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Book Review: Mikhail S. Gorbachev: An Intimate Biography

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MIKHAIL S. GORBACHEV: AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY

*The editors of Time magazine,
with an introduction by Strobe Talbott. 1988*

By Guy Clifford

Because few biographical works have been written about the Soviet Union's dynamic new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, this very readable paperback by eight *Time* editors is a welcome and timely contribution. It is appropriate reading for any person interested in a man who may well be the USSR's leader for the remainder of this century, if not longer.

The authors trace Gorbachev's life from his birth in 1931 through his third summit meeting with Ronald Reagan in 1987. Born the only son of Russian peasants in southern Russia at the time Stalin ruthlessly collectivized Soviet agriculture, Gorbachev's boyhood was also coincident with the purges and show trials of the 1930's and a brief period of Nazi occupation of his village during World War II, when he lived with his grandparents while his father served in the army. Nonetheless, he received a public education and in his early teens made his contribution to the "Great Patriotic War" by working as a combine harvester operator. His activity in the Komsomol, the Communist youth organization, and his work in agriculture earned him the Red Banner of Labor, a prestigious award, and the support of local party officials. In turn, he won admission at age nineteen to Moscow State University where he studied law, continued his Komsomol activities and met and married his wife, Raisa. Upon graduation

they returned to Gorbachev's native Stavropol region where their only child, Irina, was born. The two decades spent there were marked by a steady progression to more responsible party positions. Summoned to Moscow in 1978, he was chosen as the party's General Secretary by The Politburo only eight years later.

The man the dour Andrei Gromyko said "has a nice smile, but teeth of iron," when he suggested to his fellow Politburo members that Gorbachev was the right choice to succeed Constantine Chernenko, wasted no time demonstrating his strength, political skill and reformist bent. Intelligent, well educated, seasoned, personable, articulate and self-assured, Gorbachev embarked on an ambitious program to reduce nuclear arms, decentralize the economy (Perestroika) and increase intellectual, artistic and social freedom (Glasnost). Glasnost and Perestroika are new and becoming better understood in his country as well as in the West, and are proving to be more than just slogans.

It is too early to say where all the ferment will lead, but the energetic, relatively young (fifty-seven) and committed Communist leader has, in the words of the editor of *Time*, "given the Soviet Union, its allies and its enemies a gift they had not received from a Soviet leader in recent memory: a measure of hope." Ronald Reagan, a

strident anti-communist, was on occasion upstaged by Gorbachev and in the view of some observers was pressured into negotiating the INF treaty so as to effectively compete with the positive image developed by the leader of the "Evil Empire." The two superpower leaders demonstrated in their relations that Margaret Thatcher's contention, "I can deal with this man," applies to them. Now that George Bush is in the White House, he and other world leaders may understand Mikhail Gorbachev even better.

This informative book, introduced by *Time* Washington Bureau Chief Strobe Talbott, contains a helpful, six-page chronology of events in the USSR since the 1917 revolution. It also includes seven pages of provocative quotations by Gorbachev on a miscellany of topics, among them Glasnost and Perestroika. The book is usefully indexed, and its sixteen pages of photographs add interest for the reader. Although the chapters were individually written by six of the *Time* editors, this poses no problem to the reader. And finally, this book is a first for *Time*, having been conceived after the magazine chose Mikhail Gorbachev as its "Man of the Year" in 1987. The editors, each with impressive individual credentials, did a fine job in expanding on their original portrait of the current Soviet leader. ■