MEDIA AND MYSTERY IN THE RUSSIAN COUP;

By George Gerbner

The August Coup: The Truth and the Lessons. By Mikhail Gorbachev. HarperCollins. 127 pp. $18.00

The Future Belongs to Freedom. By Eduard Shevardnadze. New York: The Free Press, 1991. 237 pp.

Eyewitness; A Personal Account of the Unraveling of the Soviet Union. By Vladimir Pozner. Random House. 220 pp. $20.00

Seven Days That Shook the World; The Collapse of Soviet Communism. by Stuart H. Loory and Ann Imse. Introduction by Hedrick Smith. CNN Report, Turner Publishing, Inc. 255 pp.

Boris Yeltsin: From Bolshevik to Democrat. By John Morrison. Dutton. 303 pp. $20.

Boris Yeltsin, A Political Biography. By Vladimir Solvyov and Elena Klepikova. Putnam. 320 pp. $24.95

We remember the Russian coup of August 1991 as a quixotic attempt, doomed to failure, engineered by fools and thwarted by a spontaneous uprising. As Vladimir Pozner's *Eyewitness* puts it, our image of the coup leaders is that of "faceless party hacks... Hollywood-cast to fit the somehow gross, repulsive, and yet somewhat comical image" of the typical Communist bureaucrat.(P. 10)

Well, that image is false. More than that, it obscures the big story of the coup and its consequences for Russia and the world. By falling back on a cold-war caricature and accepting what Shevardnadze calls "the export version" of *perestroika*, the U.S. press, and Western media generally, may have missed the story of the decade.

The men who struck on August 19, 1991 were, as Pozner himself argues, "far from inept and, indeed, ready to do whatever was necessary to win." (P.11) Morrison agrees. "...It would be quite wrong," he writes, "to see the coup as just a bumbling adventure by a group of amateurs that was bound to collapse..." (P. 282)

In fact, they had much going for them. Gorbachev not only succumbed to the would-be plotters' demands twice before but appointed them to the highest posts of Soviet government and defended them vigorously against his own supporters. He ignored clear signs of continuing restiveness among them. He thwarted their parliamentary attempt to assume presidential powers but left them in place to strike another day.

When they did, they were riding a wave of popular disappointment with Gorbachev, despair about the course of perestroika, and fear of anarchy. A similar coup against Nikita Khruchschev in 1964 went off without a hitch. "Now," write Loory and Imse, "Gorbachev was far more disliked than Khrushchev had been." (P. 79) Gorbachev's trusted lieutenants grabbed the emergency powers he himself forced out of the Supreme Soviet and set up the Committee for the State of Emergency, they said, to rescue his reform from bunglers and "extremists."

Why did they fail? What turned the tide? How did their attempt to save the Union (approved by 76 percent voting in a referendum only on March 16) crash in 72 hours, burying in its ruins all the plotters had set out to save? Why did a second coup, less readily recognized (despite having taken place before a worldwide viewing audience) succeed in sinking Gorbachev and setting off a tidal wave that is still sweeping the geopolitical landscape? What calamity short-circuited the time needed for an orderly transition, robbing Soviet people of a sense of historical development, identity and purpose? How did a once mighty empire, powerful army, and ruling party -- whose global menace fueled the Cold War, ignited hot wars, and justified repression worldwide -- collapse without a whimper, leaving behind ever deepening crises and the revival of chauvinism, clericalism, and neo-fascism? And how did the quick-freeze of instant media history substitute a caricature for in-depth coverage of one of history's great turning points?

The authors, journalists except Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, supply some answers and also pose some new mysteries. Gorbachev's own apologia (with its wistful poses now sadly out of date) attributes the coup's failure to the "interaction of ...the democratic achievements of *perestroika* and the new relationship with the world outside." (P. 32) Probably the most, if not only, democratic achievement of the now defunct *perestroika* was *glasnost*, and the new relationship with the world outside was forged largely by friendly Western media.

Gorbachev's comrade to implement the restructuring of Soviet foreign policy, the former and now again party boss of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, had no diplomatic experience when called, to his great surprise, to head the Foreign Ministry. His chatty, rambling, emotional book, is largely a chronicle of the growing chasms between the "new thinking" (and especially its Western media version) and the reality. "The priorities disseminated so widely abroad, he writes, "were increasingly clashing with events at home...The 'export' version of the new thinking was greatly in demand abroad. But at home it was being pressed into old molds." (Pp. viii, ix.) His book is an account of the growing opposition that finally lead to the coup. An epilogue written only two days after the coup is a shaken and anguished reflection of his reactions, recollections, and regrets.

Vladimir Pozner, who grew up in New York, is a favorite of Western, especially U.S., media. He is a long-time Soviet television commentator and talk-show host, identified on the book jacket only as an author who "resigned from Soviet State Television, protesting the ban on any criticism of Gorbachev." He supplies an intensely personal and thus necessarily selective but illuminating "eyewitness" account.

Seven Days, published by CNN, is the most comprehensive of these books, illustrated with exclusive (and stunning) TASS agency color photographs. Hedrick Smith wrote a 38-page introduction. The rest, written by Stuart Loory and Ann Imse (who will be referred to as "L & I"), with contributions by eight CNN staffers, is, as the title suggests, a day-by-day account of the coup and its aftermath.

John Morrison, a Reuters foreign correspondent who spent six years in Moscow, writes an unauthorized but appreciative and well-researched biography of Boris Yeltsin. Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova, emigre Soviet journalists (who will be referred to here as "S & K"), had access to sources not available to others and are the most suspicious of Gorbachev's account.

While reviews of these books have appeared elsewhere, none has pieced together the story behind their stories, the story the U.S. media largely overlooked. That is ironic because the media themselves are the key players in that story. On the other hand, perhaps journalists are the most reluctant to admit to history-making (rather than only reporting) roles and powers they are not supposed to have.

No other crisis -- with the possible exception of the war in the Persian Gulf six months earlier -- made history quite like that. The Gulf War blanketed the globe with coherent, if contrived, real-time imagery (see our *The Triumph of the Image*, Westview Press, 1992). By contrast, the Russian coup lurched out of control because the newly reformed and revitalized communication system was too fast, too rebellious, and too leaky to be effectively controlled. As Alexei Izyumov, Russian journalist and Fellow at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University, pointed out at the recent conference of the International Communication Association, "the Soviet media, once a pillar of the communist system, served as its most efficient executioner."

The big story behind the stories is that of the pivotal role played by news media, real-time imagery, and electronic networks, in derailing coup. As I sketch that story, guided by these six books and personal interviews a month before and a year after the coup, I must warn the reader that it is a story of mischief as well as heroism, of tragedy as well as triumph, and of mystery as well as revelation.

Gorbachev's zig-zag policy (justified in his book as "the policy of compromise ... necessary to reduce tensions at moments of serious danger") (P. 14) had been creating confusion and havoc. S & K report that in the responses to a survey question "Whom do you trust the most" Yeltsin led with 1420 votes and Gorbachev was last with 115 votes. (P. 193)

The conspirators did have a plan but instant history, triggered by Yeltsin's counter-coup, gave them no time to carry it out. The plan called for rough measures backed up with a show of force but avoiding large-scale arrests and bloodshed. Their appeal, in some ways prophetic, was to widespread frustrations, fears, and grievances. They complained that "lack of faith, apathy, and despair have replaced the original enthusiasm and hopes." Echoing disaffected Gorbachev supporters Shevardnadze and Yakovlev, they warned of "mortal danger" to the policy of reform and democratic development posed by those "striving for unbridled personal dictatorial powers" (which could have meant Gorbachev or Yeltsin or both). Along with tough talk about "labor discipline and order," the Committee emphasized that "measures we envisage are not an attack on human rights." They offered "nationwide discussion," developing a "many-tier" economy including private enterprise, and urgent concentration on critical food and housing problems.

Resistance to the coup was slow, sporadic, and on a low-level. "There was anger and bewilderment on the streets," writes Morrison, "but, at first, no mass resistance. ... Across the Soviet Union, resistance to the coup was also patchy." (P. 283) What there was, was mostly confined to the Baltic states, cosmopolitan centers, journalists, intellectuals and small crowds brought out by tanks on the streets. Only one Soviet cabinet member and one ambassador came out in opposition. The Supreme Soviet fell silent. "Where was its Presidium? Where were the Deputies themselves" Gorbachev laments, and writes that "Many party committee decided to help the plotters." (Pp. 43, 46) He complains that the reaction from the outside world and from the Republics was, at first, "hesitant."

The tide began to turn when Boris Yeltsin upstaged the plotters. The coup's failure was sealed when journalists, printers, video makers and others using cameras, xerox and fax machines, mobile telephones and other electronic devices spread their versions of events. Next, Yeltsin used his newly acquired control of media to stage, on live television, another, but this time successful, coup that really brought down the Soviet colossus. But we are getting ahead of our story.

Just before dawn on Monday, August 19, 1991, a black limousine pulled up to the Moscow offices of TASS, the official Soviet news agency. Leonid Kravchenko, recently appointed by Gorbachev himself to tighten his control over the media, handed a stack of documents to the wide-eyed graveyard-shift staff. The documents he delivered, writes Morrison, "were to tell the world that the Gorbachev era was over." (P. 281)

Mikhail Gorbachev was on vacation, at Cape Foros in the Crimea. For him the coup started the day before. As Gorbachev tells the story, when an uninvited delegation arrived at the compound, he found all five of his phones dead, himself under guard, and totally isolated by land and sea. The visitors barged in and asked that he sign a declaration of emergency or hand over power to Yanayev "to save our Fatherland." He told them to go to hell.

When the coup seemed to be falling apart, he heard on the BBC that another group was on its way. "We all took it to mean that some treachery had been thought up," he writes. "It was at that moment that Raisa Maksimova [his wife] suffered a serious attack of pain..." (P. 29) When they arrived, however, he ordered them arrested, his telephone reconnected, and the first coup was over.

S & K have a "feeling that there was something superficial, theatrical, even TV-like about the Moscow events...In our TV age, any ocular reality is perceived as a show." (P. 19) Indeed, like a movie, the Russian coup began with a jolt and had a surprise ending. But why it came as a surprise to the one who should have known best, Mikhail Gorbachev, is still one of the mysteries.

Gorbachev admits that "The coup did not come unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue." (P.11) Sergei Stepashin, Chairman of the State Commission investigating the KGB, reported that Gorbachev was "flooded with documents" showing that using the presidential powers he had forced out of the newly elected Supreme Soviet (causing the resignation of Shevardnadze), powers the plotters later grabbed for themselves, was the only way to restore order in the country. (Shortly after the collapse of central power Yeltsin also proposed a declaration of emergency but he was voted down by the Supreme Soviet. He corrected that by assuming the role of his own Prime Minister, as well as President, a maneuver that seems not to have occurred to Gorbachev.)

Both President Bush and Secretary of State Baker used CIA information to privately warn Gorbachev that a coup was imminent. At the press conference held to promote his book, Gorbachev related that he replied "President Bush, don't get excited, everything is O.K.'" (*The New York Times*, 11/13/91, p. A12).

On Aug. 17, two days before the coup, at a meeting of Shevardnadze's Political Council, a statement was drafted also concluding that a coup was imminent. It was not the first. "All throughout 1990, I had been issuing warnings, with facts in my hand...The President came forward and said he saw absolutely no threat of dictatorship." (P. 211)

S & K report that "Alexandr Yakovlev, coauthor of *perestroika*, phoned Gorbachev on the evening of August 18. A day earlier, he had left the Party, publicly sounding a warning of the coming coup... They fell on deaf ears." (P. 242).

Reporting afterwards to the Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev admitted his "responsibility ... for the fact that I had not done everything possible to prevent the August coup." (P. 56) But he offers no credible explanation. The fact remains that despite repeated serious warnings, and despite his previous willingness order or condone bloody crackdowns at signs of trouble, Gorbachev did not act, inform his friends, alert the security apparatus, or take special precautions himself. He went off to his vacation compound in the Crimea.

The question of what Gorbachev knew and when he knew it is one of the mysteries that "torment" S & K. They cite speculation that the coup was engineered by Gorbachev, perhaps to provoke sympathy and revive his fading support. Perhaps, hint S & K, Gorbachev "was caught in a trap he had set up himself." "Even if Gorbachev was innocent as a lamb," they hint further, "even if his participation in the coup was an indirect one (after all the leaders were his personnel choices) -- the August 19 putsch was directed against Yeltsin whom the putchists planned to remove, not against Gorbachev -- and implemented by Gorbachev's own people. As for Gorbachev, according to Acting President Gennady Yanayev, he was soon to return to his presidential duties." (P. 22)

S & K spin out in great detail the circumstances and prominent persons supporting the theory that staging the coup might have been thought of as a way to get rid of Yeltsin and keep the Union (and the central leadership) together. They consider Gorbachev's demand that the trial be conducted behind closed doors, and the epidemic of post-coup suicides of key participants who might have shed light on the "plot within the plot," suspicious. Gorbachev's (and Raisa Gorbachev's) apparent panic not when the coup started but when it failed supports their suspicions.

Morrison calls the coup "a disaster waiting to happen" that Gorbachev refused to spot. "So reckless was his overconfidence," he writes, "that he was even suspected, by some, of complicity in his own removal." Pozner does not suspect collusion, but believes that "the real thrust of the coup was aimed at Yeltsin -- and the plotters hoped that Gorbachev with his 'Yeltsin allergy' would not interfere." (P. 213)

L & I, no conspiracy theorists, nevertheless cite Yeltsin aide Rutskoi as considering the possibility that Gorbachev was behind the coup. "You understand that speculation was rife in Russia...But when Mikhail Sergeyevich came out to meet us with his aides, it was clear from his face that he was happy to see us," Rutskoi said. (P. 151)

Shevardnadze, who probably knows Gorbachev as well as anyone, and was more hurt by his Janus-faced behavior than most, clearly knows, or suspects, more than he tells. When hearing that the plotters had fled, he asks "Where to?" Upon learning that they had flown to the Crimea, he asks, more pointedly, "But why there -- why there precisely?" Seeing Gorbachev on television, he follows the trail of suspicion, without making it any more explicit: "I also glimpsed Chief of Staff Mikhail Moiseyev among the crowd of greeters, and I had further thoughts about the president's entourage." (P. 210) What further thoughts? He does not say.

At one point Shevardnadze plunges into character analysis: "... Mikhail Gorbachev is extremely choosy in his response to things that happen without his knowledge or agreement. With some he may be unusually patient or indulgent. With others, on the contrary, he may be intolerant or irritable. Some destroy his life's achievement virtually before his eyes, and he seems not even to notice. Others attempt to save this achievement, but encounter only lack of understanding.

"In my case, he made a display of iron self control." He "refused to see that the circle of coup was closing in on him. Did he not see it? Did he not want to see it? I don't know." And: "He had so little idea of what was going on around him that I could simply not be free of all suspicion." (Pp. 219-220)

Gorbachev takes note of the suspicions and tries to preempt them. "What happened to us in the course of those days is deserving of serious analysis," he writes. "But I reject any speculation about the position taken up by the President." He specifically relates "one story that is going around...that I knew in advance about the putsch... That Gorbachev's communications were not cut off but that he kept out of the way so as to sit it out and then to arrive 'ready to serve.' A 'no-lose' situation, so to speak..." He anticipates "all kinds of things," "the crudest inventions," attempts to "compromise" "the President," etc. "But," he writes, "if those three days failed to unsettle me, it certainly won't happen now." (Pp. 27-28)

Of course, the issue is not so much to unsettle as to unburden him of the facts. But, as Esther B. Fein reported in *The New York Times* on October 4, 1991, Gorbachev said "he would never disclose everything about the events..."

Smith reports that the plotters "had accepted the legalistic strategy at the outset and that handicapped the conspirators in the crucial early hours of the coup." (P. 33) Gorbachev's own explanation is not inconsistent with that scenario. He observes that three planeloads of commandoes would have been enough to remove Yeltsin's government from power. "What was their problem?" he asks. His answer is that the plotters were "...counting primarily on people's discontent." (Pp. 34-35) If that is so, they would have been on solid ground but for three factors that proved to be their undoing: the split in the military, people's mistrust and the media's new role in making instant history.

The media's new role began with *glasnost*. Just as Khruschev's "thaw" twenty years earlier, *glasnost* did not originate as a policy of universal openness. It was, rather, a weapon for exposing and discrediting the past and the "old guard." Soviet radio and television were staffed with Gorbachev's people who used their media as bludgeons. That created obvious resentment in some circles. I had attended a large meeting in Moscow denouncing the "petty-bourgois opportunists of Gosteleradio" (the Soviet broadcasting company.) The free-swinging style of some "reality programs," like having young men on camera at a street drinking-party berate a cabinet minister facing them live in the studio, would have tried the patience of a U.S. network and certainly infuriated the Ministries.

But the tactics evoked grumbling in establishment and labor circles about "elitists, upstarts and careerists." They provoked consternation among those who believed and sacrificed all their lives. But they won the enthusiastic support of younger intellectuals and people of more cosmopolitan outlook. "Journalists became heroes. Newspapers, magazines, certain TV shows took center stage," Pozner reports. (P. 51)

Glasnost had no legal foundation until the All-Union "Law of the Press and Other Mass Information Media" was approved by the Supreme Soviet in 1990. As Moscow University Journalism Dean Yassen N. Zassoursky remarked, "A free press was established in 1917 and suspended 'until the time was right' in 1918. The time was right in 1990 when the new press law was passed." The Law limited censorship and gave editorial staffs considerable autonomy. One of its drafters, M. A. Fedotov, law professor and former Deputy Minister of Press and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, told me the law was "democratic romanticism," probably because it had no provision for financing a "free press." (The picture on the wall of his high-ceilinged spacious office was not Lenin or Gorbachev or even Yeltsin but Sakharov.)

Soon Gorbachev himself became disgruntled with the critical cacophony of the media. Five months after signing the law he joined the hard-liners, placed television under direct presidential control (eventually leading to Pozner's resignation), and called for the "temporary" repeal of the Press Law. But it was too late. Romantic or not, and even if still honored more in the breach than in reality, the law had redefined the legal structure and political climate in which media operate.

The Moscow plotters were uncomfortable with the press under *glasnost*. Their televised press conference was a disaster. "When Yanayev stated that Gorbachev was ill," Pozner relates, "the press hall, packed as it was to capacity, laughed out loud -- and Yanayev smiled....When he referred to Gorbachev as 'my friend,' the journalists hooted - and Yanayev smiled...Into the conference about twenty minutes, Yanayev's hands began to shake..." "'Trembling fingers' jokes spread around the country with the speed of lightning." (P. 93)

"This was not an Emergency Committee that could strike fear into the hearts of the press..." observe L & I. "Now it was clear that the glasnost-inspired press was not knuckling under despite the suspension of most of the capital's newspapers and repression of television...After the press conference, the almost solid front of caution began to crumble." (P. 99) The clock that Gorbachev started ticking in 1985 could no longer be turned back.

Midmorning on the day of the coup Yeltsin was told that Russian video cameras and a foreign crew, with satellite access were waiting outside. He went out and climbed a tank that stood outside the White House. "He was," writes Morrison, "a lonely figure...There was only a small crowd around to hear his defiance. It looked like the courageous final gesture of a doomed man, recorded for the archives..." (P. 284) L & I report that "Yeltsin was nervous and shaken... He did not know how the soldiers would react... The tank commander hid his head and averted his eyes... Yeltsin began speaking..." (P. 90)

Before long, however, his defiant image assumed heroic dimensions as it began to dominate the world's screens. His words were soon broadcast, feeding back into the crisis. Within hours, handbills were circulating, despite the ban. Independent publications resumed production using fax machines, photocopiers and computers. Makeshift newspapers and broadsides were distributed at rallies and pasted up on walls. Some newspapers banded together to put out a joint edition. A limited edition of *Moscow News* appeared. During the few hours that the Russian Federation's television was off the air, its camera crews "made videotapes and shipped them to twenty major cities through airline pilots and sympathetic travelers," write L & I. "In keeping with the claim of legality, the coup conspirators allowed Western news media to operate; Gorbachev and millions of Soviet citizens followed every breaking development from broadcasts of the BBC, Voice of America, and CNN." (P. 36)

The alternative news service Interfax, thrown out of its Soviet headquarters but taken in by Yeltsin and the Moscow City Soviet, became another channel to the world. The staff of *Izvestia* which, emboldened by the spirit of *glasnost* and the letter of the press law, had been feuding with the Soviet government for months, went on a brief strike rather than to publish its decrees, but, according to Shevardnadze, copied Russian government documents with a manual press. (P. 206).

Troops occupied the telephone exchange and yet, somehow, phone lines remained open. That was enough for the new "underground" communication of computer-driven electronic mail networks to go into high gear and mobilize support all over the world.

"Yeltsin spent most of the three days on the phone, talking to President Bush and Prime Minister John Major, to his supporters, to hesitating generals, and to the confused plotters," write S & K. (P. 253) Pozner relates that the BBC, ABC, CBS, NBC, Australian TV, Canadian Broadcasting and other television companies kept calling him for interviews.

Hundreds of newly independent media, fax and duplicating machines, electronic mail networks and wide-spread use of short-wave radio complicated things for the plotters. The young people working in the crowded, cluttered office of radio station Moscow Echo told me that, lacking legal warrant which the new law requires, the KGB had an engineer locate to shut down their transmitter three times, and they had their own engineer turn it back on the air three times.

A jerry-rigged Radio Russia went on the air and began to broadcast around the clock. Even though its signal covered only part of Moscow, "it brought hope because of the voices it carried, " writes Pozner. "Voices of people known to one and all, writers and actors, politicians and military men, all of them sending a signal: Come to the White House of Russia, come help build the barricades..." (P 113) The Voice of America and Radio Liberty increased their broadcasting and reported no jamming of their programs.

By early afternoon Shevardnadze drove, unhindered, to the headquarters of the Democratic Reform Movement (which he founded against Gorbachev's opposition) and held a press conference to announce that defense of the White House would be organized that night. Shevardnadze tells the story of a group of young producers from television who put together a film of rebel voices and "discovered an honorable man in the Ministry for Long Distance Communication who placed at their disposal a satellite channel. In this way, Russia from Moscow all the way to the Kamchatka Peninsula, received truthful information." (P. 205)

Official Union television in Moscow had been reduced to one channel playing "Swan Lake" interspersed with emergency decrees. But Leningrad television was still on the air, visible throughout much of the Union. Rebellious mayor Anatoly Sobchak was to speak at 8:15 p.m. L & I recount that the order to cut him off came from the Emergency Committee at 6 p.m. It went to Valentin Lazutkin, first deputy chairman of Soviet television, who had watched the press conference and decided that the coup won't fly. Lazutkin delayed the cut-off until after 8:30. (P. 100)

Next, Lazutkin reviewed the footage for the official evening news. It had shots of Yeltsin speaking atop the tank, and voiceover quotes from his speech. Furthermore, it showed crowds gathering at the White House, building barricades. Against explicit orders, Lazutkin left them in. The item ran two and a half minutes. The emergency still dragged on for awhile, but the Emergency Committee was dead in the waters of instant history.

Gorbachev notes the role of the media only briefly. "At that difficult time," he writes, " the majority of journalists and the media made no mistake in choosing where and with whom to be..." (P. 34)

Shevardnadze is more expansive. "The democratic press ignored the censorship" he writes. "Praise be information technology! Praise be CNN's reporters and announcers. Anyone who owned a parabolic antenna able to receive this networks transmissions had a complete picture of what was happening." (Pp. 206-7)

The coup collapsed, but the instant history media scenario was far from over. Gorbachev returned, he said, to a "different country." He was soon to discover just how different it was.

During the coup, Yeltsin promulgated decrees not only for Russia but also for the Soviet Union. The day after the coup, Yeltsin banned Communist Party dailies and handed the two major news agencies, TASS and Novosti, over to Russian Federation authorities. On August 24, three days after the coup, Yeltsin issued a decree placing central government communications under Russian Federation control. The entire system of the All-Union Ministry of Communications was transferred to the jurisdiction of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet Committee for Communications, Computing and Space, thus gaining control over the full spectrum of electronic communications media.

Gorbachev writes that Yeltsin "took up a brave position and acted decisively, taking all the responsibility upon himself. In those extraordinary circumstances it was justified that when I returned to Moscow I confirmed the decrees he issued at the time of the coup." (P. 33)

That all-too-brief and generous but disingenuous statement glosses over the swiftest and greatest peaceful transfer of power in the twentieth century. This is how it happened.

At the post-coup emergency session of the Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev went to the podium, fresh from the Crimea, humbled and tired but triumphant. Television, and the power to use it, had given him national and international exposure. At previous sessions he had personally had the cameras turned off when the proceedings displeased or alarmed him. But now television was under Russian, not Soviet, control. Now Boris Yeltsin was in charge.

L & I describe what took place on live television. "Yeltsin forced Gorbachev to read aloud the record of Monday's cabinet meeting, where all but two of his ministers betrayed him...When Gorbachev protested the humiliation, saying he had not read the document, Yeltsin was merciless, insisting: 'Well, read it now.'" Next "Yeltsin forced Gorbachev to promise publicly he would accept all the emergency decrees Yeltsin had approved during the coup.

Then Yeltsin informed the Soviet President that one of those decrees transferred ownership of all property in Russia from the central government to the republic. The blindsided Gorbachev had suddenly become a kind of tenant-leader in his own country. Technically, his government no longer even owned the Kremlin. But that was just the beginning. Yeltsin whipped out a document. 'On a lighter note,' he said, 'shall we now sign a note suspending the activities of the Russian Communist Party?' He signed with a flourish...Gorbachev was stunned. 'I think you'll be...I don't know what you're signing there,' he stammered." (P. 158)

At that moment, the structure that Mikhail Gorbachev tried to "restructure" came down like a house of cards. (Although Yeltsin's actions were soon to be challenged as not only illegal but unconstitutional, no court was likely to roll back the avalanche set off by instant history.) "It was," write S & K, "as if Gorbachev had become a puppet in Yeltsin's hands, following Yeltsin's orders, appointing Yeltsin proteges to all key positions..." "What forced Gorbachev to take orders..?" they ask. (P. 21) Was it only that a proud and vain head of state, obliged to appear grateful on camera, was snared by his rescuer who, smarting from past humiliations, knew when and how to make a grab for power? Or did Yeltsin also have some other hold on him, as he was to hint on later encounters? In any case, the world was watching, not fully understanding that instant history was made by the very act of its witnessing the scene on live television.

The August coup is over but the danger is, if anything, greater than in 1991. Shevardnadze writes that the coup "brought about a chaotic, irrational development of events. They've set a fateful pendulum in motion which now threatens to wreck a wall already full of cracks." (P. 222) Most of the Republics, some with nuclear arms, are ruled by autocrats unbridled by central power. What everyone calls "the Mafia" (well-organized groups running the formerly underground economy and the illegal militias) has emerged into the open to take charge of "privatization" while prices rise, unemployment soars, and even lagging wages are withheld for months because the government ran out of paper to print rubles. The Union has fallen apart and conflicts within and between Republics begin to engulf the former Soviets in a new civil war. Yeltsin's recent visits abroad (as indeed Gorbachev's before him), advertised in our press as triumphant and politically helpful, are seen at home as unnecessary surrenders and humiliating economic fiascoes, contributing to the rapidly deteriorating situation. Instead of the stodgy but relatively timid plotters appointed by Gorbachev, a fierce new alliance of hate groups, militarists, and KGB and Party careerists openly prepares to seize power.

Most knowledgeable observers I have consulted reflect widespread cynicism about the coup and what its failure has brought about. Gorbachev's complicity is still considered by many to be a reasonable explanation for an otherwise irreconcilable combination of circumstances.

But a super-conspiracy theory is also gaining currency. It is a virtual mirror-image of the Gorbachev theory but with a surprise twist. According to that theory, Yeltsin, with his excellent contacts to the military, was also in on, or at least tipped off about, the coup, and, instead of being arrested, as would have been logical if he would have been its main target, was left free in hopes that he will not oppose the sidelining of Gorbachev, and can be taken care of later. Then, the theory goes, at the crucial moment Yeltsin turned on the plotters and took over control himself. (When it was over, Yeltsin said "I deceived them.") The plotters fled to the Crimea, to Shevardnadze's consternation, in a vain desperate attempt to get Gorbachev to side with them again.

The suicides of plotters, the selective leaks from the prosecutor's office, the silence about and delay in their trials all point to great apprehensions about what really happened and what it portends for the future. Both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze implied that there is more to the story than they are willing to tell. Yeltsin in his continuing feud with Gorbachev refers to significant archives at his disposal. And, most disconcertingly for all concerned, nearly all the plotters still alive are writing books and smuggling manuscripts out of prison. Most of my informants doubt that there can be open, or any, trials, at least under the current government. They think that if and when full and authentic information about the coup and its aftermath becomes public, it will implicate too many and further destabilize the already volatile situation.

Meanwhile, walking in front of the closed Lenin Museum behind Red Square, one sees knots of the new activists make signs, launch demonstrations, deliver orders to other groups. The largest of these groups has been besieging Ostankino, the main television station, since June 12. I attended a debate in the Russian parliament on what to do about the media situation. The chaos in the country is reflected in paralysis in Parliament. Media financing, control, and policy will again hold the balance of power in the next crisis.

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