MEETING GORBACHEV

A Film by Werner Herzog and André Singer

“I have to take an audience through my camera very deep into the heart of men or women, and that’s what I do.”

Werner Herzog
Introduction:

Mikhail Gorbachev changed the world – yet remains largely a mystery.

As the world headed towards the end of the 20th century the fundamental schism that divided world politics remained firmly entrenched. The massive, impenetrable power of the Soviet bloc seemed unshakeable, its determination to oppose the values of the United States and the West implacable. Change seemed impossible.

Yet, within the space of a few months, the whole Soviet edifice tumbled. The Soviet nations gained their independence, Russia began to open up to the world and US-Soviet relations turned upside down. As our own world is gripped by a spate of rapid political developments in America and Europe, as an unsettled Russia looks to change its role and face-offs in the east threaten a new conflict, this story of a sudden reversal of political certainties nearly thirty years ago becomes of more pressing contemporary interest.
The unthinkable cataclysm that was the collapse of the Soviet Union was the work of just one extraordinary man. Rising from an unknown farm boy to become the youngest ever member of the Politburo and then President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev brought about changes that set the world reeling.

How did he do it? How did he prevail against the entrenched cadre of leaders whose every political fibre was directed towards the preservation and promotion of the USSR? And how did his actions then impact on our world today?
Another remarkable man is determined to find out. **Werner Herzog**, famed for his unusual yet penetrating interviews, talks to Gorbachev nearly thirty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Herzog wants to understand the man as well as the politician and after a long period of reflection and consideration Gorbachev is ready to share his thoughts and feelings. It is a story of enormous gains and disastrous pitfalls – a rollercoaster career veering from the highest office of state to a sordid kidnapping. What does he think he got right and which things went dreadfully wrong? The path towards *perestroika* and *glasnost* was not always smooth; Gorbachev made mistakes, which he willingly admits. Amongst other things, he underestimated Boris Yeltsin, whom he supported, and who ultimately betrayed him: "I was probably too liberal and democratic as regards Yeltsin. I should have sent him as ambassador to Great Britain or maybe a former British colony".

In his twilight years (he is 86 this year and increasingly fragile) Gorbachev’s perspective and reflections are as sharp as ever; he is less cautious in his responses than in the past and ready to reveal his final conclusions. With this interview and access to a new and unseen personal archive we can begin to build a new picture of this enigmatic Russian, and gain new understanding of a period of change whose repercussions still affect our daily lives.
While this extraordinary yet private man remained somehow separate to those around him, many contemporary figures thought they knew what made up his complex personality. The years of distance have made politicians of the time more ready to disclose notes and transcripts, as well as personal recollections. We go to them for their first-hand accounts of events and insight into the Gorbachev they knew. International politicians took differing views; was Gorbachev an inspired and gifted leader or an accidental hero? Did he end the Cold War, avert civil war and open the door for better relations with the USA – or was he a tragic, failed reformer who killed the dream of socialism and condemned Russia to a new legacy of autocracy and bitter US relations? Certainly his own story did not end well; some have portrayed him as a Shakespearian hero, comparing him to Lear, who lost his kingdom. Now, with an atmosphere of political uncertainty in both Russia and the United States, it is more important than ever to understand Gorbachev’s legacy.

In our film, Gorbachev reflects on the implications of his actions for the development of US-Russian relations in the world of Trump and Putin. Did his story facilitate the rise of distinctive, non-traditional leaders such as Trump and Macron? For generations who lived through this extraordinary era, and for later generations who knew hardly anything of it, this film provides a vital perspective.
The essence of our film will be to understand the man behind the events and to look at them through his eyes. Contrasting with that will be those who worked with (or against) him. Only people who knew him or took part in what happened during his leadership will be interviewed for the film and they will enhance the rich and often unique archive footage of events, both public and private.

Other planned interviews include former Secretary of State George P. Shultz, former British PM John Major, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Polish President Lech Walesa.

Newly released transcripts of conversations between Gorbachev and world leaders including Reagan, Bush, Thatcher, Kohl, and Pope John Paul II will be voiced by actors to give an immediacy and flavour of the times, issues and events with which Gorbachev was dealing.

We’ll look not just in the public arena but into Gorbachev’s household and personal life where, until her death in 1999, his wife Raisa played such a significant role. Seeing him in the context of his family both then and now is a crucial and very moving part of this complex picture.
“I rely on my experience in life, and I can read the heart. I do understand the heart of men.” Werner Herzog

The Herzog-Gorbachev discussion will shape the body of the film. Questions from Herzog about Gorbachev’s role in the past and his worries about the present will be the paths that Herzog will travel as the picture fills out, with all its light and shade, its detail and its colour.

• **Gorbachev to Bush**: “None of us is responsible for the division of Germany. History occurred this way. Let history continue to decide on this issue in the future. It seems to me we have developed an understanding in this regard”.

• **Bush to Gorbachev**: “I believe that in his actions Helmut Kohl was greatly influenced by an emotional reaction to events. Kohl knows that some Western allies who pay lip service to reunification when the people of Germany support it are [actually] quite upset by the prospect”.

• **Gorbachev to Bush**: “Let history decide how the process will develop and what it will lead to in the context of a new Europe and a new world.”
The early road to power

After the deaths of three leading Party figures (Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko) in five years, 1985 sees the election of the youngest ever First Secretary of the Communist Party. 54-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev becomes the most powerful man in the Soviet Union – and immediately begins to break with the past.

But how did he get there? This scene-setting section will look back at the circumstances of Gorbachev’s meteoric rise from young farm-worker from Stavropol Krai (in the Caucasus) to Secretary General - ready to transform the USSR...

Herzog: I’m a German, and the first German that you probably met wanted to kill you!

Gorbachev: My grandfather was head of a collective farm, and he suggested that we go to see our neighbours. I loved those neighbours, because they had a store with amazing cookies... My impression of the Germans was that only good people can make such wonderful cookies...

Gorbachev: How many years have you been in film-making?
Herzog: Since I was 19. So, over 50 years.
Gorbachev: I went into politics when I was in 10th grade!
Perestroika, Glasnost, Democracy

“The desire to reform, the desire for perestroika was the result of our internal needs”

The faltering USSR economy eases the way for Gorbachev’s introduction of the policies of perestroika and glasnost. Swayed by his charisma, an uncertain Communist Party permits the new broom to set the scene for new expectations - both at home and abroad. Over the next months a new team (including Boris Yeltsin) is put in place to transform the Empire.

Once in office, Gorbachev's changes come thick and fast; there's a new, two-party parliament, and fresh elections as more power devolves to local Soviets. Soviet history is revised, Stalin for the first time criticised, and a major speech at the United Nations reveals the new road map to the world.

However, the decisive Party Congress in June 1988 which was intended to herald democratic reform followed increasing major ethnic and regional upheavals in Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia, which together threatened to undermine Gorbachev’s position on perestroika.

Gorbachev: “I think what we were doing had a certain direction, and that direction was change. More democracy. And that was first and the most important thing. I also wanted more socialism.”
The tragedy of Chernobyl early into his tenure cruelly exposes the deficiencies of the existing system. It’s a major blow to the prestige of the Soviet Union both at home and abroad, as entrenched habits of secrecy and lies lead to a two-week delay before the first official comments on the disaster. To counter this major setback Gorbachev plans a foreign policy coup; he sets up an arms control summit with Ronald Reagan in Reykjavik, where they not only get on well but agree an historic first-ever cut in nuclear weapons.

**Herzog**: I’m puzzled about what makes atomic weapons so persistent. North Korea, for example, is giving a lot of headaches.

**Gorbachev**: We have been able to get rid of medium and short range nuclear weapons. We have succeeded in large part. Many of those weapons have actually been destroyed. Which means that we can succeed. We can succeed. So disarmament, above all is what we need to act decisively against those who are trying to actually speed the arms race.

**Herzog**: Advanced weapons systems. What do you see as the biggest challenges, the biggest dangers?

**Gorbachev**: This is something that I have been working on for many, many years. We and Americans know only too well what nuclear conflict would mean. It would mean the death of civilisation. And I think that’s why there is a possibility to resume the process of nuclear disarmament, to resume cooperation.
The Empire begins to unravel

After fending off earlier opposition with Moscow Party boss Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev sees his future successor rehabilitated, the former being voted Deputy for Moscow in a new system that gives Parliamentary democracy its first outing in the Soviet Union for seventy years. As Communism loses ground fast, tensions rise both within the Russian Soviet and across the Republics, with unrest spreading to the Warsaw Pact allies. As Soviet troops leave Afghanistan, they are called to quell unrest among Georgian protesters in Tbilisi. It seems that the reforms have raised the lid on a genie that is now well and truly out of the bottle; soon Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia declare unilateral sovereignty. Solidarity sweeps aside communism in Poland. If this isn’t enough to spell out the end of an empire, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 surely is.

Herzog: Do you think that dissolving of the Soviet Union was inevitable?
Gorbachev: Everyone believed that we need to do something, and that there were so many problems and flaws that we could have a situation of totally uncontrolled breakup. We needed to reform the Soviet Union. But there were people who were in a rush because they wanted power and they wanted to realise their own plans.
Germany Reunited

With the Soviet Union collapsing all around them, the people of Germany soon find themselves with only the Berlin Wall separating them. In November 1989, the Wall comes down, bringing together a nation divided for twenty-eight years.

Gorbachev: *We worked together very actively to promote rapprochement and cooperation. And that led ultimately to German unification.*

Herzog: *That was extraordinary. The situation is what we Germans see with great, great satisfaction.*

Gorbachev: We were able to bring our two nations closer together, and that has led to the friendship that evolved between us and including this amazing woman who is in charge now, Angela Merkel. I like her a lot. She is a political leader. A strong leader.
By the end of this 1991 Gorbachev, having survived a coup attempt in August, resigns. Yeltsin takes over his office in the Kremlin as elected President of the Russian Federation, and with eleven of the republics declaring independence, the Soviet Union ceases to exist. Mikhail Gorbachev, architect of some of the most dramatic large-scale events in world politics, is reduced to watching the results from the sidelines.

This is shortly followed by another blow, the death of his wife.

Herzog: *Can you speak about your former wife, your deceased wife, Raisa Maximovna?*

Gorbachev: *We were never bored with each other. And the best - the best time that we had was when we were just the two of us. And that was so for the rest of our lives. It means that it was a command from above. And two halves that were joined together.*

*H: Do you remember her voice, her laughter?*  
*G: Yes, absolutely.*

*H: Her smell, her perfume?*  
*G: All of it, all of it. And more than you would think.*
Herzog: *If you personally had the authority to address the American people directly, what would you say to them now?*

Gorbachev: *I wish that Americans would have their own perestroika. I think instead of arguing who was hacking their computers, or instead of getting upset about this I think that they should do things with their own hands, do everything with their own hands. And I think that we would all welcome that.*
DIRECTOR STATEMENT

The seven years (1985-1992) that saw the USSR under the stewardship of Mikhail Gorbachev were some of the most momentous years in 20th century history, seeing not only the collapse of the Soviet Union, but witnessing much of the rest of the Europe and the world changing forever.

Our unique access to the now ailing man at the centre of that cataclysm will reveal the inside story of what happened thirty years ago and how this impacts on today’s world. With his help we can re-examine, in a new and personal light, the forces of history that led to the spectacular fall of one of the world’s most powerful empires. The discussion between Mikhail Gorbachev and Werner Herzog is in turns enlightening, amusing and totally unique. Meeting Gorbachev will throw light on the legacy of those tumultuous years for a new generation, now facing their own turbulent times.