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## Gorbachev

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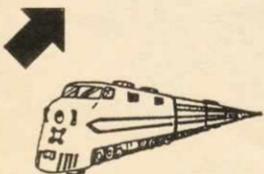
of some ten million. And apart from Leningrad, the other urban centres of Russia did not experience mass protests.

The coup had been building for months. There were open calls by party hard-liners and senior military figures in leading publications like *Pravda* and *Sovetskaiia Rossiia* for the removal of Gorbachev and all his works. What was remarkable was that it did not occur sooner. Gorbachev was never popular among the top echelons of the Soviet Communist Party. This was a group, after all, which under Leonid Brezhnev had lost all touch with the life of the common man. Gorbachev was unique among his peers in having both the vision and the courage to recognize the intractable problems facing Soviet society after seventy years. Instead of following the example of his immediate predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko, and doing nothing while enjoying the limitless perks and authority of General-Secretary, he chose to risk everything for the sake of what he understood to be unavoidable reforms.

Germany and the former members of the Warsaw Pact all owe their unity and freedom directly to Gorbachev. Glastnost has permanently and unalterably changed Soviet political life for the better, as was evident in the quick failure of the coup and the assertiveness of the republics. Imagine how different things would have been if over the past six years Gorbachev had not allowed civil society to debate issues openly and to learn the full truth about the country's tragic past. Even his stubborn and self-defeating loyalty to the "socialist choice" must be seen, at least in part, as a shrewd appreciation of the party's historical role. For all its terrible crimes, the party was the only organization capable of affecting fundamental, nation-wide changes, and without it, as we are seeing now, there is a real danger of total breakdown in the social order. Moreover, the banning of the party once again demonstrates that their understandable hatred of Communism blinds people to basic principles of liberal democracy.

The paradox, of course, is that Gorbachev was an unlikely candidate for the role of undertaker of the Soviet Communist Party. That he has done so while trying to remain loyal to the ideals of a lifetime and with unprecedented respect for legality is rather to his credit. For contrast we need only look at the high-handed and opportunistic conduct of his presidential rivals in Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and especially Georgia. Indeed, even Yeltsin has not been consistent in respecting civil liberties or the interests of non-Russians.

History will be kinder to Gorbachev than his contemporaries have been. Even if his leading role in guiding the Soviet Union is now greatly diminished, he will be remembered as a true democrat who freed the world from Stalinist Communism.



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