Favourite Son

Eduard Shevardnadze was Gorbachev's closest confidant until he resigned last December, predicting a coup. Tony Phillips looks at the man who has now assumed the status of a Soviet prophet.

When Eduard Shevardnadze resigned as Soviet foreign minister in December last year he created shock waves not just around the Soviet Union but around the world. Gorbachev himself was said to have been alarmed and surprised. The jolt was made all the greater by the explanation Shevardnadze gave: “Let this resignation be my protest against the impending dictatorship”.

At the time, many Western analysts saw Shevardnadze’s plea as an exaggeration. Now, following the August coup, it seems prophetic. In view of all this it is informative to dwell a little on the personal history of Shevardnadze, once the sole non-Slav in the Politburo and possibly one of the most influential foreign ministers in modern history. Shevardnadze is particularly interesting not just because he played such a major part in undoing the old world order, but also because he and Gorbachev were, in the heyday of perestroika, such a close double act.

Shevardnadze, like Gorbachev, could easily have been viewed ten years ago as just another loyal apparatchik on the way up. He had actually got a little further in his career than Gorbachev, becoming first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972, when he was a personal favourite of Brezhnev. While Gorbachev never achieved this dubious status, other similarities between them were quite strong. Both shared the unusual background for communist superstars of an educational background in the humanities; Gorbachev’s first degree was in law (an almost pointless area under the Soviet system of decree rather than rules), while Shevardnadze trained as an historian. Both were of the Khrushchev generation (Shevardnadze is two years older than Gorbachev.) Both seemed imbued with a strong anti-stalinism—they were there when the victims began pouring back from the camps—but are nonetheless loyal to what they see as the values of socialism. Like Khrushchev, both appear to have believed Soviet communism could work if only it were honestly applied. Gorbachev moved quickly to dispense with the cult of the general secretary, while Shevardnadze had a formidable reputation as a corruption-buster in Georgia.

As with Gorbachev, the personal history of Shevardnadze provides glimpses of the champion of glasnost he was to become. The line from Andropov to Gorbachev begins with the attempt to make the Soviet system work honestly. Gorbachev took Andropov’s anti-corruption fervour and added to it the crucial ingredients of glasnost and democracy. This set in train a process in the Soviet Union that has in ideological terms seen the dominant ‘radical’ ethic move from an economistic anti-market pro-state ownership approach to a political pro-democracy anti-oligarchy one.

Despite his historian’s training, Shevardnadze had his greatest successes enforcing law and order on corrupt officials and economic criminals as the chief of the Georgian police. This was his claim for promotion to Georgian party boss. However, once installed he was not slow to use his ‘favourite’ status to institute local economic reforms which, in fact, decriminalised some of the acts he had been prosecuting and raised the general economic output of the republic. Shevardnadze was by no means a liberal democratic angel, but neither was he the typical Brezhnevite flunky-cum-fat-cat.
Two aspects of his different style as party boss before the Gorbachev ascendancy are worth noting. First, he had a conciliatory approach to disputes. Confronted with a hostile, stone-throwing crowd in Abkhazia in the late 70s, Shevardnadze simply stepped forward and confronted the leaders. He spent the rest of the night in discussion. Such actions indicate a degree of self-confidence unusual in any politician, let alone a Soviet communist. I would argue that here we can see yet another parallel with Gorbachev, and I suspect that, at bottom, the source of the self-confidence for both men was that they were and perhaps still are believers. They believed in socialism, they believed it could work and they believed in its explanatory power.

The second noteworthy action of Shevardnadze’s career was his backing for the film Repentance. The quintessential destalinisation film, made by a Georgian and shot in a quasi-surrealist manner with strong religious overtones, Repentance shocked and delighted filmgoers all over the Soviet Union on its general release in 1987. Shevardnadze threw his support behind the director Tenghiz Abuladze in 1981, assured financial and production support via Georgian television and then pushed the finished product past important Politburo members, including Yegor Ligachev.

As foreign minister, Shevardnadze presided over a series of momentous events which culminated in the end of the Cold War. Apart from negotiating vital arms agreements, the Soviets have withdrawn from Afghanistan, allowed the collapse of Soviet-backed regimes in Eastern Europe, normalised relations with China and opened diplomatic ties with South Korea. They also applied a fresh approach to the Middle East which put more emphasis on peace and stability than superpower rivalry.

Two things can be said of Soviet policy as it evolved under Shevardnadze. Firstly, it moved from a doctrinaire and ideologically-informed ‘class-confrontationist’ policy to one of ‘realism’. That is to say, Soviet foreign policy now presumes explicitly that states have interests which they seek to maximise while maintaining some degree of stability. Realism, of course, also an ideological position—but it is one that most other states subscribe to, particularly those of the West. The explicit adoption of this position undoubtedly helped dialogue between the Soviet Union and the West. Secondly, Shevardnadze utilised the vocabulary of humanism in bargaining to great effect. It is still debatable whether the relinquishing of Gorbachev’s and Shevardnadze’s foreign policy was chiefly animated by weakness at home or a desire for an ‘offensive peace initiative’. What is clear, however, is that the language in which they couched that policy privileges the idea of a world community in a manner which has often made the West, and especially the US, uncomfortable.

The ideologies of humanism and realism should be logically contradictory, but Shevardnadze combined them surprisingly successfully. The chief outcome was a strong emphasis on consolidation of disputes and a move away from reliance on military means for prevention of war. During the 19th Party Congress in 1989 Shevardnadze made a strong attack on traditional thinking in Soviet foreign policy, arguing that war could no longer be a rational basis for policy, and that national security was more than the sum of one’s arsenal. He went on to demand further weapons reductions and described the Soviet stockpile of chemical weapons as barbaric.

Not only did Shevardnadze admit very early on that much of Soviet foreign policy had been wrong, he explicitly linked his changes in foreign policy to domestic changes. That Soviet foreign policy is made on the back of, and underpinned by, successful perestroika, was a continual theme in his speeches: hence his willingness to intervene occasionally in purely domestic matters. The most dramatic example came in December 1989 when Shevardnadze threatened to resign over the massacre of protesters in Tbilisi in April of that year. He said at the time “Nothing and nobody can justify the deaths of innocent people.”

The reasons for Shevardnadze’s resignation in 1990 have been a matter of much conjecture. We have his own explanation that it was a personal protest about the way things were heading. It can be added that it was logical that, after Yeltsin and other radicals left the party and the conservatives gained ground, the liberals such as...
Shevardnadze and Yakovlev would follow the radicals. Some in the Soviet press speculated that the military-industrial complex had forced him out. A more sceptical view argues that Gorbachev had Shevardnadze in mind as the man to negotiate the new union treaty, but the wily foreign minister decided not to accept the poisoned chalice.

In the light of the August coup attempt, it might also be suggested that Gorbachev was faced with the same scenario last year, but elected to go along with the hard line. Shevardnadze, perceiving this as something of a coup in itself, left. Whichever account is closest to the mark, the resignation was quite a momentous one—not simply because of the context, which was dramatic enough, but also because Eduard Shevardnadze may well go down as the first modern Soviet politician to retire willingly at the peak of his glory.

In February this year Shevardnadze popped up again with plans to establish an association to act as a think-tank on Soviet foreign policy. All the familiar Shevardnadze themes were present in his interviews: the importance of perestroika, the role an independent association might play in shaping foreign policy, the need to continue the ongoing processes and so forth. However, by July this year, the association had metamorphosed into something quite different: the Movement for Democracy. Among the leaders of the movement were: Shevardnadze, former Gorbachev political adviser Aleksandr Yakovlev and economist Stanislav Shatalin. It also attracted support from Yeltsin’s Russian vice-president, and leader of the Communists for Democracy, Aleksandr Rutskoi.

This grouping, made up of many of Gorbachev’s former allies, looked set to split the Communist Party in early August. It was certainly a place of refuge for those seeking to leave, including perhaps Gorbachev himself, eventually. When the coup took place, the Movement joined with Yeltsin’s forces very quickly. It was certainly able, through the standing of its members, not just to rally popular support (Yeltsin’s great strength), but also to hold back those in authority whose support was vital to the success of the coup. In the end, Shevardnadze did more than just protest against a coming dictatorship, he helped prevent it.

So the double act of Shevardnadze and Gorbachev ended with Shevardnadze standing in a besieged Russian parliament, denouncing Gorbachev for his weakness towards the hardliners which had allowed the coup to happen. In the coming months, it seems certain that Eduard Shevardnadze, an architect of the end of the cold war, will play a new and important role as an architect of a new order for the Soviet Union itself.

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