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Secret Papers Reveal Truth Behind Soviet Collapse The Gorbachev Files

By Christian Neef

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Communist hardliners staged a coup against Mikhail Gorbachev 20 years ago, and the Soviet Union collapsed soon afterwards. Previously unknown documents, which SPIEGEL has obtained, show just how desperate the last Soviet leader was as he fought to retain power -- and how he begged Germany for money to save his country.

There is one moment -- a single decision -- that some people still hold against Mikhail Gorbachev today, 20 years later.

Gorbachev, the last leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and last president of the Soviet Union, his wife and his closest confidants had survived the attempted coup by the KGB, the military leadership and the interior minister. They returned to Moscow from their house arrest at Gorbachev's vacation home in the Crimean resort of Foros. Their plane landed in the capital at 2:15 a.m., local time, on August 22, 1991.

For the last three days, some 60,000 people had been holding out in front of the Russian White House, the parliamentary seat of the Russian Soviet Republic, which had become the bastion of Gorbachev's supporters. When they heard on the radio that he had been released from house

arrest on the Crimean Peninsula, they cheered and chanted "President, President," and waited for an appearance by the then 60-year-old Gorbachev.

But Gorbachev, who was only released because the leaders of the coup had become afraid of their own people and did not venture to storm the White House, shocked his jubilant fellow Russians. Instead of asking to be taken from the airport directly to his supporters, and instead of savoring the moment of victory and celebrating the defeat of the plotters, he ordered his driver to take him out to his dacha. He spent the rest of the night at home, and drove to work at the Kremlin the next morning.

By today's standards, it was a PR gaffe beyond compare. But the three days of house arrest on the Crimean Peninsula didn't just confuse the country, it also upset Gorbachev's inner balance -- and especially that of his wife, Raisa Maximovna Gorbachova.

Erasing the Past

Gorbachev's wife had paid the highest price for those three days. She was forced to lie down on the flight to Moscow. She had hematomas in her eyes, her speech was impaired and she felt paralyzed on one side of her body. Doctors diagnosed a stroke, which was later found to have been a severe attack of hypertension.

The stress of those days, when the Soviet Union was coming to an end after almost 69 years in existence, was too much for the Gorbachevs to handle. It was not the Kremlin chief but his former protégé Boris Yeltsin who was now shining as the new political star in Moscow. Immediately after the coup, Yeltsin banned all activities of the Soviet Communist Party, of which Gorbachev had been the general secretary until then. And because the secession movement among the non-Russian Soviet republics was continuing, Gorbachev became a president without a state. Soon the only remaining core republic of the Soviet Union would be Russia, which Gorbachev no longer had control over.

Raisa Gorbachova spent those post-coup days on the veranda of the president's dacha. It was on one of those days that she erased a part of her past, by burning 52 letters her husband had written to her while on official trips. They were "letters from our youth," as Gorbachev would later say, letters his wife had kept her entire life. But following her experiences in Foros, she had become fearful, including of those who would be in power in the future. She wept as she threw the carefully preserved letters into the oven, telling her husband that she wanted to prevent outsiders from peering into their lives.

Gorbachev, who was equally in the dark as to what would happen to his family and the country in the coming weeks, and who respected his wife's opinions, followed her lead and began burning other documents.

He tossed 25 notebooks into the flames. They included notes he had made while in office, details of everyday political life, descriptions of politicians and various plans. The only notebook he kept was his private diary. Almost 20 years would pass before he spoke of the incident again, in a February 2011 interview with *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper he publishes.

Archive Contains Thousands of Documents

The official papers from his almost six years in office were preserved. Gorbachev took them with him when he announced his resignation as the Soviet president at the end of the year, and donated them to the foundation that bears his name. Since then, about 10,000 documents have been in storage at the foundation's headquarters on Leningrad Prospect 39 in Moscow. They include the personal archives of his foreign policy advisers, Vadim Zagladin and Anatoly Chernyaev.

The papers illustrate the end period of the communist experiment. They include the minutes of negotiations with foreign leaders, the handwritten recommendations of advisers to Gorbachev, speaker's notes for telephone conversations and recordings of those conversations, confidential notes by ambassadors and shorthand records of debates in the politburo.

None of the issues with which the self-proclaimed reformer of the Soviet Union was confronted in those years has been left out.

There are memorandums in which the Soviet leader is advised on how to end the war in Afghanistan or how to deal with Jews seeking to emigrate, or explaining to him why he should refuse to meet with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat ("nothing real to be expected from him") or why he should avoid putting Mathias Rust, a young German aviator who had illegally landed a light aircraft near Red Square, on trial and receive him in the Kremlin instead ("there are questions as to his psychological state").

There are reports from informers within the East German Communist Party leadership, describing how bad conditions were in East Germany and detailing who could still be depended upon in the East Berlin politburo. And there are equally meticulous reports on what the French magazine *Paris Match* wrote about Raisa Gorbachova or what the Russian singer Alla Pugacheva told a German magazine about Gorbachev's perestroika policy.

Inefficient Bureaucracy

Reading the documents feels like stepping back in time. All at once, they reveal the many problems of the calcified system, where farmers and miners alike were rebelling and intellectuals were demanding democratic elections. The people of the Baltic states, the Georgians and the Moldovans were revolting against the Russians, while the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine -- the

Soviet Union foreign policy that countries could not leave the Warsaw Pact -- was looming in Eastern Europe.

Gorbachev, who had once been a provincial official in Stavropol, stood at the helm of this country, watching it suffocate as a result of its sheer size and the refusal of its bureaucracy to change course. The documents also show that even under Gorbachev, the bureaucracy was as inefficient as ever.

Gorbachev's aide Anatoly Chernyaev, for example, complains about incompetent leaders in the global communist movement, like French Communist Party leader Georges Marchais ("a dead horse") and Gus Hall, the chairman of the Communist Party USA ("a philistine with plebeian conceits"). Nevertheless, Moscow was still paying millions to support its representatives around the world.

At this time, shops in the Soviet Union had run out of eggs and sugar, and even vodka was in short supply. Conditions were so bad that, in September 1988, Chernyaev had to submit a written request to get a telephone connection in the apartment of his driver Nikolai Nikolayevich Maikov, so that the general secretary could reach him.

SPIEGEL is also mentioned repeatedly in the internal documents in the Gorbachev archive. For example, a June 1987 memo reveals that Chernyaev was clearly upset about 54 questions SPIEGEL journalists had sent to the Kremlin leader, which he characterized as "rather insolent." He suspected that SPIEGEL intended to conduct an interview it had requested with Gorbachev "as an interrogation." In the memo, Chernyaev writes that the Kremlin should "of course not react" to this request. The request is stamped "return with denial." As it happened, the interview did not take place. Now, 24 years later, it is clear why.

Still Taboo

Gorbachev later used some of the documents in his books, much to the chagrin of the current Kremlin leadership. But many of the papers are still taboo to this day. This is partly because they relate to decisions or people that Gorbachev is still unwilling to talk about. But most of all it is because they do not fit into the image that Gorbachev painted of himself, namely that of a reformer pressing ahead with determination, gradually reshaping his enormous country in accordance with his ideas.

During a research visit to the Gorbachev Foundation, the young Russian historian Pavel Stroilov, who lives in London today, secretly copied about 30,000 pages of the material archived there and made them available to SPIEGEL.

The documents reveal something that Gorbachev prefers to keep quiet: that he was driven to act by developments in the dying Soviet state and that he often lost track of things in the chaos. They also show that he was duplicitous and, contrary to his own statements, sometimes made deals with hardliners in the party and the military.

In other words, the Kremlin leader did what many retired statesmen do: He later significantly embellished his image as an honest reformer.

Did Gorbachev Know about Violent Crackdowns?

The West has praised Gorbachev for not forcefully resisting the demise of the Soviet Union. In reality, it remains unclear to this day whether the Kremlin leader did not in fact sanction military actions against Georgians, Azerbaijanis and Lithuanians, who had rebelled against the central government in Moscow between 1989 and 1991. When Soviet troops violently quelled the demonstrations, 20 people were killed in Georgia, 143 in Azerbaijan and 14 in Lithuania, not to mention the wars and unrest in Nagorno-Karabakh, Trans-Dniester and Central Asia.

Many have not forgotten the tragedy that unfolded in the Georgian capital Tbilisi on the night of April 8-9, 1989, when Russian soldiers used sharpened spades and poison gas to break up a protest march in the city.

Gorbachev claims that he was not made aware of the incident until six hours later. He had not given the military or the intelligence service clear signals to exercise restraint in the smoldering conflict, even though he knew how fragile the relationship was between Russians and Georgians. He also did not call anyone to account later on. Even today, he still says that it was "a huge mystery" as to who gave the orders to use violence in Tbilisi.

But when Gorbachev met with Hans-Jochen Vogel, the then-floor leader of Germany's center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), on April 11, two days after the bloody suppression of the protests, he sought to justify the hardliners' approach. He later had the following passage deleted from the published version of the Russian minutes of the conversation with Vogel:

You have heard about the events in Georgia . Notorious enemies of the Soviet Union had gathered there. They abused the democratic process, shouted provocative slogans and even called for the deployment of NATO troops to the republic. We had to take a firm approach in dealing with these adventurers and defending perestroika -- our revolution.

The "notorious enemies of the Soviet Union" were in fact peaceful civilians. Of the 20 Georgians killed in Tbilisi, 17 were women.

A remark made at a politburo meeting on Oct. 4, 1989, in which Gorbachev learned that 3,000 demonstrators had been killed on Tiananmen Square in Beijing that June, shows that he was prepared for resistance to his reform plans and was not necessarily ruling out the need for violent action. Gorbachev said:

We must be realists. They have to defend themselves, and so do we. 3,000 people, so what?

Although the minutes of the meeting were later published, this passage was missing.

'We Will Only Intervene if There Is Bloodshed'

In 1990 and 1991, Gorbachev could assume that very few leading politicians in the West would question his role in the bloody conflicts with the Soviet republics vying for their independence. In those weeks, the only concern of Americans and Western Europeans alike was if the Soviets would really withdraw from Eastern Europe. As a result, they allowed Gorbachev to blatantly lie to them, such as when Moscow tried to stop the Baltic independence movement at the last minute.

In January 1991, under pressure from the intelligence service and the military, Gorbachev apparently agreed to what was already a futile venture: proclaiming presidential rule in Lithuania under Moscow's control. As was once the case in Budapest and Prague, "workers" loyal to the Soviet Union were to ask Moscow to send troops to their aid, which is precisely what transpired. On Jan. 13, special Soviet army and state security units advanced in tanks to the building housing the state television headquarters in Vilnius, where they stormed the station and killed 14 people.

In a telephone conversation with then-US President George Bush two days earlier, Gorbachev had flatly denied that Moscow would intervene in Vilnius:

Bush: *I'm worried about your internal problems. As an outsider, all I can say is this: If you manage to avoid the use of force, it will benefit your relations with us, and not just with us.*

Gorbachev: *We will only intervene if there is bloodshed or if there is unrest that not only threatens our constitution, but also human lives. I am now under tremendous pressure to introduce presidential control in Lithuania . I am still holding back, and only in the case of a very serious threat will I take tough measures.*

Helmut Kohl, the German chancellor who, in the name of his government, had consistently campaigned for the right of self-determination by national populations, declined to make any criticism of Gorbachev. When the two leaders spoke by telephone five days after the bloody events in Vilnius, he only mentioned the Soviet military action in passing:

Gorbachev: *Now everyone is beginning to ask: Is Gorbachev abandoning his course? Is the new Gorbachev finished, and has he moved to the right? I can say in all honesty: We will not change our policy.*

Kohl: *As a politician, I understand that there are moments when evasive maneuvers are unavoidable if one hopes to achieve certain political goals.*

Gorbachev: *Helmut, I am familiar with your assessment of the situation, and I greatly respect it. Goodbye.*

But Gorbachev lost his last shred of credibility with his own people during those days. "He is on the side of those who committed murder in Vilnius," a bitterly disappointed Anatoly Chernyaev, his closest confidant, wrote in his diary. He dictated to his secretary a long letter to Gorbachev that reads like a settling of accounts:

Mikhail Sergeyevich!

Your speech in the Supreme Soviet (about the events in Vilnius) signaled the end. It was not an appearance by a great statesman. It was a confused, babbling speech. You are unwilling to say what you really intend to do. And you apparently don't know what the people think about you -- outside in the streets, in the shops and in the trolleybuses. All they talk about is "Gorbachev and his clique." You claimed that you wanted to change the world, and now you are destroying this work with your own hands.

The secretary took down the letter, but then she accused Chernyaev of betraying Gorbachev. The letter disappeared into a safe instead of being sent.

'Kohl Is Not the Greatest Intellectual'

Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl figures particularly prominently in the Gorbachev documents. He was greatly indebted to the Russian leader at the time, because Gorbachev had declined not to deploy tanks in East Berlin to stop the collapse of East Germany in the fall of 1989. He also did not stand in the way of reunification the following year. In fact, to the consternation of many comrades in his own ranks, Gorbachev didn't even oppose a reunited Germany joining NATO.

Kohl was able to repay the favor in 1991, which was precisely what Gorbachev expected of him. During this phase, Kohl was, in many respects, Gorbachev's last hope.

The Soviet leader had apparently forgotten that he had viewed the German chancellor as a mediocre provincial politician for years. On Nov. 1, 1989, when he received Egon Krenz -- the

successor to East German leader Erich Honecker and East Germany's last communist leader -- at the Kremlin, he said to Krenz:

It seems that Kohl is not the greatest intellectual, but he enjoys a certain amount of popularity in his country, especially among ordinary citizens.

The message seems to have been: This isn't someone you need to worry about. Gorbachev himself had ignored Kohl for years. He had viewed him as a mouthpiece of the Americans and, for a long time, had deliberately steered clear of West Germany during his trips to Europe.

The minutes of the meeting between Krenz and Gorbachev were later published in Moscow, and were recently also made accessible to the public in Germany. However, the passage relating to Kohl is missing in the Russian version. Gorbachev was so embarrassed about it that he had it deleted.

Breaking the Ice with 'Helmut'

In the summer of 1990, after both men had negotiated the details of German reunification, his relationship with Kohl changed. The ice was finally broken when Gorbachev and his wife Raisa traveled to Germany in November, visiting the Kohls at their house in Oggersheim in western Germany and touring the nearby Speyer Cathedral with them. They even dined at Kohl's favorite restaurant, the Deidesheimer Hof. The two men switched to first-name terms on that occasion -- the breakthrough in their relationship.

Gorbachev needed the influential German chancellor, now that the situation was becoming dicey at home. There were shortages of everything in the shops -- meat, butter, powdered milk -- and his popularity was sinking.

In those months, Gorbachev reached for the phone more and more often to discuss the situation with his "friend Helmut," who had suddenly become his political adviser. The two men used a special telephone line, and hardly any of these conversations between Moscow and Bonn would later appear in Gorbachev's books. Kohl, in his memoirs, also mentions them only in passing.

This hesitation becomes clear to anyone who reads the transcripts, most of which were prepared by translators who also had to report to the KGB. The conversations were filled with Gorbachev's complaints, the cries for help of a drowning man -- words that the once-proud Soviet leader did his utmost to sweep under the rug two decades later.

At the time, however, he wanted Kohl to encourage the West to rescue the Soviet Union. He wanted the chancellor to portray the impending collapse as a catastrophe that could send the

entire world into turmoil. Or course, he also hoped for support in his fight against his toughest rival, Boris Yeltsin.

The two men spoke by telephone once again on the evening of Feb. 20, 1991. Kohl had called Gorbachev, after Yeltsin, in a television address on the previous day, had called upon Gorbachev to resign from his post at the Kremlin. Gorbachev never published this conversation, either, because it reveals the extent to which he had underestimated his rival and incorrectly assessed the situation:

Kohl: *Hello, Mikhail. Did you resign, as Yeltsin is demanding?*

Gorbachev: *I think he senses that he is losing authority and becoming more and more isolated. His appearance yesterday was an act of desperation or a stupid mistake. Yeltsin is a destroyer by nature. He has nothing constructive left to offer. He is exploiting the current difficult situation and trying to unleash a political fight.*

Kohl: *That will benefit you.*

Gorbachev: *At today's meeting of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR , someone said that such methods were undignified for a man of his rank. He will probably have to retract his words. The president of Kazakhstan and the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukraine have already distanced themselves from him.*

Kohl: *That's advantageous to you. I sense that you feel better now. I'm pleased about that.*

Less than four months later, more than 45 million voters elected the supposedly beleaguered Yeltsin to be the first president of the Russian Federation, the largest Soviet republic. This marked the beginning of a dual leadership that heralded the end of the Soviet realm. In a telephone conversation on April 30, Kohl assured the Kremlin leader:

Kohl: *I am doing everything I can to garner support for you here in Western Europe . I'll do the same in Washington , where I'm going in two weeks. You should realize that some people here are expressing grim opinions about your situation.*

Gorbachev: *Yes, I'm aware of that.*

Kohl: *To summarize, this is roughly what is being said: Yes, Gorbachev is a strong politician, but he will be unable to achieve the things he had planned. In this situation, it is extremely important to create a different environment psychologically. That's why I need authentic information from you, Mikhail. You have to tell me what the situation is really like.*

Gorbachev: *You know, Helmut, there are many people among our American friends who are whispering things about "Gorbachev's situation." They're saying, for example: Look, Gorbachev supports preserving the union, while Yeltsin might grant the Baltic states and other republics their independence. Yeltsin supports private ownership, while Gorbachev favors a mixed economy. Yeltsin will be more preoccupied with domestic issues and therefore won't get in the way of the Americans in various parts of the world. These are not credible recommendations. Bush and his secretary of state, (James) Baker, are still holding their ground, but they are coming under growing pressure. Of course, I also have to overcome these difficulties.*

Kohl: *You can rely on me, Mikhail. I will make this sufficiently clear to the Western European and American leaders.*

On July 5, when Yeltsin was already the de-facto president of Russia, waiting only for his inauguration, Kohl met with Gorbachev at the summer residence of the Ukrainian Communist Party in Mezghorye. At that moment, neither of the two leaders could know that, half a year later, Ukraine would already be an independent country.

As they were being driven from the Kiev airport to Mezghorye, Kohl reviewed the worst-case scenario:

Kohl: *I've thought about it: What would happen if Gorbachev would suddenly leave and Yeltsin would take his place? I have to say that the mere thought of it horrified me. Of course the country cannot be left to such a man.*

Gorbachev: *We certainly agree on that point.*

Kohl: *What will you do, Mikhail, when the Baltic states finally leave the union?*

Gorbachev: *They can do that, of course. It's difficult to change their ideas about sovereignty. They refuse to engage in any reasonable argumentation. If they truly want to withdraw, there is only one way to do it -- the constitutional approach. But they are terrified of taking the normal constitutional path.*

Kohl: *You really won't keep them in the union by force. On the other hand, it must be clear to the Baltic states that there is no option other than the one prescribed by the constitution. And the West's verbal support for them changes nothing in this regard.*

Neither the German nor the Russian would later publicize this conversation, because Kohl's view of Yeltsin was as devastating as Gorbachev's. What the chancellor also preferred not to see in print was the fact that he drew a clear distinction between his public support for the principle of self-determination and his actual position. Kohl did not truly support the Baltic Soviet republics

withdrawing from the union, and he demanded that such decisions be approved by the parliament in Moscow -- which, by then, was already wishful thinking.

Kohl: *Only a donkey can assume that the destruction of the union benefits anyone. The collapse of the Soviet Union would be a catastrophe for everyone. Anyone who supports this is jeopardizing peace. Not everyone understands me on this issue. But you can assume that I will not change my opinion in this regard... Gorbachev's reform course must be consistently supported. If Yeltsin comes to us, I will tell him the same thing. I will tell him that he doesn't stand a chance if he doesn't cooperate with you. The Americans have told him the same thing.*

Gorbachev: *No, they are practically encouraging him. In their eyes, he is a reformer.*

Kohl: *If Yeltsin comes to Germany , it will be a working visit. My most important goal is that you don't attack each other.*

Gorbachev: *Perhaps it would be a good idea not to invite him on behalf of the chancellor? Someone else should invite him, and the chancellor could then join the meeting as if by accident.*

Kohl: *Good.*

Gorbachev's goal of spoiling Yeltsin's chances of further advancement and getting Kohl on board, if possible, is understandable from a human standpoint. Politically, however, it was absurd.

It seems even more absurd that Gorbachev still wanted to be perceived as the leader of a world power, even as he was forced to beg for assistance behind the scenes.

'We Need Money for Current Expenses'

Two weeks later, he traveled to London to attend, for the first time, a summit of the seven leading industrialized nations, and to request that his country be admitted to this club of economic heavyweights. Kohl had paved the way to London for Gorbachev, over the objections of the Americans and Japanese. In reality, however, he traveled to London to beg for at least \$30 billion to rescue the ailing Soviet Union and its president.

Many of the reports written in those weeks -- none of which Gorbachev would later publish -- indicate that he must have perceived the situation as demeaning.

At the meeting in Kiev, he berated a man in Kohl's entourage who would become one of his key contacts in the coming weeks: Horst Köhler, the later German president, who was then a state

secretary at the German Finance Ministry and Kohl's "sherpa" (personal representative) at the G-7 summit.

When Köhler called upon the Soviets to submit to the rules of the International Monetary Fund, the Kremlin leader snapped: "The USSR isn't Costa Rica. The direction that history now takes will depend on how you configure your relations to us."

As for the idea of a Marshall Plan for the Soviet Union, Gorbachev described it as a "return to the old arrogance, according to which the Soviet economic train cannot be pulled up the mountain without the capitalist locomotive."

In reality, this locomotive was the Soviets' only remaining option. Their confidence in Kohl during those weeks was unlimited. In fact, they were practically euphoric, believing that things would improve for the Soviets in the slipstream of the powerful chancellor. In Kiev, Gorbachev adviser Chernyaev noted:

The new friendship with the Germans has been given yet another large scoop of cement. If all goes well with the Soviet-German factor, it will determine the fate of both Europe and global politics.

On the flight back to Moscow, Gorbachev said:

Kohl ... will do everything to help us rise up again and become a modern superpower. Well, he is very anxious about Ukraine (Kohl also met with the Ukrainian leadership in Kiev). But for him it's no longer Hitler's Lebensraum.

By early September, about three weeks after the August coup, the financial situation in the USSR was so precarious that Gorbachev took then German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher aside while Genscher was visiting Moscow and, abandoning any sense of pride, said:

Gorbachev: *We need money for current expenses, so that we can continue to live and maintain imports while the negotiations on the restructuring of our short-term debts are underway. I plan to discuss this with Kohl on the phone today.*

Genscher: *I don't know if you should address such a delicate matter on the telephone. I can send the chancellor an encrypted telegram right away, so that only he can read it.*

Gorbachev: *We need two billion dollars. Perhaps you advance half a billion from the payments we are to receive from you in October, and we'll take another half out of our reserves. We hope to obtain the second billion in the Middle East . I have sent (the deputy head of the KGB) Primakov there with this mission.*

Genscher: *I don't have the authority to respond to that. But I will convey everything to the chancellor right away.*

Kohl sent Köhler to Moscow. Gorbachev, who was already predicting horrific scenarios in light of the hesitant support from the West, met with Köhler on Sept. 12.

Gorbachev: *What is happening with the assistance for the USSR ? We are negotiating, weighing the options and doing the calculations. This is simply inexcusable. It's reminiscent of the Weimar Republic in Germany . While the democrats argued with each other, Hitler came to power without any particular effort. Foreign countries owe us about \$86 billion, which is roughly the sum we need now. I hope you will draw the necessary conclusions from what I have said.*

Köhler: *The chancellor has authorized me to inform you that we have approved the first request, namely to provide a billion deutschmarks. As far as the request for the second billion is concerned, we have no choice but to involve our partners in the European Union and the G-7. The search for options is complicated by the rather steep financial expectations on your side.*

Gorbachev: *Couldn't you find a way to provide loans at more favorable terms? Perhaps even interest-free loans?*

Köhler: *That's very difficult. I will try to convince my partners (in the G-7) that your country is still creditworthy. To that end, however, I need details on your foreign debt and the possibilities of selling your gold reserves.*

Gorbachev: *The harvest figures are not good. I spoke with (Kazakh President Nursultan) Nazarbayev just before your arrival. He told me that the harvest in the area of newly reclaimed land is worse than even the most modest estimates had predicted.*

Köhler: *According to American agencies, the harvest in your country will amount to 190 million tons of grain this year, compared with 230 million last year. A massive difference.*

Gorbachev: *It would be nice if we could bring in 180 million tons... During the Gulf War (following Saddam's invasion of Kuwait), everyone got together and collected huge sums of money to support the effort, close to \$100 billion. But when it comes to supporting this historic process in a huge country, one that everything in the world depends on, we start to haggle.*

Köhler: *The Americans won that war without investing a single dollar of their own.*

Gorbachev: *And what about all the things the Soviet Union has done for the world? Who is tallying up those figures? How much have our perestroika and our new way of thinking saved? Hundreds of billions of dollars for the rest of the world!*

Köhler: *There is no time to lose. It's a matter of weeks, even days. One of the miscalculations in your perestroika was to underestimate the economic side of this issue.*

But the plan to pump billions into Moscow with German help, and save Gorbachev that way, did not succeed. When the Ukrainians affirmed their declaration of independence with a referendum on Dec. 1, 1991 and elected their own president, the die had been cast. Seven days later, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus formed the Commonwealth of Independent States, which eight non-Slavic republics then joined.

The Soviet Union was being liquidated. Germany was celebrating Christmas when Gorbachev resigned as president on Dec. 25 and the Soviet Union came to a peaceful end. He sent a letter to Bonn on the same day:

Dear Helmut!

Although the events did not go the way I felt would have been correct and the most advantageous, I have not lost hope that the effort I began six years ago will eventually be concluded successfully, and that Russia and the other countries that are now part of a new community will transform themselves into modern and democratic countries.

With all our hearts, Raisa and I wish Hannelore (Kohl) and your entire family health, prosperity and happiness.

Your Mikhail

In this letter, Gorbachev is fully the statesman once again. That explains why the letter was among the few papers from the fateful year of 1991 that the failed reformer would later publish.