RUSSIA
AT THE
BARRICADES
This page intentionally left blank
RUSSIA AT THE BARRICADES

Eyewitness Accounts of the August 1991 Coup

Edited by Victoria E. Bonnell, Ann Cooper, and Gregory Freidin
To our children, Anna Freidin and Tom Keller
Contents

Map of Central Moscow vi
List of Photographs xi
Preface xiii
Acknowledgments xv
Note on Transliteration and Interpolations xvii
Guide to the Print Media xix

Introduction Victoria E. Bonnell and Gregory Freidin 3

I: Saving the Old Country 31

1. Proclamations and Decrees of the State Committee for the State of Emergency, August 19, 1991 33
   Document 1 Decree of the Vice President of the USSR 33
   Document 2 Appeal to the Soviet People 33
   Document 3 Resolution No. 1 of the USSR State Committee for the State of Emergency 38
   Document 4 Resolution of the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the Convening of an Extraordinary Session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR 41

2. The Press Conference of the State Committee for the State of Emergency, August 19, 1991 42
3. Statements and Explanations by the Putschists After the Coup  

**Document 1** Interrogation of Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov on August 22, 1991

**Document 2** Interrogation of Soviet Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov, August 30, 1991

**Document 3** Interrogation of the Head of the USSR KGB, Vladimir Kriuchkov

II: The Public Reacts

1. *Gregory Freidin* To the Barricades
2. Letter from Moscow
3. *Victoria E. Bonnell* August 19 and 20 in Moscow
4. *Lauren G. Leighton* Moscow: The Morning of August 21
5. *Vladimir Petrik* Moscow’s M.V. Khrunichev Machine-Building Factory Reacts to the August Coup
7. *Donald J. Raleigh* A View from Saratov
8. *Valerii Zavorotnyi* Letter from St. Petersburg

III: In High Places

1. *Mikhail S. Gorbachev* What Happened in Foros
2. *Boris Yeltsin* Proclamations, Decrees, and Appeals in Response to the Coup, August 19, 1991
   - **Document 1** Appeal to the Citizens of Russia
   - **Document 2** Decree No. 59 of the President of the RSFSR
   - **Document 3** Decree No. 61 of the President of the RSFSR
   - **Document 4** Appeal by Boris Yeltsin, President of the RSFSR, to the Soldiers and Officers of the USSR Armed Forces, the USSR Committee for State Security [KGB], and the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD]

4. Interview with Nikolai Vorontsov  Between Russia and the Soviet Union—With Notes on the USSR Council of Ministers Meeting of August 19, 1991  181

5. Vladimir Shcherbakov Recounts His Role in the Coup  195

6. Interview with Yevgenii Shaposhnikov  The Coup and the Armed Forces  201

7. Interview with Davlat Khudonazarov  From Dushanbe to Moscow  209

8. Interview with Anatolii Sobchak  Breakthrough: The Coup in St. Petersburg  218

9. Interview with Aleksandr N. Yakovlev  Our Children Were on the Barricades  226

IV: Defending the White House  233

1. Theresa Sabonis-Chafee  Reflections from the Barricades  235

2. Interview with Aleksandr Prokhanov  Concerning the Defenders of the White House  249

3. Michael Hetzer  Death on the Streets  253

4. A Man in the Crowd  256

5. E-Mail from Aleksei Kozhevnikov  On the Barricades  263

6. Conversation with Viktor Sheinis and Alla Nazimova In and Around the White House  267

V: Getting the News In and Out  287

1. Iain Elliot  Three Days in August: On-the-Spot Impressions  289

2. Interview with Sergei Medvedev  Getting the News on “Vremia”  301

3. Ann Cooper  The Foreign Press and the Coup  308
4. *Interview with Tatiana Malkina*  The August 19 Press Conference 318

5. *Interview with Valerii Kucher*  A Russian Reporter Remembers the Coup 322

Chronology of Events of August 19, 20, 21, 1991 337

Index of Personal Names 367
List of Photographs

- Erecting a barricade near the White House 73
- Civilians rush to form a human chain against approaching tanks on Kalinin Prospect 75
- A civilian appeals to a soldier near the White House 76
- Tanks lined up on Kutuzov Prospect 80
- Women hauling debris to build a barricade as tanks approach the White House 82
- A barricaded street near the White House, mid-afternoon on August 19 82
- Demonstrators marching from Manezh Square to the White House 87
- A civilian confronts an officer in Manezh Square 89
- “Yeltsin Has Called for a General Strike” 90
- “Outlaw the CPSU!” and “Put the Bolshevik Putschists on Trial!” 90
- People gathered for a rally by the Hotel Moskva in Manezh Square 91
- Protest leaflets at a metro station on Kalinin Prospect 92
- People carrying an enormous tricolor flag to the midday rally at the White House 94
- The Tuesday rally, with the tricolor flag draped over the White House balcony 96
The crowd listening to speeches at the Tuesday rally  
Children on a pro-Yeltsin tank near the White House  
Defenders of the White House set up camp  
Men guarding the White House early Tuesday evening  
A makeshift memorial on the spot where a young man was killed in the early morning of August 21  
Three young men who perished at the barricades  
A trolleybus damaged by an armored vehicle in the early morning of August 21  
Revolution Square, Saratov: "Hangman of Russia"  
At the Mariinskii Palace, St. Petersburg: "No to Red Fascism!" "Join the Indefinite Political Strike!" "No to the CPSU Dictatorship!"  
Rally in Palace Square, August 19  
Rally in Palace Square, August 20  
A soldier reads Yeltsin's appeal to the armed forces  
Defenders of the White House, Tuesday night
Preface

On August 19, 1991, eight high-ranking Soviet officials took over the government of the USSR by force and proclaimed themselves the country's new rulers. Less than seventy-two hours later, their attempt to seize power had collapsed. Though short-lived, the coup produced consequences few could have foreseen. Soon afterward, the Communist Party that had ruled Russia since 1917 was suspended and dispossessed. Five months after the coup, the Soviet Union itself had ceased to exist.

The editors of this volume had the good fortune to witness at close range the monumental events that shook Russia and the world in August 1991. Ann Cooper, the National Public Radio bureau chief in Moscow since 1986, was covering a story in Vilnius, Lithuania, when the coup began. By the end of the day she was back in Moscow. Victoria E. Bonnell, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and Gregory Freidin, a former Muscovite who teaches Russian literature at Stanford University, arrived in Moscow on August 15 to do research and visit friends and family.

Experienced though we all were in observing and writing about Soviet affairs, we found ourselves overwhelmed and astonished by the tremendous power of the events. With millions of others in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and throughout the Soviet Union and the world, we watched with horror and fascination as the junta sought to turn back the clock to a time—a mere six years earlier!—when a corrupt and brutal Communist party-state had ruled Russia.

Several months after the event, the three editors reunited in Berkeley, California. Despite the time that had passed, we still felt the magnetism of the August days, when democratic reforms were suddenly in
jeopardy, and the whole country teetered precariously on the brink of a civil war.

To do honor to the events and their participants and to preserve the vibrancy of the moment, we decided to put together this collection of eyewitness accounts of the three fateful days in August. We wanted to show the events from a variety of points of view—those of the plotters, the leaders of the democratic resistance, foreign and Russian journalists, visiting émigrés and scholars, military officers and ordinary citizens of diverse occupations. Our accounts concentrate on Moscow, where most of the key events were played out. St. Petersburg (then still called Leningrad), the provincial city of Saratov, and the Tajik capital of Dushanbe are represented as well. We have included some documents, such as the major declarations and decrees issued by the Emergency Committee and by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, to provide the context for the August events.

Above all, we have tried to give a sense of what it was like to be there and to see with one's own eyes how the people of Russia, as George Kennan put it, "turned their back on the manner in which they've been ruled—not just in the Soviet period but in the centuries before. . . . Even 1917 had nothing quite like this" (New York Times, August 24, 1991).
Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank George Breslauer, who gave us the idea for this volume. Gail Lapidus provided valuable and timely support for the project through the Berkeley-Stanford Program on Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies. Without research assistance, the volume would have been far longer in the making.

When we began work on the volume, we placed a notice in the newsletter of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies inviting contributions. We received quite a number of responses, and some of them have been included here. We regret that we could not publish all of them, and we thank those contributors whose work did not fit the final format of the book. Dorothy Atkinson was especially helpful in alerting us to material and potential authors for the volume.

The project benefited greatly from the assistance of several Berkeley graduate students. Special thanks to Howard Allen, Jeffrey Rossman, and especially Veljko Vujacic. George Breslauer, Victor Zaslavsky, and Veljko Vujacic gave us valuable comments and suggestions on the introduction. We also appreciate the help we received from Donald J. Raleigh, David Hartsough, and Irina Mikhaleva and Marianna Freidina in Moscow.

Most of the translations from Russian that appear in this volume are by Gregory Freidin. We have found it necessary, in many instances, to retranslate well-known documents and speeches because of inadequacies in wire-service and newspaper translations. Howard Allen, Jeffrey Rossman, and Veljko Vujacic also contributed to the translations.

At M.E. Sharpe, Patricia Kolb’s enthusiasm for the project gave us the burst of energy we needed to finish it. She provided excellent
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

assistance, and we thank her and her colleagues for bringing out the book so expeditiously. Leona Schecter also provided valuable advice along the way.

Some of the selections in this volume originally appeared elsewhere, mostly in Russian newspapers and journals. The editors would like to thank these publications for permission to reprint the following articles:


Photo Credits

Cover illustration and photographs on pages 80, 87, 89, 96, 97, 103, 174, and 250 courtesy of the PhotoGroup of the White House Defenders (PhotoArt, Moscow).

Photographs on pages 73, 75, 76, 82, 94, 99, 102, and 105 by Gregory Freidin.

Photographs on pages 90, 91, 92, and 98 by Victoria E. Bonnell and Sandor Szabo.

Photograph on page 140 by Donald J. Raleigh.

Photographs on pages 150, 152, and 156 courtesy of Vladimir Zavorotnyi.
Note on Transliteration and Interpolations

We follow the Library of Congress system for transliterating Russian words into English, but have made some exceptions in the interest of readability. Throughout, we have omitted soft signs, and we use a "Y" to begin such names as Yakovlev, Yevtushenko, and Yurii. More generally, we have adopted the New York Times usage for well-known names, titles, and places.

The reader will also note that we have used two different conventions for interpolations into the text. If the interpolation is by the author or interviewee, it appears in parentheses. If it was made by the editors for the purpose of clarification or identification, it appears in square brackets.

The explanatory footnotes that appear in the volume were supplied by the editors.
This page intentionally left blank
Guide to the Print Media

The following Russian media are mentioned in the book under their Russian names. English translations of these titles are as follows:

**Periodicals**

*Argumenty i fakty* (Arguments and Facts)
*Den* (Day)
*Izvestiia* (Information)
*Kommersant* (Man of Commerce)
*Kommunist* (Communist)
*Komsomolskaia pravda* (Komsomol Truth)
*Kuranty* (Chimes)
*Literaturnaia gazeta* (Literary Gazette)
*Literaturnaia Rossiia* (Literary Russia)
*Magnitogorskiy rabochyi* (Magnitogorsk Worker)
*Moskovski komsomolets* (Moscow Komsomol Member)
*Moskovskie novosti* (Moscow News)
*Moskovskaia pravda* (Moscow Truth)
*Nevskoe vremia* (Neva Times)
*Nezavisimaia gazeta* (Independent Gazette)
*Obshchaia gazeta* (Joint Gazette)
*Ogonek* (Flicker)
*Pravda* (Truth)
*Rossiia* (Russia)
*Rossiiskaia gazeta* (Russian Gazette)
*Rossiiiskie vesti* (Russian News)
*Smena* (New Generation)
*Stolitsa* (The Capital)
*Vecherniaia Moskva* (Evening Moscow)
News Agencies

TASS (Telegrafnoe agenstvo Sovetskogo Soiuza): the official news agency of the Soviet Union

ITAR-TASS (Informatsionnoe telegrafnoe agenstvo Rossii–TASS): the Russian wire service–TASS

RIA (Rossiyskoe informatsionnoe agenstvo, or Russian Information Agency): the official news agency of the RSFSR

Novosti: semi-official news agency of the USSR

Interfax: an independent news agency

Postfactum: an independent news agency
RUSSIA AT THE BARRICADES
This page intentionally left blank
Introduction

The events of August 1991 can best be understood as a consequence of the reform program put into motion by Mikhail Gorbachev and his closest allies, Aleksandr Yakovlev and Eduard Shevardnadze, following Gorbachev’s appointment as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985. Recognizing that the country faced severe and intractable economic and social problems that had long been neglected, Gorbachev and his team embarked on a series of fundamental reforms of the Soviet system. In a December 1988 meeting with U.S. President George Bush, Gorbachev described his intentions:

You’ll see soon enough that I’m not doing this for show and I’m not doing this to undermine you or to surprise you or to take advantage of you. I’m playing real politics. I’m doing this because I need to. I’m doing this because there’s a revolution taking place in my country. I started it. And they all applauded me when I started it in 1986 and now they don’t like it so much, but it’s going to be a revolution, nonetheless.¹

Experts disagree as to how much of Gorbachev’s revolutionary program should be attributed to his team’s original plans and how much to the unanticipated consequences of the initial reforms.² But few would deny that the changes that took place were significant and far-reaching. The introduction of glasnost—a policy of increasing openness in the mass media—irrevocably transformed the political culture of the country. Beginning in November 1987, Gorbachev relinquished the Communist Party’s monopoly on truth. Encouraged from above, intellectuals and political activists saw to it that a pluralism of ideas quickly re-
placed the Leninist idea of a single truth defined by a single party, disseminated by propagandists, and backed up by censorship. By 1990, with the revision of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which had guaranteed the Communist Party’s “leading role” in political and social life, there was virtually no subject that could not be discussed openly in the media or other public forums. Society was now able to challenge the Party’s preeminence on all fronts, and the Party, as was becoming increasingly clear, was not up to the challenge.

In the political sphere, the Gorbachev reforms led to a restructuring—perestroika—of the system of government, which since 1917 had been firmly controlled by the Communist Party. Representative bodies, from local soviets to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, were staffed in single-candidate elections and functioned as rubber stamps for decisions taken at the higher echelons of the Communist Party apparatus. Gorbachev revamped these pseudo-democratic institutions. His first major innovation was the creation of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies as a national assembly that would select the standing legislature—the Supreme Soviet—from among its members. Two-thirds of the deputies to the new Congress were chosen in elections in the spring of 1989, and—in a radical break with the Communist past—many of these were free elections with competing candidates. The remainder of the deputies were selected by so-called “public organizations,” including such stalwarts of the old regime as the “official” trade unions and, of course, the Communist Party. (Gorbachev himself chose to become a deputy not by election, which he could easily have won, but through the Communist Party quota—a decision that deprived him of any popular mandate, with fateful consequences for his future in politics.) Similar legislative institutions were then created at the republic level (elections for Russia’s Congress of People’s Deputies took place in 1990), and, for the first time, genuine elections for local soviets were held in cities throughout the country.

Though often dominated by old-guard elements (including Party bureaucrats, industrial managers, and military officers), the new legislatures provided a powerful forum for discussion of a wide range of political opinion. Most important, they made it possible for democratic politicians, like Andrei Sakharov and Boris Yeltsin, to speak directly to the Soviet public. Incessant television coverage of parliamentary debates and political commentary practically took over the air waves and the print media. The secretive or largely ceremonial poli-
ticking of the Soviet era gave way to full-blown political theater, open to all. For a while it seemed that the whole country was glued to television sets, watching the thrust and parry between Gorbachev and Sakharov and clashes between the liberal deputies of the Interregional Group and the conservatives of the “Soiuz” (Union) faction. In the process, the political horizons of the attentive public expanded so much that what seemed only yesterday a daring political move appeared today as an exercise in timid half-measures—and would be seen tomorrow as a betrayal of democracy.

The heady atmosphere of those days was propitious for the creation of voluntary associations, and they quickly proliferated during the Gorbachev era, evolving into a multitude of political parties and movements with diverse aims. These opportunities for open expression and political involvement helped to draw people into new forms of activism in the public sphere. At first encouraged, protected, indeed nurtured by glasnost and perestroika, the new political activists eventually began to chafe under the restrictions implicit in these policies. Little by little, they distanced themselves from Gorbachev, whose position (or, some would say, convictions) did not allow him to stray too far from the center of the Soviet political spectrum.

Nowhere was this process more evident than in the Baltic republics, where the first advocates of glasnost and perestroika soon emerged as champions of national independence. In a matter of months after the first free elections, this phenomenon spread throughout the Soviet Union, not excluding its heartland, the largest republic of them all—the Russian Federation.

At the republic level, the new legislative bodies, in which former dissidents sat side by side with old-style Soviet bosses, did not take long to develop their own political dynamic. The “democrats,” who were gaining in authority at the expense of the Party but still had little power, and Party apparatchiks, who held on to the levers of power but were losing their mantle of authority, found common ground on issues of nationalism—the ideological heir of communism in the modern world. Across the Soviet Union they formed powerful coalitions to challenge the authority of “the center,” namely, the top Soviet political elite presided over by Gorbachev. By the summer of 1991, many republics, acting through the newly elected legislatures, had declared their sovereignty. Among them was the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, led by its newly elected President, Boris Yeltsin.
For the first time since the revolution of 1917, the integrity of the empire was threatened from within. Whether they sought disintegration or opposed it, most responsible and foresighted politicians, among them Gorbachev and Yeltsin, understood that the old Union structure had to be replaced by a new arrangement that would transfer much of the center’s power to the republics. This became especially clear after Moscow’s attempt to overthrow the nationalist government in Lithuania in January 1991 ended in bloodshed and failure. In an effort to institutionalize the new status quo in relations with the center, Gorbachev and the heads of nine republics (the Baltic states, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia did not participate) drafted a new Union Treaty, initialed the final version of it, and agreed to have it signed on August 20, 1991. It was to prevent this from coming to pass that opponents of change attempted their coup d'état on August 18.3

Another important aspect of perestroika was the program of economic restructuring. Although the Gorbachev government failed to move decisively in the direction of a market economy, it did create opportunities for certain types of private enterprise, known by the catch-all term kooperativy, or cooperatives. This easing of central controls over economic activity made it possible for people to leave employment in the state sector for the first time since the 1920s, and by August 1991, new groups of private entrepreneurs had proliferated throughout the country.

* * *

It should not be surprising that the policies of glasnost and perestroika found some of their most ardent supporters among urban, educated, “middle-class” citizens who appreciated—and took advantage of—the new opportunities for individual and collective activity in the economy and in politics. This group emerged as a critically important new force in the country during the Gorbachev era.

At the same time, three pillars of the old system still clung to the resources and power, if not the authority, that they had enjoyed throughout the Soviet era: the military-industrial complex, which included a large part of the heavy industrial sector of the command economy; the all-pervasive Committee for State Security, the KGB; and above it all, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or more
precisely its central apparatus, which controlled virtually all top government appointments from the revolution of 1917 until August 1991. Whether for lack of will or lack of power, out of tactical considerations or out of conviction, and most likely for all of these reasons at once, Gorbachev did not break with the Communist Party. Yet his policies continuously undermined the position and authority of the Party apparatus and fostered the emergence of reform groups within the Party at all levels as well as rival political movements outside the Party.

Until its suspension on August 24, 1991, the Communist Party was the sole political organization spanning the entire Soviet Union. Using the art of political maneuver of which he was a consummate practitioner, Gorbachev tried to enlist the Party in the cause of reform and to use its organizational resources as a counterweight to the centrifugal forces that were pulling the country apart. This paradox lies at the heart of Gorbachev’s achievement, but it was the cause of his failure as well. In the year preceding the coup, grassroots political forces that Gorbachev himself had helped to unleash were becoming increasingly radicalized in frustration over the seemingly slow pace of change. At the same time, conservative elements within the Party were stiffening their resistance to reform. To placate them, Gorbachev retained key conservative figures in his government even as he was preparing to sign the new Union Treaty that would have dealt a fatal blow to their power.

As political forces polarized, Gorbachev moved first in one direction and then the other. The result was that Gorbachev appeared timid and indecisive as he repeatedly drew back from the bold strategies proposed by some of his more radical economic advisers. At the top, there was a gradual attrition among liberal politicians, including those most intimately associated with the post-1985 reforms—Aleksandr Yakovlev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Vadim Bakatin. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze’s resignation from his post drew world attention; yet his dramatic warning of an impending coup d’état—“Dictatorship is coming!”—spoken from the high rostrum of the Congress of People’s Deputies in December 1990, seemed to fall on deaf ears. Gorbachev’s apparent acquiescence in the use of brute force to suppress the nationalist movements in the Baltic republics, and, especially, the bloody attack on Lithuania’s parliament building in January 1991, cost him support among the democrats while not winning him many friends among the conservatives, who had grown to mistrust him personally as
much as they mistrusted his policy of reform.

In the months preceding the coup there were many signs that conservative forces—"a coalition of leading officials in the RSFSR Communist Party and key members of the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and the armed forces, along with some well-known ultra-nationalist Russian writers—were coalescing in opposition to reformist policies."

In mid-June, critics of perestroika in the government leadership—including future putschists Valentin Pavlov, Dmitrii Yazov, Boris Pugo, and Vladimir Kriuchkov—attempted to carry out a "constitutional coup d'etat" by expanding the powers of Prime Minister Pavlov, an outspoken opponent of the new Union Treaty which was then being negotiated. Their efforts failed.

On July 23, 1991, twelve Soviet leaders, including high-ranking army officers, published a dramatic appeal in the conservative newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossiia* which called on "citizens of the Soviet Union" to resist the breakup of the country, allegedly being engineered by greedy capitalists, foreign-directed elements, and cunning apostates. Hitherto such charges predictably had issued from the lunatic fringe of the conservative opposition. Not so this time: the signatories included such powerful figures as Colonel General Boris Gromov, the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs and a hero of the Afghan War. This appeal, published under the title "A Word to the People," prefigured many of the arguments put forward by the putschists less than a month later. With its special reference to the role of the armed forces in preserving "Holy Russia," this statement brought into the open the possibility of a military seizure of power.

Both former Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Aleksandr Yakovlev felt sufficiently alarmed by the course of events to issue repeated warnings of an impending coup. In June 1991, Secretary of State James Baker conveyed to Gorbachev, through secure channels, a report that Pavlov, Yazov, and Kriuchkov were plotting his overthrow. But Gorbachev refused to follow up these and other alarm bells with decisive action. In an interview conducted in August 1991, only a few days after the attempted coup, Shevardnadze was asked why Gorbachev had failed to take action to prevent a seizure of power by high-ranking officials, most of whom he had appointed. Shevardnadze replied:

"Most likely, he did not understand; probably he did not want to under-"
stand. Therein lies the whole tragedy, the whole trouble. This feature is characteristic of many leaders. There are numerous examples throughout history where a person does not want to believe that terrible things are going on. In my opinion, this is what happened with Mikhail Sergeevich. And this grieves me tremendously. It has cost the country dearly.7

The immediate circumstance that precipitated the coup was the signing ceremony for the new Union Treaty, scheduled for August 20. The treaty would have granted supremacy to the laws of the republics in many areas and permanently curtailed the power of the central government—and with it, Communist Party rule. Conservatives, among others, were especially indignant when Gorbachev did not make public the text of the new Union Treaty. Even cabinet ministers had no access to the text until a draft version fell into the hands of the editors of Moscow News, who published it a few days before the coup.8 There was also suspicion that Gorbachev may have struck a secret deal with the G7 leaders with whom he had met in London in July, leaving Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov out of the negotiations.9

Although the impending Union Treaty was the galvanizing event, there were other factors that aroused the plotters to action.10 Gorbachev’s skill at maneuvering between the opposite ends of the political spectrum had been making conservatives seasick for a number of years. From their point of view, the worst turn had come in April 1991. From September 1990 to April 1991 it had seemed that Gorbachev had thrown in his lot with the old guard. How outraged they must have been when Gorbachev suddenly struck an alliance with Boris Yeltsin (who had publicly resigned from the Communist Party the previous July) and embraced a number of important economic and political reforms in the months preceding the coup. One item high on the conservatives’ bill of particulars was Yeltsin’s ban on the workplace activities of political parties in the Russian Federation, issued on July 20, not long after his election as President of Russia. Clearly directed against the Communist Party, since it spelled an end to the Party’s grassroot system of control, the ban caused great consternation among conservatives. Worse yet, their failure to force Yeltsin to rescind this decree demonstrated unmistakably that the Party, the erstwhile colossus, had lost its iron grip.
All of these developments, moreover, took place against the background of a deteriorating economic situation. By mid-summer, there were strong indications of impending shortages of fuel and food, as the command system collapsed and republics and even localities set up protectionist barriers to guard local supplies.

Feeling increasingly irrelevant, afraid that Gorbachev's next maneuver would throw them overboard, the plotters resolved to take action. The decisive meeting of the conspirators took place on August 16 at a KGB resort on the outskirts of Moscow.¹¹

* * *

When the coup began on Sunday, August 18, 1991, Gorbachev was vacationing with his family in Foros, on the Crimean peninsula. The plotters' first act was to send a delegation to Foros—led by Valerii Boldin, the President's Chief of Staff, along with Yurii Plekhanov, Chief of the Security Directorate of the KGB—to seek Gorbachev's own sanction for the takeover. Some of the plotters, it appears, believed that, although he might offer resistance at first, Gorbachev would in the end cooperate with them by declaring a state of emergency in the country. After all, he had yielded to pressure from conservatives in the past. Gorbachev, however, refused to play any part in the scheme, calling the instigators "adventurists" and using (in the words of one of the plotters) other "non-parliamentary expressions." Held under house arrest and with no means of communication with the outside world, Gorbachev and his family would remain in complete isolation, unsure of their fate, until the afternoon of Wednesday, August 21.

Gorbachev's refusal to play along with their plans disoriented the conspirators, but they decided to proceed with the takeover, in the hope that the country would welcome their move as heralding a respite from disruptive change and mounting disorder.

* * *

In the early morning of Monday, August 19, troops were mobilized in the vicinity of Moscow and large numbers of tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) began moving toward the city. Beginning at 6:00 A.M. Moscow time, the country awoke to television and radio broadcasts announcing the formation of the State Committee for the
INTRODUCTION

State of Emergency. The junta consisted of eight men, seven of them high-ranking members of the government and all of them identified with the top echelon of the party-state: Vice President Gennadii Yanaev; KGB chief Vladimir Kruchkov; Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov; Minister of Internal Affairs Boris Pugo; Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov; Oleg Baklanov, First Deputy Chairman of the National Defense Council and leader of the military-industrial complex; Vasilii Starodubtsev, Chairman of the Peasants’ Union; and Aleksandr Tiziakov, President of the Association of State Enterprises and Industrial Groups in Production, Construction, Transportation, and Communications and member of the Council of Ministers.

The Committee's first public statements announced the imposition of a state of emergency in the country to rescue “our great Motherland” from the “mortal danger” that loomed over it. The form as much as the content of these statements indicated clearly that the Emergency Committee wished to turn back the clock to an earlier era, to restore the law and order once commanded by an all-powerful Communist Party, and to preserve the Soviet Union as a unitary state.

Yet it was also obvious that the conspirators wanted to give a constitutional gloss to their actions, for the benefit of the Soviet population as much as the rest of the world. Although in clear violation of the Law on the State of Emergency, they claimed to be acting in accordance with certain articles of the USSR Constitution (adopted in 1977, but much amended since 1988). Article 127(7) of the Constitution provided for a transfer of power to the Vice President of the USSR if the President was for any reason “unable to continue to execute his duties.” (Throughout the coup, the Committee would maintain the pretext that Gorbachev was incapacitated by health problems.) Ironically, this effort to formulate a constitutional justification for the seizure of power suggests that, as one commentator observed, “the reform process begun by Gorbachev ha[d] been effective in introducing some semblance of the rule of law in the USSR.”

By mid-morning on Monday, large numbers of tanks and APCs and truckloads of soldiers had begun to enter the city of Moscow. Later that day, both Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) were placed under martial law. Although martial law was not formally imposed in the Baltic republics, troops began moving there, too, and the commander of the Baltic Military District declared that he was assuming control of the region.
Popular resistance to the takeover did not appear immediately. The galvanizing force was Boris Yeltsin, the newly elected President of the Russian Federation. On Monday morning Yeltsin issued an “Appeal to the Citizens of Russia,” denouncing the takeover as illegal and calling for popular resistance, including a general strike. At midday Yeltsin mounted a tank near the building known as the White House (the House of Soviets, which housed the Russian government) and made an appeal to soldiers and officers, exhorting them to give their allegiance to the government of the Russian Federation.

In the late afternoon, at around 5:00 P.M. the Emergency Committee held a televised press conference, open to Soviet and foreign press. Speaking in a booming, authoritative voice, but with his hands visibly trembling, Vice President Yanaev, ostensibly the leader of the coup, offered the junta’s case for the takeover. Without producing any evidence for his assertion, Yanaev repeatedly declared that Gorbachev was ill and would eventually, Yanaev hoped, resume his duties.

That same evening, in one of those odd twists that abounded during the coup, the image of Yeltsin on a tank, captured by a CNN camera, was beamed to millions of Soviet viewers on the news program “Vremia.” This icon of defiance was part of a remarkable five-minute segment on “Vremia” about the appearance of a democratic resistance to the coup in the country’s capital. Put together by television journalist Sergei Medvedev, the short segment conveyed a vast amount of information: the tanks rolling down the streets of Moscow, Yeltsin’s “Appeal to the Citizens of Russia,” the building of barricades, and the massing of people determined to defend the White House from attack. Medvedev’s report on the evening news, following a taped rebroadcast of the Emergency Committee’s press conference, helped to turn the tide against the coup d’état.

As motorized armor converged on the streets of Moscow—over six hundred pieces, not counting the trucks carrying soldiers in full battle gear—people began erecting barricades, some in Manezh Square (a large plaza near Red Square where big rallies are held) and many more outside the White House. In some cases, people stopped the movement of tanks and APCs by forming a human chain.

Many among the first barricade-builders understood that the putschists were using a tried-and-true Soviet technique, one that had been used successfully all over Eastern Europe in the years after World War II: while tanks surround the government headquarters, a junta offers
the alternative of "national salvation" through Party-imposed order. Most recently the scenario had been employed in Vilnius, Lithuania, in January 1991. This time, however—unlike Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Poland in 1981, where coups d'état had been carried out under the cover of the Cold War and with totalitarian controls—Lithuania stood firm. Indeed, the Lithuanians enjoyed broad and vocal public support among Russia's intelligentsia and democratic politicians, and the "Committee for National Salvation" failed to take power.

Thanks to the Vilnius example, and to Sergei Medvedev's brief but incisive "Vremia" report about the barricade-building in Moscow, Russian citizens knew what they had to do: defend the White House, the seat of their freely elected government. That the putschists expected to succeed in Moscow (where close to 80 percent had voted to elect Yeltsin President) with a plan that had not worked in Vilnius speaks volumes about the plotters' general competence, political imagination, and horizons.

A major change in the alignment of forces occurred as early as 10:00 P.M. on Monday night, when several tanks from the Taman Division, stationed in the vicinity of the White House, declared their loyalty to Russia and moved to defend the building, cheered on by a large crowd that had been gathering since the early afternoon. An hour later, eight armored scout vehicles flying the Russian tricolor arrived to protect the White House; they were led by Major General Aleksandr Lebed, under orders from the commander of the airborne paratroop forces, Colonel General Pavel Grachev. These were the first indications of divided loyalties within the military.

Meanwhile, in Leningrad, Mayor Anatolii Sobchak had hastily returned from Moscow to take charge of the democratic resistance. One of his first acts was to reach an agreement with local military officers to keep tanks and APCs out of the city. In the evening he delivered a rousing televised speech, calling for resistance and urging people to attend a protest rally the following day. From that time on, the Leningrad television station transmitted information in support of the democratic resistance.

On August 20, the second day of the coup, large rallies were held in Leningrad and Moscow. The Leningrad rally, attended by an estimated 130,000 to 300,000 people, took place in Palace Square. The Moscow rally, variously estimated at 70,000 to 150,000 people, was held at
noon in front of the White House. Yeltsin and other major political figures from the democratic resistance addressed the Moscow rally and appealed to citizens to defend the White House against an imminent military attack. As many as 70,000 people—among them students and young people, middle-class Muscovites in their thirties and forties, and a large contingent of veterans of the war in Afghanistan—responded to Yeltsin’s call. They streamed to the White House and, despite the curfew declared by the Military Commandant of Moscow, they stayed there through the night, forming self-defense units.

An attack on the White House was expected in the early hours of Wednesday morning. Shortly after midnight, shots rang out about half a mile away: a column of APCs had found itself trapped by the barricades blocking an underpass a couple of blocks from the U.S. Embassy. As the APCs tried to ram through a row of trolley cars, a mêlée ensued in which three young men died defending the barricade. This incident notwithstanding, evidence indicates that there was no concerted attack mounted on the seat of Russia’s government, although an attack—a brutal one—had been planned and ordered. Soon afterward, tanks and APCs began to depart from the city. At 9:25 A.M., Marshal Yazov, one of the plotters, resigned his post, and the coup leadership, or what remained of it, rapidly collapsed.

On Wednesday morning an emergency session of the Supreme Soviet of Russia convened at the White House. A high-level delegation from the Russian government was dispatched to the Crimea to rescue Gorbachev and his family, who would return to Moscow shortly after midnight. Meanwhile, most of the plotters were arrested.

The following day, Thursday, August 22, was officially proclaimed the Day of Freedom. Banned newspapers began to publish again, and television and radio programs resumed their regular schedules. Yeltsin made an appearance before the Russian parliament where he thanked Muscovites for having defended the White House so courageously.

At noon, tens of thousands of Muscovites gathered at the White House for a victory rally and a march to Red Square. The speeches by Yeltsin, Ivan Silaev of the Russian Council of Ministers, Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi, Aleksandr Yakovlev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and other leading figures in the democratic movement attributed the victory over the junta to the “people of Moscow,” who heroically mobilized to defend freedom against “totalitarianism.” The potent admixture of local patriotism and Russian nationalism brought the crowd
to a frenzy of delight, with much flag waving and cheering. The speeches continued when the crowds reached Red Square, but Gorbachev was conspicuously absent.

The symbols of victory were everywhere. Many people carried small tricolor flags which had become the symbol of democratic Russia. Later that day, the tricolor was made the official flag of the Russian Republic. The square adjoining the White House was renamed Freedom Square.

On Thursday evening a massive display of fireworks had been arranged to mark the culmination of the day's events. Perhaps the organizers of the festivities conceived of victory day as a Russian version of the Fourth of July or Bastille Day. But these were not the only fireworks. In Dzerzhinskii Square—named for the head of the infamous revolutionary-era Cheka, precursor of the KGB—an angry crowd had gathered in the late afternoon. Some called for an attack on the KGB building, the Lubianka. It was the first time in four days that popular indignation appeared ready to spill over into spontaneous violence. Soon a delegation came from the White House to calm the crowd and dissuade them from rash actions. Some hours later, a mammoth yellow crane, bearing the logo "Krupp," arrived in the square and began dismantling the imposing statue of "Iron Feliks" Dzerzhinskii which stood on a tall pedestal in the center of the square.

Gorbachev conducted a press conference on Thursday evening, his first extended appearance since the conspiracy had begun. Many were surprised that the President had chosen as his first audience the press corps and not the Soviet public at large or the people of Moscow, who had risked their lives to, among other things, secure his freedom. At the press conference, Gorbachev appeared shaken by the events, even contrite, yet still unable to grasp (as his critics put it) that he had returned to a different country. In response to a question about the possible complicity of the CPSU leadership in the attempted coup d'état, Gorbachev equivocated. The impression was further amplified when, in response to another question, Gorbachev launched into his all-too-familiar defense of the "socialist idea." Still the General Secretary of the CPSU, he failed to take advantage of what was, perhaps, the last opportunity to dissociate himself publicly from a party whose leadership had betrayed him and the country by remaining silent during the coup.

The action on Friday, August 23, took place in the sphere of high
politics and on television rather than on the streets. For the first time since Monday, Muscovites became spectators rather than actors as the drama of retribution went forward in the chambers of the Russian parliament. Gorbachev and Yeltsin played the leading roles that day as they came face to face for the first time since the crisis began.

Standing like a deposed leader before an angry crowd, Gorbachev was heckled, criticized, interrogated, and disgraced by Yeltsin and other deputies. After Gorbachev finished his address, expressing gratitude to the “Russians” for their role in defeating the plot, Yeltsin walked up to him and insisted that Gorbachev now read aloud the minutes of a meeting of the USSR Council of Ministers held on the first day of the coup, in which Gorbachev’s own cabinet betrayed him. Gorbachev hesitated because the authenticity and accuracy of the minutes had not been established, but Yeltsin went on bullying him, and Gorbachev submitted, reading what turned out to be an inaccurate transcript. Then Gorbachev took questions from the deputies.

From time to time, Yeltsin interrupted the proceedings, declaring with a broad grin that “in order to relieve accumulated tension” he would now sign a decree with far-reaching implications for the future of the country. In this way he made public decrees ordering the Communist Party to cease activities in the armed forces serving on the territory of the RSFSR; suspending publication of newspapers that had cooperated with the junta; confiscating Communist Party publishing houses and printing plants and placing them under the Russian government’s control; and sealing the headquarters of the Central Committee and suspending the activities of the Communist Party in the Russian Republic, pending an investigation into its role in the coup. This last move had momentous consequences, for it signaled the end of the Party’s legal existence in Russia.

On Saturday morning, a massive funeral was held for the three men who had died at the barricades early Wednesday morning. A crowd of tens of thousands of people gathered in Manezh Square to hear speeches made by major political figures, including Gorbachev. Somber and emotional, Gorbachev paid tribute to the three men and announced that he had signed a decree posthumously awarding them the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. The crowd then proceeded to Kalinin Prospect and on to the White House, pausing to hear Yeltsin’s funeral oration, perhaps the most powerful speech of his public career. Marching in the funeral procession were Afghan War veterans, Russian Or-
thodox priests, rabbis, colorfully bedecked Cossacks, and, of course, defenders of the White House carrying a large tricolor flag. Later that day, Gorbachev resigned as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and suspended the Party’s activities, extending to the entire country Yeltsin’s decree banning the Party on the territory of the Russian Republic.

* * *

How can we account for the rapid and ignominious defeat of the “gang of eight”? Among the important factors were the ineptitude of the plotters, the general decrepitude of the centralized system of control, and, perhaps most critical at that moment, the Emergency Committee’s inability to command authority among the top brass in the military and the KGB. Their orders to arrest Yeltsin and other key political figures were disobeyed (in fact, only four people were arrested during the coup, all of them People’s Deputies). The conspirators then failed to cut off communications with the White House even after it became the headquarters of the resistance.

The spokesmen of the Emergency Committee did not make a convincing case for themselves at their one and only press conference, where they were openly ridiculed by members of the Soviet press—all of this broadcast live for the benefit of the entire country. More surprising is the fact that they could not even control the content of the one and only television news program, “Vremia,” or the government newspaper Izvestia.

When rumors of a coup had circulated some months earlier, Gorbachev reportedly dismissed the possibility on the grounds that people like Yanaev were incapable of masterminding a takeover. He was wrong about that, but the plot did in fact unfold like a comedy of errors. By the time it was over, two of the conspirators had landed in the hospital (Pavlov and Yazov); one had committed suicide (Pugo); and another lay unconscious in an alcoholic stupor (Yanaev).

But ineptness does not preclude brutality and may even facilitate it. A few days before the coup began, the plotters had placed an order for 250,000 handcuffs, and the Moscow police commandant had 300,000 arrest forms printed in advance. The plotters prepared a list of sixty-nine people, most of them public figures, who were to be arrested. Some of the men involved in the coup gave orders to arrest Yeltsin and
shoot civilians at the White House. These orders were not obeyed, as we know now, because commanders such as Colonel General Grachev (subsequently appointed Russia’s Minister of Defense), Major General Lebed (subsequently the Commander of the Fourteenth Army), and Major General Viktor Karpukhin (at the time, Commander of the KGB’s anti-terrorist “Alpha” brigade, and under pressure from his subordinates) refused to shed the blood of their compatriots.

The internal security forces provide a particularly telling example of the plotters’ failure to mobilize key segments of the military behind their effort. Moscow policemen provided the nucleus of Yeltsin’s security forces during the coup. The staff and cadets at the Riazan Higher Police Academy and a Moscow platoon of the elite Specialized Designation Police Detachment—known by the Russian acronym OMON—threw their support behind Yeltsin.

Even more critical for the defeat of the putsch was the equivocation and noncooperation within the KGB. An interview with Major General Karpukhin later disclosed the extent of insubordination. According to Karpukhin, he first disobeyed orders on the morning of August 19 when he was instructed to arrest Yeltsin at his country house. Although he was in a position to make the arrest (“My vehicles were staked out around the entire settlement. All roads were blocked . . .”), Karpukhin nonetheless allowed Yeltsin to depart.

On the evening of August 19, Karpukhin participated in a secret meeting of commanding officers at the USSR Ministry of Defense. At that point, Karpukhin had operational command over elite forces numbering about 15,000 men. He described the plan of attack as follows:

At 3:00 A.M. the OMON divisions would clear the square [around the White House] and disperse the crowd with gas and water cannons. Our divisions were to follow them. On the ground and from the air, using helicopters with grenade launchers and other special equipment, we would take the building.

My boys were practically invulnerable. All this would have lasted fifteen minutes. Everything depended on me in this situation. Thank God, I did not lift a hand. Had there been a battle, there would have been a bloody mess. I refused.24

Karpukhin was not alone among top KGB officers who resisted the plan for attack. Other Alpha commanders shared Karpukhin’s view that the White House could easily be seized, but only at the cost of
many casualties among the defenders. To be sure, some KGB officers were initially attracted by the putschists’ appeal. But by Monday evening, following the press conference of the Emergency Committee, they concluded (in the words of a KGB major general) that “this was a simple adventure, and the perplexing questions [about Gorbachev’s health] multiplied.”\textsuperscript{25} A number of them viewed the coup as “unlawful and unconstitutional.”\textsuperscript{26}

Insubordination in the police, the army, and the KGB, and especially in the elite units, prevented the putschists from carrying out their plans.\textsuperscript{27}

The number of Muscovites who participated publicly in some aspect of the popular resistance during the three days of the coup has been estimated at as many as 500,000 (many more joined the victory rally on Thursday and the funeral on Saturday). Even this high figure represents only a small proportion of the city’s total population of eight or nine million.

Yet, within hours of the coup d’état, the junta’s claim to govern had been reduced to one issue: who would control the White House? In this context, a relatively small number of people—but enough to fill to overflowing the vast space around the structure—made a tremendous difference. They stopped the movement of tanks with barricades and with their own bodies. They fraternized with soldiers and officers. They protested in the Tuesday mass rally. They organized self-defense units around the White House on Monday and Tuesday nights.

By these acts, ordinary people helped to demoralize soldiers and their officers and to dissuade them from carrying out the junta’s orders. The attack on the White House ordered by the Emergency Committee never took place. Just as in the February Revolution of 1917, when the defection of the Cossacks sealed the fate of the “old regime,” so in this case defections among army, police, and KGB officers prevented the junta—the last holdover of the Communist old regime—from imposing its will on the country.

Although evidence on the situation in the provinces during these events is incomplete, we know that local governments supported Yeltsin in a number of key cities in the Russian Republic including Sverdlovsk, Voronezh, Khabarovsky, Tula, Novosibirsk, Rostov on Don, Arkhangelsk, and Yaroslavl. The fact is that opposition was considerable—enough to prevent the tanks from even entering Leningrad and to send signals to the plotters that compliance throughout the country could not easily be achieved.
The preceding years of glasnost and perestroika, with unprecedented opportunities for public activism, had prepared the ground for resistance to the coup. First, there was no longer only one center of power and authority in the country. Apart from the central state structure—the government of the USSR—there was now an elected government of the Russian Federation, and other republic-level governments as well. The government of Russia had become identified with the new social forces in the country struggling to liberate themselves from the Communist system. It stood for constitutionalism and democracy, headed as it was by a President chosen in an open and competitive election (the only Soviet leader on Russian territory to govern by a truly popular mandate). The junta, by contrast, was identified with the old regime seeking to perpetuate the hegemony, if not of communism, then of its self-selecting political elite, the Communist Party nomenklatura.

The August Revolution provided a major test of popular allegiance in Russia: would the people, including the officers and soldiers of the armed forces, side with Russia against the central authorities of the Soviet party-state? A potent mixture of democratic sentiments, Russian nationalism, and hatred for the Communist Party drove thousands of people into the resistance movement against the junta. In the words of a Leningrad protester, people "knew what could happen, they knew what this might lead to. They felt that they were people, human beings. They had stopped being afraid."28

* * *

It is surely one of history's great paradoxes that the August 1991 coup produced results diametrically opposed to the aims of the putschists. The coup was intended to prevent the signing of a new Union Treaty and decentralization of the Soviet Union. But in the aftermath of the coup, negotiations over the treaty faltered and, barely four months later, the USSR had ceased to exist.

The plotters, all of them high-ranking Communist officials, also sought to preserve the Party's unique position in the country's political and economic life. Their ill-conceived and poorly executed plan had precisely the opposite effect. The most immediate consequence was the dissolution of the Communist Party, whose activities were sus-
pended in the Russian Republic on August 23 and in the entire Soviet Union on August 24. Though Party officials and organizations remained important actors in the months and years following the coup, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—the country’s ruling party for more than seven decades—ceased to exit.

The coup was led by people who had come to oppose many of the political, economic, and cultural reforms inaugurated by Gorbachev. Again paradoxically, when the coup failed, it elevated one of the boldest and most outspoken of the reformers, Boris Yeltsin, to an unprecedented position of power and authority. He emerged as the hero of the August crisis—the David who smote the Communist Party Goliath once and for all. In the months following the coup, Yeltsin carried forward with renewed vigor many of the reforms that had been stalled under Gorbachev’s equivocating leadership. The progress of these reforms has been far from easy, and Yeltsin’s own popularity has sometimes plunged very low. Nevertheless, when a legitimation crisis was precipitated in the spring of 1993 by the conservative opposition in Russia’s Congress of People’s Deputies, Yeltsin and his reform strategy once again won substantial popular support in a national referendum.

The seven surviving members of the Emergency Committee, together with five other high-ranking officials considered complicit in the Committee’s actions, were arrested and imprisoned following the abortive coup. They were charged with “betraying the Motherland,” a crime punishable by death. After remaining in jail for eighteen months, they were released on bail. Since that time, many of them have given interviews, addressed public gatherings, and participated in public rallies, including a May Day demonstration in 1993 that ended in a bloody confrontation with police. Meanwhile, the prosecution prepared a case against them.

After some delays, the trial finally began on April 14, 1993, but was suspended almost immediately when one of the defendants (Tiziakov) suddenly became ill. The defense team raised a number of objections to continuation of the trial and sought dismissal of the charges. It argued that the court had no jurisdiction to try the defendants on charges of betraying a country (the Soviet Union) that no longer exists. The court rejected these arguments.

On May 18, 1993, the three military judges hearing the case accepted a defense motion to suspend the proceedings indefinitely. The
court had been persuaded by defense arguments about the alleged bias of the prosecution team, citing the fact that Russia's Chief Prosecutor, Valentin Stepankov, and his deputy, Yevgenii Lisov, had used the materials from the pretrial investigation in their book *The Kremlin Conspiracy*, published in late 1992. Since the authors of the book were unequivocal in their indictment of the alleged conspirators (went the argument of the defense), and the prosecution team was subordinate to the country's Chief Prosecutor, its members could not be impartial in presenting to the court the results of their investigation. The judges referred the case to the Supreme Soviet to determine how "real independence" of the prosecution team could be guaranteed. The Supreme Soviet subsequently rejected the appeal as unfounded and the trial resumed yet again on July 7, 1993, only to be postponed due to the illness of one of the codefendants. In September 1993, the court ruled against a motion for postponement by the prosecution and thereby removed the last procedural hurdle to the resumption of the trial.

Popular attitudes toward the case are deeply divided, mirroring different retrospective evaluations of the coup itself. For some, the three days in August remain inscribed as a courageous victory for the forces of democracy and reform. For others, the takeover was a well-meaning but bungled effort to rescue the Soviet Union from chaos and disintegration. Still others view the events of August 1991 as signifying little more than a shift in power from one segment of the *nomenklatura* to another. A public opinion poll conducted in August 1993 showed the general public to be deeply divided about the coup and the criminality of the plotters. A survey of 1,600 people conducted by the "Mnenie" opinion research service disclosed that 48 percent thought the coup plotters should get "no punishment" or be formally pardoned (in the fall of 1991, only 30 percent had felt that way). The proportion of those who believed their lives would have been better had the coup succeeded rose from 4 percent in the fall of 1991 to 14 percent in August 1993.

Given such ambivalent popular attitudes about the events of August 1991, it is hardly surprising that the first two anniversaries of the coup were commemorated in a low key. The celebration has been deeply compromised by an inversion of some of the symbols of the democratic resistance to the August coup. The White House and the plaza behind it, renamed Freedom Square, were once symbolically associ-
ated with Yeltsin, the Russian parliament’s resistance to the putschists, and the crowds of Muscovites who turned out to defend freedom against resurgent totalitarianism. Between August 1991 and August 1993, those symbols—the White House, Freedom Square, and the Russian parliament itself—became transformed into their opposites through association with the anti-Yeltsin opposition in the Supreme Soviet and its motley collection of supporters, including ultranationalists, pro-Communists, neo-Stalinists, neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, and others. The dismal economic conditions and political disarray at the highest levels of the Russian government put a further damper on the celebration of a victory that promised far more than it has delivered to ordinary people.

On the first anniversary of the putsch, Yeltsin delivered a major address to the nation praising those who, a year earlier, had been “motivated by a noble patriotic impulse from the heart and by a sense of civic duty to defend freedom and democracy.” He castigated those who wanted to “erase [this heroic deed] from the people’s memory.”

Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov marked the first anniversary with an extensive and highly reflective statement about the coup and its aftermath. Popov argued that the democrats’ “main mistake [was] that they imagined they had taken power in Russia after the coup. Unfortunately, the people believed this, too.” Instead, argued Popov, the democrats’ victory “finally forced the reformist Party apparatchiks and nomenklatura to do what they had not done [under Gorbachev]—to organize themselves, unite, cleanse themselves of ideological garbage, remove the conservatives and start making reforms.” Reforms were under way, but there was still much work to be done to strengthen democratic principles.

By August 1993, nearly all vestiges of the celebratory aspect of the anniversary had been extinguished. An angry confrontation of groups demonstrating for and against the putschists took place near the White House, with strong overtones of latent violence. The once hallowed ground near the White House, stained by the blood of three victims, had become identified with a coalition of forces calling for the ouster of Yeltsin and the reformers and advocating some of the very measures that the plotters had tried to impose on the country. The anniversary had been transformed into another contested symbolic terrain for Russia’s political leaders and the public.

In early October 1993, the contest escalated into an armed conflict,
with the White House once again becoming the focal point of Russia’s post-communist politics. In reaction to Yeltsin’s September 21 decree disbanding the parliament and calling a new election for December, Ruslan Khasbulatov and other parliamentary leaders, the renegade Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi, and several thousands of their supporters mounted an armed uprising, including lethal assaults on the nearby Moscow Mayor’s office and the Gosteleradio building at Ostankino. This bloody outburst forced Yeltsin to declare a state of emergency in Moscow and to call in the army under Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, who two years earlier had refused to carry out a similar order. Stormed by paratroopers on Yeltsin’s orders, the White House burned through the night of October 4–5, 1993.

Ironically, by the spring of 1994, the cause of the August 1991 putschists had become conflated with that of the leaders of the October 1993 uprising—Yeltsin’s erstwhile allies. In late February 1994 Russia’s newly elected State Duma passed an amnesty covering those charged with crimes in connection with both events. The trial of the coup plotters was terminated, and Rutskoi and Khasbulatov were released from prison. Then, in mid-March, the case took another strange twist. Ruling in favor of the prosecutor’s appeal, to the effect that amnesty could not be granted to anyone who had not been tried and convicted, the Supreme Court ordered a resumption of the trial of the August 1991 putschists. Matters were at this impasse as this book was being sent to press.

* * *

The accounts that follow have been divided into five sections, each focusing on a particular group or aspect of the events of August 19–21, 1991. In selecting from a wide range of letters, reports, interviews, transcripts, and documents, the editors have attempted to include in the volume accounts by men and women, Russians and non-Russians, who personally took part in the August days. Since we wanted to show the events from many different angles, depending on the location and orientation of the individual, we have tried to incorporate material from a wide spectrum of people from many walks of life, but there are some gaps. We were unable to find an account by a veteran of the Afghan War who helped to defend the White House or from a businessman who provided supplies for the democratic resistance. The actions of these groups are recounted by others.

Part I, “Saving the Old Country,” is devoted to the putschists. This
section includes the major decrees, proclamations, and pronouncements of the State Committee for the State of Emergency as well as the full transcript of the press conference conducted by members of the Committee on August 19. Soon after the coup, the putschists were interrogated by government investigators preparing the legal case against them. We have included excerpts from the transcripts of interrogations of Yazov, Pavlov, and Kriuchkov. These selections show the motivations and outlook of the men who directed the putsch.

In Part II, “The Public Reacts,” eight Russians and Americans of diverse backgrounds give their personal impressions of the coup. Their accounts are based on observations of and participation in events that took place in Moscow, Leningrad, and the provincial city of Saratov. Three of the selections are by Russian citizens (the anonymous author of the “Letter from Moscow,” Vladimir Petrik, and Valerii Zavorotnyi); one author is an émigré (Gregory Freidin) and another the son of émigrés (Serge P. Petroff); and three more accounts are by American scholars (Victoria E. Bonnell, Lauren G. Leighton, and Donald J. Raleigh).

Part III, “In High Places,” shifts to the centers of power and influence among the opponents of the coup. Here we see how some of the most powerful men in the country responded to the putsch. This part begins with Gorbachev’s lengthy personal statement about what happened to him between the afternoon of Sunday, August 18, and Wednesday, August 21, when the putschists held him incommunicado at his summer residence in Foros. Gorbachev’s account is followed by the appeal “To the Citizens of Russia” issued by Yeltsin, Silaev, and Khasbulatov, and other appeals and decrees issued by Yeltsin during the first day of the coup. We have also included Yeltsin’s speech to the Russian parliament on Wednesday, August 21, when victory over the plotters seemed assured. Here Yeltsin gives his own version of the events.

Part III also contains reports and interviews from six other leading political figures in Moscow, Leningrad, and Dushanbe. These authors are generally quite well known and influential figures in Russian political life. Among them are Nikolai Vorontsov, Minister of the Environment under Gorbachev; Yevgenii Shaposhnikov, head of the Soviet Air Force at the time of the August coup; Vladimir Shcherbakov, a Deputy Prime Minister in the Gorbachev government; Davlat Khudonazarov, a filmmaker from Tajikistan who rose to political prominence under Gorbachev, serving as People’s Deputy in the USSR Supreme Soviet and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist
Party; Anatolii Sobchak, the Mayor of Leningrad; and Aleksandr Yakovlev, a former CPSU Politburo member and a leading architect of perestroika.

Part IV focuses on an event—the defense of the White House against military assault by the putschists. In this section we have included accounts of the activities both inside and outside the White House, with particular attention to the night of August 20–21, when three young men died defending the barricades. Here we hope to show the character and composition of the public opposition that gathered at the White House and the extraordinary atmosphere among those who risked their lives on the barricades. The reports, letters, and interviews are from an American student, Theresa Sabonis-Chafee; a well-known Russian ultranationalist writer, Aleksandr Prokhanov; an American journalist, Michael Hetzer; an anonymous Russian man; a Russian scholar, Aleksei Kozhevnikov; a People's Deputy to the Russian parliament and democratic political activist, Viktor Sheinis, and his wife, the sociologist Alla Nazimova.

Part V of the volume, "Getting the News In and Out," is devoted to the role played by the media. The mass media—both Soviet and foreign—were critically important during the putsch. Despite heavy censorship, the shutdown of most newspapers and radio stations, and the suspension of regular television programming, the media continued to function outside official control during the three days of the coup. As these accounts show, adverse conditions did not prevent television, radio, and newspaper journalists from transmitting critical information to the Soviet people and abroad. The foreign press is represented here by Iain Elliot of Radio Liberty and Ann Cooper of National Public Radio. The television journalist Sergei Medvedev recounts his experiences reporting for "Vremia"; Valerii Kucher describes the efforts of journalists to publish a collective underground newspaper; and Tatiana Malkina reports on her participation in the August 19 press conference.

* * *

A Chronology of Events has been provided at the conclusion of the volume with a timetable of developments during the coup, day by day, hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute. This will help to guide the reader who is interested in sequential coverage of the events of the three days and will serve as a point of ready reference.36
Notes


3. Valentin Stepankov and Yevgenii Lisov report that it was Gorbachev who insisted on August 20 as the signing date for the Treaty; other cosigners had wanted to wait until the end of the vacation season. See Stepankov and Lisov, Kremlevskii zagovor: versiia sledstvii (Moscow, 1992), p. 83.

4. A close observer of the Soviet scene noted that in June and July 1991, "the army—KGB—MVD troika undertook a well-orchestrated effort to weaken Gorbachev domestically and to humiliate him internationally... [It] seems evident that the coup leaders were laying groundwork for a move against Gorbachev [and] the anti-Gorbachev alliance was gaining experience in working together." See Scott R. McMichael, "Moscow Prelude: Warning Signs Ignored," RFE/RL Research Institute, Report on the USSR, vol. 3, no. 36 (1991), pp. 10–11. The account that follows draws upon McMichael's article.

5. Yakovlev's last warning came in an "open letter," dated August 16, 1991, that was published in Nezavisimaia gazeta on August 18. Among other things, Yakovlev wrote that "shadow structures" had already been established and were "waiting for the right moment to carry out a takeover."

6. Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh and the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, Jack Matlock, served as intermediaries (David Remnick, Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire [New York, 1993], pp. 436–37). According to Bessmertnykh's testimony, when he conveyed Baker's warning to Gorbachev (after Ambassador Matlock had done the same), Gorbachev responded that he had already had a "talk with these statesmen, a tough talk" (Stepankov and Lisov, Kremlevskii zagovor, p. 79).


8. The official text of the Treaty was made public on August 15. Under the provisions of the Treaty the office of USSR Vice President was to be abolished, a fact that throws some light on Gennadii Yanaev's participation in the plot.

9. Gorbachev chose Vladimir Shcherbakov, Pavlov's deputy, to accompany him to the G7 meeting of leaders of the top industrial nations.


12. The Committee's name was officially abbreviated as GKChP (pronounced Geh-Keh-Cheh-Peh), which not only sounds awkward but is suspiciously reminis-
cent of the well-known and much disliked acronyms for the secret police—KGB, GPU, and Cheka.

13. The law stipulated that a state of emergency could be declared only in the event of "natural and man-made disasters, epidemics, and large-scale public disorders," either by the Supreme Soviet of a constituent republic of the USSR or by the USSR President, "following the petition or consent of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR or constituent republic, or the supreme organ of the constituent republic." If the President decided to declare a state of emergency on his own, he had to "immediately seek the approval of the Supreme Soviet."


15. Ibid., p. 21.


17. In the Russian Federation as a whole, Yeltsin received 58 percent of the vote. According to General Lebed's recently released memoirs (published in the Transnistrian Republic), the paratrooper division under his command had been ordered by General Grachev to be battle ready on August 17. Neither Grachev nor his staff disclosed to Lebed the nature of his mission. The order for Lebed to move his division into Moscow came at around 4:00 A.M. on August 19. Still in the dark about his mission, Lebed (who had not listened to state radio while on the march) reached the outskirts of Moscow at 10:30 A.M. He was soon contacted by Grachev's staff officer, who conveyed to him another order from Grachev: Lebed was "personally," and without using any communications equipment, to lead the 2nd Battalion to the White House and there, after contacting the head of White House security, to assume the defense of the building. Still unaware of the coup d'état, Lebed arrived at the White House at 1:30 P.M. He tried to follow Grachev's order but was chased out of the building by an irate crowd of about 200 defenders who assumed that he was on the side of the Emergency Committee (at one point in the ensuing fracas, Lebed practically had to run for his life). As a result of the confusion, Lebed was able to carry out his order to defend the White House only late in the evening of the 19th. See Aleksandr Lebed, Spektaki nazyvalsia putch (Tiraspol, 1993); also excerpted in the right-wing nationalist newspaper Literaturnaia Rossiia, September 24, 1993.


20. Throughout Tuesday, specially organized groups of People's Deputies of Russia were dispatched to the city's military garrisons; using their parliamentary immunity to gain access, they endeavored to explain to army officers the unconstitutional nature of the Declaration of the State of Emergency. See the interview with Viktor Sheinis and Alla Nazimova in part IV, below.

21. In the confrontation of September–October 1993, Yeltsin did not hesitate to cut off all White House communications, as well as water and electricity.

22. On "Vremia," see the account of Sergei Medvedev's film report, above, and the interview with Medvedev in part V. For an analysis of television's role in defeating the coup, see Bonnell and Freidin, "Televorot." The government newspaper Izvestiia also eluded control by the putschists. Due to internal conflicts on the paper's
staff, no issue of Izvestiia appeared on August 19. The issue published on the morning of August 20 carried statements from the Emergency Committee on page one and Yeltsin’s “Appeal to the Citizens of Russia” on page two. The afternoon edition on August 20 had two photographs which showed a vast crowd carrying the Russian tricolor flag at the Moscow rally and civilians fraternizing with soldiers in tanks. Again, Yeltsin learned his lesson well. After issuing his decree disbanding the Russian parliament in September 1993, he took firm control of news programming on Russian television and briefly invoked press censorship in the wake of the October military confrontation.

23. Two other notable figures associated with the plotters (Marshal of the Soviet Union Sergei Akhromeev, and Nikolai Kruchina, Chief of the CPSU Central Committee’s Administrative Office) committed suicide soon afterward.


26. Lieutenant colonels Mikhail Golovatov and Sergei Goncharov of the Alpha unit made these statements in the interview with Literaturniaia gazeta cited in note 24.

27. According to the account by the head of the investigative team, the Russian Federation’s Prosecutor General Valentin Stepankov and his deputy, Yevgenii Lisov, the plans for the attack on the White House and the decision to proceed were made in the middle of the day on August 20. The attack itself was to commence at 3:00 A.M. on the 21st and was to be carried out by a combined force of the Airborne Paratroopers, the Special Forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and three special units of the KGB—“Alpha,” “Group B,” and the “Wave.” However, commanders of the operation soon began to develop doubts about its wisdom, partly under the pressure of the lower ranks; partly for fear of losing up to half of their force (according to one estimate) in storming what had already become a well-fortified and well-defended building; and partly from the conviction that it would be wrong to spill their compatriots’ blood. According to the plan, code-named “Operation Thunder,” the paratroopers were to be the first to take up their position. Their commander, Pavel Grachev, refused to order them to advance. After talking to Grachev, Viktor Karpukhin, the commander of the “Alpha” unit and the man in charge of “Operation Thunder,” followed Grachev’s example, as did most other commanders. When in the early hours of the morning Yazov was informed about the first instance of bloodshed and the possibility of thousands of victims if an attack were to take place, his order was to “halt” the entire operation. See Stepankov and Lisov, Kremlevskii zagovor.


29. The others were: Anatolii Lukianov, Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet; Oleg Shenin, Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee; Valentin Varennikov, Commander-in-Chief of Ground Forces and Deputy Minister of Defense; Yurii Plekhanov, Director of the Security Directorate of the KGB; and Viacheslav Generalov, Director of the KGB’s Specialized Operational-Technical Administration.
30. We have cited the book several times in this account (Stepankov and Lisov, *Kremlevskii zagovor*). To date, it is available only in Russian.


