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THE EMERGENCE OF GORBACHEV

By Serge Schmemmann

OFFICIAL SOVIET BIOGRAPHIES make for specialized reading, somewhat in the style of classified ads: "Gorbachev, Mikh. Ser. (b. 1931), Sov. Part., Govt. Official. Mbr. CPSU 1952— . 1970 1st Sec'y Stavropol Kraikom CPSU. 1971 Mbr. CC CPSU. 1978 Sec'y CC CPSU. 1979 Cand. Mbr. Politburo CC CPSU. 1980 Mbr. Politburo CC CPSU: . . ."

With practice, a message emerges from those stilted lines. The CPSU is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The CC is its Central Committee. And Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev is the youngest of the 11 men who sit at the pinnacle of Soviet power, the Politburo.

Those few lines bracket a career that has become the focus of some of the most intensive speculation ever to have focused on the future of the Soviet state. The generation that led the Soviet Union from the ravages of Stalinism and World War II through the enormous expansion of power and might over the past three decades is approaching an end.

Now a new guard stands poised to take charge, a generation of men in their 50's and 60's, and the question is whether they will prove ready or capable of breathing new life into a system that seems to have followed its leaders into debility and fatigue. More than any other Soviet leader, Gorbachev has come to personify the new breed. At only 54 years of age, the peasant's son and career party official has emerged from the shadow of Kremlin politics to become No. 2 in the party hierarchy, and to be a major contender to succeed the ailing Konstantin U. Chernenko, a man 20 years his senior.

It was as if in recognition of his importance that a group of heavyset men in dark coats and heavy fur hats marched across the frozen tarmac to a waiting Aeroflot jetliner in December. At the foot of the forward ramp they bid goodbye to Gorbachev, who mounted the steps, pausing for the stiff wave required by the ceremony of a Politburo member setting off on a Kremlin mission. His wife, Raisa Maksimovna, unobtrusively mounted the back steps.

In London, the front door opened and the two popped out together, jubilantly waving to the welcoming officials and the banks of photographers.

It was a classic magician's trick: Put a Kremlin heavy into one end, quietly slip an attractive woman into the other, wave through the air and — Presto! — out comes a New Soviet Leader, smiling, charming, gregarious and complete with elegant, educated and cultured wife.

Few in Britain were disappointed. The Gorbachevs ooh'd

and aah'd at Westminster Abbey and at Chequers. In the reading room of the British Museum, where Karl Marx once worked, he joked that "if people don't like Marxism, they should blame the British Museum." She ventured charmingly halting words in English and demonstrated a keen interest in literature and philosophy, which, it turned out, she had studied at Moscow State University. He suavely checked swarming photographers, saying, "Comrades, economize your supplies. That's enough." She captivated the gossip columnists: "What a chic lady is Mrs. Gorbachev!" gushed Peter Tory of The London Daily Mirror.

He wore business suits that made him indistinguishable from the Westerners he courted. She wore a dark suit one day; an executive pin-stripe with satin blouse the next, a white woolen suit with high-heeled patent-leather shoes the third, and, at a Soviet Embassy reception, a cream satin two-piece dress, gold lamé sandals with chain straps and pearl-drop earrings.

It was a measure of Gorbachev's success that he managed to generate excitement without diverging one whit from standard Kremlin lines. He faithfully pushed Moscow's current propaganda campaign against President Reagan's "Star Wars" space defense project, and he turned huffy at any mention of Moscow's repression of human and religious rights.

"I can quote a few facts about human rights in the United Kingdom," he fired back at one Member of Parliament who raised the issue in a private session. "For example, you persecute entire communities, nationalities." After some thought, his listeners concluded he probably meant Northern Ireland.

And, like any son of the Russian earth, he could not avoid a bit of classic Soviet bravado: "If you send us a flea, we will put horseshoes on it," he told a mystified Paul Channon, Trade Minister. The allusion was to a popular Russian tale whose moral is, in effect, that if you think you have done well, we can always top it.

That was hardly enough to darken the cheery glow of the visit. "A Red Star Rises in the East," declared The Sunday Times of London over a profile of Gorbachev. But it was Prime Minister Margaret

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Thatcher who provided the most fitting epitaph to the visit. "I like Mr. Gorbachev," said she. "We can do business together."

The scene of Mr. Gorbachev's return to Moscow, alas, is not recorded. He returned hurriedly on Dec. 21, six days into his visit, on learning of the death of Defense Minister Dmitri F. Ustinov. But given the immutability of Soviet civic ritual, it is safe to assume that she slipped out the back, while he gave a stiff wave up front to the dark men in fur hats gathered to welcome him back, and then stepped down to merge into their midst.

WHO IS THE REAL Gorbachev? The Soviet politician poured from the same mold as his dark comrades, except for a bit more polish and pizzazz and a knack for public relations? Or the nice man who did the sights of London with his lady, bantered easily with the high and mighty, and charmed the British?

Kremlinologists are wary of spotting another "liberal" in the style of the late Yuri V. Andropov, and the debate over the real Gorbachev has gone back and forth. But if the outlines of the man remain a bit fuzzy still, what has emerged with startling clarity is that this stocky, balding peasant's son from southern Russia, with his pleasant style and calm face, has achieved one of the most dizzying rises in the annals of modern Soviet politics.

A scant three years ago, he was known to the West, where known at all, largely as the youngster of the Politburo, a farm boy two decades younger than most of his comrades, a competent and apparently smart politician whose no-win responsibility for agriculture would probably break his heart or his career. He presided, in fact, at a time when the perennially poor grain crop figures became a state secret. In May 1983, on the rise under his last and most powerful patron, Yuri Andropov, the young Agriculture Secretary toured Canada and was barely noticed by the rest of the world.

Yet by the time Chernenko came to power, Gorbachev was the acknowledged second in command of the Soviet Communist Party, an enormously powerful secretary charged with ideology, party cadres

and most of the economy, as well, apparently, as agriculture. He has become the rallying point for an increasingly vocal portion of the white-collar elite that is convinced that the Soviet Union's solvency and credibility are at peril without a thorough overhaul of the economy.

Most important, he had emerged as a leading contender for the top job in the Kremlin, as the man who could lead a new generation to power in a leadership firmly gripped for 30 years by old Stalinists.

Why such a possibility excites, rather than alarms, the West is not always clear. It could be argued quite convincingly that a Kremlin in the hands of a bright new guard, not handicapped by the memories of Stalin or the insecurities of their war-scarred elders, could actually make the Soviet economy hum, making the Soviet Union a vastly more formidable and daunting adversary than it now is. One Western military attaché returned awe-struck from a recent voyage across the Soviet expanse and exclaimed: "My God, can you imagine what we'd be up against if they could make all that work?"

At a meeting of party workers last December, Gorbachev spelled out his program in unusually clear terms:

"We will have to carry out profound transformations in the economy and in the entire system of social relations. The process of the intensification of the economy must be given a truly nationwide character, the same political resonance that the country's industrialization once had."

Hyperbole, of course, is hardly new to Soviet rhetoric, and rare is the project not ranked with history's great exploits. But Gorbachev's words stood out for other reasons. He was not simply calling, like all Soviet leaders these days, for

greater efficiency and managerial innovation. He was calling for a transformation of social relations in the Soviet system, for an upheaval that, as he indicated later in his speech, would lure the working man back into the fold. "Industrialization" was another word that made people listen. He seemed to be calling for a transformation of the nation as radical as the one wrought by Stalin in the brutal industrialization drive of the 1930's.

Snatching up the banner of his late mentor Andropov, Gorbachev argued that the Soviet Union would never achieve its global ambitions if it was unable to feed and clothe its own: "Socialism has exerted and continues to exert its main influence on world development through its economic policy and through its successes in the socioeconomic field."

The message was unambiguous: "Only an intensive, highly developed economy can guarantee the consolidation of the country's positions in the international arena, can permit the country to enter the new millennium as a great and flourishing state."

There is something in the notion of a young, educated and smooth leader advocating change and lambasting the bureaucracy that the West finds irresistible. It is a feeling based on far more than wishful thinking — it draws on a deep-seated conviction that anybody pragmatic enough to see the obvious flaws of Communist systems can only move his country closer to the Western world. A Gorbachev marveling at the stained-glass windows of Westminster Abbey evokes an image of the Soviet Union edging back at last from the paranoia and absurd claims that have kept it isolated from large parts of the civilized world for six decades.

There is, too, an instinctive identification with someone who in years, style and career seems so much more familiar than a Siberian peasant like Chernenko or a Ukrainian party hack like Leonid I. Brezhnev. Law school graduate, successful politician, foe of bloated bureaucracies and inefficiency, an advocate of change — these are elements

dear to a Western heart, and it seems unduly callous to wonder whether the West should not, in fact, be hoping for someone more in the traditional mold, perhaps a coarse, gray functionary like Grigory V. Romanov, or an aging uninspired professional like Viktor V. Grishin.

That goes against nature. Beyond all the other reasons for Gorbachev's allure is a fatigue, in the West as in the Soviet Union, with a Kremlin whose public leaders are of interest only as indicators of the stage of their decrepitude, of old men who cling to scraps of paper for the simplest pronouncements, who have reduced leadership to ritual and tired slogans.

All Gorbachev had to do to impress the West, noted one Moscow cynic, was "to walk unaided and to talk without notes." It was a situation somewhat akin to Andropov's coming to power in November 1982. Never mind that he had been 15 years at the head of the K.G.B., or Ambassador to Hungary when Soviet tanks rolled through in 1956. After Brezhnev's long, tedious slide

into senility, it was enough that he was ambulatory, that he seemed to be intelligent and to have a program, that he was someone with whom we could once again talk. It was hardly surprising when rumors spread that he even sipped whisky and liked jazz.

The image may have been a trifle overdone. But even in his few months in power, Andropov managed to live up to much of the advance billing. He set in motion extensive economic experiments, he kicked truant workers out of bathhouses, and he made inroads in the corrupt and ossified bureaucracy. The immediate results were marginal, but more important for Gorbachev and the future was the fascinating rise of an Andropov legend, of a posthumous image among common people and sophisticated intellectuals alike of a man who might have transformed his nation into a rich and powerful land had he only had time.

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Gorbachev has inherited the legacy of Andropov and has emerged in the popular mind as the one man who might pick up where Andropov left off. During his trip to Canada in May 1983 — in contrast to his December tour of Britain — Gorbachev was exposed to some tough public grilling by Members of Parliament, and he quickly let it be known that behind the affable visage lay a very quick temper and a keen sensitivity to perceived slights to his country. At one point, a Member of Parliament demanded to know why the Soviet Union stuffed its embassies abroad with so many spies. Gorbachev angrily fired back with charges of deliberate provocation, following Washington's practice, and similar charges.

If Gorbachev was guaranteed attention in the West, his prospects under Chernenko were never so sure. Shortly after his return from London, the banter at an embassy reception in Moscow was about his successes. The handful of Soviet officials and journalists who were there — members of the urbanized intelligentsia who naturally fall into Gorbachev's camp — listened to the reports with growing unease.

"Gorbachev is our only hope," one of the Russians explained in hushed tones. "But this kind of popularity is very dangerous. You've got to understand how it works here — a politician is not supposed to attract personal attention unless he's at the top. You're building up Gorbachev because you're not used to a Soviet leader who can talk for himself and act normally. But his enemies might seize on this and start saying, 'Why is it that the West likes him so?'"

It was a reaction that reflected the instinctive insecurity of Soviet politics and the fact that the qualities by which bright young men push to the top in the West are not at all the qualities that win in the brutal, Byzantine corridors of the Kremlin. Soviet politics, in a system stripped of most forms of public accountability, is a raw struggle for power. Succession is determined largely by the handful of men in the Politburo.

The fickleness and dangers of Soviet politics are best illustrated by the list of also-rans who litter Soviet history: Trotsky, Bukharin, Malenkov, Bulganin, Kirichenko, Kozlov, Kirilenko. What generated suspense around Gorbachev, however, was not only the question of whether he was destined for this list or for the shorter one of successful candidates. The larger anticipation was the transition to a totally new cast of characters on the Soviet stage, a new generation of men far better educated than the Brezhnev and Chernenkos of yore, probably more secure, worldly and materialistic, and less puritanically or ideologically inspired.

WE KNOW TANTALIZINGLY little about these men. Official Soviet biographies generally consist, in addition to the dry chronological lists of positions held, of a set of speeches in the torturously boring prose of Communism and an air-brushed official photo — in Gorbachev's case, a prominent birthmark on his balding pate is carefully removed.

Kremlinology is largely a study of "formative" influences deduced from the few known facts. For men of Gorbachev's age, the dominant one is that they were in their teens when the Red Army sacked Berlin and laid the foundations for the Soviet Union as a global superpower.

Their youth was punctuated by proudly hailed coups: the Soviet atomic bomb; the launching of Sputnik, an event that jarred America from her postwar complacency; the launching of the first man into space. Their careers coincided with a growth of Soviet power undreamed of by the czars or even by Stalin, with rapid urbanization and the emergence of a new class of urban intelligentsia hungry for the good things of life, immune to the old slogans and impatient with the ossified party bureaucracy.

But if the world in which they grew up was powerful and assertive, it also remained obsessively defensive and secretive. It was a system that remained as intolerant as ever of any independence of spirit, that resolutely crushed dissidents and maintained the world's biggest political police force to hunt down any hint of defiance. If Moscow and Leningrad bred a new urban intelligentsia, then the rest of the Soviet Union remained mired in a dismal provincialism. And if younger Russians lost faith in Marxist-Leninist ideology, they remained enormously ignorant of the values and life styles of the West.

Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote at the time Andropov first came to power: "It's wrong to divide these people into conservatives or liberals, hawks and doves, Stalinists or non-Stalinists. The point is that they're all tough and brutal. The difference is that some are more intelligent, more sophisticated, more experienced and others are more parochial, narrow-minded and even stupid.

"Unless you expect the Soviet system to collapse under a stupid leader, it's probably safer for us all if our principal rival can be more intelligent."

CERTAINLY NOTHING in Gorbachev's appearance betrays a radical departure. He is stocky and balding, and in public appearances he wears much the same dark suits and muted ties that his comrades do. Basically, he looks to be what he is, the son of Russian peasants.

He was born on March 2, 1931, in the village of Privolye, in the Stavropol region, a fertile, black-earth farming zone north of the Caucasus Mountains renowned for its sheep and grain. It was a region overrun by the Germans and one curious and unanswered question is whether Gorbachev lived as an adolescent through the occupation or whether he was evacuated to the east.

His official biography says that he worked at a machine-tractor station while still a student. Real advancement started in 1950, when at the age of 18 he entered the law school of Moscow University, a dramatic shift from the agricultural hinterlands to the most prestigious Soviet institution of higher learning. He is the only graduate of Moscow University in the Politburo, and the only member with legal training.

Moscow University's law school, of course, hardly paves a career path the way an Ivy League institution does. Even with his degree in hand, Gorbachev started his party career at the bottom, as the secretary of a Komsomol — Young Communist League — organization in Stavropol, and 10 years later, he still deemed it necessary to enroll in a correspondence course in agriculture.

On the other hand, Soviet law studies are highly politicized, and the record of Gorbachev's career in Moscow suggests that his real major was politics. Within two years of entering law school, Gorbachev joined the Communist Party and became Komsomol organizer for the school, a position that marked him as a promising politician.

These were particularly interesting years at the university. Stalin died in 1953, and the discontent and rumblings that eventually found expression in Khrushchev's secret speech attacking Stalin's "cult of personality" are said to have been strong at the law faculty. Russians who claim they knew of Gorbachev in those years say he was a critic of Stalin even before official de-Stalinization. That possibility is made moot, however, by the record, which shows Gorbachev to have been active in the Komsomol by 1952, when paeans to Stalin were still mandatory for any young Communist.

From Moscow, Gorbachev returned to Stavropol and began a classic rise through the party, advancing in steady steps from Komsomol secretary to first secretary of the regional party organization and a seat on the Central Committee by the age of 39.

Probably the most significant aspect of Gorbachev's 22-year service in Stavropol, however, was the patronage of Mikhail A. Suslov, the powerful ideologue and king-maker in Brezhnev's Kremlin whose power base was in Stavropol. Gorbachev's election to full membership on the Central Committee in 1971 — without the usual stint as a candidate member — was one sign of special favor. The major break came in 1972 when Fyodor D. Kulakov, the party secretary for agriculture and yet another Stavropol man, suddenly died. Gorbachev, 47, Lenin's age at the time of the Revolution, was tapped to take over, and he moved to the center of power in Moscow.

In the waning years of the Brezhnev era, Gorbachev managed a program of massive investment in agriculture personally sponsored by Brezhnev as his "food program." He pushed through new ideas such as shifting control over agricultural operations from ministries in Moscow to regional agro-industrial authorities. He also moved to shift agricultural work to the "brigade method," giving groups of workers responsibility for a specific piece of land and paying them according to the results. The thrust in both these reforms was to restore some of the bonds that had once linked the peasants to the land, and which Stalin had so bloodily severed in the collectivization drive of the 1930's.

Gorbachev's experiments brought marginal improvement in some areas of agriculture, but not enough to offset a succession of crop failures.

What did work well for Gorbachev was the accession of Andropov.

The shrewd, tough former K.G.B. boss found in Gorbachev the perfect lieutenant to execute his ambitious efforts at sorting out the corruption and stagnation Brezhnev had left behind. Taking advantage of campaigns then under way in the party, Andropov and Gorbachev replaced one-

fifth of the regional first secretaries and nine of 23 Central Committee department heads. They cracked down on corrupt officials and on laggard workers, and launched experiments to inject more incentives into industry and agriculture. As Andropov's health deteriorated, Gorbachev's role expanded, until, at the end, he was the sole link between the dying leader and the party hierarchy.

There is no evidence that Andropov meant for Gorbachev to succeed him. But to many in the party and in the white-collar intelligentsia, Gorbachev was the logical heir to Andropov's policies, the one man who could sustain the changes. Exactly what happened in the Polit-

buro cannot be known, but the popular interpretation is that the old guard concluded it was not yet time for a man so many years their junior to seize the power they had wielded for some 30 years, and they opted to delay the inevitable with Chernenko, the oldest man ever to come to power and already ailing when he came there.

But Gorbachev emerged from the process the effective second in command, with more responsibility than any previous leader in a similar position.

Impressive as Gorbachev's rise has been, the evidence is inconclusive about his skills in political combat. Several times this past year, he seemed to slip. His speech nominating Chernenko after Andropov's death was never acknowledged in the Soviet press. At one awards ceremony in the Kremlin, he mysteriously shifted from the center of a Politburo lineup to the sidelines. At the October plenum of the Central Committee, his name was not mentioned even though the subject was agriculture, his field.

There is also the impression among Russians that he lacks an element of ruthlessness. His rise, after all, was due more to patronage than to brute force. Suslov and Andropov may have launched him into an orbit far higher than he could have achieved

on his own, while less-celebrated but tougher members of the Politburo, like Grigory Romanov, the former Lenin-grad party chief, made it to the top by clawing their way up.

What he does have, probably to a greater degree than any previous candidate for Soviet power, is a platform. He is identified, more closely than any member of the Politburo, with calls for fundamental changes in economic, organizational and social thinking. He has the mantle of Andropov, whose memory has swelled into a legend of a man who combined the stick of tough discipline with the carrot of economic reorganization. He seems to have the backing of the brighter and younger minds in the Soviet leadership.

NOBODY IN THE Soviet leadership is against economic change. The long lines outside stores alone make any other position politically untenable. But Soviet thinking on the issue has split roughly into two trends. On one side are the "hard-liners," men like Romanov and Prime Minister Nikolai A. Tikhonov, whose solution has been to cry out for more discipline within existing structures, for stronger centralized control, increased party supervision, for ruthless treatment of managers who don't achieve. Against these are ranged the "reformers," with Gorbachev at their head — men who advocate loosening of centralized controls, less party meddling, more self-management, greater use of market mechanisms and financial incentives.

Ardent as Gorbachev has been in crying out against "inertia, conservatism of thinking, inability or unwillingness to change established ways of work and shift to new methods," there are distinct limits to what he would, or could, do.

One telling incident was the furor that erupted after the journal *Voprosy Istorii* (Questions of History) published an article by Evgeny Ambartsumov, one of the leading advocates of reform, calling for more private enterprise in the

Soviet economy. He cited as his authority the "new economic policy," the brief revival of private enterprise Lenin permitted in 1921 to repair the initial ravages of Bolshevism. *Kommunist*, the premier theoretical journal of the Communist Party, soon castigated Ambartsumov for his "shallow approach" and the editors of *Voprosy Istorii* for their lax controls. Several months later, *Kommunist* reported a special meeting at which the editors of *Voprosy Istorii* "recognized the justice of the criticism."

The greatest barrier before the "reformers" is the institutional resistance of a party bureaucracy that derives its power and privilege from things as they are. It is an elite, the defector Arkady Shevchenko wrote in his recent memoirs, that "will permit no one to transform that society or alter its foreign or domestic policy in any way that may affect their perquisites."

It was this ossified elite that smothered Aleksel N. Kosygin's attempts at reform in the 1960's, simply by doing nothing to implement them. Andropov, too, recognized its force, and parallel with his campaign to discipline and motivate workers he set about firing party secretaries and cracking down on the corrupt.

What makes the prospect of internal change more propitious now is a sense of crisis that seems to be spreading among Soviet economic managers, a sense that something must change and change fast. Oil production has fallen off, industrial output is climbing at a snail's pace and agriculture remains in dismal straits. The military is clamoring for more money to match President Reagan's military buildup, and consumers are becoming more vocal in their frustration.

On the political front, the 27th Party Congress, which is said to be scheduled for November, is expected to adopt a new party program and to name a new Central Committee. At least 15 percent of the current Central Committee membership is slated for replacement.

All this could give a new

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leader — Gorbachev or another member of his generation — some scope for action. Yet in setting up the centralized and overlapping system of bureaucratic control that still holds sway over Soviet life, Stalin insured that change could be imposed only from the top — and only by a leader who could gain control over the enormous apparatus of power. Accumulating such power could take years.

One lesson of Soviet history is that any real change is likely to be accompanied by increased repression. Change has always made Russians and their leaders nervous, and at such times the authorities have invariably become more authoritarian, less tolerant of debate or dissent.

It was so under Andropov, and Gorbachev would not be likely to act any differently. Nothing he has said or done suggests any greater degree of tolerance for unorthodox thinking than any of his colleagues, and it is wise to keep in mind that his two primary mentors were Suslov and Andropov, among the most stern of postwar Soviet leaders.

Foreign affairs is the field of Soviet endeavor least likely to change under a new generation. Gorbachev's public statements on foreign issues have demonstrated no marked originality, and his ideological discourses on differences between Communist and democratic systems have been dull and standard. He would likely favor détente, if only to give breathing space to domestic programs. But nothing suggests that he or any of his peers would react any differently from their predecessors to the insecurities, expansionist forces or sensitivity to loss of face that govern so much of Soviet behavior abroad.

A Soviet Union under Gorbachev or another of his ilk would not be radically different in the immediate future. Yet Gorbachev is a man Mrs. Thatcher found likable and possible to do business with. That and his youth and the pragmatism his statements reflect probably make him as good a Soviet politician as the West can expect. ■

Serge Schmemmann is The Times's bureau chief in Moscow.