

Delving into Cold War Politics through Gorbachev's *on My Country and the World*

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ABSTRACT

Between 1985 and 1991, as Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev endeavored to uphold democratic values in Russia through his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. He played a decisive role in originating the course towards arms control, cessation of hostilities and denuclearization, leading to the termination of the Cold War. As the leader of the USSR in the late 1980s, Gorbachev is known for improving relations with the Western world and fostering a more liberal environment that contributed to the downfall of communist governments in Eastern Europe. He set off a far-reaching deluge that traversed to the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1989). Gorbachev was a persistent backer of peace and the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. In *On My Country and the World*, he elaborately discusses the foreign policy initiatives he took to end the cold war and proposes the tenets to maintain world order and stability, seeking non-violent means for conflict resolution globally. This paper commemorates Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev (1931-2022) as a Great Russian Statesman and Reformer. It examines his version of the truth to bring out his prominent role in changing the course of world history by averting major confrontations of ideologies, military encounters and nuclear catastrophe.

Keywords: Mikhail Gorbachev, Cold War, Global Humanism, *Perestroika*, Soviet Foreign Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

Mikhail Gorbachev was a visionary who helped transform his country and the world. He was successful in bringing totalitarianism to an end in the Soviet Union. In his country, he established democratic institutions. He was born with fervor, poise, potent ingenuity, and an intense drive to succeed. He lessened the threat of nuclear war. The late Russian scholar Dmitry Furman described him as “the only politician in Russian history who, having full power in his hands, voluntarily opted to limit it and even risk losing it, in the name of principled moral values” (Taubman 47).

II. THE COLD WAR POLITICS

Following the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union arose as superpowers with divergent ideologies. The formation of the alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact were clear examples of the bipolar divide in global politics. The Cold War can be most appropriately illustrated thus:

The period of mutual distrust and rivalry that ensued, characterized by ideological differences, the dissemination of propaganda, the build-up of arms, military threat, and occasional misunderstandings and crises, became known as the Cold War. Each side built up its nuclear arsenals (see arms race) and attempted to extend its sphere of influence in the developing world. (“EastWest relations”)

In *On My Country and the World*, Gorbachev states the following about the Soviet foreign policy during the cold war:

The flaw in Soviet foreign policy, however, consisted in the fact that all its energy came from an ideological source. A hard core of ideological constructs ultimately determined the behaviour of the USSR on decisive questions of international relations and nourished an atmosphere of confrontation toward the West, which was of course, also partly a response to the no less confrontational policy pursued by the West toward the Soviet Union. (65)

He further explains that-

the attempts to implement the idea of world revolution, the activities of the Communist International, directed from Moscow, were sufficient to make the West distrust the peace initiatives of the USSR... Confrontational thinking and a combative political “culture” were characteristic phenomena on both sides of the Iron Curtain (65-66).

There was détente in the 1970s when relations improved, but this was short-lived as the Soviet assault on Afghanistan in 1979 led to the start of the second Cold War. Nevertheless, the latter 1980s saw the emergence of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, advancement in arms agreements, the Soviet army's withdrawal from Afghanistan (1989), the fall of communism in the Eastern Bloc, the unification of Germany in 1990, and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact that same year. Gorbachev mentions:

In beginning perestroika, we understood that if nothing was changed in our country's foreign policy, we would get nowhere with the internal changes we had in mind. (65)

In his meeting with the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1985, Gorbachev clearly stressed on the inevitability of new political thinking and constructive political dialogue:

The relations between our countries are presently in a kind of ice age. We favor restoring Soviet-American relations to normal channels. At bottom, our position includes the understanding that *a fatal conflict of interest between our countries is not inevitable*. Further, we have a common interest—in avoiding nuclear war, in guaranteeing the security of both our countries, of preserving life itself for our respective peoples. . . We do not wish to remake the United States in our own image, regardless of what we like or dislike about that nation. However, the United States should also not undertake the quixotic task of remaking the Soviet Union to suit its own tastes. That would just lead to war. . . . Many problems exist in the world—political, economic, and social—but there is a way out, namely, peaceful coexistence, *the recognition that each nation has the right to live as it wishes. There is no other alternative*. . . We must build a bridge toward cooperation. But to build such a bridge, as everyone knows, construction must proceed from both sides. (181)

The change in the Soviet foreign policy stance was an outcome of the origination and introduction of democratic values of openness and freedom in the Soviet Union:

Perestroika fundamentally democratized not only our foreign policy but also the methods by which policy was elaborated and decisions made . . . it proposed democratizing foreign policy decisions, ruling out actions conducted in secrecy (as in the decision to send Soviet troops into Afghanistan), and called for the active involvement of parliament in deciding foreign policy. At the same time, foreign policy became an arena of internal political struggle, especially as constraints were relaxed and internal political discussion and disagreement were permitted. . . . Despite internal and external difficulties, however, the foreign policy of perestroika produced tangible and indisputably positive results based on the ideas of the new thinking. (205-206)

The German Unification on 3 October 1990 due to Soviet reconciliation was also a landmark occasion:

I confidently assert today that had the unexploded mine of a divided Germany remained in the center of Europe, peace among the major European powers would have remained unstable, and we could not have completely overcome the danger of East-West confrontation. Reunification proceeded calmly, without complications or disruption of European stability. This was one more proof of the fruitful and productive character of the new thinking and of the new Soviet approach to foreign policy in the perestroika era. (203)

III. THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION

The significant precept, according to Gorbachev, to be learnt from the history of the Soviet Union is:

the need to reject and condemn unconditionally the totalitarian system, a system that tramples on all that is human in human beings, that turns people into slaves. . . . Alienating the people from government, property, politics, and culture and seeking to suppress the slightest manifestation of diversity, totalitarianism deprives society of any incentive toward self-development and thereby dooms itself. And conversely, one final conclusion may be drawn, a conclusion based on what we experienced: **Only democracy can serve as the basis for society's healthy and dynamic growth, for drawing out and utilizing all its possibilities.** (78)

However, he mentions that the world's propensity for authoritarianism has far from vanished. There is still room for essential improvements if democracy is to meet both the needs of its citizens and new global challenges. His disagreement on the dismemberment of the Soviet Union could not avert the event:

today I still consider this to have been a most flagrant error. The Union could have been preserved. . . . The dissolution of the Union radically changed the situation in Europe and the world, disrupted the geopolitical balance, and undermined the possibility of carrying further many positive processes that were underway in world politics by the end of 1991. I

am convinced that the world today would be living more peacefully if the Soviet Union—of course, in a renewed and reformed version—had continued to exist.(83-84)

IV. THE IDEOLOGICAL DEBATE AND GLOBAL HUMANISM

Gorbachev reiterates:

I am convinced, first, that *the socialist idea is inextinguishable*. It will continue to inspire people to take action in the name of everything contained in that idea, namely, *natural* human rights and freedoms. (The term *natural* is entirely appropriate here.) Second, I believe that the question of implementing the socialist idea must be approached in a modern way, that is, taking into account the actual current situation, the experience that has been accumulated, and the real challenges and requirements of the near future. (69)

Consequences due to the deformation of the principles of Socialism need not imply the failure of socialism. All social structures are dynamic:

But our times have demonstrated the relativity of all social structures. They are all historical, in flux, changeable, especially in our dynamic age. The very terms *capitalism* and *socialism* in their ordinary and accustomed interpretation no longer offer much in the way of describing and understanding reality. The contemporary world is not a dichotomy; it is a multiplicity. Capitalist society has everywhere been highly variegated, and future societies will likewise be anything but copies of one another... It became clear that neither egoistic individualism nor authoritarian collectivism could produce optimal results. (69-70)

The new conceptual vision of the future, according to him, is of global humanism:

In light of the existing dangers, it is becoming more and more evident that *all traditional ideologies are vulnerable*. Also evident is the one-sidedness of any politics that pursues only some private interest—whether class, national, or other. Today the starting point for any rational policy must be the interests of all humanity, regardless of religious alignment or national, ethnic, and social status.(71)

New value-based orientations focussing on human beings should be the goals of development and progress:

Fixation on technologically centered factors of growth has brought us to a global ecological crisis...The need to renounce technologically centered models of progress and make the transition to a new anthropocentric, humanist model is being ignored. This means we are risking not only the danger of not solving our current problems, which are already extreme, but we risk intensifying and multiplying those problems.(72)

The human civilization can progress in the following manner:

This (progress) cannot take place any longer at the expense of irreparable injury to the human race itself and to the rest of nature, nor by humiliating and exploiting certain groups or entire nationalities with the irreversible moral and spiritual losses that entail. Progress is only possible under conditions of universal and equal cooperation stripped of any element of armed coercion, that is, under conditions of *co-development*, the simultaneous development of all...over the course of centuries, in both politics and social consciousness, a great number of differing ideas have been churned out—conservative and radical, liberal and socialist, individualist and collectivist. This is the reality encountered everywhere. An attempt to *synthesize* these views, trends, and phenomena, an attempt to achieve an optimal interaction among them based on strictly humanist criteria—that is what will ensure movement toward a new civilization.(74)

V. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the cold war and the normalization of international relations were possible due to the incessant efforts of President Gorbachev. The peaceful resolution of international conflicts gained primacy limiting the arms race. There was an emphasis on promoting universal human values and values of morality in international relations. Encounters due to power dynamics and ensuing combat cannot be negated even in the twenty-first century. In the words of Gorbachev:

The democratization of international relations has become a pressing need. It is a preventive measure to ensure that world peace is not violated and that no government engages in arbitrary actions in the world arena; it would also be important for the democratization of life in all the countries of the world. Finally, without democratization of international relations, we cannot arrive at a new, genuinely peaceful world order.(269)

The approaching era, according to him, would be an era of universal tragedy without human solidarity. The sagaciousness of the great statesman of the twentieth century needs to be acknowledged.

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