

“The Americans squandered the trust we’d built”

Mikhail Gorbachev

The last leader of the Soviet Union

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Grinding through Moscow’s horrendous traffic on my way to interview Mikhail Gorbachev, I casually ask my taxi driver what he thinks of the Soviet Union’s last leader. “You’re interviewing Gorbachev! Why?” barks Yuri, my Uber driver.

Barely 20 when “Gorby” came to power in 1985, Yuri should be grateful for the freedoms that the eighth and final general secretary of the Soviet Union (and its first and only president) gave his people. Instead he has nothing but contempt for Gorbachev’s twin policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (political and economic reforms). “We had an empire when he took over the Kremlin. By the time he left six years later, it was all gone,” says Yuri. “He sold us off to the West. He just caved in.”

I remind him it was actually Gorbachev’s archrival, Boris Yeltsin, who signed the Soviet Union’s death warrant. The leader of the then Russian republic orchestrated a secret — and drunken — pact with the presidents of Ukraine and Belarus that left Gorbachev without a nation to lead. On December 25, 1991, the USSR was no more.

“Gorbachev lacked balls,” Yuri retorts. “He should have had Yeltsin arrested and carted off to prison, shown him who’s the boss. That’s what Stalin would have done.”

Twenty-five years since Gorbachev resigned, attitudes towards him in Russia are slowly softening, especially among liberals appalled at Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian rule, but Yuri’s is still the majority view. “Tell the old man from me that he was weak!” Yuri says as I step out of the cab in front of the five-storey building that houses the Gorbachev Foundation.

I do not pass on the message. But as I wait for Gorbachev in a meeting room decorated with dozens of photos of him locked in friendly embraces with Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand and many others, I am struck once more by the disconnect between how he is adulated in the West (he won the Nobel peace prize in 1990) and despised at home. When the door to his private office

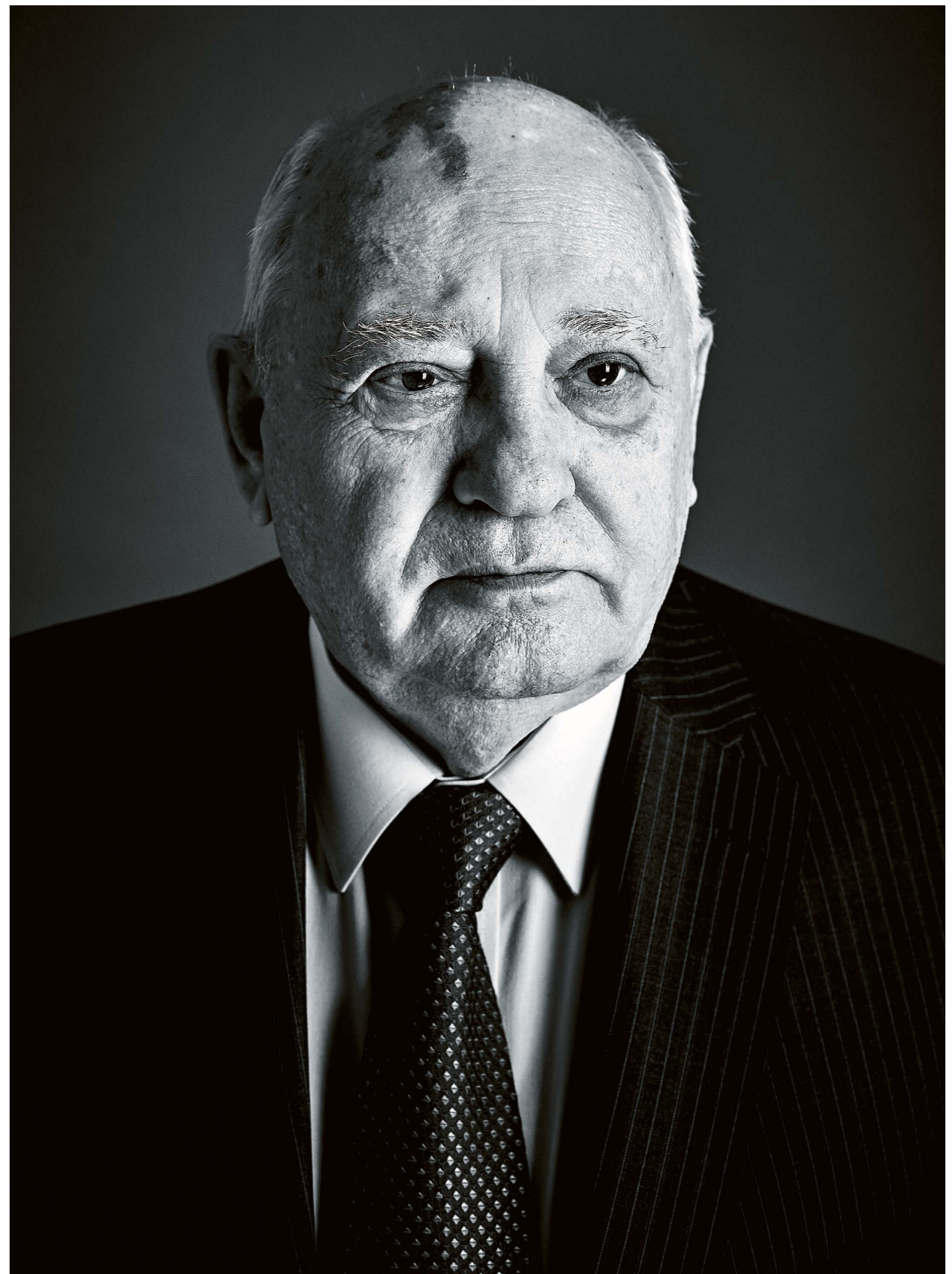
opens and Gorbachev, 85, finally appears, I remind myself as he greets me warmly that it is a rare privilege to be in the company of the man who is, arguably, the world’s greatest living statesman.

He looks frail, his hearing is fading and he shuffles slowly with the aid of a walking stick. As he takes a seat in a large leather chair, he tells me he has had four operations and suffers from diabetes. His spirit, charm and wit, however, remain undimmed. He recalls how, three years ago, ill-wishers hacked a state news agency Twitter account to announce that he had died during a visit to St Petersburg. “The head of the agency, who is a friend, called to apologise and said he did not believe the news. I told him I didn’t believe it either,” he jokes with a mischievous smile.

We are only five minutes in when he mentions Raisa, his wife of 46 years and closest friend, who died of leukaemia in 1999. The couple met as students and married in 1953 — the year Stalin died — and were inseparable. Gorbachev tells me how, for all those decades, they went for a four-mile walk every morning together. “Every day, no matter where we were — in all weather: blizzard, snow, rain, but Raisa especially loved blizzards. I would say, ‘No, for heaven’s sake, there’s a blizzard outside!’ She would just say, ‘Come on, let’s go.’ I got used to walking in blizzards. When she died, I stopped going for walks and my health got worse.”

I ask him what’s the secret to staying married for nearly half a century. “Deep mutual respect,” he shoots back. He called her his “General”. Seventeen years after she died, the pain and void Raisa left are still palpable.

In part, Gorbachev — the peasant boy who lived through famine and rose to lead a nuclear superpower — blames perestroika for his wife’s premature death. The worry and stress she endured as a result of the bitter, and at times dangerous, opposition to her husband’s reforms took a heavy toll on her health, he says. This reached its culmination in August 1991, when he and Raisa were held prisoner at his state dacha in



VIKTOR GORBACHEV FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

OUT OF THE COLD
Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev with Lady Thatcher in 1993. Thatcher and Gorbachev clashed while in power, but became friends. "I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together," was her appraisal in 1985

the Crimea during a coup by communist hardliners. The coup crumbled after three days and Gorbachev returned to Moscow, but the regime was fatally damaged and by the end of the year he was gone. The deep anxiety Raisa suffered lingered for years.

Gorbachev's tendency to make long, rambling speeches was the butt of many jokes when he was in power — not to mention his habit of referring to himself in the third person. A quarter of a century on, these traits are still very much in evidence, along with his obsessive loathing of Yeltsin for the "treacherous" way he upstaged him. It is the original sin that underpins much of his reasoning.

I have many questions, I say. "Don't you worry, we'll limit your time," Gorby quips back.

It emerges while we are together that it is his birthday. When he turned 80 five years ago, he staged a grandiose event in London to raise money for his charity, which helps children suffering from leukaemia and cancer. "Gorby 80" was hosted by Sharon Stone and Kevin Spacey and attended by celebrities including Bill Clinton, Bono and Dame Shirley Bassey. Grand Tier boxes at the Royal Albert Hall cost £100,000 each. This year's celebration was a low-key gathering of close friends and loved ones, at which Gorbachev crooned off the cuff a few Soviet love songs.

The reason we are meeting is because Gorbachev has written another book, *The New Russia*, a collection of his thoughts, articles and interviews on the state of his nation since he came to power in 1985. How, I ask, does it differ from his previous memoirs?

"I'm a pensioner, but I still want my voice to be heard," Gorbachev says, adjusting his red-and-blue tie. "I want people to hear my views at a time when the situation in the world worries me greatly. It was so hard to win freedom in Russia and so hard to achieve mutual co-operation with the US. How did we get to the edge of the abyss? I want to explain the root of the problem. I just can't stick my head in the sand."

There is a sense of urgency to Gorbachev's message. In the past two years, the man who did arguably the most to bring down the Iron Curtain and end nuclear confrontation with the US has warned ominously of the danger of a new Cold War and a new arms race.

Gorbachev is not prone to scaremongering, and his anxiety is well founded. Since Putin first became president of Russia, 16 years ago, the country has become considerably less democratic and relations with America have steadily deteriorated. Following the Kremlin's seizure of Crimea two years ago and its clandestine involvement in the war in eastern Ukraine, Russia's relations with the West fell to their lowest point since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

America and Europe imposed unprecedented punitive sanctions against Russia, which hit back with a ban on a number of western imports. Not since the



height of the Cold War have personal relations between a US president and his Russian counterpart been so frosty. To make matters worse, in the past two years Russia has taken a revanchist, reactionary, isolationist and deeply anti-American turn.

The question Gorbachev poses — how did we get here? — is of course the million-dollar one. But his view of Putin, who is demonised in the West, is ambiguous. For years after "Vlad the Bad" came to power, Gorbachev openly supported him, despite numerous early signs that Putin's Russia would become more autocratic. To the dismay of his more liberal supporters, who despise Putin, on many occasions Gorbachev made excuses for him.

More recently Gorbachev has become bolder in his criticism of the Russian president, who has already been in power a decade longer than him — and could rule Russia for another eight years. Gorbachev has strongly criticised Putin for staying on for so long and has decried him for rolling back democratic reforms, stifling dissent and muzzling the media, describing his regime as replete with "thieves and corrupt officials".

"I'm a man of freedom," he says. "Freedom of choice, of religion, of speech, freedom, freedom. Shoot me, but I won't turn my back on that. I saw Putin at an event recently. We always had normal relations. Now I wouldn't describe them as normal, we have no relations."

Why has he always been so cautious in his criticisms of Putin? "Because I'm a cautious person when criticising others. One thing I've always made clear is that the only future for Russia is a democratic one, with a free press and free and fair elections."

When it comes to the seizure of Crimea, though — the single act that most damaged Putin's relations with the West — Gorbachev is far more in tune with the Kremlin than his many admirers in the West might like to hear. Would the contested peninsula still be part of Ukraine if he were in charge? Placed in the same situation as Putin, he says, he would have acted no differently. But the seizure was illegal, I protest.

"I'm always with the free will of the people and most in Crimea wanted to be reunited with Russia," he retorts. When I press him further and say that surely Mikhail Gorbachev, the man who helped bring down the Berlin Wall by refusing to suppress popular uprisings across eastern Europe, would not have annexed Crimea, his answer is even more revealing.

"The only true reason I wouldn't have is because, had I still been in power, the Soviet Union would still exist and Crimea would be a part of it," he says firmly. At this point, Gorbachev launches into a 36-minute ➤➤➤

“Had I still been in power, the Soviet Union would still exist and Crimea would be a part of it”

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monologue about where the blame for today's crisis between Russia and America should lie. Given our limited time allocation, I start to panic when he begins by harking back to 1985 and his very first meeting with Ronald Reagan, at a historic summit in Geneva. He recalls how, when asked for his first impressions of the US president, he'd said: "I was warned that he's a Cold War hawk; he's worse, he's a real dinosaur."

Reagan described Gorbachev as a "hardened Bolshevik". On another occasion, Gorbachev told Reagan curtly: "I'm not a schoolchild and you are not a teacher. I'm not in the dock and you are not a judge. Quit lecturing. If we treat one another as equals, with mutual respect, I think our co-operation can go far."

"That's how we started out. It was a tough fight," Gorbachev chuckles. It almost sounds like an episode of the Netflix series *House of Cards*, of which he is a fan.

"And look how much we achieved together," he adds. "We ended the threat of nuclear Armageddon. But you need dialogue and trust, that's what's been lost now between Russia and the US."

Gorbachev had an even stormier early relationship with Thatcher. In his new book he recalls how, during his first official visit to Britain in 1984, the two of them quarrelled "so violently" at a dinner at Chequers that they turned their backs on each other.

Raisa later told her husband she feared the clash might torpedo the visit. But by the end of their time together, Thatcher famously said: "I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together." The two had many other clashes, but became friends.

Twenty minutes into Gorbachev's monologue and we have reached only 1988. The clock is ticking and I can see that I'm in trouble. Three times I try to steer him back to the present with a poignant question about today's crisis. "Don't ask questions!" says Gorbachev, slightly vexed. "Be patient. Wait. You won't get from me what you want to hear, you'll get what I want to say."

When Gorbachev finally does reach his conclusion, however, he has more than answered my question. His thoughts on the subject are crystal clear and unexpected. The origins of the crisis between Russia and the West lie in America's triumphalism at the end of the Cold War, he argues. Time and time again, subsequent US administrations have squandered opportunities to work with Russia to build on the trust and dialogue he secured.

His perestroika was scuppered, stopped in its tracks, in part by America backing Yeltsin, who, unlike Gorbachev, had become vehemently anti-communist and was happy to see the Soviet Union disintegrate.

"Under the table, the Americans were rubbing their hands with glee. They thought, 'We're victorious, we won the Cold War,' instead of accepting the huge role we played in ending it," Gorbachev says. "They thought, 'Now we're the boss of the world.' They

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HOWDY, PARTNERS! Gorbachev with his wife, Raisa, on the Reagans' ranch in 1992, after the USSR collapsed

weren't genuinely interested in helping Russia develop into a stable and strong democracy. They thought they'd cut Russia down to size. In the process, they've squandered the trust we'd built."

He argues that when the Soviet economy collapsed as a result of the revolutionary reforms he introduced, America should have helped Moscow financially. It did not, he says, sounding surprisingly like Putin, because it was too bent on shaping a "unipolar world" ruled by America. Washington, he goes on, is most to blame for sabotaging the rapprochement between America and Russia. Gorbachev, again echoing Putin, is deeply critical of the gradual expansion of Nato eastwards into the territory of the former Soviet Union.

I suggest that American reluctance to help a cowed former enemy grow into a strong rival is understandable. Surely he would have done the same had the tables been turned. "Nyet! Nyet!" Gorbachev says forcefully. "Not me."

The West has chastised Putin for describing the collapse of the Soviet Union in a speech in 2005 as "the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century". Gorbachev and Putin are fundamentally different leaders, but when it comes to their analysis of the end of the Soviet empire, their resemblance is striking.

A quarter of a century on, Gorbachev's greatest regret is that he could not prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union. "I regret it enormously," he says. "I regret that a great country with huge possibilities and resources vanished. My intention was always to reform it, never to destroy it. Most Russians think, like me, they don't want it back, but they are deeply sorry that it collapsed. Truth is, it would still exist were I still in power."

I point out the bitter irony that he is chastised at home and celebrated abroad for his role in bringing about the end of the Soviet Union, but in truth most on either side of the divide do not seem to understand that was the last thing he wanted. "Surely you're the world's most misunderstood leader," I suggest. "People to this day don't understand you."

"They'll understand, they'll understand," says Gorbachev with a smile. "Be patient."

By the time we part, I've long forgotten about his flashes of petulance, grandstanding and rambling about the past. What remain are his warmth, charm, wisdom, clarity and great integrity ■

The New Russia, by Mikhail Gorbachev, is published on Friday (Polity £25). To buy it for £22.50, inc p&p, call 0845 271 2135 or visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop Watch footage from his star-studded 80th birthday celebrations at thesundaytimes.co.uk/gorbachev

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