

'Shattered hopes' from Le Figaro (20 August 1991)

Caption: On 20 August 1991, following the hard-line Communist putsch in Moscow, Alain Peyrefitte comments in the French daily newspaper Le Figaro on the reasons behind the forced removal from office of Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the USSR.

Source: Le Figaro. 20.08.1991, n° 14. 615. Paris: Le Figaro. "L'espoir brisé", auteur:Peyrefitte, Alain , p. 1.

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Shattered hopes

Since last year, it was becoming obvious to anyone spending any time in the USSR that the situation could not continue indefinitely. It was becoming more and more difficult to fill *babushka's* shopping basket. There was growing unrest. Fault lines were appearing within the Government.

Mikhail Gorbachev's popularity, once immense, reached new lows. In early 1990, the weekly *Argumenti i Fakti* published an opinion poll that gauged the change of fortune. The Soviet boss wanted to fire the magazine's editor, Vladislav Starkov, and only dropped the idea in the face of strong feelings in the Supreme Soviet. The man who had introduced 'transparency' was trying to conceal his own unpopularity. The herald of democracy had lost what, in any democracy, is the bedrock of democracy — public support.

Soon, he was left to rely on just three pillars, the Red Army, the KGB and the Party. So he had to make promises to these three interconnected institutions. But he tried in vain to drag them into *perestroika* which would have stripped them of power. In each of the three, a hard core was forming that was ready to go to any extreme to save the Soviet regime that was being tossed by the storm. Gorbachev floundered amidst the contradictions. He was not liberal enough in the eyes of those opposed to his plans, and he was too liberal for those forces whose support he needed. The spectacular defections of Eduard Shevardnadze and Aleksandr Yakoviev, his fellow travellers from day one, were a portent of the coming disaster, and they brought it closer.

By getting himself triumphantly elected President of Russia through universal suffrage, Boris Yeltsin once again threw into sharp relief Gorbachev's weakness, since the latter could never have been elected in such a way. The moral authority of the boss of the Soviet Union was crumbling just as that of Russia's boss was growing. Our ruling princes had failed to predict this twin turn of events. They were as rude to Yeltsin, who was accused of popularism, as they were fawning towards Gorbachev. What a curious lack of insight. Yeltsin, who has become closer to Gorbachev since his election, is now extending a helping hand to his prostrate adversary to help him to stand up and save himself.

Will he manage it? Gorbachev finds himself in the sort of situation that de Gaulle would have faced had he been overthrown by a palace coup exploiting the Algiers barricades and the generals' putsch. Will the hardliners who have now knocked him flat win in the long term? The fact that, for the first time in 74 years, the people are able to play an independent and, therefore, unpredictable role makes it hard to foresee what will happen. Yeltsin is the only man able to mobilise this new force in a sustained way. Were he to disappear from the scene, we could expect the worst.

It is likely that, after a period of confusion, division and transition similar to those that followed the death of Stalin and the overthrow of Khrushchev, a strong man will take over. That is how both Russian tradition and the logic of great empires would have things.

Will the strong man be able to bury his predecessor's policies? Are they irreversible or not? Beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, it would seem difficult to wipe out the achievements of the Gorbachev reign. How could German reunification be reversed or the liberation of people's democracies and the launching of disarmament? Certainly the Red Army could show its teeth wherever it has bases. It could drag its heel over the withdrawal from the former GDR. It could display reluctance to keep its disarmament promises. But it is hard to see how it could completely call into question what has been agreed under international treaty. So Gorbachev has earned the lasting gratitude of the newly enfranchised.

On the other hand, if the reactionary elements in the Army, the Party and the KGB that have sidelined him manage to take control amidst the chaos, the change taking place within the USSR could, at least temporarily, be jeopardised, notwithstanding the degree of freedom to criticise and the trend towards democracy. A clampdown could halt the break-up of the Soviet Union that Gorbachev had been forced to accept.

History will no doubt recall that he made the mistake of wanting to introduce freedom into politics before

introducing it into the economy. In so doing, he unleashed enormous opposition forces that blocked his moves. The political liberalisation that was meant to have preceded economic liberalisation in fact torpedoed it.

Prior to 1989, Deng Xiaoping was idolised in the West. The spring crack-down in Beijing toppled him from his pedestal. Gorbachev was put there in his place. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that, with hindsight, Deng will be credited with having revitalised the Chinese economy while safeguarding China's unity. On the other hand, Gorbachev will have no economic recovery to his credit and, on the debit side, the break-up of the Union that he had inherited.

Saints are never canonised by the Church during their lifetime. It has to wait for the person's last day to come to be sure that he remained holy to the very end and that he continues to work miracles after his death. Clearly, the West was too keen to canonise Gorbachev and excommunicate Deng.

Men come and go. If necessary they are forced to go. Russia remains at the helm of the last colonial empire in the universe. The democratic aspirations that Gorbachev encouraged also remain. National feelings amongst 20 or so of Russia's satellites have been awoken. The fragmentation of the whole edifice might be slowed down but, sooner or later, the inevitable liberation process will prevail.

Alain Peyrefitte