

What did gorbachev
fail to foresee



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Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev vaulted onto the world scene from relative obscurity as the General Secretary of the Soviet Union in March of 1985, bringing with him the promise of positive change and the revamping of the Soviet society. Starting with the televised Central Committee meeting in June of 1985 regarding the need to accelerate progress through the development of high technology, which allowed a lively and frank debate on state problems, to the introduction of perestroika and glasnost, Gorbachev set out to implement change throughout the Soviet Union.

This change was at first meant to liberate and improve a failing economy and economic system, but was soon after to spread to all spheres of the society. Gorbachev had much in his favor. The new, young (54 years old) general secretary had discussed changes prior to ascending to his new powerful position, thus softening their impact.

He accomplished an almost complete turnover of the Central Committee secretaries and department heads favoring young reform minded individuals, and the people of the Soviet Union were ready for and expected change. However, by August of 1991, a mere six years from Gorbachev's election, it seemed that everything had gone awry and all hope of positive reform from his leadership was lost. The large disparity between the hope and promise of the summer of 1985 and the reality of 1991 begs one to ask: what happened?

How could the policies of restructuring and reforming the economic, political, and social systems of the USSR and allowing open public discussion and candor of the problems and weaknesses of the Soviet Union cause the

devastation and ruin of the country's industry and society, the demise of its strongest political party, and the attempted coup of its president? Though there are many factors involved, this paper will focus on the errors of Mikhail Gorbachev.

It will focus on his failure to learn from his country's history, his failure of not having a plan to implement perestroika or impart what it was supposed to accomplish, his weakness of not having a strong political base among others in the Politburo, and his failure of not realizing what the true weakness of the Soviet system was. It must be stated that Gorbachev was a communist and a believer in the teachings of Lenin. His policy statements from 1985 to 1987 were based on a firm belief that socialism in the USSR was a great triumph of the people and that it should continue to be developed.

Socialist principles would lead to the attainment of the ultimate objective: the building of a Communist society. ii The public demanded radical democratization and Gorbachev truly desired to bring about the change, but to continue to enjoy the party's support he claimed that the accomplishments and values of socialism would be preserved. In this early stage of his administration, Gorbachev knew that he was serving two masters. After completing the necessary formalities related to his election, Gorbachev considered his next political move, in order to bring about change and demonstrate his seriousness of purpose.

Gorbachev's associates knew more or less what needed to be done, but none had any idea how or where to start. The mere accession to general secretary did not necessarily mean that his reforms made any sense or that he had

worked out a thorough system for the implementation of changes in all spheres of society. iii From the start of his administration, Gorbachev started to use certain watchwords to state his desires to improve things, but would not show that he had not worked through how to attack these problems.

Many speeches contained bold but vacuous statements such as, "acceleration" of economic development, a " quickening" of growth tempos, " putting things in order", by heightening labor and state discipline. Starting in 1986 these statements gave way to several new strands of rhetoric that maintained that change must be nothing short of " revolutionary. " He also stated that transformations must embrace all segments of society, encompassing not only the economy, but also all other spheres of the Soviet Union.

When addressing a national conference of social scientists in October Gorbachev emphasized, " new thinking" and a " search for truth", but offered no road map. iv Although perestroika had been bandied around the entire country for some time, there was still no overall concept of the kind of changes that society needed. The first few impulsive controls and measures aimed at reforming the economy quickly foundered on obstacles and restrictions. Priorities for development were chosen in a haphazard manner.

Gorbachev failed to devise a unified concept of development and failed to see the country's problems in a macro type of view. He tried to move ahead on specific details without having an overall plan for reconstruction and reform and without a vehicle to implement it. v Gorbachev wished for a more open society and for less in the way of censorship and control over the

media than had been the rule prior to 1985. He also wanted to reform the Soviet society, but remembered what had happened to Khrushchev and his disappearance overnight in October of 1964.

Khrushchev had shocked Soviet society with his denunciation of Stalin before the Twentieth Congress of the Party. The secret speech and its revelations shook the foundations of what every Soviet citizen and communist had been taught. The continuing attacks on Stalin coupled with his constant innovations in the Soviet economy and administration angered his fellow oligarchs and, through a palace coup, they removed him. Khrushchev fell because he continued to allow Soviet politics to be conducted in a conspiratorial way, when he was removed there was not a single protest.

This fate of his predecessor was not lost on Gorbachev, and to avoid a similar fate at the hands of his colleagues, he created an atmosphere that would not allow a few members of the Politburo to plot in secret behind his back - Glasnost. This atmosphere allowed him to change Soviet society while protecting his back. But Gorbachev failed to remember the Czarists experience with constitutionalism; one cannot combine an open society with semi-autocracy. The Soviet legislative bodies and press, until now meek servants of the party, became agitated centers of real politics.

Gorbachev failed to learn from the history of the Revolution. The Czar's autocracy lost its moral authority, long before 1917, because of the open hostility of intellectuals, writers, and professors. Lenin and his successors never forgot that lesson. They administered rigid control over intellectuals and cultural life. The writers, historians, and journalists knew the party line

and the penalty for not going with it. Gorbachev relaxed the controls and was attacked from both the left and the right.

An example was when Gorbachev ended Andrei Sakharov's exile and invited him back. vi Upon his return he denounced Gorbachev and the government stating they should release all political prisoners and get out of Afghanistan. Gorbachev failed to see how the thinness of his own patronage base would weaken his power base and weaken his administration. Almost his entire career was spent in a single region (Stavropol) and a single policy area (agriculture); this fact would hamper his efforts to install cronies in position of influence.

In his second year of power only 25% of regional party bosses in the Russian Republic came from Moscow. He had no alternative to striking accords with relatively independent politicians, most frequently from one of the provincial party organizations. vii This coupled with a 38% turnover rate among full and candidate members of the Politburo left him with very little support on major reform issues when his popularity started to slide in 1988. Gorbachev failed to gather around him a body of loyal advisors and lieutenants.

Even before his downfall, he, president of the state, had become politically isolated. The last example of poor foresight is that Gorbachev may have tried to reform what could not be reformed. In February of 1986, Gorbachev telegraphed that he would apply perestroika to all manner of institutions when he attacked Brezhnev's illusion of "improving matters without changing anything." He stated he wanted to improve social democracy and re-examine the ideological teachings about planning, property, and prices.

He was relaxing the states suppression of the society. Gorbachev failed to recognize the real weakness of the Soviet system was that it rested mainly on suppression. Once that suppression slackened, there was no way the rulers could contain the people's aspirations to a freer and fuller life, as both citizens and consumers, or the non-Russians' demands for real autonomy or independence. He realized, too late, that complete freedom of speech and the press was incompatible with party rule, something in which he refused to believe until his overthrow.

The weakening of the Soviet Union's Communist party led to the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe falling like Domino's. Lithuanian and Ukrainian Communist regimes could not remain unaffected by what was happening in Poland, East Germany, and elsewhere: formally strong Communist regimes laying down their powers in panic, no longer able to count on Soviet tanks and soldiers to protect them from their peoples. Gorbachev's fall from power was not limited to his failure to foresee important events that would occur due to his policies.

Gorbachev was too much of a Communist to distance himself from the dreadful legacy of the Soviet past, but not enough of one to try resolutely to stop the flood of glasnost while it still could have been stemmed. But, the main cause was his lack of foresight and hindsight. He failed to see how the effect of a reformed economy would exacerbate a people looking for an instantaneous miracle, he failed to see how he needed an achievable plan in place to accomplish his goals, and he failed to recall the errors of his predecessors.