

Russia's Flawed Hero

Reviewed by Lynn Berry

WHEN BORIS YELTSIN DIED, ON THE AFTERNOON of April 23, 2007, CNN and the BBC immediately interrupted their programming to run non-stop coverage of his life and legacy, but the Russian channels, all under Kremlin control, did not seem to know quite what to say. They did not even report his death until more than two hours later.

The master of the Kremlin at the time, Vladimir Putin, had built his popularity in part by perpetuating the myth that he had saved Russia from the horrors of the Yeltsin years. Many Russians look back on the 1990s as a time of economic collapse, social misery, and national humiliation. But some, including much of the Moscow intelligentsia, remember Yeltsin as the man who gave them freedom and hope. They mourned not just Yeltsin but the final realization that the democratic rights he had handed them had been all but snatched away.

By evening, Putin seemed to understand that he could not allow Yeltsin's death to become a rallying point for his opponents. He arranged for his predecessor to lie in state in the grand Cathedral of Christ the Savior and to be buried in Novodevichy Cemetery, the leafy resting place of Russia's heroes. When Putin finally spoke publicly, he announced a day of national mourning for Yeltsin with words of praise, albeit indirect: "A new democratic Russia was born during his time, a free, open, and peaceful country." Thus began the cautious official reassessment, even co-option, of Yeltsin's legacy.

The role of Russia's first president in the country's transformation remains controversial both within Russia and abroad, as Timothy J. Colton acknowledges in his biography. The man will be forever remembered for climbing onto a tank in August 1991 to valiantly defend democracy and also for embarrassing his compatriots three years later when he tipsily conducted a German band outside Berlin's city hall. He was committed to freedom of speech but shelled a defiant parliament into sub-

mission. He freed market forces but allowed a group of loyal bankers and businessmen to grow fabulously rich as ordinary citizens paid the cost of economic reform.

Still, Colton, a professor of government and Russian studies at Harvard, says he has come to see Yeltsin as one of history's great men. For all his foibles and mistakes, Yeltsin put his country on the path toward democratic politics and market-based economics, and he did so while largely avoiding the apocalyptic scenarios of anarchy and civil war. He was a "hero in history—enigmatic and flawed, to be sure, yet worthy of our respect and sympathy."

Colton's biography is the first major assessment to come along since Leon Aron's *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life*, which went to press shortly before Yeltsin unexpectedly

stepped down from Russia's presidency in the final hours of 1999. It benefits from the passage of time and perspective afforded by Putin's eight subsequent years as president. Colton's research included what he describes as "eye-opening" interviews with

Yeltsin, his family members, and about 150 others. He also had access to declassified files from Soviet archives and new memoirs by former aides and other political players of the time that shed light on Yeltsin's life.

Colton says he set out to write a book about Yeltsin's leadership in the 1990s, but the further he got, the more he wondered what had molded the man who would rise through the communist system to become its "hangman." The result is that the chapters on Yeltsin's family, childhood, and early

YELTSIN: A Life.

By Timothy J. Colton.
Basic. 616 pp. \$35

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career as a construction boss in Sverdlovsk provide some of the most engaging reading of the book.

Yeltsin grew up in a self-reliant family in the Ural Mountains. His paternal grandfather, a “self-made man, a backwoods capitalist,” suffered under Joseph Stalin for the crime of owning a farm, a mill, and a smithy. A dispossessed kulak, he died a broken man when Yeltsin was five. Yeltsin’s maternal grandfather, a master carpenter, and his wife also were driven from their home, and when Yeltsin was a boy his father spent nearly three years in a labor camp for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.”

Because he had relatives who were persecuted during the Stalinist repressions, Yeltsin was neither permitted nor particularly inclined to join the Communist Party as a young man. He did so only in 1961, at age 30, after the Khrushchev thaw made it possible, and with the aim of advancing his career in the construction industry. A natural leader, he soon moved into the regional party nomenklatura.

Colton finds harbingers of Yeltsin’s future rebellion in his behavior as Sverdlovsk party boss in the late 1970s and early ’80s. Yeltsin encouraged entrepreneurial initiative in the state sector and thought it economic nonsense to control prices in the farmers’ markets. Even his hair seemed “suspiciously long” for a party member in good standing. While Yeltsin believed in the ideals of communism and had no “metaphysical thirst for reform, democracy, or the market,” he had a visceral sense that the Soviet system had lost its way. “The bacillus was there, gnawing away at Yeltsin *before* he left for Moscow in 1985,” Colton writes.

Mikhail Gorbachev brought Yeltsin to Moscow to help carry out perestroika, but they soon clashed. Yeltsin turned on him at a Central Committee meeting in 1987, spontaneously taking the floor to accuse the party of bungling the promised reforms and kowtowing to Gorbachev. Colton calls this Yeltsin’s secret speech, a bombshell comparable to Khrushchev’s address denouncing Stalin in 1956. Yeltsin later tried to patch up his relationship with Gorbachev, who wavered before stripping him of his position as Moscow party boss. Had they reached a com-

promise, Yeltsin told Colton in 2002, history might have been different.

Shunned by the Soviet establishment, Yeltsin shifted the action to the Russian republic. He won a seat in 1990 in the new Russian Congress of People’s Deputies, which elected him speaker. Gorbachev tried to prop up his own position by introducing a Soviet presidency, but refused to submit to a popular vote, even though, at the time, he would have won, a decision Colton describes as a “blunder of biblical proportions.”

The Russian republic then held a general election for its own president, which Yeltsin won with 59 percent of the vote, thus gaining the legitimacy of a democratically elected leader that Gorbachev had allowed to pass him by. After his defiance of the bungled coup of August 1991, Yeltsin’s victory was complete and the fate of the Soviet Union was sealed.

As president of a newly independent country, Yeltsin set out to free the economy from the control of the state. But the lifting of price controls led to soaring inflation, wiping out the savings of ordinary Russians. Outdated factories languished as state subsidies and contracts dried up. Colton defends Yeltsin’s reforms, claiming that the economic slump was not as bad as usually depicted. And when Yeltsin stepped down, Russia had a market economy that was beginning to see the strong growth that has continued to this day.

Colton also challenges other common perceptions of the Yeltsin presidency. While Yeltsin did overindulge in alcohol, his drinking was not central to his public role, and few realized that, after a series of heart attacks, he virtually stopped in 1996. In his second term, heart disease weakened but did not incapacitate Yeltsin, who “rationed his effort and expended it purposefully.” Colton dismisses as not credible persistent accusations that the Yeltsins accepted bribes from a Swiss construction company hired to renovate the Kremlin. Contrary to what many believed at the time, Yeltsin did not surrender control to what was known as the Family, a group of insiders that included his daughter Tatyana Dyachenko and oligarch Boris Berezovsky. Yeltsin chose Putin not because Berezovsky or anyone else put

him up to it, but because Yeltsin himself thought Russia needed a leader with a “military manner” who could consolidate political authority. But Colton is convinced Yeltsin would have reversed the decision later if he’d had the chance.

The Yeltsin that emerges in Colton’s book is a powerful man of sharp political instincts and the courage to act on them. He generously gives away his wristwatches. He habitually snaps pencils in frustration. He remains loyal to friends from his hometown but promotes young economists to help run Russia. He makes mistakes, then apologizes to his fellow Russians for them.

Frequently, Colton sets Yeltsin off against Gorbachev, his chief rival. Born a month apart, the two men could not have been more different. While Yeltsin, the grandson of kulaks, was 30 when he received his party card, Gorbachev, a third-generation Communist, joined in his early 20s, when Stalin was still in the Kremlin. Yeltsin’s instincts, Colton says, were feline, while Gorbachev’s were more canine—“trained, trainable, tied to the known and to the previously rewarded.”

But it is in the comparisons to Putin, in most cases unstated, that Yeltsin truly shines. Yeltsin was roasted in the media over the brutal war he unleashed in Chechnya in 1994, but he did not try to silence his many critics or stop journalists from investigating alleged corruption, accepting the need for political debate and an independent press. “For the first sustained period in modern times, Yeltsin’s Russia was to be a land without political censors, political exiles, or political prisoners,” Colton says. Under Putin, this all changed. National television stations were deployed as propaganda tools of the Kremlin, and journalists who angered those in power lost their jobs and, in some cases, their lives. Berezovsky leads a long list of Russians who sought asylum abroad to avoid politically motivated criminal charges, and Russia’s prisons and mental hospitals once again began to collect political dissidents.

In stepping down on New Year’s Eve 1999, Yeltsin said he was confident that Russia would never return to the past and would “proceed only forward.” He then famously asked Putin to “take

care of Russia.” Putin let him down. With Putin’s installation this spring of his own handpicked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, a man who promises to fulfill “Putin’s Plan” and has made the former president his prime minister, Putin still rules.

But Colton concludes that there is still hope for a democratic Russia. Yeltsin gave Russians a personal independence that they will not easily relinquish. His economic reforms underlie the growth that has improved the lives of his compatriots, who mistakenly thank only Putin. In his book, Colton is kind to Yeltsin. History will be, too.

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HISTORY

Meet and Greet

Reviewed by Karl E. Scheibe

ON THIS SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC, boys mocked the Hitler salute during World War II. I recall holding a pocket comb under my nose with my left hand while extending my right arm, clicking my heels, and intoning, “Heil Hitler!” I never closed the gap of consciousness between my own German heritage and my pleasure in ridiculing my father’s native land. To this day, one may mock and scorn the Nazis without fear of offending anyone’s sensibilities. Mel Brooks’s uproarious comedy *The Producers* milked this standard Nazi greeting to great effect. How is it that the defining pole of manifest evil in our times is at once chilling and funny?

In *The Hitler Salute*, German sociologist Tilman Allert has given us an analysis of the famous greeting that is both thorough and modest, accessible and profound. In the scope of 100 pages, he provides a history and interpretation of a most remarkable and telling feature of the totalitarian regime that was National Socialism. By decree from the very beginning of the Nazi era in 1933, this salutation, involving voice and gesture, was pre-

THE HITLER SALUTE:

On the Meaning of a Gesture.

By Tilman Allert.
Translated by Jefferson Chase. Metropolitan.
115 pp. \$20