

# The tragic hero of the 'house of Europe'

*A tribute to Mikhail Gorbachev, 1931-2022*

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## Two deaths

What an ominous coincidence: within a few days, we were struck by the death of two persons who symbolise two diametrically opposed visions for the future of Europe. On Saturday evening the 27<sup>th</sup>, a bomb brutally killed Daria Dugina, a young woman, while driving her father's car through Moscow. Clearly, the bomb was meant for her father, Alexander Dugin, the prominent Russian political commentator and philosopher. He is a leading proponent of Eurasianism, the idea of bringing together the peoples of Eastern Europe and Central Asia under the leadership of the Russian people in a sort of revived Russian Empire. His daughter Daria, but also a certain Vladimir Putin are very much taken by this kind of idea.

A few days later, on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup>, Mikhail Gorbachev passed away, the last Soviet leader who was one of the principal actors in the transformation of Europe during the years 1985-1991. His political vision was what we call Europeanism. Accordingly, he wanted to see all the former communist states taking their place in the common 'house of Europe'. The ideological battle between these two 'isms' is rifting countries and peoples apart.

In this article, I first summarize the background and the astonishing political career Gorbachev, as well as that became of him after 1991. In the following section, I will describe in a more detailed way deal with some events in which Gorbachev played a key role, especially the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of the two Germanies, and the bid for independence of the republics within the Soviet Union. There are interesting historical details here, that are hardly known to the wider public.

Thirdly, I will take a closer look at his vision of the 'house of Europe', which stands in sharp contrast to the Eurasian vision of the current strong man of Moscow. Finally, I shortly address the question about Gorbachev and the Christian faith.

Most of the material in this article is a selection of passages from my book *Christian Faith and the Making of Europa, Yesterday and Today* (VTR, Nuernberg, 2021, second revised edition), to which I have added biographical information concerning Gorbachev and more details about Eurasianism.

## Gorbachev

Gorbachev really is a typical tragic hero. In 1985 and totally 'out of the blue', this communist party apparatchik appeared on the international scene as the new Soviet leader. And then, to the surprise of most of his party comrades and to the astonishment of the whole Western world, he set in motion a series of internal reforms and a policy of friendly international relations that would completely change the world order. Within just six years, history books had to be rewritten as the Iron Curtain existed no more, and atlases had become obsolete, as more than fifteen new states had emerged from the once so powerful Soviet world empire.

### *Background and early career*

In 1987 I had the privilege to translate one of the first biographies of Gorbachev that appeared in the West, produced by Donald Morrison and Time Magazine, as part of the project to publish it simultaneously in 14 languages. Here are some details of his life.

Mikhail Sergeyevitch Gorbachev was born in 1931 in Privolnoye, near Stavropol ('city of the cross') in the northern Caucasus, to a poor peasant family of Russian and Ukrainian heritage. Growing up under the rule of Joseph Stalin, in his youth he operated combine harvesters on a collective farm before joining the Communist Party. Studying at Moscow

State University, he married fellow student Raisa Titarenko in 1953 and received his law degree in 1955. The couple moved to Stavropol, where Raisa became a philosophy teacher, while Mikhail worked for the Komsomol youth organization and, after Stalin's death, became a keen proponent of the de-Stalinization reforms of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. (The same Khrushchev who decided to make the Crimea part of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine, as a 'gift' to his native country.)

After a successful administrative career, first in Stavropol and then in Moscow, he joined the Politburo in 1979. Three years after the death of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev – following the brief tenures of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko – in 1985 the Politburo elected Gorbachev as General Secretary, the de facto leader of the Soviet Union and the whole Soviet Empire.

### ***Glasnost and perestroika***

Although committed to preserving the Soviet state and its socialist ideals, Gorbachev believed significant reform to be necessary, particularly after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. He withdrew troops from the Soviet-Afghan War and embarked on summits with United States president Ronald Reagan to limit nuclear weapons and end the Cold War.

Domestically, he deliberately opened the windows of the closed and monolithic communist regimes for a wind of change to blow through their sclerosed system. His policy of *glasnost* ('openness') allowed for enhanced freedom of speech and press, while his *perestroika* ('restructuring') sought to decentralize economic decision-making to improve its efficiency.

He also opened the doors to the West, and he gave the example himself by travelling regularly to all the major Western capitals where he and his charming wife soon became real stars that impressed the public. For a Western public that was used to icy old men who had been governing the Soviet bloc until then, Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev completely changed the image of 'Moscow'.

### ***Overtaken by 'the acceleration of history'***

Mikhail Gorbachev was hailed by many as the hero of a pacified 'house of Europe' from the Atlantic to the Ural. But little did he know, and little did most Western government leaders realise, that through his reforms and his openness to the West, he was in fact preparing the end of the communist world altogether, much against his own intention.

The changes that he had introduced and promoted aroused such a strong popular support in the whole communist world, and such a wave of rejection of the regimes in place, that the old order was completely unable to deal with it. The rulers in the Soviet capitals as much as Gorbachev himself, were overtaken by what Jacques Delors, the French president of the European Commission at that time, called 'the acceleration of history'.

### ***No place for the hero in the new order***

When various Eastern Bloc countries abandoned Marxist–Leninist governance in 1989, Gorbachev declined to intervene militarily.

Meanwhile, he had allowed the republics within the Soviet-Union to become more autonomous, but in 1991 their parliaments voted, one after the other, for complete independence from the Soviet leadership in Moscow. Gorbachev tried to prevent this, but even sending in military troops did not stop the process. The Soviet Union was breaking up and falling to pieces. Some leading Marxist–Leninist hardliners launched an unsuccessful Coup against Gorbachev in August 1991. In the wake of that event, the Soviet Union dissolved completely, against Gorbachev's wishes, on Christmas Day 1991.

Only six years after Gorbachev had begun his astonishing career as leader of the Soviet Bloc, history books had to be rewritten as the Iron Curtain between Eastern and Western Europe had been lifted, and atlases had become obsolete as the Soviet Union had fallen apart into fifteen new independent states.

And Gorbachev himself? Tragically, the end of the Soviet Union also put an end to his political career. All of a sudden, he was left without a political function. Instead of being 'enthroned' as a leader of the new, post-communist Europe, he became the victim of his own 'success' – like a general mortally hit by a bullet on the day of final victory. There was no place in the new order that he had so much helped to come into being.

I still vividly remember the televised images of Gorbachev being led away by the Russian police, just after the Soviet Union of which he had been the leader, was dissolved on that remarkable Christmas Day 1991. He had to leave his government apartment and was now taken to another, very modest little apartment where he had to start a new life, that of any ordinary Russian citizen who has lost his job.

As suddenly as he had appeared on the international scene and caught the attention of the media all over the world, in 1985, so suddenly did he disappear just six years later. As the ancient Romans said: *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

He became an outsider to the new political order.

### ***Awards and controversy***

What has become of Gorbachev after he lost his job? He launched the Gorbachev Foundation, was invited as an elder statesman to speak at meetings all over the world, but in his own land he became more or less a stranger, observing the transition to democracy, free market economy, and so on. He became a vocal critic of the Russian presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin and campaigned for Russia's social-democratic movement. But his role in post-Soviet Russia was entirely marginalized. In his own country, he was often derided for facilitating the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an event which weakened Russia's global influence and precipitated an economic collapse in Russia and associated states. Putin does not cease to call this 'the greatest political mistake' in Russian history. Gorbachev was often blamed for the severe, sometimes deadly economic hardship that followed in the 1990s.

Outside Russia, Gorbachev is widely considered one of the most significant figures of the second half of the 20th century, Gorbachev remains the subject of controversy. The recipient of a wide range of awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize, he was praised for his role in ending the Cold War, introducing new political and economic freedoms in the Soviet Union, and tolerating both the fall of Marxist–Leninist administrations in eastern and central Europe and the reunification of Germany.

Conversely, in Russia

## **Revolution of 1989**

This section describes in a more detailed way deal with some events in which Gorbachev played a key role, especially the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of the two Germanies, and the bid for independence of the republics within the Soviet Union. There are interesting historical details here, that are hardly known to the wider public.

### ***Decisive movements and persons***

With the resistance of churches and dissidents, winds of change had begun to blow, that would not abate anymore. Historians generally point out three factors that made these winds swell into the storm that would blast the whole Soviet system to pieces in 1989.

#### ***Solidarność, in 1980, led by Lech Wałęsa***

The first was the workers' protest movement in Poland, that began with the mass strikes of 1970 and 1976. Like earlier protests within in the communist world, these two strikes had emerged quite spontaneously out of an incident that unleashed suppressed frustration. Usually such movements were short-lived, and crushed by the military (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968). But this time, popular protest was so strong that it forced the

government to make concessions. The movement culminated in the formation of the independent trade-union Solidarność, in 1980, led by Lech Wałęsa. Whereas most previous Polish revolutionary movements had been secular in nature, this one was decidedly Catholic. During its meetings, the symbols of the cross, the rosary, and the Madonna were deployed. It's very name (Polish for 'solidarity') refers to a basic principle of Catholic social teaching. Historians agree that its emergence was directly related to the impact of the first visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland in 1979.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, the communist leaders recognised Solidarność as an official trade-union. But as the worker's movement gained momentum, they reacted more and more strongly. In December 1981, party chief Wojciech Jaruzelski declared the state of war. Thousands, including Lech Wałęsa, were arrested. Even so, Solidarność could not be totally suppressed. It went on as an underground movement.

### *Gorbachev, GS of the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet Union, in 1985*

The second factor was the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and thereby as the leader of the vast Soviet Union, in 1985. Unlike his predecessors, he took seriously the critique of dissidents and protesters. He saw the writing on the wall, realising that the days of the empire were counted, unless drastic measures of change were taken. To the surprise of the Western world as well as many in the Soviet hierarchy, he introduced a policy of openness (*glasnost*) towards the West, consisting of more travel opportunities, cultural exchange, and economic collaboration. He also used his leadership to develop a policy of economic and political reform (*perestroika*). Intellectuals and church leaders were allowed to openly question aspects of the communist system. Furthermore, the republics within the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Lithuania, etc.) were granted more autonomy. The dynamics of change were set in motion, and the question was, where would this lead to?

Gorbachev's radical reforms turned, step by step, into a revolution that crippled the party and dissolved state authority. His greatest gift to the USSR's satellite states was to restore their sovereignty and pledge not to interfere in their affairs. To the dismay of hardliners like Erich Honecker in East Germany, the Soviets refused to back up former client states facing popular protests.<sup>2</sup>

The population in the satellite states of the Warsaw Pact took advantage of the new liberties to openly criticise their communist leaders, especially in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. People demanded freedom to travel to the West, free democratic elections, and more freedom to practice their (Christian) religion publicly. People went to the streets calling for change. Contrary to the past, these demonstrations were not crushed by military repression.

### *Pope John Paul II elected in 1978, 'Fear not'*

Historians are generally agreed that the most crucial factor leading to the downfall of the communist regimes was the influence of the Polish cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła, elected as Pope John Paul II in 1978. One author analyses the situation well:

The Kremlin was appalled that a cleric from within the Soviet Bloc had been elevated to a position of global influence. The pope did not have any armoured divisions at his command, but his moral and religious authority at home and abroad translated into what Marxists understood to be a material force.<sup>3</sup>

This Polish pope inspired faith and hope all over Central and Eastern Europe. In 1979 he preached a message in Rome that could not be misunderstood. 'Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and

<sup>1</sup> Constantine PLESHAKOV, *There Is No Freedom Without Bread*, p. 82–85.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald SUNY, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> *Idem.*

political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows what is in man. He alone knows it.'

'Fear not'. That was the key phrase and the essence of all his messages. In the following decades he repeated that simple but powerful message wherever he went. 'Fear not'. Everybody in Central and Eastern Europe knew what the pope was saying to them through these simple but powerful phrase: don't compromise with Marxism, the peaceful power of faith will sooner or later prevail over the oppressive power of the atheist system. He inspired hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians to be on the street or on strike. In all the neighbouring countries, his influence was palpable.

John Paul II was called 'the travelling pope'. During his pontificate he made 146 visits outside Italy, to countries all over the world. His second foreign visit was to his homeland, Poland, in June 1979. He had planned this in April, in order to take part in the celebrations of the 900th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Stanislaw, the patron saint of Poland, but the government blocked this. The pope insisted, and negotiated a papal visit some months later, in June. Over the nine days of his Polish pilgrimage, as he called it, he went to many places and preached thirty-two sermons. He emphasised respect for basic human rights, including the right of a nation to freedom, and the role of the churches to help make men and women more devoted servants of each other, of their families and of their society.

This was possibly the most significant of all his trips as it set in train a series of events that led to the establishment of the Solidarity trade union, a movement which would subsequently play a key-role in the downfall of communism. Indeed, John Paul II publicly defended the strikers of Solidarity. In a message to Stefan Wyszyński, archbishop of Warsaw and Gniezno, he ordered the Polish church to support them and provide practical aid. In January 1981, Lech Wałęsa visited Rome to meet with the pope. At that occasion, the sovereign pontiff gave official recognition and support to Solidarity as an independent trade-union.

John Paul II repeatedly denounced the division of Europe in two halves. He called this an artificial situation, contrary to the whole history of Europe, insisting that East and West belong together as the two lungs with which Europe is breathing.

Summing up the three decisive factors and how they interrelated, Timothy Garton put them in the right order when he wrote: 'Without the Pope, no Solidarity. Without Solidarity, no Gorbachev. Without Gorbachev, no fall of communism.'<sup>4</sup>

Baltic chain, injustice of

*Baltic Chain, 23 August, Gorbachev recognise the injustice of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*

On 23 August, a remarkable peaceful demonstration took place, in the form of a human chain right through the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – 675 kilometres in all. Approximately two million people joined hands for at least 15 minutes in what would be called the Baltic Chain or the Baltic Way. They sang national songs and Christian hymns. Church bells were ringing and church services were held all along the route.

The Baltic Chain was intended to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in 1939. Its secret protocols had divided Eastern Europe between themselves, and this led to the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940. Now, the organisers wanted to draw global attention to the fact that this occupation still continued, and to manifest their desire for independence. This popular protest forced Soviet-leader Gorbachev to officially recognise the injustice of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Kremlin allowed free democratic elections in all three Baltic states, which took place in February 1990. Pro-independence candidates won large majorities. The Lithuanian Parliament was the first to declare independence, followed some months later by the Parliaments of Estonia and Latvia. Moscow accepted.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Jeff FOUNTAIN, *op. cit.*

The Baltic Way was the largest and most important campaign of the Baltic states to gain independence, but not the only one. In 1987, on the same date, thousands of people demonstrated in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn to commemorate the deportation of prisoners by the Soviets in 1941. The following year 1988, tens of thousands took part in the remembrance campaigns, while in 1989 a full quarter of the population participated in the human chain.

In 2009, the European Union recognised 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of stalinism and nazism.

### ***Gorbachev no longer backs communist regimes, Berlin Wall broken down***

#### *Church meetings*

The most dramatic of the turnabouts took place in the divided city of Berlin. East Germany's government, led by Erich Honecker, did everything to prevent the changes that were taking place in the surrounding countries. Through the Stasi, the dreaded state security police, the East German regime held its population under control.

But even here, things would change dramatically within a short period of time. In February 1989, the pastor of the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig, Christian Führer, started weekly *Friedensgebete*, 'prayer meetings for peace'. Every Monday night, people could come to the church for a prayer service and stay to discuss how to work for a change in their country. At these occasions people openly expressed their demands for freedom and democracy, including the freedom to travel to the West. Some demanded the freedom to leave the country; others declared their commitment to stay. The authorities tried to pressure the church leaders to cancel the peace prayers, but to no avail. Arrests were made after each service, but the number of visitors kept growing. Believers and unbelievers, discontent people, even Stasi collaborators turned up.

During the summer the meetings took the form of a peaceful popular protest movement. In the autumn, the movement was approaching its climax. On 25 September, at the end of the service, crowds walked around the city's ring road carrying banners with the slogans 'We are the people', 'For a free and democratic country'. The following weeks, the same pattern was repeated. After the service, the congregation took to the street with their candles, they were joined by thousands of peace protestors outside, and soldiers and police began to move into the crowd seeking provocation, but no-one reacted with violence. Church leaders insisted on non-violence. Pastor Führer described what happened:

When you carry a candle, you need two hands. You have to prevent the candle from going out. You cannot hold a stone or a club in your hand. And the miracle came to pass. Jesus' spirit of nonviolence seized the masses and became a material, peaceful power. Troops, industrial militia groups, and the police were drawn in, became engaged in conversations, then withdrew. It was an evening in the spirit of our Lord Jesus for there were no victors or vanquished, no one triumphed over the other, and no one lost face.<sup>5</sup>

Later the head of the Stasi admitted: 'We were prepared for everything, except prayers and candles.'

On 9 October, the authorities sent troops, there were rumours that they were planning to open fire and cause a massacre. Despite the risk of a violent reaction, 70,000 citizens demonstrated in Leipzig that Monday, and the police forces refused to use their guns. This victory of the people encouraged more citizens to take to the streets. The following Monday, 120,000 people demonstrated on the streets of Leipzig, a week later they numbered 300,000. Jeff Fountain summarises: 'A movement inspired by prayer, the teachings of Jesus and the courage of church leaders to stand for truth and justice was spreading across the country.'<sup>6</sup> It also reached Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Jeff FOUNTAIN, *op. cit.*, Weekly Word of October 7, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *dem.*

*Gorbachev's visit*

The communist regime tried to resist the popular demand for free travel and political change, but they could no longer count on the backing of the Kremlin. Apparently, Gorbachev had come to the conclusion that it was useless 'to go against this tide of history', as he put it during a visit to the East German government on 6 and 7 October. 'The one who comes too late is punished by life', he told his stubborn hosts.

The government had closed the border with Czechoslovakia earlier that year, but they were compelled to open it again on 1 November. The following days, the Czechoslovak authorities allowed all East Germans travel directly to West Germany without bureaucratic procedures. On November 4 half a million citizens converged on the Alexanderplatz in East-Berlin demanding freedom. Unable to stem the ensuing flow of refugees to the West through Czechoslovakia, the East German authorities eventually gave in to public pressure by allowing East German citizens to enter West Berlin and West Germany directly, via existing border points, on 9 November, without having properly briefed the border guards. When a spokesman of the regime affirmed in a TV press conference that these changes were in effect 'immediately, without delay' (which was actually not true), hundreds of thousands of people took advantage of the opportunity. The border guards were quickly overwhelmed by the growing crowds of people demanding to be let out into West Berlin. Having received no orders from their superiors, and unwilling to use force, the guards opened the gates. Soon the people forced an opening in other crossing points in the Berlin Wall. Some began to tear down the wall, while others climbed over it. The bewildered guards meekly stood by as East Germans took to the wall with hammers and chisels. The Berlin Wall did not 'fall', it was broken down!

*No orders from the Kremlin*

Meanwhile, Gorbachev had decided that the Soviets would not deploy their tanks to intervene. The Kremlin simply gave no orders, leaving the bewildered regime in East-Berlin alone in the midst of the upheaval. Much later, it was revealed that he himself had chosen to leave for his summer residence on the Black Sea during those critical days, thus adding to the disarray in the Soviet chain of command. A few weeks later, the East German government collapsed.

***Germany united – when enemies strike a deal***

After the opening of the Berlin Wall, the old guard of the East German regime had to make place for reformist politicians, during the first free elections in 1990. Meanwhile, the West German government, headed by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, pressed for the reunification of divided Germany. As history accelerated in 1989, leaders in East and West generally felt that reunification was inevitable. But the Kremlin was opposed. Surprisingly, in the Summer of 1990 the Kremlin gave up its opposition, and a few months later, on October 3, the two Germanies were officially reunited.

What had caused the Kremlin to change its position? The key was the personal relationship between the German Chancellor and his Russian counterpart. We are reminded of the words of Condeleza Rice, at that time Director of the Department of Soviet and East European Affairs of the US National Security Council, Condoleza Rice. As such she was an inside witness of the changes that were taking place. Several years later, when she had become US Secretary of State, she said, looking back to that time: 'In a period of rapid change like the end of the Cold War, personal relationships meant a great deal more than they might have at any other time.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, 1997, quoted by Matthias VON HELLFELD, 'How Kohl and Gorbachev sealed the deal on German reunification,' published on the Website of *Deutsche Welle*, 14 July 2010.

Gorbachev and Kohl were very much opposed. Yet they came to trust one another, and they struck a deal. How this happened has for a long time been concealed to the public, but since the archives of the Kremlin have become accessible, in 2010, we can reconstruct what happened behind the scenes.<sup>8</sup>

In his private diary, Anatoli Cherniaev, Gorbachev's closest aide, describes several personal experiences of the General Secretary during his meetings with Western leaders.<sup>9</sup> With most of them he got on quite well, except with Helmut Kohl. The latter, a staunch anti-communist, did not trust Gorbachev when he introduced reforms. 'I will not let myself be fooled,' he told a Newsweek reporter in 1986. Antipathy was reciprocal, because Gorbachev viewed Kohl as a mediocre provincial politician, just a mouthpiece of the Americans. For years, he had deliberately bypassed West Germany during his trips to Europe. But he came to realise that he could not get around the Chancellor if he was to succeed in his policy of open relations with the West. So, he invited him to come to Moscow in 1988. At first, Kohl refused, saying that he would not 'take orders to travel there.' Gorbachev insisted, and Kohl gave in. In October 1988 they met for the first time personally, in an icy atmosphere.

However, both realised that they needed each other in order to get certain things done, so they met again, together with their senior ministers, on 13 June 1990 in Bonn. The Soviets were prepared to let East Germany, the most prosperous Soviet country, leave the Kremlin's sphere of influence and join West-Germany. But the asking price was that a reunited Germany would no longer be a member of NATO, the Western military alliance. For a hardliner like Kohl, this condition was out of the question. He had always been in favour of a strong, heavily armed NATO as a shield against the Soviet Bloc. He simply didn't believe the Soviets had really given up on their old ideal to expand their influence further to the west, so no agreement was reached, except that they would continue their discussions in Moscow, on 14 July. That would become a turning point in their relationship, perhaps because their spouses got on so well. One evening, the two leaders went to a concert of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra in the Kremlin. A journalist reported:

The atmosphere became friendly. Mikhail Gorbachev recalled later: 'this was a wonderful evening; we have talked quite frankly about general questions and problems.' And Helmut Kohl did his best to relax the atmosphere, stating that he would follow the example given by the General Secretary and that he wanted to open a new chapter in German-Soviet relations. He emphasised the common destiny of these two nations. The two men who had grown up during the Cold War, now agreed that they wanted to establish a relation of trust. Later, Gorbachev told one of his aides that he was 'impressed' by the approach of the Chancellor.<sup>10</sup>

Two days later, the two met in Stavropol, the birth-town of Gorbachev. 'Already during the first conversation Gorbachev agreed in principle to not stand in the way of a reunified Germany being part of NATO and regaining its full sovereignty,' recalls Horst Teltschick, deputy head of the German Chancellery who took the minutes during the meetings. Kohl convinced him that Germany within the NATO would not be a threat to the Soviet-Union. And so, the two struck a deal on 17 July

Kohl had obtained all that he wanted, but what had Gorbachev received in return? The Soviet Union was faced with an enormous foreign debt, due to the staggering costs of the arms race with the US, and the war in Afghanistan (1980–1985). Its economy was in a dire state, there was a food shortage due to failed grain harvests. He simply needed money. Kohl agreed to pay the costs of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany and their resettlement at home. He also promised financial aid to the ailing Soviet economy. The total

<sup>8</sup> In this paragraph, we follow the description of the events by Christian NEEF, *op. cit.*, and Matthias VON HELLFELD, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Marie CHAUVIER, 'How Mikhail Gorbachev allowed the downfall of the Berlin Wall and the DDR.' Article based on the personal diary of Anatoli Cherniaev, member of the Politburo of the Soviet Union and a personal aide of Gorbachev.

<sup>10</sup> Eike FRENZEL, in an article written in connection with the television documentary *Je t'aime, moi non plus – une amitié à la portée historique*, broadcast by the German-French channel *Arte*, 29 December 2009.

amount West Germany ultimately paid is estimated at between 50 and 80 billion Deutschmarks (25 to 40 billion Euro). From the German point of view, this was a profitable deal. Afterward, Kohl admitted that he would have been prepared to pay even twice as much. Gorbachev later regretted, in conversations with his aides, that he hadn't asked for more.

Hardly three months later, Germany was reunited, without one bullet being shot. The bottom-line of it all is that two enemies buried their battle axes, crossed the border that separated them and became partners for a common cause, namely peace and freedom in the whole house of Europe. In so doing, they put in practice the Biblical principle of peace-making, to the benefit of their peoples.

### ***The end of an empire, exit Gorbachev***

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union itself was crashing down like a house of cards. In the course of 1991, the parliaments of all the republics within the Soviet Union voted for independence: Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) the Caucasian republics Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, as well as the Russian Federation, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin. Having lost its member states, the Soviet Union became devoid of its substance.

In December 1991, a group of hard-liners in the top of the Red Army plotted a coup d'état while Gorbachev was abroad. They sent troops to occupy the centre of Moscow and the Parliament buildings of the Russian Federation, in a desperate attempt to restore the old Soviet order. But hordes of people took to the streets, many climbed on the tanks. Leading the popular resistance, Boris Yeltsin persuaded the soldiers to give up their attempts, and so the army retreated. This was the last nail to the coffin of the Soviet-Union and the Soviet Communist Party. On Christmas Day 1991, both were formally dissolved. Having lost his function, Gorbachev was relocated in an apartment paid by the Russian Federation. The Soviet empire, for all its military might and its impressive territorial size, had come to an end.

Western leaders have praised Gorbachev for having allowed the democratic process towards independence, and for not having used full scale military force to prevent the Soviet empire from falling apart. However, some twenty years after these events, when researchers gained access to the archives of the Kremlin, it became clear that this leader was not as benign as the West had thought. In 1991 he indeed tried to crush the independence movements by armed force. As Red Army units were deployed, 143 people were killed in Azerbaijan, and fourteen in Lithuania. There were also violent confrontations in other Soviet republics. In the night of 8 April, a tragedy unfolded in the Georgian capital Tbilisi as Russian soldiers used sharpened spades and poison gas to break up a protest march in the city. During the following days twenty people were killed.

Be this as this may, military reaction to the independence movements was limited and given up rather quickly. The number of casualties is extremely low indeed, considering the enormous political change that was obtained.

### **The 'house of Europe' versus Eurasianism, from Gorbachev to Putin**

This section takes a closer look at Gorbachev's vision of the 'house of Europe', which stands in sharp contrast to the Eurasian vision of the current strong man of Moscow.

#### ***Idea of 'Europe'***

There exists among the peoples living on the continent of Europe a sense of belonging to a common cultural realm, of sharing common spiritual and cultural roots, of being 'brothers of destiny' through a common history and a common cultural heritage. This sense of togetherness or belonging to a larger whole than just one's national state, is called the 'idea of Europe'. This idea has emerged in the early Middle-Ages, and it has taken different forms in the past. Today, this idea still exists, also in different expressions.

For a detailed overview of the emergence and the development of this idea of Europe, see my book *Christian Faith and the Making of Europa, Yesterday and Today* (VTR, Nuernberg, 2021, second revised edition).

### ***Europe as a 'House'***

One idea of 'Europe' is that of a commonwealth or a family or a 'house' of nations. Instead of insisting on cultural resemblances, this idea considers that countries of Europe are bound together by a common history, a history that has not only divided them but also linked them intrinsically to each other. Given this historical 'togetherness' they have the responsibility, some would say destined, to overcome their 'fraternal' inhouse conflicts, to develop peaceful relations, to work together for the common good of all Europeans.

A 'house' is not just about physical space, but also about relationships. It is like a family; you don't choose your brothers and sisters; they are simply there. The idea of a house implies solidarity! French President Charles de Gaulle repeatedly stated that he was in favour of what he called a 'Europe of the nations.' The idea of Europe as a community of nations is only partly realised through the EU. Ideally, the 'house of nations' is larger than that.

The image of a house is associated with identity, and identity, in turn, is tied up with subjective feelings of belonging, with heritage and culture and opinions about 'Europeanness.' At this juncture, the delicate question arises how large this house really is. Does it suffice for a nation to be in geographical Europe or to have a foothold in it, in order to be reckoned as a member of this 'house?' Should other criteria perhaps come into consideration? Does Turkey belong to the 'house?' The latter is member of the Council of Europe. In Turkey, the secular state is separated from religious institutions. Nevertheless, many Europeans are persuaded that it has no place in the house as they conceive it. They point out that its largely Muslim population would destabilise the demography of Europe. They are concerned about the way in which the links between politics and Islam are tightened recently. We agree with Calvin Smith when he analyses: 'Chief among the concerns raised by those not favouring Turkish entry are its human rights abuses and the view that Turkish entry into the EU would no longer make this a union by virtue of its distinct cultural and religious identity.'<sup>11</sup>

Do Russia, Belarus and Ukraine belong to the house? Russian intellectuals and church leaders often insist that their nation should not be excluded. Given their history, their religion and their culture, they are intrinsically linked to the rest of Europe. Listen for example to what Metropolitan Mikhail Stakos of the Russian Orthodox Church said during an international conference in Istanbul, in 2000. Speaking about the contribution of the family of Orthodox churches to the construction of the 'house of Europe,' he insisted that 'we should bear in mind Europe as a whole, without national, local, political, cultural, economic, or religious discrimination.' He went on to say:

The fullness of the Church is found already in Europe. It belongs to Europe, and it forms Europe. If these basic thoughts were examined with a serious, critical disposition, then, certainly, the predominantly Western European world would come to accept the historical fact that the European reality, in other words Europe, includes Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism, just as much as it surrounds the Balkans, Turkey, Scandinavia, the Iberian Peninsula, Russia, and the Baltic States. In other words, from one end to the other – Northern, Southern, Western, Central, and Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Gorbachev***

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last secretary general of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1992, often spoke of Europe as a house of nations. From 1986 onwards, he and his government set in motion a process of openness (*glasnost*) to the rest of Europe and reform (*perestroika*) of the Soviet society. This was a major change of direction, and one of the factors that put an end

<sup>11</sup> Calvin SMITH, 'Evangelicals, the EU, Turkey and Europe's Religious Heritage'

<sup>12</sup> MIKHAIL STAKOS, 'The Contribution of Orthodoxy to the Course towards a United Europe.'

to the Cold War that had divided the continent into two opposing military alliances. What motivated this change? Besides economic reasons, there was also a clear political vision behind it. Instead of seeing Europe, and the rest of the world for that matter, through the lenses of international communism, Gorbachev considered that the Soviet countries on the European continent belong to 'the house of Europe'. In his speeches he often used this expression, insisting that these countries should be able to collaborate with other countries 'in our common house.' During a visit to Prague in April 1987 he declared:

We are resolutely against the division of the continent into military blocs facing each other, against the accumulation of military arsenals in Europe, against everything that is the source of the threat of war. In the spirit of the new thinking, we introduced the idea of the 'all-European house'... [which] signifies, above all, the acknowledgment of a certain integral whole, although the states in question belong to different social systems and are members of opposing military-political blocs standing against each other.<sup>13</sup>

In the following years he repeatedly spoke of this vision of peaceful coexistence within the European house, for instance in his address to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, July 6, 1989. In November of that same year, he was the first communist leader to meet with a Pope, in this case John Paul II. On his way to the Vatican, he gave a speech in Rome in which he outlined again the idea of the 'common European home' as 'a commonwealth of sovereign and economically interdependent nations.'<sup>14</sup>

### ***Change since 2000, Putin***

Clearly, the present rulers of the Kremlin no longer think in terms of the house of Europe, as they are creating a rival union between the Russian Federation and its neighbours, but this is another story.

In 2000, with the arrival of Vladimir Putin in power, a different wind began to blow. He and his government are less prone to seek collaboration with Western Europe than their predecessors. They consider the EU to be simply part of the Atlantic military alliance (NATO) dominated by the US. They were not at all pleased that the US extended its anti-missile network of launching bases to Poland and Romania. Even though NATO maintains that these bases were established to meet the threats of Iraq, Iran and Islamic terrorism in Central Asia, the Russia interpreted it as a threat to its position.

When Georgia no longer towed Moscow's line, asking to become member of NATO and opening its territory to US military presence, the Kremlin intervened. Apparently the Georgians had crossed a 'red line' they should have respected. In 2007, the Russians used an internal ethnic conflict in Georgia as a pretext to invade the country. Due to the intervention of French president Nicolas Sarkozy, acting president of the Council of Ministers of the EU, an armistice was agreed to, on the condition that the country remains in Moscow's sphere of influence.

Other incidents in recent years have confirmed that Moscow considers the countries east of the EU as being in its zone of influence; the cuts in the delivery of natural gas to Ukraine come to mind. While most Ukrainians, especially in the Russian-speaking east of the country, are opposed to joining NATO, a majority of the population is in favour. But Russia continues to woo the country into its own Eurasian Union, the alliance with Kazakhstan and Belarus, which is intended to comprise the whole of the former Soviet Union.

### ***Eurasianism***

The ideological approach underlying the creation of this economic and political union is Eurasianism. According to this political idea, there is a fundamental difference between

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Milan SVEC. 'The Prague Spring: 20 Years Later.' *Foreign Affairs*. Summer 1988.

<sup>14</sup> 'Chronology 1989; East-West Relations.' *Foreign Affairs*. Fall 1989–1990. pp. 230.

Western European culture, heavily influenced by the US, and Eastern European and Asian culture, of which Russia is the centre. Caroline Humphrey explains:

'Eurasia' has always been an idea directed against the influence of 'the West' in Russia, since it proposes that Russia is not in essence a European country but a unique civilisation, created by the union of the Slavic and the Turkish-Mongol steppe peoples. The idea re-emerged in metropolitan circles in the 1990s in response to the perceived failure of 'Western' models of democracy and capitalism in Russia. In contemporary versions, the key is the importance of 'the state.' For example, what distinguishes Russian history from that of Europe is that, in Russia, progress, and indeed all important initiatory action derives from the state and not from civil society, it comes down from above. The ideal state is not the exploiter but the protector of the poor and weak. Another key theme is the unity and equality of all the peoples in a common Eurasian 'super-nation,' which distinguishes it from the European colonial empires.<sup>15</sup>

This ideology seems to guide the policy of the current leaders in the Kremlin.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the border with the EU is increasingly becoming a Red Line that keeps two political realms apart. Running from the Black Sea in the south to the Arctic Sea in the north, it also includes the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, between Poland and Lithuania.

### ***Dugin***

This brings us back to Dugin, the target of the terrorist bomb that killed his daughter a few days ago. He is regularly referred to as "Putin's brain" in the Western press, but this is perhaps far too much honour for this public intellectual and regular TV talk show guest. There are many people in Russia who have far more influence on the leadership than he does and whose thinking feeds directly into policy.

But Dugin is a major proponent of Eurasianism, a political vision in bringing together the peoples of Eastern Europe and Central Asia under the leadership of the Russian people in a sort of revived Russian Empire.

For this, he has gained considerable interest in the West, which is enhanced by his fluent English and his mystical Russian appearance. He represents the belief, widely spread in Russia today, that there is a conflict between a decadent West and an at least partly resistant Russia. This creed probably goes back to the split with Western Christianity in 1054 but which enjoyed a revival under Soviet Marxism. Dugin also argues that it is a continuation of the conflict between land powers and sea powers which has characterized human history for millennia: today Russia versus America, yesterday Rome versus Carthage. He believes that the Russo-Ukrainian war is part of an irreconcilable ideological conflict between.

According to this approach, Eurasianism is the alternative to Europeanism, the political ideal of uniting the peoples in the 'house of Europe' in a structure of solidarity and collaboration, a unity in diversity, under a leadership shared by all its members.

## **Gorbachev and the Christian faith**

In this final section, I shortly address the question about Gorbachev and the Christian faith. His death has revived rumors that the last head of the officially atheist Soviet Union was a Christian convert.

### ***A 'closet believer'?***

Admittedly, Gorbachev had been more friendly to religion than most of his predecessors. His reformist principles of openness and restructuring, known as 'glasnost' or 'perestroika' helped end some draconian burdens on religious worship. His Cold War rival U.S. President Ronald Reagan was preoccupied with the idea that Gorbachev was a secret religious believer.

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<sup>15</sup> Caroline HUMPHREY, *Eurasia and the political imagination*, p. 264f.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. John BESEMERES, 'President Putin of Eurasia,' in *The Interpreter*, published by the Lower Institute of Foreign Policy 7 October 2011.

According to Reagan, who has met him personally during the Cold War, Gorbachev was a 'closet believer'.

What can we say about this?

Gorbachev and his wife Raisa have been baptized Christians in the Russian Orthodox Church, but they themselves depicted this as part of normal family custom at the time of their births. They did not baptize their daughter. In public he only expressed pantheistic views, saying in one interview that 'nature is my god'.

Raisa died of cancer in 1999 and her funeral included some Russian Orthodox rites. Her husband will be buried next to her grave in the cemetery of Moscow's Novodevichy Convent, where also Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, and various leading Russians have been buried. On the contrary, most Soviet leaders are buried at Red Square near the walls of the Kremlin.

Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader to visit the Vatican and had a meeting with Pope John Paul II in December 1989.

All of this raises the question how we should evaluate Gorbachev's positive attitude towards the Christian faith.

### ***A 'cultural Christian'***

In August 2000, television pastor interviewed Mikhail Gorbachev for nearly 30 minutes during a service at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, attended by some 4,500 worshipers. The interview was included in the *Hour of Power*, broadcast shortly afterwards in several countries around the world. Journalist David Neff wrote the following summary for *Christianity Today*.<sup>17</sup>

'They talked about religious freedom, human dignity, and the presence of Christian belief in his childhood home. He also reminisces about the end of the Cold War and the beginnings of *perestroika*. Speaking through a translator, a smiling, healthy-looking Gorbachev began by saying that "the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church is one of the most important gains of *perestroika*." He also explains his reasons for backing Russia's 1990 religious-freedom law and for deciding in 1989 to permit Schuller to broadcast a sermon on Russia's lone television channel. "We have to respect our people, and many of them are believers. ... There can be no freedom without spiritual freedom, without human beings being able to choose." Prompted by Schuller to reminisce about his mother's prayers, Gorbachev said that "practically all" his family "consisted of believers. And that was important," he added. His grandmother, he recalled, prayed and displayed Orthodox icons on an iconostasis in her home, while his grandfather, one of the first Communists in their village, displayed the portraits of Lenin and Stalin on an adjacent table. "That's how it was in real life," he said. "People did not desert faith, and faith did not desert people."

After the broadcast of this *Hour of Power*, David Neff had a telephone call with Schuller for some clarification. At that occasion, Pastor Schuller said that he believes that Gorbachev is only a 'cultural Christian'.

### ***At the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi***

In March 2008, various news reports, citing Italian news media, claimed that Gorbachev had kneeled for thirty minutes at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi during a visit, on which he was accompanied by his daughter Irina. The conservative British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reported that 'Mr. Gorbachev has acknowledged his Christian faith for the first time, during a surprise visit to pray at the tomb of St Francis of Assisi. Accompanied by his daughter Irina and spent half an hour on his knees in silent prayer at the tomb.'<sup>18</sup> This visit seems to confirm

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<sup>17</sup> David Neff, 'Gorbachev and God. In visit to the Crystal Cathedral, former Soviet leader won't say he doesn't believe.' *Catholic News Agency*, August 31, 2000

<sup>18</sup> 'Gorbachev admits he is a Christian', *The Daily Telegraph*, March 19, 2008.

decades of rumours that, although he was forced to publicly pronounce himself an atheist, he was in fact a Christian.

A journalist of the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* quoted Gorbachev as saying: 'St Francis is, for me, the alter Christus, the other Christ. His story fascinates me and has played a fundamental role in my life. It was through St Francis that I arrived at the Church, so it was important that I came to visit his tomb.'

Father Miroslavo Anuskevic, who accompanied the former Soviet leader, provided more information: 'He was not recognised by any of the worshippers in the church, and silently meditated at the tomb for a while. He seemed a man deeply inspired by charity and told me that he was involved in a project to help children with cancer. He talked a lot about Russia and said that even though the transition to democracy had been very important for the world, it was very painful for Russia. He said it was a country which has a great history, and also a great spirituality.'<sup>19</sup>

Again, what shall we make of this?

For one, Gorbachev himself has clearly rejected these reports. He told the Russian news service Interfax: 'Over the last few days some media have been disseminating fantasies — I can't use any other word — about my secret Catholicism, citing my visit to the Sacro Convento friary, where the remains of St. Francis of Assisi lie. To sum up and avoid any misunderstandings, let me say that I have been and remain an atheist.'<sup>20</sup>

According to a 2008 article in *The Chicago Tribune* Gorbachev is quoted as saying that he had visited St. Francis' tomb as a tourist, not a pilgrim, that he acknowledged that religion plays an important role in society and that he looked forward to visits to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim places of worship.

News accounts had claimed Gorbachev had referred to St. Francis as an *alter Christus*, Latin for 'another Christ.' The former Soviet leader had allegedly said he was fascinated by the life of St. Francis and claimed that the medieval saint's story 'has played a fundamental role in my life.'

In a reaction to these reports, a spokesman of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II said: 'He is still on his way to Christianity. If he arrives, we will welcome him.'

Perhaps that was the most and also the best thing one could have said while this man was still among the living. And from now on, we must leave at that.

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<sup>19</sup> Malcolm MOORE, 'Mikhail Gorbachev admits he is a Christian', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 March, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> See: Kevin JONES, *op. cit.*