Gorbachev Offers Global Perspective

A Visit with REEl Faculty
by David Ransel, Director, REEl

The visit to Indiana University by Mikhail Gorbachev in October was met with great warmth and enthusiasm by students and faculty alike. To all appearances, Gorbachev responded with equal warmth and energy. The Office of International Programs and the Russian and East European Institute (REEl) played important roles in planning the visit by Gorbachev and an entourage that included his daughter, Dr. Irina Gorbachev, and his well-known interpreter, Pavel Palazchenko.

One of the first activities was an appearance by Palazchenko in my introductory course on Russian history. The students were surprised and delighted to be able to question him in person about his work as an interpreter at many of the famous arms control summits involving Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Chancellor Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis. The Union Board invited Gorbachev in response to student requests to hear dignitaries speak on social issues that are relevant to the student body. Gorbachev is president and founder of The Gorbachev Foundation, non-partisan educational foundation, and of Green Cross International, a Swiss-based organization that focuses on global conflict prevention and preservation of the environment. Gorbachev enjoys speaking to university audiences. As he explained in a press conference preceding his lecture, "Speaking about the future of the world in this kind of company is, I think, the best thing I can do."

His lecture, "Peace in the 21st Century," did not disappoint the students. Talking on the themes of world stability and global environmental problems, he said that peace cannot be left only to politicians and scientists, and warned that "we have little time at our disposal—perhaps 30 or 40 years before the biosphere is beyond repair." He called for radical changes in attitudes, for practical efforts by citizens at the grass-roots
former Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Palazchenko discussed Gorbachev's role in Russian history and spoke of the joys and difficulties of mastering several foreign languages and being a high-level interpreter.

REEI hosted a Russian-language lunch for the distinguished entourage, much to Gorbachev's pleasure, as he could thus dispense with an interpreter and react directly in his own idiom. As we sat down to lunch, I pointed out that sitting just across from Gorbachev was Darrell Hammer, the author of one of the best known textbooks on Russian politics. Gorbachev shot back, "I'll bet he didn't predict the fall of the Soviet Union." Hammer leaned back calmly in his chair and asked if Gorbachev had himself foreseen the collapse. Gorbachev gave a full-throated laugh and allowed as indeed, no one had predicted it, neither Westerners nor he himself.

Other IU faculty at the table included Alexander Rabinowitch (History), Ben Eklof (Education), William Fierman (Inner Asian & Uralic NRC), Toivo Raun (Central Eurasian Studies), Dina Spechler (Political Science), and Nyusya Milman (Slavics). Discussion ran the gamut of important current and historical issues, focusing in particular on Gorbachev's ideas for reestablishing some kind of "soft" union, as he called it, of many of the former Soviet states. This goal, he admitted, could only be achieved over a long period of time by incremental increases in cooperation, but he considered it the only possible and desirable outcome. Fierman asked whether some former republics might become more integrated than others, suggesting that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were more likely to join than Uzbekistan. Gorbachev was confident that Uzbekistan would follow the lead of the other two in a new union with Russia.

Gorbachev was insistent that the Soviet Union never really had to break up in the first place. Far from accepting any responsibility for the collapse, he contended that he had worked hard to save the union up to the very end. When questions were posed about whether the Baltic States ever would have accepted such a solution, he made some vague remarks about communicating with the Lithuanian leader Vitautas Landsbergis, to the effect that he could approve some kind of continuing political organization. Gorbachev went on at some length about the new union that was already well along between Russia and Belarus. When I mentioned that not all was well with Belarus and that it was not a hopeful example for democratic development in the region, he agreed but said this was also probably not a lasting situation.

One of the more surprising claims made by Gorbachev had to do with the war in Chechnia. He saw it as entirely unnecessary. If the Russian government had only enlisted his services, he could have level, and for the creation of a future global society working together to help solve the world's many problems, because all nations will need to depend on one another. When asked in the question and answer period what legacy he would like to leave for the younger generation, he expressed his optimism. "This new generation will be a happy one, but you must forge it, you must create it, and you must be luckier, wiser, kinder, and more understanding."

Gorbachev had accepted to make IU the first stop on his two-week U.S. lecture tour not only because of its large student body, but because of the international prominence of its Russian and East European Institute (REEI). As part of his schedule, he had an exclusive lunch with REEI faculty in an open-ended discussion of many issues (see accompanying story by David Ransel). Other activities included a tour of the university's new "virtual reality" system, Computer Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE), for a virtual tour of the cosmos,

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- Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the Soviet Union

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Even the most conservative estimates place the number of former Alfonso advisees in the thousands. A few hundred advisees every year for 22 years allows this spirited academic advisor to lay claim to a visible legacy of success. "International students are incredibly successful here," says Alfonso. "And that's because they are committed, conscientious workers. They develop a community that supports them in their work and they really rely on one another."

But junior computer science and mathematics student Dennis Ramawy of Indonesia is quick to credit Alfonso with a significant portion of his success at IUB. "Medy takes care of us," says Ramawy. "She looks out for us and listens to us and guides us. And not just during the first two years. That's why we keep coming back to her for guidance and support. Medy is a very important part of the international student experience at IU."

As Alfonso's advisees complete their second year at IUB, they move from the University Division to the different schools within the university. "Business is the biggest draw," says Alfonso. "That school is one of the things that brings international students to IU." The School of Music also attracts significant numbers.

"But no matter where I go, I always come back to Medy," says Ramawy. "She's like a mom." Fellow junior, Alfonsa Apityarini, agrees. "She is just so helpful to all of us. We owe her so much."

Alfonso anticipates finishing her career at IU. She believes it only makes sense to continue working at the place that has meant so much to her over the years. "I love my job," she says with genuine enthusiasm. "I have been blessed with a wonderful family, at home and at school. What more could I ask for?"

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including a fly-by of the Mir space station, to the delight of the Gorbachev entourage. At the Lilly Library, they viewed rare books, Americana, and a real-estate document signed by Peter the Great, among other treasures. The entourage also visited the Musical Arts Center and saw the Thomas Hart Benton murals.

Following his evening lecture, Gorbachev was hosted by Patrick O'Meara, dean for International Programs, at a reception held at the Lilly Library. There he was introduced to University Chancellor Herman B Wells, whose vision in the '40s and '50s was so crucial to developing internationally focused research centers at IU like REEL. Gorbachev also heard a musical performance in Russian of an aria from Eugene Onegin and a song by Rachmaninov, sung by tenor Tod Kowallis, a student of Virginia Zeani of the School of Music.

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have quickly mediated the growing conflict. "I lived down there and understand the mountain people," he said. "I could have settled the affair." This remark, typical of Gorbachev's supreme self-confidence, was clearly aimed at his rival, Boris Yeltsin.

Rabinovich asked about members of Gorbachev's family, and of his wife Raisa's family, who had fallen victim to the Stalinist purges. Gorbachev's voice fell as he noted their fates without much elaboration.

Just before Gorbachev's tour, the Russian government had passed a law restricting the free exercise of religion. I asked Gorbachev about it and he spoke at some length about his own better law on religious freedom, but he felt that the new law was an understandable although "exaggerated response" to the problem of unfamiliar religious cults. The Japan-based terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo has a branch in Siberia, and there are other potentially dangerous religious groups. To my reply that the law restricted perfectly respectable religions as well, he responded that he thought the law would be a temporary matter.

At the lunch, Gorbachev never let on that he might have made some mistakes during his time in power. Following his public address that evening, however, he was asked if he had any regrets about decisions he had made during his chairmanship and presidency in the Soviet Union. He replied that on a few things he wished he had acted differently. He felt that the biggest mistake had been that the reforms were begun too late, after the opponents of reform had already had time to organize. This matter, in his judgment, was the greatest failing of his regime during perestroika. "We could have coped with the other things," he concluded.

He said that his regrets mostly related to the handling of inter-ethnic problems. He spoke of the crushing of the uprising in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in December of 1986, and regretted the damage that these actions had done to inter-ethnic relations and to the chance for successful reforms: "We acted on the basis of the old logic in dealing with ethnic conflict and missed the opportunity of doing things differently. Had we done things differently then [in Almaty] we would probably have responded differently to inter-ethnic problems later."

In his televised address at the IU Auditorium, Gorbachev acknowledged the failure of Soviet utopian ideas, but urged the West not to force on the rest of the world a benign hegemony based in our own utopian ideas.