Mikhail Gorbachev ? a tragic figure in world history

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At the age of 91, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union and party leader of the CPSU, died on August 30 in Moscow.

Putin's condolences

Even if Gorbachev and Putin had little sympathy for each other, the president of the "new", capitalist and imperialist Russia knows only too well that it is far wiser to exploit the political legacy of the deceased himself than to leave it to the Western states.

Putin famously described the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 2014 as a "pan-national tragedy of enormous proportions" and in 2015 "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." He did not mean the reintroduction of capitalism, but the loss of entire states and nations whose independence and self-determination now stand in the way of imperial Great-Russian ambitions. Of course, that does not prevent Putin from carefully appreciating the dead man retrospectively. A telegram of condolences states that the deceased had "great influence on the course of world history" and led the country "through complex, dramatic changes, major foreign policy, economic and social challenges."

Putin knows that Gorbachev has not played a significant political role since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yeltsin coming to power. The condolences and statements by Western and Eastern politicians are intended, once again, at exploiting his "legacy" for their own interests. Putin's benevolent words, about a man to whom he actually attributes a negative role, serve the same purpose.

Western grief ? no less cynical

Of course, Western grief is no less cynical. Joe Biden speaks of a "visionary", Emmanuel Macron of a "man of peace". Olaf Scholz once again emphasizes Gorbachev's services to the unification of Germany. For his efforts to reform the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and a peaceful system change in Eastern Europe, the withdrawal of the Red Army, Gorbachev was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize.

This was the consolation prize for a loser. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, as well as the restoration of capitalism, marked a turning point in history. The Cold War was decided in favour of the US and its Western allies, a new historical period began. Tributes from Western leaders like George Bush Sr., Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl were little more than ceremonial speeches by the victors for the vanquished.

Gorbachev may have believed in his own "visions" of a united "House of Europe", a global order on an "equal footing", a demilitarisation of Europe. In real life, they turned out to be utopian. Gorbachev's "peace policy" was just the last verse of the song of "peaceful coexistence", a policy that always ignored the class interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the comparatively peaceful transition to capitalism, the emergence of a new class of private owners, born to a considerable extent from the old state bureaucracy, including a new Russian oligarchy, and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact all played into the West's hands.

In just a few years, US and European capital, above all German capital, opened up new, semi-colonial areas of
exploitation in Eastern Europe as well as access to the Russian market. NATO, although its expansion was still officially ruled out in 1991, slowly but all the more surely pushed itself eastwards. Capitalist reunification shaped Germany into the economically leading imperialist power in Europe, which has since declared its own claims to power worldwide.

There is no question that without Gorbachev, the end of the Cold War would probably have been different with the largely peaceful, non-violent transition to capitalism perhaps taking on more violent forms. Struggles such as those over the Baltic republics, but above all the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the bloody uprising against the Ceaușescu regime or the unsuccessful Yanayev putsch in 1991, make it clear that a different course of history was possible even in the former Soviet Union or in the sphere of influence controlled by it.

However, this would not have changed the basic lines of development. Even a successful suppression of anti-bureaucratic mass movements would by no means have meant a return to the "old", crisis-ridden economic and politically ailing system of bureaucratic workers' states, as a look at China suggests. There, in June 1989, the bureaucracy crushed the movement in Tiananmen Square that was supported by the working class and the intelligentsia. Thousands fell victim to this massacre, but it was not "socialism" that was saved. Repression paved the way to the restoration of capitalism while maintaining the political monopoly of the CCP.

Gorbachev and the crisis of the Soviet Union

While Gorbachev's role in the collapse of the Soviet Union should not be neglected, neither should it be exaggerated. The last head of state of the Soviet Union was not a driving force, but a driven one.

Gorbachev became general secretary of the CPSU in 1985 against the background of a deep, structural economic crisis and a long-standing stagnation of society. Under Brezhnev, the country, then the second largest economy in the world, had fallen further and further behind economically and technologically. The arms race, accelerated under Reagan, cost the Soviet Union ever more of its resources. At the same time, the standard of living of wage earners, who suffered from a shortage of consumer goods in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, stagnated.

Against this background, the system of a rigid bureaucratic planned economy and the comprehensive political dictatorship over the working class, which penetrated deep into society, became increasingly untenable. The economic decline diminished the possibilities for social satisfaction of the masses. Their alienation from the "socialist" society became much more apparent in the face of a growing contrast between the deteriorating living conditions of the masses and the privileges of the bureaucracy.

This situation also fostered political discontent ? be it of the intelligentsia, the working class or the oppressed nations and nationalities, whether in the Soviet Union or in the territories under its control.

Eventually, contradictions also developed in the ruling bureaucratic caste itself. In the CPs and state apparatuses, two political wings were formed ? the so-called "conservatives" or "hardliners", who wanted to hold on rigidly to the existing system, and the so-called "reformers", who hoped to give it a new dynamic through limited, top-down, controlled economic, social and political reforms.

Unlike in the capitalist countries, where free competition and the associated compulsion to sell one's labour power almost automatically increases labour productivity, discipline and "motivation" of wage earners, this lever was largely lacking in bureaucratic planned economies. In contrast to the Stalin era, where labour discipline was enforced despotically, in the 1970s and 1980s, a far-reaching social security prevailed with full employment, housing and guaranteed health and retirement provision.

On the other hand, the increasing alienation of the workers from the bureaucratic planned economy, from "their" states, ensured that their drive to improve and develop the economic and social system had had generally atrophied. Even where this was not yet the case, it was frustrated by bureaucratic inertia.
It was simply impossible to break this stagnation by a return to the methods of the Stalin era because of technological
development and a more highly qualified workforce. Any such attempt would have destabilised the system both
politically and economically? and the bureaucracy was well aware of this.

Therefore, within this caste, the conflict flared up over the question of which economic, social and political reforms
should be permitted. These tensions pre-dated Gorbachev. While the need to increase labor productivity was more or
less undisputed, this was by no means the case with regard to political reforms.

When Gorbachev became secretary-general in 1985, it marked a shift in power in favor of the reform camp in the
Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. "Perestroika" (reconstruction) and "glasnost" (openness) became the buzzwords,
fighting terms to drive the changes in society. These were never clearly defined concepts, rather a series of reform
measures that were modified over the years in the attempt to provide an answer to changes in society.

Basically, perestroika aimed to revive the planned economy with market-based mechanisms and competition within its
existing framework. These included individual company cost accounting, forms of performance wages, expansion of
private sector activity and limited activity of joint ventures. Glasnost provided for a limited relaxation of freedom of
speech, expression and the press.

In addition, there was a new foreign policy of disarmament and détente. In 1989, the Soviet Union withdrew its troops
from Afghanistan. For Europe, a new peace order, a "common house" was propagated.

However, glasnost and perestroika, like Gorbachev's entire policy (and the entire wing of the bureaucracy on which he
relied), amounted from the outset to squaring the circle. On the one hand, society should be opened up but, on the other
hand, the rule of bureaucracy and its system of planning should be maintained.

This conception was utopian in the narrow sense of the word. Gorbachev's policies did not resolve the internal
contradictions of the system whose crisis had made him secretary-general, but rather exacerbated them further.

The economic reforms did not stimulate the economy, they strengthened the contrast between the elements of
bureaucratic planning and the market economy. They did not improve the situation of the masses, but at the same time
created a layer of managers, bureaucrats and new owners who developed an appetite for more, for the restoration of
capitalism.

The limited elements of freedom of the press and freedom of expression inevitably ran into the limits of the
bureaucratic dictatorship and the leading role of the party. Like perestroika, however, glasnost also created the demand
for more freedom, for more democratic rights, albeit for a long time in the political slipstream of the reform wing. This
gave rise to the seemingly paradoxical situation that the General Secretary of the CPSU, that is, the supreme and most
powerful exponent of the bureaucracy, became a beacon of hope and a symbolic figure of anti-bureaucratic mass
movements in the mid to late 1980s. Many identified with "Gorbi" who became, at the same time, the horror of those
bureaucrats who were particularly unwilling to reform.

Politically, Gorbachev resembled Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice. He could not get rid of the spirits he called? and
unlike in the work of the great poet, no powerful magician saved him.

The seemingly powerful leader of the CPSU and the Soviet Union proved to be a tragic, historically impotent, figure.
The goal he pursued of a reformed Soviet Union, polished with glasnost and perestroika, a reformed degenerated
workers' state, proved to be a utopia that could not satisfy the interests of any single social force of the old and the new,
emerging capitalist system.

No wonder, then, that his star went down even faster than it rose. His rule proved to be the precursor of the restoration
of capitalism, the advance of the Western imperialist states and its own overthrow.

In 1991, the conservative layers of the bureaucracy tried to turn back the wheel of history in the Soviet Union with a
half-hearted coup? and failed miserably. But, like them, Gorbachev was effectively disempowered. The openly restorationist forces of the bureaucracy around Yeltsin and Sobchak took the initiative, mobilising the masses against the coup and thereby revealing Gorbachev's impotence. On December 25, he stepped down as President of the Soviet Union and thus effectively from the stage of history.

Since then, Gorbachev has been walking the world as a more or less decorative relic of history. As chairman of the foundation named after him, he continued to comment on world events and tried his hand at intervention into Russian civil society. Politically, he saw himself as a social democrat, criticised the conditions inside Russia, but also the West and its "power arrogance" and the policy and George W. Bush and Co.

Basically, all his analyses were superficial. For him, the subjective political orientations and character traits of rulers represented the actual core of the political problems of our time, whether in the West or in Russia. He saw the fundamental contradictions between the imperialist powers, the struggle for the redivision of the world, as essentially secondary factors, which could have been overcome by good (negotiating) will.

Even here, Gorbachev turns out to be a tragic figure who followed the illusions of a bygone era and was shaped to the end by an idealistic understanding of society and history.

Mythologisation

However, during his lifetime, Gorbachev had already become a screen onto which various currents projected their own views of history.

For the Western powers and the democratic public, he was the "good" Soviet leader, because after all, he contributed to the defeat of "communism" and victory in the Cold War. After 1991, it also seemed that not only would capitalism be reintroduced into Russia, but that it could also be economically and politically dominated by the West. With the stabilisation of the Putin regime, such hopes have evaporated.

Posthumous tributes to Gorbachev are also intended to keep alive the idea that a pro-Western Russian leader is possible. At the same time, Gorbachev's miserable failure in Russia is also being reinterpreted. The conditions and weakness of bourgeois democracy there should not be attributed to the crisis of Soviet society and the catastrophic social and political effects of capitalist restoration. Rather, the Russian nation is accused of a tendency towards authoritarianism and dictatorship, an "immaturity" in terms of democracy, to which Gorbachev and Co. are said to have fallen victim. Therefore, the deceased appears to be a rare stroke of luck, which had to be exploited in favour of democracy and the market economy as long as he exerted influence.

Parts of the left also use Gorbachev as a projection screen for a distorted view of history. According to them, we would have been spared the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the entire victory of the West in the Cold War, if Gorbachev had not followed the path of glasnost and perestroika, or at least had not released the states of Eastern Europe or former Soviet republics into independence. According to this view, Gorbachev and his rise were not an expression of the final crisis of Stalinism, but were its cause. The crisis of Soviet society, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism thus become the world-historic betrayal of a great, evil man and his even more evil Western backers. Ironically, they thus differ little from the Western (and also Russian) ideologues in terms of idealistic distortion of history.

Working class

What remains remarkable and characteristic of the various posthumous tributes and obituaries is that the working class does not appear as a social force. The workers appear either as supporters and increasingly thankless objects of the bureaucracy or as mere foot soldiers of the reformers and Western democracy.

This view not only telescopes the real historical development, but also fails to recognise the potential of the upheavals that combined into a historical political crisis of bureaucratic rule in 1989.
The bureaucratic reforms that Gorbachev had been trying to use since 1985, led to a revival and awakening of the working class. In the Soviet Union, an independent trade union movement emerged at the end of the 1980s, for example among miners. In 1989, the anti-bureaucratic movements were socially based on mass support in the working class, and in some countries working class organisations were also formed. In addition, there were processes of political differentiation and fermentation within the mass organisations controlled by the bureaucracy, such as the trade unions, and in some cases even in the state party.

As a result of the destruction of the consciousness of the working class after decades of bureaucratic dictatorship and the closely associated alienation of wage earners from "their" state and "their" economy, there was a leadership crisis of the proletariat in the degenerated workers' states. This allowed first petty-bourgeois and soon openly bourgeois forces to dominate the movement.

Of course, as the Arab Spring shows, this phenomenon cannot only be observed in the death crisis of Stalinism. In 1989, the Soviet Union and all the countries of Eastern Europe faced the historic alternative: either the overthrow of the bureaucracy by the political revolution of the working class or the restoration of capitalism.

As always, if a revolution is only half carried out, it ends in a whole counter-revolution. The fact that it took on a bourgeois-democratic form does not change this. After Gorbachev paved the way for it, he himself was swept away by it.

There is no reason to gloss over his counterrevolutionary role, but also no reason to exaggerate it. It was not Gorbachev who was the real problem, but the weakness of the revolutionary forces and the depth of the crisis of the working class. The latter manifested itself far more strongly in 1989 than in previous revolutions and uprisings against bureaucratic rule in Eastern Europe. Thus, the Hungarian revolution, the workers' uprising in the GDR or the struggle of the Polish working class produced class-based dual power organs or approaches in this direction to a much greater extent than in 1989.

This resulted from two interrelated causes. First, the much deeper internal crisis of the bureaucratic planned economy and thus also of the social basis of the bureaucracy, which had generally prepared and strengthened the restorationist tendencies long before 1989. Second, the alienation and destruction of the class consciousness of the working class, which weakened the spontaneous tendency to self-organise and create one's own class-specific organisations, although some did arise.

There was, however, a third factor. Worldwide, there was no revolutionary international of the working class that could have been a fighting, political reference point for the workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. At best, it existed in the form of fragmented small groups that could essentially only intervene in the events in a propaganda way. This leadership crisis has worsened since 1989. It is the central problem not only before and around 1989, but also in our own time.

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