



## **Mikhail Gorbachev - Life and History | With History Professor Peter Kuznick**

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**AcTVism Munich (AcTV):** Thank you very much for joining us, Prof. Peter Kuznick! Can you talk about the life and history of Mikhail Gorbachev, who passed away on August 30, 2022?

**Peter Kuznick (PK):** It's interesting how differently Gorbachev is thought of outside of Russia that is thought of inside of Russia. One of the things that always surprised me when I visited Russia was that Stalin was held in much higher esteem than I expected. And Gorbachev was held in much lower esteem than I expected. Gorbachev is viewed internally as a naive, somewhat inept, unrealistic politician. He's blamed for not only the collapse of the Soviet Union. He's also blamed for the chaos that ensued, the economic collapse that ensued. The not only break of the Soviet Union, but Russia's diminished role in the world. So it was Khrushchev who said that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century, and that's a common view inside of Russia. Outside of Russia, Gorbachev is viewed as a transformative visionary, as a heroic figure. Again outside of Russia he's also viewed, though, as largely a failure. As somebody who succeeded in overseeing the end of the Soviet Union and the end of the Warsaw Pact with limited bloodshed. People often say there was no bloodshed, but we know that's not true. There was some internal crackdown inside the Soviet Union, although he didn't intervene outside the Soviet Union, but he oversaw a peaceful transformation that people thought was not possible. So that was remarkable. However, it was seen in the West as a victory. And what Reagan said was, How do I think of the Soviet Union? I think of it as we win and you lose. And that was the attitude. George H.W. Bush, to his credit, did not fall into that. He said, I didn't go jumping up and down and celebrating and rubbing it into Gorbachev's face. And that was important, that he didn't do that. But from the Western perspective, this was the triumph. The Cold War was over. The West had won. Capitalism was triumphant. And NATO was in ascendancy. And this is in some ways a fortunate legacy and in some ways an unfortunate legacy. So Gorbachev is correctly viewed as an ambivalent and contradictory figure. However, from a humane humanitarian standpoint, from the standpoint of the planet, he's the

only leader really to have spoken for the interests of humanity in the last 50 years. It is exactly what the world needs. And exactly what is missing. He won the Nobel Peace price in 1990 for his great efforts for world peace. But if you look at all of the obituaries, in all the articles everybody has written about Gorbachev, and what they mostly focus on is his failure to reform the Soviet system without triggering a collapse. So they're all looking at how this went wrong and where, what mistakes he made. And I think that's the wrong approach. We can talk about that, because it's not insignificant, but it's not the heart of who this was and why this man was such a huge figure. And it's not only because he gave Oliver [Stone] and me the first blurb on 'Untold History'. He said, I felt like a made man; we got the blurb from Gorbachev. He said: "Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick provide a critical overview of US foreign policy during the past few decades. There's much here to reflect upon. Such a perspective is indispensable. At stake is whether the United States, which is to be the policeman of a Pax Americana, which is a recipe for disaster, or a partner with other nations on the way to a safer, more just and sustainable future". You know, that was our first blurb that we got. And I mean, Gorbachev understood what we were saying. And really, when you look at who we adulate in our work, you can say there are William Jennings Bryan as an anti-imperialist, Roosevelt, Henry Wallace, certainly John Kennedy in the last year of his presidency, and Gorbachev. You know, Gorbachev is in many ways the most visionary international leader of them all. And he was up against tremendous odds.

So he's born in 1931 in southern Russia, not that far from the Ukrainian border. And his family, his maternal, his mother's side came from Ukraine. His father's side were Russians. And he was a typical product of the Soviet system in many ways, the best of it. And he went to high school and they elevated him. And he was doing very well. And then he worked on running combines on collective farms as a teenager. He lived through World War Two. His father was wounded in the Red Army. He was 14 years old when the triumph over Nazism occurred in 1945. So he's a young man, went to Lomonosov Moscow State University, the best university. There he studied law and met his future wife, Raissa. And she was a philosophy student and tied him with other intellectual circles, but he made his way up through the party, locally. And then after a two year period, three Soviet leaders died. So what you're dealing with is this gerontocracy. You're dealing with these octogenarians. And then Gorbachev, who is in his mid-fifties, he is 54 at the time when he comes to power in 1985. And unlike these older, sclerotic leaders, he's got this vision of how to change the Soviet Union. And the Soviet Union was in many ways not only dysfunctional, but highly corrupt at that point. It's interesting about Gorbachev that he was a Leninist, a true Leninist. And he'd studied Lenin and thought about Lenin and was not a Leninist in practise. Because Lenin was brutal, Lenin was ruthless in many ways. But Lenin had a vision that Gorbachev shared. And some people think that Gorbachev's shortcoming was that he wasn't more critical of Lenin, didn't understand, appreciate Lenin's role in creating the dark side of the Soviet Union. But as general secretary, as head of state there, he got access to all of the files on Stalin, and he read them and he studied them, and he was horrified by what he saw. And that was the gratuitous brutality of Stalinism. The fact that as he discovered that people were not

being killed and executed for crimes that they committed, but because the local police and the regional police had a quota of how many people they were supposed to execute; had supposed to arrest and execute. I mean, he was horrified by the excessive brutality and the thoughtless, mindless brutality of Stalinism. And he hated that. And he hated the repressive aspects of the Soviet system. And he wanted to change it. And he knew what they were up against. Pervasive corruption. It still is pervasive corruption in Russia. My friends, even those who were supporters of the regime, complain constantly about the corruption. I have a close friend whose daughter was getting to be of college age and I asked if she was going to apply to Moscow State University, the best school. He said no, because you have to need too much money to bribe people to get people in there. I mean, that kind of corruption existed then. You also have this bureaucracy. You have this gerontology autocracy.

But the major problem that confronted the Soviets was the enormous amount of their GDP that went into military spending. It was estimated at 20 - 25% of their GDP, was wasted on military spending. And much of that was even wasteful itself. It was the military industrial complex welfare state inside the Soviet Union, they were producing one point- was it 20 times as many tanks as the United States?! You know, just wasteful production for the sake of production. And without any of the creative energy that was needed to really transform things. But he tried to do that. And so he started with his policy of perestroika. And perestroika meant restructuring. And he knew that he had to fundamentally restructure the Soviet economy. But first of all, his timing was bad because between 1983 and 1986- he comes to power in 85- he comes back in the midst of this sharp decline in oil prices. So the Soviet economy, which had been stagnant already in the 1970s, now in the 1980s, was suffering from this sharp collapse of oil prices, which was fuelling the economy. So that's really a large part of what the economy was based on; was, again, like today what we see now in terms of energy and raw materials production. So it was not a vibrant economy and he tried to restructure it and he was up against all the bureaucratic inefficiency and obstacles of stagnation and made some progress in that regard, but not nearly enough progress.

And the thing about him was that he believed in socialism. He was a democratic socialist of the very, very best type. And he had this vision that the Soviet Union could- he didn't want to dismantle the Soviet Union, that was never part of his vision. He wanted to reform it, make it more democratic, make it more open. And that was the second part of his programme, which was glasnost. And that was openness, that was transparency. So under Gorbachev, they did away with the censorship. I mean, it was a tightly controlled, censored society. And he did away with that. And he actually instituted political reforms that had free and fair elections, something I wish we would have in other parts of the world. And he was able to implement that. And he became president. He was elected. And, you know, he was in many ways quite popular. However, he was up against forces that were beyond his control. And he unleashed those forces. And you saw the flourishing during those years, 88, 89, 90 flourishing of intellectual thought and ferment and creativity and dissent and challenging things and exposing the Stalinist legacy in history. So, I mean, this was an exciting period. However, the forces that he unleashed were moving too quickly. And he did the same thing internationally. And he goes to Germany, well, begins earlier than that. But he goes to Germany and talks

about that people are going to be given the freedom to create their own systems, you know, and we're not going to stop that. We're not going to repress it. And the Germans picked up on that, and the Berlin Wall comes down. But we saw that across- we saw that in the Czech Republic, we saw that Romania- we saw that across the Warsaw Pact nations. And there he did not intervene. And that was much to his credit. He understood the forces of history. The thing about him is that he was not only a true Democrat, he was a true idealist. He had this idealistic sense of human beings and human potential. And he believed that human nature was positive, that human beings, that humans were loving people and could organise the planet in a much more positive way. So he was deep down, a man of democracy, a man of peace, a man of vision. But inside the Soviet Union, he was not seen as positively. For example, he seemed to be a country bumpkin in certain ways. He was considered to be a terrible interview; because he rambled, he never completed his sentences. He would go off on tangents and his accent made him seem inside the Soviet Union that he was not a sophisticated world leader. But from the outside where we saw his words as they were translated, he was a man of extraordinary vision. And the world saw that and the world appreciated that. And his 1988 speech effectively ending the Cold War, calling for drastic reduction of Soviet troops, making them only defensive, saying effectively that we need world peace and that the Cold War is over, was extraordinary. The things that he said in, I think it's December 1988 UN speech, at a time when the world was optimistic about the possibility of peace, and he was the face of that.

Let me read to you from a The New York Times editorial on May 21st, 1989. It began: "Imagine that an alien spaceship approached Earth and sent the message: Take me to your leader. Who would that be? Without doubt, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev", according to The New York Times. He was the leader of the world in 1989 and deserved to be.

**AcTV:** What part of his legacy do you think is not sufficiently covered in the mainstream media?

**PK:** The part of his legacy that is not being talked about or written about or appreciated sufficiently was what he did for not only world peace, but nuclear disarmament. And so he comes to office, I think it was March 1985 and he had an agricultural background, like Henry Wallace. And he wrote a letter to Reagan on March 24th, 1985. You have to remember, Reagan was in some ways this Neanderthal. Reagan, a very simple minded man, but truly believed American exceptionalism, believed American goodness, American mission; wanted the United States to dominate the world and believed his own rhetoric about American democracy and capitalism. But he also called the Soviet Union the evil empire and oversaw a massive increase in US military spending; nuclear spending, other arms spending, US interventions around the world, especially in Central America, overseeing supporting death squads and other awful things, overthrowing governments in Central America, but also elsewhere, overseeing what was happening with the Pakistanis in Afghanistan. And so Reagan had really reignited the Cold War in many ways. And with Able Archer and other

nuclear exercises, we were very close to war in the early 1980s. But Reagan was starting to soften a little bit and this had some doubts. And his wife and others, Deaver and others, prevailed upon them and took him a little bit away from the hardline right wing extremists who oversaw really a lot of what was going on in his administration.

So here comes Gorbachev. And on March 24, shortly after taking office, he writes to Reagan: "Our countries are different by their social systems, by the ideologies in them. But we believe that this should not be a reason for animosity. Each social system has a right to life, and it should prove its advantages not by force, not by military means, but on the path of peaceful competition with the other system. And all people have the right to go the way they have chosen themselves without anybody imposing his will on them from outside." It comes right out of Henry Wallace, comes right out of the late John F Kennedy's AU [American University] commencement address and it goes on and it really channels Kennedy when he says in October another letter, Reagan, it says: "We must proceed from the objective fact that we all live on the same planet, we must learn to live together." Exactly what Kennedy says in his haunting words at his AU commencement address.

And he knew that one of the main obstacles to what he was envisioning and one of the main dangers, what the US was doing was Star Wars [The Strategic Defense Initiative also called Star Wars program]. He hated Star Wars. He knew that the Soviets could overwhelm Star Wars. Star Wars was a fantasy that, as in terms of the first strike, it was meaningless. Because you're sending thousands of decoys and Star Wars could not tell the difference, so it would not be useful as a first strike. However, if the US attacked the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union had a limited retaliatory capability, then Star Wars could maybe be effective in taking out the few Soviet missiles or SLBMs [submarine-launched ballistic missile] that could be launched in retaliation against a US first strike. And so he was very much opposed to it in that way. But Reagan was obsessed with it. This was Reagan's baby. And so they first met in Geneva. The first summit was November of 1985, and it was very friendly. They didn't agree ideologically, but they hit it off because Gorbachev was a people person. And Reagan for, you know, in his own sense was too. And they toasted each other warmly. And Reagan talked about the battle of Stalingrad. You know, they were off to a good start. And clearly what Gorbachev was envisioning was working with the Americans as partners for a new detente, a new era of peace and collaboration. So he decides to push this peace offensive. And in January of 1986, he wrote to Reagan, offering, he says: "A concrete programme for the complete liquidation of nuclear weapons throughout the world before the end of the present century." Who else talks like that? Gorbachev did. And he proposed removing all US or Soviet intermediate range ballistic missiles from Europe, ending nuclear testing, sharply reducing strategic weapons, changing the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty to allow the US to continue research on Star Wars, but banning deployment for 15 years. And so he already imposed a unilateral nuclear testing moratorium. But the US didn't respond very favourably to that. And then they had the Chernobyl accident. That was April 26th, 1986. Which made Gorbachev realise that that reactor, which almost contaminated much of Europe with nuclear waste, was one third the size of the smallest nuclear weapon. So it just reinforced his sense that these hellish weapons have got to be eliminated. And so he and

Reagan met again in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October of 1986. And this was an extraordinary meeting. And Gorbachev comes there with this very bold proposal. For effectively, sharply reducing nuclear weapons. And Reagan is thrown by it and he looks through his file card, they start dropping on the floor, and he has no response because they didn't expect the Russians to come up with such a visionary proposal for a peace and eliminating nuclear weapons. And so Reagan, you know, can't find the answer and finally fumbles around and so Gorbachev offered to cut strategic offensive arms in half, eliminate all intermediate range ballistic missiles in Europe, although allowing Britain and France to maintain their arsenals, freeze short range missiles, stop nuclear testing, allow on site inspections, as the Americans had been demanding, and limit SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] testing to the lab for the next ten years. Paul Nitze, the notorious hawk, says, This is the best offer we've received in 25 years. Let's go for it. And Reagan then says, Well, you know, let's don't worry about SDI, we'll share it with you. And Gorbachev finally explodes. According to Jack Matlock, the US ambassador who was an adviser to Reagan there at Reykjavik, he says: "Gorbachev finally exploded." "Excuse me, Mr. President", he said, his voice rising, "but I cannot take your idea of sharing SDI seriously. You're not willing to share with us oil wells equipped with digitally guided machine tools or even milking machines. Sharing SDI would provoke a second American Revolution. Let's be realistic and pragmatic." And so they had more meetings and George Shultz and others said to Reagan, These are great offers that Gorbachev is making that he's sincere about. And they finally came up with the idea that they would eliminate- he proposed eliminating all offensive strategic nuclear weapons within five years; no half of them within five years and all of them within ten years. And Reagan insisted on- but he said, You have to limit SDI to the laboratory. You cannot weaponize space. You cannot do this. And as Richard Rhodes, who I don't often agree with or not always, wisely said: "The agreement broke down because Reagan refused to limit Star Wars to a laboratory for ten years at a time when it had barely even entered the laboratory." And because of that, we came so close to eliminating nuclear weapons. George Shultz, secretary of state, said, Let's do it. Let's take their agreement. Let's eliminate nuclear weapons. Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze commented very emotionally. He said: "The future generations reading the minutes of meetings and seeing how close we came to eliminate nuclear weapons will never forgive us. We did not come to an agreement." And we shouldn't forgive them because they came so effing close to eliminating nuclear weapons.

Now the world is again on the brink of nuclear war. Now, people, for the first time in decades, are really taking seriously the threat of nuclear war, World War three over Ukraine, World War three over Taiwan. You know, and we almost eliminated this.

And Gorbachev kept saying, Let's go back in, let's sign this now. And Reagan refused. He says, I'm very, I'm extremely sorry, but I can't do it. And it's tragic. When Gorbachev got back to the Soviet Union, he briefed the Politburo and he said that "Reagan exhibited extreme primitivism, a caveman outlook and intellectual impotence." He said: "They thought they could take advantage of the Soviet's internal difficulties." He said that, "The United States believed it could exhaust us economically via an arms race, create obstacles for Gorbachev and for the entire Soviet leadership, undermine its plans for resolving economic and social

problems, thereby provoked popular discontent in the Soviet Union." He said: "The representatives of the American administration are people without conscience. With no morale. Their line is the one of pressure, deceit or greedy mercantilism." But he hoped to go back into these negotiations. But then the Iran-Contra scandal hit, and the Reagan administration was as good as finished. They did go back and have the INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] treaty, which was important. They eliminated an entire category of nuclear weapons. That was important. But compared to what Gorbachev's vision was, they achieved very little. And then Gorbachev gets ousted. The Soviet Union collapses. Warsaw Pact collapses. Governments are overturned. The Berlin Wall is torn down. And now under Putin, pretty much everything that Gorbachev had believed in and tried to achieve has been destroyed. So it's a tragic legacy. But his greatness should not be diminished and should be appreciated.

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