

From Brezhnev Doctrine to Sinatra Doctrine

AN INTERVIEW WITH GENNADY GERASIMOV

The perpetually witty Gennady Gerasimov was the Soviet Union's foreign ministry spokesman during the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, and famously labeled Soviet policy towards those events as the "Sinatra Doctrine." In this lighthearted but informative interview he speaks about the genesis of the Sinatra Doctrine label, Gorbachev's attitude towards the 1989 revolutions, the "Prague group" of new political thinking, and the lessons of Sinatra for Putin's conundrum in the "near abroad."

Demokratizatsiya: Tell us how the whole "Sinatra Doctrine" business came about.

Gerasimov: A friend of mine, I guess it was a birthday or something, gave me this coffeetable book about Ol' Blue Eyes written by his daughter. And only by chance, looking at the index, I found something which was a big surprise. . . .

[Reading from book]

When the Kremlin announced that it would not object if Hungary left the Warsaw Pact or if East Germany reunited with West Germany, Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennady Gerasimov appeared on a syndicated TV program and said, "Frank Sinatra had a very popular song, 'I Had It My Way.' So Hungary, Poland, every other country has its own way. They decided which road to take. It's their business. And we watch, watch closely, but do not interfere." He called the new policy "The Frank Sinatra Doctrine." Said dad: "I'm honored to have my name associated with freedom of choice and people's dreams for a better life. I think it's marvelous." Vice President Dan Quayle said the Bush administration was encouraged by Mr. Gerasimov's comment, adding, "We hope that perestroika succeeds. But as they talk about the Frank Sinatra doctrine, also remember the Nancy Sinatra doctrine in song—"These Boots Are Made for Walking."¹

This interview was conducted by *Demokratizatsiya* founder Fredo Arias-King on March 26, 2005 in Moscow.

Demokratizatsiya: That's excellent. And just by chance? You know, I was talking with Pavel Palazchenko and I asked him the following. Nobody expected a party regional secretary from a small southern province and another party secretary from a small southern USSR republic to revolutionize the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. And yet they did. What happened? What was the source or impetus for the dramatic change in foreign policy?

Gerasimov: Very simple—Sinatra. Everything returns to Sinatra. What is happening today in Kyrgyzstan? Same thing. We want it our way. What happened in Ukraine? In the latest issue of this magazine [*Novoe vremya*, No. 10, March 2005], there's an article about the Bratislava summit. And look at this. The explanation refers also to the Brezhnev and Sinatra doctrines. It also appears in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Do you know who Carlos Fuentes is?

Demokratizatsiya: Of course, a Mexican hard-left anti-American writer.

Gerasimov: That is right, anti-American. He mentioned that "I would like to know when the Sinatra Doctrine will come to the Caribbean. If the Soviet Union is rejecting the Brezhnev Doctrine, then it's time the United States rejected the Monroe Doctrine and change it to the Marilyn Monroe Doctrine, and jump into bed with anyone."

This is to show that this Sinatra Doctrine, which was born by accident—it was not prepared—has taken on a life of its own. And in Bratislava the question also was what to do with all these countries. You know? Let them go their own way. And if you saw Putin last night talking about the events in Kyrgyzstan, he said that we're going to support what they are going to decide. It's the same thing.

The bottom line of the Sinatra Doctrine is very simple—noninterference in foreign affairs. It was just a label that happened to be picked up, which I don't mind at all.

Demokratizatsiya: Yes, I wrote an essay on it a while back. But what is surprising was the lack of debate among Soviet elites to counter the Sinatra Doctrine. Why do you think that is?

Gerasimov: There was no debate in the Kremlin, because Kremlin and debate don't go together. Since Lenin, it was all formalities and meetings and unilateral declarations—everything was decided before that. Let's take for example the decision to invade Afghanistan. There was no debate at the top. Katy? is being discussed now, the massacre of Polish officers. There was no debate in Stalin's days. And even today, my suspicion is that there is no debate.

Demokratizatsiya: But at that time, when these regimes fell, there was glasnost; there was the Congress of People's Deputies, elections, so the Soviet Union was a very different country from the days of Lenin.

Gerasimov: The debates were in the press. That is right. Glasnost. There were books, even by your friend [Tatyana] Zaslavskaya, on what to do. Debate among

intellectuals. But there was no debate in Gorbachev's entourage and he himself unfortunately was not up to the job. Not really. He was a man who knew next to nothing about foreign policy when he started. Of course he learned on the job. But he still had this naïveté, for example, on this issue of the Sinatra Doctrine. When he said, "Let them decide themselves," and I know this, he was sure that given the freedom of choice, the Poles, the Czechs, you name them, would vote for socialism and friendship with Moscow. He underestimated nationalistic tendencies. When he traveled to Lithuania shortly thereafter [January 1990], he used an unusual—even dangerous—tactic, which was to stop the car in the street. And of course people surrounded him. And he was trying to convince them that it was better to be with Moscow for many reasons—economic, social, you name it—you will be better off and so on, we are going to change. It will be worse for you to go at it alone. But they said, "We want freedom, we want to go our own way." It was a very big surprise for him, especially when this kind of talk happened at a gathering of the party in Vilnius, when [Algirdas] Brazauskas was in charge of the party there. And he also said, "We want to go our own way." That was a big surprise for Gorbachev.

Demokratizatsiya: Why was he so surprised if just a few months before that, all the regimes in Eastern Europe without exception fell like dominoes? What made him think that the process would suddenly stop at the Soviet border?

Gerasimov: Let me ask you, Why were the events in Kyrgyzstan a big surprise for everybody, starting with our intelligence services, ending with President Akaev? Because people are not used to going by facts and by knowledge of history. And it has happened in our history many times. The same thing with Ukraine.

Demokratizatsiya: Was Gorbachev depressed when he saw the fall of those regimes? I actually see a lot of evidence that he was quite supportive of the fall of Honecker, Ceaușescu, and Jake? and Husák—although less so of Jaruzelski and the Hungarian comrades. But I suspect that he was almost glad to get rid of them.

Gerasimov: That's true. I remember that in East Germany he was not so much trying to get rid of Honecker and [East German Politbüro member Günter] Schabowski. He wanted to change them: if not them, their policies. But Honecker was clear enough to understand that glasnost was not going to last. That's why he was resisting Gorbachev's pressure.

Demokratizatsiya: Gorbachev said that talking with Honecker was like talking to a wall.

Gerasimov: There is this episode in some memoirs of Schabowski telling Gorbachev that Honecker is over. But Gorbachev then may have been like Akaev is

today in Kyrgyzstan. He was not *reshitel'nyi* [decisive] enough, he was not up to the job. And this explains almost everything. He didn't have the vision of where he wanted to go. No real vision. He wanted to improve the system, but how? And then he understood that the system was beyond repair, but it was too late. He was a product of the system. He got to the Kremlin quite by chance. His is the region of mineral springs and spas, so he had an advantage when compared to other regional secretaries, of meeting most of the top people in his region. They went there to cure all their many illnesses. So he had access to them and they knew him. That's why [Yuri] Andropov decided that Gorbachev was the man for the job.

Actually, I feel that while Andropov had his shortcomings so to say, he could have done things better, to go the Chinese way or something like that. I knew him quite well you know. I worked with him when he was in the Central Committee. Not in Lubyanka [the KGB's central headquarters], but in Staraya Ploschad [the CPSU Central Committee headquarters]. Very clever. You know, all these names, [Nikolai] Shishlin, [head of the USA and Canada Institute during perestroika Georgy] Arbatov, [*Izvestiya* foreign affairs columnist during perestroika and later ambassador to Israel Aleksandr] Bovin, [Gorbachev senior aide on foreign affairs Anatoly] Chernyaev, me, and some others, they were all there. Actually, Chernyaev was not there, he was at the International Department. We were in this so-called "department in charge of Eastern European communist parties." And many of the mistakes that Gorbachev made inside the country, not in foreign policy, partly could be blamed on [USSR people's deputy and Gorbachev advisor during perestroika Georgy] Shakhnazarov. Shakhnazarov, rest in peace, a good friend of mine, was behind a lot of these changes in our political structure. Very silly idea of a big assembly, thousands of people deciding. How can so many people decide anything?

Demokratizatsiya: You mean the USSR Congress of People's Deputies?

Gerasimov: Yes. Bovin was simply a speechwriter. Shakhnazarov was the mastermind behind all these changes in our political structure. Chernyaev was in charge of foreign policy but he was not very active. You know, by the way, he wrote a book—not *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, but another one—which unfortunately is now out of print. And I had this book, but unfortunately my only copy is now in Honolulu. My friends are reading it and laughing. This book is only about his women. Something about his twenty-one women. And he wrote, "this one, that one"—and of course his wife, who unfortunately had to accept it—and it's real pornography. "That particular night was so good," et cetera. It's actually his book!

Demokratizatsiya: It's something you don't expect from Chernyaev!

Gerasimov: Shakhnazarov didn't write a book like this, you know why? Because of his wife.

Demokratizatsiya: There was this Andropov group, and all of them had been.

Gerasimov: From Prague.

Demokratizatsiya: Exactly! Gathered around that journal called *Problems of Peace and Socialism*.

Gerasimov: In one of the articles in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, there was this phrase in the sense of, “If you want to know who changed the country, go to Prague, all the names are there.” So who was there? Arbatov was there, Shakhnazarov, Chernyaev, [*Pravda* editor and Politburo member during perestroika Ivan] Frolov was there, [Georgian philosopher Merab] Mamardashvili, though he was not active when he returned. And I was there. Who else. . . [former first deputy chairman of the Party’s International Department and Gorbachev advisor Vadim] Zagladin. Many of them were in this publication, actually.

Demokratizatsiya: So basically the group from Prague had a tremendous influence later at the Central Committee over the politics, and they were in Prague during the Prague Spring. Were you there at that time?

Gerasimov: No, not me.

Demokratizatsiya: And all around *Problems of Peace and Socialism*?

Gerasimov: Yes. And they had an English edition of this in London, and the name was *World Marxist Review*. And it was a place where many of the communist parties had editors, representatives, who exposed us to all kinds of foreign ideas. For instance I remember Gibbons from the British communists, Freed from the Canadian party. There was nobody from the United States, but there were French. And they were already playing with Eurocommunism at that time. And that is why we were exposed to many ideas which maybe had not changed our way of thinking had we stayed in Moscow—and this includes Arbatov, Grushin, [literary historian Yuri] Karyakin. But how were we picked up? There was a man at the International Department of the Central Committee, Tsukanov I think, the man in charge of picking journalists to staff this new magazine which was established, as a kind of a forum for communists all over the world, and

decided that it would be in Prague. That's why I like Prague better than any other city. So many beers.

Demokratizatsiya: The highest amount of beer consumption per capita in the world, according to the *Economist*.

Gerasimov: Actually, the Economist Intelligence Unit. And so he started to find journalists that had an understanding of foreign affairs, also some scientists, which is why he picked up some people from *Novoe vremya*, but not me, which is interesting. At that time when I was invited to Prague, I changed from *Novoe vremya* to another place, *Trud*, the trade union newspaper. But my guess is that I was invited because I had a working connection with the office which published some books. They had a secret section which was printing books in translation for the Soviet leadership, for them to know. Of course these leaders never had time to read. For instance, one of the books they published was by George Orwell. And they invited me to write an introduction, and trying to explain to all those who were in charge at that time. . .

Demokratizatsiya: . . .that Orwell didn't really mean *them*?

Gerasimov: . . .that he was speaking in abstractions or something. I can look back at the book. So they invited me to help them. I was not on the payroll but they invited me to do this and that. They even invited me to translate this book by an English historian, about the Munich conspiracy, before the war. And because they wanted it quickly, they gave me one-third of the book, and another third they gave to a beginner, a young lady, to translate. The editor wanted us to get together to discuss it, but it never happened because it all went by so quickly. So she translated her part and the editor complained that it needed a lot of editing. Her name was Svetlana Allilueva, Stalin's daughter. So I had a lot of misses in my life. This was one of the misses.

Demokratizatsiya: Why was it a miss?

Gerasimov: Because I missed her! She was attractive, a redhead. Another miss is when I was at the law faculty at Moscow State University writing my thesis, and this was the year, 1954, when Gorbachev was there. And that was another miss because he was in Komsomol meetings, and I was just chasing girls.

Demokratizatsiya: Another miss. Zdeněk Mlynář was also there. . .

Gerasimov: Another miss. Too bad. But later I caught up a bit.

Demokratizatsiya: During the time when the regimes were falling in the autumn of 1989, and you obviously were associated with the Soviet liberals tol-

erating this situation, did you feel any pressure from those who may have been uncomfortable with the fall of those regimes? Was there anybody from the Politburo, the Central Committee, or even the Congress of People's Deputies who said, "What is this we are doing?" Or was there really just complete silence, as Valery Boldin said?

Gerasimov: The problem is twofold: with our mentality and with the party structure. The mentality was that the man at the top knows best. It's from time immemorial in our country. Same thing today. If there is something wrong, people are writing to Putin. An example is a letter on Jewish organizations to Putin. Another example close to me. There was a mistrial against the physicians who are into transplanting organs. For some reasons that I am not too familiar with, the Prokuratura decided to put in prison several of the physicians with the charge of selling organs. It was a big fuss. The medical community wrote an open letter. To whom? To Putin. Fortunately, last month the trial was over and they were completely acquitted. This example shows that we still think that the man at the top knows best. And then when we have a general secretary, he has the opportunity to do everything he wants. Many people blame Gorbachev, and I guess I may join this crowd, that he was not resolute enough, because his word was the final word. But what his enemies could do and did do was silent resistance. But the same thing happens to Putin. Same story all over again.

Demokratizatsiya: But it was a fait accompli, the fall of these dictators in 1989. The elites here couldn't really resist. But were any of them were pressing for active intervention, with tanks, à la 1968?

Gerasimov: No, of course not. Because the man at the top said no! But also there was this white albatross on the deck—Afghanistan. It had not been Gorbachev's decision, but it was with him. There he was not *reshitel'nii* enough either, because he could actually have withdrawn much earlier, and everyone would have applauded him. But he said, "No, we are going to betray our friend." Shevardnadze said, "How could we betray our friends?" Another story which is today in the news is Katy?. When I was in the foreign ministry, correspondents asked me all the time about Katy?. And of course I knew many of the facts. But Gorbachev didn't want to know the facts. That is interesting. Did he really believe it was the Germans that did this? And we had [Soviet surgeon and investigator Nikolai] Burdenko—there is even a Burdenko street nearby here—a top military man during the war. And he signed the exhumation documents, where he concluded that the Polish officers had all been killed by German bullets. But it was the NKVD which used those German arms. You know why? Because our revolvers were hot after a few shots, but not the German guns. So all these things, Gorbachev had to know. But instead of saying "I'm sorry" and saving a little face in our relations with Poland, which are at the bottom again today—you know that they named a square in Warsaw as [original Chechen separatist leader Dzhokhar] Dudaev Square? And Shevardnadze told Gorbachev repeatedly, "We have to do something with this Katy? issue!" So what was Gorbachev's choice? "Let us

establish a Soviet-Polish commission of historians.” And so we established it. And I was asking the people in my department who were in charge of Poland, “How is this commission going?” Well, it was basically a show, which included Polish historians. In the end Yeltsin apologized and took the credit, not Gorbachev. But because he was at the top, and popular, because people in my country were tired of those old people before him, that gerontocracy, they put all the hope in him, just as now they put all their hope on Putin, who is still popular despite all the problems.

Demokratizatsiya: Then came the German unification in NATO question. But even then there was not that much debate. At the twenty-eighth party congress in July of 1990. . .

Gerashimov: We are returning to the same issue—nobody wanted to disagree with Gorbachev. The German question was decided in Arkhyz, with [West German Chancellor Helmut] Kohl. I was not there. Nobody was there. Correspondents were not there. Drinking some of this mineral water, they decided this, there was no real discussion. Of course, Gorbachev again was naïve enough to believe the words. Even though, as my American friends always remind me, “Put everything in writing!” They did not.

Demokratizatsiya: There is still this debate. How much did Gorbachev participate in the fall of Honecker, Ceau?escu, Husák, etc. Some say he did not intervene. But there are others that could swear that he did. There was even a parliamentary commission in Czechoslovakia that alleged a hand from Moscow in the events of November 17, 1989, that led to the fall of communism.

Gerashimov: I don’t believe this. First of all, I don’t know. Second, I don’t believe it. It happened like in Kyrgyzstan. It happened when they opened the border with Hungary, and this exodus began. There was no leader, no elite actions. It just collapsed. So Gorbachev was not up to the job, and this was the tragedy of our country.

Demokratizatsiya: Well, since it was you who named it the Sinatra Doctrine and put a face on Gorbachev’s policy of nonintervention in the central European states, now that we are living that debate again with Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, what do you think should be Moscow’s appropriate response to what is happening in those countries? Why is Russia alienating all these countries?

Gerashimov: You see, this is the collapse of the empire. And the only thing that the empire can do is to try to save friendly relations. Like Churchill who said that he did not become Her Majesty’s prime minister in order to preside over the dissolution of the empire, but he did. So you cannot really have this silly idea of Anatoly Chubais, of liberal empire. Actually, I wrote a criticism of this in one of

our newspapers. It's an oxymoron—liberal empire. The only way to follow I guess is what Putin is doing. He tries to save Akaev's regime, but I'm not sure if he'll manage. Actually, we have no leverage in Ukraine, no leverage in Georgia. All this so-called near abroad is almost lost for many reasons we don't have time to go into. But I guess Putin understands this, so all we can salvage is just economic cooperation and friendly relations. And maybe it is a good idea not to sell them gas at low prices, but at world prices. Because they are not selling us anything in return. It is a kind of a burden on our economy which could be excused if we were to build the empire again.

We have other troubles to look into. For instance, we had a girl here yesterday that wanted to help us clean the apartment from Chita, Siberia. She said that everyone there now is Chinese. So we have other things to think about.

Demokratizatsiya: As you said in our meeting a few years ago, about the debate on immigration to Russia, and that you favored allowing more Chinese immigration.

Gerasimov: We can discuss this ad infinitum. One of my pet peeves is demography. We can save Russia only by immigration. But we must have a good policy. We don't have a policy on immigration at all. We put obstacles to *Russians* who are returning. Very silly. And today, [Sergei] Mironov, who is in charge of that Party of Life and who is chairman of the federation council, and official number three in the country after the president and prime minister, he said today that we must double not only GNP, but also the birth rate. Just like that! But my country unfortunately is in disarray, it was not our intention when Gorbachev started—the law of unforeseenness, so to speak. When we talk about the future, try not to fall in the trap of premature specificities.

Demokratizatsiya: You know who else was in Prague? We forgot to mention Fyodor Burlatsky.

Gerasimov: Yes, I guess he was also there.

NOTE

1. Nancy Sinatra, *Frank Sinatra: An American Legend* (New York: Reader's Digest, 1998).