

System Change and State Disintegration in the Demise of the Soviet Union

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In 1991 the Soviet Union, one of the world's two superpowers, was dismantled from within. While major states and empires have declined in the past, never before has such a large and powerful state collapsed so suddenly and so peacefully. The Soviet demise had two related, yet distinct, dimensions. A major nation-state disintegrated, replaced by fifteen newly independent states. At the same time, the social system in the Soviet Union was dismantled and a new one began to arise in its place.

In this essay I argue that the key to understanding the rapid and peaceful demise of the Soviet Union is found in the social processes that produced a system transition in that country. By examining the events of 1990-91, the last two years of the Soviet Union, we can see how the course of the battle over the character of the social system in the USSR led, not only to the abolition of the old social system, but also to the dismemberment of the Soviet state.

A Pro-Capitalist Coalition Arises

By the middle of 1990, five years of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika had produced many changes in the Soviet Union. State control over individual political expression had been lifted. The mass media had been largely freed from Communist Party Control. New parliaments¹ had been created – in the Union as a whole and in some of its constituent republics – that were relatively democratically constituted, with all (or for the Union parliament, most) of the deputies chosen in relatively free, contested elections. Political power had shifted from the Communist Party to the new state structures.

Mikhail Gorbachev and his associates expected the new freedoms and the democratization of political institutions to lead to the reform and reinvigoration of Soviet socialism. However, it unexpectedly gave rise to a political coalition that favored jettisoning any

¹ These new parliaments actually consisted of two bodies, a large Congress of People's Deputies and a smaller standing body called the Supreme Soviet. In this article the term parliament will be used without distinguishing between the two bodies.

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form of socialism in favor of Western-style capitalism. The earliest converts to a pro-capitalist position were members of the intelligentsia – particularly economists enamored of Western free-market economic thought – and the small but growing class of owners of small businesses permitted by the economic reforms of perestroika.

In addition to the intelligentsia and the small business owners, a part of the Soviet party-state elite – the occupants of high level positions in the Communist Party, the state, and the institutions of economic management – began to gravitate toward a pro-capitalist position.² By the 1980s few members of the Soviet elite believed the official socialist ideology but instead were concerned mainly with power and privilege. While the party-state elite was the most privileged group in Soviet society, their privileges were limited – relative to the position of the average Soviet citizen, and particularly relative to the wealth of the elites of Western capitalism – by the socialist features of the Soviet system.³ When perestroika made it possible to consider alternative futures, the members of this pragmatic group rapidly concluded that socialism, either of the reformed kind pursued by Gorbachev or the pre-perestroika version, promised a less privileged life for them than a transition to capitalism. A study of the ideology of a sample of the Moscow elite in June 1991 found that 76.7% had come to favor capitalism while only 12.3% supported democratic socialism and another 9.6% had a communist or nationalist ideology.⁴

The idea that the Soviet elite rapidly evolved toward a pro-capitalist position was a controversial one ten years ago, but it is no longer controversial. This idea has been reinforced by the persistence in power after 1991 of former high-level Communist officials in Russia, as well as in most of the other former Soviet republics. Observers have also not failed to notice the

² A detailed account of the development of pro-capitalist sentiment with the Soviet party-state elite after 1986 is found in David M. Kotz with Fred Weir, *Revolution from Above: The Demise of the Soviet System*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997, ch. 7.

³ The top salaries of members of the Soviet party-state elite were about 8 times as large as the average industrial wage. By contrast, in the US, corporate CEO's earn several hundred times the wage of the average worker.

⁴ Kullberg, Judith S. (1994) "The Ideological Roots of Elite Political Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia," *Europe Asia Studies* 46,6, pp. 940-946.

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preponderance of members of the former Soviet party-state elite within the new big business owning class that emerged after the Soviet demise.⁵

Boris Yeltsin and the Emergence of Dual Power

The most open and daring proponents of capitalism in the Soviet Union were the intellectuals who founded and led the Democratic Russia movement. However, they had limited influence outside of Moscow and Leningrad, where the intelligentsia was concentrated. The leader of the informal coalition of pro-capitalist forces emerged, not from the intelligentsia, but from the Communist Party bureaucracy, in the person of Boris Yeltsin.

Yeltsin had risen through the party ranks in the Sverdlovsk region, then came to Moscow in 1985 where he was named to run the capital city's party organization and became a candidate member of the politburo. After the impulsive Yeltsin clashed with Gorbachev, he was cast out of the top leadership in 1987. The new freedoms and new political institutions gave the populist-oriented Yeltsin an opportunity to stage a political comeback. He won a seat in the Soviet parliament in 1989, and he eventually became the main spokesman for the assembling coalition of pro-capitalist forces in the Soviet Union.

Despite his political comeback, Yeltsin found his influence seriously circumscribed in the Soviet parliament by Gorbachev and his supporters. When the Russian Republic held elections for a reformed republican parliament in March 1990, Yeltsin shifted his focus and ran for a seat from his hometown of Sverdlovsk. After winning the seat, he was narrowly elected chairman of the Russian parliament, by four votes, in May 1990.

The Soviet Union was legally a federation of republics. The Russian Republic was only one of fifteen union republics, but it had half of the population, three-fourths of the land area, and most of the valuable raw materials of the Soviet Union. Prior to perestroika, political power had been highly centralized in the Soviet Union, and little real power was wielded by the titular leaders of the republics. However, by 1990 perestroika had transformed many Soviet institutions,

⁵ One study found that 62% of the hundred top businessmen in Russia in 1992-93 were former members of the Soviet party-state elite (Kotz with Weir, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 117-118).

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and newly assertive republican leaders were challenging the total domination of the republics by the center.

Yeltsin's accession to the position of chairman of the Russian Republic parliament created, in embryo, a situation of dual power in the Soviet Union. This was so because the Gorbachev-Yeltsin conflict was not just a personality conflict over which individual was going to occupy the top position within an established system. This personal rivalry embodied a clash between two alternative futures, with Gorbachev staying with his plan to reform socialism while Yeltsin assumed leadership of the pro-capitalist coalition.

At the start of the summer of 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev and his project of reforming Soviet socialism held sway in the Union government. Gorbachev occupied the new office of Executive President and he had effective control, if not total domination, of the new Soviet parliament. He was the commander of the formidable Soviet armed forces and its still-feared security apparatus. He remained head of the Soviet Communist Party, although the party's role in exercising power had rapidly diminished since 1989.

Boris Yeltsin, as chairman of the new parliament of the Russian Republic, was effectively the chief executive of the gigantic Russian Republic. The rapid changes taking place in political and cultural life in the Soviet Union created an atmosphere of instability and uncertainty about where things were heading. People had faced severe shortages and economic disorder since 1988, when state enterprises were given substantial freedom from central control.⁶ In this atmosphere of disorder and uncertainty, the public become increasingly disenchanted with Gorbachev and his reform program, and was ready to listen to Yeltsin's attacks on Gorbachev. Another factor contributing to Yeltsin's growing power was the sympathy for him and his positions in much of the mass media. When the Soviet media were freed from party control, newly radicalized editors assumed control of a substantial part of the major media, and they liked Yeltsin's criticism of the Communist Party leadership.

⁶ See Kotz with Weir, *Op. Cit.*, ch. 5.

The Peculiar Role of Russian Nationalism

The freedoms introduced by perestroika allowed nationalist sentiments, which had percolated below the surface in some of the Soviet republics, to come out into the open. In 1989 strong independence movements arose in the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which had been forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939, and also in Georgia, which had been an independent state in the past. While these independence movements presented a challenge for the Soviet leadership, those four republics together constituted only 4.7% of the Soviet population and had no important natural resources.

Then in June 1990 an entirely new element was injected into the nationalist conflict, when the parliament of the Russian Republic passed a resolution declaring that Russia was a sovereign entity within the USSR.⁷ Russia had always occupied a paradoxical position in the Soviet system. Russians were the dominant national group. Not only did they make up about half of the Soviet population, they were disproportionally represented in the Union party and state institutions. Ethnic Russians also occupied high positions in the party and government organs in all of the other republics. The rebellious republics on the periphery of the Soviet Union were, to a significant extent, rebelling against what they saw as domination by Russians.

Despite all of these ways in which Russians dominated the Soviet Union, at the same time Russian nationalism was in certain respects held in check by the Soviet system. Lenin had worried that "Great Russian chauvinism" might threaten the unity of the Soviet state, and the organization of the Soviet system reflected that fear. Unlike the other 14 republics, the Russian Republic did not have its own separate Communist Party organization. It also was the only republic without a separate Academy of Sciences, trade union council, Komsomol, or KGB. In the effort to build a Union-wide identity for the Soviet people, the sense of nationhood of Russians had been suppressed to some extent.

As nationalist movements around the Soviet periphery grew bolder in their demands for

⁷ In the Soviet Union the concept of "sovereignty" for a Union republic meant having substantial independent authority within the Union, but it did not imply independent statehood.

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sovereignty or even independence, Russians' sense of national grievance also grew. Yeltsin stressed Russian national grievances, often pointing out that, within the USSR, only Russia and Turkmenistan produced a greater value of goods than they consumed. One month after Yeltsin became chairman of the Russian parliament, the leaders of Democratic Russia proposed a piece of legislation declaring Russia to be a sovereign entity, with control of its own natural resources, and with precedence for its own republican laws over those of the Soviet Union.⁸ Yeltsin recognized in this proposal a way to finally outmaneuver Gorbachev and the entire Union government. It meant flirting with dismantling the Soviet Union, but this was apparently judged worth the cost in order to gain full state power. Although no basis for such a law could be found in the Soviet constitution, Yeltsin prevailed upon the Russian Republic parliament to pass the sovereignty measure on 8 June 1990, by a vote of 544 to 271.⁹

While the Russian Republic had no legal means to enforce the new measure, its passage had an immediate and profound effect on the other republics, transforming the nature of the nationalist impulses coursing through the republics. However much ethnic Russians might have dominated the Soviet system, the structure of the Union at least provided some safeguards and powers, as well as significant economic benefits, to the non-Russian republics. For example, Russia's plentiful raw materials had been provided cheaply throughout the Soviet Union. Now the Russian Republic was asserting its right to control its own natural resources and their disposition.

The leaderships of the republics which had previously been relatively quiet now immediately passed sovereignty resolutions. By August 1990 sovereignty resolutions had been passed by Uzbekistan, Moldavia, Ukraine, Turkmenistan, and Tadzhikistan. By October even loyal Kazakhstan followed suit as well. In several of these republics no mass-based nationalist

⁸ Yitzhak M. Brudny, "The Heralds of Opposition to Perestroika," in Ed A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston (eds), Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika: Politics and People, Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 1991, p. 145.

⁹ Bernard Gwertzman and Michael T. Kaufman (eds), The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire, New York: Times Books, 1992, p. 274-6.

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movement had even appeared, but the Communist leaders in these republics were positioning themselves to hold onto power if Yeltsin proved able to actually abolish the Union state.

The Battle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev Intensifies

Throughout the second half of 1990, Yeltsin sought ways to assert Russia's independence of the Union government and to undermine its authority. In October he pushed through the Russian parliament the "500 Days Plan" which Gorbachev had rejected at the Union level. This was a radical blueprint for economic transformation that called for establishing a free market system and privatizing most state enterprises in less than two years. Yeltsin demanded that the Union government also adopt the plan, which would have spelled the end of socialism. In December he persuaded the Russian parliament to provide only one-tenth of the tax revenues that were owed to the Union government, which contributed to the growing financial chaos in the Soviet Union.

In the late fall of 1990, seeing Yeltsin's growing strength and facing increasing economic disorder, Gorbachev shifted from a relatively accommodating stance toward Yeltsin and the other more militant republican leaders to a greater emphasis on saving the union and saving socialism. Seemingly abandoning his more liberal advisors, such as Alexandr Yakovlev and Eduard Shevardnadze, in December he named individuals who appeared to be more traditional supporters of socialist institutions, preserving the union, and maintaining social order, to the key positions of Vice-President, Prime Minister, and Interior Minister. On 10 January 1991 Gorbachev warned the Lithuanian parliament that he might impose presidential rule in the republic, charging that Lithuania was moving toward "restoration of the bourgeois order."¹⁰ Soon thereafter Interior Ministry troops seized buildings in Lithuania and Latvia, actions that Gorbachev neither clearly supported nor denounced. In early March 1991 Gorbachev lashed out at the gathering pro-capitalist forces. He attacked the "democrats" as "a typical right-wing opposition" and accused them of advocating "the capitalization of society."¹¹

¹⁰ John Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of Soviet Power*, London, St. Martin's Press, 1993, p. 173.

¹¹ *Pravda*, 1 March 1991, p. 2.

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In December 1990 Gorbachev had pushed through the Soviet parliament a plan for a referendum on preserving the Soviet Union. Believing that national disintegration was not popular with the public, he hoped that a victory in the referendum would break Yeltsin's momentum. The referendum took place on 17 March 1991, in all of the Soviet republics except the three Baltic republics and Armenia, Georgia, and Moldavia. 147 million people voted and 76.4 per cent approved the preservation of the Union.¹² The voters in each of the nine participating republics overwhelmingly approved the measure.¹³

Gorbachev could now claim strong popular support for maintaining a reconstituted federative state. The Soviet economy was a highly interdependent mechanism, and everyone knew there would be enormous material costs to disintegration. In the poorer republics many people believed they benefitted economically from the union relationship. Most Russians did not look forward to seeing their state shrink to half its former population, leaving twenty-five million ethnic Russians, nearly one-fifth of the total, scattered as minorities across what they feared would become separate countries. Many people did want more authority for their republican institutions, but the referendum of March 1991 found that only a small minority in the 9 participating republics wanted their republic to become an independent state.

However, Gorbachev's victory was short-lived. In late March a special session of the Russian parliament opened, called by deputies who were outraged by Yeltsin's increasingly open attacks on Gorbachev.¹⁴ As the March 1991 meeting approached, Gorbachev banned public demonstrations in Moscow during the parliamentary sessions. Defying the ban, Democratic Russia organized a pro-Yeltsin demonstration of some 100,000 Muscovites.¹⁵

¹² The wording of the question was as follows: Do you support the preservation of the union as a renewed federation of sovereign republics in which the rights of a person of any nationality are fully guaranteed?

¹³ The yes vote was 70.2 per cent in Ukraine, 71.3 per cent in Russia, 82.7 per cent in Byelorussia, and over 90 per cent in Azerbaijan and in each of the Central Asian republics.

¹⁴ In February Yeltsin had attacked Gorbachev in a nationally televised speech, accusing him of harboring dictatorial ambitions and demanding his immediate resignation.

¹⁵ Democratic Russia was able to organize pro-Yeltsin demonstrations in cities across Russia, but its limited strength outside Moscow and Leningrad was illustrated by the turnouts. In Yaroslavl and Volgograd an estimated 10,000

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Backing down from his threats, Gorbachev ordered the troops that had been brought into Moscow not to intervene. Once again the tide was clearly running with Yeltsin. At the parliamentary session, many members of the Communist caucus broke away and voted for Yeltsin. The parliament, rather than removing him from the chairmanship, granted Yeltsin additional powers. It also scheduled a popular election for the new post of president of the Russian Republic for June 1991.¹⁶

Realizing that he was losing the battle with Yeltsin, in April 1991 Gorbachev again switched tactics, this time moving toward a more accommodative stance toward Yeltsin. Now in a position of strength, yet perhaps mindful of the public endorsement of the Union in the March referendum, Yeltsin entered active negotiations with Gorbachev and the other republic heads to draft a new Union treaty to form the basis of a reconstituted Union state, as Gorbachev had been urging¹⁷.

The Russian Presidential Election

In the campaign for Russian Republic president, Yeltsin stressed the same themes that had served him well before. His message combined populist attacks on the privileges of the Soviet elite with support for democratization, sovereignty for the Russian republic, and “market reform.” He placed the greatest stress on the need for faster market reform, an effective demand as the Soviet economy descended into disorder and depression during 1991. He used his position as chairman of the Russian Republic parliament to adopt the stance of a statesman, rising above the political fray. He chose as his vice-presidential running mate a popular military figure and veteran of the Afghan war, Alexandr Rutskoi.

demonstrated, in Tula 6,000, and in Smolensk 1,500 (Yitzhak M. Brudny, "The Dynamics of 'Democratic Russia,' 1990-1993", Post Soviet Affairs 9,2, 1993, p. 151).

¹⁶ The plan to create a directly elected Russian Republic presidency had at first not been controversial, having originated in June 1990 with support from all of the factions of the Russian Republic parliament. The plan was approved by nearly 70 per cent of Russian Republic voters in a referendum in March 1991.

¹⁷ These negotiations came to be known as the "9 plus 1" negotiations, for the 9 republics willing to negotiate a new Union treaty plus Soviet President Gorbachev. The remaining 6 republics -- the 3 Baltic states and Armenia, Georgia, and Moldavia -- did not participate.

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Yeltsin did not openly support capitalism for Russia. In fact, he and his closest associates never used the word capitalism in public. Nikolai Ryzhkov, the Soviet prime minister from 1985-90 and Yeltsin's leading opponent in the June 1991 presidential race, complained that Yeltsin and his associates "kept their views secret" concerning the vast socioeconomic changes they planned.¹⁸ While some intellectuals, and particularly some of the economists, did openly advocate capitalism, Yeltsin and his associates did not do so in public.

Although Yeltsin did not openly advocate capitalism, he was leading a movement that was pushing for just such a change in society. In the fall of 1990 Yeltsin had backed the Five Hundred Days plan to bring capitalism to Russia. In November 1991 Yeltsin named Yegor Gaidar his Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Reform, and Gaidar made no secret of his aim of building capitalism in Russia. Once Russia became an independent state at the end of 1991, the Yeltsin government proceeded to rapidly dismantle what was left of socialism and to privatize state enterprises. If Yeltsin is judged, not by his words but by the social and economic positions he consistently supported beginning in 1990, it must be concluded that he was leading a pro-capitalist movement.

In the 1991 Russian presidential race, there were good reasons for Yeltsin's reluctance to explain exactly how he and his associates planned to change the system. While most of the party-state elite and the urban intelligentsia had come to favor capitalism by June 1991, the electorate as a whole had quite different views. Polling evidence showed little support for capitalism among the Russian population as a whole at that time. A large-scale public opinion survey in the European part of Russia in May 1991, conducted by a US survey research firm, found that only 17% of the respondents favored "free market capitalism."¹⁹ Some other polls taken in 1991 showed even less support for capitalism.²⁰

¹⁸ Interview by the author with former Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, 27 October 1992.

¹⁹ The survey, "The Pulse of Europe: A Survey of Political and Social Values and Attitudes," was conducted by the Times-Mirror Center.

²⁰ Another poll taken in the Russian Republic, in April 1991, found that only 3 per cent favored "undisguised capitalism" (Stephen White, *Gorbachev and After*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 249-50).

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Yeltsin and his associates understood that a large majority of the Russian public were unfavorable toward the prospect of capitalism. But the majority responded very well to criticism of the Communist Party leadership and to appeals for faster market reform, democratization, and greater autonomy for the Russian Republic. Yeltsin's election campaign won strong support not only from intellectuals but from ordinary workers, from women, and from elderly pensioners. He won the election with 57.3% of the votes.

Becoming Russia's first democratically elected president greatly increased the legitimacy of Yeltsin's power, in a Soviet Union that had clearly opted for democracy. By contrast, Gorbachev had been elected president of the Soviet Union only by the Soviet parliament. A situation of dual power, a classical feature of a revolutionary situation, had fully emerged in the Soviet Union by June of 1991.

The August Coup Attempt and its Aftermath

In the two months following Yeltsin's election, there was a sense that power was slipping away from the Union government toward Yeltsin. Trying to save some kind of Union state, Gorbachev gave way to Yeltsin's main demands in order to get a new Union treaty. On July 23 a draft Union treaty was agreed to by the negotiators, which reportedly gave the right to collect taxes entirely to the republics and also gave Russia immediate control over the natural resources and enterprises on its territory, along with their hard currency earnings²¹. The draft treaty, which was to be signed on August 20, while preserving the facade of a Union state, would not have left any significant role for the central government.

It was the impending signing of the draft Union treaty that led a group of top officials of the Soviet government to launch what has been called the "attempted coup" of August 19.²² The coup and its aftermath dealt the final defeat to Gorbachev, the socialist reform project, and the

²¹ There is some dispute about exactly what the draft treaty stated. See Jerry Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-1991*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 1997, pp. 424-5.

²² The uncertainty about whether the term "coup" is accurate stems from the evidence that its leaders may have believed they were acting with President Gorbachev's approval, or if not with his stated approval, then with the intent of soon returning him to power. See Hough, *Op. Cit.*, ch. 13.

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Union state. The failed coup strengthened Yeltsin and the pro-capitalist coalition. It propelled all of the union republics, most of which had not previously sought independence, onto a path toward separation from the USSR.

On August 19, with Gorbachev on vacation in the Crimea, eight top leaders of the Soviet government formed an emergency committee which announced that Gorbachev had been relieved of his duties. Quietly placing Gorbachev under house arrest, they imposed a state of emergency in parts of the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Republic parliamentary leadership boldly defied the coup. Within a few days the coup collapsed and Gorbachev returned to Moscow. However, power now shifted decisively from Gorbachev and the Union government to Yeltsin. Four months later the Soviet State was abolished and Russia emerged as an independent state, as did the fourteen other republics.

Why did this failed coup lead to a rapid unraveling of the Soviet Union? Gorbachev remained the legal President, and Yeltsin had no legal or constitutional grounds for the actions he took following the collapse of the coup. When Gorbachev returned to Moscow after the coup collapsed, Yeltsin appeared to just brush Gorbachev aside. With no more legal basis than the coup leaders had possessed, Yeltsin signed a decree transferring the ownership of all property on Russian territory to the Russian Republic. He lowered the Soviet flag and raised the traditional Russian flag. He suspended the Communist Party and its newspapers within Russia.²³ Within a few days, Gorbachev was forced to resign as Communist Party leader and to call on the party central committee to dissolve itself. Soon thereafter, Yeltsin forced Gorbachev to disband the Soviet parliament and transfer central authority to the republic presidents and an appointed legislative council. In actuality, nothing was left of the Union government except one person, President Gorbachev, who resigned a few months later on December 25.

Yeltsin regularly violated Soviet law in his drive for power, before the coup as well as after it. Gorbachev remained the commander in chief of the armed forces and the domestic

²³ There was some irony to this, in that the coup was carried out by Soviet state officials, not party officials.

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security forces. It is widely believed that the leaders of the Soviet military and security forces were greatly disturbed at the gradual coming apart of the country, and there is no reason to suppose that, had Gorbachev ordered Yeltsin's arrest for illegal actions that were undermining the state, the security forces would have failed to comply. Yet Gorbachev did not use the apparent power at his disposal to stop Yeltsin's drive to dismantle socialism and dismember the USSR, despite the clear evidence that Gorbachev wanted to prevent Yeltsin from achieving those aims.²⁴

There are many possible explanations for Gorbachev's inaction. He might have secretly supported Yeltsin's aims. He might have suffered from inability to act decisively. He might have feared that using force would destroy his place in history as a great social reformer.

In my view there is a more satisfactory explanation of this puzzle. This explanation avoids conspiracy theories. It also avoids reliance on the implausible claim that Gorbachev, while being tough enough to transform and democratize the Soviet autocracy, at the same time had a personality so weak that it prevented him from acting against a sworn enemy who was destroying what Gorbachev was devoted to saving.

Something immobilized Gorbachev and his allies, but it was not a matter of personality. Gorbachev's inaction at the end, and also Yeltsin's increasingly bold moves, can be explained with reference to the social forces which the main actors represented. Boris Yeltsin was leading a coalition of groups that was determined to abolish socialism and build capitalism. This coalition included articulate intellectuals who believed that capitalism would mean both freedom and prosperity for them. It included new small business owners whose future depended on a transition to capitalism. But, most importantly, it came to include, by 1991, a decisive part of the party-state elite, who saw the opportunity to greatly enrich themselves through dividing up the wealth of the Soviet Union among themselves. Yeltsin's bold assault on socialism reflected the determination of the powerful constituencies he represented.

²⁴ See Hough, *Op. Cit.*, ch. 13, for a detailed discussion of this matter.

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By contrast, Gorbachev was left without an effective constituency. He spoke about perestroika as a “revolution,” and at times he had called for the masses of Soviet people to get involved in transforming and democratizing Soviet society. However, for Gorbachev this was rhetoric rather than reality. He had risen through the party bureaucracy based on his ability to obtain and keep the loyalty of key groups with the Soviet elite. His mode of operation was bureaucratic maneuver at the top. He was not prepared to lead a mass movement of any sort. Despite the continuing support among the Soviet public for maintaining socialism and for retaining the Union state, Gorbachev’s world of operation was within the elite. Once the elite deserted his cause, he found himself immobilized.

This analysis explains the otherwise puzzling course of the August coup. In the face of defiance by Yeltsin and his supporters, the coup leaders failed to take any decisive action. They did not arrest Yeltsin at the start of the coup, nor did they mount an attack on the parliament building where he was holed up. They did not even take control of all communications in the country, allowing opponents to start organizing against them, and even letting CNN broadcast the developments to the whole world. Some observers attributed these lapses to incompetence. However, it is difficult to believe that the top leaders of the government, military, and security apparatus of the Soviet superpower, who led the coup, could be incapable of the relatively simple organizational tasks that would have been required to make the coup effective.

As for Gorbachev, the near-paralysis of the coup leaders can be explained by their realization that they had little active support within the party-state elite. It is even likely that they were at least dimly aware of this before they acted, yet they may have felt they could not give up without at least some move to stop the dismantling of the system. They apparently hoped either that Gorbachev would join them, lending their action legitimacy, or that the Soviet parliament would meet and approve their action. Their problem was not a lack of competence but the absence of any elite political support beyond their small circle. As they realized how isolated they were, they simply gave up.

The rapid and peaceful demise of the Soviet superpower resulted from the desertion of its

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own ruling elite, who came to realize that a socialist system ran contrary to their interests. It is difficult to imagine how Soviet socialism could have survived once the party-state elite turned against it. While a popular majority may have wanted to keep some kind of socialism, the top-down, authoritarian character of the Soviet system had depoliticized and demobilized ordinary people, who remained largely passive observers as factions of the elite fought over the direction of the country.

The disintegration of the Union was an outgrowth of the particular form of the Soviet state and the way in which the situation of dual power developed in the country. If Boris Yeltsin and the pro-capitalist coalition had been able to win power in the Soviet Union as a whole, the Union state might have survived the shift to capitalism. However, Yeltsin and his backers were not able to dislodge Gorbachev from the helm of the Union state. Yeltsin's route to power lay through the Russian Republic. As a result of these circumstances, the overthrow of socialism required the dismantling of the Union state.