

# ZHORES A. MEDVEDEV

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# GORBACHEV



# Gorbachev

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Zhores Medvedev



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## Preface

For the first time in Soviet history, the leadership succession has meant more than the arrival of a new leader and the possibility of the implementation of new policies. The Gorbachev succession marks the appearance of a new political generation which differs from the old guard in style, knowledge and historical vision. Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko began their ascent to power during the time of Stalin. By 1953 they were mature and experienced career Party men. Their Stalinist past was the most essential qualification for further promotion. Gorbachev, on the other hand, represents a younger post-war political generation, a generation which started its professional Party or state career during the more liberal Khrushchev era.

Political systems of the Soviet type are usually considered 'leader dominated regimes'. This is a valid description of the Soviet political system under Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev. But Khrushchev's fall in 1964, and the emergence of Brezhnev, who delegated a significant part of his decision-making power to the bureaucratic apparatus, significantly eroded the personal power of the leader. In most other countries of the Soviet bloc, however, the Stalinist structure of leadership with its inevitable 'cult of personality' remains practically intact or has changed into an even more extreme form of personal, family or military dictatorship, as in North Korea, Cuba, Romania and Poland. The erosion of personal leadership in the Soviet Union has been closely linked with the character of the leader rather than with structural change. Insofar as there has been structural change within the system, it has become even more conservative in the process.

Brezhnev was interested in accumulating the superficial symbols of power in the form of awards, titles, honours and even material

benefits of offices. He preferred to be 'head' of Party and state rather than the 'ruler'. Andropov tried to assume more personal power, but he did not have sufficient time to create a more efficient system. Far from trying to make the system more efficient, Chernenko made the declining prestige of the Soviet system of administration more obvious. The sharp contrast between the old and sick men who were in charge of the Soviet Union from 1974 to 1984 and the young, competent, dynamic and energetic Gorbachev immediately revived interest in the personality of the Soviet leader. It also aroused hopes for radical reform and change.

The end of every period of leadership in Soviet history has left society in a state of crisis. This has made each succession much more than a change of personality. Each new leader has employed very different methods to achieve his personal and political ambitions. In Stalin's time change was closely associated with methods of coercion and terror. The enormous machine of repression became the most important instrument of the personal power of the General Secretary. Khrushchev, on the other hand, ruled primarily through the Party apparatus. His main power base remained support from the Central Committee and from the regional Party barons whose position and lives he secured. The result was the emergence of an even more powerful bureaucracy. The interests of this group in a much higher level of security and stability found expression in Khrushchev's fall and Brezhnev's succession. In smaller countries of the Soviet bloc decision-making power remained in the hands of individual leaders. In the Soviet Union, however, with its more complex economic, political and military systems, the concentration of power in the hands of one man had already become difficult. Instead a new, inflexible, tenured Party and government elite began to take shape and form a privileged ruling class. It has taken almost 20 years to prove that this social and political class is sterile, inefficient and conservative. It inhibited social, economic and cultural renewal and it finally degenerated into a gerontocracy in which the only natural limit to its existence was infirmity and death. The final symbol of this degeneration has been the death of three General Secretaries in office within less than three years.

The instability and indecision associated with this decline seem to be over. Gorbachev's succession is clearly associated with the transfer of power from the old generation to a younger, better

educated generation of political leaders, from the Party bureaucracy to a Party technocracy. In previous successions the consolidation of the power of the leader has usually been a long process, linked with the appointment and promotion to key positions in the government and Politburo of loyalists and friends, often poorly qualified for their positions. It is too early to say that Gorbachev's succession will not follow this pattern, but the deep economic and political crisis which developed slowly and surely from 1979 to 1984 has made it essential to promote not only loyal but also more competent, younger people with good managerial qualities. It is for this reason that the Gorbachev succession marks the beginning of an important political evolution within the Soviet Union.

Unlike Brezhnev and Chernenko, Gorbachev seems to want to increase the power and influence of the office of the General Secretary and to restore the image of a leader who is capable of inspiring people to work harder, perform better and achieve more substantial results. But his personal and charismatic appeal may not be able to work a miracle with the disillusioned Soviet people. Farmers and intellectuals alike want reforms, not resolutions, a more open and free society, not more restrictions and coercion. The technological and scientific revolution which has shaped the life of people in the West in the 1970s and 1980s has not had the same effect on the less flexible and more bureaucratic Soviet economic system. The methods and approaches which will be selected by Soviet leaders to deal with internal crises and international problems depend very much on Gorbachev's personal qualities, his political vision, knowledge, intelligence and the flexibility he shows in testing different models. It was probably politically inevitable that he should choose to use the tough and disciplinarian methods of Andropov to begin to get the Soviet Union moving again. It was probably equally inevitable that his honeymoon period with the Soviet and Western publics would prove to be very short. Will he be able to change the course of development of the Soviet Union? How wisely will he use the enormous power of his office? These are the questions which this biography tries to answer.

This book has been made possible by my long, personally motivated interest in political developments in the Soviet Union and the situation in Soviet agriculture, economy and science since

the late 1940s, when the complete domination of Lysenko's pseudoscientific ideas in biology and agriculture made it difficult for any self-respecting scientist to continue genuine research without political and personal risk. To be a true scientist meant to be in political opposition to the system. To survive in a Stalinist society which, in its treatment of non-conformists and dissidents has remained essentially unchanged in the decades since Stalin, it was necessary to study not only science, but also the political system and its evolution.

I would like to thank my brother Roy, whose books on Stalin, 'Stalin's men' and Khrushchev and essays on the Brezhnev period and the Andropov and Chernenko succession have contributed greatly to my own understanding of political developments in the Soviet Union. He has also helped enormously by sending me articles from the Soviet professional and general press which have kept me well informed about major and minor events in the Soviet Union in the period of my involuntary exile from that country. I have also been able to read many unpublished *samizdat* works and to compare the internal official and unofficial sources of information with emigre and Western sources and to use my own judgement in selecting those which I have felt to be most reliable. 'Sovietology' and 'Kremlinology' exist because of the secretive nature of the Soviet system and the enormous efforts of the official Soviet press (both general and specialized) to distort the real history of the Soviet Union and to generate pseudo-information. However, Western perception of Soviet reality is often ideologically distorted or one-sided. This makes personal experience an invaluable attribute in selecting information. The other essential quality for writing about Soviet leaders is the patience to do the kind of detective work required to uncover details about their lives.

I would like to thank friends and colleagues, whose advice I have found much easier to solicit while writing this book than when I worked on Andropov's biography four years ago. I would also like to thank Margot Light of the University of Surrey for her linguistic and editorial assistance. I hope that the reader will find this more co-operative approach reflected in the contents of this book.

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*Part One*

The Making of a General  
Secretary

# 1

## The General Secretary is dead, long live the General Secretary!

On March 11, 1985, for the first time in Soviet history, people were expected not only to mourn the death of their leader, but at the same time to congratulate the new leader. It was only in the Soviet Far East, in Kolyma and Kamchatka, separated by seven, eight and nine time zones from Moscow, that the name of the new leader did not arrive until the next day, during the early hours of March 12. On the surface it looked as if it had been the easiest succession on record. In fact, it was not that easy, and the speed of the announcement showed that the decision had been made in a hurry.

On March 12 all Soviet newspapers carried a picture of the deceased leader, Konstantin Chernenko, on page two, together with a list of his achievements. Gorbachev's photograph and biography appeared on page one. This was unusual. But there was something even more unusual about this death report and news of the succession compared to the recent reports in 1982 and 1984 after the deaths of Brezhnev and Andropov. There was no nomination speech. It was reported that Gromyko made the speech, but the text was not published. This could only mean that it had been spontaneous, not a carefully prepared speech. There was another difference, but this one took me longer to notice. The black mourning frame printed around the second page looked rather narrow. It was only half the width of the frames used for Brezhnev and Andropov (3 millimetres rather than 6). It was still, however, a millimetre broader than the frames used for the second page announcements of the death of senior Politburo members like

Marshal Ustinov, who had died a few months previously. But there was no doubt that it was less substantial than the normal deep mourning for top leaders. The funeral commission, under Gorbachev's chairmanship, seemed to be in a hurry about the funeral arrangements. The lying-in-state was to be a day shorter than for Brezhnev and Andropov. The photograph of Politburo members paying their last respects to their deceased colleague showed nine people, rather than all ten remaining full members. Shcherbitsky, Ukraine Party secretary and Brezhnev's close friend, was missing. He had been in the United States since March 3, with a Supreme Soviet delegation. On March 8 he met President Reagan and he was due to meet other officials in Washington on March 9 and then to depart for Texas. The message to curtail his trip and return to Moscow reached him in California, too far from Moscow to make a non-stop flight. He had to change planes in Cuba and, as a result, he missed not only the Politburo meeting, but the crucial Central Committee Plenum as well.

Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko died at 19.20 on March 10, 1985. The very fact that the Central Committee members were summoned to Moscow for a meeting the very next day makes it clear that Gorbachev decided to discuss the succession at an emergency Politburo meeting immediately after Chernenko's death. Some foreign journalists living in Moscow reported that the Politburo meeting was convened three hours after the death.<sup>1</sup> From previous cases it is understood that an extraordinary Plenum of the Central Committee to confirm the new leader is called only after consensus has been reached at Politburo level. The Plenum merely has to confirm the appointment. It takes at least ten hours to assemble a quorum of Central Committee members in Moscow from all parts of the Soviet Union. There are, however, no rules about what constitutes a quorum of the Politburo. In emergency situations the available Politburo members, even if they number only three or four, have the right to make decisions. When Lenin established the Politburo in 1919 the Central Committee consisted of 18 men and one woman, five of whom were appointed to the Politburo. Lenin's rules of procedure are still followed for Politburo meetings and they do not include the need to be quorate – there was a Civil War raging at the time and formalities were irrelevant. Trotsky and Stalin were often out

of Moscow on Red Army business. Only three Politburo members normally tended to be in Moscow and one of them, Krestinsky, frequently opposed Lenin. Consequently, Lenin and Kamenev made many decisions in the name of the Politburo by themselves.

The absence of strict rules was an advantage for Gorbachev. On March 10 three Politburo members were away: Shcherbitsky was in the USA, Vorotnikov was in Yugoslavia and Kunayev was in Alma-Ata, a five-hour flight from Moscow and not less than six hours from the Kremlin. Andrei Gromyko was probably the only one of Gorbachev's supporters who had the interests of the country at heart, rather than his own personal fate. His position was secure anyway and, as the longest serving Foreign Minister in the world, defending Soviet interests was his profession. For all the others, the problem of who was to be the new General Secretary was also the problem of their future careers. Vitalii Vorotnikov, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation (RSFSR), was considered Gorbachev's ally, but his support was probably conditional. Geidar Aliyev, the very ambitious and successful First Deputy Prime Minister of the USSR, was his rival for the top job in the government when Tikhonov stepped down from the Prime Minister's post or died. Gromyko, working to build a majority for Gorbachev, probably found it easier to deal with Aliyev while Vorotnikov, Andropov's choice for the job, was still in Yugoslavia.

It was clear to everyone both in Moscow and abroad that Chernenko's own preference for his successor had been the Moscow Party secretary, Viktor Grishin. He was a safe choice for Brezhnev's former faction and both Shcherbitsky and Kunayev were ready to support him. Grigorii Romanov, Gorbachev's bitter rival, was also ready to back Grishin since his own chance to be elected had become slight. There was never any doubt about the position of the elderly, frail Tikhonov, a close friend of both Brezhnev and Chernenko. The remaining figure, the colourless Mikhail Solomentsev, chairman of the Party Control Commission, could probably be persuaded to back Gorbachev, but he was more likely to do so with his old rival, Vorotnikov, out of the way. It was the feud between Solomentsev, Prime Minister of the RSFSR until 1983, and his First Deputy, the younger and more active Vorotnikov, which had led to Vorotnikov's honorary exile to Cuba in 1979. Ambassadorial appointments were Brezhnev's

favourite method of demoting high officials. Andropov, who recognized Vorotnikov's administrative talents, had brought him back to Moscow and given him Solomentsev's job. Solomentsev had been promoted 'upstairs', to the veteran's position of chairman of the Control Commission (where he replaced Arvid Pel'she who died in 1983 at the age of 84).

If Chernenko had lived for another month, Gorbachev would probably not have stood a chance of becoming General Secretary. For the first time in Soviet political history the illness of the General Secretary had provoked preparations for a well-rehearsed transfer of power with the General Secretary himself making the nomination. Brezhnev's faction, led after his death by Chernenko, had engineered a surprising comeback after Andropov's death. It was thought that Chernenko would survive until the XXVIIth Party Congress in February 1986. When his health deteriorated, the Congress was moved forward to November 1985.<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev could expect nothing positive from the approaching Congress. Agriculture, his responsibility for a number of years, might well become the main topic of discussion and he could hardly emerge in a favourable light. But by the beginning of 1985 Chernenko was weakening rapidly and it began to seem unlikely that he would survive until November. Preparations began for his formal resignation at the regular Central Committee Plenum in the second half of March. But even this proved too optimistic and the opportunity for an orderly transfer of power disappeared.

Getting a full Politburo consensus behind the nomination of a successor is never easy and Gorbachev's case was no different. There were five Politburo members who would, given sufficient time, block his nomination. He had the full and unconditional support only of Gromyko, and confirmation by a full Plenum of a Central Committee still dominated by Brezhnev's loyal followers (many of whom had no illusions that they would be retired or dismissed from their regional or ministerial positions before or after the next Congress, if Gorbachev were elected as General Secretary) was very uncertain. His best chance would be if a speedy Politburo decision could be made before Shcherbitsky, Kunayev and Vorotnikov returned, but even then Gromyko's great diplomatic experience was essential.

It was well known in the Soviet Union and abroad that Gorbachev had been second-in-command in the Soviet leadership

since Andropov's death, but this did not guarantee his promotion in the case of Chernenko's resignation or death. There is a great difference between the first and second positions in any authoritarian system. The selection of a successor is always a complex process, fraught with difficulties. Although it had seemed that Gorbachev's influence had begun to grow after Andropov's death, he had been unable to increase his 'political capital' during 1984. Before Andropov's death it was clear that he was being groomed for succession at some future date. When Andropov died in February 1984, Gorbachev was a contender for power, but he simply did not have sufficient authority, a successful past history or the proper credentials for the job. He remained Central Committee secretary in charge of agriculture and head of the Central Committee's agricultural department. But agricultural performance had been extremely poor since his appointment at the end of 1978. 1983 was the fifth poor harvest in a row and it had become too difficult to blame the failure on the weather. Thus when Andropov died there were three days of heated debate in the Politburo, after which Chernenko emerged as General Secretary. But there were many conditions attached to his appointment and he had to make a firm promise to continue the 'Andropov line' and not to attempt to revive Brezhnev's already discredited policy. Chernenko's promotion was clearly a compromise and he was intended only to be an interim leader. It was a victory by default and his main advantage was his physical frailty. It was unlikely that he would live very long and therefore he would be unable to consolidate his power. The compromise was greeted with apparent relief by the members of the Central Committee. With Chernenko in charge, Andropov's anti-corruption line would no longer threaten them. Formal 'unity' was important to everyone. Despite the inevitable internal disagreements and feuds amongst these 300 members of the super-elite, it is unlikely that any of them would be interested in exploding the myth about the supreme wisdom of the Politburo, the infallibility of the Central Committee and the guiding force of the Communist Party.

Gorbachev became the formal second-in-command and was the official chairman of the Central Committee secretariat when Chernenko was ill or on vacation. (There is no formal position of chairman of the Politburo.) It was originally taken for granted that there had been a radical shift in Gorbachev's responsibilities. By

established tradition, the second-in-command took charge of the 'ideology portfolio' and became responsible for propaganda and ideology, the control of the media and foreign relations within the socialist camp, where relations were based on Party links and ideology (as opposed to the traditional diplomatic relations with capitalist and Third World countries and China, which were managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with the KGB and army intelligence). However, Chernenko considered ideological work his main area of competence and he was reluctant to give Gorbachev supervision over the Central Committee department of ideology. The General Secretary had the privilege of keeping one or other Party sector under his personal supervision. Moreover, Chernenko certainly understood that agriculture is the graveyard of potential leaders. The longer Gorbachev remained responsible for the unrealistic 'Food Programme' (which he had helped to create), the weaker his position would be, no matter what superficial signs of authority he acquired. Chernenko's scheme paid off handsomely in 1984, an extremely bad agricultural year. The figures for agricultural production were not reported at the end of the year, but reliable American estimates put the total 1984 Soviet grain harvest at 170 million metric tons, 70 million short of the planned target.<sup>3</sup> This was no higher than the average level in the 1960s and a record amount (50 million tons) of grain had to be imported to reduce the food and feed grain deficit. It was a personal disaster for Gorbachev. But a more serious blow was Ustinov's death.

Marshal Ustinov's death was not entirely unexpected. Since his absence from the Red Square parade on November 7, 1984 it had been reported that he had a 'cold'. The cold developed into pneumonia, but it was not fatal. By the time Gorbachev left Moscow for his successful trip to Britain, Ustinov was out of intensive care and had begun to recover. The official medical report made public later announced that during his convalescence he had shown symptoms of a possible 'rupture of an arteriosclerotic abdominal aneurism'.<sup>4</sup> His doctors decided that an emergency operation was required. The operation failed: Ustinov was 76 years old and still weak after his pneumonia. For Gorbachev Ustinov's death represented the loss of a friend and his strongest supporter. Ustinov was the most distinguished, prominent and powerful member of the Politburo. He was practically the only



member whose position was not due to patronage and 'bureaucratic promotion', but legitimated by his unique and brilliant service to the country during the critical years of the war, when he was People's Commissar for armaments and the youngest member of the government. During those years Chernenko, already in his thirties, was a student at the Party Higher School in Moscow, training for his future propaganda work.

At the beginning of 1985 Chernenko had also disappeared from public view. The meeting of Warsaw Pact leaders scheduled for January was postponed and a programme of meetings with foreign leaders was cancelled. This was almost a repetition of what had happened at the end of Andropov's life. But Andropov had made Gorbachev his representative at Central Committee meetings and for other public functions, whereas Chernenko appointed Grishin as his spokesman. From now on it was a race between Gorbachev and Grishin. Mark Frankland later reported for the *London Observer* that 'for more than a month there had been rumours among the foreign community that the Moscow party chief, Victor Grishin, was the man to watch.'<sup>5</sup> Romanov, whose chances had still been considered fairly good in October, was certainly out of the game.

The main arena of the race was the approaching elections to the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR on Sunday, February 24, 1985. The sequence in which Politburo members and candidate members make their election speeches is traditionally arranged according to seniority. The tradition dates back to the first elections to the Supreme Soviet on Sunday, December 12, 1937, when Stalin spoke on the Friday, two days before polling day. Watching the sequence is the best available indicator to diplomatic observers of the comparative standing of individual leaders. More junior and less influential members of the elite usually meet their constituents first. The later the speech, and the closer to the final speech of the General Secretary, the more senior the candidate. Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov made his speech on Thursday, February 21, as expected. Gorbachev's meeting with his constituents took place on Wednesday, February 20 and this, more than anything, showed that he still held the position of second-in-command. He had spoken on the Wednesday the year before, prior to the elections of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, soon after Andropov's death. It was the timing of his speech then that had provided the clue