

# GORBACHEV

HIS LIFE AND TIMES

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Life and Times*  
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WILLIAM TAUBMAN

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

# A Revolution!

## Depicting Gorbachev: William Taubman in Profile

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

One day in November 1985, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who had just met with President Ronald Reagan at the Geneva Summit, was giving a standard press conference, when, in the middle of an otherwise forgettable statement, he looked into the sea of reporters and flashing cameras and said that the Soviet Union's security depended on the United States also feeling secure. Watching on television from his home in Amherst, Massachusetts, William Taubman (Russian Institute '65; Ph.D., '69) leapt out of his seat. "That was a revolution!" he said to his wife, Jane. "That single sentence!"

Gorbachev's tenure had just begun, but he had already distinguished himself from his predecessors. Not only was he significantly younger and more dynamic but also he had proposed reforms—perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness)—that would revamp his country's economy and policy, while

adding a previously unthinkable level of transparency and accountability to the Soviet system. And now he was allowing that the entire standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States was no longer a zero-sum proposition. "It was a total reversal of a key axiom of Soviet thinking," Taubman told me recently.

Taubman, a political scientist, derived his insights into the Soviet Union from decades of research and travel. He'd been going there since the 1960s, but visits to Moscow during Gorbachev's first years made him anxious to experience, firsthand, how the new leadership was affecting the lives of ordinary citizens. So, in January 1988, he and Jane, a Russianist, moved to Moscow, with their two children, for a five-month academic exchange sponsored by IREX (International Research & Exchanges Board). Taubman would work at the Academy of Sciences, and Jane at Moscow State University (MGU).

Immediately after arriving, the couple felt skeptical about the extent to which Gorbachev's reforms could transform the system. They lived in a standard two-room apartment building on Ulitsa Gubkina. Every day, it seemed, they encountered long lines at food stores and overwhelming bureaucracy. But when they left Russia in June, they concluded that the "Moscow Spring," their term for this period of Gorbachev's reforms, "may prove to be more revolutionary than the Russian Revolution itself."

The quote is the opening sentence of *Moscow Spring* (Summit Books), a book the Taubmans coauthored about their experiences in the USSR. At the time of publication, in 1989, the couple had no way of knowing that, nearly two decades later, they would return to Moscow to interview Gorbachev, alone in his office, about his life, his career, and the events that had precipitated the demise of the Soviet Union.

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A sunny late-winter morning. Taubman—a tall, fair-skinned man with a booming voice and a friendly, inquisitive demeanor—sits in a magenta chair in his daughter’s Brooklyn home. He is in town from Amherst for the 2017 National Book Critics Circle Awards. His biography, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (W. W. Norton & Company), is one of five finalists for the category, and this evening he will be attending the awards ceremony with his wife and family. (The last of his books to be nominated—a 2003 biography of Nikita Khrushchev—won the award. It also received a 2004 Pulitzer Prize.)

Taubman leans back and recalls Moscow in 1988: long lines accumulating at the newsstands every morning, Muscovites eagerly waiting to buy thick, previously neglected liberal literary journals like *Novy mir* (New World), magazines like *Ogonyok* (Little Light), and liberal newspapers like *Argumenty i fakty* (Arguments and Facts). Millions of people devouring publications that divulged the atrocities of the Stalin era. Atrocities that, just a couple of years prior, had only been written about in samizdat (self-published and clandestinely distributed literature). In *Moscow Spring*, the Taubmans compare the Moscow of that period to a seminar “where, miracle of miracles, everyone had done the reading.” Taubman brings up the parallel today, too. “A whole damn city, and everybody was reading everything.”

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The period was exciting, but it was also riddled with tension. Party leader Nikita Khrushchev had attempted to liberalize the Soviet Union more than two decades prior, and he was eventually silenced by hardliners and removed from office. No one knew whether Gorbachev’s reforms would meet the same fate. “We lived on tenterhooks, constantly filled with suspense,” Taubman recalls. “What was going on? Would it last?”

Taubman became fascinated with the Soviet Union as a child. Perhaps the fascination arose from the stories passed down from his maternal grandparents, who had immigrated to the United States from Mykolaiv,

a Ukrainian city near the Black Sea, or maybe it emerged because of his parents, who had traveled to the Soviet Union during the 1930s and instilled in him an avid interest in world politics. Either way, Taubman was a “news junkie” from an early age and clearly remembers the headline announcing Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953.

Stalin had always been something of a puzzle to Taubman. Dating back to his adolescence, Taubman wanted to understand the process by which the leader had turned the utopian vision of Karl Marx—“this kind of heaven on earth”—into a “killing ground.” He read avidly about Soviet life and studied Russian language

and history as an undergrad at Harvard University. Then, he enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate in Columbia's Department of Political Science. In 1964, during his second year in the program, he finally saw the Soviet Union for himself. Part of Indiana University's summer language program, the trip was a whirlwind tour during which Taubman and his colleagues visited nine Soviet cities, including Moscow, Riga, and Donetsk, and faced a barrage of questions from Soviet citizens. He left there in awe of the Soviets' insatiable interest in the United States.

The following academic year, Taubman returned for a longer, less chaotic experience as a student at Moscow State. He lived in the dorms, worked on his dissertation about the mechanics of governing Soviet cities, and attempted to get to know his Soviet counterparts. But no matter how much time he spent with his peers, Taubman found it difficult to truly get inside their heads. He always wondered, What are people really thinking? He returned from the exchange, postponed his dissertation, and sat down to write a memoir about his year at MGU. The resulting book, *The View from Lenin Hills: Soviet Youth in Ferment*, was published by Coward-McCann in 1967. Taubman was twenty-six years old.

The desire to understand the Soviet mentality remained at the forefront of Taubman's work. Decades later, it would be the guiding force behind his Gorbachev biography: What was Gorbachev really thinking as he rose up through the ranks of the Communist Party? How did others perceive him? And what went through his

mind as he precipitated the demise of the very system that had brought him to power?

When he began his career, Taubman never imagined that he would become a biographer. In 1967, he joined Amherst College's political science department, a rewarding job that came with its own challenges. Teaching, which he had not been prepared for as a student, was more difficult than he had anticipated. And the field of political science was quite different from what he had envisioned. At Harvard, he had been exposed to a qualitative approach to the discipline. When he chose to pursue it in graduate school, he expected to study "contemporary history." And, at Columbia's Russian Institute, that is precisely what he did. His professors, many of whom had entered academia after careers in government or journalism, had been "observers of the contemporary Soviet Union," rather than theoreticians or quantitatively oriented scholars.

But as soon as Taubman departed from student life, he realized that, in the broader context of political science, the theoretical and quantitative approach overshadowed the qualitative one. And it unmoored him. "For a long time, I tried to be what I thought a political scientist should be," he confessed to me over the phone last February.

For the next decade, Taubman struggled to find book ideas that would both capture his interest and stay within the parameters of his field. He considered writing political philosophy, but felt no spark; he edited a book of commentary on U.S. foreign policy, which he enjoyed.



(Top, left to right) William Taubman and Mikhail Gorbachev. Bottom: Mikhail Gorbachev, Jane Taubman, and William Taubman. Photos by Phoebe Taubman (2007).





William Taubman. Photo by Michele Stapleton.

Then, in the late 1970s, he started a book project on the debate about the origins of the Cold War. While researching, he discovered a series of transcripts, published by the U.S. government, from the negotiations between Stalin and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Instantly hooked, he adjusted the topic of his book. The resulting work, *Stalin's American Policy: From Entente to Detente to Cold War*, came out with W. W. Norton in 1982, and, Taubman said, "it really amounted to history."

He wanted to do something similar for his next project and decided to research Khrushchev's U.S. policy. There were few primary sources available on the subject, and what he found most interesting was the material about Khrushchev as a person. But he pitched a Khrushchev U.S. policy book to W. W. Norton anyway. They

suggested he write a biography of Khrushchev instead.

Taubman was initially taken aback. "I had never written a biography," he told me. "I hadn't even read that many biographies." But he decided to give it a try. Instantly, he felt rewarded. The more he researched, the more engrossed he became in trying to understand the driving forces behind Khrushchev's behavior and decision-making. "I discovered a three-dimensional person with all his shrewdness, intelligence, crudeness, and insecurity."

Taubman spent nearly two decades on the book. Ten years in, he developed chronic fatigue syndrome. It got so bad he had to write in ten-minute intervals, resting on the floor between paragraphs. But he never considered stopping. "I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it," he said. He published the biography, in 2003, to critical acclaim. Then it won the Pulitzer. More than three decades into his career, Taubman had tapped into his passion.

The first time Taubman interviewed Mikhail Gorbachev, in April 2007, Gorbachev was talking about his childhood in the small southern Russian village of Privolnoe, when, completely unprompted, he launched into a detailed personal narrative about his mother, Maria Gopkalo. She was a tough, illiterate peasant whose relationship with the hyperintellectual and analytical Gorbachev had been rather strained. And so, Gorbachev hadn't devoted much interview time to her, preferring to discuss

his father and his maternal grandparents, with whom he'd been very close. But suddenly he was recalling an incident from early adolescence, when his mother, the family disciplinarian, once again picked up a belt to whip him. This time, instead of acquiescing, Gorbachev grabbed her arm and pulled it away, saying, "That's it! No more!" She burst into tears. "I was the last object she could control," Gorbachev told Taubman.

Taubman felt that he had struck gold. "I remember thinking, Aha! Aha! So she whipped him; she treated him this way; this must have meant that he desperately needed affirmation and adoration, which he could get as a political leader!" Later, when Taubman shared his theory with Jane, who was helping him with the research and had been present at the interview, she challenged his thinking. "Don't leap to conclusions," she said. "We don't know that yet." In the end, Taubman agreed. He mentions the incident in the book, but shies away from lending it great weight.

It is this approach—a presentation of the facts without overpsychologizing or nudging the reader to oversimplified causalities—that allows Taubman to portray Gorbachev as a complex and often contradictory character; a man who is arrogant and humble, conservative and liberal, and endlessly devoted to his wife as he prioritizes his political ambitions above her well-being and personal career satisfaction.

Taubman makes the relationship between Gorbachev and his

wife, Raisa, a prominent theme in the biography. We follow the couple from the moment Gorbachev notices her at a university ballroom dance—she pays no attention to him—through their courtship, the various stages of their marriage, and, of course, his political career, in which she participated until she died of leukemia in 1999.

Taubman's focus on the relationship makes sense—Raisa was a sensation. Unlike the wives of previous Soviet leaders, who tended to dress drably and remain largely invisible, and who always seemed subdued and expressionless when they did appear in public, Raisa was, Taubman told me, “a real first lady—intelligent, sophisticated, tastefully dressed, elegant in every way.” But what was most shocking, he said, was that Gorbachev involved her in state affairs. Within months of his ascent to power, “She [had] pretty obviously become one of his main advisers.”

As Taubman spoke about this relationship, I found it hard not to notice the parallels between Gorbachev and Raisa and Taubman and his own wife. Like Raisa with Gorbachev, Jane has been instrumental in Taubman's career. And, like Raisa with Gorbachev, Jane did not look up when, during his second year at Amherst, Taubman walked into the room where she was sitting. Taubman took her aloofness as a challenge and “spent the evening trying to evoke her interest.” What finally “won her heart,” he told me, was his impression of the announcer from Moscow Radio.

They've been inseparable since.

Morning has turned to afternoon at Taubman's daughter's home. Jane comes down the stairs and sits on the couch. She is a tall, dignified woman, with closely cropped white hair and stylish earrings.

“Bill is getting tired,” she says, shaking her head. “He can talk about this stuff forever, but he needs to eat.”

Taubman smiles and agrees to wrap up our interview. Behind them is a wall of photographs: their daughter's wedding; their grandchildren; a young Taubman, full head of curly blonde hair, looking down lovingly at a young Jane.

In 2007, when Taubman and Jane arrived at Leningradsky Prospekt and entered the modern building that housed the Gorbachev Foundation, they wondered whether their first interview with Gorbachev would be their last. Through Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev's close confidant and former foreign policy adviser, Taubman had received Gorbachev's tacit support on the biography project, but he had never officially asked the former leader for his permission.

To hedge his worries and allay his nerves, Taubman prepared a strategy. He would begin his questions with something that Gorbachev had already said, thereby proving he'd done his homework and encouraging Gorbachev to say something new. And he'd start at the beginning of Gorbachev's life, ensuring that there would be big, crucial topics, like perestroika, that they couldn't cover in the first interview.

But the tension dissipated the moment he and Jane sat down

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with Gorbachev around the long, rectangular conference room table. Gorbachev, wearing short sleeves and allowing the couple to interview him in Russian, without the presence of an interpreter, was warm and informal.

“We felt entirely comfortable in his presence,” recalled Taubman. And his tactics worked: Gorbachev granted them seven more interviews.

I test my theory—that, with their various collaborations and utter devotion to one another, Taubman and Jane resemble Gorbachev and Raisa.

Taubman pauses. “You know, it's possible that my showing up for that first interview with my wife may have helped to convince Gorbachev that I was a good guy who would do an objective job.” ■