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Instant History: The Case of the Moscow Coup

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Until recently, the historical process was entirely time-bound. Accounts were produced after the fact. News was something that happened. A documentary depicted the past. We read about, rather than witnessed, history. Now, after a long, slow buildup, history-making has become time-unbound. When the power to act on the world scene merges with the power to direct the show about it, instant history-making becomes possible. Participation, witness, and confirmation hitherto limited to those on the scene can now be globally experienced while the event is still going on.

Instant history is made when control of video-satellite-computer technologies makes it possible to blanket the world in real time with selected images, provoke reactions that feed back into the event, speed its resolution, and quick-freeze the outcome into received history. Instant history is image history in a supportive context. The sense of "being there" skirts reasoning and preempts alternatives. Instant history is the simultaneous, global, mass, living, showing, telling, and making history in brief and intensive bursts. Past, present, and future can now be packaged, witnessed, and frozen in a flash into memorable moving imagery.

Films of Vietnam took hours or days to reach us, after the fact. It may have been the first "living room war" but not for the first few years and not in real time. Starting with the make-believe incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, it was a long, slow, duplicitous buildup. It lasted 11 years, destroyed three countries, and left behind some 2 million dead and a legacy of hardship, including economic sanctions, for the living.

Body counts were in the headlines but did not have public witness. The tide of public reaction turned after victory eluded policymakers and cameras began to record unsettling images: the Tet offensive, a summary execution of an "enemy" suspect, naked "enemy" children fleeing napalm, thatched "enemy" huts being put to the torch. When cameras turn to focus on the fallen, the war is lost or soon will be. This is why the press was barred from Dover Air Force Base where Gulf War body bags landed. It took a freelance reporter posing as a mortician to get an estimate of the casualties.

The Iraq–Iran war, totally out of sight, dragged on for 10 years, claimed more than a million casualties, and ended in exhaustion. The declaration of emergency by Poland's Jaruzelski took 8 years to unravel, and the majority of Poles responding to a survey in 1991 still thought it had been necessary. (*New York Times*, May 20, 1992, p. 1). However, when chaotic *perestroika*, made visi-

ble by *glasnost,* rolled into Eastern Europe, each successive counterrevolution took half the time of the previous one.

The quantum leap in instant history-making occurred in 1991. The year began with the world-class spectacular in the Persian Gulf. Six months later, a failed coup in Moscow triggered a countercoup and the collapse of Soviet power on live television. We shall review the first major successful instant history-making (analyzed more fully in Gerbner, 1992) before we turn to our case study of the Moscow coup.

The Persian Gulf Spectacle

As presented in the media, the war in the Persian Gulf was an unprecedented global spectacle. It crammed into its first month alone the entire filmic imagery—and firepower—of 4 years of bombing in World War II. However, unlike a carpet of explosives leveling cities and setting off firestorms or of G.I.s "flushing" Vietcong from their hiding places, we were shown "seeing-eye bombs" zooming in on their targets followed by computer graphics tracing the ground offensive against an invisible enemy.

Forming the backbone of the new instant history-making machine were portable television transmitters, the global satellite network (including the collaborating Soviet satellite), dedicated direct four-wire telephone lines, fax machines, mobile phones, and computer links. This versatile system made it possible to provide controlled real-time simultaneous live global coverage from several selected sites, even when nothing much was going on. "Today," wrote CNN President Tom Johnson (in Loory & Imse, 1991), "journalists equipped with computers, beepers, satellite telephones, flyaway earth stations, and camera crews bring viewers to the story instead of the story to viewers" (p. 8). The source of the story was tightly guarded in the field. Much of what slipped through the cracks of official censorship was self-censored by mainstream media gatekeepers.

General Schwartzkopf forbade casualty estimates. Sortie-counts replaced body counts. Photographs of battle or of the dead were censored. Sleek aircraft "sortied" over unmentionable people in unfought battles in an unseen country. The few unauthorized shots of bombs falling on civilian targets were attacked as treasonous or rationalized as "collateral damage," defined by *Time* magazine as "a term meaning dead or wounded civilians who should have picked a safer neighborhood" (Solomon, 1991, p. xviii). Never before were selected glimpses of actuality strung together with sound bites of photogenic crews, omniscient voice-overs of safari-clad reporters, and a parade of military experts with maps and charts at the ready, so mesmerizing, so coherent, and so contrived.

The Soviet Coup

Desert Storm was the first major global media crisis orchestration that made instant history. The Soviet coup 6 months later was the first attempt that miscarried. A year before the coup Gorbachev had signed a new press law that promised editorial staffs a degree of autonomy not known in the democratic

West. It made for a relatively fragmented and leaky communication system. When the coup came, the plotters could not control the increasingly cacophonous media orchestra. After the failed attempt to make history, a countercoup, globally witnessed but virtually unrecognized, made instant history. Accounts by key participants and observers and research and personal interviews conducted—by me and my associates—in Moscow before and after the coup made it possible to piece together that story.

Most American's remember the Soviet coup of August 1991 as a quixotic attempt out of the blue, doomed to failure, engineered by fools, and thwarted by a spontaneous uprising. As Vladimir Pozner's (1992) *Eyewitness* put 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" (p. 10) of the typical Communist bureaucrat.

That image is false. Yeltsin biographer John Morrison (1991) writes that "it would be quite wrong to see the coup as just a bumbling adventure by a group of amateurs that was bound to collapse" (p. 282). The men who struck on August 19, 1991, were, as Pozner himself writes, "far from inept and, indeed, ready to do whatever was necessary to win" (p. 11).

Why did they lose? What turned the tide? How did the attempt crash in 72 hours, burying in its ruins all the plotters had set out to save? Why did a countercoup, 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 robbed 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 neofascism?

The August coup is over but the danger is not. The state of emergency declared by the plotters has been imposed by their nemesis, Yeltsin. A typical comment in Moscow is that the coup was the right move by the wrong clique. However, the threat by stodgy and legalistic plotters who had been appointed by Gorbachev has been overtaken by a fierce new alliance, the "red-brown forces." These combine the more militant factions of military, industrial, and labor groups and of the KGB (now called the Security Ministry) with assorted hate groups and other ultranationalists (hence, the allusion to Hitler's Brownshirts).

When I attended a debate in the Russian parliament on a proposed new media law, it was evident that the chaos in the country had paralyzed that body. Media financing, media policy, and access to the technology capable of making instant history may again hold the balance of power. Answers to questions about why one coup failed and the other succeeded bring into focus the new mechanism that short-circuits the political process.

The Making of the Coup

There was ample warning of an impending coup, wide complicity in the highest circles, little initial resistance, and much support for a change. Reporting

afterwards to the Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev (1991) confessed his "responsibility before all the Deputies for the fact that I had not done everything possible to prevent the August coup" (p. 56). However, he offered no credible explanation.

The oversight was all the more baffling in view of Gorbachev's bloody, if bungled, Tbilisi and Baltic crackdowns and the curious overreaction to a bizarre rumor not long before the coup that Yeltsin's forces were planning a coup disguised as a mass meeting on Moscow's Manezh square. The rumor prompted Gorbachev to forbid the rally and order tanks into Moscow in March, 1991 for the first time since the arrest of KGB chief Beria in 1953.

The tactic backfired as the demonstrators defied the ban, forcing Gorbachev to back down. His actions made him look undemocratic, weak, and vacillating. With central authority rapidly eroding, the old guard hastened preparations for the real attempt. Yet when that was imminent, despite repeated serious warnings, Gorbachev did not inform his friends, alert the security apparatus, or take special precautions himself. He went off to his vacation compound in the Crimea.

When the plotters struck, they had much going for them. The coup leaders, all appointed by Gorbachev to the highest posts of Soviet government, were riding a wave of popular discontent. Gorbachev's reform movement had failed to project a viable vision of society—socialist or capitalist—and was sliding into chaos. A similar coup against Nikita Khruchschev in 1964 went off without a hitch. "Now," wrote Stuart Loory and Ann Imse (1991), "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. They set up the Committee for the State of Emergency to "save the Union" that 76% had voted to preserve in a referendum in which all but six republics had participated less than 5 months before.

The conspirators did have a plan but instant history gave them no time to carry it out. The plan called for tough measures backed up with a show of force but avoiding large-scale arrests and bloodshed. Their appeal to Soviet citizens, in some ways prophetic, was to widespread frustrations, fears, and grievances. It began:

> In a dark and critical hour for the destiny of our country and of our people, we address you! A mortal danger hangs over our great homeland! The policy of reform initiated by M. S. Gorbachev, conceived as a means to ensure the dynamic development of the country and the democratization of the life of its society, has, for a number of reasons, come to a dead end. The original enthusiasm and hopes have been replaced by lack of belief, apathy and despair. Authority at all levels has lost the confidence of the population. Politicking has left no room in public life for concern for the fate of our country and of the citizen. (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 1991.)

The declaration, broadcast to all the world and monitored in the United States by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service on August 19, 1991, complained that "lack of faith, apathy, and despair have replaced the original en-

thusiasm and hopes." Echoing disaffected Gorbachev supporters Shevardnadze and Yakovlev, the coup leaders, warned of the danger to the policy of reform and democratic development posed by "extremist forces" and those "striving for unbridled personal dictatorial powers." Along with 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. (FBIS, 1991.)

Their warnings resonated to the rising fear of crime, vigilantism, and moral and economic chaos. In a survey we conducted in six Soviet republics a few months before the coup (Gerbner, Finifter, Mickiewicz, and Morgan, unpublished), more than half of the respondents expressed mistrust in people in general and agreed that "it is not safe to walk alone at night in my neighborhood." (FBIS, 1991.)

The State Committee captured the mood of many when it declared that citizens are "feeling increasingly uncertain about tomorrow and deep concern about the future of their children." Our survey found that one out of five Soviets expressed the stark view that "the future is so troubled that it would be irresponsible to bring a child into the world." (FBIS, 1991.) The country's birthrate was at a postwar low, dropping 28% in 5 years of perestroika (*The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 1992, p. A11).

Gorbachev's approval rating had sunk to 4% by the time of the coup. Pozner (1992) cites polls showing that the sentiment against democracy and for law and order increased by 19% in 3 months before the coup, whereas the popularity of the Communist Party doubled (p. 171). He notes that the coup leaders "considered the changes engendered by perestroika a disaster. . . . Yes, they acted to preserve their power . . . But they also acted to save their country and their society as they understood them" (p. 45).

Resistance to the coup was slow, sporadic, and mostly confined to the Baltic states, large cities, and small crowds brought out by tanks on the streets. The military forces remained passive. Only one Soviet cabinet member and one ambassador came out in opposition to the plotters. The Supreme Soviet fell silent. "Where was its Presidium? . . . Where were the Deputies themselves" (p. 43) Gorbachev (1991) laments in his book and writes that "many party committees decided to help the plotters" (p. 46).

The Tide Turns

The tide began to turn when Boris Yeltsin upstaged the plotters. His defiant imagery magnified the resistance, emboldened the opposition, and divided the armed forces. The coup's failure was sealed when some journalists, printers, videomakers, and others using cameras, Xerox and fax machines, mobile telephones, and other electronic devices spread their versions of events. "Television may not lie," writes Hedrick Smith (in Loory & Imse, 1991), "but it often exaggerates and magnifies, in this case giving the impression of a massive popular rebellion . . . Instant mass communication, both Soviet and international, carried reports of resistance and fanned the flames of rebellion" (p. 36).

Gorbachev observes in his memoirs 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 two other factors that proved to be their undoing: a split in the military and the media's new role in making instant history.

The Role of the Media—Glasnost

The media's role began with glasnost. Just like Khrushchev's "thaw" 20 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, creating resentment and rage in some circles. "Malicious outrage against all state institutions is being imposed," charged the junta. I attended mass meetings in Moscow denouncing the "petty-bourgeois opportunists of Gosteleradio" (FBIS, 1991), the Soviet broadcasting company. The free-swinging style of some of its programs, like having young men 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; it certainly infuriated the Ministries.

The tactics that provoked consternation among some won the enthusiastic support of many—though not all—journalists, intellectuals, and young people of a more cosmopolitan outlook. Boris Grushin, well-known sociologist and head of the new *Vox Populi* research firm, conducted a survey of 10 groups of opinion leaders on August 19 and 20 and found journalists the most cautious among them; about one out of five refused to respond. However, most others spoke up in opposition. Pozner (1992) reports that "journalists became heroes, newspapers, magazines, certain TV shows took center stage" (p. 51). The cultural ferment of glasnost may have hastened the urgency of the plotters but, at the same time, set the stage for the media backlash.

Glasnost had no legal foundation until the All-Union "Law of the Press and Other Mass Information Media" was signed by Gorbachev on June 12, 1990. One of its drafters, and coauthor of the subsequent Russian press law, M. A. Fedotov, law professor and later Deputy Minister of Press and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, told me in June 1991 in Moscow that it was "democratic romanticism," probably because it had no provision for financing a "free press."

The Law limited censorship to state security matters, and gave editorial staffs considerable autonomy. When I interviewed Fedotov a month before the coup, the picture on the wall of his high-ceilinged spacious office was not Lenin or Gorbachev or even Yeltsin but Sakharov. The Law's key provision was that editorial staffs (which, according to various definitions, may include all those employed, from editors and reporters to the night watchman) elect, by majority vote, their editors-in-chief and vote on contracts with publishers that specify how policies are to be decided. Although all media were still on state budgets and could be ordered closed, they could no longer be easily silenced. (With the selective withdrawal of press subsidies and the growing commercial

control over surviving media, the press and media laws are again contested territory.)

The Moscow plotters were more accustomed to controlling media than to manipulating them. Their televised press conference, broadcast live to all the world, was a disaster. "When Yanayev stated that Gorbachev was ill," Pozner (1992) relates, "the press hall, packed as it was to capacity, laughed out loud . . . When he referred to Gorbachev as 'my friend,' the journalists hooted . . . Into the conference about twenty minutes, Yanayev's hands began to shake (p. 93).

"This was not an Emergency Committee that could strike fear into the hearts of the press. . . . [observed Loory and Imse (1991)] 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). In any case, the spirit of glasnost, the new law, instant imagery, and the new technologies made complete control of communications no longer possible. The clock that Gorbachev started ticking in 1985 could no longer be turned back.

Media Backlash

At nine o'clock in the morning of the coup, Soviet Foreign Minister Edvard Shevardnadze (1991) sat in his office calling supporters and taking calls from newspapers and television companies at home and abroad. That day he heard from German Foreign Minister Genscher and, a day later, from Secretary of State Baker. By noon, an Italian journalist brought Shevardnadze the text of Yeltsin's appeal. The fax was still working, and he sent both Yeltsin's and his Movement's appeal to the Interfax and Novosti news agencies and to sources abroad until they ran out of paper. Then a Moscow firm called Astep brought more paper and kept the fax machine running. The instant history backlash went fully global.

At home, within hours handbills were circulating, despite the ban. Independent publications resumed production using fax machines, photocopiers, and computers. Makeshift newspapers and broadsheets were distributed at rallies and pasted up on walls. Some newspapers banded together to put out a joint edition entitled *Obshchaya Gazeta.* 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 Loory and Imse (1991, p. 16). "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 Union of Journalists issued a declaration calling on the Supreme Soviet to cancel "illegal decisions" banning publications and broadcasts. Two of the eight newspapers allowed to publish printed the statement. The alternative news service Interfax became another channel to media at home and abroad. The staff of *Izvestia,* which, emboldened by the spirit of glasnost and the letter of the press law, had been feuding with the government for months, went on a

brief strike rather than publish the decrees, but according to Shevardnadze (1991), duplicated Russian government documents with a manual press (p. 206).

Troops occupied the telephone exchange and yet, somehow, many phone lines remained open. Computer-based electronic mail traffic was heavy. Computers provided a link between the Soviet Union and the outside world. "Please stop flooding the channel with bogus messages and with silly questions," Vadim Antonov urged Westerners attempting to send electronic mail to Russia during the early hours of the coup. "Note that it's neither a toy nor a means to reach your relatives or friends at this time."

Antonov, one of the builders of the Soviet's 2-year-old computer communications network known as Relcom, knew its limitations and its potentials. The messages sent from Antonov's computer in Moscow late on the night of August 19 were copied and posted across the United States and abroad on electronic bulletin boards. KGB agents undoubtedly knew about the underground network. In a telephone interview a week later with *New York Newsday* reporter Joshua Quittner (1991), Antonov related that "during the last night of the coup we got a strange phone call. The caller said, 'We are your users, please give us your modem's phone number.' This was an absurd statement, since anyone who knew about the network knew how to interconnect to it. We said to them rude words" (p. x).

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 Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova (1992, 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, automated circuits, car phones, satellite phones, fax and duplicating machines as well as electronic mail networks and widespread use of the short-wave radio complicated things for the plotters. Moscow Echo, staffed by former journalism students and shut down repeatedly by the KGB, struggled back on the air several times during the coup.

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," according to Pozner (1992, p. 113). "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" (Pozner, 1992, p. 113).

Midmorning on the day of the coup, Yeltsin was told that Russian video cameras were waiting outside. He climbed a tank that stood outside the White House. The tank commander hid his head and averted his eyes. There was no microphone. Yeltsin began speaking. Before long, his soundless but defiant image dominated the world's screens, and his words were soon broadcast, feeding back into the crisis. 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 his Democratic Reform Movement 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" (Sheverdnadze, 1991, p. 205).

Official Moscow television had been reduced to one channel playing "Swan Lake" interspersed with emergency decrees. However, 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. Orders to cut him off went from the Emergency Committee at 6 p.m. to Valentin Lazutkin, first deputy chairman of Soviet television, who had watched the press conference and decided that the coup would not fly. Lazutkin delayed the cut-off until after 8:30 p.m.

Lazutkin next reviewed the footage for the official evening news, Vremya. It had shots of Yeltsin speaking atop the tank, and voice-over quotes from his speech. It also showed crowds gathering at the White House, building barricades. Despite orders to cut it, Lazutkin left them in. The item ran 2 1/2 minutes. When Vremya showed clips of Yeltsin addressing crowds and reported his call for a general strike, the state of emergency still dragged on for another day, but the State Emergency Committee was dead in the waters of instant history.

The Countercoup

When the original coup collapsed, the instant history scenario was far from over. In a way, it was only just about to begin. Gorbachev returned, he said, to a "different country." He was soon to discover just how different it was.

During the coup, Yeltsin had promulgated decrees not only for Russia but, without legal authority, for the Soviet Union also. The day after the coup, Yeltsin banned Communist Party dailies and handed the two major news agencies, TASS and Novosti, over to the control of the Russian Federation authorities. (He was forced to back down, at least temporarily, when the Russian Press Law, replacing the all-Union law, passed the Russian Parliament on October 6, 1992.) On August 24, three days after the coup, Yeltsin issued a decree placing all central government communications under Russian Federation control. The entire system of the All-Union Ministry of Communications was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Russian Supreme Soviet committee for Communications, Computing and Space, giving Yeltsin control over the full spectrum of electronic communications media.

When the postcoup emergency session of the Supreme Soviet opened in Moscow on August 26, Gorbachev went to the podium fresh from the Crimea, humbled and tired but triumphant. Live television and the power to use it had given him national and international exposure. At previous sessions he had personally turned off the cameras when the proceedings displeased or alarmed him.

Now television was in Russian, not Soviet, control. Now Boris Yeltsin a popularly elected leader, unlike Gorbachev, was in charge. Gorbachev's complicity in the coup, possibly to get rid of the rival Yeltsin, was (and still is) widely and publicly debated in Moscow—so were the circumstances of Yeltsin's rescue

and countercoup. Rumors, suspicions, and previous humiliations, often before an audience on live television, serve as a general backdrop to the dramatic turning point of August 26.

Stormy Relationship

After his initial elevation to the post of Moscow Party Secretary, Yeltsin's bull-in-the-China-shop style, including embarrassing televised encounters, earned him demotions and transfers. Reports of drunken orgies during his first American visit, although they later proved to be fabrications, appeared on the front page of *Pravda*. A Soviet television program showed his speech at Johns Hopkins University slurred, out of sync with his gestures. Later, a comparison with the original revealed that studio experts had tampered with the tape.

The final indignity came when, after an absence of two weeks from public view, Yeltsin showed up at a televised session of the Supreme Soviet. Suddenly, Gorbachev interrupted a routine debate. He asked the Minister of the Interior to come to the podium and report Comrade Yeltsin's "personal case." The Minister related a bizarre story of Yeltsin clambering from a lake where, he said, he had been thrown by assailants out to kill him. Taking the floor, Yeltsin was evasive. The televised scene was repeated several times during the day, and the next day's *Izvestia* printed a full transcript.

The story Solovyov and Klepikova (1992) piece together from interviews and provincial press accounts is even more bizarre. Yeltsin crashed a birthday party of his old friend and then-Prime Minister Ryzhkov, to which he had not been invited, and had a fight with Gorbachev; they even came to blows. Gorbachev, who lost out in the fight, sent his personal bodyguards to dump Yeltsin in the lake, where he caught a bad case of bronchitis that sidelined him for two weeks. For reasons still unknown, perhaps because of its improbability and fear of more ridicule, Yeltsin did not tell the true story, if that is what it was, on live television before the Supreme Soviet. In any case, August 26 must have been sweet revenge, indeed.

Loory and Imse (1991) describe what took place then, again 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 saying he had not read the document, Yeltsin was merciless, insisting: "Well, read it now" [The minutes incriminated in the plot those whom Gorbachev had defended just the day before. 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)

The Triumph of Instant History

At that moment, the structure that Mikhail Gorbachev tried to "restructure" came down like a house of cards. Instant history turned floundering perestroika into a full-fledged counterrevolution. (Yeltsin's actions were soon to be challenged in the newly created Constitutional Court, plunging the country further into a crisis of legitimacy.)

The new phenomenon of instant history short-circuited the time needed for deliberate decisions and orderly transitions. The world was watching, not fully understanding that instant history was made by the very act of its witnessing the scene on live television. A mechanism of global mischief has been added to the agenda of problems that political communication study and policy must now address.

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