the Soviet Union's existence, as it had been earlier, that co-operation and a willingness to compromise between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, for the sake of preserving as much of an economic and political union as could be achieved voluntarily, would have been in the interests of a majority of Soviet citizens.

Gorbachev was, indeed, more ready for such co-operation than was Yeltsin, who – following the defeat of the *putschists* and the political capital he was able to make out of the fact that these were people whom Gorbachev had appointed<sup>55</sup> – was increasingly unwilling to accord Gorbachev even a share of power, but the history of their relations was such that it was difficult for either person to put the past behind him. Moreover, as Shakhnazarov perceptively remarked, 'magnanimity is not in the character of Yeltsin and humility is not in the character of Gorbachev'.<sup>56</sup>

The coup itself had failed for a number of reasons. Among them undoubtedly were the fact that Yeltsin, with the legitimacy of recent popular election as Russian President behind him, provided a rallying-point for resistance to those ready to resort to repressive methods to restore the power which had been slipping fast from their grasp; the willingness of several hundred thousand people to take the risk of coming out on to the streets of Moscow and Leningrad in defiance of the orders of the State Committee for the State of Emergency and thus raise the political costs of military action; the lack of a plausible leader, still less a popular one, among the putschists, together with their indecisiveness (ironically enough, since that was one of their list of complaints about Gorbachev); the fact that jamming of foreign radio had been ended by Gorbachev and so objective information about the coup was readily available to the Soviet population; and the strong international support for Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The fruits of several years of liberty and democratization had also emboldened Russian journalists to produce underground newspapers and led a sufficient number of citizens not to accept that their political destinies could be decided once again by a small group of people 'up there'. But nothing was more important in bringing about the failure of the coup than Gorbachev's refusal to provide its leaders with any shred of legitimacy. This, in turn, meant that the army and the KGB were more divided than they otherwise would have been. Gorbachev's 'tragedy' lay, as Chernyaev observes, in the fact that on 18 August Gorbachev dealt 'in essence the decisive blow against the *putsch*' but having spurned 'the "services" of the traitors', he had by the evening of 21 August 'lost what was left of his own power'.<sup>57</sup>

Gorbachev made two political errors immediately upon his return to Moscow, although allowance has to be made for his isolation in Foros, since even foreign radio broadcasts were no substitute for direct experience of the changed mood in Moscow. The first mistake was, after returning by plane to Moscow on the night of 21–2 August, not to go straight to the Russian White House. By the time he did go on 23 August he found Yeltsin determined to squeeze the maximum political advantage from the occasion and to evoke a response from the deputies in the Russian legislature which was part enthusiastic and part fawning. Gorbachev would almost certainly have received a more sympathetic reception if he had made the White House his first port of call after his flight landed in Moscow, since that building had been the physical and symbolic centre of resistance to the coup. It is noteworthy, however, that no one in the Russian delegation who took part in the relief of Foros – and with whom he returned in the plane in which they had flown to the Crimea, rather than in his own presidential aircraft, which had once again become available to him – suggested this or mentioned that he might be expected at the White House.<sup>58</sup> (The group of *putschists*, who had taken a plane of their own to the Crimea, did in fact reach Foros before the Russian delegation. By this time, however, they had lost the will for further desperate measures and it seems that they merely wished to get their excuses and explanations in first – before Gorbachev heard the views of those who had resisted their take-over. But Gorbachev refused to meet them and, apart from those who enjoyed parliamentary immunity – which was later legally rescinded – they returned to Moscow under arrest.)

Gorbachev's second, and more important mistake, was to revert to a familiar theme in his first press conference after returning to Moscow and speak about the need for 'renewal' of the Communist Party.<sup>59</sup> Gorbachev had not for some time believed that the Communist Party should be a ruling party in the old sense; indeed, he had increasingly bypassed it. He

hoped instead to see a reformed, essentially social democratic party – several million strong – emerge out of the old CPSU. He was aware that he both lacked and needed a strong party as a political base and initially believed that, following the failed coup, it would be easier for him to win over the bulk of the party, since the hardliners had been so discredited.<sup>60</sup>

What Gorbachev failed to realize was that the Communist Party as such had, in the immediate aftermath of the coup, lost what had been left of its credibility. Almost all of the leading office-holders in the party had either supported the coup or had done nothing to resist it. The party was, accordingly, in the view of a majority both of the population and of political activists (including many, such as Alexander Yakovlev, who had themselves been senior party officials), beyond salvation. Gorbachev's remarks about the party were misinterpreted by some to mean that he was 'still a Communist at heart' when, in fact, he had done more than anyone to dismantle the distinctively communist system. But to insist on reform of the party at a time when most people wished to see it simply swept aside undoubtedly did him further political damage. Yakovlev told Gorbachev in private that to talk of the 'renewal' of the party was 'like offering first aid to a corpse'.<sup>61</sup>

The remaining months of 1991 saw a further erosion both of Gorbachev's power and of what was left of the central authorities of the Soviet Union. At the meeting of the Russian parliament which Gorbachev addressed on 23 August, he insisted – as had, indeed, been true – that the Communist Party was not an undifferentiated body of people and that its members should not collectively be held responsible for the sins of its leadership (of which by this time he was better aware). Nevertheless, Yeltsin issued decrees there and then suspending the activity of the Russian Communist Party and seizing the assets of the CPSU. A day later Gorbachev, responding to the persuasion of colleagues such as Yakovlev as well as to the pressure from Yeltsin, resigned as General Secretary and called on the Central Committee of the CPSU to disband itself. At the meeting of the Russian legislature which Gorbachev addressed on 23 August Yeltsin also insisted that Gorbachev read the minutes of a meeting of the Council of Ministers, held on 19 August, from which it became very clear that almost every member – whether from conviction, cowardice, or, as a number would later claim, lack of information – had gone along with the coup. Yeltsin's insistence that these were Gorbachev's own appointees was not denied by the Soviet President, although it was true only in a formal sense. Most of the ministers (a majority of them responsible for different branches of the economy) had been chosen by Ryzhkov and had more recently been reappointed (along with some new members) by Gorbachev in association with the Federation Council on which the heads of the union republics, including Yeltsin, sat.

[ . . . ]

The final blow to the preservation of a union came when the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia – Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Shushkevich – held a meeting near Brest in Belorussia (or Belarus, as it had become known) on 8 December and announced that the Soviet Union was ceasing to exist and that they were going to establish in its place a Commonwealth of Independent States. Gorbachev was outraged that such a decision should have been taken unconstitutionally as well as unilaterally – without consultation either with him or with the heads of the other republics still within the union. Nazarbaev was likewise offended that he had been excluded from the decision, although he was clearly going to remain President of Kazakhstan whatever happened, and it was now evident



that there would soon be no state left for Gorbachev to head. In the remaining weeks of his leadership Gorbachev gradually reconciled himself to the fact that his presidency was coming to an end and argued for the creation of institutional structures in the new 'Commonwealth' which would give it some meaning. In fact, in the short term at least, these were to remain very weak.

Gorbachev announced on 18 December that he would resign as Soviet President as soon as the transition from union to commonwealth had been completed. At a meeting in Alma Ata on 21 December, to which Gorbachev was now invited, the number of states willing to join the Commonwealth – which had gradually been increasing – reached eleven, all the former Soviet republics except the three Baltic states and Georgia. Gorbachev's departure from office came on 25 December when he signed a decree divesting himself of his authority as President of the USSR and transferring his powers as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces to Yeltsin, together with control of nuclear weapons (which passed to Russia as not only the largest successor state to the Soviet Union but in this respect, and in respect of its seat on the Security Council at the United Nations, the 'continuer state').

In a televised resignation speech on the evening of 25 December Gorbachev told his fellow citizens that he had tried to combine defending the independence of peoples and sovereignty of republics with preservation of the union and that he could not accept its dismemberment. He regretted the fact that the old system had crumbled before a new system could be made to work and deplored the August coup which had aggravated the existing crisis and, most perniciously, brought about 'the collapse of statehood'. Gorbachev acknowledged that mistakes had been made and that many things could have been done better, but he also listed the achievements of 'the transition period'. These included the ending of the Cold War, the liquidation of 'the totalitarian system', the breakthrough to democratic reforms, the recognition of the paramount importance of human rights, and movement towards a market economy.

The Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin that same day and replaced by the Russian tricolour. By 27 December, when Gorbachev returned to the Kremlin to clear his desk, he found his office already occupied by Boris Yeltsin. Gorbachev had believed that he had the use of it until 30 December. But these were the minutiae of a political rivalry which had been resolved in Yeltsin's favour. More momentous events had occurred. In less than seven years a vast country and much of the world had changed immeasurably.

## Notes

- 1 Robert Conquest, Foreword to Ian Bremner and Ray Taras (eds.), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993), p. xvii. Cf. Georgy Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody: Reformatsiya Gorbacheva glazami ego pomoshchnika* (Rossika Zevs, Moscow, 1993), 348.
- 2 Mark Galeotti, *The Age of Anxiety: Security and Politics in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (Longman, London, 1995), 192–3.
- 3 This was the implicit position of many Western commentators on the Soviet scene and close to the viewpoint also of some of the boldest of radical libertarians in Russia during the last years of the Soviet Union, among them Yelena Bonner, Gavriil Popov, and Galina Staravoytova. (Cf. Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 193.)

- 4 As the authors of an article in *Moscow News* (one of them, Illarionov, a former economic adviser to the Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, and current Director of the Institute of Economic Analysis in Moscow) observed with reference to one republic, Chechnya: 'Formally "pacified" Chechnya remained within Russia for 132 years, exactly as long as Poland, which also refused to tolerate the loss of independence. This is much shorter than the amount of time that many other states on the territory of the former USSR spent in the Russian embrace. Their independence has already been internationally recognized' (Andrei Illarionov and Boris Lvin, 'Should Russia Recognize Chechnya's Independence?', *Moscow News*, 8 (24 Feb.–2 Mar. 1995), 4).
- 5 Even Robert Conquest, who in several important books has dealt with the plight of some of the smaller nationalities during the Soviet period, appears surprisingly to overlook this point when he writes that 'the breakup of the USSR (and Yugoslavia) would add no more than a score or so to the present large roster of independent states' (Preface to Bremner and Taras, *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, p. xvii).
- 6 Accordingly, the Central Asian republics remained pro-union in the late Soviet period at a time when, one by one, the other republics began to embrace the cause of independence. In that respect, at least, the well-known book by Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire éclaté: La Révolte des nations en U.R.S.S.* (Flammarion, Paris, 1978), was less percipient than its title, for the central thesis was that the faster growth of population of Soviet Central Asia, as compared with European Russia, together with the rise of Islam, represented the major threat to the survival of the Soviet state.
- 7 Illarionov and Lvin compared 'the present "winter war"' to that launched by the Soviet Union in December 1939 against Finland, and the bombing of residential areas of Helsinki with the similar attacks on residential quarters of Grozny. They went on: 'The extermination of thousands of utterly innocent citizens on the territory of Chechnya is unambiguously characterized as genocide by international and national law' ('Should Russia Recognize Chechnya's Independence?', 4). Among the many to condemn the war on Chechnya in the pages of the Russian press was Mikhail Gorbachev, who asked: 'What kind of terrorists are they, who must be fought using all arms of the service, including tanks, the air force, artillery and, what is more, on the territory of a peaceful city?' He went on to argue that 'the tragic consequences of this bloody venture' would include 'the loss of Russia's prestige as a state' and that part of the problem was the Russian constitution adopted in December 1993 which left 'the president and the government out of control', possessing such power that they felt no need to concern themselves with public opinion. See Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Crisis Exposes Social Ills', *Moscow News*, 1 (6–12 Jan. 1995), 3.
- 8 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Collier Books paperback edn., New York, 1990), Epilogue, p. 278.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 274.
- 10 Within, that is to say, the USSR as a whole; they constituted actual majorities in certain republics.
- 11 'Every specific, concrete and feasible alternative solution to the problem of the best unit will, almost certainly, on balance benefit the interests of some citizens more than others' (Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* [Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989], 209).
- 12 See *Pravda*, 27 Mar. 1991, pp. 1–2. In the Soviet Central Asian states the proportion supporting a 'renewed federation' was in every case more than 90 per cent. In Kazakhstan, however, the question was altered by the republic's Supreme Soviet in a way which could have influenced the outcome. There the wording was: 'Do you believe it essential to preserve the USSR as a Union of equal sovereign states?' The Kazakh authorities, nevertheless, requested that the answers to *their* question be included in the overall figures of the USSR

- referendum, and the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, was, in fact, one of the most eloquent opponents of the complete breakup of the Soviet Union.
- 13 *Pravda*, 27 Mar. 1991, pp. 1–2.
- 14 Ian Bremner and Ray Taras note that, whereas in his earliest years in power Gorbachev spoke of the relations between nationalities as if it were a unified issue, 'by 1991, Gorbachev's statements consistently highlighted the differences among the Soviet nationalities, with particular emphasis placed upon the uniqueness of the Baltic situation' (Preface to *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, p. xxi).
- 15 Shevardnadze interview (17 Sept. 1991), *The Second Russian Revolution* transcripts [deposited in the Special Collections of the LSE Library].
- 16 See A. V. Veber, V. T. Loginov, G. S. Ostroumov, and A. S. Chernyaev (eds.), *Soyuz možhno bylo sokhranit: belaya kniga dokumenty i fakty o politike M. S. Gorbacheva po reformirovaniyu i sokhraneniyu mnogonatsional'nogo gosudarstva* (Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, 1995).
- 17 See John Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of Soviet Power* (Macmillan, London, 1993), 156–7; and Richard Sakwa, *Gorbachev and his Reforms, 1985–1990* (Philip Allan, London, 1990), 262–3.
- 18 Ann Sheehy, 'Supreme Soviet Adopts Law on Mechanics of Secession', [*Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, 2/17 (27 Apr. 1990)] 2–5, at p. 3. See also Jonathan Steele, *Eternal Russia: Yeltsin, Gorbachev and the Mirage of Democracy* (Faber & Faber, London, 1994), 206–9.
- 19 Sheehy, 'Supreme Soviet Adopts Law on Mechanics of Secession', 3–4.
- 20 *Ibid.*, at pp. 4–5.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 22 Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*: *po dnevnikovym zapisiam* (Moscow, 1993), 410. See also Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 196, 348.
- 23 Interview with Alexander Nikolaevich Yakovlev in *Argumenty i fakty*, 11 Mar. 1995, p. 3.
- 24 The series of proposals designed to discourage or slow down the Lithuanian drive for independence was drawn up by Andrey Girenko (a Secretary of the Central Committee since September 1989 and a Ukrainian by nationality), Yuri Maslyukov (the Chairman of Gosplan and a Politburo member), Vadim Medvedev (the Politburo member and Secretary of the Central Committee who was at that time overseeing ideology), and Georgy Razumovsky (the Central Committee Secretary, and candidate member of the Politburo, in charge of party cadres). See *Istoricheskiy arkhiv*, 1 (1992), 3–5.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Alexander Utkin, 'Pyat' rokovkh shagov Gorbacheva', *Rossiyskaya federatsiya*, 7 (1995), 4–8, at p. 8. Utkin states that the Estonian declaration of sovereignty was in October 1988; in fact, it came in November of that year.
- 27 Reported by John Lloyd in an article entitled 'Gorbachev Shivers in his Own Shadow', *Financial Times*, 24 Apr. 1995, p. 17.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Gorbachev interview, *The Second Russian Revolution* transcripts.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Cf. Gorbachev interview, *The Second Russian Revolution* transcripts; and Gorbatschow, *Erinnerungen* [Munich, 1996], 561–70.
- 32 For two useful collections of documents, one of which is devoted entirely to the Gorbachev–Yeltsin relationship and the other of which devotes substantial space to it, see M. K. Gorshkov, V. V. Zhuravlev, and L. N. Dobrokhotov (eds.), *Gorbachev–Yel'tsin: 1500 dney politicheskogo protivostoyaniya* (Terra, Moscow, 1992); and B. I. Koval (ed.), *Rossiya segodnya: politicheskii portret v dokumentakh, 1985–1991* (Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, Moscow, 1991), 393–511 (for the period Dec. 1990–Apr. 1991, pp. 487–509).
- 33 I am grateful to Professor Yury Levada, Director of VTsIOM, for supplying me with the results of twelve opinion polls conducted by his institute (between December 1989 and January 1992) on the extent to which people approved of the activity of Gorbachev. For a Gorbachev–Yeltsin comparison, see also *Reytingi Borisa Yel'tsina i Mikhaila Gorbacheva po 10-bal'noy shkale* (VTsIOM, Moscow, 1993).
- 34 *V kakoy mere vy odobryaete deyatel'nost' M. S. Gorbacheva* (VTsIOM survey), courtesy of Professor Levada.
- 35 Gorbatschow, *Erinnerungen*, 1089.
- 36 M. Gorbachev, 'Novaya politika v novoy Rossii', *Svobodnaya mysl*, 13 (1992), 3–19, at p. 14. See also Gorbatschow, *Erinnerungen*, 1089. In an interview with Angus Roxburgh for the BBC *Newsnight* programme on 6 Aug. 1992, Gorbachev made essentially the same point. I am grateful to the BBC for supplying me with the full video-recording of that interview.
- 37 Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 147. Andrey Grachev has written that during his years in power Gorbachev had been so successful in convincing the entire world of 'his ability to perform political miracles that perhaps he ended up believing it himself' (Grachev, *Dal'she bez menya . . . Ukhod Prezidenta* (Kultura, Moscow, 1994), 3). The economist Pavel Bunich, has made the point about Gorbachev's self-confidence in altogether more hostile terms, describing him as 'secretive and self-satisfied' (*Argumenty i fakty*, 12 (Mar. 1995), 3).
- 38 The only exception to that generalization is the period of several months after the August 1991 coup, when Gorbachev was able to bring back into his inner circle proponents of far-reaching change, while being freed for the first time from the pressures of more conservative forces within the party apparatus, the military, KGB, and the ministerial apparatus. The party machine had ceased to exist, new leaderships existed in all of the other organizations, and the political climate was one in which defenders of the status quo ante had been seriously weakened and the only (but decisively important) threat to Gorbachev came from Yeltsin's team and from the separatist tendencies in all of the European republics within the Soviet Union.
- 39 Bunich, *Argumenty i fakty*, 12 (Mar. 1995), 3.
- 40 Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, 376.
- 41 Gorbachev, *The August Coup* [HarperCollins, London, 1991], 111. The article which Gorbachev and Chernyaev completed a few days before the coup is published as Appendix C to Gorbachev's short book on the coup, pp. 97–127.
- 42 For Vladimir Medvedev's account of the episode, see his volume of memoirs, *Chelovek za spinoy* (Russlit, Moscow, 1994), esp. 274–87.
- 43 Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, 18; cf. Stepankov and Lisov, *Kremlevskiy zagovor* [Ogonek, Moscow, 1992], 9; and Medvedev, *Chelovek za spinoy*, 276–7. Plekhanov, as head of the KGB Ninth Department, was Medvedev's chief. Before leaving Foros himself, he ordered Medvedev to leave and the latter obeyed. Neither at the time nor later did Gorbachev hold this against his former principal bodyguard (whose face was well known to the outside world, although his name was not, for he was to be seen lurking behind Gorbachev in thousands of photographs, especially those taken abroad), since it was virtually impossible for him to disobey an order from his commanding officer. Following the coup, however, Gorbachev created a cadre of presidential bodyguards answerable ultimately to him – as did Yeltsin with the Russian presidency – who were no longer part of the KGB. Medvedev apart, Gorbachev's bodyguards remained with him, loyal to him – and armed – throughout his period of isolation at Foros, but they were under the surveillance of an 'outer layer' of fresh KGB detachments who had been brought in by Plekhanov.
- 44 Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, 17–18; and Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 262. Gorbachev and Shakhnazarov are thirty to forty minutes apart in their estimate of when their telephone conversation took place, Gorbachev saying that it was 'at 4.30 p.m.' (*The August Coup*, 17)

and Shakhnazarov stating that it was 'at 15.50', but a few pages further on, quoting from the speech he made to the Russian Supreme Soviet on 21 August, he gives the time of his conversation with Gorbachev as 16.00 hours (*Tsena svobody*, 262, 266).

- 45 A telephone operator at Foros later recounted how a KGB officer appeared behind her just as she was connecting Gorbachev with Shakhnazarov. Immediately that conversation was completed the Chairman of the Belorussian Supreme Soviet, Dementey, telephoned, returning a call from Gorbachev. The officer told him to put down the telephone and not to trouble the President with any more phone calls. The lines were then disconnected. See Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 270–1 and Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, 18.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 18–19.
- 47 Author's interview with Chernyaev, 30 Mar. 1992.
- 48 Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, 28.
- 49 Stepankov and Lisov, *Kremlevskiy zagovor*, 13.
- 50 Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, 19.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 20–3.
- 52 Stepankov and Lisov, *Kremlevskiy zagovor*, 14. Even Boldin confirms that Gorbachev ordered Plekhanov out and went on the offensive against Baklanov and, still more, against Varennikov. See Boldin, *Ten Years that Shook the World*, 26–7.
- 53 On that, see Stepankov and Lisov, *Kremlevskiy zagovor*; Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 270–6; and Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, 477–88.
- 54 Numerous articles have appeared in the hardline conservative press of post-Soviet Russia, especially *Den'* and its successor, *Zavtra*, both edited by Alexander Prokhanov – one of the main authors of 'A Word to the People' – calling for Gorbachev to be brought to trial for treason.
- 55 Ironically, Yeltsin in Sept.–Oct. 1993 faced a revolt by people whom *he* had appointed or promoted, including his Vice-President, the Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet, and the head of the Russian security service (the post-Soviet equivalent of the KGB). It ended with the storming of the Russian White House, of which Yeltsin had been a defender two years earlier, and with a substantially higher death-toll (mainly on the side of Yeltsin's opponents) than in August 1991 when three people were killed in Moscow.
- 56 Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, 176.
- 57 Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, 487.
- 58 *Ibid.* 489.
- 59 *Pravda*, 23 Aug. 1991, p. 2.
- 60 Cf. Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, 46–7; and Grachev, *Dal'she bez menya*, 8–9.
- 61 [David] Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb [The Last Days of the Soviet Empire (Viking, London, 1993)]*, 495.

## Vladislav M. Zubok

### GORBACHEV AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

#### Perspectives on history and personality

**I**T IS A PERENNIAL HUMAN ILLUSION to attribute great events to great causes. Particularly during the past century scholars have tended to attribute transitions from one historical period to another to grand, impersonal forces – shifts in the balance of power, inter-imperialist contradictions, revolutions, the rise of new ideologies and social movements. In the current scholarly climate the other extreme has become fashionable: to highlight the micro-levels of history – the role and beliefs of 'common people', incremental changes in social life, and power as a phenomenon of everyday life. As a result of these two trends, the view that history is shaped by 'great men' is utterly discredited. Today, many historians would rather die than admit that the character of a personality in a position of power at a critical juncture can make a major difference in the course of history.

Among recent exceptions is the figure of Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev. This energetic, handsome man with sparkling eyes and a charming smile 'did more than anyone else to end the Cold War between East and West', asserts British political scientist Archie Brown in his seminal study, *The Gorbachev Factor*. Yet his book deals more with the domestic field of Gorbachev's activities than with his foreign policy. And, surprisingly, in discussing the reasons for Gorbachev's policies, Brown pays only slight attention to the character and personal traits of the last Soviet leader: Gorbachev is a 'factor' in his study, not a human being in flesh and spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this reluctance to analyze Gorbachev the person can be excused. It is indeed very hard to write about a living historical personality. Proximity warps our vision. But is it possible to evaluate recent history without evaluating a person who so dramatically influenced its course? It is worth quoting Anatoly Chernyaev, the most loyal and supportive of Gorbachev's assistants. Gorbachev, he claims, 'was not "a great man" as far as set of personal qualities was concerned'. But he 'fulfilled a great mission', and that is 'more important for history'.<sup>2</sup> A more critical Dmitry Volkogonov provides another, yet also remarkable, estimate: Gorbachev 'is a person of great mind, but with a weak character.