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Ten Years of Freedom

By Gregory Feifer

AUGUST 2001

MOSCOW—The vodka bottle was less than half full but there were still many hours to Leningrad. Kolya poured another shot into the stained glass usually used for tea. I refrained this time; I didn't have the stomach for it this afternoon and had been drinking only enough to keep my friend—my very depressed friend—company. Instead I took the liberty of lighting a cigarette inside our aging, two-bunk compartment. The conductor wouldn't mind. He was hosting a drunken card game with a number of his colleagues several compartments down. Their own acrid tobacco smoke was billowing into the corridor. The rest of the car was empty. As far as I could tell, the rest of the train was empty, too.

"They're not going to send you to Siberia," I repeated for the umpteenth time. I couldn't think of anything else to say. Neither Kolya nor I really knew what would happen, even though exile seemed a crazy idea to me.

"Oh yes they are. The whole station will go. We'll be the first."

"Oh nonsense. Pour yourself another shot."

We rattled on past flat, green overcast fields toward the unknown; I was happy at least that we were moving on that fateful day ten years ago. Our empty ghost-train had been the last to leave the Lithuanian capital Vilnius before the republic's rail link was shut off. (The laws of supply and demand didn't seem to have applied, as usual—it had been nearly impossible to get a ticket. We'd really wanted to make it back home to Moscow, but there seemed little chance that would happen now.) We'd just learned about the closed borders on the



Hastily erected barricades next to Gorbati Most, a small footbridge, during the coup in 1991. The bridge stands next to the Russian Republic's parliament building, the "White House," where the republic's president, Boris Yeltsin, spearheaded opposition to the coup. Ironically, the monument was erected under the Soviet Union to commemorate the building of barricades during the 1905 revolution.



A pro-Yeltsin tank sporting the Russian tricolor near the White House, where crowds had gathered during the coup to support the "democrats" inside.

crackling speaker in the ceiling of the compartment. It was now, barely audibly, broadcasting a Moscow news conference held by a group of top-ranking Communist hardliners. General Secretary Gorbachev was ill, they said. An emergency committee had been set up that would take control over the Soviet Union.

"It's the end," Kolya moaned. His job as a correspondent at the country's most taboo-breaking channel, Russian Television, would certainly single him out during the recriminations that would inevitably follow, he said. Not to mention the fact that he'd briefly worked at CNN, where I'd met him earlier in the summer.

By the time our train pulled into Leningrad, both of us were feverishly ill. An acquaintance to whom we'd been introduced only the week before met us, smiling but visibly saddened, and drove us to his apartment in his creaking Lada. Andrei was a waiter at a top-end Soviet hotel, where he'd procured the ingredients for a borscht he made for us—no mean feat at such short notice in a city where most citizens survived on ration cards. He seemed to take the new political situation as he did everything else—accepting it, hoping for the best, doing whatever he could to get on. (When we'd first met him, he showed me his pride and joy—the impressive collection of western rock-and-roll audio tapes he'd managed somehow to procure to play on his equally impressive Soviet-built stereo he'd customized himself.) We sat up that night in his cramped apartment on the outskirts of town flipping between several television channels, unable to catch anything much but Swan Lake.

We knew the city's liberal mayor, Anatoly Sobchak, supported Mikhail Gorbachev and the new president of

the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin. Sobchak's was perhaps the loudest voice of reason heard sporadically over the airwaves, appealing for calm protest against what were now openly called plotters of a coup d'état. The next morning, with soaring body temperatures, Kolya and I made our way into the city center to join a mass of protesters who had taken over the main thoroughfare, Nevskii Prospekt. The sun was shining brightly. Barely able to walk under its glare, I choked down waves of nausea, but it was impossible not to become caught up in the crowd's enthusiasm. Many were waving the Russian imperial red, white and blue flag, which only months

ago would have been a shocking display of insubordination to the Communist regime.

There had been many such displays over the past months. That crowds had gathered to hurl insults at the Soviet government was nothing new. The novelty was that nothing seemed to stand between the protesters and the political descendants of the party of Lenin and Stalin. The reforming head of state who had initiated the revolutionary policies of perestroika and glasnost was under house arrest in Crimea. It was now up to the people to take a stand. After 70 years of Communist repression, the unbelievable was taking place.

While Kolya and I stumbled around half-dazed, our host Andrei (whose good-humored generosity—not entirely uncommon in the Soviet Union—I have nonetheless yet to see equaled) was off miraculously procuring rail tickets to Moscow. He bundled us off to the train station that night. We went to sleep on board not knowing whether we'd make it into the capital. We'd heard a curfew had been imposed, and our train would be arriving early in the morning.

Luck seemed to be on our side. We woke up not only within the city limits, but also feeling much better. The sickness seemed to be passing, if not the apprehension. That night, three young men had been killed by Soviet armored personnel carriers deployed near the U.S. Embassy. The weather was cold, grey and rainy. Dark clouds hung over the city.

I made my way to the so-called White House, the architectural eyesore built in the 1980s on the Moscow River

to house the Russian Republic's parliament. It was now the center of protest against the coup plotters holed up in the Kremlin not far away. Yeltsin, who had for years led the opposition not only to the hardliners in government, but more vociferously to Gorbachev himself, was inside with a group of Russia's other self-styled "democrats." Outside, the streets were littered with the carcasses of gutted buses and trolley buses, iron rods, concrete blocks and a vast array of anything else from the surrounding area that could have been ripped up to construct flimsy "barricades" that were symbolically important but would have done nothing to stop a single tank.

A division of unarmed tanks had by then been persuaded to "join" Yeltsin, and had maneuvered to stand with their guns pointing away from the building. Some of the

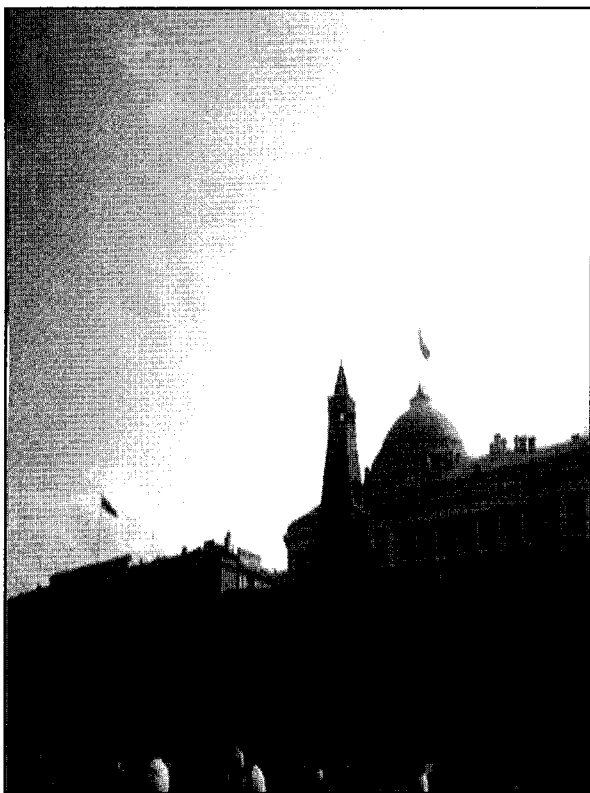


Building the barricades in front of the White House during the coup.

tanks sported tricolor flags; many were adorned with flowers.

Crowds carrying umbrellas were milling around, forming a human chain around the building. Some were still reinforcing the barricades. It had been a long, nerve-wracking night for most. Groups of so-called "meetings" sprang up sporadically, circles of bystanders arguing about the merits of the protest, the chances of success and the state of affairs in general. Some huddled around the lucky few with radios listening to any scrap of news about what was going on inside the White House and the Kremlin. Others walked the streets from the White House to the Garden Ring road in front of the U.S. Embassy, where rows of armored personnel carriers still stood from the night before. More crowds gathered in front of the soldiers who had blocked off access to the Kremlin and Manezh Square in front of it. Agitated protesters occasionally tried to persuade the soldiers to call off their guard. "Listen to the people!" one middle-aged woman screamed.

As I descended into a metro station near the White House to catch a train to Red Square, I couldn't help wondering why the underground was functioning at all. If my government had just changed hands and it wasn't clear who was running the country—and especially if the fate of an entire ruling ideology were at stake—surely I'd drop everything. I certainly wouldn't go to work. But most of the city was going about its business as usual. In the days that followed, many Muscovites dismissed the "defenders of the White House" as loiterers. "They're only there because someone drove up with a truck full of free vodka," one writer of travel books assured me.



Soldiers and their armored personnel carriers blocking off Manezh Square in front of the Kremlin during the coup.

In mid-afternoon, I went to the CNN offices. A cam-

eraman friend of mine played the footage of automatic rifle fire he'd filmed near the U.S. Embassy the night before. "It was scary," he admitted. Then we went up to the roof of the building where the White House lay in front of us in the distance and the patterns of barricades could be seen blocking off access along the main roads. Someone ran up panting after us. "It's over!" he said. "Or at least I think it's over." He carried a radio and we listened to a report that the coup plotters had dispersed; that some of them were trying to fly to Crimea and that a plane carrying Yeltsin allies was in hot pursuit.

As if on cue the clouds suddenly dispersed, as they often do in Moscow. The sun came out. Could it really be over? Most people on the streets hadn't heard the news. But gradually the atmosphere changed. Groups stood around laughing, exchanging war stories about the tense hours that had just ended as if they were long past. As the sun set, a stage was hastily set up in front of the White

House. Rock bands came out to play. Crowds walked around, trying to let off the nervous energy they'd pent up. The free-flowing beer and vodka helped, but it was impossible to believe the coup plotters had been faced down. This, August 21, was the day for which the citizens of the Soviet Union had been waiting for decades. An impossible dream had come true. Russia was finally free.

Ten Years On

As the ten-year anniversary of the coup loomed on the horizon this summer, Russian and western media outlets began commenting on the changes that had taken place. A host of coup participants gave interviews and news conferences. It could escape no one's attention that the country was fundamentally a different place than it was in 1991, not because it had progressed so far on the road to democracy and market economics, but because it seemed to be heading in the opposite direction, returning to the ways of the past.

Looking back at the past decade of freedom, most Russians didn't rue the country's current direction as much as they regretted many of Yeltsin's actions last decade. Chief among them was the 1993 shelling of the White House (then parliament), the very symbol of his own rise to power. At the time, the building was occupied by hard-line legislators opposed to Yeltsin's reforms (and the revolt was paradoxically led by two men who strongly backed Yeltsin in 1991). Yeltsin succeeded in driving them out and drafting a new constitution that gave him vast powers. Many Russians also condemned the virtual giveaway of state assets in the 1990s to a handful of insiders who amassed industrial and financial empires while the rest of the country slid inexorably toward greater poverty. There was also the first Chechen War, which Yeltsin subsequently stated he regretted having started.

One of those to take part in the debate was Yuri Levada, head of the National Public Opinion Research Center, or VTsIOM, a polling agency. He questioned, in *Obshchaya Gazeta*, why August 19th, the first day of the coup attempt, wasn't a national holiday. "In August 1991, there were two 'coups' in Russia," he said by way of an answer. "One of them was organized by the ruling elite—without the president—and failed; the other was organized by Boris Yeltsin and the democrats of that time, and turned out to be a success. There is another similarity here: both plots were destructive."

Levada went on to say that because the thousands of excited protesters in 1991 were





The view of the White House from the roof of the CNN office building during the coup. Trolleybuses were used to construct largely symbolic barricades blocking off access.

witnesses to, rather than participants in, the event, it didn't become ingrained as the momentous phenomenon it seemed to outside observers. According to a July VTsIOM poll, only 10 percent of respondents believed the coup failure represented the victory of a democratic revolution which put an end to the Communist Party's power. Twenty-five percent actually considered it a tragic event with di-

sastrous consequences for the country and the people; 45 percent said it was just an episode in the national power struggle. According to another poll, 49 percent of respondents were unable to remember even a single name of the coup plotters, the so-called "putschists."

Thus, memories of the failure of the 1991 coup seem to



The White House on August 19, 2001, during muted celebrations marking the tenth anniversary of the coup's first day.

have been considerably overshadowed by the cataclysms and hardships of subsequent years. That is precisely the opinion of my friend Nikolai (Kolya) Pavlov, with whom I was traveling in Lithuania on the first day of the coup ten years ago. Pavlov, now a Reuters Television producer in Moscow, says that in looking back at the coup failure, he doesn't feel it to have been a major breakthrough. "That's emotionally speaking, of course," he added. "One can try to talk objectively about it and what it really meant in the course of things, but given what subsequently happened—the Chechen War, for example—I'm somehow even-headed about the coup.

"It was a strange event," he continued. "Traveling in the train it felt scary. There was a sense that things were

said, was a patently undemocratic process meant to protect Yeltsin and his entourage from prosecution for past misdeeds. That new president, in his stated quest to bring order to the country, has strengthened central power, muted the free press and helped spread a general fear of the bureaucrats and law enforcers whose heightened discretionary powers, far from bringing order, have only bolstered the reach of the seemingly all-powerful presidential administration. Instead of reforming ruined institutions such as the court system, Vladimir Putin has pursued a genocidal second war in Chechnya. On the diplomatic stage, he functions as a gadfly, deviously thwarting any real cooperation with western international institutions and instead courting pariah states such as North Korea while issuing hard-line rhetoric aimed at appeasing a miserable domestic constituency. Only the most prescient observers ten years ago could have predicted that Russia's continuities would, a decade later, seem to outweigh the changes.

Dmitry Furman, a Russian historian and an astute political commentator, recently wrote that precisely the speed at which Russia suddenly found itself a changed state in August 1991 dictated the inevitability of today's situation, an outcome that could only have been different had reform been more gradual.¹ "The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party—with a total absence of civil society, developed parties, democratic traditions, with people used to blindly obeying the authorities—inevitably led to presidential authoritarianism," he wrote.²



The tiny handful of Russians celebrating the coup's anniversary gathered on Gorbatyi Most.

changing. But looking back... I don't know. People are dying in Chechnya every day. And how many people suffered in the coup? Only three."

Some liberal commentators were more forgiving of Yeltsin, saying that despite the corruption, the country was headed in the right direction for many years under his rule. Instead, they complained that by the end of his presidency, Yeltsin's quest to hold onto power led to an increase in corruption. The installation of a new president in 2000, many

During the weeks in which the coup's tenth anniversary remained topical, a number of the leading "democrats" who participated in the turmoil ten years ago called a news conference to discuss their own views. Most spoke of their disappointment at the later betrayal of their ideals. Many blamed Yeltsin for what they called the country's incomplete transition to democracy. Yuri Afanasyev, a first-wave democrat, said that the only winner of all the battles of the past decade was the state apparatus. He said the key to Yeltsin's success in 1991 was the support of middle-level bureaucrats who had acquired a taste for the money that could be made through private

¹ *The Moscow Times*, August 21, 2001.

² A manifestation of that new strain of authoritarianism is a recent wave of Internet websites created by the Kremlin to put out its spin. One of the newest, unveiled with much pomp in London, is dedicated to posting information about the raising of the Kursk submarine, which sank last year. In the days that followed the catastrophe, the Kremlin refused foreign help in trying to rescue the trapped submariners while spewing out a slew of theories about the causes of the sinking, collision with a U.S. submarine chief among them. The real reasons for the sinking are still a mystery, and will no doubt remain so because the government, by most accounts, is trying to cover up its own ineptness as well as hide the nuclear-tipped missiles the submarine is thought to have been carrying. The new website is the latest push in the cover-up. "Stay Informed—Not Fooled," the site's advertisement says—as if someone else were doing the fooling—in an attempt to create the illusion of openness.

enterprise. The trend continues today. "The choice of Putin is also the nomenklatura's choice," Afanasyev added. "They saw that the ailing Yeltsin might not be able to protect their interests any longer."

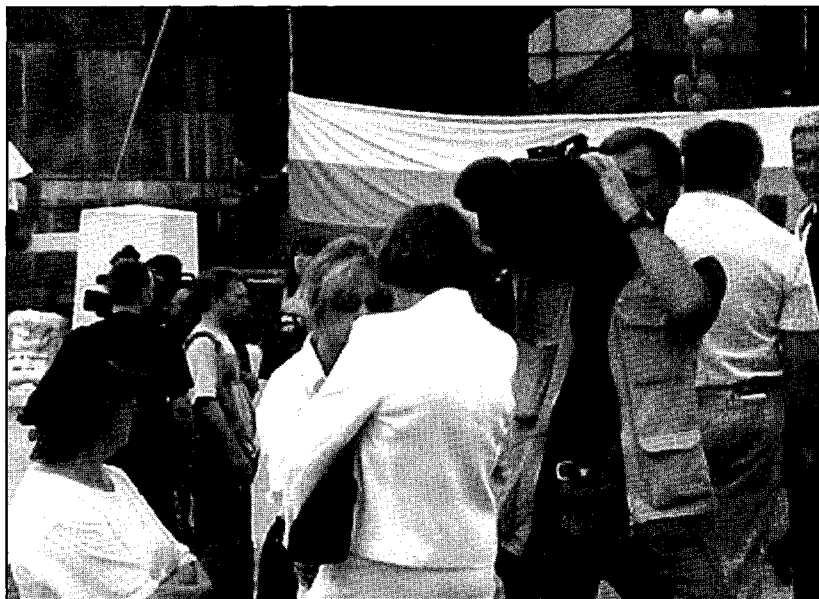
In an interview with Reuters, Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of Ekho Moskv radio who reported from inside the White House in 1991, pointed to the fact that some of the coup plotters recently hailed President Putin's leadership and approved his crackdown on the media. Two of the "putschists" had attended Putin's inauguration last year. (Putin even invited one of them himself, former KGB chief Kryuchkov.) It was unclear, Venediktov said, whether the president would mark the anniversary by visiting a shrine to the three students who died in the turmoil "or by having a drink with the committee members." In the event, he did neither.

Gorbachev Weighs In

The failure of the coup a decade ago to the very day I'm typing these words was the culmination of a process that had begun much earlier. The Party was still in control in 1991—it was difficult to procure a bottle of vodka or a decent meal—but Moscow already showed signs of radical change. McDonald's had famously arrived, along with a host of western companies that had sent representatives to open offices in the capital and put out feelers in a potentially vast, untapped market. The press was more-or-less free, and the enthusiasm of many of its young correspondents irrepressible. The economy might have been unreformed and crisis-ridden, but it seemed that society was free to shake off the drab Soviet past at will.

The political scene, however, was far from rosy. As Gorbachev's policies of internal perestroika (rebuilding) and diplomatic glasnost (openness) progressed after his ascent to power in 1985, a rift had developed in the country's political elite. The Soviet leader had made unprecedented attempts to liberalize the economy, augment civil liberties, decentralize government control and chip away at the political monopoly of the Communist Party. In the process, he increasingly found himself caught between die-hard conservatives and reformers more radical than himself. Gorbachev exacerbated the situation by appointing the very hardliners who would later betray him to high posts and pushing their acceptance through an unwilling Central Committee.

By the end of the 1980s, two major challenges threatened Gorbachev's balancing act: a stagnating economy on the verge of collapse, and loud calls for greater independence in a number of the Soviet Union's 15 republics. The dismal economic situation was highlighted by miners' strikes and empty store shelves, while the rise of reform-



There seemed to be more journalists and tourists at the tenth-anniversary celebration than revelers.

minded and nationalist forces in the republics had led to bids for sovereignty in the Baltic states—striking panic in the hearts of the Communist old guard—and bloody ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus.

Gorbachev felt—and professes to do so to this day—that the Soviet economy could still work if only it were properly reformed. His prescription for a way out of the mire—in which enterprises were to be used above all to fill the pockets of their managers and provide the full employment that kept their political bosses happy—was to loosen central control. Gorbachev's program of decentralization held as its guiding principle that central planners lacked the necessary information to make informed decisions. After his reforms, however, instead of trying to maximize the efficiency of their companies by producing better products, managers continued to do what they had done before, only this time with no fear of reprisal. The KGB, which had previously enforced the parameters of accepted corruption, faded quickly, and managers increasingly pursued their political bosses' objectives in return for greater subsidies (that is, more cash they could skim off for themselves). Meanwhile, various state agencies arbitrarily extended their control, grabbing whatever they could (such as export rights to Russia's vast mineral wealth) while mafia-style protection increasingly took over in the nascent private sector. By the end of the 1980s, the economy's development was out of Gorbachev's hands. In a bid to save the Soviet economic system by loosening central control, he had let it slip forever, sending it into a corruption-ridden crisis.

While the political situation changed at dizzying speed, Gorbachev's moderation prevented him from keeping up with the pace of reform ushered in by his own perestroika, both in Eastern Europe and at home. Later, he would call the government's caution in pushing through political and economic change in 1987-88 "a strategic miscalculation."



Two men on Gorbati Most celebrating the coup's tenth anniversary. In the uniform is World War II veteran Lev Kutsevich, 72, who holds a sign saying "August 1991" and sports a nametag reading "Defender of the White House, August 1991."

To shore up his position, Gorbachev continued to try to maintain a centrist position by playing rival groups off against each other. He set up the Congress of People's Deputies—a new parliament—to back him against the Politburo. (And he would turn to the Politburo for support when the parliament opposed him.) By the end of 1990, Gorbachev's constant pendulum swings between conservatives and reformers had alienated both groups and, over one year, his rating among the Soviet public dropped by 25 percentage points to 56 percent.

In 1990 and 1991, a string of events ratcheted up the tension and increased the stakes for which Gorbachev was playing. In December 1990, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, one of Gorbachev's closest allies and a chief proponent of reform, resigned in protest. "Dictatorship is coming," he warned parliament. "No one knows what kind of dictatorship this will be and who will come—what kind of dictator." The following January, blood spilled in Lithuania and Latvia after Soviet troops seized Communist Party and Interior Ministry headquarters, respectively, in a bid to repress secessionist agitation. In Moscow, thousands of demonstrators protested the violence, but Gorbachev remained unrepentant.

For Gorbachev, reform of the economy and maintenance of the Soviet Union's territorial integrity went hand-in-hand. He had pinned much hope on a referendum on

preserving the Soviet Union. In March, that referendum took place in only nine of the union's republics. Over 76 percent of participants supported the union. But in the Russian Republic, 70 percent of voters supported an additional questioned pushed by Yeltsin, about whether the republic should have an elected president. In June, Yeltsin ascended to the new post he had helped create in the first direct vote for a leader in Russia in 1,000 years. It proved a significant boost to Yeltsin's personal authority as well as a major threat to the Soviet Union's power from one of its component parts. Some heralded Yeltsin's attempts to bring down an oppressive regime; others maintained that in trying to undermine the Communist Party, Yeltsin's overriding goal was to grab power for himself.

Days later, an ominous—and in retrospect foreshadowing—event took place. The hard-line Soviet Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov announced that Gorbachev's health was failing and that the Soviet leader needed "more rest." Pavlov demanded that some of Gorbachev's powers be transferred to him. Two more future coup plotters, KGB head Vladimir Kryuchkov and Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, also attacked Gorbachev for neglecting the dangers posed by the capitalist West.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev pushed ahead with plans for a new treaty that would maintain a sovereign Soviet Union while enhancing the political and economic independence

of its signatories. In August, Gorbachev met with Yeltsin and Kazakhstan's Party boss Nursultan Nazarbayev to make a last push to get it rolling. The three set a signing date of August 20 for Russia and Kazakhstan. Gorbachev then left for a vacation at his luxurious dacha in the Crimean Black Sea resort town of Foros. The details of the union treaty were kept secret, but the KGB had secretly recorded the talks. On August 17, KGB head Kryuchkov gathered the eight men who would soon become known as the State Emergency Committee, or GKChP, for a secret meeting in Moscow. The following day, a delegation went to Foros to persuade Gorbachev to abandon the treaty and agree to impose a state of emergency. Gorbachev refused.

Ten years on, Gorbachev remains bitter about the coup attempt that began the following day. He is growing visibly older these days, but remains as energetic as ever. (What a contrast to his moribund successor Yeltsin!) He sports new, chic, oval-shaped glasses, which replaced the large rectangular ones favored by aging bureaucrats. The head of his Gorbachev Fund, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting disarmament and environmental causes, Gorbachev is also nominal chief of a marginal alliance of so-called "social-democratic" political parties. In mid-August, he held a news conference in Moscow, where he said that the coup plotters "saw that their time was up... they would soon have to leave their jobs and their privileges, and they couldn't accept it. They didn't pass the test of democracy." Several days later, Gorbachev told the *Los Angeles Times*: "If we had reformed the Party, we could have prevented the process of the formation of forces of resistance, revanchist forces inside the Communist Party. But as it turned out, it was the people from my entourage, the people whom I had placed in the Politburo, who turned out to be the coup plotters. To me, betrayal is the most abominable of all things a person can do, be it to friends or to colleagues. Especially when it is done for personal gain."

Unpopular for many years, Gorbachev is undergoing something of a renaissance. That's partly due to the fact that his beloved wife, Raisa—who suffered a nervous breakdown during the coup, from which she didn't recover for two years—died of cancer last year. Few couldn't help sympathizing with Gorbachev's public grief. His emerging role as elder statesman is also due in part to nostalgia for old times. Russians increasingly appreciate Gorbachev's resolute view that the Party shouldn't have been disbanded.

Gorbachev also fully backs the popular president. He says Putin is trying to stabilize a nation ravaged by a decade of chaotic reforms. On paper, at least, Gorbachev's ideas of the state's role in society seem quite close to Putin's. "I support President Putin and his strategy," Gorbachev said during his news conference. "He acts for the benefit of national interests and in favor of the majority of the population." Gorbachev has nonetheless at times criticized Putin's government, especially for putting pressure on NTV television, which was taken over by the state-con-

nected giant gas company Gazprom this spring.

No Shows at the Anniversary Celebration

On August 19, I headed to the White House to join those celebrating the coup attempt's ten-year anniversary. It was a warm, sunny day, and as I approached the building I expected to see crowds—at least some of the tens of thousands who were out in 1991. I knew that it being a Sunday, one was much more likely to come across a Muscovite—particularly on such a beautiful day—at his dacha or plot of land in the country than on the capital's streets. On this day, the city was exceptionally barren. There were so few cars, it was possible to walk calmly across the city's wide central boulevards, a move likely to prove fatal during the work week. The White House was eerily silent. As I approached, I spotted a group of not more than 50 people milling around a small, empty stage. Coming closer, I saw that most of those present were either tourists or members of the press. An elderly man took the stage to read a poem, but held the microphone in his hand in such a way that nothing was audible. No one seemed to care. George Michael music was piped in.

A handful of mostly middle-aged men and women, apparently members of the intelligentsia, stood around in small groups and spoke in quiet voices. Most had gathered on a small cobblestone bridge in front of the White House to meet friends and exchange news. Several sported "Defender of the White House, August 1991" nametags. Some banners fluttered in the wind and several die-hards in uniforms held placards. This sad, motley assortment of "democrats" couldn't have seemed more marginalized. In 1991, many stood to benefit from the changes that brought about the end of the Soviet Union. In 2001, it was clear those momentous events were falling off the edge of public consciousness. Several more people took to the stage; their words were steeped in nostalgia. "We were here! We knew what was at stake! We didn't allow the reactionaries to take power!" One man shouted. Few listened. A group of teenage boys milling around next to me were more interested in chatting up a girl selling Coca-Cola.

Of those to whom I spoke, most seemed ambivalent about the coup. "I think the end of the Communist Party was a bad thing," said a man in his fifties holding a worn plastic shopping bag and eyeing me suspiciously. He wouldn't give me his name. I asked him why he'd come to the gathering. He snorted and moved off.

Officials put on a modest rock concert two days later on August 21st and staged a commemoration of Flag Day—when Russia informally adopted the tricolor—on the 22nd. If the vast bulk of Russians seemed not to care one way or the other, the country's leaders took pains to say nothing at all. Putin was on holiday in Russia's Northwest the entire time. He "personally sent" a wreath to be laid at the graves of the three young men killed during the coup attempt. But he said nothing about the anniversary. Instead, he sent a congratulatory telegram to Vympel, a special unit in the Federal



The night following the coup's last day, protesters put flowers on the carcass of a burnt-out trolleybus that had served as a barricade against armored personnel carriers. It had burned on the second night of the coup next to the underpass where three young men were killed.

Security Service, a KGB successor, which also celebrated its anniversary on the 19th. Yeltsin also said nothing, remaining completely out of sight, apparently quite ill. No other major government official said anything either.

Russia's official "independence day" comes on June 12, and commemorates the strange day in 1990 when the Russian Republic, still a part of the Soviet Union, declared itself a sovereign state committed to democratic ideals. June 12 is a national holiday. Russians are happy for day off work, but no one really seems to understand why the date is significant. August 19—the first day of the coup attempt—on the other hand, is the important one in the eyes of the White House defenders. As I've mentioned, it is most pointedly not a national holiday.

An Unforgettable Event

Russians may be increasingly ambivalent about the coup's significance, but most still remember precisely where they were when they first heard of the event ten years ago. It began early in the morning. People tuning into the news on television and radio were among the first to hear the stunning announcement that Gorbachev had been replaced because of ill health. Power was transferred to the GKChP, officially led by Vice President Gennady Yanayev. Hundreds

of tanks and armored personnel carriers moved into the city. Channel One, the main state television channel, which was expected to serve as the Kremlin's mouthpiece, dutifully broadcast official pronouncements that new leadership had taken over to prevent "chaos and anarchy" and to save the Soviet Union.

Russians also remember the bravery—opportunistic or not—of the day's main hero. At the White House, Yeltsin and his like-minded colleagues and supporters gathered in mid-morning. Surprisingly, no measures had been taken to prevent deputies from entering and leaving. Even the telephones weren't cut off. Yeltsin drafted an appeal denouncing the putsch. "Storm clouds of terror and dictatorship are gathering over the whole country," it read. "They [the GKChP] must not be allowed to bring eternal night."

At the same time, the journalists at Channel One, conditioned by five years of perestroika, began to disobey orders, giving subtle hints about where their own sympathies lay. A tight ring of troops had sealed the television-studio complex and a KGB colonel lurked in the editorial offices to monitor reports. But the station's choice to fill airtime with solemn music and classical ballet served to alert viewers that something serious was happening. "Swan Lake" was—remarkably—scheduled to be shown that day anyway, but it was replayed repeatedly in the absence of regular programming. Channel Two, or Russian Television, the



Near the White House on the third day of the coup.

station for which my friend Kolya worked and which had supported Yeltsin as president of the Russian Republic, was taken off the air.

The tanks making their way to the White House were stopped by Yeltsin supporters gathering outside the building. In what became the enduring image of those days, Yeltsin, wearing a bulletproof vest under his suit, walked down the front steps of the White House and climbed onto one of the tanks. With the battalion commander standing by silently, he made a short appeal to the "citizens of Russia" (as opposed to the Soviet variety), accusing the GKChP of staging a "right-wing, reactionary, anti-constitutional coup" and declaring the committee illegal.

Throughout the first night and into the next day, more people came to defend the White House. Ahead of the second night, the GKChP imposed a curfew from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. Rumors leaked out of the KGB that the building would be stormed, and those inside the White House began to fear the worst. It was then that three men were killed not far away while trying to stop some of the armored vehicles moving through the city. One of the protesters was shot while jumping on top of an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC). The two others were crushed to death. The civilian deaths shocked even the coup leaders, who soon made the first signs that their attempt to grab power would unravel. The following morning, Defense Minister Yazov ordered troops to begin pulling out of the city.

While there had indeed been plans to storm the White House, the army divisions sent into Moscow were in disarray. Their soldiers were unfed, sleep-deprived and under the command of officers who themselves didn't know whom to back. Far from cowing the "democrats," their confusion helped publicize the coup plotters' lack of wherewithal to finish the task they started. It was a doomed operation from the start.

To this day, Russians remember Yeltsin as the man of the moment. He capitalized on his display of bravery, and continued to push his advantage after the coup was thwarted. In contrast, when a visibly shaken Gorbachev returned to the capital, the Soviet leader massively misread the public sentiment. He didn't go to the White House to show his support for those who confronted the hardliners and saved (if only briefly) his presidency. More damningly, he insisted the Communist Party shouldn't be blamed for the actions of a few bad apples. Gorbachev didn't realize that on his return to Moscow, he had arrived in another country.

Yeltsin seized the opportunity. A day after Gorbachev returned from Foros, he called a session of Russia's Supreme Soviet and forced the still shell-shocked Gorbachev to condemn the Party. Yeltsin behaved abominably, treating Gorbachev like a naughty schoolchild, taking his revenge for the many years he had remained second fiddle to the Party chief. (Gorbachev almost wrecked Yeltsin's career by dismissing him from his post as Moscow Party boss in 1987.) Then, with a theatrical flourish, Yeltsin signed a decree sus-

pending the Communist Party in the Russian Republic and confiscating Soviet Communist Party property on its territory—despite Gorbachev's pleadings. It was the first of three decrees that brought an end to Party rule. Gorbachev stayed on as Soviet president, but the state of which he was head disappeared from under him in December, when the leaders of the republics of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine met in Belarus to sign away the Soviet Union and replace it with the toothless Commonwealth of Independent States.

It might seem odd that the man for whom the coup attempt was such a major personal triumph said nothing on its tenth anniversary. Even more so that his heir Putin also remained totally mum. But the unanimous opinion in Moscow was that Russia's authorities want their subjects to forget about the event because it is a reminder of the power of the people. Now in control, the direct political beneficiaries of the coup-foiling are threatened by the very forces that gave them so much. Even more distressing to the critics is the direct connection to the past—the fact that Putin is a product of the KGB, a man whose chief, Vladimir Kryuchkov, himself helped mastermind the coup.

Coup Plotters Ten Years On

On the first day of the coup, Yanayev, the self-proclaimed acting Soviet President, addressed the Soviet people during a live broadcast news conference. Four other GKChP members also took part. Channel One's cameramen and live-feed editors were used to covering up leaders' failures. This time, a camera lingered on Yanayev's trembling hands, which became a key symbol of the bungled coup attempt. Viewers didn't get the sense they were looking at a group of resolute hard liners. Instead, they saw a group of agitated elderly men who didn't look at all sure of what they were doing.

At one point during the news conference, a young *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reporter just out of journalism school bluntly asked Yanayev, "Could you please say whether or not you understand that last night you carried out a coup d'état?" Yanayev mumbled incoherently in reply while the camera showed the reporter's face bearing an expression of disdain. It was a not-insignificant show of defiance.

Former Interior Minister Boris Pugo shot himself and his wife in the days after the coup failure. But many of the others have since done quite well for themselves. In interviews in the weeks ahead of the anniversary, they praised Putin's policies and maintained they only wanted to do in 1991 what Putin is doing now: prevent the country from falling apart. In early July, a number of them gathered together at a news conference, a strange reprise of their appearance before the press a decade ago. Former Soviet Prime Minister Pavlov, like virtually all his fellow plotters, backed Putin's bid to "restore order." "Today, they are trying to do what we attempted to do in the Soviet Union in 1991," Pavlov said.

Pavlov and other members of the GKChP said their

coup failed because they were badly prepared and were too cautious to use force. "We didn't want to fight against our own people," Yanayev said.

The 12 jailed coup plotters were released by 1993 and amnestied by parliament in 1994. Some later became lawmakers. Vasily Starodubtsev, chairman of the farmers' union in 1991, resumed his position as director of a collective farm before being elected Communist governor of the Tula region, south of Moscow. He was recently re-elected in a landslide to a second term. Yazov became senior adviser to Russia's main arms exporter, Rosvoruzhenie, in 1998. Kryuchkov wrote his memoirs after his release from prison, and now co-heads a think-tank that thinks along the lines of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Yanayev is a consultant for the state pension fund. Pavlov went on to become a banker and later president of a company incorporated in the United States. (That didn't stop him from harshly criticizing liberal economic reforms in his book titled "Did We Miss the Opportunity?")³ Former Supreme Soviet Speaker Anatoly Lukyanov, thought of as one of the main ideologues of the putsch together with Kryuchkov, is now a Communist deputy in the Duma, and chairs the construction commission there. He has written several books of poetry, including "Poems from Jail."

Of the plotters who claim they were only trying to save the country from collapse, perhaps Starodubtsev is bold-



Ten years on, a display about the coup mounted for one of the news conferences held to commemorate the event. The sign reads "coup d'état."

est. "I think in 100 years we will be considered Decembrists," he told Reuters in mid-August, referring to members of a thwarted 19th century revolutionary movement. "We will be seen as Decembrists who attempted to stop the collapse of a great state and halt the abuse of their own people by a mob of national traitors." A man who understands that point, he said, is Putin, who "finally after 10 years of lawlessness spoke of the independence of Russian national interests, of the priorities of the Russian people."

Yuschenkov Complains

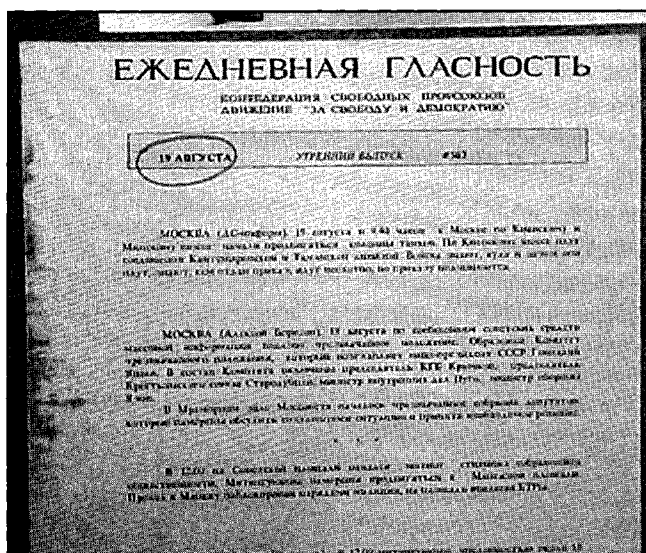
In early August, I went to a strange meeting organized by the St. George's Corps, a self-appointed group formed in June 2001 to uphold the ideals of the 1991 opposition to the coup plotters. A number of the organization's founders, who claim to have played a large role in defending the White House, were members of a private security firm, Alex. They distributed a newsletter at the August meeting with photographs of Alex security guards sporting snub-nosed AKS-74U machine guns inside the White House. The "corps," the organizers wrote, "unites all those who, in the past ten years since the putsch, have maintained a feeling of personal worth, faith in the victory of democracy and remain convinced in their abilities to defend it from all forms of totalitarianism, violence and threats to human rights."

The meeting was unmistakably glum.



A display put up by the St. George's Corps showing barricade builders' supplies. The sign reads "General Self-Defense Headquarters."

³ Agence France Presse, August 16, 2001.



A copy of the Yezhednevnyaya (Daily) Glasnost wall paper posted in metros and other public places and distributed by hand during the three days of the coup. Much of the news, under the dateline "Moscow," reported tank sightings throughout the city.

Most present were middle-aged, although a phalanx of young, square-jawed men in black sport coats with "Alex" pins stood in the reception area. These were no intellectuals—one would have expected them to applaud Putin, as so many Russians do these days. But they felt betrayed. Given what most Russians now admit—that the events in 1991 were backed by an élite intent on preserving its own power—it seemed almost farcical just how much stock speakers at the meeting put in the impromptu stand against the coup plotters. The air was sodden with nostalgia for a simpler time. "We did a lot in 1991," said Andrei Kasikov, one of the security firm's directors. "It's fashionable now to say Russia shouldn't have been put through [economic] shock therapy, which was a tremendous burden to the people. But in 1991, we were deciding something else altogether. The main question was whether we were going to



Sergei Yushchenkov, who persuaded the first tank commander to support Yeltsin during the coup. Yushchenkov is a liberal icon, and echoes the view that those running the state apparatus profited from the Soviet collapse more than any other group.

Institute of Current World Affairs

be democrats or return to the past. The main thing was that we started on a new path. To forget those conditions now isn't right."

Kasikov called for August 19th to be declared a national holiday "that will serve as a reminder which will stop us from reverting to the past." He went on to blame politicians and bureaucrats for cheating society out of its due. "We were tricked, but our goals remain intact."

The guest of honor was Sergei Yushchenkov. In 1991, Yushchenkov, who held the rank of lieutenant colonel, taught at a military academy. He was also a member of parliament. At the White House on the first day of the coup, Yushchenkov persuaded Major Sergei Yevdokimov, one of the tank commanders advancing on the building, to turn his machine away from the building in support of Yeltsin. "I went up to him and said something rather emotional along the lines of, 'officer, it is your chance to choose between eternal glory and eternal shame,'" Yushchenkov told *The Moscow Times*. Yevdokimov was the first military officer to disobey orders and defy the defense



Andrei Kasikov addressing the St. George's Corps. Kasikov complained that the ideals of the coup have been betrayed.

minister and rest of the GKChP. Now a Duma deputy, Yushchenkov remains an icon among liberals; many of his colleagues consider him a "radical democrat." After a number of speeches recalling the old glory days and bemoaning Russia's state of affairs, Yushchenkov was called on stage.

"I'm a little bit embarrassed to speak since you've dragged politicians through the mud so much," he said by way of an introduction to an audience glowing with appreciation. Then he spoke about his own turf. "Our parliament can't function independently as it should. It can't exert control over the executive authority or over our bureaucrats," he said. "Why are some of our top officials also some of Russia's richest men?" he continued. "Because the state is involved in the economy. But what is the state? A lot of it is simply bureaucrats. Bureaucrats giving out licenses, taking bribes and making their own decisions.

"But it is society that has to make those decisions, to have ultimate control over the state," Yushchenkov added.



Two days after the coup, a Russian tricolor (on the left) flew alongside the Soviet red flag. To the great joy of so many, the latter was soon taken down for good. But the tricolor now represents a state that has come to stand for many of the ideals the red flag once symbolized for the populace, chiefly increased central authority. Earlier this year, the Duma resurrected the Soviet anthem (with new words) in a move backed by President Putin.

"Ten years ago, those of us defending the White House thought, 'At least we've won, the past is over, and the future will be better.' We thought we had helped stage a great event and that everything after that would logically follow, as it should. But that doesn't happen in reality."

Paradox Remains

As I've said, Gorbachev still insists the Party should have remained intact and reforms in Russia carried out more slowly. In 1991, during the jubilation that came with the end of the Communist regime, such sentiments seemed positively reactionary. Gorbachev, however, can only be commended for speaking his mind. Whatever he thought about the final outcome of his momentous decision to undertake reform in 1985, it is clear he wanted democratic change. Not only did he allow the Soviet Union to prepare for the Communist collapse with six years of reform, but he has stuck to his line to this very day.

That line often seems ludicrous. Today, Gorbachev wholeheartedly supports a president who seems to embody everything Gorbachev doesn't. Gorbachev's style also still infuriates his critics. He often speaks of himself in the third person. He can seem intolerably smug. And whatever Gorbachev's personal bravery in resisting the attempt to topple him, many maintain it was Yeltsin's defiance atop the tanks sent to intimidate him that was more important,

revealing just how deeply the country had been transformed. As an act of bravado and sheer political theater, Yeltsin's was hard to beat, and his continued defiance helped break the resolve of the nerveless plotters. But Yeltsin—the man whose ferocious political ambition helped so much in bringing down the hated old system and introducing radical economic and political reform—also brought the reform era shuddering to a confused end because of the same desire to hold power.

The bloated, ailing Yeltsin is now out of sight like an old Politburo chief, kept from view by the circle that rode his coattails to power. Putin is fast resurrecting many of the repressive political functions of state that Yeltsin once so convincingly condemned. Meanwhile, Gorbachev remains a sympathetic character. He's the man who started it all and he's as lucid as ever. He travels the world, gives interviews and speaks his mind. Which of the two was right in 1991? Both, of course, in their own ways. As ever, all of Russia's paradoxes and tragedies—the desire to change the country for the better and the often-ruinous outcomes that follow—are still being played out. Viktor Chernomyrdin, Yeltsin's former prime minister—known best for his billions and his hamfisted public speaking style—inadvertently coined a phrase during a failed attempt to broker peace during the Kosovo crisis. It seems to sum up the Russian dilemma: "We wanted things to turn out for the best, but they turned out as they always do." □

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Fellows and their Activities

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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