**Gorbachev’s Legacy**

31 Aug 2022

Yesterday the news broke that Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary and also the first and last president of the Soviet Union, passed away peacefully at the age of 92. We thought that a few comments on Gorbachev’s legacy and how it factors into the *Northern Fury* universe would be appropriate, particularly given the ongoing war in Ukraine (which we will comment upon in a forthcoming blog post).

*Northern Fury: H-Hour* begins with the death of Gorbachev in 1992 at the hands of the August Coup plotters, whose resolve in our story is stiffened by the presence of the ruthlessly effective (and fictional) Pavel Medvedev. Gorbachev’s murder provides the point of divergence for our alternate history in which the Soviet Union does not crumble and the Cold War does not end peacefully. Though neither of us (Joel and Bart) ascribe to the much-maligned “Great Man” theory of history, we nonetheless do believe that the decisions and actions of people in positions of authority matter, and can matter a great deal. So, in a sense, *Northern Fury* is a story of what the world may have looked like without Gorbachev’s leadership.

Gorbachev’s legacy is a complicated one. The West generally remembers him as the man who helped guide the Soviet Union and the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion. In that sense he has generally been lionized as a great and enlightened statesman in North America and western Europe, or at least remembered as the non-threatening “Gorby” who brought Pizza Hut to Moscow. This is the view that most readers of *Northern Fury* will likely be familiar with, but it can paper over other divergent views of the man and the mark he left upon history.

His reputation is less burnished in his native Russia, where the economic and political chaos of the Yeltsin years, which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, gave rise to Russia’s present regime. Vladimir Putin and those who ascribe to his worldview see Gorbachev as the man who gave away Russia’s natural empire and allowed the encroachment of western Europe and NATO into Russia’s near abroad. In this sense, many westerners mistake Putin’s now-famous lamentation over the collapse of the Soviet Union as the great tragedy of the 20th century as a pining for a return to the USSR’s communist regime. It is not. Rather, Putin’s view harkens further back to the empire that the USSR inherited from Peter I and Catherine the Great, an empire that Gorbachev let slip away.

Both of these perspectives contrast with a third understanding of Gorbachev’s legacy, the one that is prominent in the countries that comprise what Russians view as their “near abroad,” namely the former Soviet republics in the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Contrary to the popular western understanding of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the revolutions that brought about independence in these countries were met with significant violence from the forces of Gorbachev’s Soviet government. Many people in these countries look upon Gorbachev as a man with blood on his hands, not as the leader who benevolently allowed their nations to steer their own course away from the USSR.

No blog post of a mere few hundred words will ever be sufficient to sum up the complex legacy of a leader like Gorbachev, one of the most important figures of the late 20th century. Perhaps the best way for us to summarize our view of Gorbachev’s legacy is to note that under his leadership the Cold War came to a quiet and relatively peaceful end. In the world of *Northern Fury*, a world we imagine without Gorbachev, the Cold War culminates in a bloody Third World War. That idea at least should be worth something in our remembrance of the man.