

Gorbachov: the Seventh Tyrant of the empire

by Michael Ericson

Bakom Gorbatjovs Kulisser

by Jüri Lina

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“The West is still the Carthage for Moscow, while ‘the Red Czars’ (including Gorbachov himself) have always regarded their empire as the Third Rome,” writes Estonian exile, publicist Jüri Lina in his new book *Bakom Gorbatjovs Kulisser* (*Behind the Curtain of Gorbachov*). The author, a refugee from his native country since 1979, said at a Stockholm press conference to release the book—one day after Estonian Independence Day, Feb. 24, 1987—that it had been “an imperative necessity” for him to write the book, when confronted with the willingness of the Western press to be a mouthpiece for Soviet disinformation about *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Lina insists that this *dezinformatsia* “has become a serious threat to the Western world.”

The author’s sources are 95% drawn from within the Iron Curtain, both official and unofficial—refugees, dissident networks, etc. This largely contributes, together with his own precise observations of the details, to produce a very readable book that gives one a good insight to how the horrors of everyday life behind the Curtain have worsened under the *glasnost* and the *perestroika* campaigns. The frequent references to first-hand sources give the reader a sensuous grasp of the empire in which Gorbachov has been placed to fulfill the task of being the “Seventh Tyrant.”

From the first pages, the book is something of a shock for the reader. To explain Mikhail Gorbachov’s new policy, Lina takes lengthy quotes from the new general secretary and his close collaborator; it sounds very familiar, in a thick, heavy prose that could only come out of a Russian technocrat, some

words about “neglect of the consumers,” “backwardness that has to be liquidated,” “economic stagnation that can’t be tolerated,” and “individual” and “secret” elections to the party organizations. Everyone would recognize a strong push for the *glasnost* and *perestroika* in them. It is the language of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

The only surprise is that the general secretary and his collaborator were not Gorbachov and Ligachov in 1987, but Stalin and Zhdanov in 1937!

Even then, Stalin called his reforms *perestroika*, and Zhdanov used in his speeches to speak of “today’s so timely concept of *glasnost*,” as his justification to purge party functionaries who were in opposition to Stalin’s *perestroika*. Thus, *glasnost* and *perestroika* are, according to Lina, nothing new for the “Seventh Tyrant of the empire.” All of his predecessors had theirs, too, and called them by these names.

Jüri Lina also gives an insightful description of how the “Seventh Tyrant” made his way to power. Gorbachov began by studying law in the early 1950s under the infamous state prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky. Vyshinsky orchestrated all of Stalin’s Moscow show-trials and concluded all his summations to the court with the same phrase, “Shoot the mad dogs!” Gorbachov became an informant for the secret police during his years of law study. Later, the young Mikhail Gorbachov became a personal friend to then-KGB chief Yuri Andropov and was an oft-seen guest at Andropov’s home at Kutuzovsky Prospekt 26 in Moscow. “In the flat above Andropov’s, resided Leonid Brezhnev,” writes Lina in his own clinical way.

But, according to Lina, it was when Gorbachov was first appointed as Secretary of Agriculture of the Central Committee that he showed his real talent for his future task. “Gorbachov is very clever at talking about efficiency, but if you examine carefully what he really says about concrete things, you get the impression that he is ignorant and rather

often uninterested in real, important questions,” writes Lina, who maintains that Gorbachov’s period as agriculture secretary amply proves the point. When Gorbachov was appointed in 1978, the country had had its biggest harvest in history, 237 million tons of grain. By 1979, it dropped to 180 million tons, and by 1981 it was down to 155 million tons. But, with the help of “skillful demagogy,” Gorbachov managed to place the blame on poor storage and increased losses in the transportation sector.

Lina proceeds, after detailing the hardened repression against dissidents under Gorbachov’s rule, by listing the names and phony sentences of activists condemned for their beliefs to years in the *gulag*, to one of the most interesting parts of the book, “the tragic picture of the existence of the Soviet people.” Lina’s discussion of *perestroika* is very interesting, because he does it not from a grand overview, but from the perspective of the ordinary people. The pre-war economic mobilization behind the current *perestroika* is only identified at the very end of the book, where he states that inside the Soviet empire there is no such thing as “peace education,” so popular in Swedish schools, but instead they have the “preparatory war-training.” To make the point, he publishes a photo smuggled out to the West of a parade of proud schoolchildren riding their small motorized toy tanks!

Making black rubles red

One of the more basic, down-to-earth results of *perestroika* that Lina points out is its deliberate effects on the vast black market economy of the empire. Already in 1986, an official Estonian newspaper published articles “revealing” that “private incomes” made by the Soviet citizens totaled 850 billion rubles, or 20% of GNP. The point of publishing this had already been made in the same article, which stated that “these earnings are taxable.” Without the black market operations, the Soviet economy wouldn’t work at all. Lina publishes figures showing that probably up to 40% of all services are done “black” and more than 10 million people may be making their living in it. By legalizing some of this activity—making black rubles red—and enforcing heavy taxation on it, *perestroika* can bring vast resources to the state and prop up an otherwise miserable economic performance.

The obverse of that coin is, of course, to enforce tough measures against anybody who does operate without a state permit, i.e., continuing black market operations of the sort tolerated by the state before the “reforms.” Consistent with that, the government has both stopped the flea markets, allowed until as recently as the late 1970s, and during the recent years, reintroduced capital punishment for economic crimes.

Or as Lina chooses to put it, “Now, Gorbachov believes that you could enslave all enterprising people with particular effectiveness, by very small changes and token concessions. And the liberals in the West cheer and pay tribute to ‘the new freedom.’ ”

Jüri Lina, however, does not give that strategy much chance and the reasons he gives are of special interest today, when the explosions of popular unrest are hitting the empire in many different regions, from the captive nations of the Baltic states and Poland in the north to Armenia in the south.

Lina insists that these entrepreneurs have started to develop a sense of “freedom and justice” totally unknown inside the pure arbitrariness that reigns in the state-controlled economy. And moreover, they have become accustomed to a certain financial independence. These tendencies, according to Lina, actually started to express themselves in open demands for permission to start private shops. Jüri Lina himself, belonging to the intelligentsia and dissident network, actually expresses somewhat mixed feelings toward this phenomenon, because they do not in themselves threaten the system. The black market operator has often to perform his services outside of the ordinary work hours, so the only thing he tends to care about is earning more money, not engaging himself in “hostile activity against the state.”

The tragic result of the new *perestroika* clampdown on the black market will be an increased impoverishment of the population, Lina says. The “reforms” in the state-controlled industries also work to the same effect. To reduce the earnings of the workers by one-third because of new “quality demands,” will be tragic to a population at an already abysmal standard of living, especially if it is introduced among workers already more or less refusing to do a “decent job” for a wage that pays for hardly anything. Illustratively, Lina reports two common sayings among Soviet workers, telling each other to slow the work pace: “Why work? Let Lenin do it, he is immortal,” and “Let the tractor work: He is made of iron.”

At the end of this book review, I wish to refer to the part that moved me most: It is where Lina discusses why so many people inside the Soviet Union willingly play Gorbachov’s game. Lina says that one of the only occasions where he was, himself, in a positive way, moved by a Soviet citizen using the “freedom” of *glasnost*, was during an interview with the Estonian film-maker Kaljo Kiisk by Bavarian television in the summer of 1987. “There is a lot of stupidity among us in the Soviet Union,” Kiisk told the TV audience. “There are many careerists who use *glasnost* for their own egoistic aims, to be able to climb. Therefore, they play according to the script: *Perestroika* is a ‘big, theatric play.’ What we need is goodness. It is goodness that we are missing,” concluded Kiisk, and thanked the Bavarian public for their kindly eyes—“Such things you rarely see in the Soviet Union.”

Jüri Lina says that Kiisk’s words were very courageous coming from someone behind the Iron Curtain under Gorbachov’s *perestroika*. As a “free thinker,” Lina was himself able to be a dissident in Estonia during the 1970s, vegetating under the “relatively passive socialism” of Brezhnev, something that would be totally impossible under the rule of Gorbachov.