William Tyler | Stalin, Cold War, and Gerontocracy

– We're not talking about the environment or the history of the environment, but we are going to talk about Russia, and I'm going to pick up the story at the point of World War II and take it through the Soviet era up to the point at which Gorbachev took over, because I'm going to look at Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin for our final meeting on Russia. But one of the things that stands out about the Soviet Union, Russia as the USSR... and forgive me if I use these terms interchangeably, Russia, USSR, and Soviet Union. I know I shouldn't use Russia, but it seems to make sense to me. So whatever I use, I'm talking about the same country. One of the things that's interesting is Russian humour, and Russian humour had a field day during the Soviet era. And this is a tiny little story to start us off, but, often, humour can tell you a great deal about a society, and particularly a society that is a repressed society like the Soviet Union. And this is a tiny little story. There was a school boy in his class who was required to write an essay every week about his family life. And he wrote one week, "My cat has just had seven kittens. They are all communists." Then, the next week, when he also had to write an essay about his family, he wrote the following, "My cat's kittens are now all capitalists." So the teacher, being a very Soviet teacher, calls him up and says, "Explain, Vladimir, exactly what you mean, because last week you said all your kittens were communists. So what's happened to make them capitalists?" And the boy said, "Well, they were all communists last week, but this week, they all open their eyes." It's an example of dry, Russian humour. I hope that humour translates to all the people that are listening. It translates well into English humour, I have to say, and that's why I shared that story with you. But I said I was going to begin at the end of World War II, that is to say in 1945. But actually, I'm going to begin with a quotation from Stalin which dates to before the war, that is to say in 1931. In 1931, Stalin said this, "We are 50 or 100 years behind the advanced countries." He means Western Europe and America. "We must make good this distance in 10 years. Either we do it, or they crush us." This is the old cry of Russian leaders, from Peter the Great to Putin, "We must catch up with the West." They're obsessed with catching up with the West. And, as we know, they have never caught up with the West. But things changed for Russia after World War II. It was the Second World War that proved to be Russia's greatest test. The Russians, of course, refer to the Second World War as the Great Patriotic War. You all recall that, in June 1941, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union, having previously, in 1939, agreed a pact. But the purpose of the pact was the division of Poland. The Second World War that followed for Russia, from 1948, '41, sorry, from 1941 onwards was horrific. The Russians lost civilian and military dead. Something in the region of 20 million Russians died. Not surprisingly that they remember and recall the Great Patriotic War as a moment of enormous endurance with an enormous test, which they came through to

the other side. And the point I want to make is that, because of World War II and Russia's intervention in World War II in 1941, opening up a second front, an Eastern front to the Western front that Britain was fighting, by 1945, Russia was one of the big three and Stalin was one of the big three, the other two being Churchill and FDR. And it was at Yalta in 1945 that Stalin played a major role in establishing the map of post-war Europe, a Europe which was to see itself divided into two by what Churchill described in a speech in Missouri a few years later as, "A iron curtain had descended across the continent of Europe." On one side, the Western side, were the Western democracies supported by the United States. On the other side were the Marxist states, the satellite states of Russia, countries like Romania and Hungary and Poland. Mark Galeotti writes in his book, "A Short History of Russia," this, if I can get the right page, I will read it, "By the end of the war, the pariah nation of Russia," a pariah nation in the 1930s, "had become a superpower, Stalin sitting down with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference in 1945 to carve up the post-war world, with Lavia, Lithuanian, and Estonia directly incorporated into the USSR," in other words, they became Russia, "and East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania destined to become Russian vassals." Stalin, after the horrors of the 1930s, is still in power, and remains so for nearly a decade after the end of the Second World War until his death in 1953. But it was clear by the late 1940s, if not earlier, that Stalinism as an economic policy simply wasn't working, and even repression was losing its edge. And again, Mark Galeotti tells us this, he writes, "After the triumph of the war, the limitations of Stalinism were becoming clearer. His economic model was increasingly ill-suited to the new technologies of the post-war era and the Gulag camps were of diminishing value, not least as risings within them became more common." So two issues, one, Russia was still trying to catch up with the West even though it came out as a victor in 1945. And secondly, there was a growing discontent now with the Soviet regime that had promised so much in 1917 and now was delivering, in the 1950s, so little, and particularly so little by comparison to the West. It thought that Stalin was preparing for a further round of purges when he died of a stroke in 1953. I'll read you one last piece from this part of Galeotti's book. And it's very simple, it goes like this, "A restive and ambitious elite had their own agendas. There are many indications that Stalin had decided on a new purge to cut them back down to size when he suffered his stroke. He might have survived had he received prompt medical care." But he was paranoid, and the servants didn't go into check him. No one sort of touched him and went in even. And so, when help finally came, it was far too late. And so he dies. Stalin is dead, but communism continues in Russia.

Between Stalin's death in 1953 and the death of the Soviet Union itself in December 1991, there were six leaders of the Soviet Union. We're going to talk about the sixth, Gorbachev, from 1985 to 1991 next week. I'm going to look at the five who succeeded Stalin and take the

story up from 1953 with Stalin's death and 1985, the accession to power by Gorbachev. Many of you will remember all the names. Even if you couldn't name them now and need a jog from me, you will recall them, maybe not so much the first one, Malenkov, who lead Russia from March to September of '53. You can discount it. Khrushchev, who remained in power for over a decade between 1953 and 1964, and you all recall his performance, and a performance it was, at United Nations when he banged the table with his shoe. Then Khrushchev was succeeded in '64 by a man who lasted nearly two decades until his death in 1982, Brezhnev. And it's Khrushchev and Brezhnev who stand out. Brezhnev was succeeded by the sick and ailing Andropov, former head of the KGB, from November '82 to February '84, by which time he was, for all intents and purposes, comatose. And then, finally, Chernenko, Andropov's deputy who succeeded in February of '84 and was seriously challenged by Alzheimer's, we assume Alzheimer's, but by a medical mental condition, who lasted only between February in '84 and March '85. Malenkov, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko. And to be perfectly honest, not even Chernenko or Brezhnev really amounted to much. I've written here an English phrase, which I hope you all know, "They were a motley crew." Only Andropov of them was intelligent, but Andropov came to power dragging behind him his involvement in the suppression of revolts against the communist rule in both Hungary in '56 and Czechoslovakia in '68. And he comes with that label, KGB. They weren't successful. They followed, give or take, a Marxist doctrine of economics, and it was failing. And each time a new leader took power, they blamed the previous leader for not implementing it correctly. And it is true, corruption was rife as it is today in Putin's Russia. And corruption doesn't aid any economic system, Marxist or capitalist. So there was a major problem there. There was also a major problem in that they never ever seem to have got true figures. Politicians in the West might not like the economic figures that are produced. They may wish to sort of try and present them in the best light that they can, but in truth, in Russia, it was not very likely or very often that true facts were presented to them. And Putin has suffered from the same problem. If you don't have the facts, how can you begin to make sensible judgements? The answer is, obviously, you can't. None of them really grasp Russia's underlying problems, like lack of infrastructure and failure to keep pace with the post-war Western world as consumerism took off in the 1960s. I don't know how many of you visited an Eastern European country during the years of communism, but if you did, you can easily testify to the fact that they were in a time warp. I remember going just as communism was dying on a Council of Europe visit toward adult education in Yugoslavia. And we took off, we took off from Yugoslavia by plane. And for some reason or other, I couldn't get a direct flight to London and I had to go via Switzerland. And I was with a Danish colleague. And when we landed in Switzerland at the airport, we couldn't believe it, we virtually got headaches there was so much light. Lighting, I mean, not just ordinary light, but artificial lighting and so much noise, music, and so many adverts, so unlike the Yugoslavia that we had left. And those of you

who have visited any Eastern European country before the end of communism will, I'm sure, have your own examples to give on how it seemed as though you were in some time warp. They never managed to catch up. They never got their economic system working to such an extent that there was no, really, seething anger beneath the surface from ordinary Russians who continued to have little choice in supermarkets; indeed, on many occasions, little food to actually buy let alone white goods, which, in the end, was one of the big issues when they began to see Western television programmes or listen to things like the BBC and read books that came in. Increasingly in the post-1945 world, there were no borders. We've seen that with Putin's Russia and Ukraine, where, however hard Putin has tried to control the news media, he hasn't been able to do so because young people in particular can get around all the barriers on the internet. They know what is going on.

So the story is one of, I suppose the easiest word to use is stagnation. One other thing I should tell you, and that is all five of these leaders, all five of them were born in Czarist Russia, all five. Gorbachev is the first Soviet leader to have been born in Soviet Russia. All the others have been born in Czarist Russia. I think it's very important to note with leaders in power when they were born and where they were educated and what they were educated in. We see that with both Johnson in Britain and Biden in the States. When were they born? What was the influential decade and what was the education they received in terms of what were they taught, what sort of standard message were they given, about Russia, for example? So Stalin dies in 1953. This is a book on the Khrushchev era that was produced for university students, and it has an interesting paragraph here, or half a paragraph. It's simply called "The Khrushchev Era" by Martin McCauley, and it is on one of my Russian booklets on the blog. "There were no rules," says McCauley, "or conventions about choosing a new Soviet leader. Stalin had ensured that there was no natural successor to him." Of course, because he didn't want a rival to unseat him. So when he dies, there isn't, as you might say, a crown prince to take over. "There was a general agreement that Malenkov was the senior of the deputies, but there were three other men, Beria, who was the head of the KGB, Bulganin, and Khrushchev. And these four were jockeying, Malenkov, Beria, Bulganin, and Khrushchev were jockeying for the power that Stalin had." They had no other model. They had been born under a czar, and the only leader they knew was Stalin. The only model they had was Stalin. And they may have been personally critical of Stalin or personally critical of some of Stalin's policies, but they didn't see any, they wouldn't even have considered that there should be a different sort of leadership. This was a leadership of one, and certainly not a leadership of four. "The immediate task for each of these four men," says McCauley, "was to ensure that the others did not succeed." And they had already been plotting, because Stalin didn't yield before his death, they had already been plotting how they would get rid of the others. But, initially, for a few months, at least in

1953, Malenkov emerged. And just as I said just now, he announced there would be a new course. Communist politicians, like democratic politicians, are coming into office and want to make a fresh start, draw a line under the past and move forward. "And Malenkov was no different. He called it a new course, by which," says McCauley, "Malenkov meant greater emphasis on consumer goods at the expense of heavy industry." That is a populist message to the people of Russia, but Malenkov isn't as good a plotter. You would have thought Beria, KGB, would've been the great plotter, no. Bulganin, not got the wherewithal. The man who was the great plotter was the Ukrainian peasant, Khrushchev. Peasant guile is often a phrase used, I think unfairly to peasants, about Khrushchev. Malenkov was a puppet. Bulganin was a nobody. He regarded Beria as the greatest threat to him. In other words, if he didn't get rid of Beria, Beria might get rid of him, him, Khrushchev. "Khrushchev manoeuvred the arrest of Beria, a show trial of Beria. And, of course, Beria, in a show trial, is found guilty." There's never going to be another option, he is going, simply, to die. A death sentence was imposed upon him. One down, from Khrushchev's point view, two to go, Malenkov. Malenkov was downgraded in 1955 to prime minister. He's losing his job as prime minister in '55. He's then downgraded in a whole series of downgradings until he lands up with a sort of not quite caretaker's job. But, basically, totally out of the picture. In 1955, the year that Beria, sorry, Beria is already gone, the year that Malenkov is gone, we have, and I remember this from school in 1955, B & K, Bulganin and Khrushchev tour the world, including Britain. And they presented a very odd picture. And I remember pictures of them in the paper and seeing it. And Sheila Fitzpatrick, in her "Shortest History of the Soviet Union," talks about them in this way, she says, "Khrushchev and his sidekick," absolutely spot on, "Khrushchev and his sidekick, Bulganin, set off to make friends in Europe in 1955, swanning around," I love this, "in matching, baggy, purplish summer suits that were the wonder of the West." They looked peasant. They didn't look the part of world leaders. "While the development of good relations with the West was set back the following year because of Suez, but particularly with Russia because of a Hungarian Revolution so badly crushed, not least by the later leader of the Soviet Union, Andropov, but they also went to the wider Third World," which is an aspect of Russia from this point on in history and to the present day of making friends in the Third World to build up support against the United States and its Western European allies. This is what Fitzpatrick writes about Khrushchev, the Western view of Khrushchev, "As a lower class comic term," the purple summer suit, "was, to a fair degree, shared in the Soviet Union itself. This was particularly true of the intelligentsia who looked down upon Khrushchev as this illiterate pest, but a broader Soviet public also preferred more gravitas in a leader." You need to look like a leader, first and foremost. We're going through the election, a party election in the Conservative Party, to produce our next prime minister. And they need to demonstrate gravitas in the way they dress, in the way they speak,

in the way they hold themselves. Well, Khrushchev certainly didn't do that. "Leadership contests in a Soviet context were not decided by popular vote. However, in Khrushchev's annihilation of Beria had shown what a wily political operator lay beneath that Ukrainian peasant shirt." He was a devious political operator. Bulganin remained the last conceivable threat to Khrushchev's having sole power. By 1957, Bulganin shared doubts about Khrushchev's new policies, we'll come to that in the moment, and he joined what Khrushchev called an anti-party group, they were members of the party, he called them an anti-party group, who were opposed to his views. In June '57, Khrushchev's opponents moved against him in the politburo. And Bulganin made a terrible mistake. He vacillated, he sat on the fence, he did not make a choice between Khrushchev and those who wanted to remove Khrushchev. Khrushchev, what a surprise, succeeded. And in 1958, Bulganin was forced retire, and like Malenkov before him, was given jobs in a descending order of importance. He even had his title from World War II of marshal taken away from him. And, finally, in 1960, only two years later, he was retired on a pension. At least he wasn't shot and he's retired. Khrushchev, like Malenkov in '53, Khrushchev saw the need for change. He saw the need to move away from Stalinism and Stalin. And in 1956, he made the famous speech called the "Secret Speech," because it was, to the party in 1956 denouncing Stalin. It looked as though Russia might be taking a new course, a more democratic course. It's true, well, it certainly didn't take a more democratic course, but it is true that the gulags under Khrushchev, many prisoners were released. Of course, new prisoners were also sent in, but there was a lull of the use of gulags. In fact, Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer, was released under Khrushchev's policy. It is to get tougher again under Brezhnev. We actually go in Russia backwards. But the one thing that Khrushchev began to achieve was a limited economic success. And Sheila Fitzpatrick tells us about his limited, and it is limited, success. "The gross national product grew at a rate of almost 7% a year throughout the 1950s compared with less than 3% in the United States." Yes, but the GNP had started from a much lower base than the American, so it isn't quite a direct comparison. "Industrial production in 1960 was almost three times what it had been in 1950," but, in 1950, it was in a very low base, "and close to five times than 1940. Agricultural production was also up. More than half the Soviet population was urban, was in 1962. "Adult literacy," now that, I should emphasise as an adult educator that the education under the Soviet regime was, in many respects, splendid. It was splendid in getting adult literacy rates from something like 50% in the 1920s to virtually 100% by the time we reached the mid 1960s. Education as a whole was extremely good, except, of course, it was under the cloak of Marxism. So you are not going to be studying novels by Solzhenitsyn in secondary school in Russia, nor are you going to get objective history or a social science. But if we look at science and if we look at maths and if we look at Russian language, all of that is of the highest order. And we mustn't forget, they were also extremely good at dealing with people with learning difficulties,

extraordinarily good in a way that the West was not good. One has to be careful about painting things on one side as entirely wrong and behind because it doesn't always work right.

But we read on, "New consumer goods started to reach the urban and even rural population. By 1965, 32% of households had TV sets, 17% had refrigerators, and 29% had washing machines." But it's nothing like America or Britain or Canada or wherever you are listening. It's not figures like ours. "Life expectancy, which had been below 40 in the 1920s was in the higher 60s by the 1960s. For the only time," says Fitzpatrick, "in Soviet history the claim loudly made by Khrushchev himself that the Soviet Union would soon catch up with and surpass the West actually looked plausible." Khrushchev believed that, in 10 years, Russia would be ahead of the West. His actual phrase, this is Khrushchev's words, "We will bury the West." Well, it isn't quite like the Cold War which began as the hot war as the Second World War ended pretty well. It is fought between Eastern Europe, Russian satellites, and Western Europe, or the West, led by the United States. And the beginning of that period, the thing that really triggers the Cold War is the nuclear arms race the United States began before the war ended by failing to tell Moscow that it was about to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August 1945. They had told Russia they had the bomb, but they didn't tell them they were going to drop it. America decided that, if it had more atomic bombs, this would discourage Russia from expanding communist influence in the world. Well, we know what happened. By 1949, the Soviets had tested their own atomic bomb and we begin the nuclear arms race, basically, between America and Russia. And then the nuclear arms race developed into a Cold War space race. And the space race is particularly interesting because it was Russia that got ahead. I mentioned previously that Russian science teaching and maths teaching was of the highest order. Well, in 1955 in July, America announced that it intended to launch artificial satellites. Four days later, the Soviet Union declared they would launched a satellite in the near future, and they beat the Americans to it when Sputnik 1 went up in 1957. Moreover, the Russians then sent up the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin on Vostok 1 in 1961. Kennedy, in a fit of patriotism but also of necessity because they believed that they could not give Russia that advantage, raised the stakes by saying that America would land the first man on the moon, which, of course, America achieved in 1969. If we go to the Cold War itself, many commentators today believe that the nearest we got to a hot war between America, the West, and Russia and Eastern Europe was with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Now, the Cuban Missile Crisis was very serious, with Russia deploying missiles in Cuba after a failed attempt by Kennedy's administration to overthrow Fidel Castro. It was touch and go whether the Russians would back down, which, of course, eventually, they did on the principle of MAD. You all remember "Mad" magazine, mutually assured destruction. if the Russians press a button, the Americans will press the button seconds later. If the Americans press the button, the Russians will press it a second later,

mutually assured destruction.

Now, with tactical nuclear weapons that Putin may yet deploy in Ukraine, we are in a different situation entirely, and indeed a more worrying one. But by 1969, there are attempts to change policy, American policy, in an effort to avoid nuclear escalation. And for all his faults, that was introduced by Richard Nixon. In 1993, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians and Americans are jointly involved in the International Space Station programmes. So the Cold War did not erupt into a hot war. Although the Cuban Missile Crisis Showed us that it might well have happened, it didn't. And the Cold War ended with the collapse of Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1991. And the Japanese American historian Fukuyama wrote that this was the "End of history." Well, it wasn't. It wasn't. I didn't believe it then and it certainly isn't true now, but no one anticipate that, in 1991, 30 years later, Russia is now a major threat. A statement made by military intelligence here in Britain says Russia is a major threat today to Britain. You might say, having done a course on Russian history, nothing changes. Well, maybe you are right in thinking that. But please, we have to have hope, hope that one day there will be change, genuine change in Russia. But at the same time as we see Russia slipping back into this Cold War era with Putin, so we see confidence, in America and Britain and elsewhere, confidence in our own Western style of democracies waning with the public. We are in a very different situation than in the first Cold War. We no longer feel confident in our own systems. And as I said just now, the dangers we face, particularly with nuclear tactical weapons, are very different than we faced with mutually assured destruction in the Cold War. But let me pick up the story of Brezhnev, who came to power in 1964 and remained in power for nearly two decades before his death in 1982. Like Khrushchev, he needed to get rid of other figures that might have challenged his power, in his case, Kosygin and Podgorny. But by the early '70s, he's more than in charge, he's solidly in charge. And so hopes for economic improvement in Russia, even suggested not political improvement, rests with Brezhnev. And Galeotti writes this of Brezhnev, he says, "The first part of Brezhnev's rule as general secretary seems strikingly successful, offering something for everyone. The elite got stability and prosperity, not in the least though, through increased opportunities for corruption and embezzlement that has stymied Russia. Ordinary Soviet citizens got an improving quality of life, their political quiescence bought with lack of discipline and new consumer goods between 1964 and 1975. The average wage in that period increased by almost two thirds. Even the West was offered a less confrontational stance than under Khrushchev, and a new era of detente and coexistence began." And I mentioned in 1969 Nixon's first efforts in that direction. So there was some hope, but, there's always a but in Russian history, but, and the but in this case, as so often, was money. Much money was spent on conventional military forces, as well as on nuclear weapons, and, of course, on space, money which could otherwise have been spent on infrastructure

and of improving the lot of ordinary Russians. But Russia was again falling behind developments in Western technology, particularly in the field of computing. This is, I think, a great paragraph by Mark Galeotti talking about all of this, summing it up a bit, and he writes this, "By the mid 1970s, problems that had previously been buried in avalanches of rubles were beginning to surface. Massive economic ventures, such as opening up a few areas to farming, had failed to deliver on the promises. A new global industrial revolution based on computing was beginning, and the USSR was falling behind. Corruption and black marketeering were eating the heart out of the official economy. A vastly expensive arms race with the West had begun. This was, however, a slow-burning crisis that needed urgent decisive action. But that is precisely what the ageing, cautious, and bright," frankly, not very bright, "Brezhnev couldn't and wouldn't provide. He lacked the temperament, political authority, or ideas. So, instead, he just survived, a metaphor for a Soviet state becoming less capable, less healthy, and more senile by the year." Brezhnev, who promised much, ends in failure. Khrushchev, who promised much, ended in failure. When Brezhnev died in 1982, Russia was backed in full crisis mode, mired in a war it could not win in Afghanistan, increasing problems of drugs for the young in its cities, caused indeed by drugs being brought back by returning soldiers from Afghanistan and drug addiction. The economy was stagnant. There was trouble in Poland. Food, on occasions, was rationed. It was actually in one heck a mess. There was a common phrase used at the time, "They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." Communism was again being shown to fail as Brezhnev died.

Now the Soviet Union collapses into full gerontocracy mode, gerontocracy, rule by the elderly, and in USSR's case, rule by the sick. When he died, Brezhnev was 76 and losing it. I'm not describing 76 years old. Please bear with me. I'm 76 and I don't feel old. But Brezhnev was an old 76. He was succeeded by Andropov, who is younger, born in 1914, still in czarist Russia. But by the time Andropov, the ex-head of the KGB, became general secretary, he was already a sick man. And he was unpopular because of his part in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, as I said, and the 1968 Prague Spring. But he also recognised the need for change, and he of all of them is the brightest and the best educated. He attempted to improve the Russian economy by increasing efficiency. Oh, wow. There is plenty of room to do that. He cracked down on workers' lack of discipline with the arrest of workers who were absentee without reason. They were taken to court, and there were penalties, financial penalties for those who were late into work. He began to look at the facts of the economic situation in Russia and made his judgement on that, although Gorbachev tells us, who was working for him, that, on one occasion, Gorbachev asked him, asked Andropov, this is an insight in itself, he said, "Can I see the real economic figures?" And Andropov replied, according to Gorbachev, there's no reason to doubt Gorbachev, "You are asking too much. The budget is off limits to you." Andropov is getting the real figures,

but is not sharing them with his closest advisors because the real figures of the economic output of Russia are appalling. Because of his focus on greater efficiency, he did achieve a 4% increase in industrial output, and he did get increased investment into new technologies, like robotics. He gave more power to the managers in state industry, but it was very little and he himself has not longed to live. In February '83, he suffered a total kidney failure. In August '83, he enters the Central Clinical Hospital in Moscow, and he doesn't leave it. He dies in January '84. And during his time in the hospital, although he's the sole ruler of Russia, he suffers from bouts of unconsciousness. He was only 69 at his death, but he is an old, old man reduced by ill health. I'd like to say that, in a Western country, he would not have survived, he would've been removed from office. But from across this side of the water, it seems, what shall I say, it seems somewhat interesting that Biden remains in office. Andropov was succeeded by his deputy, Konstantin Chernenko. Chernenko already himself had severe health problems. He served only 13 months in office, dying in office in 1985. One of the jokes going around in Russia about Chernenko, there was a usual form of words that the media in Russia used at the death of important Russians in the Soviet period, and the expression used at death was, "Today, due to bad health and without regaining consciousness, X, Y, and Z died." But the joke going around in Russia with Chernenko whilst he was alive, was this, "Today, due to bad health and without regaining consciousness, Comrade Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko took up the duties of Secretary General, without regaining consciousness, took up the duties of Secretary General." But it's all dreadful. Could it go on? Well, a big question of course is, could it go on, that is to say, could Marxism go on if somebody got to grips with it and did not slavishly follow the policies as it were laid down in the 19th century by Marx himself, but was to make them relevant to the late 20th century? And, of course, such a man emerged, the first man not born czarist is Russia, the first man born in Soviet Russia to lead, to lead Russia, Gorbachev. And we know Gorbachev tried very hard to modernise Marxism. And we know that he failed.

So one big question which we got to answer next week is, was Marxism always going to fail? Was it bound to fail? And then we have to ask you, ask ourselves, why have we landed up with Putin, as authoritarian as any of the men I've mentioned? And interestingly, now, if reports are to be believed, seriously though, is this not the norm for Russian leaders, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and now Putin? I want to read one piece from Galeotti. I'm going to finish on two things. This is the first finish. Those of you know me well know I often have two or three finishes. This is my first finish for today. "In Soviet times, as the claim that history was on the communist party's side became harder and harder to believe. As corruption devoured the state from within and the economy grounds slower and slower, the Kremlin was forced to rely more and more on propaganda and lies. But neither the party nor the masses truly bought into the red-bannered fantasies that

were peddled. Instead, everyone sought their own slice of Europe, from the ordinary citizens listening to the BBC in darkened rooms and swapping black market Beatles tapes to the elite buying themselves scotch and imported gins in party-only special shops. The Soviet idea ended up as czarism on steroids." That's a very good phrase. "The Soviet idea ended up as czarism on steroids. Well, the Soviet people themselves had very different dreams. With the USSR ending, they were going to be able, at last, they hoped, to realise those dreams." We know that those dreams have not been realised. So, next week, a final throw of the dice, the communist dice, by Gorbachev, and then, hopes dashed once more. I'm going to finish this. I've just got a couple of minutes. I'm going to finish with two more of these extraordinary stories, extraordinary jokes. This is the first one. "Early in the morning," says the story, the humorous story in Soviet Russia, "Early in the morning, Brezhnev looked out at the sky and smiled to the sun. Suddenly, the sun replied, 'Good morning, dear Brezhnev.' Amazed and happy, Brezhnev told the politburo members that even the sun knew him and greeted him personally. The politburo members were sceptical, but kept their doubts to themselves. Towards the evening, Brezhnev said to them, 'I see you don't trust my word about the sun. Well, let's go out and I'll show them.' They walked out, and Brezhnev said to the sun, which was now setting low in the horizon, 'My dear sun, good evening.' The sun answered, 'Go to hell, you idiot.' 'What's that?' said Brezhnev. 'Do you know who you're talking to?' 'I don't give a damn,' said the sun. 'You see, I'm already settling in the West, and I can do what I want.'" And this is one of my favourite of all these communist jokes stories. Some of you may have heard me tell this one before. And this is from the Khrushchev era. I do love this, and it has shades of George Orwell's "Animal Farm." "Khrushchev was visiting a pig farm and was photographed there. In the newspaper office, a discussion was underway about how to caption the picture of Khrushchev and the pigs. One journalist said, 'Comrade Khrushchev among pigs.' Another said, 'Comrade Khrushchev and pigs.' Another said, 'Pigs surround Comrade Khrushchev.' And they were all rejected as politically offensive. The editor finally made his decision. 'Third from left, Comrade Khrushchev.'" I'm sorry, I do like that. Now, before I finish, I have to mention three ladies by name whom I met yesterday, I didn't know, and who said, "We listen to you at half past five every Monday," because this was in London. And so I have to say to Frieda, to Anika, and to Denise, I'm so pleased you are listening and I had you in my mind's eye as I was talking this evening. I just hope you and all the others found something of interest this evening. And I'm sure now I've got some questions, and I have.

– William, William, thank you for that outstanding presentation. I just wanted to say that I'm going to have to jump off early and not listen to questions. I also just wanted to remind our viewers that, in an hour, we have Jason Greenblatt giving a presentation on understanding today's changed Middle East. So I think that, you know, it might be very interesting and... And go on.

- And I will try and finish then at a quarter to seven so people have a proper break before the next-

- Okay, thank you very much. Thanks a lot. see you soon. Take care. Thanks, everybody, for joining us. Bye-bye.

Q & A and Comments

Q: "Where did they get the bison?"

A: He got them from Europe. I think they got them from Europe. We had bison in zoos and things, but these are going to be released as part of a rewilding project.

Betty says, "My father was in Russia for two to three years during the war. He always said that being in Russia was a sure cure of never becoming a communist," exactly.

Q: Angela said, "Tito and Bulgaria had more benign leaders?"

A: They had different leaders. Tito was rather good at covering himself. That's more stories for another day. There's a lot of stories in Eastern Europe, and I'm sorry I can't really divert to them. We may do more on Eastern Europe sometime, and I'm happy to talk about them.

Q: "Why do you think it is yet to dawn on Russian leaders that Russia's command economy is inferior to a free-trading capitalist economy?"

A: Well, I suppose Putin might say that they tried a capitalist economy under Yeltsin, and it led to even more corruption. Well, it wasn't a capitalist economy like Americas or Britain. Well, we'd have to have sessions, and I'm not the person to lead it, you'd have to have a session with economists about whether it could work or not.

Q: "What did Churchill think of Stalin?"

A: Well, he said bluntly that he would give the devil a choice, would give the devil the benefit of the doubt if he him. And he was referring to Stalin as the devil, but he was a devil that we needed because of the worse devil of Hitler. Of course, Churchill had no time for Stalin. I don't know, we don't really know quite what was wrong with Stalin.

Q: "Did he have a brain tumour or only a vascular event?"

A: It's very difficult to say because the evidence is not there.

Q: "But what about Bulganin? Wasn't he in control during this time?" No, no. "20 million Russians killed, or have I misheard you?"

A: No, I said 20 million Russians killed during the course of World War II, that is to say civilians and military. So, no, operation Barbarossa is simply the invasion of Russian by Germany.

Oh, Stan, wonderful. "A Russian joke told me in 1979 when visiting refuseniks: 'Due to shortages of everything, it was announced on the radio that radios will be available the next morning at a specific shop. People started lining up at 3:00 AM. By 9:00 AM, the crowd was told that many were no good, and the Jews would leave the line.'" I thought this might turn out to be anti-Semitic. "'By 11:00 AM, people outside the district must leave the line, et cetera, et cetera. By 6:00 PM, the remaining crowd was told to come back tomorrow. As they were leaving the line, they exclaimed, "Those lucky Jews!" because they'd been sent first.'" Oh, Stan, I love Jewish jokes, and as a non-Jew, I can't tell some of them. I'm not sure I could tell that one. But I have to say, I think it's very funny.

"You used the term true facts in talking about the presentation report. I assume this was a sip of the tongue." No, I said that they didn't... If I said that, I said it wrong, but I think you might have misheard. I said that they did not get the true facts. But when Andropov, sorry, yes, when Andropov was in control, he got his accurate facts as were possible to get. I hope that clears that up.

Somebody's got a name called iPad, very distinctive. "We have characterised going from East to West as if watching a black and white movie versus a colour one." You are absolutely right. Yeah, that's a very clever way of putting it, because, in truth, in truth at the moment, as we have sat around our iPads tonight, as I said, in Britain and America and Canada and are probably in other countries as well, are not convinced of the quality of our own democracy. In Christian phrases, we should see the mote in our own eye. and we are not very self, we weren't over self-critical in the Cold War. We are now coming to terms with all sorts of things.

"Khrushchev banged his shoe in the Russian UN and said, 'We will bury you,'" yes. "In my view, the passing of the doctrine of the Star Wars policy, Reagan in effect told the Russians, 'We will outspend you.'" Oh, that's a very good point, Michael, that Reagan said, "We will outspend you." "Ultimately, this brilliant strategy was successful in bankrupting the USSR and bringing down communism." Well, only part of the story. If you were doing a university elective on why did communism fail, yes, Michael, you could make that point, but you would have to make lots of other points too, not least the failure in Afghanistan. Who says, Abigail. My mum was called Abigail, "When we visited Northern Poland in 1978 by car, people ran after us as there were no other cars on the road, only horses and carts. And there were

great shortages of all goods to the extent that some shops closed for lack of products," yeah.

And thank you, Abigail. I wanted someone to give an example like that. Clive says, "I recommend the film 'The Death of Stalin,' a very black comedy." Yes, it is. I've seen that. Sharon says, "In 1975, we went by way of West Germany to Russia and then home via Berlin, going through Checkpoint Charlie in a bus. We commented that it was going from a black-and-white silent film to a coloured blockbuster." Yeah, that was exactly my experience 10 years or so later in going from Yugoslavia to Switzerland.

Q: "How will you compare how the Chinese are economically dealing with consumerism opposed to Russia?"

A: Oh, Shelly, I can't answer questions like that in one minute. The problem that the Chinese have is not economic. The problem the Chinese have is having an economic system that is not matched by a political system. And many commentators think that that is, in the long term, maybe medium term is unviable.

David says, "I agree with the West going ahead, but I was told that the West had access to unlimited cheap resources in the ex-colonial Third World, unlike the communist countries." Oh, well, yes, the first part of that is right, but Russia also paid peanuts to its workers. I'm not sure, it's a really good point, but I'm not sure that it has momentum. But we could argue about that. "Another point is that Eastern European countries supported the anti-apartheid movement and the ANC." Yes, they did, but they did so not so much because they were against apartheid, but they saw it as an opportunity to wound the West and to woo Black Africans. Please no one interpret that that I approve of apartheid. Of course I don't, but there are other reasons that they were doing it. "Unlike the West, such as Thatcher government, USA, which mostly supported the colonial racist regime in South Africa," absolutely. "The wind of change speech started a major change." Well, that was long before Thatcher, 'cause that was Miller.

Monty, "A Russian Yiddish speaking Jew was asked about life under Stalin. 'We're not short of anything except for candles and sugar.' In Yiddish, the saying finisher dark" and I hope I pronounce that, I'm not sure how to pronounce that, B-I-T-E-R, biter or bitter, not sweet, means things are bad." Finster and biter, for candles and sugar. Oh, that's, Monty, you're too clever for me.

"B&K came to London on, on the ship..." Oh, now, Angela, you are just doing this to get at me. I am not going to pronounce the name of the ship. it's spelled, oh, I'm not going to do that. "B&K came to London on the ship. I don't know the spelling." Oh, well that's good because I can't pronounce what you put.

Martin has put, "Went into East Berlin twice before the fall of the wall. Was like day into night, light into darkness, excitement into depression, optimism into pessimism, wealth into seemingly abject poverty. All transitions were immediate and dramatic. Pity so many of today's young socialists in the West, and particularly in America, were too young or not even born to witness all of this." Betty can't hear me. Well, I think, Betty, I'm sorry, I can't get nearer because it doesn't work like that. No one else has said they can't hear. I'm really sorry. I'm usually very loud. I'm sorry if you can't hear.

"I visited Yugoslavia," says Clara, "in 1967 and stayed with some people on their farm. They were excited to show us their new washing machine in the barn. We went to see it. It wasn't even plugged in. They said the only problem was they had no electricity." Oh, Clara, is that real or are you pulling my leg? No, I think it's probably real.

Q: Sylvia says, "Why did Khrushchev give Crimea to the Ukrainians?"

A: Because he was Ukraine, because he was a Ukrainian and he wanted to give them something. "I know from the people of a community with which my synagogue was saying that they were delighted to become Russian again," yes, because it had always been Russian and because most of it was taken during the reign of Catherine II. And it was decidedly Russian and it was only given to Ukraine, as I say, because Khrushchev was Ukrainian and it was his sort of gift to the Fatherland. So it makes this Ukraine, this Russian-Ukrainian war is simply not good versus evil. It's a very much more complex story in there. Ordinary Russian said, "885, 8304, 3462." I take it that's your prison number.

Q: "How did Kremlin and ordinary Russians react to this offer to Ukraine?"

A: The Kremlin could do nothing because Khrushchev's in charge, and ordinary Russians passed them by. They don't have a voice.

Mona says, "Hard to fathom how empty shelves were in former Soviet occupied Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, markets. And then to see them year after year and they started to exercise their ability to follow other sources of supplies so that more than chocolates and cheap vodka were available for those who had the money that counted at the moment. A money exchange was a story in itself."

John. Oh, John, hello! "In late 1989, I was asked to go..." I know John, nice to hear you. "In late 1989," says, John, "I was asked to go to Hungary and Poland to resuscitate their moribund medical associations. Hungary, easy. The Poles offered me a holiday, a holiday trip to Krakow. I suggested Bialystok instead. Their jaws dropped. It had been a huge Jewish area from which my grandparents escaped." I can't read the last bit. I'm sorry, I can't read. I don't know what the last bit means. I think there's a typo.

Q: Myra, "What was their reason for the strength in learning disabilities?"

A: Well, oddly, because they regarded everyone as a Soviet citizen who should have the same opportunities, and they really did extraordinary... They opened up museums and allow students with learning difficulties to handle things which we would never have done at the time in the West. I worked with a charity who was run by a Jewish lady, who sadly now passed away, a great friend of mine, Helena, and she was so enthusiastic when the wall came down to support what they were doing because she was frightened that the money would run out post the Soviet Union for that work with learning disabled people.

Q: "How did they go about improving literacy and education so much?"

A: 'Cause they put money into it, short answer, and because they had well-trained teachers. Don't start me on the problems that we have in the West. And they also didn't have what we would today call... Obviously, there was political stuff or things they judged political that you couldn't do, they wouldn't have done comparative religion, for example, and all sorts of things. But what they did do was outstandingly good, and they didn't have, they listened to... I suppose what I would say, they listened to professional people, which is certainly what they don't do in Britain.

Q: "Would you agree that US Supreme Court is operating very close to the politburo, setting the country on a backward course?"

A: As a common lawyer, and common law is the basis in both America and in England, that there is considerable worry amongst English common lawyers about the way that the judges of the Supreme Court are selected. If you want my personal view, I'm glad America's a long way away. I don't want any knives in the back or in the front. But if you want my personal view, it is that it corrupts the separation of powers in America. It's not to say that everything is wonderful in Britain. It certainly isn't. But if I was being critical of the American system, I would say that the way that Supreme Court judges are put in place undermines the separation of powers, the separation of powers, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary,. The executive doesn't interfere in America with the Supreme Court, the executive actually controls it in the sense that it can appoint its members when a vacancy becomes...

Q: "I have read that Fukuyama was referring to grand unifying theories of history, i.e. history such as Marxism tried so hard to promulgate. Would you agree?"

A: No, I don't think I do agree. I think what Fukuyama was trying to

say was that we're all, that we're all now, we're all now on a upward, on an upward arc of liberal democracy. Oh, whoops, whoops, whoops, I've lost everybody. I've got to stop in a minute 'cause I promised I would.

Q: Here we are, Carol, "When sorting out my late parents, I came across a book by Walter Laqueur called 'Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations.' Have you heard of this book and read it? Is it worth reading?"

A: No, I haven't, but I guess if you find out, always the trick is, if you don't know about a book, find out about the author. I don't know who Walter Laqueur is, so look him up. And if, when you look him up, you feel that his viewpoint is, any view he has will have credibility, then read the book. But if you find out that you feel he doesn't have credibility, then don't.

Oh, Judy, "I visited Moscow when Chernenko died. I was eager to go to Red Square. Our Russian guide said it was closed. I went anyway, managing the subway system, which is excellent. I saw the preparation for the funeral. The next day, our group leader was approached by the Russian guide and told that, 'One of your group went to Red Square last night,' chilling." Oh yes, absolutely chilling. It's gone on the time I said I would finish, because you've got another talk tonight. And people have said nice things. Thank you for that. It's always good to know that some of you enjoy what I say. I'm sorry it somebody didn't hear. I'm not getting that from other people, so I think-

- [Judi] Thank you, William. I think only one or two people said they had a bit of an echo, but I didn't experience any issues with your sound today.

- Okay, that's fine. I mean, sometimes there are problems. I've got problems with my hearing aids, if people have got hearing aids. I can't speak that close. It's not possible. So if there's a real problem, Judi, you must let me know. But I can't see there is.

- [Judi] Well, I think I'm blaming it on this heat we're having in the UK, that's all.

- Sorry?

- [Judi] I'm blaming it on the heat, on the hot weather.

- Oh, well, if it's people in the UK, yes, indeed. So I'll say farewell. Enjoy the next talk you've got coming, and I will finish up on Russia next Monday. But advanced notice, Thursday week I'm doing a talk about pros and cons of monarchy so that I have all the British on my back with knives everywhere. So I shall have alienated everyone. Perhaps the Canadians can be nice to me, but I guess they will have

views about the monarchy. What am I left with? Israelis, maybe you can be nice to me if everyone else has a go. So see you next Monday.