

Interview with

N. S. LEONOV

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O.S. In your book *Troubled Years* you evaluate the Helsinki accords as having had a fatal impact on the Soviet Union. Could you please speak in more detail about why you think this is so? Many diplomats, scholars, and historians in this country, on the contrary, consider the Helsinki accords one of the Soviet Union's diplomatic achievements.

N.L. There is an official point of view, the point of view of the contemporary ruling elite, who helped formulate the Helsinki accords, participated in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and signed the relevant documents. But there is another point of view, that of experts who have studied the possible consequences of these accords. Those who regard the accords in a positive light stress only one aspect: the establishment of postwar borders in Europe. That, in essence, is the extent of our country's political victory. The Helsinki accords included the possibility for a peaceful change of borders, but since the Soviet Union had no chance of changing borders by peaceful means, and since no such opportunity was envisioned in the future, this point can be analyzed only in view of the interests of the Western powers. The absence of any

discussion of the “German question” should also be examined in this connection. Even an ordinary person acquainted with politics understood that the Soviet Union stood to lose on the German question if East Germans were allowed freely to express their will. That is, the result would be the loss of East Germany. Here is to be found the idea of German unification. There were, and could be, no other questions connected with the peacetime re-examination of borders, just the German question, set forth in veiled form.

Whether or not our leaders at that time understood this is a question for history. We understood and knew that a blow would be struck on this very issue. When I say “we,” I mean people who worked in intelligence or were responsible at the time for the country’s political course, but from the point of view of intelligence. Therefore, we sensed immediately where our weak spot would be and where, naturally, our main enemy at that time – the United States of America – would strike.

The two remaining so-called baskets, the economy and human rights, immediately seemed to us to be very harmful from the point of view of our rivalry with the United States. We are talking about the United States, since the United States was the leader of the Western bloc, and it was that country that held a controlling interest with regard to the West’s actions against us.

Regarding the economic basket, we were convinced that no progress would be made on this issue. For decades we had been following the West’s policy in this area. Essentially, there was an economic blockade of the Soviet Union that took the form of KoKom, the International Coordinating Committee for International Commodity Arrangements, which came up with a list of goods that could not be sold to our country. But I’m talking not only about the legal expression of this policy, but the psychology of

the West as well, about the very mentality of their approach to this problem. We were absolutely convinced that the West was going to play a game with us on this issue. In other words, they would make us written promises, but in reality there would be no softening of the blockade. Even ten years of democratic Russia couldn't overcome this mentality completely. KoKom was relaxed, but the mentality, in an altered form, remained. Thus, we understood that the economic basket was included in agreements for assuaging our potential resistance.

As far as human rights are concerned, both our point of view and the American point of view was that we were sure to lose on this issue. It presupposed a denial of everything we had come to understand at that time about "human rights" and imposed on us the human rights model professed by the West. It was difficult to imagine at the time how broad the battlefield was in this area and how, in various guises, it would be extended. We understood that this issue opened the door to endless human rights claims in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries.

In the end, we got only a declaration on the inviolability of borders. Border guarantees were not offered by the Helsinki accords, but rather were reinforced by Soviet military might. We didn't have any real need for the accords. As long as the Soviet Union had its war machine, its nuclear shield, and its Central Army Group, we generally didn't need any verbal guarantees. These were nothing more than a legal nicety. The question of the Kuril Islands or other contested territories didn't come up at that time. It couldn't have been raised, anyway, because it would immediately have been resisted by force. Nonetheless, a supposedly wonderful thing was "bestowed" upon us; some sort of concession was formalized. A declaration was passed which the West never intended to

observe. It included many phrases of a general nature. But at the same time the real front of the third basket opened before us, one without any limitations of time or space.

We understood at this point that by our own actions we placed ourselves at peril.

When we understood the fundamental components of the Helsinki accords, we realized that we had committed a very serious error.

O.S. Did the KGB send any documents to the country's top leadership with this kind of evaluation?

N.L. We didn't prepare that kind of evaluation for one simple reason. There was a rule that if the Politburo were to ratify a directive for Brezhnev before his trip to Helsinki (and these directives, in theory, were carried out), then coming out against the directives would be tantamount to insurgency within the state apparatus.

We had another method at our disposal, which I mentioned in my book. Before every Politburo session on Thursdays we were able to express our point of view in memoranda that we kept for the Politburo member who headed the KGB. The head of the KGB could use these materials during discussions at the meetings. In other words, our point of view found expression not in official documents signed, say, by Andropov and going counter to the accepted foreign policy line, which would have indicated a split within the Politburo. Instead it found expression in a memorandum for discussion that left room for maneuvering or, as A.A. Gromyko liked to say, "as if someone were thinking aloud." To put it another way, by "thinking aloud," you could raise any issue in a discussion. We took advantage of this. And we stated our view about the Helsinki accords precisely in that form and gave the material to Andropov. They were unofficial documents that weren't even dated. Andropov was aware that materials could be passed

on in that way. He always understood perfectly well, since we expressed ourselves on this issue on more than one occasion.

The reverse channels of communication are very limited and Andropov never provided any feedback. We work like a system of semiconductors, that is, we generate something and receive some sort of information. As a rule, we would hear persistent requests that we express our own position and put forth proposals on possible steps to be taken. We would sometimes formulate such positions within the limits of our competence. But we never knew, of course, what happened with our recommendations. We didn't know if one of our proposals was even discussed.

O.S. You didn't find out through other channels?

N.L. Any attempt to find out what your leader, a member of the Politburo, said at a meeting, or what kind of mood he was in when he returned from a meeting, was, according to our rules and customs, reprehensible. If you were told to do something, you did it. How your analysis was used was a question for those in higher positions of power. During the Polish crisis in 1981 there was an incident involving one of our high-ups, a member of the Politburo, who began giving recommendations on what to do about the crisis in Poland. But he received a harsh answer during the talks in Brest, which took place in a railroad car: "Don't tell us how to run the state." With that everything ended. Thank God nothing drastic was done, such as firing or exiling him. Nonetheless, this was a sharp rebuke. Therefore, we never showed any interest in how our materials were used, but we kept track of the reactions they produced on the basis of the documents we received, which sometimes included Politburo decisions, further instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, etc. We could see whether there was a change in

government policy. When we sensed that we produced some kind of effect, we were glad. But sometimes we felt that we worked for nothing.

O.S. In your book you lay out forcefully your position on the United States, in particular in connection with the topic of our conversation – Helsinki and American intentions with respect to the Soviet Union. When I met with the famous Soviet diplomat G.M. Kornienko, he expressed the opinion that the policy of verbal and psychological pressure that was carried out by Ronald Reagan didn't have the intended effect. In your opinion, when Gorbachev came to power, on what principles could he have based his policy toward the United States? Was it necessary for him, as many of his aides, diplomats, and advisors write, to undermine the united front in the West so quickly and with such urgency, which he supposedly did through his foreign policy initiatives? In other words, were we in a losing, dead-end, and fatal situation in 1985 with regard to foreign policy? Was there any way out? Could we have implemented, to use your expression, "operation retreat"?

N.L. I have no doubt that the disaster that befell our country was not historically predetermined. It is not at all obvious to me that our system of social and economic values was historically doomed. Not at all. Even now I hear from my many friends in high places in the West about how they get no pleasure from the fact that the Soviet Union and the alternative, socialist path of development are no more. They feel robbed and, to a certain degree, impoverished because of the current utter lack of choices for human development. These people take no joy whatsoever in the system of neo-liberal relations that exists in the world now. In meetings with colleagues (when I say "colleague," I mean my deputies in the analytic section of the KGB who remain my

advisers to this day) I would often pose the question, “Wherein lies the tragedy of socialism?” This was as far back as the Brezhnev era. We witnessed tremendous shortages in our lives and saw that we were on the skids. And we would always ask the question: Is this the result of objective causes, of the shortcomings inherent in socialism, or are they objective causes? This was a question that tormented us constantly and that we couldn’t answer with absolute certainty. In the end we reached the conclusion that received its final expression during Gorbachev’s rule: the downfall of socialism was primarily the result of subjective causes. Socialism was not historically doomed to failure. But this is an interesting question worthy of much discussion, and so we won’t delve any deeper into it here.

O.S. I didn’t have in mind the question of whether socialism as a whole was doomed. I’m interested in your opinion as an expert with tremendous knowledge about whether it was worth it for Gorbachev to carry out such fundamental changes in Soviet policy?

N.L. At first we were enthusiastic about Gorbachev and the prospects for renewal and radical reform. The need for these had long been discussed by people like Kosygin. Andropov also made an effort to set this process in motion. Gorbachev was hardly the inventor of renewal, reform, or *perestroika*. *Perestroika* is a crude word that misses the mark. But a typical feature of Gorbachev’s actions, which we probably understood a year later, was a complete lack of preparation for his policy measures, an absolutely improvised approach to life’s most complex issues, the lack of a clearly defined program, and an inability to prepare his offensive moves by any kind of organizational, political, or economic measures. Everything he did in domestic and foreign policy was dictated by

his impulsiveness, a desire to achieve theatrical effects immediately and quickly, and total ignorance about the country. Russia is like a heavy ship that is difficult to steer. In essence, Gorbachev didn't know our country. He was the worst type of party boss. There was a reason why jokes referred to him as "mineral" rather than "general" secretary. He was the type of leader you'd find in the regional committees, Ilinsky's protagonist in the movie *Carnival Night*. He was always making some kind of declaration, playing to the gallery by throwing out some half-baked idea. He's the kind of person who thinks that problems can be solved just by filling out a piece of paper or by presenting a program. In reality, all that is just a starting point.

The same goes for international affairs. For example, there was no discussion of such critical issues as the correlation of nuclear and conventional weapons in the West and East: both those possessed by the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies. A series of completely chaotic proposals were made that received no scrutiny whatsoever. Incidentally, it was under Gorbachev that the Politburo ceased functioning as a collective organ. With time, even Politburo documentation ceased and records of talks with foreign delegates were no longer being distributed. Even we were surprised when serious initiatives started appearing without warning, since we were usually employed in such projects as support staff responsible for preparing documentation. For example, we were shocked in 1986 by the sudden proposal to achieve a nuclear-free world by the year 2000. Neither the military nor we were asked about it. We immediately started calling our colleagues in the army. "Is this from your department? Was this proposal made on your initiative?" Their response was, "No, we don't know anything either. It wasn't our proposal." So the proposal was born in

Staraya Ploshchad, the quarters that serve the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union. No one in our group would ever in his life have advised putting forth such an initiative, because the United States always had a huge advantage over us in conventional weapons. To this day we maintain that as long as Russia has nuclear weapons we can feel rather secure. The Americans almost always made proposals that would place the greatest possible limits on our nuclear arsenal. All their proposals were aimed at this. They did it with such ardor and persistence that I even started to respect them for doing everything in their national interests to shield their weapons systems from any sort of cuts. Try to propose making cuts in the US Navy. No way, never, not by a single unit. It's simply out of the question. Their absolute advantage remains and will always exist. They would break off any talks for the sake of it.

Take another example, their strategic aviation, which they regarded as a sacred cow. At that time we joined up with the military and found a way to neutralize US naval forces, started deploying nuclear missiles and weapons on board our war vessels, and placed "Katyusha" mountings with two nuclear warheads on our small warships. This was equal in power to an American aircraft carrier. At this point the Americans started to panic. They began seeking the removal of nuclear weapons from surface ships. Both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze agreed to the proposals made by the Americans to maintain nuclear weapons only on submarines. As a result the United States got what it wanted and preserved their absolute superiority in naval power.

What drove Gorbachev and Shevardnadze to act as they did in this case is a mystery. The whole time they were apparently playing give-away, assuming that since we were giving them something, we would get something in return. This demonstrated a

lack of understanding of their partner's psychology, a failure to understand American pragmatism. I don't know if Gorbachev was an idealist or simply inept, although I think that he was an idealist, because there were many warnings made both on our part and on the part of the military. So Gorbachev, like the country's entire leadership then and now, had the information he needed. However, it's difficult to convince our political figures that the Americans follow their own foreign policy line. They can pursue it for fifty or sixty or seventy years, successively passing on the baton to one another, one president to the next, whether Republican or Democrat. That's nothing like what is done in our country. A year passes, the general secretary is replaced, a new policy begins. There was Khrushchev, then came Brezhnev and with him the entire framework of national priorities changed.

We said so many times that if the Americans decided to seize the Baltics, they would never acknowledge our presence there. They would pursue their plan consistently, regardless of how long it took, even if they had to incur some obvious losses. The same with Cuba. For forty years the Americans have been spending money, but they continue their policy there because they believe that it is dictated by their national interests and national priorities.

O.S. In your book you write about Zaikov's commission. I'd like you to comment on your idea that the military is chiefly responsible for the fact that the principle of reasonable sufficiency was not fulfilled. In other words, during the commission's tenure your impression was that our military wanted to keep everything they had gained instead of formulating a plan, perhaps a new defense doctrine.

N.L. Even now I am firmly convinced that aside from a lack of strategic understanding of the problem on the part of our highest officials – the government leaders – the second major shortcoming was that our highest officials couldn't withstand the pressure from the Military Industrial Complex and the army, which aimed at a limitless quantitative growth in arms. Of course, there was not only an extensive search but an intensive one as well. There was work being done on new types of weapons, but the extensive approach really caught our fancy.

For example, in 1973 the Arab-Israeli war convinced us that tanks were not the weapon of future conflicts. But we continued to produce these and other types of armored vehicles in large quantities. And this giant fist of up to forty-five thousand armored vehicles was doomed in principle. In the event of war, the only thing that would be left of this fist was a broken phalanx, because a small anti-tank missile can destroy a huge and expensive tank. And yet tank production continued.

Americans took a different tack. In contrast to our emphasis on land-based armored forces, they focused considerable efforts on developing aviation and guided striking systems, so-called precision-targeted strikes, which were sometimes as effective as small atomic weapons. Here we had two different strategic approaches. Ours was wrong-headed and lacking perspective. Maybe at some point we could have managed to overcome this barrier, but we would have had to spend much time and money.

As for Zaikov's commission, it focused not so much on discussing fundamental policy issues in the area of weapons as on formulating the Soviet Union's position at the arms reduction talks. And that's where the tragedy lay. If we had moved away from this limited mission and looked at our weapons program, then the commission's creative

potential could certainly have been more effective. We were focused on merely defining our position on what to cut and how to do so. This was the famous restrictive line of negotiations that had been established and that made the commission's work ineffective. The foreign ministry was trying to obtain results by making concessions and playing give-away. It was an old formula that had also taken root in our style of government. That is, if I can secure the signing of such-and-such a treaty, it will seem as though I am the lead player in the vanguard. Of course, this encouraged Shevardnadze to take completely unwarranted steps. And so people were shocked when they learned that Gorbachev "surrendered" the Oka system, a mobile and modern system outside the parameters of weapons slated for cuts.

O.S. It is widely known that the crucial negotiations took place with Schultz in Moscow. Dobrynin and Akhromeev were present. In his book, Dobrynin writes that Gorbachev pretended that he agreed with the mistake. But later in Reykjavik Dobrynin and Akhromeev tried to remind him about his mistake and he said, "What am I supposed to do, take back my word?"

N.L. The Americans aren't afraid of renegeing on their word. They did this on several occasions. So in this instance, it's a case of self-will dictated by narcissism and obstinacy. Obstinacy in politics is a dangerous thing.

O.S. You think that Gorbachev was obstinate?

N.L. Of course. The reason he didn't consult with anybody was that he couldn't tolerate objections. Because if he had started to listen to someone's advice, he would have been compelled either to agree with it or somehow change his conduct. But since he would not have been able to come up with the arguments in this case (he was never an

expert on these issues), he preferred to act independently. This also made Zaikov's commission very nervous. Shevardnadze, sensing Gorbachev's tendency toward such fanciful escapades, very often ended discussions on the commission by saying things like: "We did not reach an agreement. I will report to Gorbachev and we'll see what he says." And after that the question was settled in typical Gorbachev style. Any system of checks, any fight lost all meaning. If you raised an objection, you were heard out, but afterward the completely opposite decision was made.

O.S. You raised a striking example with regard to Moiseev, who couldn't restrain himself and at one meeting in 1990 made open and harsh criticisms. Zaikov even said to him that he was taking many liberties. Moiseev objected, "No more than the rules allow!" Even Yazov tried to calm him down.

N.L. That's exactly right. It ended soon afterward with Moiseev's removal from his post as head of the general staff. This was a peculiarity of Soviet rule: anyone who raised an objection to the person at the top was usually relieved of his duties.

O.S. So Zaikov took Gorbachev's position?

N.L. No. Zaikov tried, as far as I recall, holding on to his own seat as member of the Politburo and Central Committee Secretary. Therefore, as chairman of these commissions he felt uncomfortable. On the one hand the commission's sessions were attended by a full contingent of such Politburo members as the head of the KGB, the defense minister, the foreign minister, and one of the Central Committee's secretaries who oversaw the Military Industrial Complex, like Baklanov. Toward the end, Maslyukov was present. In other words, these were people in positions of authority who in theory held the same view. As for Shevardnadze, he held a different position. His

actions followed a predetermined plan. If Shevardnadze sensed that a serious skirmish lay in store, then one of his deputies, for example Karpov, would make a speech at the session. Karpov always oversaw disarmament issues and headed our delegation in Geneva. He usually took a firm anti-war stance. Karpov took the rap for Shevardnadze but stuck to his position so steadfastly that he even had the audacity to show disdain for Baklanov with respect to “weighty categories.” He raised objections to the Ministry of Defense, and the KGB, even though as far as the latter is concerned, we took a soft position. We did not favor the Military Industrial Complex or the military leaders who favored preserving our entire arsenal of weapons and demonstrated an uncompromising position on all issues. But we never shared the views of the foreign ministry. We had what was probably a unique position. Unlike the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we had no departmental interests at stake. We tried to be very objective. Perhaps thanks to the breadth of information at the KGB’s disposal, intelligence information in particular, we understood our opponents’ perspective, their estimation of our military capabilities, and our own strong and weak points. Therefore, it seemed to me that we always took a rather prudent position.

Neither the military nor Zaikov was ever concerned with the question of material expenditures. They were apparently unprepared for it psychologically. The question of calculating the financial dimension, how much things actually cost and how much we would have to spend, never figured into the picture. For example, we held talks about cutting medium-range missiles such as the SS-20, a system that was very sensitive to temperature. They had to be transported in special containers. We had these missiles in locations all over the country. The Americans insisted that, if the treaty was to be signed,

these missiles would be destroyed only in the Kapustin Ravine. We didn't have any means of transporting all these missiles, deployed or otherwise, to the Kapustin Ravine. They could never be moved just like that. Sometimes these systems had been deployed in the Far East. So we had to create special thermal cars, huge thermoses to load these systems in and bring them here. Zaikov was very calm about this problem: "So what, we'll build them. How many do we need?" As it turned out, it is cheaper to store weapons than to destroy them.

Then we raised another question: could we destroy the missiles by firing them? These missiles have a long firing range. If directed upward, they practically burn up in the atmosphere on the way down. This would be lieu of expenditures on transportation. In the end a dual system for destroying the SS-20 was used: through disposal in the Kapustin Ravine and through launching. Of course, everything that could be transported was brought there from the central regions. Then, for quite a while, we struggled with the Americans, who said that if we were going to destroy them by firing them, then we would damage the environment. We objected, saying that if missiles were going to be destroyed by explosion in the Kapustin Ravine, the environment would suffer twice as much, since additional explosives would be used for their destruction. The Americans' logic was simple: "But that's within your own country. If you destroy the missiles by firing them in the Far East, then you'll do environmental damage to other countries."

The Americans displayed their egotism on every issue, although it's true they were interested in eliminating these missiles. There was a crucial incident that occurred with the SS-18, or "Satan," missile. Someone came up with the idea of taking these missiles to a different base and deploying them in special vertical mine galleries drilled in

rock formations in the mountain ridges of the Far East. To relocate a large number of missiles there and blast the galleries, in several outcrops yet, would require insane amounts of money. But Zaikov, calmly and without the slightest doubt, said, "Let's do it, let's make a decision. Write up a memo to the Central Committee." The country was already suffering from a shortage of resources needed for normal economic progress. We vigorously opposed the idea. Representatives from the KGB said that it was impossible because of the social consequences. We were compelled to take such an incredible amount of money from the budget, which sooner or later would affect our society's stability. Thank God this decision didn't pass.

These kinds of squabbles occurred very frequently. Our leaders didn't count the money. The people from the Military Industrial Complex or its representatives didn't take economics into account at all. They thought that our resources were unlimited. As if they had not been informed as to the country's real situation.

O.S. In your book you referred to Graham Greene's talks with Torrijos. You talked about how Graham Greene said that he always believed that in the Soviet Union the people who came to power were from the KGB, pragmatic people who could change our society, change the conditions that had arisen under Brezhnev. In this connection, it would be interesting to know why the KGB didn't become a core of reform. I won't talk about the period when Andropov was in power; it was brief. But why under Gorbachev was there not a greater expression of interest by KGB personnel in active political involvement?

N.L. I don't know what factors were at work here, but, if we're talking about foreign affairs, then the influx of people into the Central Committee apparatus or

especially into the body that directly served the general secretary, that is, his aides, came from the foreign ministry. On the whole, all general secretary aides were from the foreign ministry. Supplementing what I wrote in my book, I would say that twice I received an offer to transfer jobs and to work as an aide to the general secretary. The first time was during Brezhnev's rule, and the second was after Gorbachev had come to power.

O.S. Who made you the offers?

N.L. The offers came from various quarters, including my leadership in the KGB, Chebrikov, or through the head of security. The first time I even had an appointment at Kirilenko's office on Staraya Ploshchad, where the typically pointed conversation took place: "You have been made an offer to join the staff of the Central Committee. What do you think of that?" I said, "If this is in connection with using my professional knowledge, then I have no objections. If this is no more than a change of guard, then that's a different question." I was assured that there wasn't any personnel shakeup involved. The question also arose about sending me as ambassador to one of the countries where Central Committee members were usually sent under Brezhnev. And both times the proposals came to naught. The same thing happened with the proposal that I join Gorbachev's team. This offer was made soon after he came to power. Then I was told that Chernyaev was the preferred candidate. I am simply illustrating the fact that, as a rule, people from the KGB were not chosen for those posts. What philosophy was at work? Maybe there were concerns regarding people who came from the KGB. The KGB was enveloped in a sense mystery and, as a consequence of the 1930s and '40s, it aroused fear. My whole life I sensed that people were afraid of me, even ambassadors. While working abroad with an ambassador and under the best conditions, I was bound to

hear a question like, “So tell me, why are you listening in on my phone conversations?” or “Why do you put listening devices in my bedroom?” It was difficult to keep from laughing. I would say, “Have you ever seen such a device? What purpose would this serve? Who would gain?” But there was no end to the myth about how the KGB was shadowing everyone. I had to assure the ambassadors, “I’m here for intelligence purposes. You are an ambassador, a representative of Soviet power and the party. Do what you want, but I’m in up to my neck in my own worries. Feel free to share your problems with me. You are towing the government line wonderfully.”

There has always existed a deep conviction about the omniscience of the KGB and a fear of its workers. As Burlatsky writes, there was hardly anyone from the KGB among top aides or king-makers – not under the sickly Brezhnev and Chernenko, not under Gorbachev.

O.S. Why didn’t the KGB become a nucleus of reform?

N.L. Because people were afraid of us and didn’t include us in this process. And we had no ambitions to be included.

O.S. And why not? Why didn’t you want to change the country for the better? It was Andropov who began this gradual policy.

N.L. Andropov began it, but his frailty prevented its realization. As a whole, among the officers and generals in the KGB there was the sense, inculcated for years, that they were on the decline, that their importance was secondary. We were never trained to be creators. We were executors.

O.S. Psychologically you assigned yourselves a subordinate role?

N.L. We weren't the only ones to do this. Psychologically this concerned not only us, but many others as well. There was the Central Committee, an institution where policy was drawn up and defined. And we were a subdivision that provided a service. We were supposed to obtain information in good faith and realize the adopted policy. And apparently it was not our mission to teach others how to run the government. We could give advice, but only in the form of information and analysis. This was our sole mode of operation, the only permissible form of influencing decisions affecting the fate of the state.

O.S. Andropov didn't manage to complete the implementation of his personnel policy and didn't manage to promote many people whom he wanted to see at the higher and middle ranks of power.

N.L. We intelligence officers and generals were firmly convinced, both then and now, that in terms of personnel, Andropov didn't understand anything. He didn't know how to figure people out, he couldn't grasp their true professional and political capabilities. His successors, whom he supported, were Gorbachev and, at a certain stage, Yakovlev. Gorbachev appeared on the scene only thanks to Andropov's patronage and protection. So Andropov's personnel policy was a disaster. And his last protégé, our last KGB chairman, Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kryuchkov, remains in the eyes of KGB veterans a very ambiguous figure. He senses this himself and understands he may sometimes run up against a negative and hostile attitude toward himself on the part of veterans.

Last year, during an important meeting of KGB veterans at the Dzerzhinsky Club, a loud voice rang out: "Is Kryuchkov in the hall?" Others from the meeting's presidium

assured us: “No, no, don’t worry.” And only then did the atmosphere become normal. If Kryuchkov had appeared at that moment, of course, there would have been a heated exchange.

O.S. How do you explain such a hostile attitude?

N.L. First of all, he takes much of the responsibility for the KGB’s role in the so-called August coup of 1991. The coup, despite its name, was not a coup. You can’t consider it a coup if no one was planning to shoot anyone or to use violence. Human history knows of no coup during which actions were taken for mere effect. For a coup, whether the model is Pinochet or Hitler, is usually accompanied by violence. This is a necessary characteristic of a coup. Without it a coup isn’t worthy of the name. The communists drove away the Constituent Assembly with bayonets. In this instance, violence was an absolutely necessary element. If you are planning a coup, then you have to act according to the principle that if “A” is said, “B” should follow, or nothing at all. But our veterans characterize the coup of 1991 as the exhibitionism of an old man: they opened their coats, showed their gun, and closed their coats.

We often compare the events in China with our events, Tiananmen Square in May 1989 and the events at the Russian White House. The Chinese resorted to blood and violence in order to save their country, their model of social development. But the events here were a completely feeble attempt that was doomed to failure from the beginning. Moreover, it placed the KGB under attack. I am referring to the officer corps. Like others, I applied for retirement the following day. No one among us was warned about the events being planned, no one was drawn into them, but everyone paid the price. All of us, the old guard of the KGB, who applied for retirement, the outcasts, became in the

public imagination the coup leaders. For what, you might ask? Such historical responsibility despite an airtight alibi!

O.S. At the end of Markus Wolf's book *Playing in Someone Else's Field*, there is an interesting statement with regard to the coup, the sense of which is that if the coup had been organized differently, many KGB workers would have supported it. But because of poor organization no one came out in support of it. Everyone understood that it was a doomed venture.

N.L. I've read that book. I actually have an autographed copy. But this statement is not quite right, since Markus Wolf, like many foreigners, doesn't understand life in Russia as we do. Even the leaders of our directorates didn't know that such a thing was being prepared. At that time all the principal KGB leaders were on vacation. I myself had just returned from vacation. The head of counterintelligence, Lieutenant General Titov, whose apartment is on the same landing as mine, was also on vacation and didn't know anything. In other words, there was no preparation for a real coup, no real assignments for carrying out repressive actions were given. There's much that can't be uncovered now. All coup participants have taken a vow of silence. When he returned from Foros, Gorbachev declared: "To the very end, I won't say a word!" The memoirs of the participants don't reveal anything about preparations for the coup. This was a shrewd mix. The circle of people connected with the preparation include Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Kryuchkov, and all the others. Pugo and Yazov played an auxiliary role.

O.S. Do you think that Yeltsin was connected with them beforehand?

N.L. That's absolutely correct. He kept abreast of things, but when he sensed that something wasn't right, at some point he violated his agreement. He took part in all

this calmly and openly. After all, the basic problem was how Gorbachev would be seized. I remember driving in a car in May with Kryuchkov and a group of KGB officials to meet Yeltsin for negotiations at the White House. We were going to discuss one question: Does it make sense to create a Russian KGB? I said to Kryuchkov then: “Now you’re going to go to Yeltsin’s office. We’ll stay in the reception area to talk with Burbulis. Invite us in for a consultation if you need to. But suggest to Yeltsin that he not create a large number of Russian structures. It’s better to wait for presidential elections in the Soviet Union and elect Yeltsin president of the Soviet Union, in order to preserve a unified nation.” No one was ready to come out against Yeltsin, no one even thought about doing this, because the nationwide support was obvious. He was supported by the people, who didn’t know Yeltsin’s negative qualities. Then Yeltsin told me that he was against communism. At that point there was a clearly defined proposal to him not to change any of the structures in place, not to split them up, but to reform them calmly as president of the Soviet Union.

O.S. To put it another way, it was clear to you as an expert that Yeltsin would inherit Gorbachev’s post?

N.L. That’s absolutely true. That was our sense, because the most important thing was the preservation of the Soviet Union as a whole. So, whether Gorbachev would be president for a certain amount of time or whether he would be replaced by Yeltsin was a secondary factor, as long as the Soviet Union was kept intact. But Yeltsin was so impatient that he wouldn’t agree to any alternative courses of action. He absolutely had to overthrow Gorbachev. This personal impatience was disastrous. He

couldn't wait two years until the next elections. Even less, since this matter was discussed in May 1991, when the elections were only a year and a half away.

O.S. Do you think that the coup played a fateful role for the Soviet Union?

N.L. Of course.

O.S. There are two points of view. One is that of the participants in the coup, who think that the coup extended the life of the Soviet Union. The other point of view has been expressed by Gorbachev and several of your colleagues, who believe that for all that the coup finished off the Soviet Union.

N.L. The coup simply accelerated the gradual process of disintegration that had already been going at full speed. If there hadn't been a coup and everything went at its own pace, then the disintegration might have occurred as a result of the signing of a new Union treaty on August 20. But the same process would have continued, though without the dramatic counterpoint of the so-called coup. The coup only accelerated this process, because all the regional and national elites sensed that Gorbachev was already absolutely incapable of running everything. And everyone started carrying out his own policy and building his own life.

O.S. In particular, you were involved with Eastern Europe and had been there several times. If we couldn't use force in Eastern Europe, what could we have done to avoid the result that we obtained? What alternatives were proposed by the KGB? What kind of initiatives and recommendations did the KGB propose to our leaders for the purpose of at least softening the blow and preserving our geopolitical interests?

N.L. The situation to a great extent places historical responsibility on the Soviet leaders. The leaders of the communist and workers' parties of the community of socialist

countries, especially Honecker, posed the question of holding an important meeting of the communist and workers' parties to discuss the negative processes that were increasing in these countries and work out measures for combating those processes. Beginning with Brezhnev, in 1978-79, when these processes started to make themselves felt more and more acutely, such opinions were being expressed with increasing frequency. The Political Consulting Committee, which met in those years, was strictly formal in nature: speeches were read, banquets were held, then the delegates would return home. For all practical purposes, there was no discussion of problems common to the socialist community. We basically settled all questions bilaterally. The COMECON had problems of its own. In other words, our centralized institutions, both political and economic, did not work. The Soviet leadership at that time, sensing its inability to understand the experience of the socialist community and outline ways of reviving the processes, avoided this in every way possible. On the whole, they carried out what we among ourselves called the "policy of postponed decisions." This meant that not a single problem was settled. Even regarding Eastern Europe, even despite the demands of the region's leaders.

Under Gorbachev this issue was not raised at all. I had virtually never felt that he was seriously following a given line of foreign policy. When, for example, he began *perestroika*, he didn't consult with any of our allies, as far as I know. This was a shock for them, which immediately led to a deterioration in relations.

O.S. Did you offer any predictions?

N.L. You could say that *perestroika* was like a sharp icicle that had fallen from a roof.

O.S. But you write that the analytic directorate of the KGB was 90 percent right in its predictions on foreign policy.

N.L. Yes, on foreign policy. I'm convinced of that. My convictions are based on the fact that all the documents have been preserved; they didn't disappear. Some of the documents are with the secretariat of the Federal Security Service, some of them are in the president's archive, and some are in the intelligence archive. I will never disavow a single one of the documents that we wrote at that time. From a professional point of view, they are absolutely accurate. When there was a discussion in these democratic times about how the KGB allegedly misinformed the country's leadership and Gorbachev, I said, "Gentlemen, take even one of our documents and look at the nature of the misinformation in it."

O.S. And were they objective with regard to Eastern Europe?

N.L. All our information about Eastern Europe was, for several decades, objective. It constantly contradicted information given to us by our ambassadors, who usually sent us formal reports about the unity of communist goals, the unified order of socialist countries, about the personal friendships of the general secretaries. We gave information all the time that put people on their guard, alarmist at times, when the situation called for it. But the situation was always clear: all processes were negative, from the point of view of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party. We never disguised these processes. We had many sources. Conscientious people came to us – from our point of view they were conscientious. They expressed their concerns.

For example, on the German question: over time we identified the breakdown of the East German state, due to the influence of West Germany. All of these processes

were in due course monitored. Kuzmin writes about these matters. He was in Berlin all those years as our department head in the directorate. He wasn't alone there; about twenty officers worked with him.

O.S. But what should have been done? It's not enough just to say that everything is going badly. You probably proposed some kind of alternate ways of settling the problem. I have asked many people this question and so far I have not received a clear answer.

N.L. You and I spoke at the very beginning about how offering political decisions was not our mission. Of course, various alternative solutions to problems were offered and formulated for the Politburo in working documents. These included the experience of tsarist Russia, encompassing the Kingdom of Poland, the Principality of Finland, and the Central Asian khanates. Russia at that time was unified and indivisible. We looked at the socialist community as a unified bloc and thought there was no need to panic when domestic structures of a particular kind arose. Our Soviet society was at one level of development. And if you look at Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, you don't have to be a political expert to understand that society there was completely different, more developed, more civilized. And we couldn't impose our model on them. When we did, our behavior was absurd. For example, we sent them sample bylaws for agricultural cooperatives. Therefore, we always suggested restricting our relations to defense issues and foreign policy. Life itself was supposed to take care of the rest.

O.S. Doesn't it seem to you that the economic inefficiency of Soviet relations was one of the factors that led these countries to break away?

N.L. No, that's not right. My observations of the dynamics of economic indicators attested to the fact that we were the ones who suffered from the economic relations with the countries.

O.S. You're right, we did suffer. But the paradox was that even despite the fact that we suffered and that these relations were disadvantageous for us, their relations with their Western partners were always more beneficial for them.

N.L. This is the effect of hard currency. Its impact was very strong. With hard currency East European countries could buy any goods in the West, including goods that they couldn't obtain from us. Therefore, in order to obtain hard currency, they tried to dump a lot of their advanced technological and even agricultural goods on the West, violating their obligations to us. It is paradoxical, but the Hungarians fed the American occupation army in Germany with their goods, having won a contract for supplying meat and preserves, briskets, and sausages. This was beneficial for the Americans. The supplier was nearby, there were no transportation costs, so naturally the cost was lower. And this suited the Hungarians. But for us these relations were, of course, detrimental.

O.S. I also had in mind the economic attraction of the West, which played a role in the decision of East European countries to break away from the Soviet Union.

N.L. Yes, it did. But here you have to define a frame of reference: don't take the rigid position of an administrator who is constantly second-guessing.

O.S. Was there any chance of keeping Eastern Europe in the orbit of the Soviet Union?

N.L. Of course. There were provisions in special programs to introduce joint-venture enterprises. Speaking of the Hungarians, for example, we worked out a plan with

them for developing poultry farming in Russia. We were supposed to pay in oil, and the Hungarians were to create the poultry-farming industry here. So there were attempts, but, unfortunately, the COMECON proved inefficient. Our leadership did not devote the necessary attention to questions of economic integration.

O.S. And could Gorbachev have made a difference?

N.L. He didn't even try. As early as 1986 Gorbachev had announced that he was "giving up on" Eastern Europe. This announcement was made in December 1986 at the United Nations in New York. It came down on everyone like thunder on a clear day. Announcements such as those on the nonuse of force for preserving the socialist order in Eastern European countries or on reducing the armed forces by five hundred thousand people were usually made bilaterally under the seal of secrecy. They were not made publicly. But Gorbachev in his typical manner made this pronouncement at the U.N. It created an explosion!

O.S. As I understand it, for you and your colleagues this speech was unexpected.

N.L. Absolutely unexpected. It was like a planet that you can't see but that is just about to appear. Gorbachev's actions had already taken on a chaotic, unpredictable character, and their general capitulatory tendency was clearly evident. But the fact of the announcement itself, of course, was unexpected for us.

O.S. During your stay in East Germany with Novikov, you prepared a telegram to Kryuchkov saying that there was nothing that could be done in the present situation in East Germany. In the end this telegram made its way to Gorbachev's desk. However, it's unclear that you and Novikov advised Kryuchkov to do this. Your book merely establishes the fact.

N.L. My mission was to draw a conclusion on the question of whether it was possible to preserve socialism in East Germany. We concluded that it was no longer possible to preserve a socialist system in East Germany. In fulfilling our second task, we were supposed to formulate steps that needed to be taken. But they were obvious: think about the fate of our armed forces that were still in East Germany – the Central Army Group. But what should be done with it? Either withdraw it or leave it there, stipulating some kind of legal grounds for its being there.

O.S. So it would have been possible after all to leave the Group there and avoid the decisions that were made later?

N.L. Of course. We understood that at that time British, French, and American troops were on German territory

O.S. In that case, what is your opinion of the following conversation with the military cited by Shevardnadze's aide, Tarasenko: "The military were asked if they could support a group of Soviet troops in Germany. They started to count the money, taking into consideration that maintaining the troops would have to be paid for in hard currency. The military did their calculations and came to the conclusion that there wasn't enough money."

N.L. In this case our troops were supported at their own base by our supplies. All weapons, all ammunition, all provisions of flammable lubricating materials came from the Soviet Union. The only problem was food. Army food always came from two sources: on the one hand, the Soviet Union and other countries, and on the other hand, East Germany. East Germany didn't have the resources to feed an army that size by itself. So there was no problem. We could have maintained our troops in Germany

because the luck that had blessed the Germans in connection with German unification gave us the freedom to articulate any position we wanted.

O.S. We really had such an opportunity?

N.L. Of course we did. Who could have driven us out of there by force? We always forget that there was an army of 500,000 men with a huge nuclear stockpile. All the nearby NATO air bases were within range of our aviation.

O.S. Do you think this was a serious factor?

N.L. Without question. Everyone took it into account. The Germans at that time were willing to agree to anything for the sake of a unified Germany. We just had to settle in a professional way the issue of how much to cut, stipulate dislocation terms, that is, remain in the same situation as the French, British, etc. Moreover, Mitterand and Thatcher supported us on this issue. So there were no unusual problems in this area. Our withdrawal from Germany, which took place in a panic and was disastrous, like a shipwreck, was the result of a fussy requirement to somehow untie the knot of foreign policy problems. It was pure improvisation. The participants in the talks in Arhus, which took place in the summer of 1990 during Kohl's visit, talked about how Gorbachev, from a technical point of view, was not ready for these talks even on a minimal level. Kohl was willing to make concessions. But Gorbachev said, "Okay, this is all nonsense, we'll finish everything up later. Let's go eat shish kabob." That was his whole policy.

O.S. You're not exaggerating?

N.L. No. True, I wasn't there myself. I'm repeating what those who were at the talks said. Only history will tell what principles guided Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and

Yakovlev, what considerations influenced them. I exclude the issue of professional training. Here you can sense the influence of Yakovlev, who I suspect of great misdeeds. I have no doubt of this. Now even he has acknowledged that he was waging a fight against the party. We wrote Gorbachev on many occasions about Yakovlev, about his true role in the dissolution of the Union.

O.S. You think he was an agent of influence?

N.L. I don't have the slightest doubt about that. It would be absurd of me to assert the opposite given the fact that his policy – all his activity – was absolutely logical, consistent, and directed toward one goal. Beginning with his trip to Canada, our comrades were watched. His friendship with Trudeau, the prolonged and numerous absences. And during his studies at Columbia University in 1958, a group of four people was formed, all of whom without exception turned out to be traitors. It was rare for a Soviet student at that time to filter through the CIA's recruitment networks. It was virtually impossible. Of course, they were all subject to processing. And later, there was training. I know what this was about because I myself was engaged in this work in other countries. I know how Yakovlev was given the façade of a theoretician and great reformer.

O.S. Yakovlev at one time was a very tough propagandist, a conformist in the '60s. He arranged the cover-up of the Soviet action in Czechoslovakia in 1968. It is said that he went there in a BMP, that he received a medal for his activity.

N.L. At that time I wasn't involved with the events in Czechoslovakia. Up to that time Yakovlev was in close contact with the KGB.

O.S. Now I'd like to ask you a question about the domestic situation in the Soviet Union. You write that in February 1991 you had a meeting that was practically devoted to the issue of saving the Soviet Union. You touched on this only lightly in your book before moving on to another topic. What actions were proposed?

N.L. At that time everything revolved around one alternative: the inevitable destruction of the Soviet Union or the possibility of preserving it. What could have been done to save the Soviet Union? There were two ways: legitimate and by force. When it came to the different ways of saving the Soviet Union, we, of course, advocated the legitimate way. This had already been declared over the course of many years. The rest of the world regards legitimate means more favorably, but we had to accustom our own people to legitimate means. In connection with this, the issue of carrying out an action in support of the Soviet Union came up. This was implemented later on, in the referendum of March 17. A difficult struggle ensued when the referendum was being prepared within the political leadership. The referendum was postponed continuously. And if there had not been strong pressure on the part of the KGB in favor of carrying out the referendum immediately, who knows how it all would have ended. The pressure was put on in the course of a whole series of meetings.

O.S. That means you put the final pressure on Gorbachev?

N.L. Yes.

O.S. Why didn't you do the same thing on other issues? If you pulled it off on this one, why not on another? You keep telling me, "We couldn't, we didn't want to."

N.L. We couldn't openly remove Yakovlev from the political leadership, despite the fact that I personally wrote notes in Gorbachev's name about what Yakovlev was really like.

O.S. Did Kryuchkov pass these notes on to Gorbachev?

N.L. Yes, of course.

O.L. But he writes that you did this.

N.L. I prepared them, since nobody could be trusted. It involved a special level of secrecy. But if you were to look at copies of them now, there would probably be a note on it that said: "Executed in one copy. Executor: Leonov." Each document in the KGB contains the name of the author and executor. I didn't give them to anyone. I wrote them myself and filled them out myself.

On several issues we forcefully asked Gorbachev to reconsider and take a sober look at how events were really taking shape. He didn't react to this, but passed on the notes, say, once again to Yakovlev. Yakovlev became even more enraged at the KGB. And all this started to take on the appearance of court intrigues, although, in actuality we were thinking about the same thing – saving the country and the Party. At the time, we understood that the country could not survive without the Party.

O.S. At the same time, in September 1990, you and Shebarshchin approached Kryuchkov and said, "Vladimir Aleksandrovich, we need to dismantle the Communist Party. We need to liberate the KGB from Party organs."

N.L. As soon as the famous Paragraph 6 was removed and the artillery and mortar fire began on the party, it became absolutely clear that Gorbachev was striving to give the Party a dressing down. It was no longer a secret for us. At that time he had

already put forth his idea of creating the post of president of the Soviet Union in order to leave the Party, to abandon it. But why should we hold on to the Party? That was the subtext of our appeal to Kryuchkov. If the country's political leadership was going to leave the Party, then what sense did it make state institutions to remain instruments of the Party? It made no sense.

O.S. But at the same time you say that in February 1991 the Party should have been preserved.

N.L. The problem is that the Party nonetheless remained society's core, although it had been yanked out from the state apparatus. This was the only hinge that united our republics, social classes, and all our state institutions into an integrated whole.

Therefore, in fighting to preserve the Soviet Union, we, of course, were fighting to save the Party. I myself went to the Central Committee many times. At that time we were trying to agitate Party members for the referendum. We desperately fought for the legitimate resolution of the question, thinking that we would, in this way, tie the hands of the separatists and give Gorbachev a powerful trump card that would simply be a crime not to use.

O.S. Were you surprised by the results of the referendum? You write that they surpassed even your expectations and that more people than you anticipated had voted for the preservation of the Soviet Union.

N.L. The problem is that in this case the deceit of the press had an effect. Since our press by that time was no longer controlled by the party, such newspapers as *Moskovskie novosti* and *Argumenty i fakty* turned into a separatist farce. They sometimes created a visual distortion of reality. Relations between structures in the KGB started to

weaken. I have in mind, for example, those between the Ukrainian KGB and us.

Contacts started to weaken, because people always try to find out which way the wind is blowing to save their own skin. Ukrainian separatism intensified.

We expected to win, otherwise we wouldn't have insisted on holding the referendum. We were certain of victory. But the result, which exceeded 73percent, or three quarters, of the population, was not only good news for us, but even unexpected good news.

O.S. And you write that after the referendum the conditions for saving the Soviet Union were favorable. Are you sure that this is so?

N.L. Absolutely. Anyone could have used this to his advantage. Given the results of the referendum we could have shut down all signs of separatism by any violent means, and this would have been justified in the eyes of public opinion. This was a mandate from the entire Soviet nation for any action designed to preserve the integrity of the state.

O.S. You were hoping that Gorbachev would make use of these results?

N.L. I had almost no hope, because of his personal qualities, which we are very familiar with. But we still thought that the collective pressure of the Politburo would force him to take the proper measures.

O.S. But in April the opposite happened.

N.L. Necessary measures could have been taken later as well. The Belovezhsky Accord of December 1991 gave Gorbachev grounds for arresting Yeltsin, but Gorbachev at the time was bound hand and foot.

O.S. It is said that the military, which didn't get involved, was the key factor.

N.L. I'm not certain. At that time Gorbachev was the commander-in-chief. The military was always very disciplined. If a command was given or an order signed, rarely would a soldier resolve to disobey it. Not a verbal order, of course, but a written one. In that way, all armed forces are subordinate to the leader of the government.

O.S. During the coup there was no written order.

N.L. No, there wasn't. During the events of 1993 Yeltsin was forced to give a written order to fire on the White House. He gave it; he had enough determination.

So what happened in the Belovezh Forest was a betrayal of all peoples of the Soviet Union and a violation of the most sacred and legitimate right.

O.S. It's a real shame that in the eyes of the people Gorbachev and the center merged together into one whole. Maybe people thought that, in choosing the Soviet Union and Gorbachev, they were receiving new life. The mistake was that it would have been possible to remove Gorbachev and thereby preserve the power structure. This, too, was factor. Why didn't Gorbachev resort to force?

N.L. That's a very difficult question to answer, because politics largely depends on personal qualities. This was so in the case of Gorbachev. The most difficult thing in making predictions in politics is to consider the personal qualities of the politician who is going to implement a given action. Gorbachev has absolutely no will. This is why carrying out operations that involved the use of force was always an agonizing problem for him, although governing a state demands the use of force. He avoided taking responsibility every time. According to his own testimony and that of his wife, Raisa Maksimovna, the most important thing for Gorbachev was that no shots be fired. But as a result there were more shots fired, and there was more bloodshed. A lack of

determination to use force when necessary had disastrous consequences. The most important thing was that he lacked the will required of a politician. The most important qualities for a politician are strategic thinking and a will. Gorbachev had neither. The same failings got him into trouble in foreign policy. As to domestic policy, it is said that if the person in power is afraid to use force, then anyone who is not afraid to use force will come to power. That's what happened.

O.S. Thank you for such an informative interview.