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A Cleansing Storm: The August Coup and the Triumph of *Perestroika*

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Two approaches can be taken to the Soviet coup of 18–21 August 1991. The maximalist version stresses the revolutionary elements of mass popular mobilization and the triumph of democracy, whereas the minimalist view stresses the elements of continuity and the manipulation of events by the democrats. An examination of a number of models of the coup suggests that both approaches provide valuable insights yet neither is entirely adequate. The coup acted as the catalyst for a profound structural transformation of the polity and society.

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No sooner was the coup of 18–22 August 1991 in the USSR over than it entered the realm of historical and political controversy. The maximalist view suggests that the coup meets the definition of a revolution as a significant shift in power and property relations achieved through extra-constitutional means. After August 1991, the maximalists insist, Russia for the first time in its history set out upon the path of building a genuinely democratic system freed of the burden of empire. The minimalist view suggests that the old regime fell under the weight of its own inadequacies rather than through any genuinely revolutionary process. They stress the continuities between the old regime and the new and question whether a 'coup' took place at all. The August events can be analysed within the framework of a number of models which place the debate in context.

I. The Heroic Revolutionary Model

According to Martin Malia, the collapse of the Leninist regime in Moscow meant its eventual demise everywhere: 'Thus the revolution of August 1991 is not just another twentieth-century revolution; it is, in

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Hegelian terms, "world-historical": the greatest international turning point since 1945 and even, in a sense, since 1917'.[1] In more prosaic terms, the central argument of the maximalist view of the coup contends that popular mobilization brought down the State Committee for the State of Emergency (SCSE), the eight-person body formed on 18 August and headed by the Vice-President, Gennadii Yanaev. The years of *perestroika* had opened up a public sphere, which in the most physical sense meant that public spaces had been reconquered by the people. The 'masses' had turned into a citizenry.

On 22 August Alexander Yakovlev talked in terms of a 'people's revolution' against the 'Bolshevik counter-revolution'.[2] And Yeltsin's biographer, John Morrison, argues 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 within a few hours. It failed because there was resistance to it. Boris Yeltsin was the man who led that resistance, and without him, it might have succeeded.'[3] Already on 18 August Gorbachev had warned the delegation from the SCSE: 'The people are not a battalion of soldiers to whom you can issue the command "right turn" or "left turn, march" and they will all do as you tell them.'[4] And Shevardnadze noted, 'The plotters took much into account except the main thing: the years of *perestroika* had delivered us from fear, and now we are different. And in so far as we are different and they have stayed the same, we are invincible.'[5] Eyewitness accounts stress the sense of popular anger: 'What do they take us for? They're treating us like swine. They think they can just shut us up again, cut us off from the world and from each other.'[6] Gorbachev summarized: 'That was where the plotters went wrong: they did not realise that society was now not at all what it had been a few years back.'[7]

This 'heroic model', however, has been challenged. Abraham Brumberg talks in terms of the myth 'that "people's power" brought down the "State Committee for the State of Emergency".'[8] Internal divisions within the SCSE's camp, rather than popular mobilization, led to the coup's downfall. The crux of the minimalist argument is that Yeltsin and the democrats were able effectively to mould a version of events which bore little relation to reality but which served as an effective instrument to bring down the old regime. The coup was, from this perspective, a brilliant exercise in 'the social construction of reality'.[9]

The heroic model has been attacked on several points by the minimalists. The first is that only a relatively small number of people actively resisted the coup. The numbers defending the Russian White House are crucial to this argument. The usual figure given is that by Tuesday 20 August there were some 150,000 surrounding the Russian parliament

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building, although if the numbers which marched from the Moscow Soviet building to the White House are included the total is probably double that.[10] The demonstration in St Petersburg on that day attracted some 200,000 people.[11]

The second line of assault against the 'heroic' image is evidence from public opinion polls. Brumberg stresses that polls conducted during the coup revealed that half considered the putsch illegal, 25 per cent actively approved of it, and the rest had no opinion.[12] Leonid Gordon argued that only a negligible proportion of the population took definite action during the putsch, and he ascribes this to the contradictions in mass consciousness. While some 85 per cent spoke in favour of the market economy, only 42 per cent were in favour of the large-scale use of hired labour; and only one-third strongly preferred democracy to order.[13] There was therefore a substantial constituency to which the plotters could appeal.

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The maximalists would argue that there was a much larger spread of opinion than the minimalists suggest. A poll on 20 August covering four towns showed views ranging from 76 per cent denouncing the coup in Krasnoyarsk to 49 per cent condemning it in Voronezh.[14] A second poll on 20 August was far more decisive in denouncing the plotters, with 73 per cent in Moscow and 94 per cent in Yerevan taking a hard line against the Committee.[15] Differences between republics were also marked, with the Ukraine joining Armenia in taking the most resolute stand.[16] Moreover, the maximalists would argue that a longitudinal approach has to be taken to shifting attitudes. Even before the coup, polls had demonstrated that society had indeed changed, thus weakening the political base of the putsch. A poll in December 1990 suggested that 52 per cent considered that harsh methods would not improve conditions, 22 per cent thought they would and 27 per cent had difficulty answering.[17] Already during the Baltic crisis of January 1991, 80 per cent of the Russian and Soviet political elite denounced the use of military force in Lithuania.[18] Moreover, public opinion as a whole had moved sharply away from an 'imperial' consciousness, with over 70 per cent of the population consistently stating that republics should be allowed to secede if they so wished.[19] Hence the central appeal of the putschists, to keep the Union together, was aimed at a diminishing constituency.

The third line of attack is to suggest that Boris Yeltsin's call for a general strike against the coup went largely unheeded. The head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, testified on 22 August 1991 that 'people did not follow the call for a strike. Four mines went on strike ... But the country reacted much more calmly than one might have imagined.'[20] This was yet another case of Kryuchkov's wishful thinking, and even a cursory examination shows that the response was more more vigorous than he

imagined despite the fact that, given the speed of the collapse of the coup, workers had barely time to mobilize. The miners, with experienced strike committees in place, led the way in active opposition. By Tuesday 20 August miners in Vorkuta and the Northern Urals basin had stopped work, and in Kemerovo 40 per cent of the mines had stopped.[21] The evidence would suggest that a rumbling strike wave would have affected the country if the coup had lasted longer.[22] Whether this would have been enough to overthrow the plotters is another question.

Evidence for and against the heroic model is inconclusive. Part of the problem is that opposition to the coup was largely inchoate. The numerous political parties that had sprung up since 1990 played almost no organized role during the coup, although, as in February 1917, middle level political activists formed the core of organized resistance. The movements spawned by *perestroika*, notably the anti-Stalinist 'Memorial' association and Democratic Russia, played a leading part in printing leaflets and coordinating opposition. Resistance was significant in the official media as well. Newscasters informed the public of Yeltsin's pronouncements against the coup, and journalists on *Izvestiya* refused to carry out the orders of the junta.[23] In a manner typical for Russia, during the coup the fourth estate to a degree compensated for the weakness of the third.[24] The resistance of the military is also difficult to quantity.[25] The junta's failure to carry the armed forces with them is what ultimately condemned their venture to failure.[26] The divisions within the democratic movement had long been condemned as one of its greatest weaknesses, but it now turned out to be one of its strengths. Gorbachev's rich legacy of confusion and the luxuriant nature of the nascent Russian democracy provided too many targets, and at the same time none.

There is no doubt, however, that if the plotters had been more determined and better organized they would have found plenty of collaborators. Andrei Dunaev, the Russian Federation Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs during the coup, took a resolute stand against the plotters and while some of his subordinates 'understood the situation at once ... Others, if you will forgive the expression, we simply had to shout at and pound our fists. Now many of them are phoning me and thanking me from saving them from disgrace.'[27] There is some evidence to support the assertion by the writer Alexander Zinoviev that if the plotters had managed to hang on for a week then the restructuring of power – which we now call a coup because it failed – would have been accepted by the West, submitted to by the mass of the population, and welcomed by significant numbers.[28] Zinoviev assumes a thorough disgust by the population for Gorbachev's 'catastroika' policies and hence mass support for the restoration of order and Soviet norms of life.

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The other side of the politics of collaboration is the politics of resistance. Personal experience, age, class and national factors play a part here, as well as the opportunity to give voice to opposition in an organized way and the expectation that resistance can be effective. The triumph of *perestroika* is that it had raised precisely these expectations and provided the institutions of protest.[29]

II. The Conspiracy Model

There are numerous versions suggesting ever more incredible scenarios and Zinoviev, indeed, believes in most of them. Above all he suggests that a 'coup' was needed in order to legitimate the 'revolution' carried out on the basis of its suppression.[30] Conspiracy theories find a ready audience in Russia among a population unused to believing that things are what they seem.

Conspiracy theories focus on the personal roles of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. On two occasions during the events in August Shevardnadze suggested that Gorbachev's immediate role was less than honourable, arguing that at the very least Gorbachev had behaved irresponsibly.[31] Gorbachev's behaviour in his last year in power, although explicable in terms of a crude framework of allying with the strongest faction while trying to avoid becoming their prisoner, deserves at the very least Shevardnadze's judgement that in this period Gorbachev was 'deaf and blind, he hears and sees nothing'.[32] Above all, Gorbachev has never answered Shevardnadze's question: 'how could the President appoint people to his team who were so obviously opposed to his policies?'[33]

Several theories focus on Gorbachev's involvement in the August events. Martin Sixsmith discusses the idea that Gorbachev conspired with the hardliners to flush out the liberals, but that the plot went horribly wrong.[34] Gorbachev might have half-promised the plotters to declare a state of emergency to legitimate harsh measures but then, as during the Baltic events of January 1991, got cold feet and aborted the coup attempt as soon as it began. Another version is quite the opposite, namely that he was willing to string the plotters along in order to give them enough rope to hang themselves.

There are some answers to these questions, none of which do much credit to Gorbachev's leadership qualities but they do at least exonerate him from any direct culpability in the coup. Above all, the hard-liners appear to have been very successful in imposing an information blockade around him. All the top Soviet and Russian leaders were being bugged by

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the KGB, whose influence if not powers had increased markedly during *perestroika*.[35] As Yevgeniya Albats notes, 'not a single paper was laid on the President's desk without Valerii Boldin's [Gorbachev's chief of staff] knowledge.'[36] Gorbachev, however, was not totally unaware of the gathering storm. Shevardnadze's resignation speech of 20 December 1990 informed the world that 'The reformers have gone into hiding. A dictatorship is approaching.'[37] On 16 August Alexander Yakovlev added his voice to the growing flood of dire warnings, and resigned from the communist party.[38] In his 'Crimea Article' written a few days before the coup, which was to have been his speech delivered on the signing of the Union Treaty on 20 August, Gorbachev presciently noted that 'The introduction of a state of emergency, in which even some supporters of *perestroika*, not to mention those who preach the ideology of dictatorship, see a way out of the crisis, would be a fatal move and the way to civil war.'[39] While his complicity in the plot of August 1991 is improbable there remains much to be explained.

Other versions of conspiracy theories focus on Yeltsin's role, stimulated by the old Roman principle of *cui bono*? (who benefits?). They suggest that Yeltsin, although clearly not the initiator of the coup, exaggerated the danger even though he knew that the plotters were ill-prepared and their forces divided. He played the propaganda game for all it was worth, even inviting foreign journalists into the White House on the Tuesday night of 20 August when an assault was expected at any minute.[40] He then staged his own well-prepared counter-coup and thus transformed a coup into a revolution. While the plotters were trying to save the state and the Soviet constitution, if by unorthodox methods, Yeltsin staged the real coup against the old regime, breaking almost every law in the book.

The crudest version of Yeltsin's complicity in the coup comes, typically, from Boris Kagarlitsky. In his *tour d'horizon* few players on the Soviet stage escape involvement, including Gorbachev. Kagarlitsky dismisses the view that Yeltsin 'provoked his opponents into doing it, and then crushed them, solving all his problems and ending communism in one go.' Such a version would assume extraordinary stupidity on the part of the plotters. Instead Kagarlitsky highlights a point made by many others: how could Yeltsin be so sure of success? He allegedly knew that the White House would not be stormed, and indeed was to have played a part in a new government of national unity with some of the plotters and Gorbachev. Instead, Yeltsin staged his own coup and turned the tables against the plotters, and while they pretended to stage a coup, he launched a real one. In sum, according to Kagarlitsky, 'What took place on 19 August was not a triumph of democratic freedoms, but the

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beginning of the end of the democratic interlude between two dictatorships, the Communist and the right-wing populist.'[41]

Yeltsin's relationship with the military and security forces during the coup is crucial to this argument. Yeltsin had been careful to build up links with the army and this was repaid during the coup. Leonid Ionin argues that the tanks were no more than 'decoration in the drama of the struggle between Yeltsin and the SCSE. The army was politically neutral.' It did as it was told, it 'entered and stood', as the famous words of the command on 19 August put it. Yeltsin was able to act with such confidence, Ionin alleges, because 'The White House knew how little it was threatened by the army.' Yeltsin had visited the headquarters of some of the divisions earlier and knew their mood, and during the coup General Konstantin Kobets, promoted on the spot to the post of Russian Defence Minister, and Vice President Alexander Rutskoi, were constantly on the phone to military leaders.[42] Even on the night of 20–21 August, when the world held its breath expecting the storming of the White House, Yeltsin's team apparently much exaggerated the danger and put out their own version from the White House. In short, two coups were in progress between 19 and 21 August, and only one of them by the SCSE.[43]

The second issue is the role of the KGB. Did Yeltsin know that the Alpha group was not going to assault the White House on the night of 20-21 August? Already in May 1991 Yeltsin forced Kryuchkov to agree to the establishment of a Russian KGB, headed by a career KGB official, Viktor Ivanenko.[44] Thus Yeltsin had a foothold in the Lubyanka, yet there is no evidence that he knew that the order to storm the White House would not be given or fulfilled.[45]

The obvious conspiracy theory, of course, is the degree to which the attempt to impose an authoritarian solution on the social and political disintegration of the USSR was planned. Did Anatolii Luk'yanov, chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet, really play the part of *éminence grise*, the ideological progenitor of the coup? In the 'Spiegel tapes' of his interrogation on 22 August Dmitrii Yazov, the Soviet Minister of Defence and a member of the SCSE, put forward the idea that gained currency later that 'There was no conspiracy or plan ... We did not think about anything, either in the short term or the long term.'[46] Yazov was being disingenuous. Kryuchkov appears to have been the main strategist behind the coup and had been preparing detailed plans for some months. By late 1990 resistance to *perestroika* began to shift from the political to the military sphere. In particular, the attempted *coup d'état* in Lithuania in January 1991 marked a turning point. As a representative at the Lithuanian Prosecutor's Office put it, 'We shall never understand the reasons for the August putsch without ascertaining the underlying reasons for the events of 13 January.'[47]

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III. The Statist Model

The coup was statist in two senses. It appealed to the unity of the Soviet state as a territorial formation; but it was also statist in that it relied preeminently on the instruments of the state rather than those of the party. In both respects, the SCSE eschewed ideological appeals of the communist sort.

The putschists appealed to Soviet nationalism to counter the insurgent nationalism of the republics. Their main concern was to prevent the signing of the new Union Treaty on 20 August that would have taken power away from the Union ministries and the bureaucratic 'centre'. Mark Beissinger argues that 'The August crisis must be understood primarily as a nationalities crisis – indeed, the final nationalities crisis of a decaying and exhausted political order.'[48] The plotters tried to rally the population to the slogan of 'statehood in danger', and for this there was little need to have recourse to communist slogans. However, the putschists, and indeed some of their patriotic allies, probably underestimated the degree to which Soviet statehood was dependent on a communist legitimation.

While the putschists made little overt reference to communist ideology, the party apparatus played a significant, though subaltern, part in the coup.[49] The Deputy General Secretary of the CPSU, Vladimir Ivashko, appeared to miss the point when he argued that the party had played no part in organizing the coup, and the editors of *Pravda* entered the realm of fantasy when they asserted that the state of emergency was directed in part 'against the democratic renewal of the party'.[50] As Gorbachev admitted, the failure by the party leadership to condemn the coup in effect meant support for the SCSE.[51] Evidence provided by V.A. Makharadze, chief RSFSR State Inspector, suggested that in August 70.5 per cent of the leaderships in all of Russia's 73 regions did not support their own Russian president (14 gave active support to the coup), and even the remaining 29.5 per cent restricted themselves to formal pledges of loyalty. Only three provinces and Moscow and Leningrad actually supported Yeltsin. Not a single party committee spoke in favour of the Russian leadership: a third adopted a wait-and-see attitude; and the rest (67 per cent) supported the SCSE.[52]

The coup appeared to show that the CPSU was indeed unreformable, and at the same time the party's marginalization indicated that this was indeed a post-communist coup.

If the 'official' coup was statist, then the 'unofficial' counter-coup was designed precisely to free the republics from the 'centre' and the state from the communist party. Prior to the coup Yeltsin had well understood

that there could be no effective governance unless the party was deprived of its privileged relationship to the state and returned to the competitive sphere of multi-party politics in civil society. Hence Yeltsin's 'departification' decree of 20 July 1991 was a milestone, 'preventing interference by public associations in the activity of state agencies and the influence of intraparty struggle on the functioning of the state apparatus'.[53]

Statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*) was being restored to Russia in two senses: as a nation-state separate and distinct from the USSR; and as a political state separate and distinct from the communist party. The plotters only hesitantly dared to call on party structures, the old motivating force of the state apparatus, and sought to save a modified system by jettisoning some of its ideology. The plotters were caught between civil society and the state, daring to appeal to neither, caught between the past and the future.

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IV. The Populist Model

The absence of ideological invocations was one thing, but apart from the unity of the Soviet state, what actually did the putschists appeal to? There appear to have been three main populist concerns. The first was the restoration of order (*poryadok*). Decree No.1 of the SCSE spoke of 'restoring legality and law and order, stabilizing the situation, overcoming the grave crisis and preventing chaos, anarchy and a fratricidal civil war'.[54] The 'Appeal to the Soviet People' also spoke in terms of waging 'a merciless war against the criminal world, and to eradicate shameful phenomena that discredit our society and degrade Soviet citizens'. An unpublished decree would have allowed patrols 'to shoot thieves, hooligans and saboteurs without trial'.[55] The SCSE hoped to take advantage of the groundswell of public opinion in favour of order indicated by opinion polls, but failed to note that while their aims were popular, their methods were not.

The second concern was an attempt to capitalize on an alleged popular hatred for the new entrepreneurs. The decree cited above talked in terms of 'waging a resolute struggle against the shadow economy, and inescapable criminal and administrative measures are to be applied against corruption, embezzlement, speculation, the concealment of goods from sale, mismanagement and other legal violations in the economy'. Office holders were banned from engaging in entrepreneurial activity, a move that affected communist party officials as much as others. The list the SCSE had prepared of those to be arrested included some prominent businessmen.[56]

The third appeal was to the politics of the stomach, the belief that as long as people had food they would be willing to put up with limitations on democratic rights. The Appeal talked in terms of conducting an inventory of foodstuffs in the belief that hidden reserves would thus be made available. Yazov admitted in his interrogation on 22 August 1991 that the SCSE was 'counting on the theory that there were some goods, that somewhere there were some sort of reserves and stockpiles', only to discover that none of this existed.[57] Prices of certain foods and consumer items were to have been reduced. All of this, apart from the promise of little garden plots for workers, echoed the administrative approach to economic problems that had marked the Soviet regime from the first, and would no doubt have been no more successful.

The emphasis on populist measures suggests that the coup tried to save the system but not the ideology. However, it was clear that the system could not survive without the ideology, however much the banner of socialism had become a tattered cloth soaked with the blood of a decayed idealism. Hence the transition successfully negotiated by General Jaruzelski from communist to patriotic legitimation in 1981 was impossible to effect in 'the homeland of ideology', especially in the absence of a credible external threat. Kryuchkov's attempts to manufacture the bogey of 'imperialist intervention' was greeted with ridicule even by some of the hardliners in the *Soyuz* group at the closed session of the Supreme Soviet in June 1991 when one of the future plotters, Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov, had tried to gain extra powers.[58] This indeed was a triumph of *perestroika*: reality had broken into the paranoid world of Bolshevism.

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V. The Conservative Model

The minimalist argument stresses that the coup was not an attempt at a reactionary restoration of the old pre-Gorbachev, let alone Stalinist, regime. The real reactionaries, who might have been more willing to shed blood, were excluded.[59] The plotters were not reactionaries in this sense, but conservatives, willing to reform to a modest extent as long as this did not challenge the old structure of power and privileges. In promising to continue the reforms the SCSE conceded that even they realized that there could be no full-blooded restoration of the old regime. Like Andropov, they were willing to rationalize the system, but, like the conservative reformist Yegor Ligachev, they believed that Gorbachev's reforms were going too far. The conservatives sought to steer a mid-path between reaction and reformism.

The conservatives made up a heterogeneous group, and before the

coup increasingly verged on the outright reactionary as the middle ground of politics, as in 1917, was gradually squeezed out by increasingly polarized views. Their disquiet had been vividly expressed at the Central Committee meetings in the run-up to the coup, and they were incensed by Gorbachev's proposed party programme, endorsed by the Central Committee meeting of 25–26 July, which went far beyond Leninism and returned the party to its social democratic roots.

Above all, the conservatives were concerned with keeping the Union intact, and thus a conservative patriotic alliance began to take shape against Gorbachev's reformism. The so-called 'Letter of the 53' of December 1990 warned against the disintegration of the country, and this theme had become much more urgent in the patriotic 'Address to the People' of 23 July 1991. Both were probably instigated by the publicist Alexander Prokhanov, who four days before the coup announced that a congress of patriotic forces would meet at the end of September.[60] The Address warned in baleful tones: 'An enormous, unprecedented misfortune has befallen us. Our homeland and country, a great state that was given into our care by history, nature and our glorious ancestors, is perishing, breaking up, and being plunged into darkness and non-existence.'[61] The signatories included Prokhanov and the writer Valentin Rasputin together with the putschists, Vasilii Starodubtsev and Alexander Tizyakov. Two important military figures signed: Valentin Varennikov, commander of ground forces, and Boris Gromov, the Deputy Minister of the Interior. The appeal in effect called for rebellion, yet no action was taken against its military signatories.

The *Soyuz* group of USSR deputies had long advocated a forceful if not dictatorial solution to the country's problems, but in the event were merely bystanders to the drama of the coup. The group's leading figures, such as Viktor Alksnis, Yevgenii Kogan, Yuri Blokhin and Nikolai Petrushenko, denied any involvement in the coup, but they certainly acted as its intellectual progenitors, and the group had been frequently received by Gorbachev.[62]

The coup can be seen as conservative in that it tried to retain the Union and promised to work within the framework of the changes since 1985. The plotters had tied their own hands in failing to put forward an identifiable programme of their own. Above all, they failed to coordinate their actions with the nascent patriotic bloc, and thus were unable to mobilize their natural allies. An alliance of the conservatives and the patriots would have been potentially a much more powerful one. One of the outcomes of the over-heated rhetoric of the Soviet patriots was the putsch, but the patriots were not directly involved and have yet to show their hand.

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VI. The Constitutional Model

Khrushchev's ouster in October 1964 had been conducted perfectly legally within the terms of the old system. *Perestroika* had broadened the sphere of politics to encompass the state and society, but the continued parallelism between party and state meant that the issue of succession remained confused. The plotters were by no means prisoners of earlier conceptions of leadership change, but neither were they able to come to terms with the legitimacy derived from electoral politics.

Since 1989 there had been much discussion about the need for an 'iron hand' to establish an authoritarian political framework in which civil society and a liberal economic system could grow.[63] From late 1990 the 'iron hand' argument passed from the reformist to the conservative camp with less regard for legal niceties.[64] Presidential power was one form in which the new authoritarianism was implemented. The creation of the Presidency of the USSR in March 1990 extended the already awesome battery of powers given to the chairman of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies. Even more 'special powers' were granted in late 1990, allowing the president to rule by decree in emergency situations. It was these powers that the plotters sought to usurp.[65]

Already at the Third (Emergency) RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies in March–April 1991 the conservatives had tried 'to carry out a coup by parliamentary means'.[66] On that occasion Yeltsin had outwitted them and strengthened his powers. When in June Pavlov had tried to seize extra powers at the USSR Supreme Court Gorbachev graciously, if not foolishly, insisted that there were no major differences between himself and Pavlov. The failure of these attempts at legal change encouraged extra-legal approaches. Yet one of the main appeals of the putschists was to legality. In their 'Statement of the Soviet Leadership' of 19 August 1991 the putschists had tried to subordinate the republics to the centre by ending the 'war of the laws' between them. The plotters hoped to use the constitution to bring the republics to heel and insisted that 'the USSR constitution and USSR laws have unconditional supremacy throughout the USSR'. The putschists surrounded all their acts with desperate appeals to legality, whereas 'The logic of a *coup d'état* excludes attempts to play with legal democratic niceties.'[67]

The putschists lacked resolution in trying both to defend and to subvert the constitution. By appealing to Article 127 of the USSR constitution in the case of the indisposition of the president they tried to make this a constitutional coup, retaining Gorbachev as a figleaf of legality. This also helps to explain why there were so few arrests at the time the coup was launched, quite apart from the initial failure to arrest Yeltsin and the

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Russian government team. In the first hours of General Jaruzelski's declaration of a 'state of war' (martial law) in Poland on 13 December 1981 some 6,000 Solidarity activists were already safely locked away behind bars, including Lech Wałęsa. There was a complete media blackout throughout Poland for four days. Afraid of alarming the West, the Moscow plotters allowed newspapers, radio and television stations to work, and the international and domestic telephone and fax system operated throughout the emergency. The electricity and other services to the White House operated without interruption. By the time Jaruzelski addressed the people a few hours into his coup, he knew that he had decapitated the leadership of the opposition. By contrast, when the plotters faced the media late on Monday afternoon on 19 August they sensed that their attempts to maintain a constitutional front had doomed the venture to failure.

There was uncertainty over the constitutional status of the introduction of the state of emergency and over the legal basis for the actions of the SCSE. The chairman of the USSR Constitutional Review Committee, Sergei Alekseev, equivocated both during and after the coup. The statement drawn up on 19 August by the committee left room for doubt, though in broad terms criticizing the SCSE, while at the meeting of the USSR Supreme Soviet later he argued that 'there had been a coup in the political and moral sense, but the courts would establish whether there had been one in the legal sense.'[68]

It was Yeltsin who realized before the putschists that the old Soviet constitutional system was dead, and he could thus act with more resolution in the crisis. From the outset on the morning of 19 August Yeltsin declared in no uncertain terms that they were 'dealing with a right-wing reactionary, unconstitutional coup' and that the SCSE was an illegal body.[69] While the putschists might have tried to wrap their actions in the figleaf of constitutionality, the democratic forces had few such scruples. The coup legitimated the harsh and formally anti-constitutional counter measures by Yeltsin's team.

The attempt by the *junta* to maintain legality and membership of the international community robbed them of all resolve in the decisive days of August. They tried both to have a coup and not to have one: to go beyond the law and to maintain it. Even they realized that there was no longer any legitimacy to an appeal beyond Gorbachev and *perestroika* to a purer form of socialism, and none of them wanted to stage a military coup of the Pinochet type. A coup for them was something that happened far away but not in the homeland of socialism.[70] For those brought up in the Soviet tradition that would have been the ultimate disgrace. Hence the extraordinary passivity of the plotters during the coup, even to the

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extent of exposing themselves to the world's media in the ill-fated press conference. They hoped to pass off their coup as no more than a rearrangement of the internal structure of the regime while maintaining the Union intact and forestalling the democratic extremists who were 'staging an unconstitutional coup'.[71] By a show of force they hoped to intimidate Gorbachev into joining them. The last thing they wanted to do was to destroy the constitution that sustained them.

VII. The Elite–Class Model

This version suggests that the defence of the Union was not much more than a cover to maintain the power of what Milovan Djilas called the 'new class' at the centre. Yakovlev eloquently put forward the elite view of the coup at the first conference of the Democratic Reform Movement in late September 1991. 'The August putsch', he argued, 'was a revolt by those who will be its greatest losers, those who will lose their dominating role and who are being pushed aside: the reactionary party apparatus and its multitudes of servants; the old structures of the old Union, where the central authorities were the main reason for the Union's existence, and were its sole ruler; those in the military industrial complex who were educated and who thrived on the arms race and nearly 50 years of cold war.'[72] In this view, the coup represented the last gasp of the elites nurtured by Stalinism. Sobchak noted the pressure that the *nomenklatura*, afraid of losing their privileges, brought to bear against Gorbachev to abandon Shatalin's '500-day plan' in late 1990.[73]

The political scientist Anatolii Butenko saw the events as part of the struggle between the party-state bureaucracy and democracy, the latter including 'extremist' elements of the 'incipient bourgeoisie'.[74] While formally the coup was dominated by 'statist' figures, Butenko insisted that this represented only 'the visible, above-water part of the conspiratorial iceberg'. Below lay the ideological inspirers of the coup in the apparatus of the CPSU and the leadership of the Russian Communist Party. Politburo members Oleg Shenin and Yurii Prokof'ev, the head of the Moscow party organization, openly supported the coup, and the CPSU Secretariat sent out numerous documents endorsing the putschists. In short, 'the coup was organized not by administrators alone but by the party-state bureaucracy.'[75] Thus the events of August 1991 are comparable to the palace coup of October 1964 which ousted Khrushchev. A section of the elite, worried about the radicalization of the reform processes launched respectively by Khrushchev and Gorbachev, delivered a pre-emptive blow.

However, rather than 'the *nomenklatura*' acting as a monolithic bloc,

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its internal divisions by the sixth year of *perestroika* had become apparent. While the *nomenklatura* class as a whole might have resisted the onset of marketization and republican sovereignty, there were sections that might well have welcomed it. Despite the involvement of Baklanov and Tizyakov, large sections of the managerial and technical elite in the defence industries could not be relied upon to support the coup.[76] *Perestroika* can be interpreted as an attempt by the progressive bureaucracy to transform its privileges and powers enjoyed by convention into property and rights guaranteed by law. A useful analogy with the events of August 1991, including the relative lack of blood, is the Lockean 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–89, ousting James II and establishing a property-owning parliamentary monarchy.

Those sections of society who were by choice or necessity in a condition of dependency provided a social base for the coup. Thus the only mass organization immediately to hail the coup was the Veterans' Union. The coup was supported by the sections of the elite who were the least able to adjust to market conditions. These included the Secretariat and part of the Central Committee apparatus, a few regional and republican Central Committees, the central ministerial apparatus and the military industries' bureaucracy, the general staff, the KGB, and sections of industry and state agriculture.[77] During the coup it became clear that the leaders of these sections were so discredited that even their own staffs would no longer follow them. Albats indeed argues that 'the second echelon of authority saw the coup as a means to remove people such as Kryuchkov, Yazov and Pavlov from the political scene.'[78] It is this second echelon that has now come to power and adopted the language of democracy while often employing neo-Bolshevik methods.

Despite widespread support for the coup in the regions, new forces were emerging. The soviets had been, legally at least, in the vanguard of trying to implant the market in Russia. Many had signed business deals with Western companies, and some were in the process of distributing land, and so on, and all this was now in jeopardy. As Fadin puts it, 'the process of the modernization of the *nomenklatura* and the pluralization of its interests had gone a long way.'[79] They were joined by the new entrepreneurs who contributed funds, personnel and organizational resources to the struggle against the coup.[80]

Despite the relative newness of the democratic elite, sections of which had come to power in the local and republican elections of early 1990, Oleg Vite notes that 'the events of 19–21 August revealed something that any number of sociological surveys could not have shown, namely that the career bureaucracy, as a whole, followed the new powers.'[81] Sections of the bureaucracy realized that democracy had outgrown the phase of

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dissident groups and informal movements and had now become a real power in the land, and acted accordingly. The social basis of the Yeltsin regime was the old career bureaucracy allied to the new democrats. This perhaps is one of the reasons that in certain respects the new regime looks remarkably like the old one.

The *nomenklatura* was beginning to turn into a middle class, if not a bourgeoisie, by valorizing or capitalizing on its influence and privileges, and the last thing it needed was a new iron age. The coup failed not simply because it encountered resolute public hostility, but also because it was not able to find a dynamic constituency even among its putative supporters. The coup appealed not only to the values but also to the social structure of an age that had passed.

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Conclusion

The revolutionary era ended as it had begun. The democratic revolution in Russia had opened with an irresolute fiasco in Senate Square on 26 December 1825; it ended in an ill-planned and misconceived coup on 19 August 1991. December was separated from August by 166 years, but the two events marked the beginning and end of a distinct epoch in the history of Russia.

The greatest triumph of *perestroika* was the manner in which it failed. Few empires have collapsed with so little bloodshed and so few international convulsions, unprompted by failure in world war or the pressure of barbarians at the gates. Gorbachev was correct when he characterized the coup as 'a cleansing storm'.[82] In his book he argued that 'these events, like flood waters in spring have swept away a great deal that was obstructing our forward advance.' These obstacles, he now realised, despite his equivocations and renewed pledges of loyalty to a reformed party at his press conference on 22 August,[83] included the party: 'the coup wiped out any hope of reforming the CPSU and turning it into a modern, democratic party.'[84] Shevardnadze's memoirs also reflect the sense of relief that the mystifications of *perestroika* were now over: 'An amazing clarity emerged. Everything was now open, names, intentions, actions.'[85] Both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze sensed that the restraints on 'the new world struggling to be born' had been removed and the way to a more open, though no less difficult, politics lay ahead.

The maximalist and minimalist views of the coup both contain insights into the nature of the events, but the maximalist view encompases more broadly the whole extraordinary significance of what happened. The minimalists are right to stress that these days were no more than the culmination of long-term processes of modernization and elite transfor-

mation, that sections of the public equivocated, and that the new regime in certain respects mimicked the practices of the old. But the maximalists are right to stress the August days as a turning point in the history of Russia and the other republics, a moment that stripped away the obfuscations of *perestroika* and allowed new social and political actors to come into their own on the post-communist stage. This was far more than the 'euphoria' of victory, a term used by the minimalists to trivialize and denigrate the genuinely popular and revolutionary nature of the events of August 1991. Both a coup and a non-coup, the August days marked the end of only one relatively short chapter in the very long book of Russian history.

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NOTES

1. Martin Malia, 'The August Revolution', *New York Review of Books*, 26 Sept. 1991, pp.22–8 (p.22).
2. Gerd Ruge, *Der Putsch: Vier Tage, die die Welt veränderten* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), p.153. See also Yakovlev's speech on 20 August: Alexander Yakovlev, *Muki prochteniya bytiya. Perestroika: nadezhdy i real'nosti* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), pp.363–4.
3. John Morrison, *Boris Yeltsin: From Bolshevik to Democrat* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p.282.
4. Mikhail Gorbachev, *The August Coup: The Truth and the Lessons* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), p.23.
5. Eduard Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor: v zashchitu demokratii i svobody* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), p.363.
6. Jamey Gambrell, 'Seven Days that Shook the World', *New York Review of Books*, 26 Sept. 1991, pp.56–61 (p.56).
7. Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, pp.31–2.
8. Abraham Brumberg, 'The Road to Minsk', *New York Review of Books*, 30 Jan. 1992, p.21.
9. Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).
10. Kryuchkov estimated the crowd at 160,000: *Izvestiya*, 10 Oct. 1991, p.1; whereas Martin Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup: The Death of the Soviet System* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p.34, estimated no more than 50,000.
11. Sobchak states that 120,000 gathered in Palace Square on 20 August: *Izvestiya*, 23 Aug. 1991, p.4.
12. Abraham Brumberg, 'The Road to Minsk', p.21.
13. Leonid Gordon, in *Moscow News*, 1991, No.41 (13–20 Oct.), p.7.
14. VTsIOM, *Data Express*, special issue, 20 Aug. 1991, p.1.
15. In Moscow 1,792 persons answered, and in Yerevan 155: VTsIOM, *Data Express*, special issue, 20 Aug. 1991, p.1.
16. Ibid., p.2.
17. Ibid., p.2; Alexei Levinson, 'Pochemu provalilsya perevorot?', *Izvestiya*, 2 Sept. 1991, p.3.
18. *Mir mnenii i mneniya o mire*, 1991, No.1, pp.1–2.
19. Seventy per cent of young Russians thought that republics should be allowed to secede if they wished, just under 19 per cent were against, and 11 per cent were undecided: *The Independent* (London), 20 Feb. 1991.

20. *Izvestiya*, 10 Oct. 1991, p.1.
21. *Khronika putcha chas za chasom: Sobytiya 19–22 avgusta v svodkakh Rossiiskogo Informatsionnogo Agentstva* (Moscow: Russian Information Agency, 1991), p.44. This book, together with *Putch: khronika trevozhnykh dnei*, with forewords by A. Vinogradov and G. Pavlovsky (Moscow: Progress, 1991), provides invaluable material charting reaction to the coup.
22. Yuri Luzhkov, acting mayor of Moscow during the coup, describes how the party committee in the Zil motor factory damped down opposition to the coup, a process no doubt repeated in many other factories: *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 5 Sept. 1991, p.2.
23. *Izvestiya*, 22 Aug. 1991, p.1.
24. On the media, see Vera Tolz, 'How the Journalists Responded', *Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, Vol.3, No.36 (6 Sept. 1991), pp.23–8.
25. On military attitudes to politics, see 'A Visit to General Rodionov's Office', *Den'*, 1991, No.9, p.1: *Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, Vol.3, No.36 (6 Sept. 1991), pp.9–10; and see the same issue for articles by Mark Galeotti, Scott R. Michael, Stephen Foye and Stephen Carter on the role of the security and armed forces.
26. The network of political bodies in the army sought to stimulate support for the junta: *Kuranty*, 21 Oct. 1991, p.6.
27. *Izvestiya*, 27 Aug. 1991, p.8.
28. Alexander Zinoviev, 'Istoricheskaya tragediya', *Russia and CIS Today*, Media News and Features Digest of the RFE/RL Research Institute, Munich, from *Imidzh*, 1992, No.3, pp.57–62.
29. Sergei Stankevich gave a sharp rejoinder to attempts to peddle ever more minimalist versions of the coup: *Kuranty*, 26 Oct. 1991, p.9. An example of the heroic mode of describing the coup is a selection of letters under the heading 'We Have Risen From Our Knees', *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 3 Oct. 1991, p.2.
30. Zinoviev, 'Istoricheskaya tragediya'.
31. Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor*, p.342; Ruge, *Der Putsch*, p.155.
32. Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor*, p.348.
33. Ibid., p.353.
34. Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, pp.149–58.
35. Secret files on Yeltsin with Gorbachev's notes in the margins were found in Valerii Boldin's safe after the coup: *Rabochaya tribuna*, 7 Jan. 1992.
36. Yevgeniya Albats, 'A Nation under Surveillance: A Thing of the Past?', *Moscow News*, 1991, No.49 (8–15 Dec.), p.15.
37. Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, p.79.
38. *Izvestiya*, 16 Aug. 1991, p.2; see also *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 1991, No.34 (28 Aug.), p.2.
39. Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, p.111.
40. Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, p.38.
41. Boris Kagarlitsky in *New Statesman and Society*, 6 Sept. 1991, pp.18–20.
42. *Izvestiya*, 9 Sept. 1991, p.8.
43. Leonid Ionin, '"Golosa" pobedili staryi poryadok', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 Sept. 1991, p.8.
44. Amy Knight, 'The Coup that Never Was: Gorbachev and the Forces of Reaction', *Problems of Communism*, Vol.40, No.6 (1991), pp.36–43 (p.41).
45. *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 28 Aug. 1991, p.5; *The Observer*, 3 Nov. 1991, p.13.
46. *Izvestiya*, 10 Oct. 1991, p.1.
47. Nikolai Lashkevich, *Izvestiya*, 1 Oct. 1991, pp.8–9.
48. Mark R. Beissinger, 'The Deconstruction of the USSR and the Search for a Post-Soviet Community', *Problems of Communism*, Vol.40, No.6 (1991), pp.27–35 (p.27).
49. Evidence presented to the Russian parliamentary committee on the coup revealed broad communist party involvement: *Izvestiya*, 22 and 23 Oct. 1991; see also Elizabeth Teague and Vera Tolz, 'CPSU R.I.P.', *Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, Vol.3, No.47 (22 Nov. 1991), pp.1–8.
50. *Pravda*, 30 Sept. 1991, pp.1 and 3.
51. *Izvestiya*, 26 Aug. 1991, p.2; see also Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, p.46.

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52. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 Oct. 1991; *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 23 Oct. 1991, p.1.
53. *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 23 July 1991, p.1.
54. *Pravda*, 20 Aug. 1991; *Izvestiya*, 20 Aug. 1991.
55. *The Guardian*, 22 Jan. 1992.
56. *Argumenty i fakty*, 1991, No.38, p.8.
57. *Izvestiya*, 10 Oct. 1991, p.1.
58. *The Second Russian Revolution*, Brian Lapping Associates for BBC television, programme No.7; *Izvestiya*, 17 June 1991.
59. The absence of the real hard men led the *Soyuz* group on 20 August to denounce the adventure as a 'paper coup': *The Guardian*, 18 Sept. 1991.
60. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15 Aug. 1991.
61. *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 23 July 1991, p.1.
62. *Izvestiya*, 27 Aug. 1991, p.2.
63. Igor Klyamkin and Andranik Migranyan, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 16 Aug. 1989.
64. 'Tema "sil'noi ruki" v sovetskoi mass media do 19.08.91', *Putch: khronika trevozhnykh dnei*, pp.219–32.
65. The plotters' failure to name the regions in which a state of emergency was to be imposed technically invalidated emergency rule: see Carla Thompson, 'Constitutional Issues Surrounding the Coup', *Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, Vol.3, No.36 (6 Sept. 1991), pp.19–21; Carla Thorson, 'The Collapse of the Constitutional Order'. *Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, Vol.3, No.42 (18 Oct. 1991), pp.15–18.
66. Ruslan Khasbulatov, *Russia: Time of Changes* (unpublished manuscript), p.385; from an addendum to the English-language version of his book *Rossiya: pora peremen (besedy na Krasnoi Presne)* (Moscow: Megapolis-Takom/Russkaya entsiklopediya, 1991).
67. Nina Belyaeva and Anatolii Kovler, 'Pravo i politika v dni perevorota', in *Putch: khronika trevozhnikh dnei*, pp.248–63 (p.253).
68. Cited by Butenko, *Pravda*, 18 Sept. 1991.
69. Boris Yeltsin, 'To the Citizens of Russia', 19 Aug. 1991, *Khronika putcha*, p.3.
70. Luzhkov described his reaction on hearing the news: 'A Coup! The concept couldn't get through to me. Never in Russia ... This is not Chile, not Latin America. It's absurd': *Partiinaya zhizn'*, 1991, No.18, p.64.
71. 'Appeal to the People', *Pravda*, 20 Aug. 1991; *Izvestiya*, 20 Aug. 1991.
72. *Soviet Weekly*, 10 Oct. 1991, p.7.
73. Anatolii Sobchak, *Khozhdenie vo vlast': rasskaz o rozhdenii parlamenta* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), p.267.
74. Anatolii Butenko, *Pravda*, 18 and 19 Sept. 1991.
75. Butenko, *Pravda*, 19 Sept. 1991.
76. Julian Cooper, *The Soviet Defence Industry: Conversion and Reform* (London, RIIA/ Pinter, 1991), pp.86–8.
77. Andrei Fadin, 'Pochemu sovetskaya nomenklatura ne podderzhala putch?', in *Putch: khronika trevozhnykh dnei*, pp.264–8 (p.264).
78. Albats in *Moscow News*, 1991, No.49 (8–15 Dec.), p.15.
79. Fadin, op. cit., p.265.
80. During the coup traders and entrepreneurs went to fight on the barricades: *Rynok*, 1991, No.17 (24), pp.1 and 2.
81. Oleg Vite, 'Revolyutsiya v apparate', in *Putch: khronika trevozhnykh dnei*, pp.279–82 (p.281).
82. 'Address by the President of the USSR, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, at the Opening of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, 10 September 1991', mimeo, pp.4–5.
83. *Pravda*, 23 Aug. 1991, p.2.
84. Gorbachev, *The August Coup*, pp.46–7.
85. Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor*, p.336.

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