

Yuri Glazov

Gorbachev is Gone, Yeltsin . . . ?

For many years the collapse of the Soviet empire had been seen by several observers as almost inevitable. Nevertheless, the incredible events which took place in Eastern Europe over the last five or six years outpaced our most daring and seemingly irresponsible predictions. Who indeed could anticipate, with any certainty, even twenty or twenty-five months earlier that in the final month of the summer of 1991 the Soviet Communist Party, "the intelligence, honour and conscience of our epoch," would be declared outlawed, the immensely powerful Soviet Union would be shattered, and President Gorbachev would be ousted in disgrace from his office soon after the enigmatic coup of 1991,¹ while its major agents and co-partners, including the former Soviet Prime Minister and the KGB chairman, would be thrown into the Matrosskaya Tishina jail pending the trial now awaited with avidity.

The huge empire has been intimidating the world for many decades with its "invincible" army and nuclear missiles. The Soviet ideological machine never stopped boasting about its superior philosophers and writers, ballerinas and chess masters, hockey players and mathematicians. Soviet spaceships could successfully compete with American ones, while attracting the world's delighted attention. At the same time many millions of Soviet citizens felt afraid even to murmur a word of criticism of or displeasure with their own authorities. Many thousands of people living beyond the Soviet borders, proud of the Soviet victories, never concealed their dissatisfaction with those scholars and students who risked underrating "the first socialist country's" achievements and unparalleled contribution to global civilization.

An exhausted and bleeding country, Russia today calls to mind the finale of other powerful empires. In trying to perceive the inner meaning of these recent events it is tempting to compare the present situation of Russia with some crucial periods in her own history. One significant facet of the vanishing empire can be seen in the fact that the idea of Russia, tightly intertwined with the Soviet-Russian version of Marxism, has been handed a decisive and historically meaningful defeat. Despite the vigorous attempts of the Neorussophiles such as A. Solzhenitsyn and I. Shafarevich to separate the Russian from the Soviet spheres, it is not so easy and logical to differentiate between these two highly nationalistic and heavily ideological systems (Shafarevich 7). Along with the Soviet empire, the centuries-old Russian colossus has been pulled down. The Soviet system was an integral part of the enormously expanded Russian territorial unity. Joseph Stalin tried his best not only to restore the Russian imperial conglomerate, which included Finland and Poland, but to absorb the islands of Japan, the deserts of Mongolia, and the fertile lands of East Prussia. The demise of Stalin's empire meant essentially the death of imperial Russia as well. No wonder, at this dramatic moment of Russian history, the proponents of the Russian national idea demonstrate side by side with those who feel mortally wounded by the collapse of the Soviet machine; a new Russian word "redbrowns" (*krasno-korichnevyye*) testifies to the amazing vitality of this social and political stratum, where prosoviet, procommunist forces and ideologues merge with profoundly nationalistic, highly chauvinistic, and even openly fascist-minded Russians (Pozner 2).

Three periods in their history are remembered by Russians as highly meaningful, resembling turning points in the development of the past millennium: the end of the Tartar-Mongol yoke around 1480 AD, the Times of Troubles in 1605-13, and the Revolution of 1917, which started with the abdication of the Russian Tsar in February and culminated in the "historical Great October Socialist Revolution," accomplished by the Bolsheviks. All these events left an indelible impact on Russian mentality and society. The slaughterous and barbarous Tartar rule could have been terminated exactly one century earlier, with the victory of Dmitry Donskoy in 1380; by 1480, it had lasted almost two and a half centuries.

Like the Tartar domination, the Communist regime permeated the soul and the body of the nation. One can say that its influence was even more

profound than that of the Tartar, because Marxism-Leninism was produced from the depth of the nation itself. And like the Tartar-Mongol yoke, the Marxist-Leninist influence on Russia and on Russians will be felt for many decades to come.

A consideration of the Time of Troubles sheds equally important light on recent events. The end of the Romanov dynasty was much more disastrous than the demise of the Riurikides, with such central figures as Ivan the Terrible and Boris Godunov. No wonder, Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov* was banned under Andropov, when Yuri Liubimov started to perform it in his Taganka theatre (Gershkovich 177-85). In building his empire Stalin imitated Tsarist patterns. The Time of Troubles, when the Russian throne looked empty or illegitimately occupied, is by no means forgotten today, with details of the last Russian Tsar's brutal murder in 1918 time and time again providing newspaper headlines. The period remains highly relevant for various reasons, including the prophetic significance of Dostoevsky's novel *The Devils*, whose main heroes Nikolay Stavrogin and Pyotr Verkhovensky, tightly connected with the spirit of the Time of Troubles, prefigure numerous characters and adventurers on the stage of the Russian Revolution. This Russian Revolution of 1917, and the succeeding self-destruction of the nation, remains very much in focus for thinking Russians. The murder of the Tsar and his family, the numerous and costly social experiments will demand in the years to come a total reevaluation of Russian literature and the Russian intelligentsia, with their bitter lamentations concerning life under the Tsars and the ardent expectation of a paradisiacal and resurrectional Revolution.

The crucial epoch-making developments in Russia today are closely connected with the figures of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Almost from the first months of Gorbachev's rule, Yeltsin's star began to rise. In the fall of 1987, Gorbachev, with an obvious concern for his monolithic power, made a strong effort to dampen the recalcitrant and overly ambitious Yeltsin (Yeltsin 77-78). However, Gorbachev's policy failed, and this should be seen as a major miscalculation. Together they could have created a powerful twin-like being, for in many ways they complemented each other. Now that Gorbachev has definitely lost his power, it is reasonable to try once again to understand this complicated figure.

Did he have, from the very beginning of his rule, any substantial plan to rebuild the country? Did he consider himself a dedicated Marxist-Leninist, or was this frequently repeated phraseology no more than a sham? (Samoilov 5). Did he ever think then, amidst his fame and the overwhelming publicity, that the formidable empire he had inherited from his predecessors would, so suddenly and so disgracefully, break in pieces and disintegrate? A recent observation made by a person who spoke with Gorbachev personally may be brought up:

I have heard a great deal from those working with Gorbachev, and not long ago I had a chance to have a lengthy conversation with him, to feel literally some field emanating from him and I am convinced: he is capable of reading other people's thoughts, calculating far ahead his opponents' possible moves. And I do not believe that he failed to take into account the moves of Kriuchkov, Yazov, Pugo and others despite the informational blockade, with which he was allegedly surrounded by the apparatus, headed by Boldin. (Kiselev 9)

Did Gorbachev understand what kind of people had been working under him?

I have known personally at least three individuals who later became Gorbachev's close assistants: Georgy Shakhnazarov, Aleksandr Yakovlev and Yevgeny Primakov. To characterize them briefly will help us understand slightly better Gorbachev's surroundings and, perhaps, his character. With Shakhnazarov I was more or less friendly in the 1950s: for several years we worked under the same roof in a big publishing house, where he was a deputy director of the State Political Literature Publishing House, Politizdat. At that time he was certainly a nice man, rather open to others, when other people of his status were practically inaccessible outside their offices. But he was of course responsible for the publishing of that party propaganda which poured unchallenged into the minds of his compatriots and millions of Soviet sympathizers abroad. He was incredibly critical of Khrushchev in the days of his victory in 1957; he was certainly deeply indoctrinated by Marxist dogmas. At that time Shakhnazarov was clearly able to combine his careerist inclinations with human softness, interest in people, and undisguised curiosity.

In the summer of 1981, I spent several hours conversing with the Soviet ambassador to Canada, Aleksandr Yakovlev. The president of my

uni-versity invited the ambassador to a dinner. His excellency was much younger then and more vigorous, although visibly humiliated by his exile to Canada after his distinguished post on the Communist Party Central Committee. This meeting took place several months after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the exile of Andrei Sakharov to Gorky. Naturally, Yakovlev behaved as an impeccably reliable emissary of Leonid Brezhnev and in his conversations with me he could hardly conceal his nervousness and even irritation, which I interpreted as a reaction to my recent public statements about these hot issues of Soviet external and internal politics. When I was leaving the banquet hall, Ambassador Yakovlev, in the presence of his aide, the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, made a point of addressing me in Russian: "Do not make political statements!" I interpreted his excellency's words as a breach of diplomatic etiquette and a threat on behalf of the KGB. This strengthened my unpleasant feelings about him; several years later I was perturbed when Yakovlev became the ideologue of what was known to the world as Gorbachev's "perestroika." Whatever happened afterwards, I was never able to convince myself that this man, who had been so aggressive and indiscreet with me, could truly promote "glasnost" and "perestroika" in his country.

As a student of the Moscow Oriental Institute from 1947, I knew rather well Yevgeny Primakov, who joined the Institute the same year as myself. During the worst years of Stalin's rule Primakov was well known for his uninterrupted and dedicated party activities. The succeeding years were devoted by him to self-promotion, working abroad in various fields of the party and state security business, with one eye on establishing himself in the academic world. As the result of this, he eventually became an Academician in the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Director of the Oriental Institute. This was a mockery of the traditional values of the highly respected Russian academic world. My friends, who cannot be rebuked for any extremism in social behavior, fought tenaciously against Primakov's growing influence. Nevertheless, Primakov became Gorbachev's personal envoy to both Saddam Hussein and George Bush.

These three persons, among many others, became Gorbachev's confidants. They were ambitious, strong-willed, and thoroughly calculating figures. While there were those in Gorbachev's entourage who betrayed him in the days of the August coup, these three remained

faithful to their boss, and Shakhnazarov, it is said, was the best (Cherny-aev 1). However, Gorbachev's choice of lieutenants was frequently criticized in public and, after his return to Moscow from Crimea in August 1991, to his face.

Personally, I do not see a great deal of enigma in Gorbachev. A capable and hard-working boy from a southern province of Russia, he saw the world in the light of his own career and far-reaching ambitions. In order to make such a spectacular career as the one accomplished by Gorbachev at the dark period of Suslov's and Brezhnev's reign, the person in question had to satisfy a long list of party prerequisites. Gorbachev became a member of Brezhnev's Politburo after having being picked out by Yuri Andropov, then KGB chief, and by Mikhail Suslov, "a grey Cardinal" (Butson 49). People from the Stavropol area, the homeland of Gorbachev, did not think highly of his party activities and moral integrity. Not long before his sudden death, Andrei Sakharov expressed grave misgivings about Gorbachev's impeccable past.

Gorbachev should be seen as a complex product of the communist structure and party life at a time when the great majority of Soviet people and its intelligentsia had lost confidence in that corrupted institution (Cohan 66-67). At that stage intelligent people were inclined to stay away from the party and if they happened to have joined its ranks, they tried their utmost to keep a low profile. Mikhail Gorbachev belonged to the younger layer of the party structure and it would not be erroneous to imagine that in the depth of his mind he might have cherished a bold plan to undertake a radical reorganization of the entire party life as soon as he came to power. Gorbachev himself acknowledged that as early as 1985 he said to his friend Eduard Shevardnadze that everything in the country "had gone rotten through" (Goldman 83). But those who tend to see Gorbachev only as a great reformer and a person of great integrity should remember these facts. In 1983, while in Canada, Gorbachev denied in public that there had been any mass starvation among Ukrainian peasants fifty years earlier (Eisen 337). On his election as the new General Secretary of the Communist Party, he qualified anti-Stalinism as a form of anti-Sovietism. Until 1986, when Andrei Sakharov was released from his Gorky exile, his treatment in that city was extremely harsh, not to say brutal. While recalling Stalin's crimes of exterminating millions of Russians, let us not forget that nobody else but Gorbachev bears

responsibility for having concealed the first news of the Chernobyl tragedy in 1986 and for having forced millions of "enthusiastic citizens" of Kiev and Minsk to demonstrate in their city central squares during the May First Festivities under the disastrous fallout of Chernobyl radiation, with the greatest risk to their life and health. And it was none other than Gorbachev who, in November 1987, while solemnly celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the "Great October Socialist Revolution" in front of the whole world, repeatedly emphasized "Stalin's important contribution to the struggle" (Black 337) and to building socialism in the country.

For years Gorbachev had proved to be a highly sophisticated politician, an enormously flexible survivor, who pumped his international prestige to the extent that a mere criticism of Gorbachev seemed inappropriate and senseless. Essentially he wanted to save what it was still possible to save. He defended Lenin, the founder of the socialist country; he did not want Stalin's name to be smeared in the history of the party. He had no desire to bring back Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winner. Gorbachev's relationships with another Nobel Prize winner, Andrei Sakharov, underwent dramatic shifts: the latter, still "a criminal" during the first stage of Gorbachev's rule, was returned to Moscow with great honor, but was treated repeatedly very harshly by Gorbachev at sessions of the Soviet Parliament. Though Gorbachev had ousted thousands of Soviet bureaucrats, nonetheless he wanted to rely upon the remaining bureaucrats as his main power base.

Along with these contradictions Gorbachev's personal and political line suffered from grave incompatibilities. "Glasnost" had been declared, while there was no real openness in the media. The country was talking about "perestroyka," but in reality too little was being built and rebuilt. There was no shortage of declarations about allegiance to the cause of socialism, while "the socialist camp" was falling apart: Poland, Hungary, the Berlin Wall, Czechoslovakia. Gorbachev was praised as a peacemaker and, true, in Afghanistan the withdrawal of the Soviet troops took place, but at the same time in various parts of the Soviet Union—in Latvia and Lithuania, Moldova and Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan—Russian troops were responsible for the bloodbath. The KGB continued its notorious activities abroad. Gorbachev kept on asking for money from capitalist banks, and millions of dollars were channelled abroad from

Russia to support communists and terrorists, or to be deposited in major foreign banks (Kardin 2). And no doubt, Gorbachev showed himself as a master of half measures.

Gorbachev's behavior and secret thoughts during the August coup have remained a mystery. In an interview immediately after his return to Moscow on 22 August 1991, he surprised his listeners by suddenly blurting out: "In any case everything I will never tell you!" Yevgeny Kiselev, who cites this phrase in his article, tries to explain Gorbachev's behavior in this way:

The former President at some moment had decided that the best method to get rid of the resistance rendered by the anti-reformist forces would be to provoke them to an open action, by having pretended at the same time that he, Gorbachev, in his soul supported them. (9)

This assumption should not be forgotten, at a time of chaotic developments in Russia, in the light of the pertinent remark uttered by an ex-Soviet, Arkady Shevchenko: "In Moscow nowadays the well-known Machiavelli could not teach others; he would have had to be a student there." The possibility cannot be excluded, however, that in those memorable days a desperate Gorbachev was gambling and ready at the last moment to support a winner. No doubt, Gorbachev, advised by his assistants, knew quite well that in Russian history a conservative or right-wing party as a rule gained the upper hand. The one who had been calculating his future too shrewdly was ultimately defeated by his main rival. But unlike many of his party predecessors, he survived physically and retained some capacity to continue his political games.

For more than a year Russia has been presided over by Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin's past, his rivalry with Gorbachev, and his present-day status should be examined more closely in order to understand what is going on now in what has remained of the Soviet Union and, perhaps, what may happen there in the months and years to come. Yeltsin is a child of the Soviet system and the Communist Party—he knows very well the evils and vices of these terrifying institutions against which he has promised more than once to fight hard for a better, free, and dignified Russia. Ekaterinburg, which I revisited in May 1992, was the place of his birth, growth and early work. This city links European Russia and Siberia. From here roads bring you to central Asia, China, and the Far East. It

was here, in the heat of civil war following the 1917 revolution, that the Russian Tsar, Nikolay II, and his large family were slain. If Gorbachev grew up on the slopes of the magic Caucasus which so delighted Pushkin and Lermontov, Yeltsin observed around himself those quietly-slumbering tayga forests, the Ural mountains, the deep-watered and swift rivers where now, unfortunately, fish have become too contaminated to be safely eaten. Yeltsin's city and its surroundings have seen Russian invasions in the past, numerous local uprisings against Russian rule, the Whites' vehement struggle against Bolsheviks, the creation of gulags and death camps. This is the country immortalized in *Doctor Zhivago*.

Yeltsin's childhood and adolescence were spent in Siberian simplicity, amidst the not necessarily safe games of his peers. In those years he showed his talent as a ringleader (Yeltsin 14-18). Having received a technical education, he did not rush to join the Communist Party in the years after Stalin's death. But once accepted into it, he soon began his spectacular rise. He became well known for his cleansing of corruption in Ekaterinburg, for having destroyed, on secret instructions from Moscow, the world-famous Ipatyev House, a place of pilgrimage on the way to the last Tsar's murder site. As Communist Party boss of that Siberian city he did many things, which he later regretted, prior to his transfer to Moscow in Gorbachev's first months of power. As usual, he built around himself a team of devoted assistants, including Y. Petrov and G. Burbulis, who after a while followed their boss to the country's capital to be known as "the Ekaterinburg mafia" (Dubnov 4-7). One should not wonder at this: Brezhnev brought his friends from Dnepropetrovsk, Gorbachev from Stavropol.

From 1985 Yeltsin worked in Moscow as party leader. Almost from the beginning he demonstrated in this position some personal traits which made him a different party member in the eyes of many Muscovites. He fought corruption in the city, fired many bureaucrats, personally showed up early mornings in the food shops to verify whether the transported food was put on their shelves or stolen (Yeltsin 50-53). He used public transportation instead of party officials' breakneck limousines, and his wife accepted the boredom of standing in lengthy lines to buy food like many ordinary citizens. The interviews Yeltsin used to give to journalists attracted public attention and infuriated his bosses.

Boldness, gambling, combined with an almost childish aspiration for honesty, seem to be a part of Yeltsin's personality and behavior. In the summer of 1986, at the Congress of the Communist Party, he made a stunning speech, in which he acknowledged that it was fear that prevented him from speaking out against Brezhnev while the leader was alive and powerful. No doubt it was a challenging indication of what would be his behavior in the months to come. At that time Gorbachev announced "glasnost" and "perestroyka," but the party system and bureaucracy survived essentially intact. Yeltsin's courageous and unprecedented speech in October 1987, his fight against the Party's Stalinists and hardliners, supported by Ligachev, his criticism of Gorbachev's pace of reform sounded like a logical consequence of his confession of his "cowardliness" during Brezhnev's "period of stagnation."

Yeltsin's behavior throughout the succeeding four years, his ability to outmanoeuvre his mortal foes, to escape the KGB-sponsored attempts to assassinate him, to organize his followers in order to deal heavy blows upon his opponents' heads will be, no doubt, well remembered in the chronicles of the Russian democracy's tormented advance. Gorbachev personally admonished his former maverick assistant that it was in the latter's best interests to stay away from big politics. No doubt, Gorbachev issued special instructions to keep his disobedient subordinate under tight control. The recent revelations of the former KGB Chairman, Kriuchkov, concerning their plans to eliminate Yeltsin at that period hardly can be interpreted to mean that Gorbachev as a party boss knew nothing about this.

Gorbachev had unleashed another segment of the state mechanism and allowed the self-expression of the people, which altogether created a breathing space for Yeltsin and his followers. But Yeltsin had to resort to extreme steps, feeling almost every day on the edge of abyss. He could not be prevented from visiting America, even before he was elected as the President of Russia (Yeltsin 99). Speaking on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, he was asked whether he was still a communist. His answer was remarkable: instead of stating with great enthusiasm, as all other Soviet visitors invariably did, that he was a proud communist, Yeltsin meditated strangely for almost a minute, looked around uncertainly, and then said: "I am not yet expelled from the Communist Party." He criticized communist theory. In his speeches he hinted that future

generations might see some criminality in the Communist Party's activities. Of course, in these remarks there was little new for ordinary Russians: who else could be held responsible for the economy and life in general after the Revolution of 1917? But when in July 1990, during the work of another historical Party Congress, Boris Yeltsin, viewed by TV watchers all over the world, put his Party card down on the stage podium and left the Congress Hall, this was highly sensational and unbelievably courageous.

Gorbachev and his powerful apparatus left no stone unturned in order to stop Yeltsin from becoming Russia's President. Despite their diehard opposition, in June 1990 Yeltsin was elected President by the Russian Parliament and a year later won a popular election, the first in Russian history. In August 1991 he showed spectacular valor and shrewdness, when in the initial hours of the coup all odds were against him. On August 20, in Yeltsin's words, the Defence Minister Yazov, a leader of the coup, shouted over the phone: "Why have not you killed Yeltsin yet?! Why have not you stormed the White House yet?!" (Press Conference 8). In that exceptionally dangerous situation Yeltsin did his best to bring the leading participants of the coup out of the Kremlin, convincing the KGB Chief, Kriuchkov, that they should go to the Crimea to obtain from Gorbachev real proof that the latter was sick and incapable of remaining the leader of the country. The coup was defeated, the Communist Party banned, and the new Russian Revolution seemed victorious. In the succeeding months, Yeltsin continued to score immensely in his struggle with Gorbachev, until in December the Soviet Union was declared non-existent. While Gorbachev lost his Presidency, which had never been validated by national election, on the rubble of the Soviet empire, Yeltsin became the indisputable leader of Russia.

One year has passed since Boris Yeltsin's historic triumph over his foes. Some interim observations may be made. Yeltsin bears the main responsibility for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the formation of a loose Commonwealth of Independent States. Disintegration fell like a bolt from the blue sky and there are at least two main reasons for it: the results of the Ukraine's independence referendum and, most probably, a desire to put an end to Gorbachev's presidency. Various other parts of the former Soviet Union are not yet ready for independence and their political, economic, and cultural dependence upon Moscow will be felt

for many years, if not decades. Boris Yeltsin came to power, with limited presidential authority, at the time of the greatest constitutional and territorial crisis in the modern history of Russia. The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the volatile situations in Moldova and Georgia, the many uncertainties in the Baltic republics and the Ukraine, cannot be satisfactorily solved without Russian involvement.

Yeltsin's position is exceedingly precarious. Among the formidable forces opposing him, we see the previously mentioned ideological camp of "redbrowns," which includes former communists, Russian nationalists and open chauvinists, even open-minded fascists. I have personally observed closely two huge demonstrations organized by the "redbrowns" on 1 and 9 of May 1992 in Moscow. I should admit that prior to my personal conversations with the participants in these demonstrations I had been inclined to underestimate their aggression and forcefulness. By many thousands they voted against Yeltsin in Red Square, demanding his impeachment as a traitor to the nation; they equally dislike Gorbachev, considering him a source of the calamities which hit their dear Russia (Lukyanov 5). To these people, utterly irrational, their lifelong ideology, tantamount to a fanatical faith, their communist ideals, the legacy of Lenin and Stalin—whose images may soon be tossed out of official life forever—their former status in society and their contribution to the building of "socialism," their animal hatred towards other nationalities inhabiting their former country, their blind devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church—so much compromised by its association with the secret police—and the grandeur of the Russian empire constitute a single body of belief which cannot be so easily erased, changed, or replaced with anything comparable. They can be numbered in the millions. The worst of them, former powerful officials and KGB hatchet men, cannot be punished or jailed. Nor can they be silenced, or convinced of past injustices. They cannot respect Yeltsin and his team, because they see in them—and rightly so—people of their own background and convictions, but much more cunning, intriguing, and successful. A well-known Russian journalist, a former spokesman for President Yeltsin, wrote this in a leading Russian newspaper:

Our effort to represent last August as the victory of democracy is unfortunately nothing more than self-deception. Communists were defeated by those same communists, who, however, threw away the external

regalia of their own party. And therefore the whining as regards the former party apparatchiks, who had allegedly crept into the entourage of the Russian President, should be seen as naive. These people had crept nowhere, had not run over, not crossed over. In general they remained in their positions and readily swore allegiance to the new master of the Kremlin, who had defeated his less successful political sparring partner. (Voshchanov 1)

The Russian population has been profoundly upset and hurt by Yeltsin's rule and reforms, although an essential part of the population is still ready to exercise a certain amount of additional patience to see what the reforms lead to. Many of those, including the intelligentsia, who supported Yeltsin at various stages before his rise to power, feel cheated and awfully disappointed (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 1-2). But Yeltsin is still seen by many as their last hope: people have lost their trust in former communists and politicians in general. The scope of economic disaster may be compared only with that created by the collectivization of the 1930s, and earlier by the Civil War after the Revolution. The population sees that the floating prices reform started in January 1992 has failed to bring any of the promised benefits. Instead of the promised rate of 8 or 10 rubles to the dollar, the rate at the end of 1992 is about 480 rubles to the dollar. Salaries have risen only slightly, while prices have soared very often fifty- or sixty-fold. The population's hardships have become barely endurable for many reasons, including the government's inability to pay on time even the miserable salaries due to their workers.

The country's economy could hardly be worse. Workers no longer pretend that they produce anything properly. In Yeltsin's words at his press conference on 21 August 1992, Defence Ministry plants have reduced their production this year by 68 percent, and one of the results, observed personally by him in Nizhny Tagil, located not far from Ekaterinburg, was this: "The Ural plant of railwagons produces the most modern tank in the world, the T-88. These tanks move themselves across the street to the Nizhny Tagil Metallurgical Plant, where they are melted down into metal! Can you imagine the idiocy of all of this?" (*Russkaya Mysl'* 28 Aug 1992). As far as consumer goods and food are concerned, Russia is the cheapest country in the world for foreigners, while for Russians, if these goods and food are at all accessible, their prices are unaffordable. A pound of sausage or three pounds of tomatoes could cost

one third of a student's monthly stipend, whereas for a foreigner or a person with hard currency less than a dollar. According to some polls, almost eighty percent of young people would like to emigrate, and teenage girls are eager to become hard-currency prostitutes. A good number of people are engaged in buying food and goods sold by the state and reselling them in the mushrooming street markets. This creates enormous indignation and protest among all layers of society. The real tragedy of Russian life may be seen not only in the highly negative and scornful attitude of the Russian population towards everything connected with trade and shopping, but in the total inability of Russian industry to compete in the production of consumer goods with the developed countries of the West. The machinery and equipment of existing plants and factories are basically obsolete. The lesson of East Germany, where industry was much more developed than in the Soviet Union, is significant: after reunification, industry had to be almost totally torn down and built anew. The industry of the former Soviet Union cannot be mended or renewed: it has to be rebuilt on a new basis to compete. Collective farms have to be eliminated, while state-supported farmers, still too much discriminated against, need a free rein. Twenty or thirty billion dollars of foreign help, which as a rule disappears in Russia without trace, will be only a drop of water in the ocean of need.

Among the main faults of Yeltsin in the eyes of liberal-minded people is his failure to introduce radical reforms immediately after the collapse of the August coup. In the first weeks and months after the defeat of the plotters, Yeltsin was riding the crest of a revolutionary wave and could have done practically anything, including privatization of the land, the ouster of former bureaucrats from the higher and middle-rank positions, and the creation of his own administration and hierarchy of assistants (Yakovlev 6). No doubt he has had to face many difficulties with the potential to overpower any leader in so desolate a time. However, Yeltsin had been struggling too long, too hard, with rare courage, and with the support of too many millions of Russians, to be so easily forgiven for the oblivion of what the slogans promised.

The country is experiencing the profound drama, if not the tragedy, of striving to get out of the infernal world of communism and decades-long social lethargy by using essentially the same practice of half-measures and disguised lies which had been so used by Gorbachev and his

entourage. Despite many protests and horrendous revelations, Vladimir Lenin still lies in honor in his sarcophagus inside the familiar mausoleum erected by Stalin, and millions of naïve people keep on worshipping him. Yeltsin is fearful of removing this symbol of the Soviet past. The government he heads has failed to repudiate officially and unambiguously the legacy of communist dictators. The unbridled "redbrown" forces, feeling this weakness in the new rulers, have placed themselves in the womb of the old ideology. More than a year has passed since the defeated coup, but the trial of the putsch-plotters has not yet started and hardly anybody knows when it will take place. The authorities have promised to open the archives of the Party and the KGB, but access to these "treasures" is still tightly guarded. The Russian intelligentsia feels utterly disenchanted with what is happening in the shattered country. Yeltsin's popularity is falling; the press writes openly about his pastimes, but the worst rumor is that he is not totally briefed by his own assistants about many aspects of the decaying situation in the country.

Yeltsin's reputation sank to a new low in the middle of December 1992, when Yegor Gaidar, the real symbol of reforms and visible achievements in the everyday economy, was ousted by the Congress of the Deputies and Victor Chernomyrdin, a former Communist party apparatchik, was elected as the new Russian Prime Minister. Yeltsin is likely to appeal to a national popular referendum. Perhaps this will be his last chance to regain his popularity. However that may be, the country's problems are so crucial and dramatic that one or two decades will yet be needed to achieve a radical change in the major spheres of life.

So at this stage Yeltsin as a political figure is not much different from Gorbachev. Both started from humble origins. Each of them climbed to the top of the Party and state pyramid, being, no doubt, masters of power games or, using the old party jargon, they knew "how to play chess." Both have been demonstrating for years fantastic skill, shrewdness, ambition, and courage. In his own way, each tried to save the core of the dying system. Each used the support of the concerned populace, the streets. And both have betrayed and alienated a good many of their former supporters. Of course, there are still profound differences: Yeltsin, from 1987, was repeatedly in mortal danger and the state security apparatus might indeed have got rid of him as it did of a number of other prominent Russians, including the widely popular Rev. Aleksandr Men,

slain in the fall of 1990. The resemblances between Yeltsin and Gorbachev are such that we can speak of them as a dualistic creature, twins. Gorbachev was wise enough not to eliminate Yeltsin totally. The future will show whether Yeltsin committed a grave mistake by removing Gorbachev from power (Telen' 5). The future will also show whether Yeltsin will commit another and even more fatal mistake by not accomplishing what he has promised time and again to do—to start building a new civilized society on the ruins of the Stalinist empire.

NOTE

1. In his interview in *Argumenty i fakty* Yakovlev says, "There will be no other putsch and there has been no coup."

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