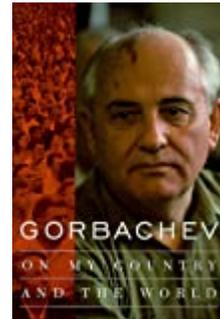




Mikhail S. Gorbachev. *On My Country and the World.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 300 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11514-8.



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Gorbachev's Short Course

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In the nine years since Mikhail Gorbachev presided over the collapse of the Soviet Union, he has remained an extraordinarily active figure. Approaching seventy years of age, he is a frequent traveler who gives lectures to Western audiences as he continues to head the Gorbachev Foundation, a think tank in Moscow. Still, Gorbachev remains a politician at heart, having made a run at the Russian presidency in 1996 (he received less than one percent of the vote) and more recently (March 2000) founding a Social Democratic Party. As an author he has been prolific if less than stimulating. Unfortunately, the latter is also true of his latest offering, *On My Country and the World*. Readers who have contemplated earlier works such as *Perestroika* (1988) and *Memoirs* (1996) will find little new here; on some subjects readers might be surprised at how little Gorbachev's thinking has changed since he stood at the apex of Soviet power a decade ago.

The book is composed of twenty-eight essays gathered into three parts of nearly equal length—although Gorbachev's tedious writing style has the effect of making each section appear more lengthy than the one that

preceded it. Part One is a meandering meditation on 1917, titled "The October Revolution: Its Sense and Significance." The second part, "The Union Could Have Been Preserved," is, clearly enough, Gorbachev's attempt to demonstrate that there was nothing inevitable about the sudden collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991. Even the most patient readers may require a second pot of coffee to slog through Part Three, "The New Thinking: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," which outlines the author's nearly utopian vision of future international relations while critically evaluating Western foreign policies (particularly that of the United States) since the end of the Cold War.

The views of Gorbachev the historian have evolved very little since the late 1980s. "In the specific situation that arose in Russia and around it," writes Gorbachev, "the October revolution was inevitable" (p.3). [Original quote in italics.] This point of view, characteristic of Soviet historiography but disputed by some Western historians, including Richard Pipes and Martin Malia, informs all of Part One. The savagery that consumed Russia for three years after the revolution, Gorbachev writes, was the result of Western intervention, which tried to stran-

gle the experiment in its cradle.[1] The Bolsheviks, he continues, came to power amid chaos; “Harsh measures were required to overcome this—especially because, even after the end of the civil war, the resistance of the former ruling classes continued to make itself felt.” Still, he concludes that all sides, Red and White, were indeed “patriots” who loved the motherland. “Is this not a lesson,” the post-Soviet Gorbachev asks, “for the present time and for the future?”(p. 10)

As he did at the height of the glasnost’ era, Gorbachev takes the “good Lenin/bad Stalin” view of Soviet history. Policies based on a “reasonable approach” were made by Lenin (p. 14), but after his death the “strong democratic conditions” within the Party died (p. 21) and the Soviet Union became a one-party state. Ultimately, Gorbachev writes, “a harsh and even cruel totalitarian system triumphed. It underwent an evolution to be sure; after Stalin’s death its harshness and cruelty were modified and blunted somewhat, but in essence it remained the same” (p. 15). Gorbachev fails to acknowledge that the cruelty of the system was in evidence well before Lenin’s death, and consequently he shows little sympathy for those crushed by the Bolsheviks in the early years of the regime. Anti-Church policies, for example, were “understandable” in light of the circumstances in which the Bolsheviks found themselves. “Understandably the Bolsheviks regarded the Church as a political opponent against which it was necessary to struggle.” “Certainly,” he adds, “this was understandable in the acute phase of internal conflict” (p. 20).

The system that grew out of the Civil War may have been harsh, Gorbachev asserts, but it was solid and generally enjoyed widespread support. As evidence for this, Gorbachev points to the war against Hitler: despite the tragedies endured during the formation of the USSR, “this state withstood the test of the Great Patriotic War. Even in that tragic hour it did not fall apart, but stood its ground” (p. 84). This notion, a mainstay of Soviet mythology, is absurd. Numerous people living in western Ukraine initially welcomed Hitler’s soldiers; what ensued in the western borderlands was something akin to civil war. As Stalin well knew, in 1941 there was indeed much doubt about the allegiance of the Soviet peoples to their socialist state.

So the state survived its greatest challenge, Hitler’s Germany. But was it still worth saving half a century later? Although the system that evolved was indeed cruel, Gorbachev acknowledges, it was not without great accomplishments and therefore was worth saving and re-

forming. When Gorbachev came to Moscow in 1980 to serve in Brezhnev’s politburo, the Soviet system could claim (though not entirely accurately) nearly full employment, rising incomes, decent housing, free education, excellent libraries, and a universal public health system—all fruits of the October revolution. Moreover, he argues, “October played a civilizing role in the vast expanses of Asia and southeastern Europe.” (p. 29) Despite these significant accomplishments, Gorbachev sadly concludes that on the whole, “the entire gigantic system functioned for only one purpose: to consolidate and strengthen the power of the party-state” (p. 30). Given this conclusion, one can only speculate why in 1992 Gorbachev ignored the summons by the RF Constitutional Court to render testimony on that very issue.

Despite his contention that the unrivalled power of the party-state was *the* paramount concern of the system, Gorbachev believes that the breakup of the USSR was a tragedy for its citizens, most of whom were reasonably content to live in a decentralized but united Soviet state. Such a state could have been preserved, he writes, but the Party was late in responding to events in the Soviet periphery. However, Gorbachev does accept some of the blame for exacerbating Soviet nationality issues, for example, when in 1986 he replaced the native first secretary of the Kazakh republic with an ethnic Russian, thereby violating an unwritten rule that Stalin’s successors had observed for three decades. While the Party failed to learn the proper lesson from the ensuing backlash, ethnic tensions in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Baltic republics and elsewhere continued to grow.

Force, Gorbachev believed, was only a last option—a principle that certainly distinguishes him from both his predecessors and his successors. The former general secretary takes responsibility only for the violence in Baku in January 1990 (“I regret that blood was spilled, but the purpose was to stop further bloodshed at all costs”); the matter of who gave the order to use force against demonstrators in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1989 “remains a mystery” (pp. 95-97). Despite the existence of documentation that links the Soviet leader to the bloody KGB operation in Vilnius in January 1991, Gorbachev still clings to his denial of responsibility.[2] Force, he contends, was unnecessary for the preservation of the Soviet state, since most Soviet citizens genuinely backed the Union. For Gorbachev, the results of the March 1991 referendum, in which citizens of the nine participating republics responded positively to the question of preserving the Union, unequivocally demonstrated that the USSR was still a viable entity, but now as a Union of

Sovereign Republics. “Thus all the arguments claiming that the national conflicts in the Baltic region, the Caucasus, and Central Asia triggered the dissolution of the Soviet Union are nothing but attempts to justify, after the fact, Yeltsin’s irresponsible actions, and those of the organization Democratic Russia, in causing the disintegration of the USSR” (p. 110).

Even after the August coup, Gorbachev was convinced that the Union could have been preserved. The separatists—namely the leaders of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian republics—went against the will of the people as expressed in the referendum. But today, Gorbachev, muses, although a return to the old USSR is no longer possible, a union of the Slavic states (recommended back in 1990 by Solzhenitsyn as an alternative to the Soviet empire) of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus is still foreseeable.[3] “The Union could have been preserved. A new Union can be created”(p. 167).

Gorbachev, with good reason, holds Yeltsin responsible for the Union’s breakup, and his negative attitude toward Yeltsin persists even today. (Yeltsin, who shares this antipathy, claims that the two have not met since December 1991.) Gorbachev criticizes his successor for implementing the “shock therapy” program that helped destroy the social safety net; in the political sphere, “The present authoritarian regime [Yeltsin’s] is putting the breaks on Russia’s development toward democracy” (p. 36). Whether true or not, Gorbachev supplies little evidence to support the latter assertion. Unfortunately, this is not the only instance where Gorbachev makes a blanket indictment but fails to back it up with facts. For example, Gorbachev, writing long before the recent election debacle in the United States, laments that “we cannot help noting the Western democracy is not well: It is in a crisis” (p. 52). What sort of crisis? Gorbachev does not say.

The final third of the book begins with Gorbachev’s discussion of his own role in ending the Cold War. Despite the dubious claim that “new thinking” in Soviet foreign policy, like perestroika in domestic affairs, was in effect from the moment he assumed power, the subject of Gorbachev the statesman and visionary is where he is most comfortable. However, his question-and-answer style betrays his earlier career as a Soviet apparatchik. “A question is often asked of us: Do you mean that before perestroika no one in the Soviet Union recognizes the need for change in the realm of foreign policy, both in theory and practice? Of course such ideas did occur” (p. 176). “Does this mean that everything had been clearly

thought out by the time of the March 1985 plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU—which was the starting point for change in the policies of our party and country? Of course not!” (p. 179)

The reality was that “new thinking” in foreign policy, like perestroika at home, evolved in response to changing circumstances. By 1990 a fundamentally new Soviet foreign policy was in place, one that emphasized “universal human values” over class conflict. The new thinking, Gorbachev writes, “carried the recognition of diversity to the necessary logical conclusion: recognition of the fact, above all, of the undeniable freedom of choice for all peoples, the freedom to choose their own path of development and way of life” (p. 189). It is true that this recognition is one of Gorbachev’s greatest achievements as a Soviet leader—one that was applied to the satellite countries of Eastern Europe with little hesitation. In the USSR, however, Gorbachev resisted this principle almost to the end.

It is from this perspective, in defense of national sovereignty, that Gorbachev criticizes Western foreign policies in the last decade. Referring to the actions taken to stop Iraqi aggression in the Persian Gulf in 1991, Gorbachev writes that “the use of force had become the accepted way of resolving disputes during the Cold War. In the United States that approach persists to this very day” (p. 204). Indeed, the propensity of Western (NATO) countries to use force beyond their own borders is a concern to many Russians today, and Gorbachev does not pass on the opportunity to criticize the recent actions of “the major Western countries” who have relapsed into “attempts to impose hegemony, subordinate other countries to the interests of the major Western powers, and dictate to other countries by political, economic, or military means. Any attempts at interference in the internal affairs of another country must be ruled out” (p. 189). Later in the book his criticism of NATO’s actions in Yugoslavia is more explicit: “[In violation of international law], NATO engaged in a massive armed assault on a sovereign country” (p. 257). Kosovo, Gorbachev ominously asserts, “sets a significant precedent indicating the direction of American strategy,” (p. 256), which he characterizes as “highly dangerous and destructive” (p. 257).

The attempt to achieve political goals by using modern weapons, he warns, threatens “to plunge humanity into the abyss of destruction.” (p. 191) (The phrase “into the abyss” characteristically occurs frequently in this book.) What should be done to prevent this dan-

ger? “It is essential to move forward decisively toward finding new answers to the new challenges on the global level of civilization as a whole. It is necessary, in other words, to find roads leading to a new civilization.” (p. 221) What is this “new civilization”? We can be certain that the new civilization Gorbachev envisions will be peaceful, but other than that the author leaves his readers guessing. Likewise, although he devotes more than fifty pages to the subject of the challenges facing the modern world, Gorbachev provides us with only the vaguest idea of what they are [(1) globalization, (2) diversity, (3) global problems, (4) power politics, (5) democracy, and (6) universal human values] and how they should be faced (p. 222).

Although some would say that, for a time, Gorbachev’s deliberate vagueness was one of his strengths as Soviet leader, this quality does not serve him well as an author and in fact is one of the main problems with this book. Gorbachev the author, like Gorbachev the politician, has a tendency to make sweeping statements and to issue broad recommendations that are short on facts, evidence, or details. Phrases such as “of course” and “absolutely” appear far more frequently than “such as” or “for example.” Also irritating is the author’s excessive use of the passive voice, and its resulting ambiguity. “The world,” Gorbachev writes, “is once again being pushed onto a dangerous path. This tendency has already found expression in actual policies and has led to new divisions, with certain nations being placed in opposition to others” (p. 169). The reader searches in vain for some explanation of this statement. On occasion, Gorbachev’s analyses appear as near gibberish, such as the following passage:

“A new world economy and worldwide information and cultural systems were in fact taking shape. ”Under these conditions everything became interconnected; all problems—both national and international—were tied in a single knot that had to be unraveled. And this had to be done in the name of one’s own national interests (which coincided with the interests of all countries) and for the survival of the human race. “The changes that had taken place were not reflected in international relations or gov-

ernment policy. Or if they were reflected, it was in a one-sided way. The great powers were using the emerging possibilities to exploit the less powerful, less developed countries. Interdependence among nations became an instrument of power for those who sought to pursue a hegemonistic policy in world affairs” (p. 175).

On the whole, *On My Country and the World* is a disappointing and frustrating book. Despite the title, readers who are interested in Russian current affairs will find little of interest here. In fact, aside from the occasional criticism of Yeltsin, Russian affairs in the post-Soviet period are almost completely ignored. Chechnia—a case which apparently does not neatly fit Gorbachev’s paradigm of “national sovereignty”—merits a single, brief mention (p. 109). As the leader of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was a person who articulated his ideas in broad, often abstract terms; some would even call him a visionary. While one hopes that Gorbachev’s achievements as a Soviet politician will be more fully appreciated by Russians in the decades to come, only a few die-hard Western Gorbophiles will find much value in his post-Soviet role as a global thinker.

Notes:

[1]. Evan Mawdsley, among others, writes that Allied intervention in the Civil War was fairly inconsequential; moreover, it was not coordinated, the participating countries providing varying levels of support for anti-Bolshevik forces at different times and locations. Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

[2]. In a Russia discussion list, Amy Knight recently referred to a report by the Ponomarev Commission, which in 1992 uncovered extensive correspondence between KGB chief Vladimir Kriuchkov and Gorbachev about plans to institute rule by force in Lithuania. Johnson’s Russia List, no. 4379, 21 June 2000.

[3]. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Kak nam obustroit’ Rossiia?,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* 38 (18 September 1990), 3-6.

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