***Commentary***

Nikolai Petrov

# *Boris Yeltsin: Catalyst for the Cold War's End?*

TOLSTOY's *War and Peace* illustrates how personalities can influence the course of history.

This is especially true if one happens to be in the right place at the right time.[1] Michael McFaul demonstrates this point using the example of Boris Yeltsin and his fight against communism. But Yeltsin appears to be a much less convincing example of McFaul's second point: the importance of ideas.

In my opinion, it would be presumptuous to say that Boris Yeltsin was an advocate of "liberal, pro-Western values." The universal lesson Michael McFaul draws from "Yeltsin's role in destroying communism and ending the cold war"[2] seems quite ambiguous, especially in light of what the author himself says: "The slow pace by which Western leaders engaged Yeltsin as a potential ally suggests that Yeltsin's own actions made him suspect as a democratic revolutionary. Yeltsin's spotty record as a democratic promoter in the post-Soviet era suggests that his acceptance or understanding of these liberal ideas was not complete. Consequently, it is not un-

1. A system that finds itself at a crossroads may start developing further along different paths. In that case, it takes a relatively modest effort or a willful decision to set the system's development in motion along one path or another. This process is not irreversible. The development path is not a railroad track but rather a normal road on which one can always make turns.

2. McFaul writes, "The lesson from the end of the Soviet menace is that the threats emanating from Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are most likely to end when the Yeltsins of these three countries emerge to challenge and eventually topple these autocratic, anti-Western regimes."

reasonable to assume that Yeltsin could have adopted a different set of ideas, which in turn would have resulted in a different trajectory in Russia's relations with the West.''

Let us try, however, to look into the substance of this theme, following Michael McFaul's reasoning in a sequential manner. Let us start with the question: Why and how did the cold war end? Did it end with democratization of the mighty USSR, a giant that suddenly turned peaceful and voluntarily renounced the policy of opposing the West? Yes and no. Yes, because the notorious evil empire actually did become more humane. No, because the process of becoming more humane resulted in the collapse of the evil empire rather than in its transformation from a hostile power to a friendly one. Once it became less malevolent, the evil empire collapsed. There are no such things as good empires, at least in our time.

When did the cold war end? Did it end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, or in 1991 with the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and Gorbachev's unilateral force reductions, or later the same year with the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet military? Regardless of the answer, Yeltsin's role would not have been decisive. At one point, McFaul says, ''Imagine if the coup leaders had prevailed in August 1991 and a leadership determined to preserve the Soviet empire, the command economy, and Communist dictatorship were still in the Kremlin today. . . . The failed August coup and the collapse of the Soviet empire might still not have ended the cold war completely as Russia's relationship with communism and the West was not clarified until several years after 1991 when market and democratic institutions began to take hold.''[3]

3. Returning to the role of personality in history, and to Yeltsin's role in particular in the collapse of the Soviet empire, it is useful to quote William Odom: ''At some point during the last couple of years of the Gorbachev period, the forces of dissolution began to outweigh the forces of centralization. Perhaps Dunlop [John Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993)] is right that the GKChP, if it had stormed the White House, could have saved the Soviet Union. No doubt it could have gained control of Moscow, but reversing all the centrifugal forces in the republics and the far-flung regions of the RSFSR would not have been easy. The bureaucracies that held the Soviet Union together for so long were no longer effective—

Boris Yeltsin actually did play an important role in the breakup of the Soviet Union and, through it, the ending of the cold war. However, he played that role at the final stages of the process, and that role, albeit important, was not the decisive one. This view is supported, on the one hand, by the fact that Western leaders and analysts have long held that Gorbachev, not Yeltsin, was the revolutionary leader of the Soviet transformation (unlike McFaul, I do not think they were mistaken), and, on the other hand, by the fact that it is Mikhail Gorbachev, not Boris Yeltsin, whom the Russian public has traditionally blamed for the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the latter point, there may be doubts or different assessments, but they do not change the substance of the issue: Gorbachev made the breakup of the Soviet Union possible, and Boris Yeltsin's actions transformed that possibility into reality and accelerated the process. Thus, Yeltsin's catalytic role was not to enable, but to hasten, the reaction. In any event, the cold war's end represents a by-product of the power struggle that led the Soviet Union to its collapse.

## *Yeltsin's Path to Power: Myths and Reality*

The perception of Yeltsin as a fighter against the Communist system is a great myth. That myth is based on the banning of the CPSU, anti-Communist statements by Yeltsin himself, and the propaganda campaign during the 1996 presidential elections. It is important, however, to distinguish between substance and facade. Based on outward appearances only, if one looks at the situation in 1999, the last year in which Yeltsin was in power, it would be odd, to put it mildly, to speak of Yeltsin's successful struggle against the Communist system. That year, the president was a former candi-

particularly the military, which was the last line of defense, the 'embodiment' of the sovereignty and stability of empire. Had the GKChP been victorious against the White House, it might have postponed the dissolution of the Soviet Union for a while, but not for long." William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 395–396.

date member of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, Prime Minister Evgeni Primakov and Federation Council Chairman Egor Stroev were former Politburo members, Duma Speaker Gennadi Seleznev was the former editor-in-chief of the main Komsomol publication and then of the principal Communist Party newspaper, and he was number two on the Communist Party ballot during the 1995 and 1999 Duma elections.

Taking a closer look, one will see that the Soviet *nomenklatura*, or Communist, system, actually changed very little under Boris Yeltsin, despite all declarations to the contrary.[4] *Nomenklatura* perks and privileges made officials dependent on their superiors within a huge bureaucratic apparatus, allowing the state to dominate society and the party leadership to dominate the state. (Under Yeltsin, the role of party leadership was taken over by the presidential administration, which symbolically moved into the offices of the former CPSU Central Committee on Staraia Ploshchad.) All of this led a number of analysts to insist, as early as 1992, that the *nomenklatura* system had gained revenge.[5] Thus, to a large extent, Yeltsin maintained the system that, like a lizard, had cast away its tail to keep its head.

Yeltsin's appointment to Moscow in 1985 was not at all incidental. Partly, it was an element of the natural process of bringing fresh blood into the system in the same way that Gorbachev, former first secretary of the Stavropol Regional Party Committee, Egor Ligachev, former first secretary of the Tomsk Regional Party Committee, and many others before them had made their way into the Communist Party's central apparatus. It was also partly a result of Gorbachev's attempt to secure his own power base by pushing aside the party gerontocracy, including Viktor Grishin, Yeltsin's

4. Whether Yeltsin was indeed capable of building an alternative system or restructuring the old *nomenklatura* system into something new is an important question. His position was similar to that of an armory worker who, having spent a lifetime producing machine guns and having no skills to produce anything else, is suddenly instructed to produce a pram.

5. See, for example, V. Varov, A. Sobianin, and D. Yuriev, *Nomenklaturnyi revansh* [*Nomenklatura*'s Revenge] (Moscow: RF Politika, 1992).

predecessor as head of the country's largest and most influential party organization and Gorbachev's rival in the general secretary election. Ligachev, who had overseen regional party organizations in his capacity as CPSU Central Committee secretary since December 1983, traveled to Sverdlovsk to become better acquainted with Yeltsin. Ligachev liked what he saw, and Yeltsin received an offer to move to Moscow and join the Central Committee apparatus. At the April 1985 plenary meeting of the Central Committee, which is traditionally viewed as the starting point of perestroika, Ligachev was elected a full member of the Politburo. Yeltsin became a Central Committee secretary three months later. The paths of Ligachev, the number two man in Gorbachev's entourage, and Yeltsin, a protégé of both Gorbachev and Ligachev and a would-be career rebel, were destined to cross more than once.

The start of Yeltsin's career in Moscow coincided with the political demise of Grigori Romanov, Gorbachev's former rival in the power struggle, who had moved from Leningrad to Moscow two years earlier. The career of Viktor Grishin, another candidate for the post of general secretary, came to an end at the beginning of 1985, when Yeltsin replaced him as head of the CPSU Moscow City Party Committee.

Researchers normally tend to ignore the period when Yeltsin was at the helm of the Moscow City Party Committee, the country's largest and most influential such organization. That period, however, is quite important for understanding the personality of the future "fighter against the system." When, at the very start of sweeping changes, he found himself heading the Moscow City Party Committee, Yeltsin realized that Moscow, always so much in the public eye, could become a great springboard for his career. He needed tangible and obvious successes and the popularity he had enjoyed back in the Urals, and Yeltsin started to act at once.[6] He

6. Boris Nemtsov, another individual from the provinces who was in the focus of public attention in the capital city, would find himself in a similar situation ten years later. Being much younger and better prepared, it took Nemtsov two years to adapt to the Moscow climate.

did so in the traditional ways he had mastered when heading a large industrial region in the Urals. He called for extraordinary overtime work, tongue-lashed and maltreated officials at lower levels, and socialized with the "commoners."

Young and energetic, the new master of Moscow and his emphatic ways of running the city were a sharp contrast to the anemic management style of the "stagnation" years. The problem was that Moscow, ever prominent in the public eye and more prestigious than any other regional posting, could not provide the full autonomy that Yeltsin had enjoyed as the party overlord of the Urals. Besides, Muscovites never considered the power of city-level party leadership to be distinct from that of the Central Committee.

What did Yeltsin do? He fired two-thirds of district-level party bosses in less than a year, and in some districts he started a second wave of dismissals.[7] He organized grandiose autumn food fairs at which refrigerated vans carrying fruit to Moscow became makeshift retail outlets instead of simply unloading their goods and heading back. He rubbed shoulders with the masses, spending hours with workers and gladly answering copious questions, some of which had been prepared by his assistants well in advance. The arsenal of ploys he used to gain popularity included such simple tactics as demonstrating his Russian-made shoes ("costing 23 rubles") and jackets. In the same manner, Yeltsin would travel by limousine and then transfer to the tram to ride the last two stops

7. "Yeltsin fired 23 out of Moscow's 33 district Party secretaries and some of them were fired two times in a row because the new appointees proved to be no better than the old cadres. 'Trading bad for worse,' Yeltsin used to joke later. One of the fired district Party secretaries jumped to his death from a seventh-story apartment window. Yeltsin took this incident very close to heart. When he was blamed for ruining the cadres, he referred to Gorbachev's experience who dismissed 66 percent of provincial Party bosses across the country, while he fired only 60 percent of district-level Party secretaries in Moscow. In the Moscow City Party Committee, Yeltsin fired 40 percent of the CPSU *nomenklatura* cadres, 36 percent of municipal government officials, and 44 percent of trade union leaders. The respective numbers of Gorbachev's dismissals stand at 60 percent of ministers and 70 percent of heads of CPSU Central Committee departments." Vladimir Soloviev and Elena Klepikova, *Boris Yeltsin: A Political Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992), 37–38.

before visiting a factory or plant, or he would turn up at his local medical clinic instead of going to the Kremlin hospital. Such mingling with the general populace received generous coverage in municipal mass media controlled by the City Party Committee and by Yeltsin personally.

Yeltsin's more senior Politburo colleagues were growing increasingly irritated by his populist policies, love of theatrical gestures, arbitrariness, attacks on the very fundamentals of the *nomenklatura* system,[8] and growing popularity. First, Yeltsin was refused the expected promotion, instead remaining an alternate rather than a full Politburo member, which he should have become by virtue of his position.[9] Later, in the fall of 1987, he was first dismissed as head of the Moscow Party organization and subsequently as candidate member of the Politburo. It was at that moment that Gorbachev vowed he would never allow Yeltsin to return to politics. However, Yeltsin did receive a *nomenklatura* sinecure, being appointed deputy chairman of the State Construction Committee with a ministerial portfolio.

Yeltsin's expulsion from the pinnacle of party leadership immediately turned him into a hero in the eyes of the public. Rumors started to spread that, at a plenary meeting of the CPSU Central Committee, the Moscow Party leader denounced Gorbachev's indecisive and palliative policies, called for more radical reforms of the party and society, and blasted the *nomenklatura* system. The popular perception of Yeltsin was that of a fighter for good and

8. It is important to stress that Yeltsin's challenge to the *nomenklatura* system with slogans about combating privileges and corruption was strictly limited by the time period of his ascent to power. Once he took power, however, Yeltsin developed that system and made it more comprehensive rather than demolishing it.

9. In this regard, the comparison with the former Tomsk region secretary, Egor Ligachev, made by McFaul is inaccurate. However, three Moscow and Politburo newcomers, former masters of remote regions, Mikhail Gorbachev (Stavropol), Egor Ligachev (Tomsk), and, to a lesser degree, Boris Yeltsin (Sverdlovsk), pushed away the Kremlin gerontocracy representing national capitals, Viktor Grishin (Moscow) and Grigori Romanov (Leningrad), and defined the fate of the CPSU and the USSR itself.

against evil. He was even said to have urged Gorbachev to sharply reduce the visibility and role of his wife Raisa, who was extremely unpopular with the general public. When the plenary meeting documents were published a few years later,[10] they revealed that Yeltsin's speech was not as iconoclastic as expected. As for the "revolutionary" speech that was unofficially circulated in 1987, it was, in fact, written by a team of journalists close to Yeltsin, as Mikhail Poltoranin, who headed the group, admitted in an NTV channel production titled *Tsar Boris*.

Two other interesting episodes are closely connected with this turning point in Yeltsin's career, and they portray him as "a persecuted advocate of justice." They are Yeltsin's penitential speech at the plenary meeting of the Moscow City Party Committee of the CPSU at which he was dismissed as first secretary,[11] and his plea for "life-time rehabilitation" at the Nineteenth Party Conference in 1988. These two episodes do not fit well with the perception of Yeltsin as a man who had conscientiously and resolutely severed ties with his Communist past.

Had Yeltsin not been lucky in subsequent events that brought him back into political prominence in 1988, he would have spent the rest of his life in oblivion like Aleksandr Shelepin and Dmitri Polianski before him. The system itself had to bend so that a politician expelled from the leadership could stage a comeback to the very top. Yeltsin's failing party career suddenly became a step up, not down, when the whole system of power capsized.

## *Yeltsin as a Popular Tribune*

In April 1989, Yeltsin was elected a people's deputy of the USSR representing the Moscow city constituency, although at the party

10. *Izvestia TsK KPSS*, no. 2, 239–241.

11. Yeltsin accounted for his incoherent and pleading speech by referring to his poor health (he had been hospitalized) and the influence of strong sedatives, which had paralyzed his willpower. Three years later, Yeltsin would say that the footage showing him in a state of intoxication while on a visit to the United States

conference a year earlier he had represented Karelia, and at the Congress of People's Deputies of Russia a year later, he represented the Ural region. There are at least two factors that make Yeltsin's choice of his constituency interesting. Nominated as a candidate for people's deputy in a number of constituencies, it appeared that he had a broad choice. However, considering the fact that candidate registration decisions were made by constituency-level election commissions, most of which were under party control, the real choice was between the Moscow and Sverdlovsk National-Territorial *okrugs*, or NTOs (the former including the city of Moscow, and the latter the Sverdlovsk Oblast), and about 50 constituencies in Moscow and the Sverdlovsk Oblast. What Yeltsin needed was not simply election to the Congress but a triumphant victory. That was why he chose the Moscow city NTO, thus blocking the way, deliberately or not, of academician Andrei Sakharov, for whom Moscow was the only alternative to the Academy of Sciences ballot list. The main political feature of those elections was the opposition between the party *nomenklatura* candidates and a broad front encompassing political forces ranging from the democratic platform within the CPSU to dissidents. Therefore, there was nothing surprising in the situation whereby Yeltsin, a Communist who had fallen out of favor, found himself on the same side of the barricade with Sakharov, a democrat and anti-Communist. Yeltsin and Sakharov were even nominated together by a democratically minded gathering at Moscow's House of Cinema.

Yeltsin's rival in the constituency was Evgeni Brakov, general director of the Likhachev auto plant. Brakov was an obscure candidate generally viewed as the personification of the party apparatchik rather than an individual contender. In the context of relatively free voting, there was effectively no way Brakov could defeat Yeltsin.

had been tampered with and shown in slow motion. After some time, the explanations of his repeated antics would make him a laughingstock.

Two important aspects must be stressed here. First, the phenomenon of early Yeltsin is, to a large extent, propagandistic in nature, and anti-Yeltsin propaganda may have easily played a more important role than pro-Yeltsin propaganda in his rise to power. The anti-Yeltsin propaganda was clumsy and crude; the population was generally disappointed with the authorities of the day, and Yeltsin must be given credit for his skillful manipulation of that disappointment.[12] Yeltsin finally assumed the right image of a popular hero, a fighter for justice who challenged the system and was victimized by it. All these factors combined in the public consciousness to generate the Yeltsin myth, which could not be dispelled by any rational reasoning. What was needed was either another myth or time for the Yeltsin myth to dissipate.[13]

Second, all stages of Yeltsin's rise to power, from his invitation to Moscow to his election as Supreme Soviet Chairman and, later, as president of the Russian Federation, were invariably connected to Mikhail Gorbachev. One cannot fail to notice a number of chance situations that were extremely fortunate for Yeltsin. They include having convenient contenders (Brakov in 1989, Ivan Polozkov in the 1990 election of the Supreme Soviet Chairman, and Ni-

12. The antigovernment sentiments of the populace were most clearly manifested during the 1989 and 1990 elections of people's deputies of the USSR and the RSFSR. Voting against apparatchiks of all levels was the main feature of electoral behavior, while a clear division along political lines was still missing. The "protest" nature of the vote found its most eloquent manifestation in 1989 in Leningrad, where a number of party bosses, including the first secretaries of the oblast and city party committees, lost the election even though they had no rivals. As for the Leningrad NTO, the country's second largest after Moscow, the election there was won by an obscure populist, Nikolai Ivanov, who, in tandem with Telman Gdlian, won prominence for his investigation of the cotton and other corruption scandals.

13. The myth of General Aleksandr Lebed (1996–1997) is the second such instance in Russia's modern history. It is peculiar that Yeltsin himself saw a certain similarity between himself and the brave general: "A. Lebed reminded me of someone: myself. Only he was a caricature of me, as if I were looking in a fun house mirror." Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 67.

colai Ryzhkov in the presidential elections); his ''miraculous'' election to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR,[14] where Yeltsin secured himself one of the leading positions; and, most importantly, his 1987 transformation from a candidate member of the CPSU Central Committee Politburo to a potential opposition leader. It is not incidental that a number of Sovietologists, including Jerry Hough, continued to regard Yeltsin as ''Gorbachev's man'' even after the 1991 presidential elections.[15]

The fact remains that Yeltsin, a *nomenklatura* man himself, headed the anti-*nomenklatura* revolution in the USSR and guided it to its ultimate conclusion in favor of the *nomenklatura* system. One can find certain similarities with the regional ''velvet revolutions'' of the late 1980s, when first secretaries of regional party committees were replaced by second and third secretaries, as well as with a number of gubernatorial elections in the second half of the 1990s, when the regional systems of power were preserved through the sacrifice of the first persons and their immediate entourages.

## *Yeltsin and Democrats*

The alliance between Yeltsin and the democrats was created in the spring of 1989 during the election campaign of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR and, most importantly, during the preparation for the First Congress of the Moscow Initiative Group, which later become the core of the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies. The alliance against the common enemy—the party of power

14. The Supreme Soviet was formed at the Congress out of people's deputies to work on a consistent basis. Yeltsin did not get enough votes that time to be elected on his own. It was owing to one of the Siberian deputies, Aleksei Kazannik, who refused to release his mandate in favor of Yeltsin, that the latter became an MP and chaired the Supreme Soviet Committee on Construction. Later, when Yeltsin came to power, provincial lawyer Kazannik was awarded the position of prosecutor general, a post he lost in 1994 when he let Ruslan Khasbulatov, Aleksandr Rutskoi, and other leaders of the 1993 deputies' opposition to Yeltsin out of prison despite Yeltsin's pressure not to do so.

15. Jerry Hough, in discussion with the author, July 1991.

represented by the Communist *nomenklatura*—was a mutually beneficial one; the democrats needed a popular hero to use as a battering ram, and Yeltsin, who was entering public politics, needed secure massive electoral backing to support him in his campaign. "The democrats wanted to use Yeltsin for their own ends, but ultimately he used them for his own ends," was the way this cooperation was later expressed. But this description is too simplistic. It would be more accurate to speak about a tactical alliance in which most participants lacked a vision of strategic objectives.

As a kind of epilogue to the story of Yeltsin's early history with the democrats, it is interesting to trace what happened to the democratically minded intellectuals in Moscow who forged an alliance with him in 1989. Michael McFaul mentions seven individuals; some are no longer alive and others have dispersed. Andrei Sakharov died in the fall of 1989 under circumstances that still are not completely clear. In 1992 Yuri Afanasiev left the leadership of the Democratic Russia movement, which he believed had associated itself too strongly with the antidemocratic Yeltsin. He abandoned politics and currently heads the Russian State University of Humanities, which he founded. Gavriil Popov became Chairman of the Moscow City Soviet in 1990 and mayor of Moscow in 1991. In the middle of 1992 he unexpectedly resigned, and in 1993, as one of the leaders of the Russian Movement for Democratic Reform, he tried but failed to win a seat in the Duma. Currently serving as a university rector, Popov is involved in politics only in a consulting capacity; he is seen as one of the leaders of the Social Democrats. Until her assassination in 1998, Galina Starovoitova was the leader of the Democratic Russia movement, serving as the presidential adviser on ethnic issues. She remained with Yeltsin until 1992, the year in which she was considered as a potential candidate for the vice presidency and even for the post of minister of defense. Sergei Stankevich spent some time working as deputy chairman of the Moscow City Soviet and then served as Yeltsin's adviser on political issues. He left the country in 1993, was prosecuted on corruption charges, and currently lives in Poland. Arkadi Murashev spent

some time working as head of the Moscow police force and was dismissed by Yuri Luzhkov in 1992; he currently heads the Liberal and Conservative Policy Center. He lost two elections to the state Duma (in 1995 and 1999); between Duma elections, he ran unsuccessfully for the Moscow city Duma. Ilia Zaslavski, who was included in this group by chance in the wake of the democratic movement of the late 1980s, did not stay long in politics.

As the foregoing list reveals, none of the real leaders of the first-wave democrats have remained in politics, either in power or in opposition. Many democratic leaders were appointed by Yeltsin to various positions, but they were forced to leave politics the year after he took over the Kremlin. Many left political life, and others passed away. The death of Andrei Sakharov, spiritual leader of the democratic opposition and uncompromising representative of the democratic movement, was the most negative event affecting the future of democracy in Russia.

Speaking of non-Moscow politicians, Michael McFaul mentions Anatoli Sobchak, who might easily have been the most successful among the founding fathers of the democratic movement outside Moscow. He served as mayor of St. Petersburg from 1991 to 1996, played an important role in the 1993 Constitutional Assembly, and at one point was even considered a possible successor to Yeltsin. However, having lost the 1996 mayoral election, Sobchak became politically marginalized and was even forced to emigrate after criminal charges (including abuse of office and illegal apartment distribution) were brought against him. When Sobchak returned to Russia in mid-1999 following the appointment of Vladimir Putin, his former deputy, as prime minister, Sobchak was nominated to the Duma in one of the St. Petersburg constituencies, but he lost the election. He died suddenly in early 2000 while serving as one of Putin's representatives in the presidential elections.

Having allied himself with the democrats, Yeltsin started to mount an opposition to centrist Gorbachev and the conservative wing of the party *nomenklatura*. Yeltsin's own democratic convic-

tions were situation-specific (although similar situations had repeatedly emerged since 1989) and position-specific, his position usually being against, rather than for, a particular idea or movement. First, he opposed the conservative wing of the CPSU, then the conservative and pro-Communist faction in the Russian Congress of People's Deputies headed by Ruslan Khasbulatov, and finally the Communist majority in the Duma and the virtual "Red menace" of Gennadi Ziuganov's Communist Party of Russia.

Yeltsin had four major onsets of democratic sentiment in 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1996, and each time, he pursued a specific goal: to come to power, to avert an economic collapse, to secure full power, and to stay in power. Each time he had new democratic allies: democrats of the first wave, Egor Gaidar and his team, Gaidar once again with Sergei Kovalev, and Anatoli Chubais and the "St. Petersburg team." Thus for Yeltsin, democracy was a means rather than an end, and he was quick to forget his democrat loyalties as soon as he attained specific political goals. It is not surprising, then, that in 1992 prominent political expert Aleksandr Sobianin spoke of "the *nomenklatura* revenge,"[16] and today Michael McFaul speaks of Yeltsin's periodic lapses into antidemocratic and anti-Western policies.

The process of creation and affirmation of Yeltsin's image as a democrat was promoted by both the existence of the Communist opposition and the absence of a democratic opposition. The latter factor is only partially connected to Yeltsin's skillful political maneuvering and his ability to avoid turning his associates into enemies; once they were forced out of active political life, Yeltsin found ways to secure their silence and neutrality. It is equally important that, in an environment in which the spontaneous public enthusiasm of the late 1980s receded while the state continued to rigidly control all economic activities, no independent economic actors came forward, and political parties free of ties to clans within the ruling elite simply could not emerge.

16. Varov, Sobianin, and Yuriev, *Nomenklaturnyi revansh*.

## *Yeltsin Promotes Democracy: Steps Forward and Backward*

The picture of Russia's democratic development and Yeltsin's role in it would not be complete if, in addition to analyzing the motivations and intentions of political actors, we did not analyze the process of democratization with its major milestones and achievements. They are: direct elections of (1) members of parliament, (2) the president, (3) regional legislatures, (4) regional governors, and (5) heads of municipalities; referendums; liquidation of the Soviets; ban of the CPSU and nationalization of party assets; mass media and freedom of information; the constitution; freedom of travel; federalism; and horizontal division of power.

What was Yeltsin's role in securing these main achievements of Russian democracy? A distinction should be made between mainstream development and momentous steps that did not necessarily modify overall progress but nevertheless played an important part. Such steps include:

- 1991–1993: Ignoring the will of the people expressed directly at the 1991 all-Union and 1993 all-Russia referendums.
- 1991–1996: Postponing direct elections of regional governors for five years.
- 1991–1996: Weakening the role of institutions and strengthening the role of individuals; creating a system of favoritism with a succession of *eminences grises*, and generally pursuing a Byzantine style of leadership. The nontransparent and autocratic system of appointments to and dismissals from the highest government positions, which demonstrated utter contempt for public opinion, existed throughout Yeltsin's rule but became especially pronounced in 1998 and 1999. Yeltsin ignored gross violations of the constitution and federal legislation by regional barons in such places as Kalmykia in 1998, Tatarstan in 1996, and Bashkortostan in 1998, and engaged in

continued political bargaining with them, trading the center's noninterference in regional affairs and the support of regional leaders for their demonstrated loyalty to the president.

- 1993: Ignoring the Constitutional Court decision that confirmed the authority of the Cheliabinsk Oblast governor, Petr Sumin, whom Yeltsin refused to recognize; and using force in September to oust the Cheliabinsk and Briansk Oblast governors who had been popularly elected six month before. Yeltsin halted functions of the Constitutional Court itself for six months, and the court's composition was changed.
- 1993: Using crude force to resolve the conflict with the Supreme Soviet; trampling upon the constitution; bringing in tanks to shell the Supreme Soviet building in downtown Moscow, resulting in numerous casualties; pushing through his own version of the constitution instead of the one previously agreed on by the Constitutional Assembly, in violation of the effective referendum law; demonstrating contempt for the idea of a national referendum by calling elections for bodies that were not specified by the effective constitution simultaneously with the adoption of the new constitution; abolishing the right to vote "against all" on the very eve of the elections, thus preventing voters from blocking powerful but unpopular candidates; and allowing massive fraud in the 1993 elections and the constitutional plebiscite.
- 1994: Breaking his promise to hold an early presidential election as a kind of a vote of public confidence after the 1993 coup d'état.
- 1994–1996, 1999: Unleashing and waging an all-out war in Chechnya without declaring a state of emergency and without the approval of the Federation Council.
- 1995: Illegitimately prolonging by two years the term of regional legislature members elected in 1993 and 1994.
- 1995, 1999: Ignoring constitutional provisions and the opinion of the Federation Council when appointing and dismissing Prosecutors General Aleksei Iliushenko and Yuri Skuratov.

- 1996: Using the full might of the state to secure his election for the second term; exceeding the legally permitted amount of campaign funds by tens, if not hundreds, of times; and selling state property cheaply to finance his presidential campaign.
- 1999: Bestowing power on his successor in an antidemocratic way while securing immunity from criminal prosecution for himself and his family members.

The list of other wrongdoings includes Yeltsin's failed attempt to restore the KGB-FSB in 1994; the planned dissolution of the Duma in 1996 to avoid presidential elections; the firing of some elected officials at the municipal level in 1997 and 1998; and expanding influence of the coercive apparatus during his second term, including mass appointments of secret service and police officers to high civilian positions.[17]

During the full six years from December 1993 to December 1999, Yeltsin, whose political career in the new Russia started with the position of parliament chairman, visited the state Duma, the Russian parliament's lower chamber, only twice. First, in 1997, he personally delivered a state award to Speaker Gennadi Seleznev on the occasion of Seleznev's fiftieth anniversary, and second in 1998, when he assisted in the approval of the anticrisis plan of Sergei Kirienko's government. Yeltsin's attitude toward parliament and its members was clearly expressed when he said in the spring of 1998, as the Duma was discussing Kirienko's appointment to the post of prime minister, "I gave an instruction to Pavel Borodin to resolve the problems of the Duma deputies."[18]

One must conclude that Yeltsin advocated democracy only when

17. Three out of four prime ministers appointed by Yeltsin in 1998 and 1999—Evgeni Primakov, Sergei Stepashin, and Vladimir Putin—had the experience of heading either foreign intelligence or FSB. The new wave of presidential representatives in regions appointed in 1998 and 1999 consisted mainly of FSB officers.

18. See, for example, Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy*, United States Institute of Peace Press, http://www.usip.org (2001).

he was aspiring to power and abandoned it once power was in his hands. He understood democracy as limiting not his own power, but that of others. His concept of democracy was expressed by the goals he declared, not by his methods. Evidence that Yeltsin's idea of democracy was destructive rather than constructive is contained in his memoirs.[19]

With regard to democracy, especially in the Russian context, the question of ends and means becomes quite important. In Russia, democracy is often understood as power of the self-styled democrats; the means employed, especially when dealing with Communists and other ideological adversaries, are considered unimportant. This is why the terms ''democrat'' and ''Communist'' are often enclosed in quotation marks, for they share a genetic code and both groups often act in similar ways.[20] Not surprisingly, when the conflict between Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet ended in bloodshed in 1993, it was widely remarked that ''one wing of the Bolshevik party had defeated the other.''

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that Boris Yeltsin was an outstanding personality—a bright, strong, inventive man who destroyed all obstacles blocking his ascent to power.[21] Unfortunately, attaining power was Yeltsin's only agenda. Once he possessed absolute power, he

19. Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*.

20. For a detailed description, see Alexander Lukin, *The Political Culture of the Russian ''Democrats''* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

21. Yeltsin in general was a reactive, revolutionary type of politician for key moments of history, but not for everyday life. His extraordinary activist outbursts were followed by long periods of passivity or total absence from the political scene. As time went by, his activism became more artificial and less positive. I can remember him on the evening of January 13, 1991, when, at the celebration of the Moscow News jubilee, he got a message about the Vilnius events described by McFaul and left for the airport to fly to Vilnius immediately. At the time, Gorbachev did not react at all, but later he explained that he had been sleeping and thus had not been informed. Less than four years later, at the beginning of the first Chechen war, the president and commander in chief was absent from Russia for an entire week due to a ''planned operation on his nose.''

proved unable to use that power for the benefit of the country. Yeltsin is guilty of, and has to be pitied for, having squandered a tremendous amount of public confidence by betraying the expectations of those who supported him, however unrealistic those expectations might have been. By the end of 1993, Yeltsin had fully played out his historic role, and for the six years that followed he simply lingered in the political arena.

Boris Yeltsin was a person of great integrity. He was never a renegade, neither in the late 1980s nor in the mid-1990s. He adapted to changing political situations and entered into political alliances with the enemies of his enemies. He accepted the famous call to "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow!" which was perfectly consistent with the logic of the moment because sovereignty would then be taken away from Mikhail Gorbachev and union authorities, not himself. At various points in time, Yeltsin's allies included the so-called democrats, leaders of ethnic regions, striking miners, the Baltic republics, and the West.[22] Yeltsin often reversed his relations with such allies and maintained no lasting relationships. Instead of working for the interests of Russia or democracy, he pursued his own ambition for power. Only at certain stages did Yeltsin's self-interest coincide with interest in democracy for Russia.

Returning to Michael McFaul's analysis of the role of personality and ideas in Russia's modern history, I believe one may conclude that both Gorbachev and Yeltsin played extremely important roles in the democratization of Russia and bringing about the collapse of the old regime,[23] but the conflict between the two leaders was even more important. This was a perfectly institutional conflict with a personal touch. With Gorbachev gone in 1991, a new con-

22. It is widely known that once the Belovezhskaia Pushcha Accords (which dismantled the Soviet Union) were signed in 1991, Yeltsin called President George H. W. Bush in an attempt to secure Western support. Only later did he inform President Gorbachev.

23. The difference is that, when he came to power, Gorbachev started to modernize the system, which eventually led to its collapse, whereas Yeltsin forced the system's disintegration as a vehicle to bring himself to power.

flict, also institutional, started to drive the democratization process: the conflict between Boris Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet. It is to that conflict that the country owes the process of federalization, the first elections of regional governors, and the referendum. Once the conflict was over, so was the initial stage of the democratization process. Further democratization weakened the state and all its institutions.

I fully agree with McFaul that Yeltsin essentially shaped the peaceful transition out of communism in Russia. Without Yeltsin, this transition from the former *nomenklatura* system to the present neo-*nomenklatura* system might have proceeded in a different direction. With regard to Yeltsin's adoption of democratic ideology, I would give more credit to Russian society than to Yeltsin himself. Yeltsin skillfully rode the powerful democratic wave from 1988 to 1991. It was a rational choice inspired by external political circumstances, and had he adopted a different ideology of opposition and a different set of allies, he would have failed to grasp power.

There is not necessarily a rigid link between Yeltsin's embrace of democracy and his relations with the West. His honeymoon with the West ended at the beginning of 1996 when Evgeni Primakov replaced Andrei Kozyrev as foreign minister. Yeltsin interpreted the electoral success of the Russian Communist Party in the 1995 Duma elections as a signal of growing left-wing and superpower sentiments in society. After that, he effectively shared the Communists' foreign policy agenda while retaining certain domestic policy differences with them. Thus, Yeltsin was ''pro-Western'' only until he entered the 1996 presidential campaign for his second term; hence, the fate of START II.

Boris Yeltsin was a man of many facets. A democratically elected tsar, he played the role, acting autocratically and on impulse, with little respect for democratic processes or even for the laws he himself had established. At the same time, he was never simply a political machine devoid of idealistic aspirations. Yeltsin may not deserve blame, for the problems he faced as a leader were essentially with Russian society, but neither does he merit praise.