



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Gorbachev: A Biography

Even after a productive three and half month research visit to Moscow and Tbilisi, it is too soon to have arrived at even preliminary conclusions concerning the large questions and issues raised in my project proposal. Instead, I will talk about how I went about gathering material needed to answer them in due course.

Perhaps my most basic question is: How did Gorbachev become the man who dismantled the Soviet system? Obviously, that question has to be answered biographically, which means that his life and career as a whole must be carefully traced from his birth to the present time. (Even the time since he left the Kremlin in December 1991 undoubtedly contains clues to Gorbachev's behavior before then.) The challenge of so doing is that a biographer must attempt to understand not only that life and career, but their context, which is to say the history of the time through which Gorbachev has lived, everything from the nature of peasant life in southwestern Russia, to the politics of the Moscow intelligentsia, to the intricacies of arms control and the German question. To do this I have to learn about all these, even as I try to collect as much personal information as possible about Gorbachev and his family.

A second basic question noted in my proposal was: Why did the Soviet system submit to dismantling almost without resistance? This requires understanding the dynamics of that system, why it ended up promoting Gorbachev to lead it, and how it reacted to his reforms. One way to get at this set of issues, I believe, is to read the published

recollections of Gorbachev and his colleagues and adversaries, as well as to interview as many of them as possible. Also mentioned in my proposal are some of the psychological complexities that underlie Gorbachev's behavior. To get a glimpse of these, let alone understand them, I tried to pay particular attention, when reading books and documents, and in interviewing sources, not only to "objective" information, but to mood, tone and nuance.

Childhood, of course, is where biography begins. Fortunately, I was able to devote an entire long interview with Gorbachev to his childhood, including the village where he was born and grew up, his parents and grandparents, and the schools he attended. Another long interview was devoted entirely to his years at Moscow State University (1950-1955), and another to his early career in Stavropol (1955-1978) and his years in Moscow before he became General Secretary of the Communist party (1978-1985). Although we touched on his years in power (1985-1991) in these interviews, I deliberately focused on the period before then, since Gorbachev and his colleagues have written so much about the Perestroika period.

In the course of these interviews, I was able to clarify the question, raised in my proposal, about why Gorbachev returned to Stavropol after graduating from Moscow University, rather than remaining in or near the capital. Was he as repelled as he was attracted by the prospect of power? I asked in the proposal. Did he sense that the Moscow, where Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalin still lay ahead, wasn't ready for his brand of idealism? The answer, I found, is much more prosaic: The kind of position he hoped to land in Moscow, in the Procurator's Office, turned out to be closed to young people like him as a result of the post-Stalin's regime's realization that, under pressure from their superiors, younger Procurator staffers in Stalin's time had proven too ready and willing to overlook the terrible injustices meted out during the purges.

One of the lessons of my interviews has to do with how to conduct them. Since many of the people I interviewed have written memoirs, as well as other books and articles about their experiences, I wanted to avoid having them simply repeat what they had already written, a quite likely prospect in the case of elderly people with failing memories. My attempted solution to this potential problem was to read these memoirs before interviewing, and then to preface almost every question with a quote from the memoirs, particularly quotes in which the memoirist had provided obviously incomplete information. In some cases, I can report, this technique worked well. In too many others, it failed to prevent an interview from repeating what was already in the memoirs.

The work I did in Moscow and Tbilisi (where I interviewed former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze) tended to confirm, but also added to, my sense of how my book should be structured. In particular, I now realize that my coverage of Gorbachev's years in power will have to be further subdivided into more chapters than I had anticipated, breaking down the period both chronologically and by subject area. Yet I remain convinced that the former should take priority over the latter, if the overall narrative is to maintain its momentum.