clinging to him. Of course, he was still General Secretary, and therein lay his personal drama: his world-scale talent had to be combined with the narrowness of Communist attachments. Even when his disloyal comrades-in-arms attempted to depose him by means of the August 1991 coup, he still clung to this dualism.

Gorbachev seems never to have forgotten what he said at the Twenty-Seventh Congress in 1986: ‘You know, when you read [Lenin] again, and you must read him when you’re working on a document like this [i.e. his report to the Congress], you come to the conclusion that you have to begin with him and end with him.’ And so it was with Gorbachev. He could have dropped Lenin, in favour of deeper values whose significance he had come to understand. Yet he repeatedly returned to Leninism, making the journey back and forth between universal truth and class lies.

Gorbachev and Yeltsin

On taking office, Gorbachev began a cautious ‘purge’ of the Central Committee and Politburo. He knew that slow-witted functionaries and senile leaders would block any constructive initiatives, and he believed that renewal of the Party and society was possible only with new people. On the other hand, his Central Committee purge was also motivated by traditional Bolshevik suspicion. In January 1986 the Politburo discussed ‘measures for regulating contacts between Soviet officials and foreign citizens’. Before adopting the decree, Gorbachev summed up: ‘We have a lot of rebels in this matter, such contacts break the elementary rules. People are not reporting on their contacts, not reporting on the content of their conversations ... We even had to remove two officials from the Central Committee who had permitted this sort of thing. These are serious matters. We literally have to chuck the chatterers out of the Central Committee organization and foreign policy agencies. We have evidence that the enemy is showing an interest in such people.’

None the less, Gorbachev’s main intention in renewing the Central Committee was to strengthen it with energetic, knowledgeable and progressively-minded people. He knew that Boris Yeltsin, a former building engineer who was now the Party chief of Sverdlovsk, one of the most heavily industrialized regions, was a man with a dynamic personality and boundless energy. At the beginning of April 1985 Gorbachev ordered V. Dolgikh to telephone Yeltsin and offer him the job of head of the Construction Department of the Central Committee in Moscow, which was responsible for heavy industry, industrial, transport and agricultural construction, planning, research and architectural affairs, building materials and much else.

Yeltsin did not hesitate: he declined respectfully. Perhaps he thought the job was not big enough; perhaps he preferred to stay in direct contact with the people, meeting them in their factories, on building projects and in canteens. He was at his best when he was out of the office and among people at work. In this respect he was a ‘populist’. He had always had a jaundiced view of office work, and this could be observed throughout his subsequent career. All his successes and popularity are associated with his mingling with the crowds, whom he knew how to uplift, inflame and inspire. By contrast, all his failures and defeats are connected with the work of the organization, the apparatus and the actions of the indestructible bureaucracy. In addition to this, he loved the Urals and was not keen to move to Moscow.

The next day, it was the turn of Yegor Ligachev to try. Ligachev was the Politburo member in charge of ideology and Party organization. He too was a provincial, from Novosibirsk, who had quickly risen to the top ranks of the Party after being summoned to Moscow by Andropov. His influence in the Politburo was considerable: when Gorbachev had taken his first holiday as General Secretary, in the summer of 1985, Ligachev chaired the meetings in his absence.

Ligachev was insistent in his conversation with Yeltsin: ‘Your refusal won’t be accepted by the Politburo. Do you think I was so keen to come to Moscow? Come on, don’t be so clever, say you’ll come. I’m seeing the General Secretary today. There’s nothing to think about. You have to.’ Yeltsin reluctantly submitted to the demands of Party discipline, and on 11 April 1985 the Politburo duly approved his appointment. Gorbachev concluded patronizingly: ‘We’re relying on you. It’s not a cushy number. You’ll manage.’ Yeltsin’s move to Moscow would turn out to have momentous effects for Gorbachev and for the country.

At first Yeltsin found it hard to settle in the capital. He found it
difficult to adapt to working in the vast Central Committee machine, with its unwritten rules, norms of behaviour and etiquette. As deputy head of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Army and Navy, I was invited several times to meetings of the Politburo, and I was struck by the sensitivity to rank among the top echelons—a hierarchy complex, one could say. Although everyone addressed everyone else respectfully, by name and patronymic, I sensed an inner imperative of authority and harsh subordination. An insignificant Departmental Inspector, who would prostrate himself before his head of sector, would address an army commander who had been summoned to the Central Committee as arrogantly and peremptorily as if he were the General Secretary's deputy himself.

Yeltsin did not remain a department chief for long, and within two months was made a Central Committee Secretary, a post carrying with it awesome authority. Henceforth his contact with Gorbachev became personal and frequent. They were almost the same age, and both were from the provinces, though Gorbachev, after several years at Staraya Square, was more flexible and calculating than Yeltsin, who was more direct and less complicated.

Since Gorbachev intended pensioning off such veterans as Gromyko, Romanov and Grishin, he needed replacements, and these soon appeared in the form of Alexander Yakovlev, Georgy Razumovsky, Baklanov, Yuri Manayanov, Ivan Frolov, Valentin Falin, Lev Zaikov and Vadam Medvedev. Gorbachev was frankly fed up with Grishin, the Secretary of the Moscow City Party Committee and a quiet, highly experienced operator who personified the Brezhnev era. A few months after Gorbachev took over, Grishin was given a hint that his days were numbered. He at once sent in his resignation, hoping to negotiate a better retirement package. At the next Politburo meeting, in December 1985, Gorbachev introduced the first item on the agenda: 'Comrade Yeltsin, B.N.' He announced that Grishin was retiring, and that he would be joining an advisory group in the Supreme Soviet, then turned to the question of his replacement. 'We are talking about the Party organization of the capital,' he said. 'We should therefore find someone in the Central Committee with experience of working in a major Party organization, who knows about economics, science and culture. We have a proposal to nominate Comrade B.N. Yeltsin.'
doubts about socialism, Leninism or the role of the Party. It was only the old Bolshevik edifice, but a fundamental modernization. To be sure, in the early years of the perestroika period, however, as a sword... The alliance was temporary because it was tactical. Yeltsin needed Gorbachev as a shield, and Gorbachev needed Yeltsin to help and support everyone and relieve them of their many ills. The more cynical, or perhaps more experienced, knew that he would come unstuck, that he would not be able to rid Moscow of its invertebrate bureaucracy, corruption and muddle. The general public, however, saw clearly that what was needed was precisely a new perestroika-minded leader, one who was not like all the rest. Yeltsin’s popularity grew among the populace, but hostility and anger were mounting in the Party elite.

News of Yeltsin’s populism reached the Central Committee. Officials there heard with astonishment that he had declined a luxury country villa and selected a much more modest one instead. He had not accepted the offer of his own plane to fly to the south on holiday, and he went on living in the fairly ordinary apartment he had been given when he first arrived in Moscow. Gorbachev and his colleagues took notice, but Yeltsin’s populism was not a cause for conflict, although there were mutterings from some that he was ‘after cheap authority’.

Gorbachev saw no cause to intervene. He had put Yeltsin into the Moscow organization precisely in order to clean up the city, to eliminate scandals, denunciations and conflict. He was, as his Russian biographers Vladimir Solovyov and Yelena Klepikova have written, Gorbachev’s ‘new broom’, and he took his work seriously. ‘For the time being these two men were absolutely necessary to each other: Yeltsin needed Gorbachev as a shield, and Gorbachev needed Yeltsin as a sword... The alliance was temporary because it was tactical.’

Gorbachev underestimated Yeltsin, thinking that he would always be an obedient executive who would strictly follow the path of perestroika laid down by himself. For the single-minded new arrival from Sverdlovsk, however, perestroika should not be a mere patching up of the old Bolshevik edifice, but a fundamental modernization. To be sure, in the early years of perestroika Yeltsin, like most of us, had no doubts about socialism, Leninism or the role of the Party. It was only after his clash with Gorbachev and the leadership at the end of 1987 that he understood the threat to any genuinely democratic innovation posed by the constraints and narrowness of Party orthodoxy. The intellectual entourage that began to form around him at this time brought his ‘rebellious’ views to rapid maturity. As a member of the Party’s top echelons, Yeltsin knew that it was not capable of fundamental reform. The best that could be hoped for was superficial liberalization and the dropping of some of the more odious dogmas.

I first met Yeltsin in 1989, and had many private conversations with him. After I was sacked from the Main Political Administration and, in June 1991, from the Institute of Military History, I became one of his advisers, and I believe him to be one of the most courageous and honest of all Soviet politicians. It is true that there were many who had for a long time seen the incompatibility between the high ideals and the dark practices of Leninism, but there were very few – and most of those had fled abroad – who dared to rebel against its innate defects.

Within a year of becoming the Moscow Party Secretary, Yeltsin began to sense Gorbachev’s unspoken jealousy at his growing popularity. He felt dissatisfaction and frustration at the knowledge that in many respects perestroika was merely superficial, and would not touch the foundations of the system. In September 1987, two months before the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution, and after long reflection, Yeltsin wrote to Gorbachev, who was on holiday at Pitsunda on the Black Sea. He wrote of feeling ‘superfluous’ and ‘awkward’ in the Politburo. His directness and style of work did not fit that of the supreme body. He ended the letter on a firm note: ‘I request that you release me from the job of First Secretary of the Moscow Organization and my responsibilities as a candidate member of the Politburo. I request that you regard this as an official announcement.’

Gorbachev did not reply until a week after his return to Moscow, when he telephoned Yeltsin. ‘We’ll talk about your letter later,’ he said. But still no conversation took place.

A month later, on 15 October, the Politburo met and spent nearly four hours discussing the General Secretary’s speech for the seventieth anniversary. What strikes one today, reading the minutes, is the virtual defence of Stalin and Stalinism. Gorbachev even declared that in the 1920s and thirties Stalin had defended ‘Lenin’s concept of revolution’,
and that this had been 'his enormous contribution'. One is also struck by the Politburo's deep suspicion of anything of a democratic or innovative nature that did not emanate from the Central Committee itself. It is enough to read these minutes to feel that, for the Party, *perestroika* was a means of survival, a small degree of modernization to make the Party 'contemporary'. This attitude harboured a deep contradiction between what the Party *nomenklatura* - especially its top echelon - wanted and expected from *perestroika*, and what the population was hoping for: on the one hand, the 'renewal' of the Party and the system, on the other, the basis of a new society without Bolsheviks. The debate at the Politburo showed that the contradiction was real, and that it would eventually lead to the collapse of the CPSU.

Yeltsin was the seventh member to speak. He spoke in quite traditional terms, despite the fact that only a month before he had asked Gorbachev to release him. Yeltsin suggested that the General Secretary's speech at the ceremony should not just refer to Lenin, but also to his comrades. Gorbachev, as was his wont, interrupted with a long tirade which contained an obvious message to Yeltsin over his letter of resignation: 'When a personal element enters into the sphere of high politics and top politicians are involved, personal ambition, grudges and an inability to work in the collective and so on and so forth can often transform themselves into a person's political position. So, you see, none of this is simple, the dialectics are subtle.'

Gorbachev was using Yeltsin's suggestion that Lenin's comrades be mentioned in his speech as a device to attack him. When Gorbachev finally stopped talking, Yeltsin sharpened his own tone: 'The theme of *perestroika*, which is developing in the country, is very important, as are questions of the timetable, the time reckoned for a *perestroika* that has begun. The people are waiting for very precise formulations. In general, we here think that *perestroika* is going to take fifteen to twenty years; that is, it's a long-term policy. But we should deal with current and urgent tasks literally in two, three or five years. This should be in the speech.'

Gorbachev, who was to interrupt Yeltsin's brief speech no fewer than six times, replied: 'The issue of timing needs thinking about.'

Yeltsin was expressing his dissatisfaction with the course of *perestroika* by criticizing the absence of a timetable, which, he said, 'disoriented' people by depriving them of a sense of direction.

He continued in the same vein a week later at the plenum of 21 October, where Gorbachev's anniversary speech was debated again. Everything was running smoothly, the delegates voicing support for the Politburo and the General Secretary. Suddenly, Yeltsin raised his hand and made his way uncertainly to the rostrum. His speech was poorly constructed and badly conceived, but two particular points stood out as unusual for this forum: 'What was said at the congress about *perestroika* in two or three years - two years have passed or almost passed, and again another two to three years are being indicated - this disorients people very much, it disorients the Party, disorients the masses, to the extent that we who know the mood of the people can now sense the fluctuating character of their attitude to *perestroika*.'

The delegates listened, hushed. This amounted to criticism of the Party line. Ostensibly Yeltsin's speech was about timetables, but in reality it was about the low level of results and public dissatisfaction with the way *perestroika* was being carried out.

'In the history of the Party,' he continued nervously, 'there have been many defeats due to the fact that Party authority was given to one sole pair of hands, due to the fact that he, that one man, was totally protected from any criticism. I'm very worried, for instance, by the fact that among the Politburo members ... recently there has been a distinct growth, I'd say, in eulogies from some members of the Politburo about the General Secretary.'

Such criticism of a living General Secretary was unheard of. The delegates froze. Gorbachev looked at Yeltsin with a mixture of surprise and irony. Yeltsin became even more nervous. He had no prepared text to resort to: 'Evidently my work in the Politburo is not going well. For various reasons. Evidently, my experience and other things, maybe also a certain lack of support, especially from Comrade Ligachev, I would stress, have led me to think that I should raise with you the question of releasing me from my post and responsibilities as a candidate member of the Politburo. I have handed in the proper notice, and as for my being First Secretary of the City Party Committee, that will no doubt be decided by a plenum of the City Party Committee.' He remained standing at the podium for a moment, as if he wanted to say something else, but then returned heavily to his seat. The silence was broken by Gorbachev: 'This is something new for us. Is it about a department of the Moscow Party organization?
Or has Comrade Yeltsin raised the question of his leaving the Politburo, but remaining First Secretary of the Moscow City Party Committee? There seems to be a desire to fight with the Central Committee. That's how it looks to me, though maybe I'm making it worse than it is.130

As a practised bureaucrat, Gorbachev knew that the rest of the Politburo would start jumping on Yeltsin the heretic. When had a General Secretary been criticized at a plenum before? And Yeltsin had voiced his doubts about perestroika. They would see him as sceptical and ambitious. Gorbachev was at once supported by a forest of hands; then came the speeches from Ryzhkov, Vorontsov, Chebrikov, Shevardnadze, Gromyko and others. Yeltsin’s speech was condemned as slanderous, rabble-rousing, groundless, capitulatory, capricious and primitive. Addressing Yeltsin in the familiar form, ty, Gorbachev went in for the kill: ‘Are you so politically illiterate that we have to organize a grammar lesson for you here?’ He called Yeltsin’s confused but courageous speech a trick to shift the debate away from the main report: ‘I personally regard this as disrespectful to the General Secretary. Look what he said, that in reality for two years the people have got nothing.’

Twenty-seven members of the Central Committee spoke. Apart from Georgy Arbatov, who made a cautious attempt to defend him, they all condemned Yeltsin. Few of them could have imagined that Yeltsin’s moral and political ascendancy began that day. It was from that moment also that a four-year political struggle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin began.

The dramatic rivalry between the two leaders took place as Soviet society was in transition from totalitarian to democratic form. Gorbachev was in the limelight during the first five years of the period, and Yeltsin during the second five years. Gorbachev plainly underrated Yeltsin, who was able more rapidly than he to shed the dogmatic shackles of Communism and identify the path of democratization. Gorbachev’s strength lay in his ability to influence the course of world opinion. His contribution to reducing the threat of nuclear war was immense. Within the USSR, with the help of Alexander Yakovlev he initiated glasnost, which, more than any bombs, terror or orders by the omnipotent Central Committee, undermined Leninist totalitarianism by revealing the truth about the country and the world outside.

It was perhaps a unique example in history of the truth alone achieving what was beyond the power of a mighty state.

Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin committed serious mistakes in their confrontation. Because each had a different view of the object of perestroika and democratization, they had to make important decisions without the benefit of a common denominator in their relations. It was only when the force of nationalism and separatism exploded, and threatened the disintegration of the Union, that the Soviet President and the Russian President made an effort to co-ordinate their efforts. But they were too late. Gorbachev’s delay gave time for the opposition in the leadership to organize their coup d’etat and bring down the entire edifice of the Union.

Yeltsin’s evolution into a national leader began after his confused speech in October 1987. Henceforth Gorbachev would personify a perestroika which in the people’s minds ‘had given them nothing’ – a massive misjudgement by them – while Yeltsin would play the part of the remorseless critic, fighter for the interests of ordinary people, and advocate of ‘real’ perestroika.

All of Gorbachev’s talk of democratization and glasnost in planning, methods of stimulating the socialist market and a new understanding of centralism111 were in fact attempts to renew, improve and preserve the bankrupt Leninist system. He undoubtedly believed what he was saying, but he was still clinging to the Leninist delusion. Despite his claims of ‘new thinking’ for ‘the whole world’, he remained wedded to old thinking for the socialist world. He said on numerous occasions that he could continue to rule for another ten years without changing the system, but that it was not in his character to do so. The impulse for change had begun with Khrushchev and continued with Andropov. By the time Gorbachev came to power the system was in desperate need of change. A return to Stalinism was out of the question, nor would Gorbachev have wished it: Building a bridge to the future was an imperative. Gorbachev attempted this, and deserves credit for doing so. As he himself wrote, it was hard if not impossible for a true Communist ‘to change the social system, to return to methods and forms that typify another social order’.132

Even had he been able to introduce radical changes in the social order, Gorbachev would not have been permitted to do so. Perestroika itself had slipped unnoticed into the stagnation phase, in which slogans
about a new revolution, new stages and more socialism meaning more democracy could change nothing without first creating new foundations.

Gorbachev was becoming nervous. His actions at times were impulsive and over-emotional. The thread of reform had slipped from his grasp and the position was becoming worse, not only in the economy, but also in the political and national spheres. He became extremely sensitive to criticism, and could not forgive himself for bringing Yeltsin from Sverdlovsk onto the national stage, where he could display his self-will and exploit his rising popularity. As Solovyov and Klepikova have written: 'The rivalry which arose between Gorbachev and Yeltsin was both personal and political in equal measure. It arose as the revolution begun by Gorbachev began to decline, when he had lost control of the events he himself had brought to life. At that very moment Gorbachev, a completely sane person, acquired a fixed idea: whatever happened, he blamed Yeltsin. Yeltsin became his bête noire. Things would soon reach a point where Gorbachev would turn any conversation to Yeltsin. Everything about him irritated Gorbachev, even when his criticism was not aimed at him. Gorbachev was irritated by his popularity, which was growing in direct proportion to the fall in Gorbachev's own, and it seemed that Yeltsin was drawing the people's affection to himself.'

Relations between the two worsened still further after the Nineteenth Party Conference of June 1988, the first such conference since 1941. At first all seemed normal. All the delegates in the Palace of Congresses rose when Gorbachev appeared on the platform and was invited to speak. He talked of political reform, heightening the role of the soviets, the weak performance of the food programme, the fact that not everyone was satisfied with perestroika, and again he recalled Lenin.

The delegation of which I was a member had been allocated seats in the balcony. As it happened, Yeltsin was sitting a little in front of me. Without waiting for Gorbachev to finish speaking, he sent a note to the platform stating his wish to speak. Time passed, days passed, and as one new speaker after another was called to the podium, Yeltsin sat in silence. During an interval he said: 'They want to shut me up.'

The conference was moving towards its close, and still Yeltsin had not been asked to speak. Suddenly he left his seat and went to the exit. After a few minutes he emerged in the body of the hall, walked to the front and sat down. It was obvious that he wanted to speak. Gorbachev realized this, and got up and left. Men in grey uniforms approached Yeltsin and asked him to leave too. He was unmoved. Then, after one more speaker, he was given the floor. Again his speech was rather confused, but it was a frank criticism of the Politburo, the General Secretary and the course of perestroika. About a third of the delegates greeted the speech warmly, the rest either cautiously or in an openly hostile manner. Afterwards, a manifest spirit of confrontation arose in the great hall between the old Party elite and the new supporters of democracy. Ligachev and a number of other delegates devoted their speeches to an essentially anti-Yeltsin theme.

The gulf between Gorbachev and Yeltsin became deeper and wider. Regrettably, Gorbachev, still not free of the old Bolshevik way of thinking, saw the radical, democratic wing in the Party and society not as opponents, but as enemies. Between 1989 and 1991, when the Politburo discussed almost any topic the terms 'opportunists', 'radicals', 'anti-Communists', 'regionalists' cropped up with dismaying regularity, and the closer the demise of perestroika approached, the more was said and the less was done. The long sessions, at which Gorbachev was invariably the most loquacious speaker, testify to the leadership's confusion. Gorbachev did his best to invigorate his colleagues by urging the need for concrete measures and calling on everyone to stay at his post and see the course through. On occasion he was more blunt: 'We mustn't give in and we mustn't panic.'

It seems that Gorbachev saw one of the causes of his mounting difficulties as the activities of the political opposition, which he sometimes called, with a degree of disparagement, 'the democrats'. Attacking the inter-regional group of democratically inclined People's Deputies, which included Andrei Sakharov, Gorbachev told the Politburo: 'We look at them and we see they're like snotty intellectuals, though we also see that they're degenerates and turncoats, yet we are unable to put them in their places. No, this is simply intolerable!' 'I'll tell you frankly,' he continued, '80 per cent of the members in the regional group are normal people. There is a group of political opportunists there who are not the "leaders", so to speak ... We have to defeat them intellectually. There are also incorrigibles, people like those "leaders".'
Gorbachev spoke of democracy as the axis of perestroika, yet he denounced those who advocated and expressed democracy. A special decree was adopted on his initiative by the Politburo on 22 March 1990, according to which it would be appropriate to keep to a line on the intellectual and organizational demarcation of the supporters of the “Democratic Platform.” In other words, there were to be no ‘democrats’ in the Party.

On occasion Gorbachev’s hatred of Yeltsin was expressed quite blatantly. An excessively long meeting of the Politburo on 3 May 1990 was discussing the forthcoming Twenty-Eighth Party Congress and Russian Party Conference, as well as the next Congress of People’s Deputies. Perestroika was still failing to deliver, and it was plain that Soviet socialism was beyond redemption. For this, it seems, there had to be culprits.

Gorbachev’s angry and confused speech amounted to saying that the ‘democrats’ could put an end to perestroika by their opposition: ‘Why has Yeltsin seized on the question of the formation of the Russian Communist Party? He does it to play to use it to get to power in Russia. And through Russia to break up the CPSU as well, and the country... These are not the aims of socialism, the renewal of socialism. It’s all a rabble-rousing disguise. They need power. These people are omnivorous. They’re willing even to consume themselves, to close ranks with the most “hardline Marxists and even with dictators...” Just as long as they get into power. But they are dangerous. Under certain circumstances they could completely ruin perestroika, bury all hope of ennobling and renewing our society.’

Yeltsin was mentioned again in the context of a completely different issue. One of the members had the idea of inviting him to take part in a television debate and tripping him up. A journalist would be engaged to ask him questions about Lithuania, the Kurile Islands, AIDS and other potentially inflammatory subjects. Yeltsin had acquired a reputation for being accident-prone and unstable. In 1991 newspapers carried reports of his appearing late one night at a militia station soaking wet, explaining that he had somehow found himself in the Moscow River. Was he drunk? Had a jealous husband tried to settle a score? The media were naturally interested. Yeltsin claimed to have been thrown in the river by secret agents hoping to provoke a public outcry and industrial unrest, which would provide an excuse for imposing martial law.

Whatever the truth, this was novel behaviour for a politician of Yeltsin’s rank. Gorbachev played on this theme when he added: ‘Our man has a reputation. He drank half a bucket – that took some doing!’ Someone else mentioned that Yeltsin was ill. Gorbachev replied: ‘Yes, I’m sure... We are always motivated by moral considerations, whereas they have no morals whatever... They’re just a bunch of opportunists, simply the dregs of politics.’

From this kind of discussion, it is obvious where the gossip about Yeltsin at that time originated.

Gorbachev rejected Yeltsin both as a political opponent and as an individual. What was the essence of this deep personal hostility? Chernyayev identifies a fatal mistake in Gorbachev’s actions: ‘Despite his constant refrain that the aim of perestroika was to liberate the natural logic of social development, and not to impose yet another scheme, he took on the role of chief constructor himself, as well as the job of clerk of works in building the “new” society. But this became an objective impossibility.’

Gorbachev did not want a perestroika that would lead to replacing the old Bolshevik totalitarian order, even in ‘improved’ form, with a democratic, non-socialist one. Yeltsin, on the other hand, at first indistinctly but with growing definition, wanted just that. After the autumn of 1987, each leader perceived perestroika differently: Gorbachev in terms of the socialist renewal, and Yeltsin effectively in a pro-capitalist sense. As a Party pariah in self-imposed isolation, Yeltsin became unrestrained in his public criticism of the General Secretary.

As a rule, Gorbachev was enraged by criticism, especially when it consisted of arguments about his alleged lack of direction, that he was dictating from the ‘centre’, that he had no strategy for change. When on 16 October 1990 at the Russian Supreme Soviet Yeltsin declared that Russia would not allow itself to be ordered about by the centre, Gorbachev let loose: ‘Yeltsin’s busting to get the Presidency of Russia... and at such a time as this. He’s simply out of his mind. He’s setting his people on me... They need a good smash in the face.’

Gorbachev tried to trip Yeltsin up at every opportunity. When the Russian President made foreign visits, efforts were made to ensure
that he was only 'half-received' by senior foreign officials. In early-
1991 a visit by Yeltsin to Peking was repeatedly discussed by the
Soviet and Chinese governments. Gorbachev did not want it to take
place, and Alexander Bessmertnykh, the Foreign Minister since
Shevardnadze’s resignation in December 1990, submitted a proposal
to the Politburo: ‘The Chinese comrades should be asked to invite
B.N. Yeltsin on behalf of the governments of the three Chinese
provinces that border the Soviet Union (in north-eastern China) and that
have extensive ties and co-operation with the RSFSR. If someone in
the Chinese leadership in Peking wants to meet B.N. Yeltsin after his visit to these three provinces, that’s their business. But that would not
constitute a visit to China.’ Gorbachev gave his approval to the plan.\textsuperscript{141}

For Yeltsin the break with his Communist past was anything but
simple. It was not the case, as many thought, that he became a ‘heretic’
as his populism peaked and during his personal confrontation with
Gorbachev. I shall never forget the way he took the floor at the last
Party Congress [the Twenty-Eighth, in 1990] and announced that he
was leaving the Communist Party. It was a short speech, and it stunned
the delegates. ‘In connection with my appointment [on 25 May 1990]
as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR and my enormous
responsibility to the people and to Russia, and considering the shift
of society to a multi-party situation, I shall no longer be able to carry
out only the decisions of the CPSU . . . Therefore, in accordance with
the responsibilities I have in the pre-election period, I am announcing
my departure from the CPSU.’\textsuperscript{142}

The speech was met by silence at first, and then a rising howl of
condemnation and hostility. Yeltsin meanwhile left the hall with a
heavy gait, and did not look at anyone. He passed close to where
I was sitting, and I could see that his face was grey. He told me a few
days later: ‘When I announced my exit from the Party, I literally felt
something snap in my chest . . . I couldn’t sleep all night.’ The shed-
ding of a lifetime of spiritual shackles had not been easy.

Relations between Gorbachev and Yeltsin reached such a pitch
that the General Secretary could not utter Yeltsin’s name without
becoming angry. Almost every important foreign visitor would find
Gorbachev turning the conversation to Yeltsin, at times in the most
abusive terms. Yeltsin was closely followed by the special services, and
all his telephone calls were bugged. After the August 1991 coup,
investigators found a mountain of files containing transcripts of his
telephone conversations in two safes in the office of Gorbachev’s
assistant Valeri Boldin. ‘For several years,’ Yeltsin wrote, ‘they noted
down everything I said, morning, noon and night.’\textsuperscript{143}

From the beginning of 1991, however, there were sound reasons
for a rapprochement between the two men, or at least between the
groups whose interests they expressed. They were pushed towards
each other by the growing threat of the break-up of the Soviet Union.
The Novo-Ogarevo process, as it became known (after one of the
Soviet President’s residences), began in April 1991, when Gorbachev
initiated talks with nine of the republican heads, including Yeltsin –
al all fifteen had been invited, but six were not interested in anything
less than complete separation from the USSR. On 4 May Yeltsin,
who favoured a new Union, declared that the meeting of ‘9+1’ had
been ‘a great event’ which had achieved agreement in principle for a
new ‘Union of Sovereign States, joining with each other voluntarily’.\textsuperscript{144}
The Union would be preserved, he said, and that was the main thing.

Yeltsin recalled that the talks at Novo-Ogarevo ‘dictated (and
allowed) that Gorbachev and I would behave like normal people. We
set aside our personal feelings. The price of each word we spoke was
too high . . . After the talks we would normally go to another room
for a friendly supper with Gorbachev’s favourite brandy, Jubilee. We
would come out of supper warmed up and excited by the circumstances
of the meeting, and by the supper.’\textsuperscript{145}

The talks were leading towards a powerful Confederation with a
common economic area, a common army and a common currency.
Both leaders saw in this arrangement a real possibility of preserving
what used to be called the USSR.

‘Nevertheless,’ Yeltsin went on, ‘to say that my relations with
Gorbachev at that time were simple would be quite wrong. While
taking this step towards Russia in the Novo-Ogarevo process, he did
everything in his power to prevent my appointment as President of
Russia.’\textsuperscript{146}

In the event, both men became Presidents. In the previous year, at
the Congress of People’s Deputies of 27 March 1990, it had been
announced that 1,834 of the 2,486 Deputies had voted in favour of
Gorbachev as head of state. He was elated, and barely able to contain
his excitement.
Yeltsin's approach was on a much broader political base: he submitted himself for election by the entire voting population in June 1991, and became the first man to be elected President of Russia, beating all his rivals in the first round. His popularity rose even higher. Gorbachev offered his reserved congratulations, and expressed the hope of 'collaboration and agreement in the renewal of the multi-national state, which the signing of the new Union Treaty should serve'.

On 2 August 1991 Gorbachev appeared on national television from his palace at Foros and announced that the new treaty would be signed on 20 August. Why not earlier? Why did he stay at Foros, delaying what could have been done sooner? He evidently believed that, despite all the criticism and attacks being aimed at him and Yeltsin alike by the conservatives, nothing would prevent the signing of the new treaty in three weeks' time.

On 19 August the attempted coup d'etat took place. From my hospital bed in Oxford, where I was to undergo a major operation that very day, I sent a fax to the Speaker of the Parliament, consisting of an appeal to the Russian population during this 'change of epochs'. Attempts by Varennikov and other members of the so-called 'State Committee for the State of Emergency' to blame Gorbachev and Yeltsin for 'the collapse of the USSR' are not supported by the facts. Gorbachev had finally come to reject the socialist Utopia, but it was too late. The conservatives, or more accurately reactionaries, in the Central Committee and his entourage were incapable of dropping the idea of 'real socialism'. By being indecisive towards his treacherous colleagues, Gorbachev had created the conditions for the bungled coup. The conspiracy, however, was enough to destroy the old Union and prevent the formation of a new one.

The trauma suffered by Gorbachev and his family under house arrest was enormous, and bears no comparison with what had befallen Khrushchev. What happened at Foros was like something out of Russia's pre-Revolutionary history, when tsars were removed by means of palace coups or assassinations. No General Secretary, invested as he was with the panoply of power and authority, had ever been subjected to such indignity, to say nothing of the threat of physical danger. It was Gorbachev's wife Raisa who most clearly suffered from the ordeal.

The coup failed for many reasons, chief of which was the people's widespread desire not to return to the past. Another was the impossible orders the plotters issued, such as that addressed by General Varennikov to the headquarters of the Emergency Committee: 'We all earnestly ask you to take immediate measures to liquidate the adventurer B.N. Yeltsin's group.' Nor was their order to the air force 'to destroy in mid-air the plane carrying the Russian government delegation headed by B.N. Yeltsin back from Kazakhstan on the night of 18 August' obeyed.

Yeltsin was spared, and he in turn saved Gorbachev. It was he who kept the world informed of what was happening at Foros, and on 21 August he sent a delegation to the Crimea to rescue Gorbachev, who was in fact out of danger by then. The coup leaders also flew to Foros in a vain attempt to justify their actions, but were apprehended by guards loyal to Yeltsin and brought back to Moscow under arrest. Gorbachev chose to return to the capital with the 'democrats', thus creating the impression that he had survived thanks to Yeltsin's intervention.

But the alliance between the two men, that had seemed so close, did not come to pass. On his arrival in Moscow, Gorbachev spoke of the need to reform the Party, as if he was unaware that it was the Party itself - or its significant elements - that had brought about his downfall, not to say its own imminent destruction. Yeltsin, meanwhile, pressed home his advantage by seizing the assets of the CPSU and banning the recently formed Russian Communist Party. At the Russian Parliament on 23 August, which was televised, Yeltsin insisted that Gorbachev read out the names of those of his own Ministers - almost all of them - who had supported the coup. This was perhaps the most humiliating moment of Gorbachev's career.

Gorbachev resigned as General Secretary the next day, and called on the Central Committee to disband itself, effectively announcing the demise of the Party. Simultaneously, the Union itself began to fall apart along its ethnic seams, as one republic after another declared independence or desirous of becoming so. Most damaging to the chances of the Union's survival, on 1 December a referendum in Ukraine returned an overwhelming vote in favour of complete independence. On 25 December Gorbachev resigned as President in a televised address that also drew a line under the history of the Soviet
Union, and opened the era of independent states which replaced it.

Both Yeltsin and Gorbachev were embodiments of the changes taking place in the country. Gorbachev started his utopian effort to 'renew' socialism by unwittingly opening the sluice-gates that would wash away the ruins of Leninism. Yeltsin, as the first leader ever to be elected by the entire people in Russia's long history, had to try to create a modern, democratic society in the midst of ruin and chaos. It was a task no less difficult than liquidating the Communist system.

Gorbachev as a Historic Figure

Mikhail Gorbachev launched the most fundamental and irreversible changes in Soviet history since Lenin. Many people still see him as a saviour, while just as many regard him as a destroyer, and those who are indifferent are growing in number. If he does not evoke sympathy among his contemporaries, he has certainly earned the gratitude of future generations.

Kerensky, the Russian Prime Minister in post-tsarist 1917, was also underrated, yet in a certain sense what Gorbachev tried to do, perhaps without even realizing it, was to set Russia back on the path that had been started in February 1917 and that was blocked in October by the Bolshevik coup. Like Kerensky, Gorbachev left the scene apparently defeated. But history often awards its laurels many years after the event. Lenin, whom Gorbachev so revered, seemed for seventy years to be the victor, yet the October Revolution was seen by his political enemies, including Kerensky, as the harbinger of inevitable historic defeat. Now, eighty years later, it is clear that they were right.

As a historical figure, Gorbachev does not deserve blame, nor does he need vindication; if he does not want his historical image to be blurred, he should not attempt to blame or vindicate others. A political figure of his stature should be neither prosecutor nor defendant. Having lived for most of his life as an unknown Party official, he remained so until Chernenko's infirmity compelled the geriatric Politburo to think hard about a younger successor. Gorbachev knew this, and did not force events. His trump card was his age, and he could afford to wait.

Some writers have claimed that he was already voicing embryonic ideas of perestroika as early as 10 December 1984, at a conference on 'Perfecting Developed Socialism'. Former Politburo member Vadim Medvedev, who was a close comrade of Gorbachev's, claims that his speech was 'a fundamental pre-perestroika document', and that 'it was distinguished for its manifest originality,' and gave a 'realistic and for that period highly critical assessment of the development of the country, and in a generalized political form advanced the need to accelerate social and economic development'. Medvedev further asserts that 'the conference produced a big and profound impression on public opinion. Gorbachev had made himself known as a major political leader, with a deep understanding of economic and political life and international relations.'

I was at that conference, and listened carefully to what was said. Certainly, everyone looked at Gorbachev with heightened interest as the most likely successor of the dying Chernenko. As for his speech, it was entirely in the Central Committee mode of those made under Brezhnev and Andropov. In other words, he was performing a ritual that was expected of him. Most of the ideas he expressed were worn-out Leninist propaganda, the classic Bolshevik catalogue: 'the superiority of socialism', in the form of 'the planned character of our economy, the priority of the social goals of economic development', 'the working class as the leading force in society right up to the complete overcoming of class differences'. He also mentioned 'democratic centralism' and how to 'organize competition', the importance of preserving 'socialist principles of distribution', and dwelt on the idea that 'capitalism has no historic prospects', that what was needed was 'Bolshevik restlessness', and much more in the same vein.

Gorbachev said what we all said, marooned as we were in our would-be Utopia. He uttered his first broad notions of perestroika on 8 April 1986 in the industrial city of Togliatti, but continued to uphold the Bolshevik style and methods that had evolved over decades. As late as May 1987, he told his colleagues in the Politburo that they must 'stress that perestroika has a socialist character and has nothing in common with bourgeois liberalization'. The 'revolutionariness' of which he loved to speak did not extend beyond the limits of the existing order, although that was to be liberalized, if in a socialist and not bourgeois spirit. He, too, needed time to change, or to begin to change.
However much he did to democratize society — and he did a great deal — Gorbachev retained a soft spot for the special services. He did not abolish political investigation and telephone tapping — even of the members of the Politburo — and he relied to a great extent on the reports and information fed to him by the security organs, who were thus able to influence his decisions to a certain extent.

At a November 1988 meeting of the Politburo, Gorbachev raised the issue of the recently formed ‘Memorial’ Society. A number of such bodies had sprung up with the aim of finding out the truth about the atrocities and excesses committed in the past by the NKVD and the Party, establishing the number and names of the innocent victims and publishing the names of those who had committed these crimes against humanity. The security services were, of course, telling Gorbachev to quietly extinguish this nationwide movement, and to reduce it to strictly local or regional status.

Gorbachev gave his frank opinion of this kind of de-Stalinization. ‘This “Memorial”,’ he declared, ‘is mushrooming. Its latest efforts show that it is trying to get bigger than society.’ Later in the debate he said: ‘I’d like to link two issues: the [secret NKVD] burial-grounds and “Memorial” ... we have to somehow de-energize “Memorial”, to really give it a local character, and the Party organizations in the localities should take all this business into their own hands ... What this is about is not “Memorial”. It’s a cover for something else again.’

Having thought about the problem, he returned to it next day: ‘We have to take a political decision that includes a political appraisal of the trials and decisions taken by the troikas [three-man NKVD tribunals] without judicial investigation. [We have] to acknowledge that they were illegal. And that’s all, comrades ... If we do this, we will beat off all these “Memorials”.’ What was being ‘beaten off’, however, was not ‘Memorial’, but the desire to restore the country’s historical memory and to bring justice to the victims of Bolshevik oppression.

Gorbachev rarely made a major decision without Politburo approval. He also often discussed questions that were neither on the agenda nor included in the final, edited form of the minutes, remaining only in draft form under ‘any other business’. As a rule such issues were too trivial to clutter the official record, but on occasion they were of particular importance. In April 1988 Gorbachev raised the question of the Party’s attitude to religion in the circumstances of pereustrika. The minutes show that only he spoke on the subject. ‘The Politburo,’ he said, ‘has recognized my meeting with [Patriarch] Pimen and the Synod [the governing body of the Orthodox Church] as expedient in principle. People say there hasn’t been such a meeting in a long time. Something similar took place during the war, in 1943. True, at official occasions when members of the clergy were present, Leonid Ilyich [Brezhnev] made a gesture towards them and later said, “It was a good conversation.” The churchmen will raise the issue of opening a seminary in the Tarnopol region. I recall in my time having had a hand in closing a seminary in Stavropol region ... We shouldn’t bow and scrape to religion, or cosy up to it. But we have to deal with it as a reality ... We shouldn’t adopt an apologetic position of any sort.’

Under ‘any other business’ Gorbachev informed the Politburo that Malenkov had died: ‘Should an official announcement be published?’ he wanted to know. Other members remembered that Malenkov had had a hand in the purges of the 1930s, and it was agreed that there was no need for an official announcement. The death of one of its former leaders was an internal Party matter. As for where he should be buried, it was finally agreed that next to his wife’s grave in Novokuntsevo Cemetery would be ‘permissible’.

Decisions on more aid going abroad were being debated in the Politburo under ‘any other business’. In January 1986 Gorbachev told the Politburo that he had received a ‘worrying telegram’ from Aden, where a short, sharp civil war had broken out: ‘They want to shoot fifty people. I think we ought to send an appeal, pointing out to them that the main thing is unification.’ But Ali Muhammad al-Hasani, leader of the pro-Soviet Socialist Party of South Yemen, went ahead with his plans. He left the room where he had been chairing his Politburo, and his special forces rushed in and gunned down everyone around the table. The army did not support him, however, and he soon had to flee to North Yemen and thence to Ethiopia. In Aden, meanwhile, the mutual slaughter of his supporters and opponents went on.

After a time, Commander-in-Chief Ground Forces General Yevgeni Ivanovsky was despatched to South Yemen. I accompanied him on this ‘peace-making’ mission, and the signs of the recent slaughter
were awful to observe. Almost a third of the officers who died in the bloody seizure of power had been to Soviet military schools and academies. Now, in our meetings with the new Yemeni leadership, they sang the old tune: 'We need your help – economic and technological help, advisers, places in Soviet universities.'

Sometimes issues were discussed under 'any other business' which show how slowly the Soviet leadership was practising the 'new thinking'. At the end of one of their June 1989 meetings, Gorbachev asked the Politburo members to remain for further discussion:

GORBACHEV: Now to the question of publishing the works of Solzhenitsyn.

MEDVEDEV: *Gulag Archipelago* is [more than two thousand pages] long... It's difficult and tedious to read.

RYZHKOVT: It begins with the time of Lenin. It will be a bombshell.

GORBACHEV: They slipped up by letting him into the archives when he was writing *Ivan Denisovich*.

CHEBRIKOV: No, they didn't let him into the archives.

MEDVEDEV: He got about three hundred memoirs from various people.

GORBACHEV: The issue is not about Stalin, but the assertion that he was Lenin's faithful pupil. That he continued his cause. And he does it by quoting Lenin's telephone-tapes and letters.

LIGACHEV: How can we allow this sort of thing to be written about Lenin?

GORBACHEV: Anyway, we are faced with *Gulag Archipelago*. I don't think he's ever going to be our unconditional friend and supporter of perestroika.

SHAKHNAZAROV: We should let it be published.

GORBACHEV: Vladimir Alexandrovich [Kryuchkov], let those comrades read it who haven't already done so.

Shevardnadze: I'm in favour of publication.

GORBACHEV: It turns out that, as far as Lenin was concerned, the worse, the better. Let the people suffer, let men die in the trenches... for him there was only the lust for power... There's a hint about the link with Inessa Armand... Contempt for the Russian people...

YAKOVLEV: We have to publish it. Everyone's in favour of publication: the Union of Writers, the magazines...

GORBACHEV: So, are we the only ones left? I'd better read it myself.159

Without having read the book, Gorbachev was ready to condemn it. I was no better. In two publications I condemned Solzhenitsyn without having read his work, relying instead on the 'correctness' of the Central Committee which fed me its regurgitated opinions. I have many times since expressed repentance, knowing that all of us, from the General Secretary down to rank-and-file Communists, were victims of Bolshevik intolerance of everything that contradicted the Soviet religion of Leninism.

As leader, Gorbachev inherited the style and methods of his predecessors, but he deserves credit for letting the public know what the Central Committee was doing, for initiating the publication of a revamped journal, Izvestiya TsKPSS (News of the Central Committee of the CPSU), containing hitherto secret materials, and for making press conferences by members of the leadership routine. His style became more open and democratic, even though a one-sided interpretation of events, cuts and cover-ups were still practised right up to August 1991.

Although he was man more of mind than will, Gorbachev could be very tough when he was sure of widespread public support. When the young West German Matthias Rust landed his light plane right next to the Kremlin in Moscow, having first flown round it twice, Gorbachev was visibly shaken. He regarded the incident as a national disgrace, even if it was seen in the West as little more than a foolish prank, and his response to it raised his popularity in the Soviet Union.

The Politburo meeting was a stormy one. The military top brass had been summoned, and had to endure the sort of criticism they might have expected if they had lost a war.

Gorbachev was venomous and maliciously sarcastic: 'This went on for two and a half hours, while the offending plane was in the zone of 6th Army.' Turning to General Lushev, he asked: 'Was this reported to you?'

LUSHEV: No. I knew about it when the plane landed in Moscow.

GORBACHEV: I suppose the traffic cops told you?

After a two-hour debate, Gorbachev summed up: 'An event has occurred that surpasses everything that has happened before in terms of its political consequences... We are talking about the people's
loss of faith in our army, for whose sake the people have made many sacrifices. And for a long time. A blow has also been struck against the political leadership of the country, against its authority.' He then announced a thirty-minute break, after which he listed the points of a Politburo decree:

1. To accept [Defence Minister] Comrade Sokolov's notice of retirement.
2. To confirm Comrade Yazov as Defence Minister.
3. Commander-in-Chief Border Troops Comrade Koldunov to be relieved of his post.160

On the other hand, there were important instances when Gorbachev's role was more ambiguous. Nationalist feeling had mounted steadily throughout the Caucasus in 1988, nowhere more violently than in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Georgian nationalists, meanwhile, had their own local adversary in the form of the movement for independence for the ethnic territory of Abkhazia, but they also had the higher goal of Georgian independence from the Soviet Union. Gorbachev called repeatedly for a political, non-violent outcome to all such claims. In April 1989, however, a peaceful demonstration in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi was attacked by Soviet troops using poison gas and sharpened spades. Nineteen demonstrators, mostly young women, were killed, and more than a hundred injured. If the nationalists had needed further justification for their demands, and more fuel for the fire of their campaign, this senselessly cruel act provided it, and an extremist, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was elected as the head of an anti-Soviet administration, and in due course as President of an independent state of Georgia.

While it is plain that Gorbachev neither ordered nor approved the vicious actions of Soviet forces in Tbilisi, it is also true that he left it to subordinates to settle what he had been warned was a potentially dangerous situation in an unstable region. The Ministries of the Interior and Defence and the local Communist authorities were undoubtedly directly responsible, tactically and politically, for what happened in Tbilisi, and Gorbachev cannot be faulted for seeking to resolve an explosive situation by peaceful means. But as Soviet President and General Secretary, he cannot be excused for failing to exercise his supreme responsibility for public order and security.

In the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which had been annexed by the Soviet Union in the shameful agreement Stalin had made with Hitler, and where the local nationalists could claim to be undoing an illegal act, many people expected independence to come without bloodshed. Despite the fact that in September 1989 Gorbachev had refused to give the Lithuanian Communist Party independence, in order to contest elections with the nationalists on a level playing-field, as the tide of nationalism rose throughout the Union he adopted a liberal position, urging peaceful discussion and political agreement rather than the use of force. By 1991, however, he was boxed in by the hard-liners in his administration — most of the liberals by now having gone, either of their own accord or let go by him. Forceful rhetoric was used in relation to the Baltic states on a number of occasions, and it seemed that Gorbachev was contemplating tough measures to curb the nationalists' aspirations. In January 1991 fourteen people were killed by Soviet troops during a peaceful demonstration in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. Gorbachev said he heard about this bloody event only on the morning after. At such dramatic and tragic moments the President was, astonishingly, left in ignorance on the sidelines.

Gorbachev led the Party and the state not only through the Central Committee and government, but also with the help of what his close adviser Vadim Medvedev called 'the Gorbachev team', meaning his advisers, speech-writers, aides and top officials. They included such men as Alexander Yakovlev, justly called the 'brains' of perestroika, Ivan Frolov, Georgy Shakhnazarov, Anatoly Chernyayev, Valeri Boldin, Tatiana Zaslavskaya, Anatoly Lukyanov and a couple of dozen more. This was a very able group, and Medvedev had every reason to say at a meeting of the Politburo that 'the Soviet leadership has created a team for Gorbachev the like of which has never been known in the Soviet Union before.'161

The question may be asked, if Gorbachev's team was so talented and professional, why could he not attain his goals, and why did some of them betray him so savagely? Much has been written about the team in the memoirs of its members, though they do not dwell on the reasons for Gorbachev's failure. All of them are highly critical of Yeltsin, and all of them except Lukyanov and Boldin, who stabbed
him in the back, depict their former boss in a positive and often flattering light.

Georgy Arbatov, one of Gorbachev's best-informed advisers on foreign policy, wrote to him many times on many issues, sometimes giving simple advice such as 'keep your speeches short', 'interrupt someone if he starts to praise you', and 'you should know that Ligachev is a real threat', at other times on major issues, such as 'your main priority on the external arena is to strengthen the socialist commonwealth: remove the tactical nuclear missiles from the Transcausus without delay; after the Twenty-Eighth Congress resign as General Secretary,' and so on.

Gorbachev did indeed make a rather half-hearted attempt in April 1991 to resign as General Secretary, whether or not this was prompted by Arbatov's advice. Had he managed to do so, he would have been able to get rid of a lot of organizational and ideological baggage. He would also have distanced himself, as Yeltsin had done, from the hopelessly discredited Party, which now drifted aimlessly, and many of whose more 'astute' members were profiting from the economic near-anarchy that had evolved since 1989. He would have remained President of the Soviet Union, but it is difficult to imagine that this would have stemmed the tide of national independence that had effectively reduced his territory to the Kremlin - and soon only part of that, since Yeltsin installed himself there when he became President of Russia in June 1991.

Gorbachev worked at very high pressure, but he always tried to keep the weekends free for his family and the countryside. 'The few hours of relaxation I have,' he said, 'I try to use to the full. My interests are the most varied: reading creative literature, theatre, music, the cinema. My favourite relaxation is walking in the forest.'

A normal working day would start at 9.30 a.m. and end at about 9 p.m., with the intervening time filled with one meeting after another, with telephone calls to and from local and foreign politicians, and receiving foreign visitors.

Although conditions in the country were worsening, and the feeling was circulating that without a 'strong hand' nothing would improve, the idea of 'saving' democracy by force was unbearable for Gorbachev. It soon became clear to him that perestroika had unleashed intra-national problems before which the use of force was ineffeuctual, and harmful to the entire cause of democratization. The old formula, 'friendship of the peoples' in a unitary state, had quickly shown itself to be inadequate in the new climate, but Gorbachev learned the lesson very late.

In his brief but stormy time as leader, Gorbachev tried more than once to resign as General Secretary of the Party. In December 1989 yet another plenum opened in Moscow to discuss the Second Congress of People's Deputies. Many delegates spoke, but it was the speech of the First Secretary of the Kemerovo region, A. Melnikov, that stung Gorbachev most. An uncompromisingly orthodox Communist, Melnikov spoke in favour of including worker-Communists in the Politburo and Central Committee, according to Leninist methodology. Gorbachev lost his temper, and agitatedly proposed that a new Politburo be appointed, and a new General Secretary as well. He was calmed down with difficulty, and no more was said about replacing him.

At the Politburo on 25 April 1991 Gorbachev again raised the question of resigning. With his deputy, Vladimir Ivashko, in the chair, no discussion took place. Instead a resolution was passed: 'With the highest interests of the country, the people and the Party in mind, the proposal put forward by Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev for his resignation as General Secretary is withdrawn from discussion.' He was prevented from leaving the sinking ship, and forced to sit out the collapse of the Leninist system to the bitter end. One of the most obvious signs that this was the case had occurred in March 1990, when the Party held the first free elections ('free' in the sense that members were no longer compelled to vote for approved candidates) for its top posts. Almost half of the First, Second and Regional Secretaries failed to be elected to their previous positions. Indeed, the fact that elections were held at all testified to the Party's fast-declining influence in society.

In his memoirs, Anatoly Lukyanov, who as Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1991 had been one of the initiators of the coup, and who had known Gorbachev since their student days together in Moscow, writes that he found 'the phenomenon of Gorbachev's authority' understandable: the policy of concession and compromise, which led to the 'destruction of the Warsaw Pact', suited the West very well. As for Gorbachev's personal characteristics:
His pernicious tendency to resolve everything, even matters of principle, by compromise, improvisation and vacillation, under the influence of circumstances and his personal adviser, became a sort of curse hanging over him... He had a blithe belief that everything would somehow be all right and was permanently lagging behind events. He was certain that every presidential word would be effective of itself and he lacked the ability to listen to the opinion of others... He was astonishingly unwilling to defend people from his own team and had a tendency to quickly get rid of anyone who had fulfilled his task and ceased to be useful to him.165

When Lukyanov was asked to define the part Gorbachev had played in the history of Russia, he was unequivocal: 'It was the role of Herostratos... Gorbachev betrayed his Party.'166

Alexander Alexandrov-Agentov, who had been an assistant of Gorbachev's and was replaced by Anatoly Chernyayev, echoed some of Lukyanov's thoughts: 'Unfortunately, Gorbachev suffers from a very serious shortcoming in a leader: he is totally unable to listen, or rather unable to listen to his interlocutor, but is wholly absorbed by what he says himself. I left Gorbachev and took my pension because he had no need of advice.'167 Thus, one of Gorbachev's enemies says he was swayed by his advisers, and another says he would not take advice.

One episode may serve to illustrate the difficult moral choices Gorbachev was confronted with. For many years relations with Poland were marred by unexplained facts concerning the Soviet-Polish War of 1920, the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party in 1938, the 1939 secret agreements between the USSR and Germany, the execution of Polish officers and others at Katyn and elsewhere, the circumstances surrounding the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and more.

The Soviet government had never had the courage to deal honestly with any of these issues. For instance, Vadim Medvedev, the Central Committee Secretary responsible for relations with the socialist countries, wrote a memorandum to Gorbachev on 13 March 1987 which proposed that, on the subject of the 1920 war, 'two or three articles should be published on the aims of bourgeois-landlord Poland in that war, and on the positions of individual Soviet political, state and military figures.' On the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party, the fact should be acknowledged, but it should be said that 'at the end of the 1950s the repressed Polish Communists were rehabilitated, many of them posthumously.' As for the 'reunification of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia with the USSR', and the existence of 'some secret protocols to the Soviet-German treaty of 1939', it should be said that 'there are no grounds for reviewing our position.'168

In a note on the Soviet-German treaties of 1939, Gorbachev stated: 'If one takes a realistic view, the Non-Aggression Pact between the USSR and Germany of 23 August was inevitable.'169 He circulated the documents, marked 'top secret', to all members of the Politburo, in effect closing the ranks. The Poles, however, were persistent, and asked again for an opportunity to work with the Soviets in an attempt to unravel the knotty problem of the 'secret protocols'. At a meeting on 5 May 1988, the Politburo discussed the question of the 'secret Soviet-German documents of 1939 as they affect Poland'. Medvedev suggested they adopt a gradual approach. Georgy Smirnov, the Director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, admitted that there were no convincing arguments on the Soviet side, and the other members spoke in roughly the same vein:

GROMYKO: There definitely were originals. And not to recognize this is a big risk. On the level of history it is better to tell the truth. But the truth should be that we have copies but not the originals. The originals might have been destroyed under Stalin or without Stalin.

(Gromyko remained staunchly mendacious to the end of his life. In his memoirs, and in the face of the evidence from German archives, he insisted that the 'secret protocols' did not exist: 'The Soviet chief prosecutor at Nuremberg labelled it a forgery, and correctly so, since no such 'protocol' has ever been found, either in the USSR or in any other country—nor could it be.'170)

CHEBRIKOV: It's too soon to decide about publishing...

GORBADEV: I have a proposal. I believe the Politburo can work out a position when it has the official documents in its hands... I suggest we limit ourselves to an exchange of opinions... We'll continue to work in the archives to locate the documents. If the documents should become available, maybe we'll come back to this issue...

The others mumbled their agreement. Three days later, Gorbachev concluded: 'I think the copies should be kept where they're supposed to be.'171
In December 1991 I was appointed Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet Commission for the transfer of Party and KGB archives to the public domain, in other words for the opening of the archives. In nearly two years we declassified some seventy-eight million files and placed them at the disposal of the relevant archives for the benefit of researchers. Acting on the orders of President Yeltsin, towards the end of 1992 three members of the Commission – Professors Rudolf Pikhoya and A. Korotkov and myself – were in the process of opening ‘Special files’, i.e. materials of the utmost secrecy. In the Soviet period, these files could only be opened with the permission of the General Secretary. The contents of the files were not indicated on the outside, and only a set of numbers indicated some form of identification. As we had no code-book to decipher the numbers, we simply opened one envelope after another to discover what secrets they held.

We had already found many interesting things when we came to another file, big and thick and, like all the rest, secured with a number of wax seals. Inside we found an inventory showing that it contained ‘Documents relating to the Soviet–German Talks of 1939–1941’. Below this was written: ‘Original texts of the Soviet-German secret agreements concluded in the period 1939–1941’. Here were the originals, in Russian and German: six protocols, the announcement of the Soviet and German governments of 28 September 1939, the exchange of letters between Molotov and Ribbentrop, and two maps of Poland signed by Stalin and Ribbentrop. There was also a note signed by sector chief A. Moshkov and dated 10 July 1987: ‘I reported to Comrade V.I. Boldin. He ordered me to keep this to hand in the sector for the time being.’ Boldin could only have asked to see a Special File with the permission of the General Secretary. Clearly, Gorbachev had been acquainted with this material long before 5 May 1988.

The documents on the Soviet massacre of Polish officers at Katyn were treated similarly. On 18 April 1989 Boldin opened the Special File, and must have reported its contents to Gorbachev. (As it happens, the papers show that Andropov had read the file on 15 April 1981, and said nothing.) What then are we to make of Gorbachev’s comment on 5 May 1988: ‘If the documents become available, maybe we’ll come back to this issue . . .’?

It is safe to assume that Gorbachev had had the documents in his hands, but in the name of dishonest Bolshevik secret policy, he chose to sacrifice morality, and in a sense also his historical reputation. After having seen the documents, he claimed that they were not ‘available’. At the same time he was writing in his book: ‘I support open politics, the politics of real things. Such politics cannot have a false bottom.’ Gorbachev was fond of reminding the public that he was open, sincere and honest: in his farewell speech to the country on 25 December 1991 he repeated, ‘I am speaking honestly and frankly. It is my moral duty.’ But politics is a cynical and ruthless business, and Gorbachev’s life, for all his virtues, testifies to that sad fact.

For Gorbachev, Communist ideology was a kind of secular religion that had no place for morality, yet it was also the main source of his dramatic departure from the political scene. The Wall Street Journal of 27 December 1991 rightly said: ‘Gorbachev was the best thing the Communist Party had to offer. He played the central role in a remarkable chapter of world history, but was forced in the end to go, because in the historical play there was no longer any room for a man who still wanted to be a Communist.’

In his dramatic speech on central television on 25 December 1991, when he lay down the office of President of the USSR, Gorbachev expressed what history will surely decide of his turbulent time as the USSR’s seventh leader: ‘Society now has liberty, it has been emancipated politically and spiritually. And that is the main achievement that we have not fully comprehended because we have not yet learned how to use that liberty.’ Speaking in Paris in May 1993, he declared: ‘The Gorbachev era has just begun . . . Gorbachev began the reform of society and international relations in a framework of new thinking . . . We are moving towards a new civilization which will not be a choice between capitalism and socialism, but a synthesis of our own experience.’

I believe that the historic outcome of the unforgettable years of perestroika outweighs all of Gorbachev’s mistakes and miscalculations. The invaluable fruit of his reform was the liberty which has given the former Soviet society a chance to attain a prosperous and democratic way of life.