



Gorbachev, Mikhail (Sergeyevich)
(gôr-bâ-chof')

Mar. 2, 1931 - General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Address: b. Central Committee of the Communist Party, Staraya Ploshchad 4, Moscow, USSR

Mikhail Gorbachev's election, on March 11, 1985, to succeed the late Konstantin U. Chernenko as general secretary of the Communist party marks a new epoch in the history of the Soviet Union. Articulate, well-educated, and confident, Gorbachev "typifies the style and substance of the upcoming generation in Moscow," according to Serge Schmemmann in the *New York Times Magazine* (March 3, 1985). The youngest Soviet leader since Joseph Stalin succeeded Lenin in 1924, Gorbachev served for twenty-two years as a party official in the southern district of Stavropol before his appointment as agriculture secretary on the Central Committee of the Communist party in 1978, and he soon became part of the Kremlin's inner circle. Since his election, he has continued the program of economic and social reform begun by his mentor, Yuri Andropov, and while maintaining a tough stance toward the United States, he has indicated a desire to pursue a course of peaceful coexistence in the spirit of the détente of the 1970s.

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As is often the case with Soviet leaders, relatively little is known of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev's early life. A native of the fertile agricultural area of southern Russia, just north of the Caucasus mountains, he was born on March 2, 1931 into a family of peasants in the village of Privolnoye, in the Krasnogvardeisky district of Stavropol territory, where he was educated in local schools. Although he was only eleven when the Germans occupied Stavropol during World War II, the experience left a deep impression on him. From 1946 to 1950 he worked summers at a machine and tractor station as an assistant combine harvester operator in the grain fields of the collective farms of his home area.

At Moscow State University, where he entered law school in 1950, apparently under the sponsorship of the Stavropol regional Communist party organization, Gorbachev invested more energy in politics than in his studies. According to a former schoolmate, who was quoted in *Time* (March 25, 1985), he was only an average student who "didn't have a lot of original ideas" but "made an effort to be everybody's buddy." Apparently Gorbachev never intended to practice law, which was not a particularly prestigious field of study in the Soviet Union at that time, but regarded the law primarily as preparation for party work. After joining the Communist party in 1952, he became active in the Young Communist League, or Komsomol.

Accounts differ about Gorbachev's political views in the last difficult years of Stalin's regime. According to some observers, he supported Stalin's "anti-cosmopolitan" line, while others maintain that he criticized the dictator's repressive regime long before Nikita Khrushchev's famous 1956 speech made it safe to do so. Whatever the case, Gorbachev's devotion to politics was obviously paramount, and as soon as he obtained his law degree in 1955, he returned to Stavropol to immerse himself in party work.

At first, Gorbachev worked with the Komsomol, the traditional training ground for Soviet party officials. From 1956 to 1958 he was first secretary of the Stavropol city Komsomol organization, and for the next four years he served the Komsomol committee for the Stavropol territory, first as deputy chief of the propaganda department, then as second secretary, and later as first secretary. In March 1962 he moved to the more demanding job of party organizer for the territorial production board of collective and state farms, and in December of that year he became head of the department of party organizations of the Stavropol territory Communist party committee. In 1963 Gorbachev became chief of the agricultural department for the entire Stavropol region, an important post for one so young. At the same time he took courses in farm economics at the Stavropol Agricultural Institute, from which he obtained a diploma in agronomy in 1967.

Rising steadily in the Communist hierarchy, Gorbachev became in September 1966 first secretary of the party committee for the city of Stavropol. In August 1968 he was chosen second secretary of

the Stavropol territory party committee, and in April 1970 he was named its first secretary, becoming at thirty-nine one of the youngest provincial party chiefs in the USSR. Gorbachev helped to reorganize his district's vast and productive grain farms, improving living conditions for the workers, expanding the size of private plots, and allowing the collectives a greater voice in planning.

His innovations apparently were effective, since recognition by the authorities in Moscow soon followed. In 1970 Gorbachev became a deputy to the Soviet of the Union within the bicameral Supreme Soviet—the formal legislative body of the USSR—and he was named to its conservation and youth affairs commissions, becoming chairman of the latter in 1974. Within the national party organization, he became a member of the powerful Central Committee in 1971. He served as a delegate to a number of party congresses in the USSR and was sent on trips abroad, heading party delegations to Belgium in 1972, to West Germany in 1975, and to France in 1976.

No matter how able, even the most promising Soviet party officials need mentors to get ahead, and Gorbachev was particularly successful in attracting the favor of powerful men. His first important mentor was Mikhail A. Suslov, a former Stavropol party chief who served as Leonid I. Brezhnev's ideology minister. Gorbachev also gained the backing of the Suslov faction in the Kremlin, which included KGB chairman Yuri Andropov, and the agriculture secretary, Fyodor Kulakov. After Kulakov died of a heart attack, Gorbachev was brought to Moscow in November 1978 to replace him on the ten-member secretariat of the party's Central Committee, giving him "a swift leg up in the Soviet succession ladder," as his biographer Thomas G. Butson noted in his book *Gorbachev* (1985).

But Gorbachev's new position was "as dangerous as it was enticing," in the words of the *London Observer* (November 11, 1984), because the limited amount of arable land and uncertain climate, combined with problems involving collective management, had long made agriculture the Achilles' heel of the Soviet economy. Despite their strenuous efforts, many party leaders, among them Nikita S. Khrushchev, had met with failures in that area.

As agriculture secretary, Gorbachev tried to revive Soviet agriculture by supervising Brezhnev's massive program of farm investment as well as promoting innovations of his own, such as transferring control over agricultural production from the ministries in Moscow to regional agro-industrial authorities, and using the "brigade system" under which groups of workers were assigned to farm specific plots of land and rewarded according to the results. But Gorbachev fared little better than his predecessors. In fact, during his tenure in agriculture, harvests were so poor that the government stopped publishing crop statistics and had to spend billions to buy grain abroad. Yet the crop failures had little effect on the "Teflon Commissar," as Gorbachev was dubbed in *Newsweek* (March 25,

1985). Continuing to advance his career under the patronage of Suslov and Andropov, he became a candidate, or nonvoting, member of the Politburo in November 1979, and was advanced to full membership in October 1980, the youngest member of the Central Committee's policy-making organ.

Gorbachev's early years in the Politburo were troubled ones for the Soviet leadership. As the elderly Brezhnev grew increasingly infirm, the government drifted, and corruption became widespread. After Brezhnev died in 1982, the reformers within the Kremlin succeeded in electing Yuri Andropov as general secretary, and he immediately launched a broad-ranging program of reform. As Andropov's right-hand man, Gorbachev helped to carry out his mentor's bold reform initiatives, including a purge of corrupt and incompetent party officials that resulted in the removal of one-fifth of the regional party secretaries, one-third of their staffs, and thousands of local managers and party workers. Gorbachev also supervised Andropov's "five ministries" program, inaugurated in January 1984, which introduced a measure of decentralization and technological innovation in a small number of industries and granted managers greater flexibility in establishing goals.

As Andropov's health worsened, Gorbachev became increasingly conspicuous both inside and outside the walls of the Kremlin, acting as the ailing leader's liaison with the party hierarchy, making major speeches, and attending important diplomatic functions. In May 1983 he led a Soviet delegation on a highly publicized trip to Canada. Many observers believed that Andropov was grooming Gorbachev for the succession. But he died too soon to guarantee a chosen successor, and the mossbacked old guard, apparently convinced that younger leaders were too inexperienced to take over power, elected the elderly Konstantin U. Chernenko, a Brezhnev loyalist, as general secretary in February 1984.

It soon became evident to Kremlinologists that Gorbachev had emerged from the succession struggle in a very strong position. Although he had some opposition within the Kremlin, notably from the party secretary for defense industry administration, Grigory Romanov, who was considered his chief rival, Gorbachev began to act as the unofficial "second secretary" in charge of the key areas of ideology, economics, and party organization. In April 1984 he became chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Supreme Soviet. Loyal supporting Chernenko, Gorbachev gradually assumed more and more of the ailing chairman's public leadership functions. As one informed observer noted in *Time* (March 25, 1985), "Gorbachev was smart not to push Chernenko out. He just waited for the old man to drop."

When Gorbachev led a Soviet delegation on an exchange visit to the British House of Parliament in December 1984, accompanied by his chic wife, he demonstrated a sense of humor, mercurial intelligence, and sophisticated style that made him an instant media sensation. Even Prime Minister

Margaret Thatcher, whose anti-Communism is beyond question, was much impressed with him and remarked, "I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together."

Following his nomination by the veteran foreign minister, Andrei A. Gromyko, Gorbachev was elected general secretary in an emergency meeting of the Central Committee, on March 11, 1985, only a few hours after the official announcement of Chernenko's death. The speed of the succession confirmed conjectures that it had been arranged long in advance. In making his acceptance speech on the same day, Gorbachev emphasized the need for rapid economic development as the most important goal and called for "further perfection and development of democracy" and "socialist self-government." With reference to the resumption of Geneva arms limitation talks, scheduled for the following day, Gorbachev pledged to maintain the "defense capacity of the motherland" but asserted that his nation was not striving to "acquire unilateral advantages" over the United States and the NATO powers and promised to follow the "Leninist course" of "peaceful coexistence."

The new general secretary moved confidently and vigorously ahead with Andropov's program of reform. His first order of business was to consolidate his power after years of drift and diffusion. Vacancies on the Politburo allowed him in April 1985 to appoint three Andropov protégés, Yegor K. Ligachev, Nikolai I. Ryzhkov, and Victor M. Chebrikov, thus giving himself a substantial majority on the thirteen-member ruling body. Furthermore, Gorbachev had ample time to prepare for the twenty-seventh party congress, scheduled for late 1985 or early 1986, which under his direction was to adopt a new party program and five-year plan as well as elect new members to the Central Committee. Finally, he could count on old age to remove the last members of the monolithic old guard who had long resisted change in the Soviet system.

At the lower levels of party organization, Gorbachev renewed the drive to remove corrupt and incompetent functionaries. Several officials concerned with production of energy, an area vital to Soviet economic recovery, were "retired" after denunciations in the press, and a number of provincial party chiefs along with dozens of local officials were dismissed in what some observers described as a purge.

Building an effective party organization was essential to Gorbachev's primary concern, economic revitalization. In recent years, the Soviet economy had shown alarming signs of weakness: a drop in oil production, the nation's chief export commodity; a disappointing increase of only 2 percent in gross national product, well below those of China and the United States; and continued poor performance in agriculture. The Soviet leadership was clearly worried that the continued economic crisis threatened national security. "We cannot remain a major power in world affairs unless we put our domestic house in order," Gorbachev had warned in a speech to the Central Committee in December 1984.

Like his patron, Andropov, Gorbachev did not intend to dismantle the system of centralized planning but wanted merely to make it more efficient. His program involved enforcing greater worker discipline, including a campaign against alcoholism, while rewarding better efforts with cash bonuses and consumer goods. At the management level, he wanted to introduce greater independence and use incentive schemes to increase productivity. He was also enthusiastic about modernizing the Soviet economy by introducing new technology. Having spoken favorably of Hungary's more market-oriented socialist economy, he stressed in speeches the need for "intensification," a Soviet code word for introducing market principles into a planned economy.

On foreign policy issues, Western observers predicted that Gorbachev would be less innovative because of the collective nature of Kremlin policymaking and his relative lack of experience in that area. Yet he demonstrated what Hedrick Smith of the *New York Times* (April 9, 1985) called a "knack for diplomatic theater" by announcing on Easter Sunday that the Soviet Union would observe a six-month moratorium on deployment of its SS-20 medium-range nuclear missiles. Critics pointed out that the Soviet Union had virtually completed the deployment anyway and was already testing a new version of the missile. Nevertheless, Gorbachev's political showmanship reinforced the perception that he would be a formidable diplomatic adversary.

A major point in Gorbachev's foreign policy and defense views was his opposition to the proposed Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars" plan, of the United States, which he regarded as a dangerous militarization of space. He accused the Americans of violating the guidelines for the Geneva arms talks by refusing to negotiate simultaneously on the space program and on strategic and medium-range nuclear weaponry. In view of the Soviet Union's failure to block deployment of the Pershing II and cruise missiles in Western Europe in 1983, Gorbachev's emphasis on the Star Wars plan has been seen by Western observers as an effort to drive a wedge between the United States and its NATO allies, many of whom are uneasy about the American space initiative.

Although Gorbachev has denounced the United States as "the forward edge of the war menace to mankind," he has also referred to superpower confrontation as "an anomaly," and at Moscow trade talks in May 1985 he told United States Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige that it was "high time to defrost the potential for Soviet-American cooperation." Many analysts believe that Gorbachev's domestic problems are too pressing for him to take any assertive action that might threaten the current uneasy state of détente. Gorbachev has indicated that he would be receptive to a summit conference with President Ronald Reagan, possibly in the fall of 1985, when he is scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly.

Closer to home, Gorbachev has announced his resolve to cement ties with other Communist countries, especially China. His statement in his inaugural speech that he intended to "expand cooperation with socialist states" and to "enhance the role and influence of socialism in world affairs" was seen by Western observers as an assertion of continued Soviet dominance within the Communist bloc. In May he signed two economic agreements with visiting Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and discussed with him, among other matters, the possible threat to India and the USSR posed by Pakistani aid to Afghan rebels fighting Soviet-backed troops.

Experts on Soviet affairs have warned against confusing Gorbachev's more open style with a more liberal political philosophy. He has been described, like his mentor, Andropov, as an "intellectual authoritarian." Although he has indicated an unusual willingness to consult public opinion and a more relaxed attitude toward censorship, Gorbachev is not expected to be especially tolerant of dissidents. As Andrei Gromyko said of Gorbachev in his nomination speech, "Comrades, this man has a nice smile, but he's got iron teeth."

Nevertheless, analysts also note the absence of evidence in Gorbachev's career of the "killer instinct" often found in Soviet leaders. They point out that he rose through the ranks as a result of his own ability and the help of powerful patrons, rather than by means of military prowess or bloody purges. Too young to experience personally the full impact of Stalinism or of World War II, he came of age in an era of expanding Soviet power. As a result, he has a self-confidence and freedom from paranoia noticeably lacking in the old guard. In any case, many observers agree that after a long period of uncertain leadership, the Soviet Union has a strong, effective, charismatic man at its helm. After a meeting with Gorbachev, Speaker of the House of Representatives Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, Jr., heading a United States congressional delegation to Moscow, told *Celestine Bohlen* of the *Washington Post* (April 11, 1985): "He's a master of words, a master of the art of politics and diplomacy. . . . He's hard, he's tough, he's strong."

Mikhail Gorbachev's wife, Raisa Maksimovna Gorbacheva, whom he met when they were both university students, is an unusual asset for a Soviet leader. The attractive, poised, and stylish Mrs. Gorbachev holds a doctor of philosophy degree and teaches Marxist-Leninist theory at Moscow State University. The Gorbachevs are said to have two children, although only one, their daughter Irina, who is a physician and mother of their granddaughter Oksana, has appeared in public with them. The couple have an apartment near the Kremlin and a lakeside dacha outside Moscow. Gorbachev enjoys hiking and listening to classical music, and he has read widely in world literature. He and his wife regularly attend the ballet and the theatre, and they have taken motoring vacations in Italy and France.

Gorbachev is a somewhat bald, stocky man, five feet ten inches tall, who bears a resemblance to the

American actor Rod Steiger. He dresses in well-cut but conservative dark suits. A prominent strawberry-colored birthmark on his pate is usually airbrushed out of official photographs. Observers describe him as a soft-spoken, mild-mannered man who is very direct without being abrasive. Westerners used to the dour demeanor that often characterizes Soviet politicians are particularly struck by his expressive face, sense of humor, and ready smile. He reportedly puts in a six-day-a-week, twelve-hour-a-day work schedule. Among

his many decorations are three Orders of Lenin, the Order of the October Revolution, and the Order of the Red Banner of Labor.

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