

THE ONCE AND FUTURE RUSSIA

Who could have imagined a dozen years ago that the Soviet Union would vanish, or that an independent Russia would choose its second president at the polls? Yet Russia's March election has provoked international consternation and concern rather than celebration. The victor, Vladimir Putin, has a dark history and rhetoric to match. The nine years since the end of communist rule have brought welcome freedoms for Russia but much hardship and civic discord, as well as war. Our contributors assess the Yeltsin years and peer into the Russian future.



Shuvalovo Station (1978), by Vladimir Ovchinnikov

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The Two Worlds of Vladimir Putin

I. The KGB

by Amy Knight

I was introduced to Vladimir Putin's KGB in the summer of 1981. I was in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), the city where he was born and spent much of his career before his improbable rise to Russia's presidency. That summer I was visiting as a tourist more interested in the city's splendid architecture and museums than in bucking the system as I had as a student traveler in 1967. Fourteen years had not changed the rule: Forging acquaintances with local Russians was strictly out of bounds. Foreigners, especially Russian speakers like me, were still cordoned off from contacts with ordinary Russians by the efficient operations of Intourist and the infamous *dezhurnye*, the elderly ladies who were positioned on every hotel floor to monitor the comings and goings of guests. So it was very odd when an unusually friendly Russian man approached me as I sat in the lobby of my hotel, right under the watchful eyes of Intourist, and began earnestly telling me about the woes of Soviet life and expressing sympathy for American ideals. It took a while before I realized what was going on. I was the target of an entrapment effort. Shaken, I quickly broke off the conversation and hurried away.

My new "acquaintance" was doubtless an employee of the local branch of the KGB. Part of his job was to hang around hotels spying on visiting foreigners and trying to single out a few—as in my case, apparently—who could be more directly exploited. This was the kind of elevated activity Vladimir Putin did during the nine years he worked for the Leningrad KGB, from 1975 to 1984. (For all I know, the man in the Hotel Moskva's lobby may have been Putin, who has been aptly described as "professionally nondescript.") It is hard to imagine what people like Putin felt when they went through daily routines such as this, but I will never forget my own reaction. I felt like going up to my room and taking a long shower. I had come face to face with an organization I knew chiefly in the abstract from reading the samizdat writings of Soviet dissidents whose lives had been destroyed by just such mundane KGB functionaries. What came to mind



“Red on the Inside,” the Russian newsweekly Itogi screamed in January. The image of Vladimir Putin is a composite photo.

was Hannah Arendt’s phrase about the Nazi regime—the banality of evil.

Now, with the political ascendancy of Vladimir Putin, that banal evil has reached the summit of power in the Kremlin—a situation that should cause more concern to U.S. policymakers than it apparently does. At home, journalists and political pundits scour the past of American presidential contenders to see if they have smoked marijuana, dodged the draft, or committed adultery, but the background of

the new Russian leader is, policymakers tell us, irrelevant. The important thing is that Putin is “someone we can do business with.” It is not hard to understand the rationale behind this approach. But if you judge Putin by his past, it does not bode well for the future of Russian democracy or for Russia’s relations with the West.

Contrary to the myth generated by the Kremlin and perpetuated by the Western news media, many authoritative sources agree that Putin was never a spy of the sort so romantically depicted by John le Carré—a sophisticated, suave cynic who hobnobs in Western diplomatic circles abroad, sipping cognac in elegant, book-lined rooms. If such a person existed, he might conceivably have realized that the Soviet system was a sham and warmed to the democratic ways of the West. (The Kremlin exploited a similar myth when former KGB head Yuri Andropov came to power in 1982, suggesting that he was a jazz-loving Western-style sophisticate.) But the spymaster group was an old-boy elite to which Putin, the son of a factory worker, had no entrée. When Putin was hired by the KGB after finishing law school in Leningrad in 1975—a training ground for police and administrators, not foreign intelligence officers—he was sent to its Leningrad branch rather than a more desirable foreign post.

According to former KGB spy Oleg Kalugin, who was banished to Leningrad in 1980 by disapproving superiors, the local office was a backwater. As he recalled in his 1994 memoir, “Our 3,000-person KGB office in Leningrad continued to harass dissidents and ordinary citizens, as well as to hunt futilely for spies. But I can truly say that nearly all of what we did was useless. . . . In the twenty years before my arrival in Leningrad, the local KGB hadn’t caught one spy, despite the expenditure of millions of rubles and tens of thousands of man-hours.” As a low-level cog in this machine of repression and deceit, Putin, as Kalugin has since put it, was a “nobody.”

After a year of study at the KGB’s Red Banner Institute of Intelligence in Moscow, Putin finally won a stint abroad in 1985. But he was sent to Soviet-controlled East Germany, not the West, and, contrary to many press reports that now suggest he was engaged in high-level espionage, he had the same sort of job he had in Leningrad. Working in close cooperation with the Stasi, Putin spied on German and Soviet citizens and recruited informers. Not very lofty work, by any stretch of the imagination.

Putin, who speaks fluent German, appears to have been heavily influenced by his five-year immersion in Stasi culture. In *The File: A Personal History* (1997), journalist Timothy Garton Ash estimates that by 1988, when Putin was in East Germany, the Stasi had more than 90,000 employees and some 170,000 collaborators. In other words, at least one out of every 50 adult East Germans was directly connected with the secret police. The East German police state, Garton Ash observes, was “less brutal than the Third Reich, to be sure, far less damaging to its neighbors, and not genocidal, but more quietly all-pervasive in its domestic control.”

Garton Ash sees a strong parallel between the Stasi mentality and that of the Nazis. Both appealed to “secondary virtues” such as discipline, hard work, and loyalty, while completely ignoring the “systemic wrong” of the totalitarian state they served. Putin’s words since his rise to prominence certainly fit the pattern Garton Ash describes. The new president speaks of reviving the “moral fiber” of the Russian people and of “exterminating” the Chechens in the same breath. He emphasizes the need for honest leadership, yet he also extols the accomplishments of the KGB—which was not only morally corrupt, we now know, but riddled with more ordinary corruption as well.

When the collapse of communism in East Germany in 1989 brought his career there to an end, Putin returned home to Leningrad. He formally retired from the KGB in 1991, going to work for the city’s mayor, Anatoly Sobchak. Some say that he continued spying for the security services. Eventually, Boris Yeltsin’s cronies in St. Petersburg, part of a far-flung clan of often corrupt oligarchs, tapped him for service in the president’s administration in Moscow. The rest of Putin’s prepresidential résumé is straightforward. In

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They called it victory: The Russian flag rises over the Chechen capital of Grozny in March.

1998, Yeltsin, under fire for the rampant corruption in his regime and for the bungled first war in Chechnya of 1994–96, named Putin chief of Russia’s domestic security agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB). When the Russian parliament was about to impeach Yeltsin on a variety of charges, he gave Putin the additional job of heading the president’s Security Council, which oversees the entire security and defense apparatus. Putin pulled out all the stops for Yeltsin, bullying the parliament with a threatening speech and using an embarrassing videotape to discredit the Russian prosecutor-general, who was bent on the prosecution of a Yeltsin crony. Putin’s good works were rewarded last year when Yeltsin named him prime minister and then made him acting president when he stepped down on December 31. He was elected president in March without ever having held elective office.

How could the Russian people accept as their leader a dyed-in-the-wool KGB apparatchik with unexceptional credentials? Frightened by the specter of Chechen terrorism and fed up with Yeltsin’s dysfunctional “democracy,”

Russians have embraced Putin because he pressed hard in the war against Chechnya and built an image as a tough, aggressive, anti-Western superpatriot. Human rights activist Sergei Kovalev aptly summed up the current attitude of his fellow Russians in a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*: “We don’t want to return to communism, but we’re fed up with your democracy, your freedom, your human rights. What we want is order.”

Putin did not come to power alone. He is part of a cohort of professionals from the Russian security services who have used the support of Yeltsin and corrupt oligarchs such as business tycoon Boris Berezovsky and former Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais to infiltrate the Kremlin. Early in his presidency, Yeltsin began courting the security services and building up their powers because he needed them, with their investigative and surveillance capabilities and their elite troop units, for support in his political battles. Before long, Yeltsin was surrounded by former KGB officials, and they came to play a prominent role in determining both domestic and foreign policy. It is hardly a coincidence that the last three Russian prime ministers hailed from the KGB and its successor organizations. If Putin had not been the designated successor to Yeltsin, it would have been someone very much like him—an iron-fisted, tough-talking former KGB officer who promised to restore law and order by cracking down on criminals. (Not members of the Yeltsin clan, of course, just the Chechens and others, such as journalists, who embarrass the Kremlin.)

Have Russians forgotten the heavy price they paid for “law and order” and national pride in the heyday of the KGB: no meaningful elections, no freedom of the press, and no ability to travel freely or exercise religious beliefs? To be sure, Russia has not yet turned back the clock to the Soviet period, but the signs of regression are everywhere: the brutal onslaught against the Chechens, the harassment and arrest of journalists who are critical of the government, and the growing state control over the news media. This should surprise no one. Why expect people who spent most of their careers callously abusing human rights suddenly to stop, especially in the chaotic and ruthless world of Russian politics?

As Aleksandr Nikitin, the outspoken environmentalist who was arrested on charges of treason in 1996 for exposing the Russian Navy’s harmful nuclear dumping practices, observes: “There is no such thing as an ex-KGB employee, just as there is no such thing as an ex-German shepherd.” Nikitin, whose arrest and prosecution were orchestrated by Putin’s long-time Leningrad colleague, Viktor Cherkesov, was unexpectedly acquitted at the end of December. The man who persecuted him for more than two years, however, is now second in command of the FSB.

The greatest risk for Russia’s future will come if and when ordinary Russians become disenchanted with Putin. Then he and his allies may decide that courting public opinion is simply more trouble than it’s worth

and fall back on the familiar methods of the security services. Putin has already placed a number of former KGB colleagues in high positions. In addition to Cherkesov, for example, the new chief of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, went to law school with Putin and served with him in the Leningrad KGB. The head of the president's Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, graduated with Putin from the KGB's Red Banner Institute.

Given Russia's increasingly belligerent anti-Westernism, the United States and other Western governments can do little in the short run to influence events in Russia directly. But by acknowledging the implications of having another former KGB apparatchik as Russia's president, U.S. policymakers would at least avoid giving an impression of naiveté that would encourage the Kremlin to be even less inhibited about flouting world opinion than it already is. The fact that almost a decade after the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991 someone like Putin could rise to the top of the political leadership in Russia is a grim reminder that the legacies of police states die hard. □

II. Leningrad

by Blair A. Ruble

More than three months after Boris Yeltsin startled the world by resigning in favor of Vladimir Putin, Western analysts are still groping for insights into the new Russian president. They debate the significance of his KGB past and his role in St. Petersburg's democratic movement during the 1990s. They wonder what the Russian war in Chechnya tells us about the heart and mind of the man who prosecuted it while serving as Yeltsin's prime minister. In truth, we are not likely to learn enough about the inscrutable Mr. Putin to predict what he will do as Russia's president. Yet one important and neglected piece in the puzzle of his character undoubtedly resides in St. Petersburg, where he was born and spent many of his politically formative years.

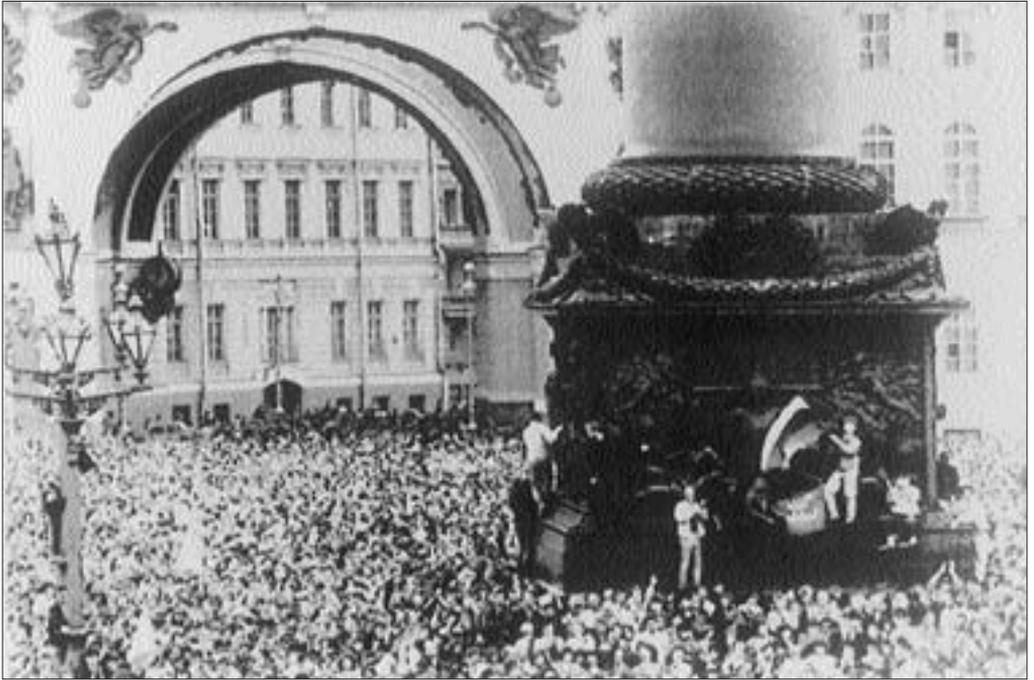
During those years, two distinct realities coexisted within the city's official boundaries. The first, and by far the weaker, was that of the historic city center and the pre-revolutionary values it embodied. This community was known in unofficial shorthand as "Peter." Around it in the years after World War II grew a new Soviet industrial city, representing all the values of the Soviet Union. This sprawling urban center was rightly known in local parlance by the city's official name, "Leningrad."

“Peter” grew out of the city’s proud tradition as Russia’s imperial capital, the center of its high culture and intellectual life, and its “window on the West.” Founded by Peter the Great in 1703—who gave it straight streets and borrowed neoclassical architecture in an attempt to impose European rationality on an addled Russian landscape—it grew to be Europe’s fifth largest city by the eve of World War I. After the fall of the Romanovs, the city entered a period of wrenching transformations. The Russian Civil War cost it more than half its population, and it lost its name (which had changed to Petrograd in 1914 and then in 1924 to Leningrad) and its status as the capital city. In the 1930s came Stalin’s purges and an influx of peasants fleeing his unfathomably brutal collectivization of agriculture; Hitler’s 900-day siege of 1941–44 cost the city more dead than all of its wars together have cost the United States. During the late 1940s, the few members of the local intelligentsia and political elite who survived suffered another round of purges. By the time Putin was born, in 1952 (shortly before Stalin’s death), the city of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky was no more.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the city’s Communist leaders created a distinctive Leningrad model of development, emphasizing defense and other specialized industries, including shipbuilding, machinery, and precision instruments. The city’s economy rested on the increasing integration of a vaunted technical and scientific academic community with leading local industries and the national security apparatus—an especially vigorous presence in Leningrad. The Leningrad model included cultural policies that were even more authoritarian than the Soviet norm. The new economic and cultural policies sharply divided the city’s intellectual elite, creating, in effect, two cities. On one side stood the writers, artists, performers, and humanistic scholars who identified with a mythical “Peter” that stood in latent opposition to Soviet power—their more outspoken colleagues having been dispatched to the gulag. On the other stood what the Soviets called the technical intelligentsia—designers, engineers, architects, and the like—who served the Soviet Union’s leading regional military-industrial complex. This was Vladimir Putin’s city.

Putin graduated from the Leningrad State University Juridical Faculty during the mid-1970s. I was a visiting graduate student at the time, in Leningrad to do research for my doctoral dissertation, and although I don’t recall meeting Putin, I well remember the asphyxiating atmosphere of the place. The drear was relieved, ironically, only on Soviet holidays, when some of the faculty members (officers in the

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Where's Vladimir Putin? An extraordinary crowd gathered at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to protest the hardliners' abortive August 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev.

KGB, one student whispered to me) showed up in colorful dress uniforms. Leningrad State, like all Soviet-era law schools, was a prime training ground for the KGB and other security agencies.

The local Communist Party and security agencies were among the Soviet Union's most aggressive enemies of dissent. When I arrived, the law school was in the midst of a crackdown on professors with unorthodox views or Jewish names—the two categories were considered virtually synonymous. Local hostility was forcing many members of the city's once large Jewish population into exile and liberal scholars were being driven underground. Clumsy Communist politicians, resentful of the city's heritage of liberalism and high culture, were hard at work turning their once proud metropolis into a provincial industrial town. Leningrad party chieftain Grigorii Romanov earned a reputation for boorishness even among Brezhnev-era Politburo and Central Committee members, hardly a crowd noted for high standards of refinement. It was in this city at this time that Mikhail Baryshnikov decided to flee to the West, and a young Vladimir Putin decided to cast his lot with the KGB.

Since the demise of communism, a resurgent “Peter” has overshadowed the city's “Leningrad” heritage, assuming a prominent role in post-Soviet Russia's faltering democracy. Their conflict, hidden during the Soviet years, was brought into the open by Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalizing policies during the late 1980s. Fittingly, it was through battles over the preservation of historic build-

ings that “Peter” first found a legitimate forum for advancing the war against “Leningrad.” Raucous street demonstrations erupted in March 1987 to protest the city’s graceless restoration of the once grand Astoria Hotel and its more déclassé neighbor, the Angleterra. It was from the Astoria bar that John Reed witnessed the 10 days that shook the world in 1917, while at the Angleterra the poet Sergei Essenin, in despair over the emerging face of the Bolshevik regime he had once embraced, took his own life in 1925, scratching a final verse in his own blood. For the first time, local citizens found the courage to publicly reject the economic visions formulated for their city by Soviet planners.

This was the beginning of the city’s rise to prominence in pro-democratic Russia. In the historic Supreme Soviet elections of 1989, Leningrad voters turned every senior local Communist Party leader out of office, effectively breaking the party’s back in much of the Soviet Union. When a Communist coup threatened Russia’s new government in August 1991, Boris Yeltsin’s defiant display of bulldog tenacity riveted the world’s attention on Moscow. But in Petersburg, a genuinely revolutionary moment occurred as one-third of the entire local population crowded into the historic square in front of the Hermitage Museum to oppose the coup. Local voters have remained Russia’s most liberal electorate, right down through the parliamentary elections of December 1999.

Yet “Leningrad” continues to lurk just beneath the surface of Petersburgian democracy, much as “Peter” hid in Leningrad’s shadows during the Soviet decades. Vladimir Putin appears to embody all of the contradictions between the two. After service in the KGB that took him to East Germany and Leningrad, Putin threw in his lot with the reformers in the 1990s. He was St. Petersburg’s deputy mayor from 1991 until 1996, working closely with the city’s high-toned reform mayor Anatoly Sobchak (who had been one of Putin’s law school professors). In 1998, after two years in the Yeltsin government, Putin was named head of the Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB. In August 1999, Yeltsin named him prime minister.

Sobchak’s Petersburg circle produced an impressive number of Russian leaders, from Yeltsin’s promarket “gray cardinal,” Anatoly Chubais, to national privatization honchos Sergei Belayev and Alfred Kokh. These and other prominent St. Petersburg politicians—including the assassinated democratic politicians Mikhail Manevich and Galina Starovoitova—had all rejected “Leningrad” during the Soviet era. The depth of their commitment to free markets and free elections varied, but at some level all shared the status of outsiders, talented professionals who had felt unjustly ignored merely because they lived in the Soviet Union’s second city. To some of them, at least, the democratic movement of the late 1980s offered an opportunity for rapid upward mobility while also having the virtue of being virtuous.

This singular blend of cynical calculation and idealism is one of the distinctive qualities of the politicians the city has bred.

The city continues to struggle with the legacy of the Leningrad model of development. The approach emphasized the centralization of decision making, rationalization of the links between research and development and industrial production, and the streamlining of lines of command in order to force existing institutions to operate more efficiently. The tanks coming off the assembly lines at Leningrad's Kirov Factory, the nuclear power stations built by Elektrosila, the high-grade plastics being turned out by Plastpolimer, and the precision optics produced at LOMO deluded Leningraders into thinking that their economy was world class.

The 1990s revealed the folly of Leningrad's economic and political strategies. The city's Soviet inheritance has been a deadweight, sinking nearly every effort to drag it into the global economy. In pegging the city's fortunes so closely to the Soviet military-industrial complex, its leaders failed to confront its underlying economic handicaps: a peripheral geographic location, a harsh climate, a lack of natural resources, and the absence of an economically active hinterland. Despite numerous behind-the-scenes proposals to remake the city as a high-tech center, Leningrad's Soviet planners never made the sorts of adjustments that would have converted a hierarchically managed industrial-age metropolis into a flexible, horizontally organized postindustrial leader. Instead, they squeezed enough out of the existing system to create the illusion of success.

Leningrad never confronted the central issue facing Russia today: how to generate and sustain economic creativity and growth. That will require the establishment of legal and credit structures that encourage small business and entrepreneurship. It means encouraging bottom-up initiatives rather than rule by top-down decree. It means, in effect, calling upon "Peter" to help make the future work.

There may be something of "Peter" in Russia's new president, but there is undoubtedly a good deal of "Leningrad" in him as well. Putin seems to favor using the strong hand of government overseers to prod the existing Russian economy to function more effectively. It is true that authoritative government will be needed if Russia is to succeed, but that is not what Putin seems to mean. In a statement released only days before he succeeded Yeltsin as acting president last December, Putin tipped his hat to the values of democracy and capitalism even as he observed that "the public looks forward to the restoration of the guiding and regulating role of the state to a degree which is necessary, proceeding from the traditions and present state of the country." These words are as full of contradiction as the city that bred their author. Putin's efforts as Russia's president may bring some improvements, but in assessing them it will be worth recalling the Leningrad legacy of surface achievement at the expense of more profound long-term gains. □

Yeltsin's Legacy

by Michael McFaul

Days after staring down the August 1991 coup attempt, Russian President Boris Yeltsin boasted a 90 percent approval rating at home, adorned the cover of every international weekly in the world, and was christened a democratic hero by world leaders from Washington to Tokyo. When he suddenly resigned as president on December 31, 1999, Yeltsin enjoyed an eight percent approval rating at home (with a margin of error of plus or minus four percent). He probably had only two or three international calls to make. With the exception of Bill Clinton and a few others, Yeltsin had almost no friends in high places left. Even the Western media all but ignored the passing of this onetime hero. When Clinton appeared that morning to comment on Yeltsin's retirement, most American television networks chose instead to air the fireworks display in Beijing.

Many would argue that Yeltsin's pathetic passing from power correctly reflected his performance as Russia's first democratically elected president. In part, it did. In his resignation speech, Yeltsin himself apologized to the people of Russia for his mistakes, a rare act for any politician but especially out of character for this fighter. For many in Russia (and abroad), the apology was too little, too late. As he left office, a war was under way in Chechnya, the state had just manipulated a parliamentary election, and rampant corruption had stymied economic reform. Still, for many others, Yeltsin's parting plea for redemption sparked nostalgia for a fallen hero. And Yeltsin certainly deserves credit for monumental achievements. On his watch, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was destroyed, the largest empire on earth was peacefully dismantled, and electoral democracy was introduced into a country with a thousand-year history of autocratic rule.

As the emblematic figure and presiding force during the tumultuous last decade of the 20th century in Russia, Yeltsin invites and eludes a ringing assessment. Was he a heroic revolutionary, or an erratic reformer? An astute politician and a committed democrat, or a populist improviser with little interest in the hard work of coalition building? Was he a daring economic reformer, or a blundering tool of the oligarchs? And finally, from the vantage of the new millennium, does he emerge as a larger-than-life leader who rose to unprecedented challenges, or as a figure overwhelmed by the enormity of change?

The answer, not surprisingly, is that Yeltsin was all of the above. Initially, the revolution made Yeltsin great, but eventually the revolution



Facing down the hardliners in August 1991, Yeltsin enjoyed his finest hour.

also undermined Yeltsin's greatness. At first glance, his is the classic story of the man made for heroic times whose talents proved the wrong ones during a time of transition and rebuilding. Indeed, Yeltsin in many ways embodied his country's dilemma: Ready to throw off its chains, Russia was far from prepared for what was to follow. But Yeltsin's is also an ironic saga of missed opportunities, which is surely why he inspired such high hopes and left behind so much disappointment. Yeltsin owed his rise to masterful political maneuvering within the crumbling Soviet order and to his bold sense of timing in declaring Russia's independence in 1990. Yet his own experience notably failed to serve as his guide once he was in power. Yeltsin's major missteps as president lay in failing to seize the moment to foster further political reform and to clarify the federal order of Russia. He skirted the question of secession, and let party and governmental confusion spread, all in the name of focusing on economic reform. Yet those mistakes guaranteed that the goal of a new economic order receded even further out of reach.

Three decades ago, few would have predicted that Yeltsin would one day become a revolutionary. Where Mandela, Havel, and Walesa devoted their adult lives to challenging autocratic regimes, Yeltsin spent much of his political career trying to make dictatorship work. Mandela, Havel, and Walesa all paid a price

for their political views. Yeltsin won promotion within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for his. To be sure, Yeltsin had a reputation within the party as a populist crusader who worked hard to fulfill five-year plans, improve the economic well-being of his people, and fight corruption. Still, he was not a dissident. During the three decades he spent steadily rising within the Soviet Communist Party to become first secretary in Sverdlovsk Oblast, he did not advocate democratic reforms, market principles, or Soviet dissolution. He embraced these ideas only after his fall from grace within the Communist Party.

That fall occurred soon after Yeltsin's arrival in Moscow in 1985. Shortly after assuming leadership of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev invited Yeltsin to relocate to Moscow and join his reform team. Six months later, Gorbachev asked Yeltsin to become first secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, one of the highest jobs in the Soviet system, because he believed that Yeltsin shared his commitment to making socialism work. In that position, Yeltsin seized upon Gorbachev's reform agenda, pushing especially for renewed vigilance against corruption within the party. Yeltsin's tirades against party privilege, coupled with his populist proclivities (he used to ride the metro and buses to work) earned him immediate support among the masses in Moscow. Yeltsin became increasingly critical of Gorbachev's go-slow attitude toward fighting corruption, which Gorbachev did not appreciate. In 1987, he finally sacked Yeltsin, demoting him to deputy chairman of the Ministry of Construction.

In the pre-perestroika system, Yeltsin's demotion would have signaled the end of his political career. Stunned by his ouster, Yeltsin himself thought as much and began to drink even more heavily than usual. But these were not ordinary times. They were revolutionary times in which, under Gorbachev, the rules of the game were changing, and ironically enough, in ways that resuscitated Yeltsin's political prospects. After tinkering unsuccessfully with minor economic reforms, Gorbachev concluded that the conservative Communist Party nomenklatura was blocking his more ambitious plans for economic restructuring. To dislodge the dinosaurs, Gorbachev introduced democratic reforms, including a semicompetitive electoral system for selecting members of the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies.

These elections, held in the spring of 1989, were only partially free and competitive. Still, they gave Yeltsin the chance to resurrect

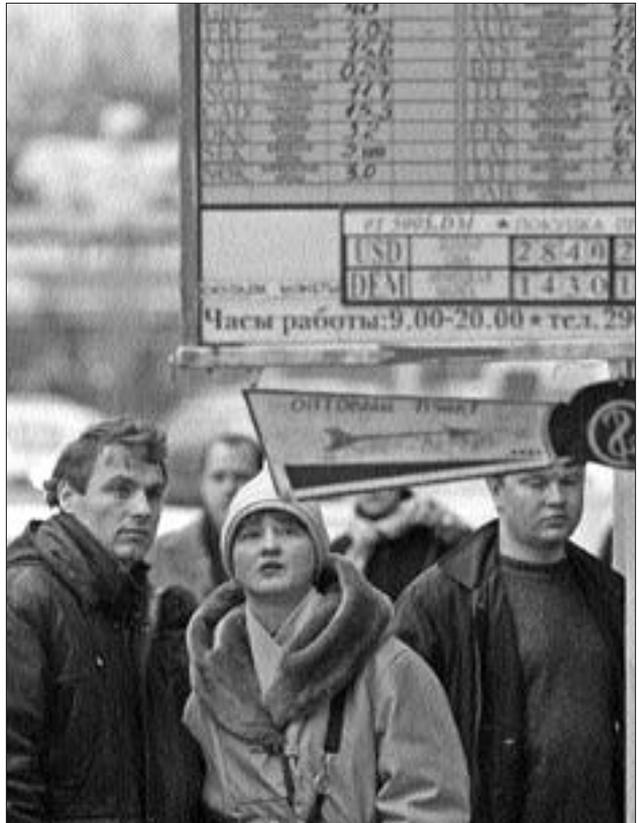
> MICHAEL MCFaul is a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and an assistant professor of political science and Hoover Institution Fellow at Stanford University. He writes widely on Russia and U.S.-Russian affairs and is the author of several monographs, including *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election: The End of Bipolar Politics* (1997). Copyright © 2000 by Michael McFaul.

his political career, and he took full advantage of it. Running in Moscow, Yeltsin conducted an essentially anti-establishment campaign, calling the party's leadership corrupt, and vowing to roll back the privileges of the party's ruling elite. The rebel won in a landslide.

At this stage in his new career, Yeltsin was a populist running against the grain of the Soviet regime. If what he stood against was clear, what he stood for was less obvious. At the time, many considered him to be a Russian nationalist.

Others cast him as an autocratic demagogue, less cultured, less liberal, and less predictable than his chief rival, Gorbachev. Western leaders in particular looked askance at this rabble rouser, fearing he might disrupt the "orderly" reforms being executed by their favorite Communist Party general secretary, Gorbachev.

Yeltsin could have become all these nasty things. Indeed, his flirtation with militant nationalist groups earlier in the 1980s suggests that his political ideas weren't firmly formed when he suddenly became the focal point of the anti-Soviet opposition in 1989. During the 1989 Russian parliamentary campaign, Yeltsin and his aides made their first contact with Russia's grassroots democratic leaders of the so-called informal (*neformal'nye*) movement—thanks to the initiative of those leaders, not Yeltsin. By the late 1980s, informal social associations had sprouted throughout the Soviet Union in response to Gorbachev's political liberalization. Their aims at the outset were modest—convening to speak foreign languages, gathering to rehabilitate Russian cultural traditions. But these non-Communist public organizations soon embraced overt political objectives, not least getting their own leaders elected to the Soviet parliament. Their strategy was to ride Yeltsin's coattails to



A dropping ruble is only one symptom of Russia's economic decay. The economy shrank by nearly 50 percent between 1989 and 1999.

power, and to that end candidates from the informal movement such as Sergei Stankevich sought out Yeltsin to win his endorsement. They succeeded, drawing Yeltsin into a democratic political culture he had not known previously.

Both Yeltsin and Stankevich ran on protest platforms, but the staffs supporting them came from very different strata of Soviet society. The supporters of Stankevich and the other informal movement candidates were young, highly educated, liberal-minded activists who had little or no experience with the Communist Party. Many, in fact, were ardent opponents of the party and the Soviet system more generally. Yeltsin's entourage was a mix of former members of the ruling elite—like Yeltsin himself—and populist, grassroots leaders of voter clubs, primarily from working-class neighborhoods in Moscow. Though also new to politics, these Yeltsin supporters were older, less educated, and less ideological than those around Stankevich and candidates like him. At this stage, all they shared was a common ideology of opposition, a shared hatred of the Soviet Communist Party.

Yeltsin and his scruffy new allies did not sweep into power after the 1989 election. On the contrary, they won only a small number of seats in the new Soviet parliament and quickly became marginalized in this institution dominated by Gorbachev. Frustrated by their lack of power and by Gorbachev's unwillingness to cooperate, Yeltsin and his allies made a tactical decision to abandon Soviet-level politics and focus their efforts instead on the upcoming elections for the Russian Congress of People's Deputies and, even more locally, on city council elections throughout Russia. It was a fateful decision, with dire consequences for the future of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin spearheaded the charge. His aim was to seize control of political institutions from below as a means to undermine Gorbachev's power from above. The Russian Congress and the Moscow City Council—institutions never before important to Soviet politics—would eventually whittle away the legitimacy and authority of Kremlin power.

Thanks to voters restless with Gorbachev's pace of reform, Russia's anti-Communist forces captured nearly a third of the seats in the Russian Congress in the 1990 elections. With additional votes from Russian nationalists, Yeltsin then won election as chairman of the legislative body. The anti-Communists had seized control of their first state institution. In one of their first acts as the newly elected representatives of the Russian people, the Russian Congress declared Russia an independent state in the summer of 1990. Yeltsin called on the Russian people to consider the Russian Congress, rather than the Soviet Congress, the highest political organ in the land.

Yet the Russian Congress and the Russian state were located within the Soviet Union. The Kremlin, not the White House (the home of the Russian Congress), still controlled all the most important levers of power. A protracted struggle for sovereignty between the Soviet state

and the Russian government ensued. In a replay of Russian history circa 1917, Russia once again experienced dual power during 1990–91. From January to August 1991, the balance of power shifted back and forth between radicals and reactionaries several times. Large demonstrations throughout Russia to protest the Soviet military invasion of the Baltic republics that January reinvigorated the democratic movement. But Soviet conservative forces soon won political victories, introducing major changes in the composition of the Soviet government. Of the original perestroika reformers in the highest echelons of the Communist Party in the late 1980s, only Gorbachev remained. A referendum in March 1991 looked like another triumph for Gorbachev and his new conservative allies, when a solid majority of Russians (and Soviet voters in participating republics) voted to preserve the Soviet Union. But they also voted in favor of a proposal, astutely added to the ballot by Yeltsin, to introduce the elective office of president of Russia. Once again, he had an opening. In June, Yeltsin won a landslide victory to become Russia's first elected president, a vote that returned momentum to the anti-Communist forces.

Soviet conservatives attempted to strike back. After prolonged negotiations, Yeltsin and most of the other republican leaders were prepared to join Gorbachev in signing a new Union Treaty, an event scheduled to take place on August 20. Soviet conservatives saw this treaty as the first step toward total disintegration of the Soviet Union, and preempted its signing by seizing power. While Gorbachev was on vacation, the State Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP in Russian) announced on August 19 that it had assumed responsibility for governing the country. The GKChP, drawing heavily on nationalist rhetoric, justified its actions as a reaction against “extremist forces” and “political adventurers” who aimed to destroy the Soviet state and economy. Had these forces prevailed, it is not unreasonable to presume that the Soviet Union, in some form, would still exist today.

But they did not prevail, because Yeltsin and his allies stopped them. Immediately after learning of the coup attempt, Yeltsin raced to the White House and began to organize a resistance effort. As the elected president of Russia, he called on Russian citizens—civilian and military alike—to obey his decrees and not those of the GKChP. In a classic revolutionary situation of dual sovereignty, Soviet tank commanders had to decide whether to follow orders from the Soviet regime, which were coming through their radio headsets, or the orders from the Russian president, which they were receiving by hand on leaflets. At the end of the day, enough armed men had obeyed Yeltsin's leaflets to thwart the coup attempt. By the third day, the coup plotters had lost their resolve, and began to negotiate an end to their rule.

What looked like a triumph of democratic sentiment was only in part that. Yeltsin's success in orchestrating this peaceful collapse is all

Russia's Moral Rearmament

“Looking at the present condition of my country. . . I cannot but wonder at the short time in which morals in Russia have everywhere become corrupt.” Prince M. M. Shcherbatov, an aristocrat during the reign of Catherine the Great, made this observation in a 1786 treatise, *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia*. But his assessment might just as well have been voiced today by any number of journalists writing about Russia's current predicament.

Money laundering, corruption, filthy electoral campaigns—these are the catch phrases in Western media coverage of things Russian. According to critics, business and politics in Russia are driven by greed and seething with criminal activity. After succeeding Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin himself announced that “the revival of people's morals” would be the cornerstone of his program.

In the decades following the death of Peter the Great in 1725, Russia wrestled with a similar moral crisis brought about by the introduction of new economic, social, and political standards. Peter the Great, like Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, was the product of a conservative and cumbersome administrative culture that he first modified and later destroyed. Indeed, it is tempting to draw up a modest list of cognates between Peter on the one hand and a melding of Mikhail and Boris on the other—from Harvard University economist Jeffrey Sachs, the modern counterpart to Peter's adviser, German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz, to Peter's famed Westernization during the early 18th century.

The Western-style customs and standards Peter introduced along with his “technology transfer” from Europe directly affected only the privileged. Succeeding generations of elites, in a process at once gradual and fitful, moved away from being subjects of a Westernization initially imposed from above—commanded by a formidable and terrifying monarch who cut off the sleeves of the boyars' kaftans with his own shears, forced the recalcitrant nobles among them to build houses on the swamp that was only beginning to take shape as St. Petersburg, and required aristocratic men and women to wear Western dress and mingle at social gatherings. Many members of the elite were eventually transmogrified into eager recipients of Western-style luxuries and adornments. Prince Shcherbatov thought their passion for Western “voluptuousness” had led to moral collapse. But by the time of Alexander Pushkin, early in the second quarter of the 19th century, many of these nobles had evolved into educated and worldly gentlemen and ladies imbued with the very spirit of Western refinement. The moral crisis that so alarmed Prince Shcherbatov had passed.

In Russia today, Vladimir Putin is right in his insistence on the need for moral regeneration. According to what precepts does he imagine such a revival ought to take place? Surely not the homely, stolid, and prudish conventional morality characteristic of so many hardworking drones of the high Brezhnev period, nor the inner-directed, conscience-driven teachings of that paragon of bourgeois virtue, Benjamin Franklin.

It may be that a campaign to change popular morals will take the form of vaguely Christian pontifications, hand in hand with punitive anticorruption measures, since Putin, like Boris Yeltsin before him, has allied himself closely with the Russian Orthodox Church and its obscurantist patriarch, Aleksy II. Indeed, Putin says he was secretly baptized as a baby and is an observant Christian.

More than 70 percent of Russians are Orthodox Christians. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews each account for less than one percent of the population, and estimates of the size of the Muslim segment vary widely. Baptist and Pentecostal evangelicals are among the fastest growing religious groups in the country. If the promised revival of morals takes the form only of theopolitical utterances represent-

ing one of the many faith traditions currently very much alive in the Russian Federation, then the prospect of moral renewal from above remains troubling. In Russia's long and turbulent history, many rulers have attempted to meddle with popular morals. Emperor Nicholas I's 1826 edict established a particularly pernicious form of morality-based censorship, and he personally supervised the editing and rewriting of poetry he deemed impious or unseemly, all in the name of saving the souls of his unwitting subjects. In the autocratic



Peter the Great

political culture of old Russia, with which Stalin self-consciously allied himself (that is why he took such a personal interest in Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic masterpiece of the 1940s, *Ivan the Terrible*), the monarch assumed staggering responsibility but also reserved the unique right to bestow privilege as he saw fit. Both the caprice and the totality of the ruler's authority found expression in Moussorgsky's famous "Song of the Flea," in which a king bestows upon a favorite flea a velvet kaffan, and also "complete freedom."

Putin seems neither capricious nor (as yet) autocratic. He realizes that any genuine moral change needs to come from the people themselves. In an open letter to Russian voters at the end of February, he spoke about the need for a core set of moral values: "For a Russian citizen, what is important are the moral principles which he first acquires in the family and which form the very core of patriotism. This is the main thing. Without it, it is impossible to agree on anything; without it, Russia would have had to forget about national dignity, even about national sovereignty. This is our starting point."

But Putin also shares with the Romanov emperors a passion for the military. He used war (and genocide) to achieve nonmilitary goals such as social unity and civil accord. The war in Chechnya and the demolition of its capital, Grozny, were purportedly launched to fight terrorism. It seems natural for Putin to turn to the military in his campaign to revive popular morals. Not long ago, he reintroduced into Russian schools the teaching of "military preparedness," which in the Soviet era was a salient feature of a "military-patriotic upbringing."

Patriotism, respect for the armed forces, and a government-sponsored Orthodox Church—these are the three likely sources of Vladimir Putin's program to combat "the corruption of morals in Russia" today and in the months to come. They have a solid grounding in Russia's past, and might indeed provide a kind of stability that the country needs. A Russian moral revival is not necessarily good news for the West.

—Nina Tumarkin

>NINA TUMARKIN is a professor of history at Wellesley College and the author of *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (1983) and *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (1995). Copyright © 2000 by Nina Tumarkin.

the more remarkable in that he accomplished it in the face of a surprising lack of widespread support. To be sure, the democratic movements in Moscow and St. Petersburg mobilized tens of thousands on the streets, yet only a very small minority of Russians actively resisted the coup attempt. Yeltsin's call for a nationwide strike on the second day of the coup was largely ignored, while the rest of Russia and the most of the other Soviet republics stood on the sidelines, awaiting a winner.

Yeltsin deserves great credit for making it seem inevitable that he would be that winner, for it was not. The outcome of the August 1991 putsch attempt fundamentally changed the course of Soviet and Russian history. For the first time since the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, Soviet authorities had moved to quell social opposition in Russia and failed. The moment was euphoric. For many Russian citizens, no time is remembered with greater fondness than the first days after the failed coup. Even Gorbachev belatedly recognized that after the August events, there "occurred a cardinal break with the totalitarian system and a decisive move in favor of the democratic forces." Western reactions were even more ecstatic; a typical headline declared "Serfdom's End: a thousand years of autocracy are reversed." Yeltsin, the unquestioned leader of this resistance, was at the height of his glory.

He and his revolutionary allies immediately took advantage of their windfall political power to arrest coup plotters, storm Communist Party headquarters, seize KGB files, and tear down the statue of Felix Dzerzhinskii, the founder of the modern-day KGB. The pace of change within the Soviet Union accelerated rapidly. Yeltsin and the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in effect seized power themselves. They pressured the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies to dissolve, disbanded the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, assumed control of several Soviet ministries, and compelled Gorbachev to acquiesce to these changes. Most dramatically, Yeltsin met with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus in early December to dissolve the Soviet Union. On December 31, 1991, the Soviet empire disappeared. Buried with this empire were Soviet autarky, the Soviet command economy, and the Soviet totalitarian state. Staring down the August 1991 coup may have been Yeltsin's bravest moment. Dissolving the Soviet Union may have been his most important achievement.

But, as in all revolutions, destruction of the old regime proved easier than construction of a new order. Now that the Soviet past was closed, what would Russia's future look like? What kind of political regime, economic system, or society could or should fill the void? Even the borders of the state were unclear. The tasks confronting Yeltsin and his allies in the fall of 1991 were enormous. The economy was in shambles. There were shortages of basic goods in every city. Inflation soared, trade stopped, and production plummeted. Many predicted massive starvation during the winter. Meanwhile, the centrifugal forces that helped pull the Soviet Union apart had spread to

some of the republics within Russia's borders. Months before the Soviet Union dissolved, Chechnya had already declared its independence. At the same time, the political system was in disarray. Yeltsin enjoyed a honeymoon period of overwhelming support after his August 1991 performance. Yet the rules of the game for sharing power between the executive and legislative branches remained ambiguous. Yeltsin, after all, had only been elected president of Russia the previous June. As part of the deal struck to permit this election, the constitutional amendments delineating his power were scheduled for approval in December, and thus were not in place when Yeltsin suddenly became head of state in the newly independent Russia.

The Russian state did not yet even exist. In the autumn of 1991, Russia's "independence" was an abstract concept, not an empirical reality. It must be remembered that in August 1991 Russia had no sovereign borders, no sovereign currency, no sovereign army, and weak, ill-defined state institutions. Even after the December agreement to dissolve the Soviet Union and create the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia's territorial location was still contentious, while Russians' psychological acceptance of a Russia without Ukraine, Belarus, or Crimea still had not occurred. Throughout the former Soviet Union, some 30 million ethnic Russians became expatriates overnight at the same time that ethnic minorities within the Russian Federation pushed for their own independence.

In tackling the triple transition of political change, economic reform, and empire dissolution, Yeltsin and his allies were on their own to an unparalleled degree. In many transitions to democracy in Latin America, Southern Europe, and East-Central Europe, old democratic institutions, suspended under authoritarian rule, were reactivated, a process that is much more efficient than creating new institutions from scratch. Russian leaders had nothing to resurrect. Similarly, even the most radical economic reform programs undertaken in the West—including Roosevelt's New Deal—took place in countries that had experience with markets, private property, and the rule of the law. After 70 years of communism, none of the economic institutions of capitalism existed in Russia. Even the memory of such institutions had been extinguished among the Russian citizenry after a century of life under a command economy.

Yet Yeltsin and Russia's revolutionaries did not enjoy a tabula rasa in designing new market and democratic institutions either. They had to tackle the problems of empire, economic reform, and political change with many of the practices and institutions of the Soviet system still in place. The shadow of the past extended far into the post-Soviet era because Russia's revolutionaries ultimately refrained from using violence to achieve their goals of political, economic, and state transformation. Even the Communist Party, after a temporary ban, was allowed to reappear on the Russian political scene.

Nor did the revolutionaries really know what they wanted to do. Democracy and capitalism were buzzwords of Yeltsin's ideology of opposition, not concepts he had grappled with over years and years of struggle behind the scenes. The informal movement had only begun to develop overtly political ideas in the last year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union; it had not generated blueprints for a post-Communist society in Russia, for few within this movement believed that change would occur as fast as it did. Democratic Russia, the umbrella organization for Russia's grassroots democratic movement, held its founding congress in October 1990, only 10 months before the coup attempt. In contrast, Solidarity had been in opposition for a decade before taking power in Poland. The African National Congress in South Africa spent most of the century preparing for power.

Finally, Yeltsin also had to deal with the ambiguous balance of power between political actors who favored reform and those who opposed it. There was no consensus in Russia about the need for market and democratic reform. Russia's elite and society were divided and polarized, a very different situation from the comparative cohesion in several Eastern European countries. In August 1991, political forces in favor of preserving the old Soviet political and economic order were weak and disorganized, but they soon recovered and regrouped within the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, in regional governments, and on the streets to demonstrate their power. On the other side of the barricade, those in favor of reform looked invincible immediately after the August 1991 coup. But this anti-Communist coalition quickly fell apart after the Soviet Union collapsed. A common enemy had united them. When that enemy disappeared, so did their alliance.

The changes under way on every front plainly overwhelmed Yeltsin, who left Moscow in October and hid out in Crimea for three weeks, allegedly in a drunken stupor. On his return, he made a series of critical decisions that shaped the course of Russian political and economic reform for the rest of the decade. But he also refrained from making some important decisions, which arguably had an even more profound influence on Russia's first years of independence. Yeltsin's most consequential omission was one that his own recent rise might have warned him against. He had watched as Gorbachev's miscues regarding political reform had undermined his economic reforms. Yet Yeltsin proceeded to miss an opportune moment to give the anti-Communist coalition, on which he and his programs depended, a chance to solidify and develop.

In the afterglow of the coup, Yeltsin could have, of course, used his power to establish an authoritarian state, as many a revolutionary leader faced with a radical transition has done. He could have disbanded all political institutions not subordinate to the president's office, suspended individual political liberties, and deployed coercive police units to enforce executive policies. His opponents expected him to do so. Even

some of his allies urged him to do so, arguing that it was the only way to introduce radical economic reform. Or Yeltsin could have taken steps to consolidate a democratic polity. He could have disbanded old Soviet government institutions, including first and foremost the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, and replaced them with more democratic structures. After all, the system of soviets put in place by the Bolsheviks was never designed to govern. He also could have adopted a new constitution codifying the division of power among executive, legislative, and judiciary as well as federal and regional bodies. And he could have called new elections to stimulate the development of a multiparty system. In this crucial transition period, he also could have joined Democratic Russia or created a new party of his own as a step toward creating a national reformist party.

Yeltsin, however, pursued neither strategy. He did not attempt to create a dictatorship, but he also did little to consolidate a democratic regime. Most important, he resisted calls for new national elections, and actually postponed regional elections scheduled for December 1991. He also did not form a political party. Finally, he delayed the adoption of a new constitution, even though his own constitutional commission had completed a first draft as early as October 1990, codifying the relationship between both the president and the Russian Congress and the federal and regional governments.

Instead, Yeltsin decided that economic reform and Russian independence took priority, and made his boldest moves on those fronts. He hired a small group of neoliberal economists headed by Yegor Gaidar to oversee the introduction of radical reforms. Beginning with the freeing of most prices on January 1, 1992, Gaidar and his team initiated the most ambitious economic reform program ever attempted in modern history. His goal was to liberalize prices and trade, achieve economic stabilization, and privatize property, all within a minimum amount of time, earning his plan the unfortunate label of "shock therapy."

Yeltsin did not understand the plan, but initially embraced it as the only path to creating a "normal" market economy in Russia. And as Gaidar explained, "you cannot do everything at the same time." Yeltsin and his new government believed they could sequence reforms. First, they wanted to fill the vacuum of state power by codifying the new borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, then begin economic reform, and finally reconstruct a democratic polity. Yeltsin and his advisers believed that they had achieved major political reforms before August 1991. Free elections, an independent press, and the triumph over the coup attempt made it appear that democracy was secure; now the development of capitalism needed their attention. Western governments and assistance organizations also encouraged this course, devoting nearly 90 percent of their foreign aid budgets to economic reform.

In retrospect, Yeltsin's failure to focus on political reform during 1991–92 was his greatest mistake as Russia's first president, haunting his administration for the rest of the decade. By postponing elections, party formation, and work on the constitution, he fueled ambiguity, stalemate, and conflict between Moscow and the regions as well as between the president and the Congress. Both confrontations ended in armed clashes. Political instability, in turn, impeded the very market reforms Yeltsin had set his sights on.

Conflict between the executive and legislative branches of the federal government came first. The Russian Congress of People's Deputies was an odd foe for Boris Yeltsin. He had risen to power within it, and thwarted the coup from within its building. In November 1991, the Congress had voted overwhelmingly to give him extraordinary powers to deal with economic reform, and a month later the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Congress ratified his agreement to dissolve the Soviet Union. To be sure, Communist deputies controlled roughly 40 percent of the seats in the Congress, yet Yeltsin had nonetheless prevailed against his opponents throughout the heady early months of revolution. There was nothing that should have prevented him, once he became president of Russia, from reaching agreement with this Congress about the rules that would govern their interaction with each other, especially with a newly minted constitution already on hand. Indeed, after the putsch attempt, political relations were initially smooth, with most deputies supporting Yeltsin.

But after price liberalization and the beginning of radical economic reform in January 1992, the Congress began a campaign to reassert its superiority over the president. Disagreements about economic reform spawned a constitutional crisis between the parliament and the president. With no formal institutions to structure relations between the president and the Congress, polarization crystallized yet again, with both sides claiming to represent Russia's highest sovereign authority. Preparing for the 10th Congress of People's Deputies during the summer of 1993, deputies drafted constitutional amendments that would have liquidated Russia's presidential office altogether.

Yeltsin preempted their plans by dissolving the Congress in September 1993. The Congress, in turn, declared Yeltsin's decree illegal and recognized Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi as the new interim president. In a replay of the 1991 drama, Russia suddenly had two heads of states and two governments claiming sovereign authority over each other. Tragically, this standoff only ended after the military conquest of one side by the other. Rutskoi and his allies initiated the violent phase of this contest when they seized control of the mayor's building and then stormed Ostankino, the national television building. Yeltsin responded with a tank assault on the White

House, without question one of the lowest points in his political career. Political inaction in the autumn of 1991 had led to military action in the fall of 1993.

The same constitutional vacuum that fueled conflict between Yeltsin and the Congress allowed federal conflicts to fester. Eventually, one of them—Chechnya—exploded into a full-scale war. Federal problems arose before the executive-legislative standoff. Right after the August 1991 coup attempt, Chechnya declared its independence. In March of the following year, Tatarstan held a successful referendum for full independence. The first of several federal treaties was signed then, but negotiations over a new federal arrangement embedded within a constitution dragged on without resolution into the summer of 1993, prompting several other republics as well as oblasts (smaller territorial units) to make their own declarations of independence complete with their own flags, customs agents, and threats to mint new currencies.

For two years after independence, Yeltsin failed to focus on these federal dilemmas. Consumed with market reform and then distracted by the power struggle with the Congress, he chose not to devote time or resources to reconstructing the Russian federal order. In particular, he ignored Chechnya, which acted increasingly as an independent political entity, if still economically dependent on Moscow. After the October 1993 standoff, Yeltsin did put before the people a new constitution, ratified that December, which formally spelled out a solution to Russia's federal ambiguities.



The price of putting economic reform first? The White House burns after Yeltsin's 1993 attack.

The new constitution specified that all constituent elements were to enjoy equal rights vis-à-vis the center. Absent from the document, however, was any mention of a mechanism for secession.

The formal rules of a new constitution did not resolve the conflicts between the center and the regions. Negotiation over the distribution of power between the central and subnational governments has continued, and it will continue as long as Russia maintains a federal structure. Nonetheless, all subnational governments except one—Chechnya—did acquiesce to minimal maintenance of a federal order. Eventually, in December 1994, Yeltsin decided to use force to deal with this single exception. The results were disastrous. Almost two years later, after a loss of 100,000 lives, Russian soldiers went home in defeat. Yeltsin's envoy, Aleksandr Lebed, negotiated an end to the war in the summer of 1996, but did not resolve Chechnya's sovereign status. Not surprisingly, war began again, in the summer of 1999. The failure to deal effectively with the problem of Chechnya will haunt Yeltsin's legacy forever.

So, perhaps, will the dramatic—and ironic—final fallout from Yeltsin's irresolution in the fall of 1991: Economic reform, the very cause for which he had neglected political reform, was derailed. As soon as Gaidar's Big Bang program began to meet public resistance—as everyone expected that it would and should—Yeltsin began having doubts about his choice. Having foolishly promised an economic turnaround within a matter of months, he lost his resolve when the miracle did not occur. Sustaining support for Gaidar's reforms was complicated by conflict between the president and the parliament. Who ultimately had responsibility for selecting the government or charting the course of economic reform? The constitution in place at the time did not provide a definitive answer. Yeltsin felt compelled to negotiate with the Congress over the composition of his government, diluting the Gaidar team with enterprise managers—the so-called red directors—whose aim was not real reform but the preservation of the incredible moneymaking opportunities that partial reform afforded them and their allies. By December 1992, these Soviet-era managers were back in control of the Russian government under the leadership of Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Thus, shock reform in Russia failed in part because it was never attempted. Instead, Yeltsin allowed Chernomyrdin and his government to creep along with partial reforms—reforms that included big budget deficits, insider privatization, and partial price and trade liberalization, which in turn combined to create amazing opportunities for corruption and spawned a decade of oligarchic capitalism. In this economy, capital has been concentrated in only a few sectors. For most of the 1990s, dynamic economic activity was located in trade and services, banking, and the export of raw materials, particularly oil and gas. Production of manufactured goods of

any sort decreased, first dramatically during 1990–91 and then steadily throughout the decade. Small-enterprise development, after a boom in the late Gorbachev era, has decreased gradually as a share of gross national product.

Most disturbingly, big business is closely tied to the state. Through the financing of state transfers, privatization, and the loans-for-shares program, Russian bankers have made fortunes as a result of political connections, not market moves. The intimate relationship between the state and the so-called private sector has served to sustain rent-seeking, not profit-seeking, behavior. The August 1998 financial collapse dealt a major blow to these tycoons and may, in the long run, provide new opportunities for the development of small profit-seekers at the expense of these large rent-seekers. But even those optimistic about this reversal believe the process will take several years, if not decades.

Yeltsin's nondecisions during 1991–92 also have meant a mixed record on the consolidation of democracy. That Russia today is an electoral democracy is Yeltsin's doing. Political leaders come to power through the ballot box and not through the Communist Party appointment process. They do not take office by force. Most elites in Russia and the vast majority of the Russian population now recognize elections as the only legitimate means to power. Leaders and parties that espouse authoritarian practices—whether fascists or neocommunists—have moved to the margins of Russia's political stage. Given Russia's thousand-year history of autocratic rule, the emergence of electoral democracy must be recognized as a revolutionary achievement of the last decade.

Yet Russia is not a liberal democracy. The political system lacks many of the supporting institutions that ensure the health of democracy. Russia's party system, civil society, and rule of law are weak and underdeveloped. Wealthy businessmen and executives, at the national and regional level, have too much power. Crime and corruption, forces that corrode democracy, are rampant. Over the last several years, Russia's news media, while still independent of the government and pluralistic, have become increasingly dependent on oligarchic business empires. In a society where basic public goods are lacking and the economy at best sputters along, democratic institutions and habits have had trouble taking root.

Yeltsin deserves partial blame. Had he pushed for adoption of a new constitution in the fall of 1991, the balance of power between executives and legislators would have been more equally distributed. By failing to call elections at that time, Yeltsin robbed Russia's democratic parties of their ripe opportunity for emergence and expansion. Instead, he convened the first post-Communist Russian election in December 1993. By that time, most parties created during the heyday of democratic mobilization in 1990–91 had disappeared. Liberal parties especially were hurt by the postponement of

elections, because many voters associated the painful economic decline from 1991 to 1993 with these parties' leaders and their policies. An underdeveloped party system and weak legislative institutions have hampered the growth of civil society.

What if Yeltsin had pushed for ratification of a new constitution in the fall of 1991, held new elections, and then had his new party compete in this vote? Would the military confrontation in October 1993 have been avoided? Would the Chechen wars never have happened? Would economic reform be further along today? Of course, we will never know. In comparing the case of Russia with other, more successful transitions from communism, we do know that the countries that moved the fastest to adopt democracy are the same ones that have avoided internal conflicts and wars, and have enjoyed the fastest material progress. Big-bang democracy helps to produce big-bang economic growth.

Yet Russia is not Poland or Czechoslovakia. Yeltsin faced revolution on an unmatched scale. He had to tackle the end of empire, the specter of Russian federal dissolution, the construction of a new polity, and the introduction of market principles all at once. And Russia's "democrats," unlike the democrats in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia, did not have overwhelming support within the elite or among the population at large when they suddenly came to power in the fall of 1991. Russian leaders might have been able to manage the array of changes facing them had they all agreed on a common strategy. But they did not agree. This guaranteed a troubled transition.

The revolution is not complete, but it also has not been reversed. The Soviet Union is gone and will never be resurrected. Communism will never return to Russia. Russia has not gone to war with Ukraine, Latvia, or Kazakhstan to defend Russians living there and is less likely to do so today than when Yeltsin took office. Though neofascists and neocommunists have threatened with periodic electoral splashes, neither succeeded in coming to power in the 1990s, nor do they seem likely to do so in the near future. The Russian Communist Party has lagged behind its counterparts in Eastern Europe, unable to recapture the Kremlin. Individual freedoms in Russia have never been greater.

By resisting the temptation of dictatorship, Yeltsin established an important democratic precedent that will raise the costs for future authoritarian aspirants. Defying the predictions of his critics, he did not cancel elections in 1996, he did not suspend the constitution after the August 1998 financial crisis, and he did not stay in power by any means necessary. On the contrary, he won reelection in 1996, abided by the constitution, and even invited communists into his government in the fall of 1998. And then he stepped down willingly, peacefully, and constitutionally. If dissolving the Soviet Union was Yeltsin's most important destructive deed, his surrender of power through democratic means may be his most important constructive act. □

The Future That Never Was

by Alexei Pimenov

Russia has always done the unexpected. The Soviet system emerged suddenly after 1917. When it seemed fragile, it thrived. When it seemed invincible, it collapsed. After the demise of communism in 1991, Russia was supposed to go to the opposite extreme. Communism would give way to Western-style capitalism and parliamentarianism; dogmatic party apparatchiks would be replaced by open-minded liberal intellectuals. An epoch of liberal democracy would begin, just as a person cured of a disease becomes healthy.

Instead, surprising changes have come from surprising directions. It was not the Communists but the democrats who launched a shamelessly chauvinistic campaign against Chechens in Russia and then last autumn unleashed the war in Chechnya. The Westernizer Anatoly Chubais and the fascist Aleksandr Prokhanov used the same vocabulary of militant nationalism in an effort to rally the Russian elite. And their “new deal” worked. With their patriotic demagogy, they easily eclipsed their pro-Communist opponents. Have the actors forgotten their parts, or are they enacting a different play altogether?

Westerners trying to understand events in Russia are like the Japanese readers who encountered the first translation of Alexandre Dumas’s *Three Musketeers* in the mid-19th century. Unfamiliar with European culture, the Japanese read Dumas’s adventure tale—with a queen who gives her beautiful diamond pendants to a foreign prime minister—as a political pamphlet attacking government corruption. Westerners run similar risks in trying to read contemporary Russian politics.

The Russian political system today, while different from the Soviet system, still has little in common with the Western democracies. The parties in Russia’s new “multiparty system” are not built on political or ideological principles. Politicians adopt their opponents’ slogans and even programs, altering their approach to the nation’s fundamental problems in an instant. Alliances form and dissolve depending on political circumstances. The most powerful parties and coalitions grow out of corporate-bureaucratic relationships. Viktor Chernomyrdin’s Our Home–Russia movement attracted

enthusiastic support from Russia's bureaucrats when he was prime minister, but when Chernomyrdin left office in 1998, his political influence evaporated. Yet a party that does have a significant ideological foundation will become no more than a political sect if it lacks such a foothold in the Russian power structure. This has been the fate of Yabloko, the party that represents Russia's small liberal intelligentsia.

The Russian Communists play an extremely important role in this political show. Constantly demonized by opponents, and expressing the most reactionary tendencies (extreme nationalism in particular), they represent the interests of the least successful segments of the former Communist elite. They are numerous but badly organized in the struggle for the presidency. But the office is not essential for them. Indeed, the Communist Party seems satisfied with its current status, assembling resources that can be placed behind other political forces in return for concessions.

As for the two most powerful political coalitions—Unity (the party of the current government) and its defeated rival, Fatherland–All Russia, the Yuri Luzhkov–Yevgeny Primakov coalition—no important ideological distinctions separate them. Both coalitions hold similar doctrines and employ similar political vocabularies. Both are very heterogeneous, mingling democrats, liberals, statist, nationalists, and others.

But party politics is only the tip of the iceberg. The real conflict in Russia, occurring beneath the surface, is a struggle among different financial and industrial oligarchs. The oligarchs use and sometimes manipulate the parties and movements. It is no exaggeration to say that they determine what happens on the Russian political scene. There are perhaps a dozen major oligarchies, each encompassing a variety of different enterprises and employing thousands, even millions, of employees (though all remain, officially, employees of the state). The oligarchs occupying the top rungs of these amalgamations are the true successors to the former Communist Party elite—and, indeed, some of them once belonged to the Communist nomenklatura.

The new system differs from classical Soviet totalitarianism in many respects, yet it has more in common with the old system than it does with Western capitalism. The fundamental difference from the West is structural. In Russian big business, no real boundaries separate private ownership from state ownership, because no real boundaries separate business power from administrative power. In the United States this would be seen as corruption. It exists in Russia for a very simple reason:

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Portrait of Gorbachev (1990), by Valery and Natasha Cherkashin

In the transition from communism, bureaucrats became capitalists while remaining bureaucrats, even as they were released from any form of hierarchical control. This blending of political and corporate power can be found everywhere, irrespective of political labels. The national airline is controlled by members of former President Boris Yeltsin's inner circle; former Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais controls Unified Energy Systems of Russia; Moscow's Mayor Yuri Luzhkov controls a financial-industrial group called Systema.

Decrying Russia's "wild capitalism," many critics today blame the 1992 "shock therapy" implemented by Yeltsin's "young reformers" for the failures and excesses of the economy. The Russian economy *is* wild in many respects. But capitalist? It differs in fundamental ways from the market economies of the United States and Western Europe. With its closely interwoven political and corporate leaderships, the Russian pattern can more plausibly be compared with the pre-1945 zaibatsu system of imperial Japan or the "crony capitalism" of the modern Philippines.

To understand the new Russian system, one must go back to its roots in the totalitarian Soviet past. The Soviet system admitted no distinctions among the social, economic, and political realms. The nomenklatura that ran the state machinery

constituted the entire ruling class. The only way to achieve high social and economic status was to achieve a high rank in the Soviet state hierarchy. It was a system, in other words, with many *archaic* elements and social patterns built in. It used the archaic method of state slavery (the Gulag), for example, to solve the extremely modern problem of industrializing agrarian Russia.

The terror practiced by the state was not only a way to deal with political opponents, it was the main tool for maintaining social discipline. In this respect, the Soviet system had much in common with the Nazi regime as well as with archaic chiefdoms and kingdoms. Thus, in the Soviet Union under Stalin, as in 19th-century Buganda, the elites oversaw mass killings of innocent people, accusing their victims of absolutely impossible crimes, or not even bothering to accuse them of anything.

Ideology determined every facet of Soviet social life. But the ideology was syncretic. The Communist elite used different ideological constructions at different times, like an actor changing masks. Communist leaders could announce astonishing political and ideological changes that seemed to contradict the most important principles of their political faith, as Stalin did in forging an alliance with Nazi Germany in 1939, without suffering any serious ideological qualms.

The collapse of a state built upon archaic foundations does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the system. The history of such archaic societies, particularly Asiatic ones, from the Middle East to India, offers many examples of empires and societies that disintegrated and were later restored, perhaps around another center and by different people but according to the same basic scheme.

Today's "new" Russia can be seen as a new set of answers to some very old questions. Every society in which there is no separation between the ruling class and the state machinery faces two questions: How is the stability of the elite to be maintained? How is social status to be passed on to the next generation?

Under Stalin, the hierarchical order was maintained by terror. Everybody, irrespective of rank, could become a victim of the secret police. The system remained highly centralized, and party officials were rotated to new posts every three or four years. The privileged had few opportunities to ensure the status of their children. Taking power in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev ended both the terror and the constant reshuffling. The local party secretaries—the leaders of the Soviet Union's hundreds of republics, oblasts, and regions—gained still more independent authority after 1964, under Leonid Brezhnev. The party hierarchy swelled in size and, in effect, different nomenklaturas emerged, as elites in the party, the military, industry, the scientific establishment, and other sectors pursued their different interests.

The decisive transformation of the *nomenklatura* occurred under Mikhail Gorbachev. He gave this new turn its first expression at the Central Committee plenum in December 1987. “Our socialist property of the common people has become an ownership without owner,” he declared. This was absurd—and not entirely clear even in the original Russian—but it turned out to be extremely important politically. Amid endless theoretical debates about the social and economic shape of the Soviet future, something of much greater significance happened: the gradual division of the “socialist property of the common people” among different ministries and organizations.

This unofficial bureaucratic “privatization” was never openly declared, and only later did it become clear what had happened. Gorbachev had proposed that state-owned business enterprises become self-governing. The most important result, however, was that the bureaucratic-industrial elites became independent. This period saw the creation of huge enterprises—such as Gazprom in energy, ANT in military goods (which proved a failure), and Logovaz in autos. Officially, the assets remained state property, but practically speaking they were not controlled by any central authority. Revenues increasingly went to those who ran the enterprises rather than to the central party bureaucracy.

This transformation was accompanied by remarkable changes in the life of the bureaucracy. In the past, party officials were expected to be discreet about their privileges. But the larger and more emancipated elite of the *perestroika* era did not feel compelled to keep its wealth under wraps. Flaunting their money and power, Russia’s new rich provoked a strong popular reaction. Attacks on bureaucratic privilege became the common theme of democrats and many nationalists. Local authorities in the ethnic republics took up a similar cry against the tyranny and privileges of the central ministries, which eventually developed into the key element of their secessionist efforts.

The hardliners’ attempted putsch of August 1991 might have ended very differently if this unofficial privatization of 1987 had not occurred. The conservative Communists leading the putsch against Gorbachev represented the parts of the political elite that had lost out after 1987 and stood to lose even more. For obvious reasons, the more successful groups did not take their side. What began as an effort to turn back the clock thus ended that December in the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ascension of Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

It has become commonplace to interpret Yeltsin’s long rise as a triumph of the democratic movement. But if Yeltsin had been nothing more than a representative of the intelligentsia’s democratic movement, he would not have been able to climb the ladder to Russia’s presidency in the June 1991 election, much less to successfully lead the opposition to the putsch in Moscow that August.

Yeltsin's original decision to join the democrats did have important consequences. Remaining a representative of the party elite yet also possessing the charisma of a victim after Gorbachev cast him out of the party's top ranks in 1987, he used his unique influence to channel popular anger in a democratic–anti-Communist direction rather than a populist-chauvinistic one. Yeltsin's decision, however, was a great surprise. Not only did he lack any earlier ties to the liberal intelligentsia, but one of the most controversial moments of his career had been a highly publicized appearance only a few years earlier before Pamyat, an extreme nationalist and anti-Semitic group.

But Yeltsin recognized that despite the popularity of democratic rhetoric, the democratic forces alone were not strong enough to bring him to power in 1991. At that moment, the former party boss demonstrated again a surprising capacity for exact political calculations and maneuvers. He formed an alliance with the bureaucracy of the Russian Federation.

The bureaucrats desperately needed someone like Yeltsin. In the great grab for assets, ironically, they were losing out badly. To understand why, one must take an excursion into Russian and Soviet history. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian national identity was rooted both in familiar notions of ethnic identity and blood and in a peculiarly Russian sense of universalism—what Dostoevski called “world openness”—that grew out of the Russian Orthodox Church. Under this somewhat contradictory principle, identity grew not out of ethnic origin but confessional belonging.

The new Soviet identity that took shape after the revolution of 1917 was essentially a new form of traditional Russian identity. Universalism remained, but it changed from a Christian universalism to a Marxist one. Chauvinistic attention to “blood” remained as well. The Soviet Union was proudly “internationalist,” but every citizen's passport nevertheless specified his or her ethnic origin in what was called the “fifth column.” And ethnicity was determined not by cultural choice but by the origin of one's parents.

Russia itself held a peculiar status in the Soviet system. On the one hand, Russia was unmistakably its dominant element. For example, while each of the ethnic republics had its own Communist party with its own party secretary, each also had a “second secretary,” almost always an ethnic Russian, sent directly from Moscow to control the first. On the other hand, Russia was expected to embody Soviet universalism. So while each republic had its institutions, notably its own Communist party, Russia itself had few. There was no Russian Communist Party, nor even a Russian Academy of Sciences.

Under Gorbachev, all of these contradictions began to be discussed openly. The central idea of perestroika was a return to “real” Leninist socialism. This appeal to communist ideology was sounded



“New Russians” enjoy the good life. One estimate suggests that 10 percent of Russians have greatly benefited from economic and political change, while 40 percent have greatly suffered.

too late to be effective. But the idea of revival was powerful. It is not surprising that in a multiethnic country it assumed the form of a national, or ethnic, revival. The more people were drawn into the democratic process, the more the slogans of perestroika were transformed into a program for restoring each republic’s own ethnic-national golden age.

The only exception was Russia. At first, the idea of Russian ethnic revival was used by the conservative bureaucratic opponents of perestroika rather than by its supporters. Yeltsin changed this situation in a moment. To the struggle against bureaucratic privilege he added a second appeal to mobilize the Russian nomenklatura: sovereignty for the Russian Federation. It was an enormously successful move because the bureaucracy of the Russian Federation had grown deeply dissatisfied with the results of Gorbachev’s unofficial privatization. Why? Because the largely decorative character of Russian republican institutions prevented them from following the example of the central bureaucracy and those of the Soviet Union’s republics.

That is where the clue to Yeltsin’s surprising success can be found. The liberal ideas of the democratic intelligentsia became the third component of this quickly created combination. The results were extremely effective. Yeltsin’s opponents tried to play the same game, hastily organizing the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Their attempt was not only belated but politically absurd. By violating the old taboo against openly demonstrating the

overwhelmingly Russian character of Communist rule, they triggered the immediate collapse of the Soviet Communist Party.

By 1992, when Yegor Gaidar and other young reformers, aided by Western advisers such as Jeffrey Sachs, launched the first official privatization, the underlying rules of the game had changed in ways that were not yet widely perceived. The “Chicago boys” won favor in the Yeltsin administration not because they prevailed over their opponents in grand theoretical debates between economic gurus, but for a quite prosaic reason: The nomenklatura found a lot to its liking in the reformers’ plans to free Russian big business from centralized control.

The young reformers themselves played a very important role, not by making crucial decisions but rather by serving as political decoration that made the new Russian elite more attractive to the Western democracies. Soviet history is full of such “useful idiots.” As many in the West pinned their hopes on the market-oriented reformers, the real and far more important conflict continued behind the scenes, as it does to this day. As a saying in Russia puts it, it is a conflict between those who have been grabbing and those who have not been grabbing enough.

A Russian general once conceded that many clashes in the war in Chechnya were little more than mock battles, with the outcome determined by mutual consent of the two sides. Russian politics can be seen in much the same way, as a sequence of bargains struck by opponents who then quietly become partners.

Their bargains are driven by several imperatives. One is the growing economic stratification of the population. Ordinary Russians chafe at the gaudy prosperity of the “New Russians,” whose wealth is widely seen as illicit and immoral. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union has deprived Russian statehood of its larger universalist purposes, creating fertile soil for ethnic chauvinism. Twenty-five million Russians now live outside Russia’s borders, in the former Soviet republics. They loom in the Russian imagination much as the 10 million Germans detached from Germany did in the German mind during the years after World War I.

Russia’s ruling clique has continued to follow the traditional strategy of changing programs and using the slogans of others. To distract ordinary Russians from the real social conflict, the new elite needs to create a convincing enemy. First it was the Russian Communist Party. Then, when the extreme nationalist supporters of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy scored unexpected victories in the State Duma elections of 1993, winning nearly a quarter of the vote, the Yeltsin clique created a new enemy. It promptly borrowed the ideas of its opponents, unleashing the first war in Chechnya in late 1994.

As Yeltsin slipped into physical and political decline in the fol-

lowing years, the new elite became increasingly torn by internal conflicts over the division of state property. The emergence of Yuri Luzhkov as a leader of the opposition and the creation of the Luzhkov-Primakov coalition gave political form to this oligarchic rivalry. But Yeltsin's "party of order" staked everything on creating a new dictatorship in order to secure its power and prevent any new redivision of state property. It used "continuity" as a slogan and the secret service as a main means.

Once again, the Russian elite is playing an old game to solve domestic problems. Waging a second war in Chechnya is the best way to mobilize support among a population that has nothing in common with the oligarchs—and to prevent the hungry, oppressed army from attacking the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin's measures as acting president, including the militarization (or re-militarization) of the economy and the restoration of military education in the schools, speak for themselves. The ruling clique needs to be at war. At the same time, it no longer needs to cast the Communists as the enemy. Indeed it needs the Communists' support and has courted them in the Duma more openly than before. Yeltsin was probably pushed out precisely because he was an obstacle to this new coalition.

Do all of these dark trends presage a return to the totalitarian past? Because of the oligarchic nature of the current elite, any new dictatorship in Russia will differ from the Soviet system. But three features of the past remain. First, there are no real boundaries between ownership and state power. Second, terrorist means will be used to resolve fundamental social problems. And third, as shown by Putin's ability to pay honor in almost the same breath to the dissident Andrei Sakharov and the KGB chief Yuri Andropov, the tradition of changing ideologies like masks is very much alive.

A period of dangerous instability is beginning in Russia. A nationalist and anti-Islamic campaign is a dubious way to unite a multiethnic country. In order to consolidate Russian society Moscow also needs the support of the local authorities, which, little by little, are becoming the only real power beyond Moscow. But the price for this support is always the same: more independence. Paradoxically, further disintegration will be the only long-term result of this effort to consolidate.

We have arrived at the end of a long and skillful political masquerade. Now we see the real face of the Russian political elite. In making sense of what is happening in Russia, it is important above all to be realistic, rejecting romantic interpretations of the country's reforms and recognizing the archaic nature of many of its political institutions and practices. As the great Russian poet Aleksandr Blok said in his despair over the false promise of change nearly a century ago, "We must not be lulled by the calendar." □