Writing means saying something in a way that it actually is not. Because everyone knows that the writer only provides insight into the state of his reality. If what is written were nothing more than a reflection of the real we could stop communicating with one another, for we would only see the same things and would be sentenced to death by boredom. Historians thus provide information about the present by deciding how they want to see the past. They know that their research says nothing about the state of the world as such, but rather how it can be seen. Everyone should be happy with their own story. Once this is acknowledged, one can return to one’s desk and write down sentences that make for a readable text. Because a historian without a readership has lied for nothing.

The text does not belong to the author. It belongs to the reader, who can deal with it as he pleases. Every reader reads his own text. Manfred Hildermeier, however, would have liked to have read a different text, for he criticised the author for writing something that is «one-sided» in its unambiguousness and on the edge of what can be proven. Whoever is concerned with impact and good wording alone – this seems to be the gist of the remark – has nothing serious to say either. Mark Kramer on the other hand did not read an essay but a research paper with some gaps, yet he did not find any fundamental flaws in the theses contained therein. And so he proceeds to tutor the criticised via the footnotes. The things that the author could have written down if only he had known what the critic knows! Alexei Filitov seems to have been the only one who read the text as the author understood it. He reproaches the author for not writing a better – rather than a different – text, a text in which examples and arguments would have been in greater concurrence.

All critics are right in their own way: the text is one-sided because it wants to take up a standpoint that differs from others. Had he presented all arguments ever recited about this subject, this essay would have become a research paper, and the text as such would have been incomplete. It is complete as an essay because it only conveys what is of relevance to the plausibility of the arguments. Whoever chal-
lenges life in writing must be selective in what he wants to recount. This is why the
art of narration lies in restriction, for one can only tell of what makes sense in the
story one wants to bring on paper. And yet I could have recited all the arguments
against my interpretation of events myself. But then there would not only be no
criticism and no objections; the author would have been forced to violate the most
basic principle of narration: thou shalt not bore!

Was perestroika an expression of a crisis or did it precipitate this crisis in the
first place? This question can be answered in a number of ways. In this case, the
answer depends on the premises preceding the question. I am not interested in the
state of the world as such, but rather how people perceive it. There is no gaping
chasm opening up between representation and reality which would need to be
overcome. Reality is comprehended reality; hence reality cannot be separated from
its interpretation. Therefore my only answer could have been: a crisis that is not
perceived as such is not a crisis. But Manfred Hildermeier considers such a diagno-
sis to be devious. Even what appears to have been a crisis in hind-sight constitutes a
crisis. How is this sentence to be understood? My reading is as follows. What histo-
rions consider to be impertinent must also have been impertinent for contempo-
raries. If this were the case, we could ignore the life stories of historical people.
They would have to remain silent and would no longer be able to challenge the
interpretations of historians. But without the power of veto from sources, history
would be nothing more than prose, because it would merely be staging what histo-
rions have thought up about the past.

Before perestroika had even begun, says Hildermeier, Soviet citizens had been
shaking their heads over the ubiquitous corruption. But was the giving and taking
in a society of scarcity really impertinent to them? Were the abysmal performance
level of the Soviet economy and the squandering of resources cause for outrage?
And did Soviet citizens demand due legal process and democratic order to trans-
form scarcity into abundance? If it were so, there would be no end to the head-
shaking, even in post-Soviet Russia. Because everyone knows that while socialism
as an economic order had vanished from life, corruption and the squandering of
resources had not. And with the exception of the Baltic republics, the end of the
Soviet command economy did not spell the end of authoritarian regimes. Russia’s
top achievers were most notable among those who arranged themselves with its
«steered democracy». In Hildermeier’s reality, however, they should have become
democrats and critics.

Of course perestroika was not just a product of fantasy. It was, first and fore-
most, an answer to the actual crisis experienced by Gorbachev and his advisors. But
because they saw what others did not, they were free to do what was decided upon.
No one opposed their plans, because it blended into the rhetoric of the old regime.
They promised that everything would remain the same. Life would merely become
more pleasant. Still no one had really understood that the brave new world of
capitalism could not be had without performance and competition, which is why there was great disappointment once it became possible to speak nothing but the truth but buy only very little. Hildermeier, though, confuses competition with performance. People competed for scarce resources in the clientele society of the late Soviet Union by exchanging favours; however, they did not render any performance to bring them into their possession. Why should they, as the end of the Soviet Union carried the end of social security in its wake, have put their faith in the forces of the free market?

What could be experienced in the decades preceding the end of the Soviet Union only becomes understandable if one conceives of it as an answer to a crisis that had been created by violent Stalinist rule. Khrushchev’s de-Stalinisation was the greatest civilisational achievement of the twentieth century, because it restored the pride of the people who had been affected by the terror. The late Soviet Union was a welfare state whose citizens were poor and had to live in a dictatorship, but at no point in time did democracy and the lifestyle of the West provide the benchmarks for people’s wishes and needs. And this is why dissent remained isolated, not because it was unable to make itself heard, but rather because it failed to find ears willing to hear its truths. The intelligentsia had exposed the lie and delegitimised the Soviet state, writes Hildermeier. Because it had reminded the regime of unfulfilled promises and raised awareness of the fact that while the party leadership spoke of life in abundance, it was merely administering scarcity. But who was really interested in these truths? Indeed, citizens of the Soviet Union lived in a society of scarcity, although life in the seventies was better than it had been two decades earlier. Hence living conditions in the West can in no way provide the benchmark against which it would be possible to measure what was considered to be a hardship in the Soviet Union. Hildermeier’s reformers would have had to break with the old order in order to succeed.

In truth, however, neither Khrushchev nor Gorbachev had options. They could only achieve their aims with – rather than against – the old order, because there was no alternative. Gorbachev failed because he threatened the clientele-relationships within the apparatuses and ultimately put his own power on the line. There could be no successful reform against the Communist Party. The reformers would have had to democratise the Communist Party, says Alexei Filitov, so as to mobilise the intellectual forces for change in the Soviet Union. Instead, Gorbachev destroyed all structures that would have made it possible for him to succeed.

Historians are not judges, nor are they prophets. They want to understand what people have done. I am not interested in whether or not the Chinese way would have been a better solution, but rather why it was not a viable option for Soviet elites. For Gorbachev was neither a master nor a prisoner of destiny. He could have changed his mind at any given time. Yet he preferred to combine economic liberalisation with the democratisation of the political order, and not because he saw a
connection between the market and democracy that others did not. Hildermeier claims that the Soviet state had been so closely intertwined with socialism as an organisational principle of society and the economy as the Tsarist order had been with the estate system. Chinese Socialism, on the other hand, had been inconceivable. There are several arguments against this interpretation: Why did the Russian Federation remain a multi-ethnic unitary state under authoritarian rule, even after the end of Socialism? Why did the states in Central Asia want to remain part of the empire, even in the capitalist order? An interpretation that fails to distinguish between lip-service and ideological zeal knows no answers to these questions. Yesterday’s Communists are today’s entrepreneurs. Back then, they had no qualms about leaving their principles at the door like clothes at a wardrobe, and even now they have no guilty conscience when they proclaim things they had condemned two decades ago. Vladimir Putin, Heydar Aliyev, Alexander Lukashenko and Nursultan Nazarbayev – if one were to ask these men which order they would prefer to live in, their answer would be: capitalism, though not in a democracy. So why could the Soviet Union not have gone the Chinese way? This path was not taken because Gorbachev was unwilling to take it and because the Communist elites believed, for a short period of time, that the key to the Union’s salvation lay in its dissolution and democratisation. This alone made the empire’s disintegration possible in the first place: because the party leaders in the republics realised that they now had to legitimise themselves via references to the nation after Gorbachev had shifted the centre of power out into the regions through elections. Filitov is right in saying that the Soviet Union had been a multi-ethnic empire in which the interests of one nation could be aligned with the interests of the other. It was no ethnic dunce – how else could one understand the fact that the old elites lost none of their power, even at the periphery. No earlier than the crisis precipitated by Gorbachev’s perestroika did parting with the empire become an option. Before the beginning of perestroika there had merely been a crisis in the republics that was experienced as a serious hardship. Mark Kramer speaks of the effects of assimilation. But he fails to provide an answer to the question of why the assimilated no longer wanted to remain within the empire after the end of the Soviet Union. The answer is simple: one could be Azerbaijani, Latvian and Ukrainian and be a citizen of the Soviet Union at the same time. Only a small number of people considered this to be a tragic contradiction. When the empire disintegrated, Soviet citizens remained what they were: Azerbaijanis, Latvians and Ukrainians. Were it not for the existence of these nations, none of the party leaders in the republics would have been able to play the nationalist card against the empire.

Without the end of the cold war, writes Filitov, there would have been no perestroika. Democratic reforms would have been suppressed under the pretext that they would serve the enemy and weaken the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had probably also understood that the success of his undertaking depended on détente on the
European continent. Certainly, one could not be achieved without the other. One could also say that the end of the cold war was both a prerequisite for and a consequence of perestroika. It delegitimised the military industrial complex and opened up a space for action in which old certainties in both East and West were shattered.

Was Gorbachev a driven man who merely yielded to constraints and was overrun by the dynamism of events, or was he the driving force behind what was taking place? Historians have given different answers to this question. Kramer’s answer is as follows: Gorbachev meant for nothing more than to reform Socialism and preserve the unity of the Socialist camp at all costs. But events took on a life of their own and eluded the control of the participants. Gorbachev had become a radical reformer against his own will. Surely, Gorbachev could not have known what would happen when he set out to change the Soviet Union. Whoever allows criticism must reckon with the fact that it will be seized upon by critics, and already the situation changes. One is no longer in control of events. That is the situation of perestroika. Yet how are we to know if Gorbachev merely sought to reform the Socialist system? Kramer’s answer to this question is unsatisfactory: because Gorbachev had always spoken of brotherly solidarity and the unity of the Socialist brother states in public. What other choice did he have, apart from expressing the wish for change in the usual language and rituals? Politicians play roles and they peak in formulas which convey a feeling of familiarity to the addressee. The Communist cosmos was all that stood at Gorbachev’s disposal; there was no other space for his legitimisation. Before Gorbachev, all Soviet politicians spoke in the same manner but had not acted accordingly. Whoever spoke of socialism with a human face in 1989 took it to mean nothing more than what had still been a matter of course for Communists of the year 1968. In short: if one wants to know what people want, then one may not confuse the form of what is said with its content.

Historical interpretations are reasonable forgeries of reality; they are interpretations of interpretations – not depictions of real events. Whatever we may have written, in the end it all solely depends on which story readers hold to be plausible and which stories they will favour.

Translated from German by Ivo Komljen

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