Chapter 9
Mistakes and Demise: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Dissolution of the Soviet Union

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Abstract This chapter focuses on the final stage of the history of the Soviet Union, from 1985 to 1991, when the last Communist Party and Soviet state leader Mikhail Gorbachev tried to reform his country by making economic life more effective, widen the scope of political participation, open up history and culture for debate, and introduce a new, peaceful thinking in international affairs. Gorbachev wanted to save the Soviet system but ended up destroying it. His initially successful strategy of taking a middle-of-the-road position to gain support worked well during the first years of reform, but the mid-position became successively narrower until it finally dissolved. Gorbachev's increasingly desperate attempts to negotiate a new and revised union treaty led in 1991 to the failed August Coup which, in turn, dealt the final death blow to the Soviet Union. By way of conclusion, political mistakes are often difficult to distinguish from failures caused by structural problems. As is illustrated by the case of Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, this is particularly salient in societies in which statist power and cultural patterns have traditionally played decisive roles in historical developments.

Keywords Mistakes · Errors · Failure · Dissolution · Gorbachev · Reform · Soviet Union

9.1 Introduction

In the end of 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and disappeared from the map of the world, to be replaced by 15 successor states with the Russian Federation as the primary heir. Simultaneously, the Cold War came to a definite end. The rules of

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international politics changed dramatically when one of the two main Cold War contenders ceased to exist. No doubt, failures and miscalculations, the theme of this book, played its part in the process. The leader of the Soviet Union at the time, Mikhail Gorbachev, had not intended his state to dissolve, nor could he have anticipated the revolutionizing chain of events. When he in the preceding years had initiated a series of governance reforms, his intention had been to save the Union. Instead he ended up bringing about its demise. How could this happen? This is the main theme around which our chapter is woven.

It is well-known in history as well as in political science that a middle-of-the-road position may be a safe and inclusive stance when events proceed smoothly, but in a tougher political climate, polarization tends to occur, and the middle strip of the road may vanish ever so quickly (Fleisher and Bond 2004; Handlin 2017). Through history, the dilemma to find a middle way between political and ideological extremes, between revolutionaries and autocratic conservatives, has been recurrent for Russian and Soviet actors with liberal-democratic or reform communist ideas. Tsarist as well as Soviet politicians with ambitions to change state and society in Russia with gradual measures have constantly needed to take this predicament into account. Gorbachev had to handle this dilemma too, with for him devastating results.

9.2 Scholarly Interpretations

Among scholars, there is no consensus on how to explain the fall of the Soviet Union. There are experts who analyze its demise mainly from an external perspective. Most popular is probably the idea that the Soviet Union, normally always prepared to standing up against the United States' arms buildup, succumbed to imperial overstretch (Kennedy 1988) and failed to compete in the Cold War global arms race accelerated by the American President Ronald Reagan to defeat the "evil empire." Igor' Klyamkin, a Soviet commentator, wrote in 1990 that a change of politics was necessary since "we would in the future be incapable of solving our defense problems at the expense of social programs and other sectors of the economy" (Klyamkin, quoted from Dunlop 1993).

However, most commentators are inclined to look for the causes of the Soviet collapse in internal factors and processes. According to such interpretations, the Soviet system was doomed to failure from the outset (Malia 1994), due to several aspects: a planned economy that could neither be developed nor improved, although the Soviet Union had most natural resources in the world; a political system that was impossible to reform, other than within the framework of the single allowed party; a communist ideology that was never permitted to be tested against and legitimized by social reality; an opposition that was always met with violence, repression, or silence; and an imperial structure that had to be upheld. There is some correspondence between this interpretation and totalitarianism theory (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965), which rests upon the idea that there are certain immutable basic elements, such as repression, censorship, and propaganda, that keep up the totalitar-

ian society. When sheer repression ends, some other forms of social control will need to replace it to maintain stability in society, and here social scientists would tend to suggest legitimacy as the prime candidate (Weber 1978; Holmes 1997). However, legitimacy was evidently in short supply in the Soviet Union of the 1980s and early 1990s.

To avoid crude determinism, it is necessary to pose questions such as: Given this predestination, then why did the Communist Soviet Union last nearly three quarters of a century? Surely, totalitarian control ended roughly with Stalin, and yet the Union endured for almost another 40 years. What, finally, caused its collapse? The latter question allows for a much larger scope for individual and collective agents, such as the nationalist popular fronts in the Soviet republics, and their intentions and motives. Explanations that put forward individual agents and their ideas, albeit in confrontation with social structures and cultural inheritance, can hardly avoid turning their attention to Mikhail Gorbachev. That is also the route that we endeavor to take in this chapter.

9.3 Gorbachev's Reform Agenda

On 11 March 1985, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, 54 years old and a young politician according to Soviet appointment standards since the Brezhnev era, was unanimously elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by the highest party organ, the Politburo. To be sure, he was not without contenders, but both Viktor Grishin, aged 71, and Grigorii Romanov, 62, backed out and fell in line behind Gorbachev, who had the full support of influential older politicians such as the long-term foreign minister Andrei Gromyko (Taubman 2017). With Gorbachev, a new generation that had not worked in Stalin's industrialization drive, participated in the purges, or fought in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany, took power. Instead, they had their formative political experiences during Khrushchev's destalinization and reform years.

Gorbachev was also the first Soviet leader since Lenin's generation to have a formal university education. After attending Moscow State University, where Gorbachev studied law and became full member of the Communist Party in 1952, the new leader started climbing the party ladder and served as party leader in his region of birth Stavropol between 1969 and 1978. In this period, he rose through the ranks and entered the CPSU Central Committee. In 1978 he was appointed Moscow-based party secretary responsible for agricultural affairs (which hitherto had been considered a dead-end mission), and 2 years later, he was made a full member of the Politburo.

Soon after taking over the highest power position as General Secretary, Gorbachev demonstrated an ambition to change the Soviet Union with peaceful and gradual means. Revolutionary, violent change was not an option for him. He realized that the country needed a new course of reforms to revitalize a stagnant command economy and to liberalize political life, but what this really meant and how far

change should reach was not clear to him. The problem of Soviet modernization was obvious: Was it even possible to carry out economic and political reforms without radically changing the authoritarian political system, the party, and the structures of the planned economy?

Already in the first period after his appointment, Gorbachev stated that people did not like to live "in the old way" anymore and called for an acceleration, uskorenie, and a restructuring, perestroika, of the economy. To achieve this general goal, he called for increased labor discipline, higher productivity, and an end to corruption. Long years of erosion of meaning in Soviet political discourse made it initially difficult to see the novelty of Gorbachev's ideas, and several elements were reminiscent of Nikita Khrushchev's reform efforts a little more than two decades earlier (Schroder 1990). However, when Gorbachev introduced his first concrete reform, an anti-alcohol campaign, it was certainly a radical move, aiming at improving discipline, health, and work efficiency, but it did not make him very popular in Soviet society or among his associates. In the Soviet republic of Georgia, e.g., the anti-alcohol campaign included the actual destruction of vineyards and was received as an attempt to strike a lethal blow at Georgian wine-based culture and way of living (White 1996). Besides, the Soviet state lost large incomes with the restrictions of sales of alcohol. All in all, the General Secretary's campaign, in popular parlance transforming him to mineral'nyi sekretar' (mineral water secretary, to be compared with general'nyi sekretar', for general secretary), was his first major political failure.

These early, after all rather cautious, initiatives, presented in a 5-h speech at the 27th Party Congress in February 1986, answered to Gorbachev's belief in the Communist Soviet Union and to his ambition to make the economy more efficient and competitive by attacking inertia and apathy in party and society. This was not primarily intended to introduce qualitatively new policies but to implement the old ones in a better and more efficient way. The initiatives were clearly inspired by some of his first scholarly advisors, such as the economist-sociologist Tatyana Zaslavskaya, who blamed economic stagnation on "the human factor," on a situation in which people had "no reason to work well, do not want to work well, and do not know how to work well" (quoted from Taubman 2017; 187).

During 1987, Gorbachev' modernization strategy assumed a more clear and elaborate form, introduced as it was by an extremely hardworking politician with an entirely new, open, and popularly accessible leadership style, with a new political self-confidence, and probably with a new understanding that the first reforms would not be effective enough for a successful Soviet modernization drive. The overall perestroika idea had fallen into three main parts in a package of reforms that was introduced gradually, both in the Soviet Union and into the international lexicon. In January, Gorbachev called for demokratizatsiya, that is, a democratization of the authoritarian political system by ensuring more power to ordinary people and "guaranteeing that past mistakes will not be repeated" (Gorbachev 1987). In July, he introduced various economic reforms in terms of perestroika. In November, on the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, he delivered a candid speech in which he condemned Stalin's crimes against his own population, thereby triggering a

politics of openness, glasnost', that Soviet politicians had not experienced since Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956.

While perestroika did not bring about immediate economic progress, but, due to glitches such as unwieldy procedures of quality control and transportation problems, rather led to shortages of consumer goods from 1988 onwards, the glasnost reform was a tremendous success, at least as measured by cultural and historical openness. Journalists, writers, theater producers, and other intellectuals revealed aspects of Soviet history that so far had been debated seldom or not at all, such as Stalin's long-term terror against his own population. However, as a policy meant to strengthen Soviet society, the success was less evident and definite. Rather it set processes in motion that struck at the very foundations of the political system.

From the outset, Gorbachev had probably not intended glasnost' to be total transparency, but an openness which would facilitate the implementation of the reform package as a whole. Increasingly, however, glasnost' became a way to try to increase the legitimacy of government in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev realized that the Stalin-time repression and crimes were gross liabilities for the regime. Therefore, he advocated going back to what he perceived as the uncontested ideological roots of the Soviet Union, to Lenin as the founding father of the Soviet state. Lenin's legacy, the argument went, had subsequently been squandered and corrupted by Stalin and the oppressive regime that he led. However, the fundamentally critical debates did not stop at Stalin. They went further back in time, and revelations about atrocities being committed already under Lenin during and after the Bolshevik coup and the civil war found their way to the public debate, serving to erode legitimacy rather than resurrecting it. With hindsight, Gorbachev's underestimation of the processes unleashed by glasnost', and his belief in the regime's ability to keep them within restricted bounds was one of his gravest strategic mistakes. Once the genie has been let out of the bottle, there was simply no way of forcing it back in.

9.4 The Reform Pace Quickens

Perestroika, economic change, was still considered the main reform for Gorbachev, even if he introduced a second, more broadly reformist, and decidedly altogether more far-reaching stage in 1987, starting from the idea that the different reform packages must reciprocally influence and strengthen each other. Historian Geoffrey Hosking notes the importance of Gorbachev's change from a moderate perestroika Mark One, generally in line with Soviet experiences, to a more radical perestroika Mark Two of the year 1987, "which soon led him into uncharted territories, awakening suspicion and resentment among some of those who had helped him to come to power" (Hosking 1991).

As already hinted at, and as noted in several of the best biographies written about Gorbachev, the reform ideas were not entirely his own (Brown 1996; White 1990). In a political generation shift, he soon assembled a team of new leaders around him and promoted them to Politburo members. The liberal internationalist Aleksandr

Yakovlev, once an exchange student at Columbia University in New York, former Soviet Ambassador to Canada, Politburo member, and the acting head of the Department of Propaganda at the Central Committee, was a key person behind the party leader's reform program. In 1983, Gorbachev spent a week in Canada, where he and Yakovlev became friends (Taubman 2017, pp. 182–186). It is probable that Yakovlev, together with the newly appointed foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, was involved in Gorbachev's reorientation in the international arena with major elements such as the drastic reduction of the arms race, the successive release of the East European satellite states, the revocation of the Brezhnev doctrine, and ultimately the termination of the Cold War. No doubt, this new foreign policy, called new thinking or novoe myshlenie, might have had idealistic traits, but it was also a way of reducing the costs of military competition with the United States. The idea that domestic needs should dictate Soviet foreign policy, and not the other way around, was surely a new feature in Soviet politics.

Yakovlev is also considered to be the main architect behind glasnost', which no doubt corresponds well with Zaslavskaya's idea of the importance of the "human factor": Only informed, educated, and motivated people acting in a society more open than the traditional Soviet one and with means of making their own decisions based on verified information can constructively contribute to true economic development. The need for a democratization of political life can be motivated from a similar idea that increased political participation would have a beneficial effect on the engagement for economic reform work.

However, the political recipe that Gorbachev offered to the Soviet people was not a transition to democracy but rather a half measure. In one major political reform, voters were given the opportunity to choose among several candidates for parliamentary bodies at different levels of the state structure but without abolishing the leading role of the Communist Party in the political process. However, in this way, a group of old, anti-reformist, and unpopular communists could at least be made to step down.

Moreover, the power of the party institutions and the bureaucracy was reduced in favor of the Soviet state structures. In February 1990, while keeping on to the position of Party General Secretary, Gorbachev created for himself the new, formal position as President of the Soviet Union (Robinson 1992). It seemed at the time as if the move was undertaken by Gorbachev to try to guarantee him continued key political influence, should the power of the Communist Party erode and prove to be insufficient as a basis. An erosion of the power of the CPSU would certainly take place soon enough, but the occupancy of the formal position as president of the Soviet Union eventually did little to protect Gorbachev from falling from grace.

9.5 The Cross-Pressure Increases

Not surprisingly, Gorbachev's reform packages provoked different reactions among different Soviet camps. Whereas he during the first years of reform could successfully balance out the different camps against each other, the strategy eventually backfired as the opposing groups increasingly attacked him, the leader of the middle ground, instead of their adversaries on the other side of the spectrum. Polarization increased, Gorbachev's mid-strip shrank, and the once so successful strategy turned out to be another fateful mistake.

Among groups of zapadniki, Western-minded liberal reformists in political and cultural circles, Gorbachev's politics meant a badly needed modernization, and a closer association of the Soviet Union to Western and European institutions and values, necessary for the invigoration of politics and society. These groups appreciated the ambition to democratize the political system and played an important role in the rapid implementation of the openness policies in mass media and cultural life. While some in this group gradually became supporters of a further radicalization of the reform activity, aiming at a democratic Soviet Union, others successively realized that Gorbachev's ideas carried a revolutionary appeal that they could not share.

Not only democrats saw Gorbachev's reforms as a hope for a systemic change. The new openness had also allowed scope for nationalist ambitions in the Soviet republics. Everywhere, historical and ecological complaints were lodged against Soviet rule (Nove 1989; Davies 1989). The criticism took different forms in different parts of the Soviet Union. While in south Caucasian Armenia and Azerbaijan violent ethnic conflicts exploded in February 1988 and developed relatively independently of the Kremlin, so-called popular fronts in the Baltic republics, initially created in the summer of 1988 to support Gorbachev, soon levelled sharp criticism against Moscow and called for sovereignty, understood as exit from the Union and the proclamation of independent Baltic states. This development seemed to be unexpected by Gorbachev, who appeared to have problems understanding the power of nationalism and did not find a formula for how to placate the popular fronts (Plokhy 2015). Recurrent declarations of sovereignty from the Soviet republics in 1990 underscored the acuteness of the situation. When even the largest Soviet republic, the Russian Federative Republic (Russia), demonstrated its intention to deviate from the Soviet course by issuing its declaration of sovereignty, the Soviet Union's days were numbered. In the end, "Gorbachev became "a fireman rushing from one conflagration to the next" (Suny 1998).

On the conservative, not to say reactionary, end of the spectrum, the newspaper Sovetskaia Rossiia printed on 13 March 1988 a letter from a chemistry teacher, Nina Andreyeva, titled "I cannot betray my principles." In an aggressive tone, she attacked all those "who have brought us to believe that our country's past was a long chain of mistakes and crimes" (Andreyeva 1988). The publication of the letter, and its replication in several other newspapers, was the start of an attack on Gorbachev's reforms, probably initiated by more powerful persons than Andreyeva, and a signal

from conservative forces that the reform work must be brought to a close, lest it threaten the entire Soviet system. For this group, not only what they considered as far-reaching reforms as such but also Gorbachev's adventurous international politics, his friendly advances toward the capitalist and purportedly aggressive West, and his lack of support for the communist regimes in the Eastern European satellite states were mortal threats to the Soviet system. In particular, Gorbachev's decision that the satellites were free to chart their own courses, independently of the Soviet Union, aroused the anger of many conservatives, who regarded external strength and internal consolidation as two sides of the same coin.

9.6 The Conservative Turn

Feeling the pressure from all sides, Gorbachev chose in the winter of 1990–1991 to try to align himself with the conservatives. There were many signs that he had started to retreat from his initial liberal reform-mindedness, apparently in order to preserve the Union from disintegration. In January 1991, special Soviet troops were sent to Riga and Vilnius to quell manifestations of opposition. Tens of lives were lost during the violence that followed, and disillusionment grew among reformists at home and Gorbachev's supporters abroad. It has never been proven that Gorbachev had ordered the action (Lasas 2007), but at the time, it was frequently interpreted that way.

Gorbachev's conservative turn was borne out beyond doubt by his choice of new associates. In several cases he replaced reform-minded persons in his closest political environment with conservatives. Thus, the liberal minister of the interior, Vadim Bakatin, was replaced with Boris Pugo, former leader of Latvia's Communist Party and a convinced supporter of a preserved Communist Soviet Union. The communist apparatchik Gennadii Yanayev was appointed to the new post of vice-president of the Soviet Union. Both Pugo and Yanayev were later to become members of the putschist group that acted to remove Gorbachev from office in August 1991. So did Anatolii Lukyanov, whom Gorbachev had made chairman of the new Soviet parliament in 1989, and Valerii Boldin, a key aide who had become his chief of staff. However, as was soon be shown, these moves did not placate the conservatives; rather they became more active in their measures behind the stage. The conservatives had certainly been alarmed by Gorbachev's reformist political agenda already long before, but new developments related to the president's policies, in particular the growth and increased strength of nationalist movements in the Soviet republics, increased their uneasiness and preparedness to take more radical measures to stop what they saw as unfolding.

While Gorbachev's conservative turn was deemed insufficient by the hard-liners, many of his hitherto loyal liberal followers took it badly. Close associates such as the reform architect Yakovlev started to abandon him as they believed that he was no longer true to their ideals. Several others of his reformist collaborators, such as the foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, distanced themselves from his politics – Shevardnadze resigned in December 1990 – and Gorbachev's former ally Boris

Yeltsin left the Communist Party and engaged himself fully in Russian politics. He soon reached the prominent position of spokesman for a democratic, anti-Communist Russian Federative Republic and was popularly elected as Russia's first President in the spring of 1991. Thereby, he emerged as an outspoken adversary of the continued existence of the Soviet Union and the main rival of Gorbachev.

As a third party, the international community put additional pressure on Gorbachev, often with the best of intentions. As an extremely popular politician in the West, who not only wanted to change his own country from within but had also liberated Eastern Europe from Communist rule and brought the Cold War to a peaceful end, Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. The award was not well received by Soviet conservatives, who saw it as another surrender of Soviet, anti-Western values. Conversely, democratic and nationalist radicals regarded the award as a promise for the future but wanted the president to pursue his reform program at higher speed. The mid-strip where Gorbachev was maneuvering grew ever smaller.

9.7 The August Coup Attempt

Throughout 1991, Gorbachev continued to look for solutions that may have been a miracle cure 5 years earlier but were now hopelessly outdated. He was working relentlessly for negotiating a new union treaty, replacing the one that had formed the legal basis of the Soviet Union since 1922, and providing a greater amount of autonomy for the constituent republics. Six of the republics – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldavia – refused to participate in the negotiation process, but the other nine went on, finally hammering out a draft treaty in the summer of 1991.

The negotiations for achieving a new draft treaty illustrated Gorbachev's dilemma and his miscalculations. The six republics that refused to take part in the process insisted that the draft treaty was obsolete and not far-reaching enough, whereas several of the remaining, including the Russian Federative Republic under the energetic leadership of Boris Yeltsin, shared much of that criticism. They simply wanted bigger concessions. On the other hand, the hardliners within the Communist Party and the security apparatus held that the draft treaty went way too far and risked selling out the Soviet Union altogether. They also believed that the fact that several republics had been allowed to refrain from participating could inspire others to defect. This was one of the major reasons for the coup attempt that would soon follow: to stop the implementation process in its tracks and to salvage the old Union.

The attempt itself was carried out in August 1991 by a junta of reactionary and hardline Communist politicians and apparatchiki – the gang of eight – who had the conservative ambition to save the state from disintegration. The group thus included Gorbachev's recent top appointees during his conservative turn: Pugo, Yanayev, Lukyanov, and Boldin. With hindsight, these appointments can certainly be regarded as miscalculations from the president's side. It is indeed a mistake to engage co-workers who conspire to dethrone you. However, they were also evidence of the

increasingly polarized political situation in the late Soviet state and society, with Gorbachev caught between, on the one hand, radicals with democratic or nationalist agendas, and on the other, conservative Communists who were prepared to preserve the Soviet Union whatever the cost might be.

The coup attempt was a frontal attack against the reform-minded Gorbachev, whom the coup ringleaders had confined to house arrest at his dacha in the Crimea. By proclaiming a state of emergency, they hoped to be able to restore Soviet order, based on a reborn Communist Party and recovered state authorities. Instead, the unsuccessful and aborted coup, in Russian Avgustskii putsch, accelerated the process of demise of the Soviet state and ended a dictatorship that had lasted since the first Communist coup d'état by Lenin and his Bolsheviks in November 1917. Weaknesses and poor preparations from the putschists' side, lack of the anticipated support from groups within the military and security police, and a determined resistance led by the democratically elected president of the Russian Federative Republic Boris Yeltsin sealed the Soviet Union's fate. At the height of his charisma at the time, Yeltsin emerged as the true leader of Moscow and Russia, whereas Gorbachev paled into insignificance. When the Soviet president was liberated from his Crimean confinement and brought back to Moscow by air, he had completely lost his political momentum to Yeltsin.

Whereas in the face of the theme of the book, several things could be said about the mistakes of the coup ringleaders, as they accelerated the demise of the Union by their badly performed coup attempt, this is a side story to our narrative. However, even as the coup was defeated, Gorbachev went on tirelessly, and in vain, to bring about a new union treaty and did not realize that its time had passed altogether. Even in the fall of 1991, there was a new string of meetings, and new drafts were proposed (Russell 1996). However, finally, the leaders of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian republics gathered in Belovezha, in today's Belarus, and signed on December 8, 1991, the Treaty of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Shushkevich 2013). The Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, was dominating the meeting, and Gorbachev was not even invited to attend. In consequence with the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the three leaders declared the Soviet Union null and void. Gorbachev was still the formal president of the Union, but the state did not exist de facto anymore, and by the end of that year, it had ceased to exist altogether as a legal entity.

9.8 The Burden of the Past

Modernization had been a principal political goal for many Russian tsars and Soviet leaders at least since Peter the Great's era in the years around 1700. Confronted with Western ideas, states, and societies in military campaigns or peaceful interaction, reform-minded tsars such as Aleksandr I och Aleksandr II and their councilors recognized that Russia was backward and must change to be able to compete with the more modern societies and states in the Baltic area, in Europe, and in the world. For

Lenin, the establishment of Soviet power must go together with economic modernization, symbolically expressed as electrification. Consequently, after military defeats, modernist technical, economic, and military projects were started up, including the establishment of various educational institutions. Nevertheless, the ambitions to modernize often ended halfway, as an unbalanced and limping process. When modernization became threatening to the political stability and their own power positions, the Russian and Soviet rulers retracted. Many of them ended up as staunch defenders of the established order, which meant that all reform ideas were drawn back.

Furthermore, and consequentially, Russia and the Soviet Union were wanting in the categories and institutions that had forced the pace of Western modernization: the bourgeoisie, an independent educational system, a free press, and a civil society. All the time, the process in Russia had a top-down character, while bottom-up initiatives were absent or, if they occasionally occurred, were actively opposed by the state or passively resisted by broader, uneducated, and alienated strata of the population. The goal of the Russian and Soviet modernization was to satisfy the needs and demands of the state, not of individuals or collectives within that state. Thus, the Soviet Union could for long successfully compete with the West when strictly industrial and military developments were on the agenda, but the production of consumer goods for the citizens was considered of secondary importance and lagged. When the development of the "human factor" was on the table, efforts von oben were weak and indecisive. Democracy was never an alternative that was seriously contemplated. Cultural discourse always geared into eligible patriotic or Communist tracks and was strictly controlled from above.

Initially, Mikhail Gorbachev's reform plans followed this political-turned-cultural pattern. Perestroika, economic reform, was presented as the main goal of the modernization, while democratization and openness were intended as additional reforms to support and strengthen the economic acceleration. But Gorbachev was probably aware – or had been informed – of the basic Russian/Soviet cultural predicament: economic modernization without activation of the human factor does not lead to positive results or can even end in a conservative backlash. It is more doubtful whether he was aware of the other side of the coin: that an economic modernization that gives too much space to the same human factor, to democratization and openness, might endanger the entire system, especially in a country in which there had never been a liberal, reformist middle way between, on the one hand, autocratic and one-party rule and, on the other, radical revolutionary change.

A lingering question is why Gorbachev did not follow the example of his predecessors and suppressed unintended political consequences of the reform work. The most convincing answer is probably that he did not want to use large-scale repressive means. He had excluded violence from the beginning of his tenure. Another answer is that he at least to some extent had followed the historical path by taking a more conservative attitude in the final years of the Soviet Union, expressed increasing doubts in a transformation that had slipped out of his hands, and even accepted, or at least had not protested, when internal special forces were dispatched to Riga and Vilnius in early 1991 to quell the independence process in the Baltic republics.

A third explanation is that new circumstances and phenomena had rendered a repetition of the historical pattern impossible. It has been argued that a middle class, a broad reformist elite, and a civil society had finally come into existence in the Soviet Union, radically changing the rules of the game of Russian and Soviet politics and political culture (Keep 1996; English 2000). For the first time in Russian and Soviet history, the one-sidedly top-down modernization pattern was defied, with revolutionary consequences that Gorbachev had not expected or intended. With this interpretation, the political and cultural tradition that Russian and Soviet rulers had adjusted to and relied on for centuries was no longer applicable for Gorbachev in his effort to change and preserve the Soviet society and state.

9.9 The Mistakes and Failures

Political mistakes are often difficult to distinguish from failures caused by structural problems and inflexibilities. The actual policies may have been based on prudence, sober evaluations, and good judgements all along and indeed been flawless in their individual components, but still they emerge as failures since they are implemented in contexts that are intransigent and unyielding. In the end, Gorbachev was fighting windmills. No doubt he did so bravely, astutely, and for all the good reasons, but eventually he still came across as the epitome of failure, simply because he tried to reform that which could not be reformed.

The general structural dilemma is particularly salient in societies in which statist power and cultural patterns have played decisive roles in the historical development, traditionally leaving a limited scope for individual initiatives, especially those questioning and threatening the stability of the system. Russian and Soviet historical development eloquently proves this point. In fact, most of the problems that Gorbachev faced and that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union must be analyzed in terms of his encounters and clashes with the old political and cultural structures (Tompson 1993). Whether those problems were due to what should be called mistakes or mismanagement is not clear, since Gorbachev in so many ways was caught in structures with a high degree of resistance and durability. He had to challenge the system, but it struck back at him and his reform work, which gave rise to a variety of unintended consequences. His perestroika reform package hardly ever had a chance of being successfully implemented given the hegemony of the institutions, principles, and procedures of the planned economy and the only permitted party, but Gorbachev cannot be blamed for having had the courage to try.

However, there are certainly several mistakes, tactical as well as strategic, that must be attributed to Gorbachev. He did not demonstrate a fingerspitzgefühl in his selection of aides and associates, but rather appointed some who would turn out to be his implacable opponents. The consequences of his modernization program were not always reflected. The anti-alcohol campaign that he initiated, an early effort to master problems of discipline in the Soviet work force, was a mistake that not only

affected the strained Soviet economy negatively but also hurt his popularity in wider circles. Possibly, it installed hesitance at his continuous reform work.

What is more, some of the later reforms were obviously not sufficiently prepared. The democratization and openness policies implied that the old rulers should be held responsible for mistakes and failures in the past. Gorbachev gravely underestimated the severe criticism directed toward the Communist Party and the Soviet state from large groups of citizens, a criticism that he, as the highest political leader, could not dissociate himself from.

It has often been argued that the internal stability of Russia is dependent on an aggressive foreign and imperial policy, based on assertiveness, fear, and presence in the conquered territories. External aggression promotes internal consolidation (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). The fact that Gorbachev permitted the Eastern European states to follow their own paths and abandon communist rule and their dependence on the Soviet Union, that he thus refrained from curbing the revolutions that transformed Eastern Europe, and that he did not use political or military force to counter the liberalization movements in the Soviet republics, was from this perspective serious mistakes. From an ethical perspective, however, it is of course praiseworthy that Gorbachev did not use the force of arms against his opponents but rather held on to the peaceful principles that he had laid down from the beginning.

All in all, to walk a reformist, third-way road between the extremes of autocracy and revolution, between conservative standstill and radical transformation, without slipping back into one of them, proved to be too difficult for Gorbachev. As a representative of the Soviet system, he wanted a gradual reform process that could change mentalities and structures, and his great accomplishment was that he was capable of starting the reform process and eliminate some of the obstacles that he met on this way, especially those represented by the conservative defenders of an unreformed Communist Soviet Union. However, he let the reform work get out of hand so that he faced a revolutionary process that not only destroyed or incapacitated the old structures, but also many of the new modernizing structures that were created at his own initiative, and finally swept away the Soviet society and state altogether.

Democratization and glasnost' triggered a revolution of expectations of another life and society that Gorbachev could not cope with, live up to, and satisfy. Ronald Grigor Suny has caught Gorbachev's predicament well when he notes that he "wanted to be both Martin Luther and the pope, both revolutionary reformer and defender of the existing power structure" (Suny 1998, 457). He tried to play both these roles, or rather combine the two, by initiating radical reforms in order to preserve the Soviet Union. With the benefit of hindsight, this was his most fateful mistake.

9.10 Epilogue

So, how will then Gorbachev go down in history – as a hero, as a tragic person, or perhaps as both? Perspectives may of course vary depending on the political inclinations of the beholder, but regardless of the outcome, there is a rather sad epilogue to

the Gorbachev story. In 1996 regular presidential elections were held in the Russian Federation. This was a time when post-Soviet Russia seemed to be in endless crisis. The economy was in free fall, the dependence on the United States and the other leading Western powers was monumental, Russia's international influence was receding into insignificance, and domestically Chechnya was rebelling, trying to fight its way to independence, risking provoking a row of falling dominoes if successful. At the same time, there was a profound crisis of leadership. The incumbent president, the once so charismatic and energetic Boris Yeltsin, was ailing and suffered from ill health and an excessive consumption of alcohol. According to the initial polls, he was about to be defeated by other top contenders, such as the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Gennadii Ziuganov, and was not even deemed likely to make it to the final round between the two top performers of the first round. This was the situation when Gorbachev decided to run for the presidency.

The campaign leading up to the election turned out to be something quite different from what Gorbachev had probably anticipated. Maybe he had envisioned a de Gaullian return of sorts, where the people would greet him with open arms as he offered to take the lead of the country again in its hour of need. Nothing of the kind took place. At campaign meetings he was heckled, spat at, and, according to his own statement, subjected to an assassination attempt (Russian Election Watch 1996). When the voters' verdict was passed on the contestants, Gorbachev gained around 0.5% of the vote, which ranked him 7 out of 11 candidates (Colton 2009). Yeltsin, for his part, with no so little help from his oligarch friends in the media, surged miraculously to a win against Ziuganov in the second round. The tragic twist to the story about Gorbachev was not that he was utterly defeated in the election but that he ran in the first place, not realizing that his time as a top politician had passed. As the General Secretary of the CPSU, he had made it a habit of referring to himself in the third person, and now his capacity to self-aware reflection seemed to have abandoned him completely.

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