

[Nichols on D'Agostino, 'Gorbachev's Revolution'](#)

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Anthony D'Agostino. *Gorbachev's Revolution*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. ix + 379 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1898-8.

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The ongoing Western adulation of Mikhail Gorbachev rests on a simple assumption that for most of his time in office, he knew more or less what he was doing. In the usual telling, the wise and patient Gorbachev outfoxes his neanderthalic opponents both in Washington and Moscow, and not only brings relief to the repressed Soviet masses but peace as well to a world grown weary of the incessant, dangerous bickering of the Cold War. This is nonsense, of course. Many Russians revile Gorbachev as an incompetent and impossibly smug politician--in the 1996 presidential election, he got an embarrassing 386,000 votes out of some 74 million cast--but in the West it remains tenacious nonsense. With Anthony D'Agostino's new book, it is a myth that we might just begin to lay to rest.

Gorbachev's Revolution begins with an observation that would otherwise be painfully obvious, but in the Western context is actually bold revisionism: Gorbachev, D'Agostino tells us, was never consistent in, or committed to, his own programs, nor did he ever fully comprehend the effects or consequences of events he himself set in motion. This is an observation that was made in recent years by Dmitrii Volkogonov, among others, but Westerners have been deeply reluctant to accept what is plain to most Russians. Even now, as D'Agostino points out, Gorbachev gives two different stories about the end of the USSR: he takes credit for it in front of Western audiences, but denies he ever meant it to happen in front of a Russian courtroom. "Well," D'Agostino asks, "which way was it?...Both of Gorbachev's lines of argument cannot be correct." (6)

D'Agostino provides a better answer (and one that draws conceptually on his work on earlier periods in Soviet leadership politics). What drove Gorbachev was what drove all Soviet leaders: power and the need to keep it. Gorbachev's policies of reform were weapons in a political struggle with his own comrades in the Communist Party leadership. The idea that Gorbachev was driven more by expediency than by principle is not only sensible, it also helps to explain how a "reformer" like Gorbachev survived as long as he did in the Party: he was not, at heart, a reformer. As D'Agostino puts it: "A revisionist account, assuming the power struggle itself to be the engine of his reform projects, is at least better than trying to prove that Gorbachev intended the liquidation of the state that he was chosen to rule. It is probably also better than supposing that Gorbachev at some point turned against the Communist idea, which he was in fact still defending the day before he resigned his position as head of the party on 24 August 1991."(7)

It also helps to explain something Gorbachev himself cannot (or at least not convincingly): why a man supposedly committed to reform would surround himself with some of the most conservative figures the Soviet system had to offer, such as minister of defense Dmitrii Yazov, or even outright thugs such as interior minister Boris Pugo. If Gorbachev meant to win in the ongoing struggle to maintain his position, he had to work with such men rather than against them, and their personal convictions were

less important than their institutional power and political loyalties.

To be sure, the book does not claim that Gorbachev was completely rudderless, and he appears in this account to comprehend what many of his less intelligent colleagues did not: that by the mid-1980s, the USSR was in such awful shape that almost any Soviet politician would have to take up the banner of reform in order to be a credible candidate to lead the Party. The economy was in tatters and the Soviet global position, once so commanding, had been compromised as much by ham-fisted Soviet policies as by a resurgent challenge from America and her NATO allies. Reducing tensions with the West and repairing the economy (Soviet leaders at this point had no idea the economy was beyond repair, but that's another matter) would have to go hand in hand.

But as D'Agostino's careful and detailed narrative points out, reforming the defense and economic establishments also meant clearing out the entire rotted political infrastructure built by Leonid Brezhnev--a kind of mafia from whose ranks Yuri Andropov and later, his protege Gorbachev, would defect. Thus, the struggle between the Brezhnevite establishment and the new contenders for power was structurally almost predetermined to be a struggle between reform and reaction: the only way the challengers could gain any traction against the old guard was to break with them, point at the sorry state of the nation, and then turn and blame them for it, all in hopes that the rest of the Party would decide to throw their lot in with the new team.

Gorbachev's road to ruin, however, really began after the January 1987 plenum of the Central Committee, and D'Agostino shows great insight in understanding the importance of this overlooked event. It was here that Gorbachev fully realized the possible size of the Brezhnevite opposition, and he certainly understood that almost nothing had come of his calls for change in the previous year of his rule. In order to outflank his political competitors and recover some of the stature in foreign affairs he had lost at the Reykjavik summit (in many Soviet eyes a "ludicrous charade," according to D'Agostino) he committed himself publicly to positions that would undermine the very *raison d'etre* of the USSR, and bring about the end of the system. Specifically, he sought to remove ideology from its central position in Soviet foreign policy, thus defanging some of his most tenacious critics in the Party and the military.

To renounce an arms race with the West is one thing--Soviet leaders did so rhetorically on a regular schedule--but attempting to trump Party ideologues by removing ideology from the East-West competition was quite another. If the Soviet Union was not to be a revolutionary state committed to the support of like-minded movements around the world, what point was there in being a "Soviet Union" at all? Of course, Gorbachev wasn't thinking about ideological rigor; he was thinking about Yegor Ligachev and the other Soviet conservatives who would have replaced him given the chance. But once he had committed the USSR to that position, the rest of the world took him at his word, and he could hardly now turn and claim that he hadn't been serious all along.

Gorbachev's political maneuvering is something like a priest avoiding a charge of heresy by claiming there is no God: it might catch one's opponents off guard for a moment, but explaining it to the faithful (who might enjoy abjuring the strict rules of religious belief) can be something of a chore, especially once they all flee the church.

Once the Soviet retreat from the ideological competition with the West was underway, efforts to

reform the economy were even more pointless, since the typical bureaucratic shuffles that accompanied "reform" were soon to be overshadowed by the disintegration of the Soviet global and regional alliance system, and then of the Union itself. Gorbachev could, conceivably, have stopped the momentum of that decline by reversing himself and using force to prevent further erosion of Moscow's authority at home and abroad, but to do so would have required admitting that he was wrong, reigniting the Cold War with a Western coalition that was not disinclined to fight it, and essentially handing over a great deal of his own power to the men he had fought for dominance in the Party. In any case, Gorbachev had already publicly foreclosed to himself the coercive instruments that kept the Party barely in power, the Soviet economy barely running, Soviet nationalities barely under control, and Soviet allies barely loyal, all in the name of winning the political struggle in the Kremlin.

It is Gorbachev's tragedy, but our good fortune, that this incompetent man remained unable to see why, even at the end, the Party collapsed, the economy finally imploded, the nationalities revolted, and the allies deserted. As D'Agostino notes, even when all was lost, Gorbachev failed to understand what was happening around him. When Boris Yeltsin saved him from the August 1991 coup, he returned to Moscow and told an "incredulous" greeting party at the airport that the collapse of the coup was a "serious victory of the perestroika process." D'Agostino remarks that this showed "how little he realized, or, giving him more credit, how little he was reconciled to, the sweeping victory of Yeltsin."

D'Agostino's book is an achievement, and without question among the best and most detailed accounts of the internal Soviet political struggles of the Gorbachev years. (Indeed, it is vastly better and more interesting than Gorbachev's own memoirs, perhaps because it is more reliable.) If anything it is *too* detailed; at 355 pages of very densely rendered narrative, it is both exhaustive and exhausting. Some of it is redundant and a bit idiosyncratic--for example, D'Agostino's attempt to portray Gorbachev's thinking by imagining a detailed dialogue in the Soviet leader's mind is unnecessary and even mildly pedantic--and there are odd lapses of editing that are distracting. Also, the book lacks reference to some of the newer materials on this period (including Russian memoirs), but this is perhaps unavoidable in a work of such size and sweep.

Still, the value of *Gorbachev's Revolution* is both in its thesis and its narrative. The deep and rich detail in which the events of 1985-1991 are rendered will make it an enduring and useful reference work (if something of a difficult read), which should be on the bookshelf of every scholar interested in the Soviet period, and part of the required reading in any serious Soviet history course. But the interpretation is of more immediate value: D'Agostino is among the very first to suggest that Gorbachev "will not be compared to the great figures of Russian history," but rather will probably be remembered more like King Lear: "drawn by vanity to seek affection in ritual obeisances, misled by a foolish credulity into the partition of his kingdom by those who did not love him, finally banished by ingrates, yet at the end of it all strangely lifted by his losses to a higher wisdom."(354)

Readers of Gorbachev's memoirs or his recent speeches might well wonder if the last Soviet leader has been truly "lifted" to any kind of wisdom, but his previous foolishness is undeniable. To understand the end of the USSR, it is imperative to understand Mikhail Gorbachev's limits and weaknesses as a leader, and this book is an excellent place to start.

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