The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Gorbachev the Traitor

By Boris Kagarlitsky

March 16, 2011



The 80th birthday of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev this month sparked a sudden but understandable surge of nostalgia for perestroika among the liberal intelligentsia. Their praises for the last Soviet president sounded more like a rationalization from people who share responsibility along with Gorbachev for the collapse of the country.

Speeches defending Gorbachev sound just as unconvincing as the criticism directed against him. Some blame him for the collapse of the Soviet Union, while others argue that it was unavoidable for objective reasons and that therefore no individual is to blame. If that were true, would it be fair to blame Stalin for the wholesale terror and murder committed by his regime, or to blame Leonid Brezhnev for the economic stagnation that prevailed while he was leader? Conversely, it would be incorrect to attribute Nikita Khrushchev for the thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations.

The Soviet Union did not disappear because of a great flood or a major earthquake. Somebody was at the helm making decisions and setting a political course. Politicians should be responsible for their actions. But do politicians alone bear responsibility?

In fact, Gorbachev's problem is inseparably linked with the unstated problem of the low self-esteem and rationalization of the millions of people who lived through the drama of 1991. Some justify Gorbachev's actions in an attempt to justify their own complicity in events. For the same reasons, others try to shift blame from themselves by holding Gorbachev solely responsible. "He ruined everything," they say. "We are not to blame."

Unfortunately, the Soviet people bear responsibility for what happened to their country. That does not lift responsibility from any one individual, even if that person was part of the leadership — those whom we naturally call on the carpet first for anything that happens. We the people are to blame for not mounting any resistance to that course of action, or at least for not fighting it hard enough.

In truth, the only people with the moral right to criticize Gorbachev today are the ones who had the courage in the 1980s and 1990s to point out how destructive his policies were, to go against the flow, and to condemn the path followed not only by Gorbachev, but also by his main political rival, former President Boris Yeltsin.

Gorbachev's rule contrasts favorably with the leaders who came both before and after him, and he is not remembered for having committed any particularly egregious wrongdoings. According to that thinking, Gorbachev did not "destroy" the Soviet Union, he "only" betrayed the country he led.

Gorbachev took office with a pledge to serve and defend the state. He cannot be blamed for the fact that a catastrophe that had been brewing for two decades erupted during his reign. But as the captain, he was obligated to "go down with the ship" and share the same political fate as the country he governed. The problem is not that Gorbachev could have prevented the collapse and didn't — he couldn't have under any circumstances — but that when the troubles came, he snuck away from the battlefield and went home to have dinner.

The people might sometimes excuse or even justify the deeds of malefactors, but it never forgives a traitor.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/03/16/gorbachev-the-traitor-a5661