

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GORBACHEV

Reading many media comments on Mikhail Gorbachev who has died aged 92 he is presented to us as loved abroad but despised at home. We are supposed to be grateful to him for his leading role in ending the Cold War but also to believe that he is hated in Russia for dismantling the USSR. He certainly must take the credit for being the one who persuaded Reagan and Thatcher to follow his lead. And at home his attempt at Perestroika, a policy of restructuring and reforming the USSR so that independent countries remained friends, did not come off. It was a hugely ambitious policy and we probably forget that in the USSR around one hundred and thirty languages were spoken, giving some idea of the size and complexity of the task that he set himself and those he hoped to support him.

Probably the best writer on Gorbachev is Archie Brown, professor emeritus, Oxford. A short extract (p.349) from his book on the ending of the Cold War, *THE HUMAN FACTOR, Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher and the end of the Cold War* (2020) might provide us with a different perspective and perhaps a clue why Russia has become what it is today.

"Later that month Gorbachev wrote to Bush asking for a loan of \$1.5 billion to the USSR for the purchase of American grain on the world market. Bush was dismissive of the request at a meeting with Baker, Scowcroft, and Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, saying, 'The guy doesn't seem to get it. He seems to think that we owe him economic help because we support him politically. We've got to give him a lesson in basic economics. Business is business'. Speaking publicly, Bush said that 'regrettably' the Soviet Union has not begun the market reforms that 'I think Gorbachev aspires to' and that 'I know Mr Yeltsin aspires to.'

"Gorbachev was bitterly disappointed, telling his aides that when they started the Gulf War the US had 'no problem finding 100 billion', but 'when it's not a matter of going to war but assisting a new strategic partner it becomes problematic.'"

After Gorbachev lost power Russia certainly did become a market economy which the UK can attest, as Russian billionaires bought property in central London to go with their newly acquired football teams and luxury yachts. Perhaps strangely, that market economy is now enclosed within a strongly dictatorial framework dominated by a Putin starkly different to Gorbachev in terms of political values.

The West has pursued two seemingly contradictory policies towards today's post Gorbachev Russia, a Russia that it helped to bring about. On the one hand it has encouraged capitalism, even to the extent of allowing itself to become dependent upon Russia's natural resources, but, on the other hand, although it is strongly denied by the West that Russia was told that NATO would not move one inch eastwards, its expansion was quite naturally perceived to be aggressive. That aggression stimulated counter aggression. Should we be surprised? Ukraine?

For me Gorbachev offered a huge opportunity to the West. He offered peace, but he also offered a far more co-operative world. Unfortunately, his offer was also a challenge too far for nationalist-minded people in Russia and also for capitalist-

minded people in the West. His failure was our loss. We need not one more Gorbachev, we need several in different power blocs fostering and promoting his values. For a while he was the international political G-Spot.

Cliff Jones, 31st. August 2022

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