

History Is a Tough Lady

An Interview with the Honorable Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, Chairman of the Board, Green Cross International



The Hon. Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev

lications – including Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World (1987), The August Coup (1991), Memoirs (1995), Gorbachev: On My Country and the World (1999), and Understanding Perestroika (2006) – he has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (1990), the Order of Lenin, the Red Banner of Labor, and the Badge of Honor. In addition to his role as chairman of Green Cross International, he is president of the International Foundation for Socioeconomic and Political Studies in Moscow (the Gorbachev Foundation).

You made possible one of the few times in history when a stroke of courage changed the world. Did it also change you?

History is a tough lady, but I would still leave it up to her and future generations to judge my actions. That's right, though, it did take courage to dare to "swim against the current," to break the decades-established ideals and rules, to try and change the most delicate and complicated of matters – the human mentality. Naturally, the decision to bring about perestroika was not some sort of an instant, divine inspiration. It was a result of my entire experience as a politician, a citizen, and a human being. Before attempting to influence the way of thinking of millions of my countrymen, I had to re-evaluate my own vision of reality and be absolutely sure of where I stood.

I believe that, in the last 20 years, Russia made an important contribution toward the transformation of the world, on the eve of the new millennium. But just like for any dialogue, we need at least two participants; global changes cannot be brought about unilaterally. Therefore, I think that Western countries, and particularly the United States, should urgently get over their "winner's complex" and attend to the challenges of our time, challenges we all share. And who knows? Perhaps a global perestroika is yet to come.

Do the former Soviet countries and their people appreciate the results of new nationalism?

I believe that nationalism in any form is an evil from which humanity has already suffered enough in the 20th century. This notion should not be confused – deliberately or not – with patriotism or independence. Unlike some people, I do not think that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable. But now people in my country say that those who do not regret the col-

EDITORS' NOTE Born in 1931 and a law graduate of Moscow State University, Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952. After gaining recognition in Stavropol politics, in 1971 he was elected a member of the Soviet Union's Communist Party Central Committee (CPSU). From 1970 to 1990 he was deputy of the Supreme Soviet (Parliament), while also serving as the CPSU's Agriculture Secretary (1978 to 1985) and chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (1984 to 1985). From 1985 to 1990, he was a member of the Presidium of the Soviet Parliament, as well as its president from 1989 to 1990.

Gorbachev became General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee in 1985, a position in which he remained for six years, simultaneously serving as president of the Soviet Union from 1990 to 1991. The author of numerous pub-

INSTITUTION BRIEF Headquartered in Geneva, Green Cross International (www.greencrossinternational.net) was founded in 1993 with the mission of helping to "ensure a just, sustainable, and secure future for all by fostering a value shift and cultivating a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility in humanity's relationship with nature." Working in cooperation with governments, the private sector, religious groups, international and non-governmental organizations, and individuals, it mobilizes the strength of its network, represented in 30 countries, to prevent and resolve conflicts over natural resources, address the environmental consequences of wars and conflicts, and promote value and behavior changes.

lapse of the USSR have no heart, and those who preach for its re-establishment have no brain.

There is no point in looking back and speculating about what could have been. Geopolitical analyses should be future-bound and based on reality and not on wishful thinking. Russia and the new states created in the post-Soviet territory are linked by millions of visible and invisible ties – family, language, cultural, business, etc. I hope that, at the end of the day, we shall witness the closest cooperation, if not integration, of all these countries, and the level of this integration will be dictated by the reality. In my opinion, whatever its level or form, such integration would certainly contribute to the overall stability of the region.

It is unfortunate that governments of some states do not understand this tendency towards integration correctly, and worry that Russia is plotting a new USSR. Such worries are unfounded. It is true, though, that we are talking about building a new Europe, and this process should develop from both ends, and not only from the Atlantic.

As to the living conditions of the populations of these countries, I am sure they will also improve if things follow their natural course.

U.S. President Ronald Reagan considered you one of the real heroes of civilization. What did you think privately about President Reagan and his personality?

My relationship with President Reagan was not an easy one. After our first encounter, when asked what I thought about him, I said: “He is a real dinosaur.” Later I learnt that when answering a similar question about me, he called me “a hard-headed Bolshevik.” This is how our relationship started. We had our ups and downs, some dramatic as well as funny episodes. What counts is that, as of the very first meeting, and in spite of such unflattering impressions of each other, we were able to start a dialogue based on mutual respect. Soon, we were calling each other by the first name and learned to trust, although “trust but verify” has always remained President Reagan’s favorite Russian proverb. We had not become friends in the usual sense of the word; each of us had a great country and a tremendous responsibility behind him. I quickly realized that President Reagan had incredible political intuition and was a man of principles who had a grand vision of the world. There is no doubt that he played a key role in the process that led to the end of the Cold War. On the whole, I feel that the world was extremely lucky to have competent, intelligent, and broad-minded leaders at the top of major governments at that time.

Many leaders after their success

want to give back. How are you giving back?

I have recently turned 75. Fifty years of my life were dedicated to politics. This was a tough choice, but I do not regret it. I am proud of having been able to contribute to ending the Cold War and, whatever the critics might say, to opening the door for Russia to freedom and democracy. This is, for me, my “giving back.” In fact I believe that leaders should “give back” to their people not once they have stepped off the mainstream political scene, but while in office; that is when they have the real power to give.

But if you are curious about what I do with my free time, I can assure you that I almost do not have any. Most of my time is shared between my foundation and Green Cross International, a non-governmental organization I helped to found in 1993.

In addition, I created the World Political Forum and initiated the Forum of the Nobel Peace Prize laureates; all this requires my time and attention. I hope to be able to continue contributing to dealing with the main challenges of our time for as long as I can and for as long as I feel that my contribution is needed and appreciated.

Do politicians and the general public realize the dangers and how Green Cross helps?

From what I see, I conclude that politicians do not quite realize the importance of the challenges we are facing and the consequences of their inertia for the future generations; otherwise, they would have taken much more radical and strong decisions both at the G8 summit last summer and the U.N. summit on the Millennium Goals last September. It seems like individual governments hope that their countries will be, by some miracle, spared the problems shared by the rest of the world, although all recent events prove to the contrary.

Green Cross International [GCI] is a non-political NGO, working in the field of sustainable development. Obviously, we cannot substitute for the national governments in fighting poverty, hunger, and insecurity in their countries. But we are part of international civil society, which becomes increasingly influential and whose opinions can no longer be ignored or taken lightly by the decision-makers.

At the moment, one of the central activities of GCI is its campaign for the Right to Water, with an ultimate goal to provide safe and affordable drinking water to 1.2 billion people in need by means of adopting a relevant international convention.

This initiative already benefits from the support of several NGOs and governments, and I hope that others will join us. In addition, our work focuses on the legacy of the Cold War – and here our Destroy Chemical Weapons Now! cam-

paign was certainly a success – and on the environmental consequences of wars and conflicts, including the Chernobyl catastrophe. In the last two years, more than 3,000 children living in the contaminated areas underwent medical examinations and received treatment through the efforts of Green Cross, and over 9,000 youths participated in various Green Cross educational and medical events.

How is Green Cross funded? Is there a need for more help and if so, for what programs?

I do not know any organization, which does not need help – both financial and intellectual – and Green Cross is not an exception. GCI is funded from three sources: Contributions of our member organizations represent approximately one third of the budget, another third comes from corporate and governmental sponsorship, and the rest I make from my fees from lectures and books.

Recently, we have created a Green Cross Circle of Friends – a kind of exclusive club of our supporters, both individual and corporate, with membership limited to 300 people. Its members will be involved in the consultation process on the future orientation of GCI and will be in touch with me and with other members of our international board of directors, which includes such distinguished personalities as Simon Peres, Mario Soares, and Raymond Barre. Perhaps your magazine will join the club?

You now travel the world fulfilling speaking engagements and personal appearances. Are you expensive? And where does the money go?

Yes, I am expensive, but such is my market price. As I have already mentioned, the money goes mainly to my foundation and Green Cross International, but also to a number of charities in Russia and abroad, as well as to support my family.

You will be 75 on March 2. How is your health? Your brain? Your enthusiasm? What’s your view of the future? What is there left to accomplish when you are already such a major part of history?

Since the age of 20, I have had a feeling that “old age” is somewhere 15 years ahead. I still have this feeling. I cannot complain about my physical health, and as to my brain, I’d leave it to the readers of this magazine to decide.

I am a convinced optimist, always trying to look on the bright side of life. Green Cross even publishes a quarterly magazine entitled *The Optimist*. The number of high-profile authors contributing to it shows that my positive position is shared.

As to future accomplishments, life is full of surprises and who knows what kind of unexpected challenges are yet to come my way. As far as I am concerned, I am ready to face them. ●