HOW I BECAME 'GREEN'

Since leaving my post as President of the USSR and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I am often asked why I have devoted my attention to ecology and taken on the leadership of a non-government organization, namely Green Cross International, which was founded in 1993.

We all want to make the best use of our abilities. And it seems to me that concerning myself with ecology in the widest sense will enable me to reach a kind of synthesis of my life, my life as a farmer, an intellectual, an economic functionary, a politician and finally as President of a state that encompassed one sixth of the earth's surface. For me environmental matters are inextricably bound up with peace, security and social justice.

I was born in the Stavropol region of the North Caucasus, one that had witnessed countless invasions and been a crossing point of many and varied cultures and civilizations. Its small territory has been home to three orthodox Christian confessions[1], to Islam and to around a dozen languages and indigenous cultures. Even today, in addition to Russians, the population includes Ukrainians, Greeks, Armenians and numerous peoples of the North Caucasus: Karachai, Circassians, Ossetians, Noghai, Chechens and others. So my

home region schooled me early in tolerance and respect for other nationalities, languages, customs and religions.

Village life and that of my peasant family were closely bound up with nature – and thus also unavoidably with having to pull together to survive natural disasters and the effects of social injustices.

As a child I lived in poverty: in a traditional cabin with an earth floor. We slept on top of the Russian stove, and in winter a calf and in spring hens and ducks were kept under the same roof. In 1933, while I was still a child, Stavropol suffered a famine which was described in neighbouring Ukraine as 'planned starvation'. According to a number of historians it was artificially brought about by the government.[2] But more than anything else, collectivization had ruined agricultural production by destroying traditional peasant life and banishing the best farmers, the kulaks, to Siberia. In that terrible year nearly half the population of my native village, Privolnoye, starved to death, including two sisters and one brother of my father.

Another trial followed the famine: the Stalinist purges. Both my grandfathers were arrested on trumped-up charges, but fortunately they survived. But my wife Raissa's grandfather was shot and not rehabilitated until 1988.

Then, in 1941, a terrible tragedy struck the Soviet people: the attack by Hitler's Germany. My father was sent to the front while together with the rest of the family my mother and I, still only a young boy, lived through the German occupation,

the hunger, the constant worry about my father (once we even received notification of his death, which later proved to be a mistake) and depressing concern for the fate of our country.

What is my strongest memory of those horrible years? There was that first winter of the war which was exceptionally cold, as though nature were trying to resist the invaders.

Then there were the hunger and poverty. The farmers had to hand over almost the whole of the harvest for the army and the armament production workers. There were no supplies even for our simplest daily needs. We reverted to a pre-industrial existence resembling the world 'after the catastrophe' as seen in Philip K. Dick's science fiction novel or as depicted in Tatyana Tolstoy's novel *Kys*. We sowed hemp and sheared sheep; grandmothers fetched their old spinning wheels and looms down from the attic; we even made our own footwear from cowhide, soaking the soles in Masut. Salt came from the salt lake 50 kilometres away; we learnt to use soda to make soap; we struck sparks with flint or manufactured matches from explosives we scraped out of unexploded shells.

Despite all this it was the following episode more than anything else which forever shaped my abhorrence of war. In late February or early March 1943, just as the snow was beginning to melt, I set off with a few other lads to hunt for 'trophies' in the undergrowth between Privolnoye and the neighbouring village of Belaya Glina. We happened on the remains of a group of our soldiers who had fallen in battle:

decomposing bodies in shreds of uniform, half devoured by wild animals, skulls in rusty helmets, bleached bones of arms and hands still clutching rifles, empty eye-sockets staring at us. This face of war, this image, so surrealistic in its realism, will remain in my memory forever. Whenever I hear of some new conflict or yet another act of terrorism I think of those soldiers as I listen to matter-of-fact reports about casualty numbers.

There is also another ghastly image that will never leave me. On my way to university in Moscow some years after the war I had to change trains in several towns where the most brutal battles had taken place: Stalingrad, Rostov, Charkov, Voronezh, Orel, Kursk. Endless kilometres of ruins . . . This, too, was the face of war.

Although my village had to struggle with cold, hunger and primitive levels of subsistence, the extent of our suffering was far less than that of the country as a whole: the occupation of a part of the USSR, the huge mortality of soldiers and officers, including some of my relations. What kept us alive was our belief in victory and the hope that life after the war would improve for the members of our *kolkhoz* (collective farm).

However, our life bore no resemblance to that depicted in post-war official propaganda. Books and films praising Soviet peasantry were produced showing *kolkhoz* members labouring like heroes and being rewarded by prosperity and plenty of fun in their free time. But our life was anything but full of fun.

At the age of 15 I began to help my father driving the combine harvester. It was crushing work, but all the members of the *kolkhoz* worked hard although they were not rewarded with money but only with measly 'payments in kind', i.e. farm produce. *Kolkhoz* families could only survive with the help of their private patches of land, and even from these they had to hand over a portion of their harvest to the state. And they had to part with a specific amount of milk, butter and meat even if they had no livestock. And fruit trees were taxed although they did not bear fruit every year.

In 1861 Tsar Alexander II liberated the Russian peasantry from serfdom although without interfering with the agricultural riches of the large landowners. The socialist utopia, for which millions of peasants had fought during the Revolution because it promised them land, turned under Stalin into a new form of serfdom. Now the peasants had become serfs of the state and were even prevented from migrating to the towns. The authorities refused them internal passes, and without such a document they could obtain neither work nor residence permits outside their own village. I soon began to realize – albeit only in broad outline – that Soviet peasants were the victims of social injustice. But I believed that their sacrifice would be short-lived and that a bright future would soon materialize.

During those post-war years I also became aware of the power of nature. For my granddaughters today, as for the majority of town-bred children, nature is a beautiful though

abstract world: *trees* and *flowers* grow in woods and parks, and *birds* sing there. But if you ask them to name a simple wild flower or a warbling bird they cannot do so. Of course they have read Ivan Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* but doubtless they skipped his impressive descriptions of the Russian countryside for they have never seen a single one of the many plants and animals he mentions. On the other hand, having been immersed in nature from childhood, I found those descriptions perfectly familiar: especially the enchanting world of the steppe with its endless distances where corn-crakes sing in the ripening wheat at sunset, where soft breezes murmur and a myriad of stars shine in the sky at night. At difficult times in my life Nature has always offered me refuge. For me it is not 'environment' or a 'place of leisure and relaxation' but a temple in which I experience feelings that are almost religious.

The natural disasters visited on our country in the post-war years showed me how dependent we are on nature. In 1946 almost the whole of the harvest in our region, and indeed in nearly all grain-growing areas, was ruined by drought. Countless hungry people descended on us from Stalingrad and other towns in the hope of exchanging anything they had for bread. The same scenes were repeated in 1947. And 1948 also began dramatically. For three days the whole of the North Caucasus was enveloped in dust storms so thick that you couldn't recognize a person standing five metres away from you. After the storms my father took me with him to

look at our fields. The crops were crushed, flattened and buried under a layer of dust. My father was a reserved man who never raised his voice either at us children or at his wife, and in this situation, too, he did not weep or shout. But I saw the despair in his face. And then, a few days later, it rained, the crop perked up and recovered, and in the autumn we brought in a bumper harvest.

That was my first object lesson, which has to be seen against the background of the official doctrine of the time. Pinned up in every classroom was a maxim formulated by the famous agronomist Ivan Michurin who had succeeded in increasing the yield of apple trees by crossing various varieties: 'We cannot expect any gifts from nature – it is up to us to take possession of whatever it offers!' Several years later, when I returned from Moscow University to work in my native region, I soon realized what this formulation really meant.

Under Soviet conditions party leaders were first and foremost economic functionaries. So in the fertile region of Stavropol my efforts were focussed mainly on agriculture. This was a matter of rescuing the harvest in periods of drought, rescuing the cattle that were to be sent to Moscow, rescuing the soil which had become depleted through exploitation, and closing down the mines where gravel was won because this involved dynamiting the most beautiful hills of the North Caucasus. It was probably during that period that I swore to myself to devote all my power to change

this situation one day. Little did I know how soon I would find myself in a position to do just that.

The higher I rose on the career ladder the more I saw before me the picture of the economic, social and ecological crisis for which the Soviet Union was heading. As we know, all information about the true state of the country was kept secret, and I only gained some access to it in 1970 when I had become a delegate to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and a member of the Committee for the Conservation of the Environment. Not until I became General Secretary of the Communist Party did I become fully aware of all the details.

No care was being given to the earth, the fount of our existence; it was exhausted and laid waste. The state gave precedence to heavy industry which worked mainly for all aspects of armaments manufacture, and to the mining of our mineral wealth the sale of which was financing the arms race. Millions of hectares had been expropriated for military exercises. The construction of gigantic dams and the resulting artificial lakes needed for hydroelectric power stations had not only ruined the rich stocks of fish (in a country that had once been famous the world over for its fish delicacies) but also caused 14 million hectares of the most fertile land to be flooded. Further dozens of millions of hectares had been designated border areas. Primitive land improvement techniques had ruined huge once fertile territories. The careless application of pesticides had polluted fields, rivers and lakes and irreparably damaged flora and fauna. Especially affected

was the far North where barbaric methods of oil and gas extraction had devastated parts of the tundra, the natural habitat of indigenous tribes. In the far East and Siberia incalculably valuable forest regions had been deforested. Then there is the Aral Sea which has lost 50 per cent of its surface area in the last 40 years. For decades the winds have been distributing across thousands of kilometres the salty dust mingled with pesticides which has formed on its dried up bed. This dust travels as far afield as Belarus and Afghanistan, destroying vegetation there. The basin of the Volga, the great Russian river along whose banks half the population of the Russian Federation lives, is also polluted. And in regions such as Chelyabinsk, where test areas for nuclear and chemical weapons had been fenced off, the population was not even warned of the dangers. We should not forget that in the 'closed'[3] town of Kyshtym not far from Chelyabinsk a chemical explosion took place in 1959 in a treatment basin for nuclear waste which caused serious poisoning of the population and the environment. This accident was kept secret for almost 30 years.

I was horrified. The lack of a public opinion permitted the leaders of the country to perpetrate unbelievable outrages without any mention appearing in media muzzled by censorship while functionaries of Party and State were rewarded with medals for their 'heroic deeds'!

In 1985 I was elected Chairman of the Communist Party which meant I became head of state of the USSR. By that time

I had already developed a number of ideas for reforming the country. Those ideas were supported by my firm conviction concisely summarized in the words: 'We cannot go on like this!'

I presented society with three aims: glasnost, perestroika and acceleration. An essential prerequisite for the reforms to which I gave the name of perestroika was glasnost or transparency, which gave people the possibility but also the right to speak the truth. How could reforms be put in train if one did not tell the truth about the actual situation, if people could not hear the truth about the past? The third aim meant that we must very quickly come to grips with the new technologies if we did not want to be pushed to the edge of the civilized world as electronics and computer technology forged ahead with their contribution to the process of globalization.

Freedom of expression electrified a society where problems had been building up for decades like the pressure in a boiler with its lid screwed shut. There were endless meetings, gatherings and discussions in the press and on television – society was bubbling over. And the first topic taken up by a newly awakened citizenship was that of ecology and the living conditions of the many millions of the Soviet population. In 90 towns of the Soviet Union, in fact in every large industrial centre, people were living in an environment of polluted air, water and soil. Women and children suffered the greatest ill health. Some protest meetings lasted for several days at a

time. And we decided for ecological reasons to close 1,300 factories either forever or until they could be modernized. Even though several of them were producing essential goods we did not allow ourselves to be deflected from our decision. Under pressure from public opinion and the awakening civil society we also put a stop to the absurd 'pharaoh project' that planned to reverse the flow of Siberia's mighty rivers. It could have led to natural disasters in the whole of the Eurasian region.

The Chernobyl catastrophe which taught not only me but I hope the whole of humanity a lesson befell our country in April 1986, a year after I had been brought to power. According to the experts there was one chance in millions that the crew of the Chernobyl power station would make all seven mistakes at once that were needed for a catastrophe to happen. But happen it did, and the resulting explosion set the inside of the reactor on fire, causing it to blow its top so that considerable amounts of radioactive materials were flung into the atmosphere up to a height of one-and-a-half kilometres.

This was a new situation not only for our own scientists but for the world as a whole. Thousands of the Soviet Union's best experts – physicists, mathematicians, nuclear scientists, chemists – in Moscow, Kiev and Minsk were busy calculating every possible variation that might occur as the accident continued to worsen and suggesting ways of putting out the fire. Academician Velikhov and his colleagues warned the Politburo that the burning reactor might collapse. This would

give rise to a thermonuclear reaction in which the critical mass would be ten times greater than that of the Hiroshima bomb. For understandable reasons we wanted to prevent panic breaking out, but in order to prevent an even greater disaster we deployed huge forces to extinguish the fire (which was continuing to send further radioactive particles into the atmosphere): many thousands of soldiers, fire-fighters and mineworkers continued to do their duty in the most difficult of conditions. Although each individual was relieved after only a few minutes, the amount of radiation to which they were exposed was so high that many suffered radiation damage and subsequently fell ill and died. After the fire was extinguished thousands of specialists continued to work for many months to decontaminate the Chernobyl area. These selfless individuals deserve our praise and our admiration for they knew that their life and health were in danger. They are the true heroes of our time!

I reject the accusations made against the Soviet government from time to time: that they did not give sufficient aid to the inhabitants of the affected areas. We did everything in our power. The fire was extinguished and the population evacuated, first within a radius of ten and then of 30 kilometres. Huge efforts were made to decontaminate residential areas, fields and meadows, and a 'sarcophagus' was placed over the damaged reactor in record time. In spite of the difficult economic situation of the country we spent dozens of billions of roubles on all this.

One unfortunate consequence of the splitting up of the Soviet Union was that neither the stage by stage evacuation of the affected populations nor the long-term measures being carried out were brought to a proper conclusion. Paradoxically, the treaty between the presidents of the three republics at Byeloveshskaya Pushcha[4] meant not only that the historical community of these three Soviet nations with their economic, political and human links was dissolved but also that each of the now independent states – Russia, Ukraine and Belarus – has been left with 'its own' Chernobyl problem. Belarus has suffered particularly as a result because 70 per cent of the radioactive fallout fell on its territory. Two million White Russians, one fifth of the population, still live on contaminated ground.

Chernobyl turned me into a different person, so what lessons have I learnt from the greatest technological calamity in human history?

Firstly, Chernobyl became a decisive test for the new policy of glasnost. Whatever may have been written about the matter, the following is the truth about what really happened: My government colleagues and I decided on the very first day to publish all the details about the catastrophe as soon as they reached us. In addition we kept foreign governments, especially our immediate neighbours, informed about developments. Members of the government committee held press conferences in Moscow on 6 and 9 May. And finally a detailed and well-accepted report was presented to the International

Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna by a Soviet delegation led by academician V. Legassov, one of the chief constructors of Chernobyl's RBMK Reactor and a first class scientist who, plagued by his conscience, later committed suicide.

Secondly, my belief in the absolute reliability of technology was shattered. For 30 years we had been assured that 'the peaceful atom was no more dangerous than a samovar', to quote academician A. Alexandrov's telling phrase, and that a nuclear power station could be built in Red Square without any problems. We had regarded physicists as demigods who with the help of science would fulfil humanity's ancient dream of cheap and 'clean' energy. Suddenly, however, these demigods had become vulnerable and were seen to possess human weaknesses. Therefore I gained the new conviction that all technological processes which might have negative effects on the health and life of the population require supervision by society.

Thirdly, my time-scales changed radically. The half-life of Caesium 137, the radioactive isotope most damaging to health that escaped from the 'cauldron of Chernobyl', is 30 years which means that this element will still be poisoning foodstuffs and affecting the health of populations in the polluted areas for a long time to come. What right have we to burden our descendants with such a problem? Whom should they blame for the misdeeds of our time?

And fourthly, Chernobyl stiffened my resolve to establish new international contacts and demonstrate emphatically

that we are a single humanity sharing a single planet. After all, the radioactive cloud had spread around the globe within a few days, and traces of radioactivity had been found thousands of kilometres distant from the location of the catastrophe.

I had been thinking about a new concept of international relations for years. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 had already shown that opposition between the two superpowers must on no account be allowed to lead to a nuclear conflict. Yet despite the politics of détente in the 1970s and despite the Final Helsinki Declaration the mutual distrust between the two blocs was so great that arms proliferation continued. Both arsenals were repeatedly augmented and the 'Nuclear Club' kept on growing.

I first had an opportunity to put forward my idea of a 'new political thinking' in December 1984 when I led a delegation of the Supreme Soviet to London even before I became General Secretary. This idea was based on convictions which I had found were shared by like-minded scientists at a number of universities. After talks with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher I addressed the British Parliament. In my speech I stressed that there could be no winners in a nuclear age, that the cold war could not serve as a basis on which to conduct international relations, and that we were prepared to embark on limiting our arms, especially nuclear weapons, according to the principle of parity with our western partners. That was when I made the statement that has remained my

creed to this day: 'However we may differ, we inhabit the same planet. Europe is our common home. It is a house, not a theatre of war.'

Despite resistance from western political circles and from the conservative parts of the Soviet party and state apparatus, the idea of this new political thinking gradually gained momentum. After the first Soviet-American summits in Geneva and Reykjavik a further theoretically important step was the New Delhi Declaration which I signed in November 1986 with the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who was murdered four years later by a Tamil suicide bomber, a woman. This declaration gave expression to several ideas which I considered essential for people in the twenty-first century. Among other points, we stressed that human life was of the highest value, that relinquishing violence was the highest priority in the co-existence of individuals and of nations, and that the 'balance of terror' would have to be replaced by a global security system.

Only a few years after I took up my position as head of state the political climate of the world had completely changed. Here are some of the milestones in those eventful years:

– A conference of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna in 1989. This culminated in the signing of an exceedingly important document which gave a new impulse to the talks on conventional disarmament in Europe. The document also contributed to

strengthening the co-operation between all European countries and the role of human rights in the whole continent.

– The first Soviet-American treaty of 1987 on the destruction of land-based short and middle distance nuclear rockets which served as a prologue for the ratification of the START 1 and the START 2 Agreements[5] and led to the complete destruction of chemical weapons arsenals.

– The departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in late 1988 and early 1989.

– The departure of Soviet troops from eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the introduction of multi-party systems and the transition to democratic government in all the countries of the eastern bloc during 1989 and 1990.

– The fall of the Berlin Wall and the re-unification of Germany.

In 1990 my endeavours to create a new system of international relations on the basis of peace, the recognition of universal human rights and without any ideological pressure were marked by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

My internal policies were guided by the same principles. The fundamental changes that took place during my years in government were: renunciation by the Communist Party of its monopoly on power and the introduction of a multi-party system; free elections; renunciation of centralism in relations

with the Soviet Republics; renunciation of the use of force against nationalist movements; press freedom; religious freedom; economic reforms with the aim of a gradual transition to a market economy; unilateral reduction of the armed forces and the conversion of numerous armaments factories. From a totalitarian state in which every form of dissidence was punished, in which religious believers could not follow careers, in which every printed word was subject to Party censorship and thousands of books by contemporary writers and philosophers were stored in 'special archives',[6] the transition was made to a free society. Unfortunately perestroika did not succeed in improving the material living standard of Soviet citizens. But the reforms did make them free human beings who held the future in their own hands.

I shall not dwell here on the circumstances of my final year in office since they are well known, namely the putsch and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union which I had hoped to prevent so as to build a genuine federation with a common economic system.

Despite the disappointment I felt after my resignation in 1991 because of Boris Yeltsin's duplicity in sabotaging the signing of a new union treaty of sovereign republics[7] I relinquished the leadership with confidence. It seemed to me that the new thinking which had followed on from the cold war, and the multi-polarity that had taken the place of the two spheres of influence of the superpowers, had opened up new prospects for international co-operation, for example for a

changed role of the United Nations, or for a joint struggle against poverty and international crime and for a healthy environment.

As I departed from my post as President simultaneously with the disappearance of the Soviet Union I decided to devote my future to my country and to humanity. Together with a number of my closest collaborators I set up the Gorbachev Foundation in order to develop further the idea of the new thinking and the idea of a new humanitarian civilization for the twenty-first century. I hoped that respected politicians and those working in the cultural sphere in every country would be attracted to join in the project.

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 gave me additional encouragement to return to a set of questions which, as I have said, had moved me deeply since my childhood, namely to save and conserve the environment – within the framework of a sustainable development based on social, moral and intellectual ideas. It seemed to me that this would be the best way of harmonizing my philosophical interests, my love for our earth and nature, my political experience and my moral authority. Above all I am convinced that this is the most urgent task facing humanity today.