

## CHAPTER 7

Michael McFaul : *Boris Yeltsin:  
Catalyst for the  
Cold War's End*

INDIVIDUALS MATTER. Ironically, this simple hypothesis about politics receives little attention in the social sciences today. Although we have many well-developed theories about the role of institutions, classes, modernization, and power in the social sciences, we have very few theories that give a causal role to the individual. Structures—not agents—still enjoy a privileged position in the modern canon of social science theory. Even rational choice theory—a model of how individual choices produce social outcomes—reduces the role of the individual to a utility maximizer. In this role, the personality, beliefs, and actual decisions of a *specific* individual do not matter since the aim of the rational choice project is to provide a *general* theory for all human behavior.<sup>1</sup> In place of historical figures with first and last names, individuals become faceless players in strategic situations, usually represented by the variables *x* or *y*.

One consequence of this explanatory approach is that much theoretical work in political science focuses on elucidating equilibria phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Rational choice methodologists have devoted particu-

1. In their search for general theories, social scientists end up focusing their energies on repetitive, static phenomena rather than unique, dynamic situations.

2. Regarding legislative theories, representative and overview works include Kenneth Shepsle and Barry Weingast, "Structure-Induced Equilibrium and Legislative Choice," *Public Choice* 37 (1981): 503–519; Barry Weingast and William Marshall, "The Industrial Organization of Congress; or Why Legislatures, Like Firms, Are Not Organized as Markets," *Journal of Political Economy* 96, no. 11 (1988): 132–163; and Terry Moe, "An Assessment of the Positive Political Theory

lar attention to modeling and explaining stability. As Robert Bates and Barry Weingast write, “The greatest achievement of rational choice theory has been to provide tools for studying political outcomes in *stable* institutional settings.”<sup>3</sup> Theorists of equilibria phenomena tend to downplay, dismiss, or ignore moments of rapid change, such as the end of the cold war, especially when the change in question is unexpected, radical, and hence, by definition, exogenous to models concerned with representing static and recurrent outcomes. Kenneth Waltz has gone so far as to assert that theories should not even *aspire* to explain change because “a theory explains continuities. It tells one what to expect and why to expect it. Within a system, a theory explains recurrences and repetitions, not change.”<sup>4</sup> Consistent with Waltz’s recommendation, many of our most robust theories seek to explain the lack of change: why the rules of the U.S. Congress “make public policy stable and predictable when it might be expected to be arbitrary,” why countries do not go to war even when the anarchy of the international system permits, if not encourages, them to do so, or why political systems persist even when they stunt economic growth.<sup>5</sup> In Soviet studies,

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of ‘Congressional Dominance,’” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (November 1987): 475–519. As Moe writes, in summarizing this literature, “Its contributors have been concerned, most abstractly, with moving from models of voting—especially models of pure majority rule with their attendant emphasis on voting cycles and system instability—to an understanding of how institutional rules can shape collective choice and induce the kinds of stability we actually observe in politics.” (476). In international relations, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954). In comparative politics, see Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); and Juan Linz, “Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes,” in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 3.

3. Robert Bates and Barry Weingast, “Rationality and Interpretation: The Politics of Transition,” unpublished manuscript, June 1996. Emphasis added.

4. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 69.

5. The summary quote about American institutional approaches to the study of Congress comes from Robert Bates, “Macropolitical Economy in the Field of Development,” in *Perspectives on Positive Political Economy*, ed. James Alt and Kenneth Shepsle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 46.

as well, there was a “theoretical bias in the direction of stability.”<sup>6</sup> Explaining change in these systemic equilibria—be it the Gingrich revolution of 1994, the collapse of the bipolar international system in 1989, or the sudden end of the Soviet regime in 1991—is beyond the domain of static theories. And the role of the individual in bringing about these rapid, unexpected changes receives almost no attention whatsoever.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of real, live people in social science theory today stands in sharp contrast to how practitioners, journalists, and even historians describe and explain history. The memoirs of former presidents and prime ministers are filled with anecdotes about the importance of individual relationships or key (and unique) decisions. The recent explosion of millennium lists focused almost entirely on the role of great men and women in the making of history. In their careful study of causality, historians are not afraid to evaluate the role of individuals as one of several factors that produce specific historical outcomes. Moreover, these accounts of history often focus on unique, unexpected events rather than static phenomena or recurrent behavior. For instance, historians have produced hundreds and hundreds of volumes on World War II, many of which include detailed accounts of the roles of individuals such as Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, but very few international relations specialists have devoted serious attention to explaining this unique event.

These two views of politics need to be integrated. Obviously, structures and strategic situations shape, constrain, and mediate the decisions and actions of individuals. At the same time, individuals do make specific decisions in unique contexts that shape the course of history.

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6. Thomas Remington, “Soviet Political Studies and the Problem of System Stability,” in *Beyond Soviet Studies*, ed. Daniel Orlovsky (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995), 180.

7. A notable, important exception is Paul Hollander, *Political Will and Personal Belief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

In certain contexts, individuals make these decisions not only out of self-interest but also because of an attachment to certain ideas. This is the second hypothesis of this essay: ideas matter. The beliefs, ideas, or even ideologies that individuals embrace can have a causal influence on political outcomes. If powerful individuals embrace these ideas, then they can change the very course of a state's history and the very structure of the international system. Alone, individuals and ideas do not alter the course of history. Power and interest always come into play. Under certain conditions, however, this fusion of unique individuals and new ideas can catalyze revolutionary change.

Such a fusion occurred in the late 1980s in the Soviet Union when Boris Yeltsin embraced anti-Communist ideology. Soviet economic decline and Gorbachev's response to it—perestroika, glasnost, and democratization—created the permissive conditions conducive to the emergence of both a historical figure such as Yeltsin and revolutionary ideas such as democracy and capitalism. Without Gorbachev and his reforms, there would have been no Yeltsin and no revolution. Yet, the converse is probably also true; without Yeltsin and the revolutionary ideas he embraced, the Soviet Union might have avoided or at least prolonged its collapse, the basic institutions of the Soviet economy and polity might have survived, and, in turn, the cold war might not have ended when and how it did. To be sure, the cold war was well on its way to ending before the rise of Yeltsin. And the Soviet Union was bound to collapse someday. However, as Michael Dobbs has written, "There was nothing inevitable about the timing of the collapse or the manner in which it occurred."<sup>8</sup> Soviet and U.S. competition fueled by competing world visions would have lingered well beyond 1991 if the coup plotters in August 1991 had succeeded. At a minimum, Yeltsin and his ideas accelerated the process of Soviet domestic change, which in turn helped to end the cold war.

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8. Michael Dobbs, *Down with Big Brother: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 451.

This chapter makes this argument in three increments. Section one recounts how and why Yeltsin became a challenger to the Soviet *ancien régime*. Section two then chronicles how and why Yeltsin came to embrace liberal, anti-Communist ideas championed by Russia's democratic movement, a marriage that was not inevitable. Section three demonstrates how the combination of Yeltsin and these revolutionary ideas helped to destroy communism, dissolve the Soviet empire, and thereby facilitate the end of the cold war.

### ***Boris Yeltsin, Accidental Rebel***

For the first three decades of his professional career, it would have been impossible to predict that Boris Yeltsin would one day help to destroy the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Lech Walesa in Poland focused their energies on undermining communism, Yeltsin was devoted to making communism function better. Havel and Walesa served time in jail for their efforts; Yeltsin won promotion. Yeltsin had a reputation within the CPSU as a populist crusader who worked hard to fulfill the plan, improve the economic well-being of his people, and fight corruption. It was his reformist credentials, after all, that compelled Mikhail Gorbachev to bring him to Moscow to become the capital's first secretary. As Dusko Doder and Louise Branson wrote in 1990, "Boris Yeltsin in many ways typified the new 'perestroika gang' assembled by Gorbachev."<sup>10</sup> Yet Yeltsin was not a dissident. During his years as a rising star within the Soviet Communist Party, Yeltsin was not reading Thomas Jefferson, Friedrich Hayek, or Robert Conquest. His embrace of democratic, market, and anti-imperial ideas came only after his fall from grace within the Communist Party.

That fall occurred soon after Yeltsin arrived in Moscow in 1985.

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9. The definitive biography, especially detailed in these early years, is by Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

10. Dusko Doder and Louise Branson, *Gorbachev: Heretic in the Kremlin* (New York: Futura Publications, 1990), 103.

That year, Gorbachev directed Yeltsin to leave his post as CPSU first secretary in Sverdlovsk Oblast and assume the position of head of construction within the Central Committee. Only six months later, Gorbachev asked Yeltsin to become the first secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, replacing Viktor Grishin, a potential rival to Gorbachev.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, Yeltsin was not made a Politburo member but instead was appointed as a candidate member, even though first secretaries from lesser regions, such as Egor Ligachev from Tomsk, had been promoted to the Politburo before him.

Upon his arrival in Moscow, Yeltsin immediately seized upon Gorbachev's anticorruption slogans and pushed openly for more radical changes.<sup>12</sup> Yeltsin's anticorruption speeches, coupled with his populist proclivities (he used to ride the metro and the bus to work) earned him immediate popularity in Moscow. Whether for personal or ideological reasons, Yeltsin became increasingly incensed by Gorbachev's lack of attention to corruption issues and he began to make bolder statements that threatened the core principles of Communist Party rule.<sup>13</sup> In response, Gorbachev removed Yeltsin as first secretary and demoted him to deputy chairman of the Ministry of Construction in 1987. Gorbachev, however, was not satisfied with simply removing Yeltsin. In a dramatic episode, he ordered Yeltsin out of the hospital and forced him to convene a plenum of the Moscow Party Committee in order to admit to his mistakes as first secretary. Gorbachev personally attended the meeting to watch the humiliation.<sup>14</sup> This event crystallized the per-

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11. John Morrison, *Boris Yeltsin: From Bolshevik to Democrat* (New York: Dutton Books, 1991), 43.

12. See, for instance, Matlock's description of Yeltsin and his views at an August 1987 meeting in Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), 112–113; and Aron, *Yeltsin*, chapter four.

13. In Fedor Burlatski's estimation, Yeltsin wanted to be included in Gorbachev's inner circle of liberal reformers within the Politburo, but was never invited to join. See Fedor Burlatski, *Russkie Gosudari: Epokha Reformatsii* (Moscow: Shark, 1996), 214–215.

14. Yeltsin exacted his revenge in August 1991 when he made Gorbachev sit through a humiliating session of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies at which Gorbachev's role in failing to prevent the coup attempt was discussed.

sonal animosity between the two men, a hatred that eventually had consequences for the fate of the Soviet Union itself.<sup>15</sup> Yeltsin also felt betrayed by the Communist Party as an organization, a grudge upon which he later had the opportunity to act.

The so-called Yeltsin affair was a single incident without immediate consequences. Analysts in the West, for instance, predicted that Yeltsin's political career was over. In the past, such a demotion signaled the end of one's political career in the Soviet system. According to memoirs written by his aides at the time, Yeltsin's behavior after this demotion indicated that he himself believed his political career had ended. He began drinking heavily, and some report that he even attempted suicide.

### ***Reviving an Old Enemy: Gorbachev's Democratization***

Gorbachev, however, inadvertently resuscitated Yeltsin's political prospects by introducing pluralist reforms in the summer of 1988. Yeltsin's greatness as a political leader and his role in helping to end the cold war would not have been realized without changes in the political institutions of the Soviet Union—changes over which he had little control or influence. Structure most certainly shaped Yeltsin's opportunities and actions as an individual political actor. Once these political changes occurred, Yeltsin took advantage of the new context in ways never predicted by the designers of the institutional reforms, including Gorbachev himself.

As Gorbachev makes clear in his own memoirs, he initially introduced limited democratic reform not as an objective in itself but rather as a means for pursuing economic reform. Even before becoming general secretary, Gorbachev took a more critical view of the health of the economy than most of his Politburo colleagues.

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15. Gorbachev himself explains the "Yeltsin affair" as a scandal concocted by Yeltsin himself to win popular support. See Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 242–248; Boris Yeltsin, *Isповed' na Zadannuiu Temu* (Leningrad: Sovetskii Pisatel, 1990); and Fedor Burlatski, *Russkie Gosudari: Epokha Reformatsii*, 216–218.

When he became general secretary in the spring of 1985, economic reform was his primary focus. Gorbachev's first attempts at reform resembled other Soviet reform efforts that focused on making the current system work faster and more efficiently.<sup>16</sup> When these strategies did not produce results, Gorbachev introduced more radical ideas under the rubric of perestroika. Though short on specifics, Gorbachev conceptualized perestroika as a revolutionary re-ordering of economic and social life within the Soviet Union. The very word, "perestroika" (restructuring), implied sweeping and fundamental change in the economic organization of the Soviet system.

Gorbachev and his government did introduce some important economic reforms, including self-financing and increased autonomy for enterprises, and eventually even partially private property in the form of collectives. However, Gorbachev was not satisfied with the pace of economic change, and he blamed the entrenched *nomenklatura* within the CPSU as the chief impediment. Even after he succeeded in purging the party's upper echelons, Gorbachev still worried that the CPSU was a hindrance rather than a vanguard for perestroika.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Gorbachev believed that political reform had to be introduced as a strategy for weakening the conservatives within the CPSU. In other words, he saw political reform as a means to spur further economic reform.<sup>18</sup>

By allowing greater freedom of the press and new rights of assembly, Gorbachev hoped to stimulate societal allies for perestroika. Most dramatically, however, he spelled out a radical program for political reform at the Nineteenth Party Conference in the summer of 1988, which included a new, semicompetitive electoral system for selecting deputies to the Soviet Congress of Peo-

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16. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Politicheskii Doklad Tsentral'nogo Komiteta KPSS XXVII S'ezdu Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza* (Moscow: Polizdat, February 25, 1986).

17. Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 282.

18. For elaboration, see part one of Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Transition: Political Change Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).



ple's Deputies.<sup>19</sup> Gorbachev essentially wanted to strengthen the mandate of these so-called legislative institutions and weaken the power of the party. If the party could not become the instrument of economic change, then perhaps a revitalized state could. Approved at the twentieth session of the USSR Supreme Soviet in December 1988, the constitutional amendments governing elections to the 1989 Soviet Congress of People's Deputies outlined a freer and fairer process for elections than ever before witnessed in Soviet history.<sup>20</sup>

Yet these elections were only partially free and competitive.<sup>21</sup> A third of the seats were not open to competitive elections but were reserved for social organizations. Some of these social entities did allow for competition within their organizations, but most did not. The CPSU and its allies also controlled the nominations process. Nonetheless, the elections to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, held during the spring of 1989, provided Yeltsin with an opportunity to resurrect his political career. He took full advantage of it.

Although encouraged to compete in several regions of Russia by voter initiative groups, Yeltsin decided to run in the largest electoral district in the country, the all-city district in Moscow. He ran an essentially antiestablishment campaign, calling the party's leadership corrupt and vowing to roll back the privileges of the party's ruling elite.<sup>22</sup> However, his attacks, aimed at the party-state bureau-

19. *Materialy XIX Vsesoiuznoi konferentsii KPSS*, 120.

20. For a summary and discussion of the law, see the interview with Central Electoral Commission Chairman V. P. Orlov in *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, March 14, 1989, 1. For a chronicle of the electoral reform process leading up to the 1989 elections, see Peter Lentini, "Reforming the Electoral System: The 1989 Elections to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies," *The Journal of Communist Studies* 7, no. 1, 69–94.

21. For comprehensive discussions of nondemocratic features of the law, see M. L. Gerver, "Predlagaiu izmenit' nashu izbiratel'nuiu sistemu," *Sovetskoe Gosudarstvo i Pravo* 7 (1990): 78–85; and Nikolai Biriukov and Viktor Sergeev, *Russia's Road to Democracy: Parliament, Communism and Traditional Culture* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1993), 96–100.

22. For the blow-by-blow account of the campaign, see Boris Yeltsin, *Against the Grain: An Autobiography* (London: Pan Books, 1991).

cracy, fell short of calling for a new political or economic system altogether. In 1989, Yeltsin had not formed a coherent set of political or economic ideas, but was instead tapping into the high levels of public resentment toward the ruling elite.

At this stage in his new career, Yeltsin's allies were members of voter clubs from large enterprises located in working-class neighborhoods of Moscow who loved Yeltsin's antiprivilege message. These groups eventually formed a coalition called the Committee of 19. Leaders of this coalition were populists, not intellectuals or dissidents. Likewise, few liberal ideas jumped out of Yeltsin's campaign speeches.<sup>23</sup> Like the other sweeping successes in this election, former state prosecutors Telman Gdlian and Nikolai Ivanov, Yeltsin was a populist, not a democrat or neo-liberal reformer, and most certainly not an anti-imperial crusader. By championing anti-establishment themes, Yeltsin shocked the country and the world by winning 90 percent of the popular vote in this election.

### ***Forging the Yeltsin-Democrat Alliance***

Yeltsin was not the only beneficiary of Gorbachev's political liberalization. Paralleling Yeltsin's rehabilitation, informal social associations also sprouted throughout the Soviet Union. At first, these groups advocated modest, apolitical aims such as more attention to Russian cultural traditions. Over time, however, these independent associations, called "informals," eventually became more overtly political. Still, liberal ideas did not dominate. On the eve of the 1989 elections, the range of ideologies represented within the informal movement included radical anti-Communists such as the Democratic Union, militant neo-Communists such as the United Workers Front, and strident nationalist organizations such as the *Pamiat* groups.<sup>24</sup> Before the 1989 vote, Yeltsin personally had only

23. Boris Yeltsin, *Ispoved' na zadannuiu temu* (Vilnius: INPA, 1990).

24. For details on all of these groups, complete with interviews of their leaders, see Sergei Markov and Michael McFaul, *The Troubled Birth of Russian Democracy: Political Parties, Programs, and Profiles* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1993).

limited contacts with these informal groups. In 1987, he had given permission to the local *Pamiat* branch to hold a public demonstration in Moscow. Some interpreted Yeltsin's approval of this demonstration—the first public gathering on the streets of Moscow by an independent political organization in decades—as a sign of his nationalist inclinations. At the time, radical pro-Western groups did not trust Yeltsin. After all, he had devoted his whole career to working for the enemy, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

During the course of the 1989 campaign, however, Yeltsin and the voter associations supporting him came in contact with Moscow's leading democratic movement at the time, the Moscow Popular Front. Front leaders opportunistically initiated the contact. Front campaign managers wanted to tie the electoral prospects of their unknown candidates to Yeltsin's extraordinary popularity. Sergei Stankevich, a young leader of the Moscow Popular Front and a Congress candidate from a Moscow electoral district, was particularly aggressive in attaching his electoral fortunes to Yeltsin's coattails.<sup>25</sup> Stankevich sent a telegram to Yeltsin supporting his candidacy. Then his campaign team reproduced and distributed the telegram throughout their district as a way to identify the unknown Stankevich with the wildly popular Yeltsin. Voters in his district were led to believe that Stankevich and Yeltsin were close political allies even though they had never met.

Soon thereafter, campaign managers from both teams began to coordinate their efforts with a set of interactions that eventually produced the alliance between Yeltsin and Russia's democratic movement.<sup>26</sup> The alliance was based not on shared norms but on a mutual enemy—the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Both candidates ran on protest platforms, but the campaign staffs supporting Yeltsin and Stankevich came from very different strata of

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25. Stankevich was running in Cheremushkinski district, a subsection within Moscow, whereas Yeltsin was running in a national electoral district, which included the entire city of Moscow. Consequently, Yeltsin was campaigning throughout the city, including Stankevich's district.

26. Eventually, Stankevich served as a political adviser to Yeltsin.

Soviet society. Stankevich's supporters from the Moscow Popular Front were highly educated, liberal-minded activists from the informal movement who had little or no experience with the CPSU. Many, in fact, were ardent opponents of the CPSU and the Soviet system more generally. Yeltsin's entourage, on the other hand, was a mix of former members of the ruling elite—including Yeltsin himself—and populist, grassroots leaders of voter clubs primarily from working-class neighborhoods in Moscow. At this stage, no forward-looking ideas united the two campaign staffs. Instead, they shared a feeling of opposition to the party-state. This common *ideology of opposition* served as a focal point for these antisystemic forces and constituted the basis of the alliance.<sup>27</sup>

The results of the 1989 elections could not be interpreted as a victory for this new opposition alliance. Some CPSU leaders, such as Soviet premier Nicolai Ryzhkov, understood the embarrassing defeats of senior party leaders (including several who ran unopposed) as a sign of a shift in power away from Gorbachev and the Communist Party he headed.<sup>28</sup> Nationalist victories in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania also strengthened the cause of independence in the Baltic republics. Gorbachev, however, claimed that the election results represented a big victory for the CPSU, in part because 85 percent of the deputies were CPSU members and in part because the process demonstrated that the CPSU was not afraid of competitive elections.

In Moscow, Yeltsin's landslide victory signaled that the protest vote against the Soviet system was growing. In major metropolitan areas, the population appeared to be demanding more than Gorbachev's reforms of the Communist system. Several other progressive deputies also obtained seats in the Soviet Congress through social organizations. However, these electoral victories for radicals were the exception and not the rule. In Moscow, only one leader of the

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27. In other words, the idea that united these groups was negative rather than positive. On the role of focal points in solving coordination problems, see Thomas Shelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

28. Nikolai Ryzhkov, interview by Michael McFaul, June 1992.

informal movement, Stankevich, had won. In Leningrad, informal groups did organize successful negative campaigns against conservative CPSU members and elected to the Congress a couple of ardent reformers—Anatoli Sobchak and Yuri Boldyrev. CPSU officials and their allies, however, won the vast majority of seats within the Russian Federation and formed a solid majority within the Congress as a whole. Independent of Yeltsin, Russia's democratic movement was still very weak.

The first session of the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies provided the next major catalyst for strengthening the alliance between Yeltsin and the democrats. The most progressive deputies organized themselves into a bloc called the Inter-Regional Group of People's Deputies (MDG). With human rights activist Andrei Sakharov as the informal leader and the Club of Voters of the Academy of Sciences providing ideological and logistical support, the MDG quickly assumed a distinctly intellectual, urban profile. Initially, populists such as Yeltsin and Gdlian kept their distance from this assembly of the intelligentsia. Within the Congress, however, Yeltsin soon realized that these academics could be useful allies and he eventually decided to join their parliamentary faction. In fact, the MDG was the only non-Communist political association within the Congress because nationalist and neo-Communist groups failed to win significant numbers of seats in the 1989 vote. Had Yeltsin had the opportunity to ally with a nationalist coalition, one wonders what choice he might have made.

The intellectuals that dominated the MDG, as well as their allies in the rapidly expanding grassroots democratic movement outside of Congress, also had a choice to make about Yeltsin. Some argued that the former party boss was a populist demagogue who neither understood nor embraced democratic principles. (At the time, there was little discussion about economic reform so his views on the economy were not as central.) Others complained that Yeltsin's Communist Party career disqualified him as a legitimate leader of Russia's democratic movement. Pragmatists countered these historical and ideological worries by recognizing that Yeltsin's popu-

larity could not be matched by any other leader within the democratic movement, including Sakharov. Yeltsin's charismatic orations and populist connections with broad segments of the Russian population were assets that could not be ignored. Without a political figure like Yeltsin, so the argument went, the democratic movement within Russia would always be relegated to minority status. Consequently, these advocates of cooperation argued instead that liberals had to try to shape Yeltsin's thinking in the "right" direction rather than oppose Yeltsin altogether.

In addition to Moscow intellectuals and populists associated with Yeltsin and Gdlian, leaders of nationalist liberation movements from other republics constituted a third component of the Inter-Regional Group.<sup>29</sup> For the first time, the MDG fused leaders of Russia's intelligentsia and the human rights movement, such as Sakharov, with populist "dissidents" from the *nomenklatura* such as Yeltsin and Gdlian and leaders of the independence struggles in several republics. At the height of its popularity, the MDG had less than 20 percent of all Congress deputies. These contacts proved vital in forging an anti-imperial alliance between Russian liberals with their new leader, Boris Yeltsin, on the one hand, and leaders of the national liberation movements of the non-Russian republics on the other.

The MDG's representation within the Soviet Congress, however, was far short of a majority. As Gorbachev and his allies asserted their control over the agenda of the Congress, Inter-Regional leaders realized the difficulties they faced, as a minority, of promoting radical change from within. Frustrated by their lack of power, radical voices within the MDG advocated abandoning Union politics altogether in favor of seizing state power at the lowest levels of gov-

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29. The faction's leadership reflected the balance of power of these three different groups as the original five cochairs were economist Gavriil Popov, historian Yuri Afanasiev, physicist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov, Estonian academician Viktor Palm, and Boris Yeltsin. Other prominent members included Telman Gdlian, Arkadi Murashev, Anatoli Sobchak, Sergei Stankevich, Galina Starovoitova, and Ilia Zaslavski.

ernment.<sup>30</sup> This group called upon USSR people's deputies to focus their attention on the upcoming 1990 elections at the republic, oblast, city, and district levels. Driven by fading prospects for reform from within the Soviet Congress, Russian democratic opposition groups moved to seize power at lower levels of government. This strategic decision eventually produced dire consequences for the future of the Soviet Union. In agreeing to compete for a seat in the Russian Congress, Yeltsin spearheaded the charge.

### ***The 1990 Elections to the Russian Congress of People's Deputies***

In 1990, Soviet and U.S. negotiators were ironing out the details of German unification, an important milestone in ending the cold war. Equally important to the end of the cold war, though almost totally unnoticed by U.S. and Soviet diplomats, were the 1990 elections for deputies to soviets at the republic, oblast, city, and district levels. Even more amazingly, the original designers of Soviet political reform devoted little attention to these elections. Top Communist Party officials did not engage strategically either in writing the rules governing these elections or campaigning for *their* candidates. As had always been the case in Soviet history, they assumed that the most important institutions of political power were located at the highest levels. They were wrong. More than any single event during the Gorbachev era, these elections empowered anti-Soviet fronts in the Baltic republics, Georgia, and Armenia.<sup>31</sup> The same was also true in Russia. Above all else, these elections gave Yeltsin the chance to win another popular contest and then gain independent control of a government institution.

30. Iliia Zaslavski, interview by Michael McFaul, July 1995.

31. In a report on the Lithuanian elections, the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe concluded that the Sajudis' electoral victory "paves the way for a dramatic confrontation, possibly within a week, between Vilnius and Moscow over questions of independence." U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Report on the Supreme Soviet Elections in Lithuania" (Washington, DC: U.S. Congress, March 6, 1990), 1.

The 1989 election experience fueled greater popular participation in the 1990 elections.<sup>32</sup> Almost 7,000 candidates competed in 1,068 electoral districts.<sup>33</sup> In 1989, 49 percent of all electoral district seats had been contested; in 1990, 97 percent of all districts had at least two candidates. With almost two years of experience in organizing political demonstrations, Russia's opposition forces were much more cohesive as a national political organization in these elections. In the interval between the 1989 and 1990 elections, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the calls for independence in the Baltic states, and the rapidly declining Soviet economy created a much greater sense of crisis within Russia, a condition that helped the opposition to consolidate and grow. Yeltsin and his allies had the momentum.

By the spring of 1990, Yeltsin was the unquestioned leader of Russia's anti-Communist movement, and Democratic Russia—a new coalition of dozens of proto-parties, civic groups, and trade unions—was the hegemonic anti-Communist organization. Yeltsin never formally joined Democratic Russia because his virulent antipathy toward the Communist Party gave him an uneasy feeling about political organizations.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the former Politburo candidate member, Sverdlovsk chief executive, and construction foreman had little in common with the non-Communist urban intellectuals who dominated Democratic Russia. At the same time, Yeltsin realized the importance of this alliance in defeating their common enemy, the Soviet *ancien régime*, but he never saw the necessity of creating new political parties as a component of a new Russian democracy. His embrace of liberal ideas was both tactical and limited.

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32. For accounts, see M. Steven Fish, *Democracy From Scratch* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Geoffrey Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

33. N. A. Mikhaleva and L. A. Moroza, "Reforma respublikanskogo izbiratel'nogo zakonodatel'stva," *Sovetskoe Gosudarstvo i Pravo* 6 (1990): 34.

34. After quitting the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1990, Yeltsin never joined another party or formed his own political party, a strategic decision that has had negative consequences for party development and democratic consolidation in Russia.



Even if Yeltsin did not formally join the organization, Democratic Russia did fuse together two disparate but radical parts of Russia's nascent democratic movement: the intelligentsia and human rights advocates on the one hand and populist groups associated with Yeltsin and Gdlian on the other.<sup>35</sup> Human rights leaders associated with Andrei Sakharov, such as Lev Ponomarev, Father Gleb Yakunin, and Dmitri Kataev, constituted one part of the movement's leadership, whereas activists from the Committee of 19 closely associated with Yeltsin, including Lev Shemiaev, Aleksandr Muzykanski, Sergei Trube, and Vladimir Komchatov, constituted a second core group. A third set of allies came from Russia's new parties, who realized at the time that they were better off allying with a national coalition headed by Boris Yeltsin than seeking to win votes for their unknown political parties.

The formation of Democratic Russia as an electoral bloc before the 1990 elections did not mean that Russia's democrats shared a common political platform or plan for political and economic reform. On the contrary, anti-communism was the only concept that united them. This banner included everyone from radical Westernizers to militant Slavophiles. In addition to ideological incoherence, the Democratic Russia bloc also faced several difficulties competing in these elections. Because the Communist Party still controlled all mass media, Democratic Russia had no easy way to publicize its existence. The group also had limited financial resources as few independent sources of funding for anti-state activities existed in an economy still dominated by the state.<sup>36</sup> Momentum, however, provided a countervailing force to offset these financial and structural obstacles. As the only organized societal voice for reform in these elections, Democratic Russia had little trouble tapping into the growing protest sentiment within the Russian electorate. The

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35. Vladimir Pribilovski, "Moskovskoe Ob'edinenie Izbiratelei (MOI)," mimeo, 1990.

36. Vladimir Bokser, Democratic Russia leader, interview by Michael McFaul, May 1995.

election eventually became polarized into two camps, Communists and democrats.

The principal campaign strategy for Democratic Russia candidates in the 1990 elections was to ride Yeltsin's coattails, just as Stankevich had done in 1989. Once the bloc had endorsed a candidate, she or he was then allowed to print a personal leaflet with signatures of endorsement from Democratic Russia's most popular national figures, such as Yeltsin, Popov, and Stankevich. Given the thousands of new, unknown candidates competing in these elections, such endorsements proved decisive. Yeltsin, in effect, helped hundreds of anti-Communist deputies at all levels get elected.

Like the 1989 vote, 85 percent of all deputies elected to the Russian Congress of People's Deputies were members of the CPSU. But this percentage communicated little about the real balance of forces within the Congress. Democratic Russia asserted that candidates endorsed by their electoral bloc won roughly a third of the seats to the 1,000-member Congress.<sup>37</sup> Conservative Communists won roughly 40 percent of all seats and subsequently formed the Communists of Russia, the largest and best-disciplined group in the Congress. Though conservative Communists still won the largest number of seats, momentum in these elections had definitely swung to the democratic opposition.

In its first consequential act in May 1990, the new Russian Congress of People's Deputies elected Boris Yeltsin as chairman, though only by a paltry victory margin of four votes. Despite Democratic Russia's careful planning and the Communists' lack of strategy, the vote nonetheless reflected the precarious balance within the Congress. Democrats were a minority in this body. At the peak of its strength, Democratic Russia still had no more than

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37. In preparatory meetings leading up to the First Congress, Democratic Russia organizers counted 35 percent of deputies as solid supporters and another 20 percent as soft supporters. (Aleksandr Sobianin, interview by Michael McFaul, July 1995). See also Sobianin and Yuriev, *S'ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR v zerkale poimennykh golosovaniï* (Moscow, 1991); and Dawn Mann, "The RSFSR Elections: The Congress of People's Deputies," *Report on the USSR*, April 13, 1990, 11–17.

400 deputies loyal to its cause out of the 1,068 total seats in the Congress.<sup>38</sup> Yeltsin secured a majority only by reaching out to other nonliberal constituents within the Congress, including many regional representatives and nationalists who sought greater autonomy from the Soviet Union for the Russian Federation.

### ***Yeltsin's Embrace of Anti-Communist, Pro-Western Ideas***

Yeltsin and his allies in Democratic Russia knew well what they stood against but had very vague ideas regarding what they stood for. Because of his “betrayal” in 1987, Yeltsin detested the Communist Party *nomenklatura* as a group and Mikhail Gorbachev in particular. Everything that Gorbachev advocated, Yeltsin opposed. Given Gorbachev's essentially reformist orientation—an orientation that included greater economic and political autonomy for individuals in the Soviet Union and greater integration with the West—Yeltsin could have easily gravitated to the opposite ideological direction if his hatred of Gorbachev had been the only motivating factor. Instead, however, Yeltsin opted to outflank Gorbachev on the reformist ledger. In part, Yeltsin probably made this tactical move because his allies in the democratic movement also held these views. Other anti-Communist ideologies such as nationalism or fascism had neither mobilized mass followings nor produced electoral victories for their proponents. Given his own history with the Communist Party, Yeltsin was unlikely to embrace neo-Communist ideas, and neo-Communists did not embrace him. Consequently, Yeltsin's only real choice was to be more radical than Gorbachev himself. Although initially vague, several antisystemic themes

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38. Lev Ponomarev and Gleb Yakunin, Democratic Russia leaders in the Russian Congress, interviews by Michael McFaul, July 1995. Ponomarev expressed frustration that both the Russian public and the West did not fully appreciate their weak position within the Congress and therefore expected too much from this body by way of reform. For analysis of the changing balance of support for Democratic Russia and its causes within the Congress, see Sobianin and Yuriev, *S'ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR v zerkale poimennykh golosovaniï*.

eventually crystallized to help situate these challengers in diametric opposition to Gorbachev's *ancien régime*.<sup>39</sup>

Demand for national sovereignty was most salient. According to Democratic Russia leaders, the 1990 elections gave them a mandate to seek greater autonomy for Russia.<sup>40</sup> As Boris Yeltsin stated in May 1990, "The problems of the [Russian] republic cannot be solved without full-blooded political sovereignty. This alone can enable relations between Russia and the Union and between the autonomous territories within Russia to be harmonized. The political sovereignty of Russia is also necessary in international affairs."<sup>41</sup> This rhetoric about sovereignty helped Yeltsin cobble together the majority that elected him chairman of the Russian Congress. It also appealed to Russian democrats, who saw Yeltsin's declaration as a peaceful way to dissolve the Soviet empire; to Russian nationalists, who embraced the idea for ethnic reasons; and to mid-level Communists, who saw sovereignty as a way for them to gain independence from CPSU bosses in Moscow.<sup>42</sup> Two months later, in June 1990, the Russian Congress of People's Deputies voted to declare the Russian Federation a sovereign state.<sup>43</sup> Obviously, such ideas

39. During revolutionary transitions, moderate opposition ideas are often replaced by more radical ideas over the course of time. See Michael McFaul, "Southern African Liberation and Great Power Intervention: Toward a Theory of Revolution in an International Context." PhD diss., Oxford University, 1991.

40. See the comments by Viktor Sheinis from May 1990, as reported in John Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 95–96.

41. Boris Yeltsin, speech to the Russian Federation Congress of People's Deputies, Moscow, May 22, 1990, reprinted in *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse*, ed. Alexander Dallin and Gail Lapidus (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 410.

42. Anatoli Shabad, interview by Michael McFaul, July 1995. Shabad, a Jew, was deeply offended by the kinds of conversations he overheard during the deliberations on this declaration but saw this alliance as a tactical necessity. In contrast, Russian nationalist Ilia Konstantinov recalls that he voted for Yeltsin and sovereignty but then deeply regretted his votes. Ilia Konstantinov, interview by Michael McFaul, May 1995.

43. "Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federation Socialist Republic," reprinted in Dallin and Lapidus, *The Soviet System*, 404.

cut against the grain of Gorbachev's quest to reform but preserve the Soviet Union.

Capitalism constituted a second, but underdeveloped, component of Yeltsin's (and Democratic Russia's) ideology of opposition. During deliberations over the 500-Day Plan—a blueprint for market reform for the USSR as a whole—Yeltsin and his aides adopted increasingly radical positions on free prices, private property, and international trade liberation. If Gorbachev sought to revitalize the Soviet command economy by introducing some modest market mechanisms, Yeltsin wanted to introduce radical new market reforms as a means to destroy the Soviet Union. However, whether Yeltsin's objective was the destruction of the Soviet empire, the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, or the Socialist economy remained unclear at this stage. Likewise, within Democratic Russia, advocates of Eurocommunism and neoliberalism coexisted. Yeltsin himself never articulated a coherent economic program,<sup>44</sup> and on some issues, such as price reform, Yeltsin championed populist, antimarket views. Only when the Soviet economy edged toward collapse in the winter of 1991 did the opposition's call for a new economic order grow increasingly militant.<sup>45</sup>

Democracy was a third component of the ideology of opposition. In fact, Russia's revolutionaries effectively captured this term in labeling themselves "democrats" and their movement the "democratic opposition." The term helped to crystallize Russia's political spectrum into two camps—democrats and Communists—though the so-called democratic camp included many non-democrats and the Communist camp included several promoters of the democratic process. To clearly delineate this democratic versus antidem-

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44. Egor Gaidar, Russia's eventual architect of radical economic reform, recalls in his memoirs that he was very troubled by Yeltsin's early statements on economic reform. Egor Gaidar, *Dni Porazhenii i Pobed* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996), 61.

45. *Materiali: II S'ezda Dvizheniia Demokraticheskoi Rossii* (Moscow: DR-Press, November 1991).

ocratic cleavage, the opposition promoted and carried out the election of their leader, Boris Yeltsin, to the newly created post of president of Russia in June 1991. Yeltsin's election in June 1991 was his third landslide victory in as many years, whereas the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, had never even participated in a general election. Respect for individual liberties, a free and independent press, and the rule of law: all were themes propagated by Russia's democratic movement. Russia's democratic opposition also used mass events to contrast their democratic credentials and popular support with the authoritarian practices and waning popular appeal of Gorbachev's regime. As with capitalism, however, the opposition's—and especially Yeltsin's—commitment to democracy was neither firm nor comprehensive. Generally, Russia's informal political organizations practiced internal democracy, at times to a fault. Yet the speed of change and the minimal time in opposition (a few years as compared with several decades for the African National Congress in South Africa or even a decade for Solidarity in Poland) meant that democratic principles did not have time to mature within these organizations. Yeltsin did not spend years thinking about democratic ideals. National debates about the virtues and vices of a democratic polity did not occur.

A fourth component of this ideology of opposition was a stridently pro-Western orientation regarding international affairs. Because Western capitalist democracies were prosperous and opposed communism, they were perceived by Yeltsin and Russia's democratic movement as allies in their common struggle against the Soviet system.<sup>46</sup> Besides democracy and capitalism, there were no

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46. This analysis echoes the arguments on transnational relations and epistemic communities with the caveat that my argument incorporates the structure of the international system as a determining factor for understanding which ideas travel and which do not. For elaboration, see McFaul, "Southern African Liberation and Great Power Intervention." On the Soviet and Russian case, see Matthew Evangelista, "The Paradox of State Strength: Transnational Relations, Domestic Structures, and Security Policy in Russia and the Soviet Union," *International Organization* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 1–38; and Sarah Mendelson, *Changing*

other attractive models or ideologies in the international system with which Russian revolutionaries could identify. Relations with the Western world, however, posed a particularly difficult dilemma for Yeltsin and his supporters as Gorbachev had already acquired a formidable reputation as a friend of the West in most European and American capitals. To win over Western favor, Yeltsin tried to be even more pro-Western than Gorbachev, compelling him to articulate radical positions such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Russian membership in NATO. Without question, Yeltsin and his allies aimed to end the cold war.

### ***From Ideas to Action: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the End of the Cold War***

Ambiguous ideologies of opposition are common in revolutionary situations. Tactically, ambiguity helps to unite disparate groups. Revolutionaries generally know better what they are against than what they desire. Over time, ideologies of opposition also tend to become more radical and more antithetical to the ideas of the regime in power. Moderate ideas and centrist politicians lose sway as attempts at compromise fail.<sup>47</sup>

Such revolutionary ideas become consequential only if the revolutionaries win. In the year leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's revolutionaries did not always seem to be gaining power. Within Yeltsin's entourage and especially within the democratic movement that backed Yeltsin's actions, the fall of 1990 and the winter of 1991 were uncertain times, marked by dispute, division, and doubt.<sup>48</sup> At the same time that the democratic opposition

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*Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

47. Crane Brinton, *Anatomy of a Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938).

48. This observation is based on dozens of meetings and discussions between the author and leaders of the Russian democratic movement at the time.

in Russia appeared to be splintering, conservative forces appeared to be consolidating.<sup>49</sup> In the fall of 1990, Gorbachev purged his government of most liberals and centrists and strengthened the hand of conservatives, especially those affiliated with the military-industrial complex. In protest against this conservative turn, one of Gorbachev's most loyal allies, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, quit the government in December 1990, warning in his resignation speech of an impending coup.<sup>50</sup> In response to Shevardnadze and others, Gorbachev claimed that he was carving "a centrist position, trying to keep the state organs committed to the maintenance of order in the country, away from the swing of rightist or leftist extremes."<sup>51</sup> Increasingly, however, Gorbachev's regime sounded and acted reactionary, not reformist or centrist.<sup>52</sup>

The implications of this change in the balance of forces at the top was first manifest in January 1991, when Soviet troops seized control of the publishing plant of the main newspaper in Riga, Latvia, attacked the printing house in Vilnius, Lithuania, and then stormed the television station there. Upon capturing the television station, members of a "committee for national salvation" proclaimed that they were the new government and pledged their loyalty to the Soviet government. Fourteen people died in the raid and hundreds more were injured. The following week, special forces (OMON) of the ministry of the interior killed four people in Riga.

From January to August 1991, the balance of power between radicals and reactionaries swayed back and forth several times. Large demonstrations throughout Russia to protest the invasion of

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49. Such a backlash had been predicted by careful Soviet observers for some time. See, for instance, Peter Reddaway, "The Quality of Gorbachev's Leadership"; and Andranik Migranyan, "The Quality of Gorbachev's Leadership: A Soviet View," both in *Soviet Economy* 6, no. 2 (1990): 125–140 and 155–159, respectively.

50. Shevardnadze's speech before the Soviet Congress, reprinted in *FBIS-SOV-90-245*, December 20, 1990, 12.

51. Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 584.

52. Serge Schmemmann, "The Tough New Leaders in Moscow Have Kremlinologists Up and Guessing," *New York Times*, January 27, 1991.



the Baltic states reinvigorated the democratic movement, which then organized several massive demonstrations throughout the year. In the first part of 1991, Soviet conservative forces also scored victories, including major changes in the Soviet government and an electoral victory in March 1991, when a solid majority of Russian voters (and Soviet voters in republics that participated) passed a referendum to preserve the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup> In June 1991, Yeltsin won a landslide victory to become Russia's first elected president, a vote that returned momentum to Russia's anti-Communist forces.

Sensitive to the momentum swing, Soviet conservatives attempted to strike back. After a prolonged set of negotiations during the spring of 1991, Yeltsin and most of the other republican leaders were prepared to join Gorbachev in signing a new Union treaty, scheduled to take place on August 20, 1991. Soviet conservatives saw this treaty as the first step toward total disintegration of the USSR<sup>54</sup> and therefore preempted its signing by seizing power. While Gorbachev was on vacation, the State Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP) announced on August 19, 1991, that they had assumed responsibility for governing the country. Gorbachev, they claimed, was ill and would return to head the Emergency Committee after he recovered. The GKChP justified their move as a reaction against "extremist forces" and "political adventurers" who aimed to destroy the Soviet state and economy.

We can only speculate about what would have happened had this junta succeeded in seizing power. Had they prevailed, the process of ending the cold war rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union would have lingered much longer than it did.<sup>55</sup> The

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53. On hints of an impending coup, see Dunlop, *The Rise and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*, 192–194.

54. Gennadi Yanaev and Anatoli Lukianov, two of the principals in the coup attempt, interviews by Michael McFaul, November 1993. See also Anatoli Lukianov, *Perevorot: Mnimyi i Nastoiashchii* (Voronezh: Vorenezhskaia oblastnaia organizatsiia Soiuza zhurnalistov Rossii, 1993), 46.

55. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, U.S. and Russian leaders have declared the cold war over many times, suggesting that the end of the historical period was a process and not a single event or moment. Even George W. Bush and his administration felt compelled to declare the cold war over more than a decade after the

GKChP pronouncements were flavored with heavy doses of Soviet nationalism. These leaders seemed committed to preserving the Soviet Union. Some of them, it should be remembered, had already authorized the use of military force in January 1991 against Latvia and Lithuania. From these actions, it seems safe to predict that they would have resisted Soviet dissolution, most certainly would have delayed Russian troop withdrawals from places like the Baltic states, and would have been much less cooperative with Western countries that promoted Russian military withdrawal and Western alliance expansion. Some of the coup leaders also represented interest groups, such as the military-industrial complex, the KGB, and the military, that subsequently became the loudest anti-American voices in post-Soviet foreign policy debates in Russia. Had the coup succeeded, the new Soviet dictators would have been beholden to these interest groups, rather than to the people, to stay in power. Subsequent political activities of the participants in the failed coup also reveal what might have occurred had they stayed in power. For instance, Anatoli Lukianov became one of the Communist Party's most articulate anti-American representatives in parliament after his release from jail. He and other coup participants became the darlings of militant nationalist and Communist groups in post-Communist Russia.

These people did not stay in power, however, because Yeltsin and his allies stopped them. After learning about the coup attempt, Yeltsin immediately raced to the White House, the building that housed the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, and began to organize a resistance effort. As the elected president of Russia, he called on Russian citizens—civilian and military alike—to obey his decrees rather than those of the GKChP. At the time, each of the two independent governments claimed sovereign authority over the same territory. The Russian Supreme Soviet convened an emer-

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Soviet collapse. Those late declarations imply that lingering elements of the cold war persisted well beyond the fall of the wall and the dissolution of the USSR. The argument here is that these lingering elements would have lingered longer had the coup plotters succeeded.

gency session to approve Yeltsin's decrees. This legal alternative to the coup leaders' decrees gave military commanders the necessary excuse not to fulfill orders issued by the Soviet authorities. While Yeltsin orchestrated the resistance at the White House, Democratic Russia and its allies assumed responsibility for mobilizing popular resistance on the streets of Moscow.<sup>56</sup> Democratic Russia activists quickly assembled hundreds of supporters outside the White House only a few hours after news of the coup had been announced. The following day, two massive demonstrations took place on the streets of Moscow in which tens of thousands of Muscovites defied Red Army regiments. By the third day, the coup plotters lost their resolve and began to negotiate an end to their rule.

The failed coup attempt and Yeltsin's victory rapidly accelerated the pace of change within the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, imprisoned in his vacation home in Crimea for the three days of emergency rule, returned to a different country when he flew back to Moscow. Believing that they had a new mandate for change, Yeltsin and the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in effect seized power themselves. They pressured the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies to dissolve, assumed control of several Soviet ministries, and compelled Gorbachev to acquiesce to these changes. Most dramatically, Yeltsin then met with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus in early December to dissolve the Soviet Union. On December 31, 1991, the Soviet empire disintegrated. Historians continue to de-

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56. Without question, the outcome of the coup would have been vastly different had it taken place in 1988 or even 1990. Analyses that focus only on splits within the military tend to forget that opposing positions within the armed forces would not have crystallized without clearly defined choices as to which political group to support. If, for instance, Yeltsin had been arrested immediately and popular resistance had not taken to the streets to defend the Russian parliament building, who would defecting Soviet military units have supported? For an interpretation focusing on the military and downplaying the role of democratic political movements, see Stephen Miller, "The Soviet Coup and the Benefits of Breakdown," *Orbis* (Winter 1992). On the politicization of the Soviet military, see Stephen Miller, "How the Threat (and the Coup) Collapsed: The Politicization of the Soviet Military," *International Security* 16, no. 3 (Winter 1991-92).

bate about when the cold war actually ended. The day the Soviet Union died most certainly has to rank as one of the important milestones in ending this historical era.

### **Conclusion**

Gorbachev initiated the crucial reforms within the Soviet Union that began the process of ending the cold war. He then refrained from intervening to protect Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, a nonevent that was as important as any direct action in ending the cold war. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was difficult to imagine how the cold war could have been restarted.

But think again. 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 battlefronts of the cold war might have moved farther east, but the war itself might not have ended. In fact, the failed August coup and the collapse of the Soviet empire still might 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. Some have speculated that only the emergence of a new common enemy—terrorism—after September 11 finally ended the cold war. And even after September 11, the fragile footing of Russian democratic institutions still allows for the possible reemergence of dictatorship in Russia. The return of an autocrat to the Kremlin would most certainly fuel competition, if not conflict, between the United States and Russia.

Yet, even if Russian democracy collapses and Russian capitalism continues to sputter, the reemergence of a *Soviet* or *Communist* threat to the West is highly unlikely. Yeltsin made some disastrous mistakes as Russia's first post-Communist leader.<sup>57</sup> He and his

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57. For a review of this list, see Michael McFaul, "Yeltsin's Legacy," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 2000): 42–58.

team achieved only limited success in building new political and economic institutions. Nonetheless, he still deserves credit for destroying the dangerous institutions of the Soviet Communist and imperial system. Yeltsin's leadership and the democratic, capitalist, and pro-Western ideas he embraced, in combination with the support of his allies in Russia's democratic movement, proved to be a powerful catalyst for speeding the process of Soviet disintegration. This same configuration of leaders, ideas, and organizations also provided the critical check to those who attempted to preserve the Soviet system. Russia's democratic movement has not proven strong enough to build liberal democratic institutions, but it was powerful enough to help destroy Soviet autocratic institutions.<sup>58</sup>

Would the Soviet Union have collapsed and the cold war ended without Yeltsin? We will never know the answer to this question, but thinking through counterfactual concepts helps to isolate Yeltsin's personal contribution as well as the role of ideas in these events.

First, if Yeltsin had not emerged as the leader of the democratic movement, others most certainly would have tried to fill his shoes. Yet, Yeltsin embodied several important leadership characteristics that few others, if any, exhibited. Whether in the service of communism or anti-communism, he was a bold, charismatic, and forceful leader. Within the democratic movement, few could match his leadership qualities. Until his death in December 1999, Andrei Sakharov had greater authority than Yeltsin within the democratic movement because of his integrity and ideals. But even had he survived, Sakharov lacked two other leadership qualities that Yeltsin possessed: the ability to speak to the masses and the capacity to work with Communist Party apparatchiks. If Russia's leading democrat had emerged from the dissident community, Russia's anti-Communist forces probably would not have gained control of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in the spring of 1990,

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58. On the illiberal flaws of Russia's political regime, see McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Transition*, chapter nine.

but would have remained a minority group in this body and more generally for years to come. Subsequent post-Communist elections in Russia after the Soviet collapse demonstrated that the electoral base for liberal parties was always much smaller than Yeltsin's own following.<sup>59</sup> Yeltsin's CPSU background also gave him the skills to navigate the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet system, a balancing act that grassroots leaders of Russia's democratic movement might not have managed well. It is important to remember that the distribution of power between Communists and anti-Communists was always much more equal in Russia than in Poland. Consequently, the transition from communism in Russia was not and could not have been as clean and abrupt as Poland's transition.<sup>60</sup> A reformed Communist such as Yeltsin, rather than unequivocal democratic leaders such as Walesa or Havel, might have been a necessary evil of Russia's anti-Communist revolution.

A second counterfactual idea has to do with the historical contingency that brought together Yeltsin and democratic concepts. What if Boris Yeltsin had adopted a different ideology of opposition and a different set of allies who associated with those ideas? That Russia's revolutionary ideology of opposition became pro-democratic, pro-market, and, by association, pro-Western was not inevitable. Many alternative ideologies of opposition were articulated and discussed during this transitional period. Nationalist organizations had cultivated an anti-Western ideology that was anti-capitalism and anti-communism, as they considered communism a Western, cosmopolitan, Jewish ideology. Their anti-Western and pro-imperial ideology was radically different from the approach of the liberal and pro-Western Democratic Russia. Yet, even within Democratic Russia, several prominent leaders advocated national-

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59. Stephen White, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister, *How Russia Votes* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1997).

60. For elaboration, see Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (January 2002): 212–244.

ist, rather than liberal, ideologies.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, many Socialist and social-democratic organizations that were both anticapitalist and anti-Soviet flourished in the early days of Gorbachev's liberalization.<sup>62</sup> In several respects, the alliance between Russia's liberals in Democratic Russia and Boris Yeltsin, the Communist boss turned populist, was an accident of history forged by common enemies, the Soviet Communist system and later Mikhail Gorbachev.<sup>63</sup> Had Yeltsin's rise to power been buoyed by a different ideology or backed by a different set of allies, Russian democratization might have produced a more belligerent foreign policy—not an end to the cold war, but a different variation of the old East-West confrontation.<sup>64</sup>

Yeltsin's identification with liberal ideas was not totally random, nor was it entirely determined by internal alliance politics, as the balance of ideologies within the international system also shaped choices made by Yeltsin and his allies. But it would be wrong to assume that his embrace of liberal, pro-Western values was inevitable. 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 demo-

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61. McFaul and Markov, *The Troubled Birth of Russian Democracy*, chapters four and five. The Democratic Party of Russia (headed by Nikolai Travkin), the Russian Christian Democratic Movement (Viktor Aksiuchits), and the Constitutional Democratic Party of Russia (Mikhail Astafiev) left Democratic Russia when the organization decided to endorse the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

62. Boris Kagarlitsky, *Farewell Perestroika* (London: Verso, 1990).

63. Democratic Russia founders Vladimir Bokser, Viktor Dmitriev, Lev Ponomarev, and Gleb Yakunin, interviews by Michael McFaul, Summer 1995. At the time, Democratic Russia leaders debated the alliance with Boris Yeltsin as some claimed he was a Communist while others thought he was a nationalist. In 1992, Democratic Russia co-founder Yuri Afanasiev quit the organization, claiming that it identified too closely with the antidemocratic Yeltsin. Russian liberals divided again over their support for Yeltsin during the October 1993 events and the Chechen war.

64. For a discussion of such cases, see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," in *Debating the Democratic Peace*, ed. Michael Brown, Sean Lynn-Jones, and Steven Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

cratic promoter in the post-Soviet era suggests that his acceptance or understanding of these liberal ideas was not complete.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, it is not unreasonable 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.

As a final counterfactual idea, consider what would have happened if the coup plotters in August 1991 had succeeded. This group held anti-Western views and illiberal ideologies and enjoyed close ties to the military, the KGB, and the military-industrial complex. Had they prevailed, civil war might have ensued and interstate war would have been more likely. At a minimum, Russia would have become an opponent, if not a belligerent enemy, of the West. In retrospect, their failure seems inevitable. At the time, however, support for their actions throughout Russia and parts of the Soviet Union seemed significant. Only Moscow and St. Petersburg staged large anticoup demonstrations, only three regional heads of administration openly sided with Yeltsin, and Yeltsin's call for a national strike went unanswered.<sup>66</sup>

Here again, Yeltsin played a critical leadership role. He inspired Democratic Russia activists, mobilized support within the Russian Congress, and perhaps most importantly, persuaded a handful of Russian officers and soldiers to join his side of the barricade. Without this charismatic leader armed with democratic ideas, the August 1991 coup might have succeeded.

Yeltsin's role in destroying communism and ending the cold war provides a powerful policy lesson for future American decision-makers who must deal with rogue states. The lesson is simple: domestic politics matter. Internal changes in the composition of a regime can have a profound influence on the international behavior

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65. See Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Realities* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

66. Koordinatsionnyi Sovet "Demokraticheskoi Rossii, Vsem, Vsem, Vsem," mimeo, August 19, 1991. According to a poll of 1,746 Russian residents conducted by VTsIOM on August 20, 1991, only 34 percent supported the idea of an immediate strike while 48 percent opposed such an idea. See VTsIOM, "Data-express" *Ekstrennyi Vypusk*, mimeo, August 21, 1991.



of that regime. Today, the United States faces security threats from a small but menacing set of states: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. U.S. leaders are prepared to spend billions of dollars to defend our borders and skies from these states. At the same time, 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.

In theory, therefore, U.S. foreign policymakers should seek to court and then support the Boris Yeltsins of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. The problem with this strategy, however, is that U.S. leaders will always be slow to recognize the Yeltsins of the world. They could also hurt the political prospects of such revolutionary challengers by embracing them too quickly. And finally, U.S. leaders can pick and then identify too strongly with the wrong leader. This inability to select winners and this clumsiness in intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries suggests that U.S. leaders should focus instead on promoting the right ideas and then hope that the right leaders will eventually embrace them.

Individuals matter. But they matter most when they are acting as individuals and not as the puppets of outside powers. Ideas also matter. And the beauty of democratic ideas is that they cannot be owned or controlled by anyone.