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MIKHAIL SERGEEVICH GORBACHEV: A PERSONAL ASSESSMENT OF THE MAN DURING HIS VISIT TO THE UNITED KINGDOM, 15-21 DECEMBER 1984.

1. Gorbachev's performance in the UK will at least in part have been dictated by the political purpose of the visit. He described his underlying purpose in an aside to The Speaker after only five minutes on British soil - "We accept Britain as it is, and hope that you will accept us similarly; I have come to clear away the obstacles (razgrebat zavaly) in the way of improving Anglo/Soviet relations." It became ever clearer as the visit proceeded that fulfilment of this purpose required a man who could realistically sell optimism; appeal convincingly to British economic and political self-interest; sustain a long, diverse and very demanding programme; and show the acceptable face of Communism to a wide range of governmental, parliamentary, business and media representatives. (Success in this was necessary to him in his accompanying, unstated, purpose - that of exploiting the contacts and timing of the visit to the benefit of the Soviet position on the non-militarisation of outer space.)
2. My close observation of him as his interpreter throughout his official programme leaves me in no doubt that Gorbachev was eminently the right man for the job. Of course he fitted his face to the tasks in hand, refusing for example to let himself be provoked by persistent demonstrators, by the Prime Minister's challenging and probing examination of him, by the clamorous and potentially embarrassing attentions of the media, by speculative questions from Members of Parliament and others about his standing in the Soviet hierarchy. The man, however, proved not just equal to but bigger than the task, and left some strong impressions also of his real self. Also revealed were some new biographical details, including certain likes and dislikes and the intriguing fact that he was baptised (Annex B).
3. There was about his movements and his utterances an unaffected, self-assured and un-self-conscious air of competence and confidence. One was conscious of great resources of energy in him, well-harnessed. Although he joked about his heavy programme - "we'll fulfil it if it kills us" - he never flagged nor faltered. He spoke as a rule in simple, generally short and clear sentences. While showing on occasion that he could trade if necessary in the language of the dialectic, he kept his remarks throughout the week notably free of the familiar Marxist/Leninist jargon, bombast, "preachiness" or cliches.
4. He would listen, immobile, with concentration and great attentiveness, and would almost invariably answer all questions put to him - in his own time, of course, and only in the degree of detail which suited him. He had a knack of doing so in a disarmingly straightforward, unpolemical manner and of finding apt, often humorous turns of phrase to register his point or defuse unwanted tension. He was aided in this by a ready smile and occasional laughter. A roguish twinkle was never far from his eye (he even once winked at me over his shoulder as I interpreted a neat parry of his to one of the Prime Minister's verbal thrusts). He often spoke without notes, confidently, steadily, and in a manner
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which inspired confidence in his audience.

5. While not an intellectual, he clearly has a very good memory and a disciplined head. He was also thoroughly in control of his brief. I found him - especially for someone so little acquainted with the ways of the West - notably quick to size up a political situation or take a hint, indeed generally quick on the uptake. Even at 'Cosi Fan Tutte' he was much quicker than his more "intellectual" wife to get the point of an unfamiliar plot and to appreciate the spirit and humour of the production. His demeanour in addressing others, either singly or in large numbers, and regardless of whether they were British or Soviet, can be summed up in the word "naturalness". If, as occurred once or twice, he was less than totally fluent, that too seemed natural and bothered him not at all. He appeared at these times (when searching for a word or phrase) to prefer to be "sound" and to feel right with his answer before giving voice. If his message was unsurprising, even predictable, and rarely if ever strayed far from orthodox Soviet positions, the style was often lightened with a touch of humour, irony or with colloquialisms. It was refreshing for example to hear a Soviet leader (in conversation with the Secretary of State) use such words as chepukha (nonsense/twaddle) rather than some cant equivalent from Pravda. Such examples were far from infrequent. But the message remained, in Soviet terms, irreproachably sound, even if the style and lexicon had the ring of relative modernity.

6. Without ever for a moment suggesting ideological unsoundness or indifference (indeed, his conviction about the rightness and superiority of the Soviet system seemed heartfelt), he came across to many as a pragmatist. In official talks with the Prime Minister, Secretary of State, Mr Jopling and Mr Channon, as well as in the visits to industrial/agricultural companies and plants, he spoke as a man at ease with the capabilities of robotics, computer technology and new management techniques, and certainly not afraid of them. He regularly produced a stream of apt, often detailed comments, and of penetrating questions. His enthusiasm for airing his knowledge was marked, notably in his beloved fields of economic management and agriculture. Everywhere he seemed interested in and impressed by what our American cousins would call a "can do mentality". His unscheduled and unannounced visit to a 10 Downing Street empty of its principal resident was probably less a caprice and more an example of his confidence and decisiveness (of which there were several other instances) and his apparent conviction that problems exist to be solved. His confidence in the power of technology harnessed to sound organisation was several times expressed in terms of evident pride in Soviet power. He told one of his parliamentary hosts that the Soviet Union had told the Americans: "We can perfectly well nowadays live without you and you without us, though cooperation would be preferable"; he spoke with obvious pride to the Prime Minister about Soviet scientific and technological achievements; he showed (not for the first or last time during his visit) a strong streak of nationalistic pride, even touchiness, in telling Mr Channon that people who regarded the Russians as technological "backwoodsmen" were both arrogant and ignorant and would learn better. "Send us your smallest British flea and we'll make shoes for it!" This, though accompanied with a disarming chuckle, was said with deep feeling.

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7. The strain of Russian/Slav nationalism in him came through also in private conversation about art and music (with Mr Rifkind and Lord Gowrie), where Gorbachev sang the praises of several Soviet painters of the strongly Russian nationalist (and realist) school - notably Ilya Glazunov. He even suggested to Lord Gowrie that Britain should put on a Glazunov exhibition. At the same time he poured gentle ridicule on modernist paintings of the "nothing but a plain rectangle" variety and was amused at people who could stand in front of them for hours in rapt concentration and awe. In music, too, his pride in Russian national achievements was evident. It prompted him to recommend visitors to Moscow to go to a church in Fili, on the city's outskirts, (Sobor Svyatogo Pokrova), where 15th and 16th century Russian chants were "brilliantly" and "wonderfully" performed by an unaccompanied choir. Although the evidence is inconclusive (he guffawed at an anti-Polish bon mot by his host at a parliamentary dinner), I very much suspect that his Russian pride is tinged with racism or, at the very least, condescension towards other races. He told several people that without the firm grip at the centre in Moscow, the many races in the Soviet Union would have flown apart and produced chaos. He also remarked favourably on the pragmatic British approach towards his very demanding programme in the UK, remarking that with the Germans the programme ruled - it was "programme first, second and last". (He said he had learned some German in his youth but it was now broken and rusty). Taking an intelligent interest in everything around him, he seemed genuinely impressed both by the British sense of tradition and by examples of British technical innovation (automated insertion of windscreens in cars etc).

8. On two noteworthy occasions the unemotional mask slipped - in both cases on the issue of human rights. It slipped slightly when Mr St John-Stevas harried him, in the meeting with the House Foreign Affairs Committee, about the Soviet Union's failure to honour its human rights commitments. Prevented from changing the subject, Gorbachev threatened retaliation by vigorous "exposure" of British sins in this field. The mask slipped badly at the Official Opposition lunch, when Mr Kinnock privately pressed the same issue. This provoked an intemperate outburst of obscenities and threats by Gorbachev against "turds" and spies like Shchavansky, who was in prison "and that is where he will stay". He warned, with appropriate gestures, that Britain would get it "right in the teeth" in a "merciless" denunciation of its human rights crimes if that was the game it wanted to play. With his usual adroitness, however, Gorbachev collected himself and told Mr Kinnock that he had never spoken so undiplomatically on the subject to anyone else during the visit, and that such frankness was possible only between people who referred to each other as "comrade"! He sought a no less disarming escape route from a sharp exchange of views in private with the Prime Minister by remarking that her candour was a mark of her confidence in him. Nimbleness of foot was a feature of Gorbachev's performance throughout his stay. But the chill impression left by these instances remains: we had glimpsed beneath the surface a man conscious of power and ready if need be to exploit it ruthlessly.

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9. As remarked above, Gorbachev came to the UK to present the acceptable face of Communism and was outwardly pretty successful in his mission. He repeatedly stated his satisfaction with his programme and was visibly gratified at the length and substantive nature of his talks, notably with the Prime Minister and Secretary of State. Without evidently trying too hard, indeed quite naturally and unemotionally, he evoked a sense of confidence in virtually all his interlocutors. He struck them as approachable and, because unaffected, as also sincere or least as someone with whom it was possible to have a rational dialogue. Members of his own Delegation also seemed to find him sympathetic and approachable. The Delegation's loquacious and self-conscious "card", the poet Isaev, spoke to me in terms of admiration, even adulation, for Gorbachev's "peasant simplicity, unaffectedness and closeness to people", his "wisdom even more than his brain". His Delegation as a whole seemed to have easy access to him and to be prepared to confide in him. Their attitude, though one of natural deference and admiration, was nothing approaching awe. He not infrequently gave members of his team the floor to speak on subjects close to themselves. He was never seen to give himself airs, "pull rank" or reprimand them (not even the embarrassingly florid Isaev nor the miner, Strelchenko, who worked himself into a shouting militaristic rage at the Speaker's dinner). He was attentive to others' needs (sympathising with his interpreters as they worked, un-fed, through his mealtime conversations).

10. Gorbachev displayed generally during the visit the kind of unostentatious personal magnetism and political soundness of touch which, were he a Western politician, would swing many voters behind him. He handled the British media like a "natural" - with patience, decisiveness and winning touches of humour. I saw no signs of vanity in him (though several in his wife). There is certainly some steel behind the surface smoothness; some fire and deep convictions behind the "cool customer" exterior. There is a disarming directness in him, and some human sympathy along with evident drive, determination and national pride. He has strong nerves (and could even swap jokes just before his departure from Edinburgh, about doctors and death, though he had only just broken the news of Ustinov's demise to his hosts). I am sure he could be utterly ruthless if necessary.

11. What these qualities and the others described above will do for him in the Soviet political arena, it is hard to predict. If the Soviet Union one day needs the kind of leader who, like a General on the eve of battle, can put new heart into his troops simply by going quietly and reassuringly among them, then Gorbachev could be their man. In this event the West would need to recall not only Gorbachev's best behaviour but also those moments when the urbane mask slipped. The combination of cleverness, modern-mindedness, Slav nationalism, energy, charm, self-assurance and single-mindedness would make him at worst a formidable adversary and at best an interlocutor to be treated with the utmost respect and circumspection.

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K. A. Bishop
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