

The death of Mikhail Gorbachev and the legacy of Stalinist counterrevolution

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31 August 2022

Mikhail Gorbachev, the former general secretary of the Communist Party (CP) and president of the Soviet Union, died on Tuesday at the age of 91 in a Moscow hospital. He had reportedly been suffering from kidney disease for several years.

Gorbachev, who joined the CP in 1950, was a loyal servant of the Soviet bureaucracy for three and a half decades. He was responsible for the final act of betrayal carried out by the parasites who raised themselves up above and fed off the Soviet working class: the full-scale restoration of capitalism and the dissolution of the USSR into more than a dozen states. He was a man with whom, in the words of arch-reactionary Margaret Thatcher, “one could do business.”

Gorbachev’s policy of *perestroika* (restructuring), implemented over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, initiated the systematic dismantling of the system of nationalized property that emerged out of the Russian Revolution of 1917. *Perestroika* scrapped restrictions on foreign trade, legalized small businesses, ended subsidies for key industries, tossed out labor laws and threw the Soviet economy and society into disarray.

Enterprises suddenly forced onto a system of “self-financing” found themselves unable to secure the resources they needed to produce, pay wages or fund the social services and benefits that were the right of the working class and the backbone of their living standards. Managers of the most well-positioned factories, directed by the state to manufacture for profit, diverted goods from the state sector of the economy and sold desperately needed consumer items at whatever price the market would bear.

The reforms initiated a process of the wholesale looting of state assets. The children of the elite took advantage of special legal privileges granted to members of the communist youth organization, the Komsomol, to open businesses and sell Soviet assets and resources domestically and abroad. An entire secondary banking industry emerged, as those with access to enterprises’ financial accounts set up lending operations that profited off the crisis and social desperation.

By 1989, about 43 million people in the USSR were living on less than 75 rubles a month, well below the official poverty line of about 200 rubles. Writing in 1995, researcher John Elliot described the era as characterized by “deteriorating quality and unavailability of goods, proliferation of special distribution channels, longer and more time-consuming lines, extended rationing, higher prices ... virtual stagnation in the provision of health and education, and the growth of barter, regional autarky, and local protectionism.” Officially, about 4 million were unemployed as of 1990, although specialists argue that was a vast undercount, with the real number being as high as 20 million. With masses of people shipwrecked, alcoholism, drug use and deaths of despair all exploded during the years to come.

For all of this, Gorbachev is widely and rightly hated throughout the former USSR.

During *perestroika*, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, was the only

political tendency that rejected Gorbachev’s claims to be ushering in a new era of prosperity and “socialist justice” in which the deserving would be rewarded and the corrupt stamped out. In a 1987 statement, *What Is Happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism*, the ICFI warned:

For both the working class in the Soviet Union and the workers and oppressed masses internationally, the so-called reform policy of Gorbachev represents a sinister threat. It jeopardizes the historic conquests of the October Revolution and is bound up with a deepening of the bureaucracy’s counterrevolutionary collaboration with imperialism on a world scale.

The ICFI published dozens of statements exposing Gorbachev and his policies for what they were. This extraordinary record of political analysis can be accessed here. David North, currently national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board, traveled to the USSR in 1989 to intervene in events. He spoke with workers, students and intellectuals about the political dangers Gorbachev’s phony reform agenda posed.

In opposing any conception that the Soviet bureaucracy was undergoing a process of “self-reform,” the ICFI stood against all those claiming to be socialists who supported and cheered Gorbachev. Leading among them were the Pabloite parties, which in 1953 broke with Trotskyism on the grounds that Stalinism did not have to be overthrown but rather could be pressured to move to the left. They covered up and facilitated Stalinism’s many crimes against the working class over the course of the subsequent half century. During the 1980s, the Pabloites were gripped by the “Gorbymania” that hailed the Soviet leader as a great liberator of the people and his wife, hated in the USSR for her shameless displays of personal wealth, as a true “first lady.”

Writing in 1989, Ernest Mandel, a leading figure in Pabloism, declared in his book *Beyond Perestroika*, “From the viewpoint of the Soviet working people and the world proletariat, Gorbachev would today be the best solution for the USSR.” Just that year alone, according to official data, the USSR lost 7.3 million working days to strike action, largely driven by mass unrest in the mines. During just the first nine months of the following year, that number rose to 13.7 million.

Gorbachev was not, the ICFI insisted, breaking with Stalinism, as was claimed by the Pabloites and many others, but bringing it to its logical conclusion. The ICFI based its analysis on a historical perspective, rooted in the struggle led by Leon Trotsky against Stalinism and the subsequent fight of the ICFI against Pabloism.

Trotsky, who led the 1917 Russian Revolution alongside Lenin and later the socialist opposition to Stalin, described the bureaucracy which emerged within the context of the Soviet Union’s backwardness and

isolation as akin to a police force controlling who would get what out of a growing but still inadequate pie. It made sure that it took the most for itself.

In conflict with the egalitarian principles of the revolution and the working masses' claims to the wealth produced from its own labor, the bureaucracy ruled by force. The Great Terror of the 1930s, which culminated in Trotsky's assassination at the hands of a Stalinist agent in 1940, exterminated an entire generation of revolutionists and sought to violently suppress the demands of the proletariat.

However, the brutality of the Terror did not resolve the problem of the working class for the Soviet bureaucracy. Inasmuch as the ruling elite was living off the nationalized property that emerged out of the 1917 Revolution, it knew that the workers of the USSR could reassert their claims to what they had once conquered and in so doing, drive the bureaucrats out of power. As Trotsky wrote in *Revolution Betrayed*, the question was, "Will the bureaucrat devour the workers' state, or will the working class clean up the bureaucrat?" The repeated eruptions of working class anger against Stalinism—in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, in Poland in 1980-1981—haunted and terrified the CP.

Gorbachev was rising in the ranks of the party bureaucracy during this period. He moved ever higher in party circles with the support of forces who, notwithstanding criticisms some came to make of Stalin's crimes as part of the Khrushchev era thaw, were full participants in the dictator's bloody rule. They were absolute defenders of their own privilege and power, their comfortable apartments, vacation homes, chauffeurs, closed shops where only they could purchase special goods and so forth.

With the backing of Leonid Brezhnev, Gorbachev moved into the CP's upper elite during the 1970s. He was politically and personally close to Yuri Andropov, the head of the Stalinist secret police and the early architect of the *perestroika* reforms. They even vacationed together.

After Andropov's death in 1984, Gorbachev became the leading representative of that wing of the CP that believed the only way it could preserve its privileges was to move as quickly as possible to restore capitalism in the USSR—that is, to make itself, as Trotsky predicted, a genuine owning class before the proletariat could move against it. When miners' strikes hit the USSR in the late 1980s and millions of workers in other sections of industry walked off the job in protest against the policies of *perestroika*, the bureaucracy accelerated the process of capitalist restoration.

Alongside *perestroika*, Gorbachev initiated the policy of *glasnost* (openness). It allowed, for the first time in many decades, public debate and discussion of Soviet history, including further revelations of Stalin's crimes. The aim of *glasnost*, however, was not to democratize Soviet society, much less give the working class the right to any say in the affairs of its own state. Rather, Gorbachev's goal was to create a constituency for capitalist restoration among the emerging Soviet petty bourgeoisie and those layers seeking to gain entry into it by permitting them a voice in political affairs and encouraging a liberal democratic reinterpretation of Soviet history that was both anti-communist and defended Stalin's attack on Trotsky. In addition to being the object of endless historical lies, Trotsky was disparaged as an "equality-monger."

As *glasnost* was developing, the Communist Party promoted a vicious assault on the principle of equality. It was identified as the real source of the USSR's myriad problems. Particular vindictiveness directed at the working class, who allegedly got too much and did too little. While many former revolutionists were officially rehabilitated during the Gorbachev era, Trotsky remained an object of official hatred and falsifications. In his 1987 speech commemorating the 70th anniversary of the 1917 revolution, Gorbachev explicitly denounced Trotsky as a heretic and "an excessively self-assured politician who always vacillated and cheated." He was never rehabilitated by the Communist Party.

In his 1990 speech to the congress of the Communist Party, Gorbachev declared that his reforms laid the "the material foundations for an irreversibly peaceful period of history and for the solution of mankind's global problem." None of this has come to fruition. The dissolution of the Soviet Union produced a collapse in life expectancy unseen outside of world war.

The Putin regime in Russia represents a faction of the oligarchy that enriched itself enormously through the liquidation of state assets. The vast majority of people in Russia and the former USSR are impoverished. The entire region is an object of imperialist machinations. Little remains of the entire post-World War II settlement. The Middle East and North Africa are in flames. Ukraine is being destroyed as part of the US-NATO war against Russia. The world is closer to nuclear holocaust than ever before.

As the ICFI has argued for decades, the liquidation of the USSR by the Soviet bureaucracy did not mark the triumph of the global capitalist order but was an initial sign of its descent into an ever-deeper crisis. During the 1980s and 1990s, the nation-state system of the postwar era was breaking up under the pressure of globalization, and all the forces used to contain and corral the working class, keep its struggles locked within national borders—from the Stalinists to the social democrats to the trade unions—were falling apart. The imperialists, who had long relied on the Stalinists to stabilize the world system politically, would once again be at each other's throats, vying for control over resources and markets. The opening up of the USSR to foreign investors vastly increased the size of the spoils.

On December 25, 1991, Gorbachev signed the declaration that wrote the Soviet Union out of existence. Since then, it has been 30 years of unending war. Shortly after he died on Tuesday, the pages of the Western press filled with hosannas for the former Soviet leader. The very news outlets that are shedding tears over the USSR's last counterrevolutionist are also those applauding the US and NATO's war against Russia. They demand not the end of the bloodbath but its expansion.

Gorbachev's true legacy lies not in his nit-wit pronouncements about the alleged virtues of capitalism and that imperialism was a myth, not a reality, but in the fratricidal war, prepared by the US and NATO, which is currently ripping apart Ukraine and targeting Russia for dismemberment.

As for the proclamations from the West that Gorbachev's reforms and the dissolution of the USSR heralded "the end of history" and the triumph of the liberal world order—they have been proven equally false. American democracy is in a state of near-death. Nineteen months after a far-right coup nearly brought down the US government, President Biden is due to speak today on the threatened collapse of American democracy. Meanwhile, life expectancy in the US has fallen by a staggering three years due to the homicidal response of the ruling class to the pandemic.

But just as much as the Stalinist bureaucrats and the imperialists were wrong about the victory of global capitalism, so were they wrong about the class struggle and the supposed end of socialism. The massive growth of social inequality, the grotesque state of modern politics, and the brutality of everyday life are drawing tens of millions into struggle around the world. For them, socialism did not die with the Soviet Union but is rather very much on the order of the day.



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