

Moved by the death of Mikhail Gorbachev, by M*l*n K*ndera

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Abstract. This paper offers a brief analysis of what it is to be moved by a death. It is written as an imitation of a famous European writer and it has an analysis of some newspaper material as well, which was just some gentle fun, if it be permitted.

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“In the name of liberty

Brothers in mockery are we”

We who still swim in the river of world history are moved: when a figure we all know from the news and who has a secure place in the textbooks dies, we cannot but be moved. But what is it to be “moved”? Even a novelist such as myself must define terms.

- (a) To be moved here is to be saddened by the death.
- (b) To be moved here is to be the subject of cause and effect. The death is the cause – or the news of the death – and there is some effect on us. We are like physical objects affected by other physical objects, but this sense leaves open how.

Exiled in England, I went to a convenience store and I saw his face covering one half of the newspaper: more than the size of a column horizontally, but not the whole side vertically. I glimpsed at his famous birthmark and read the sentence: “Mikhael Gorbachev, 1931-2022: leader who ended the cold war dies at age 91.”

We are today living in the age of the image, not the sentence – the image with all its immediate power. What does a child today think when they see this image? What do they think if they read the words below? That he replaced cold with hot, like a plumber fixing a water problem? I said, “Look he is dead,” to a boy walking past in the street, showing him the cover page, and he opened his hand in a claw-like gesture. I then returned to my apartment and read the newspaper. I turned to the second page to finish the article. The third reported a murderer. There I could see images of men who looked like Gorbachev. I had to look again. Even on the second page, there were Gorbachev-like men. All these Gorbachevs! And a photograph of Ronald Reagan with the great Russian leader, below. He seemed to be laughing, not the shared laughter of two men struggling towards a common goal, but laughter he could not share, laughter that divides rather than unifies. Yes, he was certainly laughing at Gorbachev. And Gorbachev too seemed to be mocking, mocking the glamorous American.

I am not a young man now. Tired I fell asleep and dreamt. The scene was entirely black and white. I was in the audience of a great crowd. It was snowing. On a palace balcony stood a man with a hat and a glove, and next to him Gorbachev, shivering. The man offered Gorbachev the hat. He rejected it. The man threw the hat into the crowd. It flew an enormous distance, with the ease of a gull, and reached me. I caught it. People started whooping. I did not have Gorbachev’s confidence. I felt it would be an insult not to wear it and I did. Then the man on the balcony offered Gorbachev a glove. He wore it. He opened his hand to the audience; it was a strangely clawed glove. Then I suddenly awoke, sweating, fearing that to sleep any longer would have been a fatal error.

The next death was coming soon. I had remembered him, reflected and dreamt; and it

was time for us to part ways.

References

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