The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

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The KGB in the Soviet System

The Committee on State Security (KGB) is often blamed for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Had it not been for the KGB’s behind-the-scenes machinations and betrayal of Gorbachev, the theory goes, the situation in the country might not have reached the crisis point that it did in 1991, and some sort of a union, if only a fragile one, might have been preserved. But KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov, according to this view, embarked on a destructive path in 1990, feeding Gorbachev with alarming disinformation and secretly arranging for the use of force in areas like the Baltics. Kryuchkov’s actions are seen as having fueled an already volatile situation, thwarting compromises with the nationalist and democratic opposition. Gorbachev, blocked by hard-liners at every turn in his efforts to steer perestroika back on course, finally ended up a prisoner in the Crimea in August 1991, helpless to avert the imposition of a state of emergency by Kryuchkov and his colleagues. This last desperate act by the KGB-led group to cling to power accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union to the point of no return.

Appealing as this theory might be to those who view Gorbachev as a well-meaning but naive and misguided reformer, it does not hold up to an analysis of what actually happened. First of all, Gorbachev was an astute leader whose political instincts were sharply honed. It is doubtful that he allowed

1. An example of this view can be found in Jack Matlock’s book, Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union (New York: Random House, 1995). In presenting his assessment of the Soviet collapse, Matlock concludes: “If I were to reply to the question I posed to Russian politicians regarding the person most responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union, my answer would be Vladimir Kryuchkov. He was the organizer of the August 1991 attempt to seize power that accelerated the disintegration and thus made it much more difficult to create a voluntary federation of at least part of the empire. No credible attempt to overthrow Gorbachev could have been mounted without the support of the KGB chief—which is one of the reasons Gorbachev failed to anticipate the move against him. His trust in Kryuchkov’s loyalty was as complete as it was misplaced” (p. 665).

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allowed himself to be continually duped by the KGB. Second, the notion that
the KGB or, as some would say, Kryuchkov was to blame for the Soviet col-
lapse rests on the assumption that the KGB was an independent actor, power-
ful enough to pursue a course of action that was counter to the aims of
Gorbachev. In fact, neither the KGB nor any of its predecessors was ever in a
position to circumvent the channels of party control in any major way. Even
the notoriously ruthless People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD)
always acted on the orders of Stalin.

The idea that the state security organs were an autonomous force in the
Soviet system, implementing their own covert agenda, was often promoted by
leaders of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) because they found it expedi-
tent to blame the secret police for the regime’s more unsavory actions, thereby
preserving for themselves some form of legitimacy and credibility. The Stalin
period witnessed the use of the term Ezhovshchina to describe the Great T error
of 1936–1938, carried out at Stalin’s behest by NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov.
That Ezhov himself became a victim of the Ezhovshchina in late 1938 and was
later executed did little to dispel the view in the Soviet Union that Ezhov him-
self was largely to blame for the purges. Only after Nikita Khrushchev initi-
ated his de-Stalinization campaign in the mid-1950s did the Soviet public be-
come more fully aware of Stalin’s direct responsibility.

Khrushchev, of course, also employed the strategy of scapegoating the se-
curity services when it served his purposes. Discounting his own role in im-
plementing the purges, he made a great show of discrediting and dismantling
Lavrentii Beria’s Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) in 1953–1954 and estab-
lished a new service, the KGB, vowing that henceforth the secret police would
always adhere to “socialist legality.” A new charter for the KGB was drawn up,
new men (with ties to Khrushchev) were brought in to take over its opera-
tions, and terror was disavowed as a means of subduing opposition. Not sur-
prisingly, Khrushchev’s cavalier reorganizations of the security services and his
open criticism of their past activities eventually created considerable animos-
ity toward him on the part of the KGB. This enabled Khrushchev’s party col-
leagues to enlist senior KGB officials in their successful effort to oust Khrush-
chev in October 1964. But even in this case, the KGB was not an
autonomous actor; it simply went along with the most powerful CPSU fac-
tion, led by Leonid Brezhnev.

Brezhnevrewarded the KGB chairman, Vladimir Semichastnyi, for his
support of the move against Khrushchev. Semichastnyi gained full mem-
bership on the CPSU Central Committee, and Brezhnev upgraded the KGB’s
status and increased its powers. Having learned from Khrushchev’s mistakes,
Brezhnev did not attempt to make the KGB the “fall guy” for his repressive
policies. Indeed, to ensure the continued loyalty of the KGB and prevent it
from engaging in antiparty activities, he brought KGB officials into the party leadership at all levels. In 1973 Semichastnyi’s successor, Yuri Andropov, became the first security chief since Beria to be granted full membership on the CPSU Politburo.

Like the military (whose highest-ranking official, Defense Minister Andrei Grechko, and his successor, Dmitrii Ustinov, also gained full Politburo status under Brezhnev), the KGB represented a separate institution, with its own professional and organizational identity, and a strong esprit de corps. As a result, the KGB undoubtedly had its own institutional point of view on policy matters, a view that sometimes diverged from that of the CPSU or the military. But because KGB leaders were participating in party decision making from the district level upward, the agency’s interests tended, more often than not, to coincide with those of the party. Andropov’s accession to the office of CPSU General Secretary in November 1982 demonstrated just how far this party-KGB symbiosis had come. The fact that Andropov had served as KGB chief for fifteen years in no way detracted from his candidacy to succeed Brezhnev.

It was Andropov, ironically, who first fostered the image of the KGB as a proponent of reform, at least in the economic sphere. Rightly or wrongly, Andropov is widely credited with being able to see that the Soviet system had stagnated and was in danger of entering a crisis without significant economic and political renewal. Being in ill health himself, he reportedly bequeathed the job of renewal to Gorbachev, whom he is thought to have favored as his successor.2

Gorbachev and the KGB

After some initial hesitation Gorbachev went far beyond the cautious economic reforms advocated by Andropov, which centered on fighting corruption and raising economic efficiency. But when Gorbachev came to power in

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2. For an interesting discussion of Andropov and his legacy, see Vadim Pechenev, “‘Zaveshchanie’ Andropova: Mif ili Istoriya?” Nash Sovremennik (Moscow), No. 7 (1995), pp. 140–152. Mark Kramer has argued, on the basis of declassified materials and memoirs, that although Andropov, like Gorbachev, “wanted the Soviet system to run more efficiently, the similarities between the two men end there.” Andropov, Kramer writes, “was a staunch advocate of internal repression and aggressive foreign policies,” whereas “Gorbachev pursued far-reaching liberalization at home and retrenchment and conciliation abroad.” Quoted from Mark Kramer, “The Demise and Residue of the Soviet Union,” SAD Review, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer–Fall 2002), pp. 343–344. See also Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War,” Review of International Studies, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 566–567. Kramer’s view is shared by, among others, Aleksandr Yakovlev, who argues that “Andropov was an authoritarian leader [who] wanted to transform the country into a giant socialist barracks. It is impossible to regard him as the forefather of perestroika.” Cited from the interview with Yakovlev in “Priglashenie k sporu,” Literaturnaya gazeta (Moscow), No. 19 (15 May 1991), p. 3.
the spring of 1985, after the brief interregnum under Konstantin Chernenko, he did so with the endorsement of the KGB. Significantly, one of Gorbachev’s first moves was to elevate KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov to full Politburo membership. Chebrikov, an old Brezhnevite whose career in the KGB dated back to the 1960s, had never exhibited any liberal or reformist tendencies. As in the past, the KGB was to be a pillar of the Soviet regime and a loyal protector of the party’s interests.

In the early stages of the Gorbachev regime, the CPSU’s interests did not seem to diverge from those of the KGB. Indeed, when Gorbachev began talking about perestroika in 1985 there was probably a favorable reaction at the Lubyanka, the KGB’s headquarters. Gorbachev at this time was proceeding cautiously, giving little indication that he intended to go beyond modest reforms that would reinvigorate the current system without changing its essence. As the “eyes and ears” of the regime, the KGB was privy to all the information about what was actually happening in the country, and its officials knew better than most that new economic policies were needed to pull the Soviet Union out of its economic quagmire. Unlike many longtime party stalwarts, high-ranking KGB officials acknowledged the seriousness of the country’s problems and were receptive to Gorbachev’s initial proposals.

In 1985 and 1986, when Gorbachev’s reforms were limited mainly to the economic system, Chebrikov and other KGB officials voiced strong public support for perestroika. In a speech in November 1985 commemorating the Bolshevik Revolution, Chebrikov spoke of the need to get the system moving again and said that he and his fellow “Chekists” were anxious to proceed. He went on to remind his audience that the security services had always taken an active part in resolving economic and social problems.3

That Chebrikov was chosen to deliver the November anniversary speech is indicative of his good standing with Gorbachev and the party leadership. There were other signs as well. Chebrikov received the prestigious Hero of Socialist Labor medal and had several articles published in major press outlets in 1985. His trips abroad and other public activities received prominent media coverage, and at the CPSU’s 27th Congress in March 1986 Chebrikov became the first KGB chairman since Aleksandr Shelepin (who spoke at the 21st Congress in 1961) to address the gathering. Meanwhile, Gorbachev continued the trend, begun under Brezhnev, of increasing KGB representation on key party bodies at all levels, including the CPSU Central Committee.4

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The honeymoon between Gorbachev and the KGB ended abruptly in late 1986, when the focus of the reforms shifted to the political arena. Until then Gorbachev’s program had been similar to that of Andropov, with a strong emphasis on discipline and fighting corruption, and thus compatible with the KGB’s interests. But when glasnost (greater openness) and demokratizatsiya were added to the agenda, the KGB lost its enthusiasm for perestroika, and understandably so. As part of the new openness, the hitherto sacrosanct organs of state security were subjected to damaging criticism in the Soviet press. Revelations about the crimes of the KGB’s Stalinist predecessor, the NKVD, soon gave way to exposés of current KGB misdeeds. In early 1987, for example, the so-called Berkhin affair came to light, revealing that KGB officials had arrested a journalist who was investigating corruption and later died in prison. Chebrikov was forced to make an apology in the pages of Pravda and to assure readers that the KGB officers in question would be disciplined. Henceforth, scandal after scandal impugned the integrity of the KGB.

In the words of former KGB Lieutenant-General Nikolai Leonov: “Bombs were continuously exploding in the press with a stinking smell, hurled at the besieged KGB fortress by political enemies.”

The negative press coverage of the KGB gave rise to ominous calls for a strengthening of legal controls over its operations and for a reform of the law enforcement system. Demokratizatsiya led to the release of more than 300 dissidents who had been arrested by the KGB on political charges and to the “rehabilitation” of the KGB’s bête noire, the human rights activist Andrei Sakharov. An apparent moratorium on political arrests deprived KGB officers of their main weapon in fighting dissent, compelling them to make do with threats and harassment. The KGB also had to stand by helplessly in the face of mass protest demonstrations and mounting ethnic demands in the national republics fueled by glasnost. As the organization chiefly responsible for preserving internal stability, the KGB had good reason to be concerned. Unlike previous Communist leaders, Gorbachev showed little appetite for forceful confrontation with opposition groups.

Chebrikov and his deputies decided to fight back in the latter half of 1987, when they began to issue a series of defiant statements against perestroika. At a celebration to honor the first Soviet secret police chief, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, in September of that year, Chebrikov claimed that the West was exploiting Soviet democratization for subversive purposes and warned of the danger that extremist elements would push the reforms too far. In April 1988 Chebrikov delivered a speech in which he criticized “certain individuals” for “unleashing a varied arsenal of methods of social demagogy and substituting

bourgeois liberalism for the essential concept of socialist democracy.” Other KGB officials followed suit, echoing Chebrikov’s theme that glasnost had made the Soviet Union more vulnerable to subversion by Western intelligence agencies and that people were abusing perestroika.6

The coup de grâce came in September 1988, when a lengthy interview with Chebrikov appeared in the main CPSU newspaper, Pravda. In remarkably strident terms Chebrikov again warned about the excesses of perestroika and urged the KGB to intervene promptly against “hostile actions undertaken with the aim of undermining and eliminating our existing system by citizens of anti-Soviet and antisocialist persuasion.” Chebrikov clearly intended to warn that Gorbachev’s reforms had gone too far.7

As it turns out, the Pravda interview was Chebrikov’s swan song. Within just a few weeks he was removed from his KGB post and made a Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee and head of the Central Committee’s new Commission on Legal Policy. At the time, this move seemed to be a promotion for Chebrikov. A Central Committee Secretary was a powerful position, and Chebrikov was given oversight responsibilities for the KGB, which meant that he would supervise the new KGB chief, Vladimir Kryuchkov. But we know in retrospect that the changes made at the September plenum—following up on proposals offered at a Party Conference two months earlier—were the beginning of a reorganization of the party apparatus that would seriously weaken the Secretariat and leave Chebrikov out of a job by 1989.8

**Gorbachev and Kryuchkov**

To the extent that Gorbachev removed Chebrikov from the KGB because of his opposition to reform—a point that was underscored by the simultaneous ouster of several other conservatives from the party leadership—Kryuchkov seemed an odd choice as his replacement. At age sixty-four Kryuchkov had been in the KGB since the 1960s, rising to become chief of the KGB’s foreign intelligence directorate in 1974, a post that he held for the next fourteen years. He was a protégé of Andropov, who had encouraged changes in the system and backed Gorbachev, but this hardly made Kryuchkov a reformer. On the contrary, he largely shared Chebrikov’s view that perestroika was getting out of hand.

7. See the interview in Pravda, 2 September 1988, p. 3.
Gorbachev, nonetheless, says in his memoirs that “my decision was influenced by the fact that Kryuchkov had for many years been a close ally of Yury Andropov. Yury Vladimirovich’s attitude toward him was the reason for my choice. The information I had at the time cast no doubt on his candidacy.” Curiously, Gorbachev goes on to say that “my opinion of Kryuchkov was supported by Chebrikov and especially by Yakovlev: they were longtime acquaintances and at that time were particularly close.”9 Why would Gorbachev rely on the advice of Chebrikov, who had become such a sharp critic of reformist policies that he had to be eased out? It is also surprising that Aleksandr Yakovlev, the “architect of perestroika,” would have been pushing for Kryuchkov. According to what Kryuchkov writes in his memoirs, his relations with Yakovlev were far from close. Kryuchkov claims that as far back as 1983, when he first met Yakovlev, he had considered him untrustworthy and insincere. Kryuchkov adds that by the end of the 1980s he had become convinced, from KGB intelligence reports, that Yakovlev was an agent of American intelligence services.10

Kryuchkov casts no further light on the reasons for his appointment in his two volumes of memoirs, except to say that he was not completely surprised when Gorbachev asked him whether he would be interested in the job. Rumors had been circulating for some time about his impending promotion. Kryuchkov’s only reservation concerned the fate of Chebrikov and, when Gorbachev told him about the job as Central Committee Secretary, Kryuchkov felt no qualms about accepting the KGB post. Prior to 1985, Kryuchkov says, he had never met Gorbachev, but Kryuchkov had greeted Gorbachev’s appointment to the party leadership with favor and still had considerable faith in him in September 1988: “At this time I had no particular doubts about Gorbachev’s line and his good intentions. I believed his many pronouncements about strengthening the state and the union, making development more dynamic, and achieving new advances. Therefore I had a great desire to help him.”11

As for Gorbachev, he had worked since 1985 with Kryuchkov on intelligence and foreign policy issues, and he may have been impressed with Kryuchkov’s expertise and skill in this area. Kryuchkov had served in the Soviet embassy in Hungary in the 1950s and was a specialist on Hungary in the CPSU Central Committee apparatus for several years in the 1960s. His knowledge of Hungary’s economic reforms was a positive attribute. Probably the most important consideration, however, was that it was politically expedi-
ent to appoint someone from within the KGB rather than an outsider. Because most of the KGB officials working on the domestic side were unhappy about the course of reforms, it made sense to choose someone from the foreign intelligence apparatus. At the same time, the appointment of a foreign intelligence expert as KGB chief suggested that, in keeping with perestroika, internal policing functions would be deemphasized.

Kryuchkov, who gave no less than eighteen interviews to the Soviet and Western media during the first two years of his tenure as KGB chairman, presented himself as a strong supporter of perestroika. He welcomed the creation of a Supreme Soviet committee to oversee the KGB, spoke positively about cooperation between the KGB and Western intelligence services, and stressed the importance of rehabilitating the victims of Stalin’s purges. Kryuchkov launched an ambitious public relations campaign to improve the KGB’s image and dissociate it from the Stalinist secret police. He encouraged KGB employees to speak at public meetings and assure their audiences that the KGB was reforming itself. In a speech in early 1990 Kryuchkov asserted that perestroika was irreversible and that the changes he had introduced in the KGB were “more than cosmetic.”

Gorbachev, meanwhile, gave every indication that he was happy with Kryuchkov’s performance, making him a full member of the Politburo in October 1989 and inviting him to deliver the anniversary speech in honor of the Bolshevik Revolution a month later.

**Problems with Perestroika**

Behind the scenes, however, tensions were developing, at least on the part of Kryuchkov and his KGB colleagues, who were becoming increasingly disenchanted with Gorbachev and his reforms. They watched with great alarm, for example, as Eastern Europe suddenly discarded Communism at the end of 1989. For those who had worked in foreign intelligence, the loss of the invaluable agent network in these countries was a particular blow. The KGB had depended heavily on the cooperation of the intelligence services of the satellite states in Eastern Europe, and KGB officials had worked closely with their East European counterparts. With the collapse of Communism, the erstwhile employees of the East European state security forces not only lost their

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13. According to Kryuchkov, Central Committee Secretary Aleksandr Yakovlev was angry about the anniversary speech because he believed that he should have been given the honor. See Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, Vol. 1, p. 277.
jobs but in some cases were arrested. Leonid Shebarshin, KGB Foreign Intelligence Chief at this time, later recalled:

Our comrades—employees of the intelligence services of the former socialist bloc—had a hard time. A wave of suicides spread over Czechoslovakia. People could not endure the atmosphere of moral terror that surrounded them. The new German regime staged trials of former spies of the GDR, accusing them of espionage on behalf of foreign powers (i.e., the GDR), which now formed part of the united German state. In its vengeance democracy does not play second fiddle to despotism. The only difference is that the reprisals are meted out slowly.14

According to Kryuchkov, the KGB tried to defend its “German friends,” urging Gorbachev to appeal to Chancellor Kohl to stop the persecution of the GDR security organs, but to no avail: “Gorbachev avoided any reaction to the events in the GDR, throwing all these friends of the Soviet Union into the hands of fate.”15 In the back of Kryuchkov’s mind was doubtless an awareness that the same fate could befall officials of the KGB.

Judging from his memoirs, Kryuchkov’s views of Gorbachev and perestroika were very different from those Kryuchkov projected publicly in 1988 to 1990. Kryuchkov’s memoirs, of course, were written after the failed coup attempt and the collapse of the Soviet Union, while he was languishing in prison. They are blatantly self-serving and reflect his intense personal bitterness toward Gorbachev. Nonetheless, a great deal of what Kryuchkov says was probably an authentic reflection of his feelings at the time. He was, after all, a diehard Communist, who wanted, at all costs, to preserve the Soviet state and the rule of the Communist Party. He went along with perestroika for the same reasons that his mentor, Andropov, had urged changes in the system—so that it would become more efficient and economically viable. By the very fact that Kryuchkov headed the KGB, he cannot have favored any expansion of freedoms or any form of democracy, no matter how limited in scope. But he was not yet prepared to challenge Gorbachev’s policies in public.

In a speech to the Supreme Soviet in July 1989 Kryuchkov endorsed the transfer of power from the Communist Party apparatus to new state agencies created by Gorbachev. As Alexander Rahr pointed out, Kryuchkov also was the first member of the leadership to speak in favor of a multiparty system. In December 1989 he was quoted as saying that the proposed abolition of Article 6 of the USSR Constitution, which had long guaranteed the CPSU a

“leading and guiding role” in society, would “not be a tragedy.” Rahr speculated that Kryuchkov stood to benefit from the party's loss of power if it freed the KGB from traditional party control. But in fact the KGB had a great deal to lose from the demise of the Communist Party, let alone the creation of a multiparty system. The party not only controlled the KGB, it was the means by which the entire Soviet regime functioned and held together.

As Kryuchkov’s KGB colleagues noted in a collectively written book about the security services that appeared a few years later:

The main principle guiding the activity of the VChK-KGB organs throughout their history was the principle of party leadership. . . . It was precisely the KGB’s link with the party structures that enabled it to become more powerful and influential, but, on the other hand, this link led the KGB to disintegration along with the weakening, internal degradation, and finally collapse of the CPSU and the Soviet Union.  

Although some KGB officials might have been willing to see the presidency develop into an institution separate from the CPSU, the majority viewed the fate of the KGB as inextricably bound to the fate of the Communist Party.

Equally threatening to the KGB’s authority was the phenomenon of “whistle-blowing” from within its ranks. It was one thing to be criticized in the press by outsiders. But in mid-1989 the liberal weekly Ogonek published a self-confession by a retired KGB colonel, Yaroslav Karpovich, who expressed shame for his participation in the KGB’s ruthless war against dissenters in the 1960s and 1970s. Another sensational exposé of the KGB’s activities appeared in Ogonek in early 1990, based on revelations by three former KGB employees who claimed that they had been dismissed in 1985 as part of a cover-up of a scandal that had led to the execution of one of their colleagues.

Most damaging of all to the KGB’s image was the public denunciation of the KGB by Major-General Oleg Kalugin, who had earlier served under Kryuchkov as chief of the counterintelligence department of the First Chief Directorate and had been fired from the KGB in 1989 after a falling-out with his superiors. Kalugin caused a sensation when he appeared before a conference of the Communist Party’s insurgent Democratic Platform and voiced a scathing assessment of the KGB and Kryuchkov. He challenged the notion that the KGB had reformed itself under Gorbachev, insisting that “the new image of the KGB is cosmetic and just consists of applying rouge over the quite flabby face of the old Stalin-Brezhnev system.” Kalugin also claimed

that the KGB’s staff was enormously inflated and its operations inefficient. According to Kalugin, KGB officers had sold more secrets to the West over the past decade than in all previous years of the Soviet regime.19

Outraged by these allegations, Kryuchkov publicly accused Kalugin of being a liar and a hypocrite who was trying to get revenge on the KGB because he had been demoted for incompetence. In his memoirs Kryuchkov claims the KGB had suspected for a long time that Kalugin was cooperating with the American intelligence services and that this was the reason he had been dismissed, against his wishes, in 1989. Kryuchkov notes that Kalugin and Yakovlev, who also was suspected of illicit ties with America, were very close, thus reinforcing the idea of an American-led conspiracy to undermine the Soviet system.20

When Kryuchkov began talking publicly about a CIA plot against the Soviet Union, most people viewed it as just another KGB propaganda gambit to gain support for hard-line policies. But Kryuchkov may actually have believed what he was saying. As a devoted KGB professional with a limited political vision, he doubtless had trouble understanding how someone like Kalugin could turn against the KGB unless it was because he was an agent for the West. By this time the KGB was an agency under siege, and the entire Soviet structure was crumbling. It was natural for Kryuchkov and his colleagues to suspect that the CIA was helping to foment the trouble. It was also convenient, of course, because it offered them a justification for clamping down and getting tough with those who were taking perestroika too far, particularly the non-Russian nationalists. Kryuchkov probably had this in mind when he delivered a speech in December 1990 to the Supreme Soviet that, even by KGB standards, was exceptionally hostile to the United States. He asserted that the CIA was working covertly to destabilize the USSR by sabotaging its economy and supporting ultraradical, anti-Soviet groups. He warned that the restoration of order in the country might require bloodshed, and he called on Gorbachev to introduce a state of emergency.21

**Gorbachev Swings to the Right**

By the autumn of 1990 Gorbachev had begun a noticeable shift toward the right and appeared to be losing his enthusiasm for perestroika. A month after

19. Ibid., pp. 26–27.
he was elected Soviet president by the Supreme Soviet in March 1990, he pushed through a bill on “The Legal Regime for a State of Emergency,” thus establishing the legal groundwork for possible emergency measures. In September 1990 the Supreme Soviet granted Gorbachev additional powers to rule by decree during the “period of transition.” Thus, the party and parliament were steadily losing ground to the president and the executive structures. In the meantime Gorbachev had supported the KGB on Kalugin, issuing a presidential decree stripping the former general of all honors and awards and going along with a Council of Ministers decision to deprive Kalugin of his general’s rank and his pension. With Gorbachev’s approval, the USSR procurator’s office also initiated criminal charges against Kalugin for divulging state secrets.

By December 1990, when Kryuchkov gave his virulently anti-American speech, Gorbachev’s rightward swing was all but complete. He had withdrawn his support for the bold 500-Day Plan devised by economic reformers, fired the moderate, reform-minded minister of internal affairs Vadim Bakatin (who was replaced by a former KGB official, Boris Pugo), and, significantly, signed a decree giving the KGB the power to control foreign economic operations in the country. The next month Gorbachev enacted yet another decree, which invested the KGB with a new mission, that of “combating economic sabotage.” Gorbachev was also outspoken in supporting a new law on the KGB that gave the agency sweeping powers. The law, passed by the USSR Supreme Soviet in May 1991, placed control of the KGB in the hands of the Soviet president, not the Supreme Soviet.22

Judging from these developments, Gorbachev seemed to be giving his wholehearted endorsement to a stronger KGB and a renewed emphasis on law and order at the expense of demokratizatsiya. The authoritarian trends so alarmed Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze that he resigned from the government in December 1990, warning of the threat of a “reactionary dictatorship.” As a Georgian, Shevardnadze was acutely aware of the rising strength of the separatist movements in the non-Russian republics (not least Georgia) and was especially concerned about the implications of a Soviet crackdown that seemed to be drawing near. Ironically, the KGB worried about just the opposite possibility—that the Soviet authorities would be reluctant to deal forcefully with recalcitrant nationalists and would be unable to suppress them.

One need only consider the KGB’s mission and role within the Soviet system to see why Kryuchkov and other KGB officials would promote the harshest of measures toward ethnic separatism. Since 1917 the security police

22. See Knight, “The Future of the KGB,” p. 27.
had been responsible for ensuring the integrity of the Soviet state, a task that necessitated strict obedience to Moscow by the non-Russian republics and the suppression of aspirations to any form of independence. The KGB and its predecessors had always been in the front line between Moscow and the non-Russian nationalities. The idea that any Soviet republic would secede from the union was an onerous prospect for the KGB. For democratic nationalists in these republics the KGB was the symbol of despotic Soviet rule and thus the focal point of all discontent with Moscow. Georgian nationalists had already stormed the KGB headquarters in Tbilisi, and KGB officials feared that the same would happen elsewhere.

It is no wonder that Kryuchkov and others at the Lubyanka became alarmed when the Baltic states began to demand independence. They sensed that the Soviet leadership was in real danger of losing control. Secessionist demands from the democratically elected parliaments were mounting. Young men were refusing to take part in the military draft, even though such refusals were tantamount to treason. In early January 1991, democrats staged mass demonstrations in Vilnius to protest the government’s plans to raise retail prices. On 7 January Mikolas Burokiavicius, the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, sent Gorbachev a detailed letter warning that the situation there had reached a crisis and that the lives of those who supported the Soviet Union were in real danger. It was imperative, Burokiavicius concluded, that presidential rule be instituted in Lithuania immediately.23 The letter must have heightened Gorbachev’s anxieties. According to his aide Anatoli Chernyaev, Gorbachev “could not reconcile himself to the secession of the Baltic republics. He sincerely believed that, if this occurred, it would cause great harm to the people of these republics.”24

Kryuchkov and Gorbachev differ significantly in their versions of the January 1991 events in the Baltic states, just as they differ in their renditions of the August 1991 coup. Kryuchkov claims that everyone in the leadership, including Gorbachev, recognized that “the situation called for extreme measures.” Kryuchkov says that extra border troops were brought into Lithuania at the end of 1990 as a preparatory measure. According to his memoirs,

All these measures were taken with the approval of the highest leadership in the country. What is more, both I and my deputies at various meetings were criticized more than once for “inaction” in the face of a threat of anticonstitutional secession of the Baltic states from the USSR. Gorbachev himself made this accusation. However, these gallant phrases sounded more and more hypocritical:

24. Urushadze, Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s vragami, p. 274.
Whenever the question of concrete measures arose, the answer from Gorbachev was always the same: "Study the situation, don’t rush, prepare suggestions, we will clarify our position in good time.” I drew a line—the Committee of State Security would use force only if given an instruction to do so. I transmitted this plan—to refrain from any independent forceful actions—not only to the deputies and chiefs of the relevant departments of the Committee, but also to local officials. Too fresh in our minds were the events of Tbilisi and Baku, after which Gorbachev adeptly escaped the fire of criticism by claiming he was not informed, leaving the implementers of his orders to be torn to pieces.25

Kryuchkov goes on to claim that in late December 1990, at a meeting in Gorbachev’s office, the decision was taken to use force in Lithuania and Latvia. Gorbachev behaved decisively, giving Kryuchkov, Pugo, and Minister of Defense Dmitrii Yazov (the "power ministers") the go-ahead. That evening, however, Gorbachev began to hesitate, telling them to study the situation a bit more and then they would discuss it again. But things continued to deteriorate and, finally, on January 10, Gorbachev ordered the three ministers to use force in Vilnius. On the night of 13 January 1991 the special KGB “Alpha” detachment, together with units from the MVD and the military, stormed the television tower in Vilnius.26

Gorbachev acknowledges in his memoirs that he received a letter from the Lithuanian Communist Party leadership urging him to declare presidential rule in Lithuania but says that “even in this situation I still believed I had no right to resort to that extreme measure.”27 He goes on to say, however, that Yazov, Kryuchkov, and Pugo reported to me that they had taken measures to prevent the situation in Vilnius from getting out of control, and this would render the introduction of presidential rule inevitable. Only this matter was discussed and nothing else, that is, how to act in case of bloodshed.

Astoundingly, despite the clearly stated intentions of the power ministers, Gorbachev insists in his memoirs that he had no inkling of an impending attack on Lithuania and does not know who gave the orders: “The mechanism that was triggered off during the night of 12–13 January has to this day not been clarified; nor have the people who gave the command been identified.”28 He claims that he asked Kryuchkov about the incident and that Kryuchkov claimed not to know anything about it. In reality, Kryuchkov never denied

28. Ibid., p. 578.
that he gave orders to the Alpha unit or that he considered the move to be completely justified.

Further evidence that Gorbachev knew about the plans to attack the television tower in Vilnius came from the findings of the parliamentary commission to investigate the coup, headed by Lev Ponomarev. The commission uncovered extensive correspondence between Kryuchkov and Gorbachev about Lithuania and plans for instituting presidential rule, which meant rule by force. The former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, mentions how puzzling it is that Gorbachev did not try to get to the bottom of the Vilnius affair and punish those responsible:

Perhaps he cannot face the fact that on this occasion he willingly allowed himself to be duped. It was his responsibility as President to see to it that whoever gave the command was brought to justice. If he had done so, there would have been no attempt to remove him in August.

In reality Gorbachev must have known that Kryuchkov was behind the Vilnius affair, but because he himself had given Kryuchkov the go-ahead, he could hardly punish him for what he had done. What is more puzzling is why Kryuchkov and the KGB did not later heed the lesson they had learned from Vilnius—that Gorbachev would continue to feign ignorance and dissociate himself from strong-armed tactics while at the same time encouraging others to employ them. Gorbachev needed a strong KGB—as evidenced by his strong endorsement of the new law on the KGB—to back up his presidential rule and prevent the Soviet Union from sliding into chaos. But he was very concerned with his image as a reformer and wanted to distance himself from hard-line actions as much as possible. Thus, again, in March 1991, when the government decided that a democratic rally of 100,000 persons had to be broken up by MVD police and soldiers, Gorbachev concurred. But, Kryuchkov says, “Gorbachev, as usual, having agreed to the measures, went into a corner, and [Prime Minister Valentin] Pavlov had to take everything upon himself.”

Aleksandr Yakovlev put it another way: “His [Gorbachev’s] soft and delicate scruples about introducing force created the impression that if the hard-liners were themselves to use force, he would indulge them.”

The First Coup Attempt

Kryuchkov found Gorbachev’s behavior extremely frustrating. The KGB chairman did not want to embark on risky and controversial strategies without full presidential backing, but Gorbachev continued to waver. Meanwhile, in the KGB’s view the country was in a deep crisis.

Gorbachev began to get upset and nervous, and it was clear that he was agitated because he had lost his authority and opposition to his politics had grown significantly. . . . The main thing that was causing his anxiety was the weakening of his personal power and the threat to his position.33

On 12 June 1991 Boris Yeltsin was elected to the Russian presidency, a position that enabled him to push successfully for a transfer of power from the center to the republics and thereby to edge Gorbachev out of his position as political leader—a trend that pointed toward the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was under tremendous pressure from the members of his government to prevent this from happening, and he of course was gravely concerned himself about the erosion of his powers. But he knew that any open effort on his part to suppress the democratic movement by force and remove the new Russian leadership would be political suicide. So he decided on a third option—to encourage his hard-line colleagues to embark on these measures on their own and play the usual game of feigning ignorance or, if need be, voicing opposition to their measures. Even if the introduction of a state of emergency did not work, it might create the kind of crisis that would lead the West to reconsider bailing the Soviet Union out of its economic crisis for the sake of political stability.

On 17 June, while Yeltsin, fresh from his victory, was on a visit to the United States, Prime Minister Pavlov spoke at a session of the Supreme Soviet. Noting that the country was in a deep crisis, he demanded that the Council of Ministers be given emergency powers to overcome the crisis. His demands were backed in subsequent speeches by Kryuchkov, Yazov, and a series of conservative deputies. Kryuchkov made statements that would be echoed almost verbatim by the self-declared emergency committee in August: “Our motherland is on the verge of catastrophe. . . . The situation is already such that, without actions of an extraordinary nature, it will be impossible to manage.”34 Typically Gorbachev kept a low profile, absenting himself from the several days of proceedings.

The mayor of Moscow, Gavriil Popov, a strong supporter of Yeltsin, was one of the numerous reformers who were alarmed by these developments.

34. Urushadze, Vybrannye mesta, pp. 303–304.
Popov became all the more disturbed when he learned from a friend who had access to the top leadership that Pavlov and the Council of Ministers planned to use their additional authority to declare a state of emergency and neutralize Yeltsin’s powers while he was out of the country. There was no point, Popov recalls in his memoirs, of going to Gorbachev: “I had no illusions about what Gorbachev knew. After all both Yazov and Kryuchkov were members of the Presidential Council. This meant he had agreed with them.” With the aim of getting a warning to Yeltsin in Washington, Popov went to see Ambassador Matlock around noon on 20 June. According to Popov, he scribbled a message (which was then torn up) to Matlock that read: “Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin must immediately be told that a coup is possible and that he must fly back to Moscow immediately.” In response to Matlock’s written question “who?” Popov wrote “Pavlov, Kryuchkov, Yazov.”

Matlock later claimed that Popov’s note had read: “A coup is being organized to remove Gorbachev. We must get word to Boris Nikolaevich.” In response, Matlock notified Washington of an impending plot to oust Gorbachev and later, at President Bush’s behest, went to warn Gorbachev personally about the threat. (Matlock offers a somewhat different version in an article published after his memoirs, claiming that he went to see Gorbachev only after Bush had relayed the message to Yeltsin at their meeting that day and Yeltsin had replied that they should warn Gorbachev. In fact this would have been impossible, since there was an eight-hour time difference, and the Bush-Yeltsin meeting took place after the decision was made to warn Gorbachev.)

According to Gorbachev’s chief foreign policy adviser, Anatolii Chernyaev, Gorbachev laughed when Matlock told him about a possible coup attempt and replied that Matlock’s information was “one hundred percent wrong.” The next day, Gorbachev made a sudden appearance at the Supreme Soviet and asked to speak. He effectively put an end to the discussion of extraordinary powers by saying firmly that it was impossible to make a decision on the issue at the moment. Popov is convinced that Gorbachev took a stand against the hard-liners only because of Matlock’s warning and a subsequent telephone call from President Bush, which made it impractical for Gorbachev to feign ignorance as his subordinates pursued plans to declare a state of emergency. Gorbachev himself inadvertently came close to

36. Ibid., pp. 203–206.
confirming this in a 1992 interview: “Information reached Washington that there would be a coup the next day. I said to Bush: ‘Dear President, sleep well, there will not be a coup.’ The next day there was not a coup.” Popov was baffled by the Bush administration’s decision to turn to Gorbachev, since his warning was clearly intended only for Yeltsin. Otherwise, he says, “Why would I, being in Moscow, not have gone to Gorbachev myself? Why would I have needed such a complicated means, through Washington?”

Whatever the reason for the U.S. government’s action, the June 1991 attempt at a “parliamentary coup” made it clear that Gorbachev was still strong enough to rein in his hard-line subordinates if he so chose. It also revealed how important it was to Gorbachev to preserve his image in the West as a democratic leader. As his authority within the country plummeted, he relied increasingly on his relations with the West, particularly the United States. Kryuchkov later remarked with disdain, “Gorbachev saw the key to solving all our problems in the development of Soviet-American relations.” Gorbachev realized that the Soviet economy was in a dangerous decline and that his only hope was to persuade the West to grant subsidies that would enable the economy to reverse its downturn, giving Moscow some economic leverage over the increasingly recalcitrant non-Russian republics. Kryuchkov took a dim view of Gorbachev’s aspirations, predicting that they would not yield concrete results. With a worldview shaped by many years of service in the KGB during the Cold War, Kryuchkov found Gorbachev’s continued overtures to the West and his close relations with President Bush difficult to countenance: “Gorbachev was strategically oriented fully on Bush. This was evident in all his conduct and in his conversations with those who worked with him. . . . Efforts to warn Gorbachev were met with objections and smiles: ‘Bush won’t let me down.’”

**Prelude to the Coup**

Kryuchkov was proved right when the Western powers refused to take on the burden of the Soviet Union’s economic recovery and Gorbachev returned home empty-handed from the G-7 meeting in London in July 1991.

40. Popov, Snova v appozitsii, p. 202. Popov adds that Matlock promised him that *Autopsy on an Empire* would relate the episode as Popov believes it actually happened. Unfortunately, the book presents a different version.
42. Ibid., p. 45.
Gorbachev’s options were now seriously limited. Although he clearly did not want to preside over the liquidation of the Soviet Union and watch his own powers evaporate, he realized that it would be political suicide for him personally to authorize the declaration of a state of emergency and the suppression of the democratic movement. He thus had no choice but to cooperate with Yeltsin and the other republican leaders in the hope that Kryuchkov and other hard-liners would do something to thwart the process. Gorbachev began meeting with Yeltsin and Kazakh party leader Nursultan Nazarbaev to work out the details of a new union treaty. Predictably, when Gorbachev showed Kryuchkov the draft, the latter was incensed. In essence, the treaty stripped the union government of all but a few formal powers. What particularly upset Kryuchkov was the provision stipulating that state security would be a prerogative of the individual republics and would no longer be carried out by the center. The KGB would be only a coordinating body. Kryuchkov voiced his objections to Gorbachev and demanded that he be allowed to consult republican leaders, including Yeltsin, about this issue. As a result, the word leadership was added to the KGB’s responsibilities vis-à-vis the republics, as set down in the treaty. But the fact that the word was starred and a note was added saying pointedly that the suggestion came from Kryuchkov left the impression, as Kryuchkov was aware, that the matter was still up for discussion.

Gorbachev barely mentions Kryuchkov in his memoirs, even though the two were meeting almost daily in Gorbachev’s office by the summer of 1991 for heated discussions about the growing crisis. Gorbachev knew that Kryuchkov would be the pivotal figure in any attempt to declare a state of emergency and prevent the signing of the union treaty. The others—Pavlov, Pugo, and Yazov—would not act without the KGB. Gorbachev also could see that Kryuchkov was becoming increasingly desperate to do something about the situation. But Kryuchkov and the other power ministers were not about to go out on a limb and impose emergency measures without Gorbachev’s consent. According to more than one source, Gorbachev came close to giving that consent on the eve of his departure on 4 August for a vacation at Foros in the Crimea. At a session of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, Gorbachev instructed Kryuchkov, Pugo, and Yazov “to prepare measures in the event that a state emergency would have to be introduced.”

Again, this was equivocation on Gorbachev’s part. He had not given any firm orders. But it was enough for the power ministers, at this point grasping

43. Ibid., pp. 136–139.
at straws, to begin preparing in earnest to introduce a state of emergency. They held meetings on the plan with all the government and party leaders, as well as military and KGB officials. They also were in daily contact with Gorbachev, who continued to be noncommittal. Gorbachev was furious about the unauthorized publication (said to be engineered by Pavlov) on 15 August by Moscow News of the secret draft union treaty, a disclosure that created a sensation and raised the level of tension in Moscow considerably. But the Soviet leader continued his vacation at Foros, apparently determined to stay there until the day the treaty was to be signed, on 20 August. Gorbachev began to complain on the telephone about bad health, saying that a back pain was keeping him from activity, thus clearly implying that he was in no condition to fly up to Moscow before the 20th.45

Kryuchkov and his colleagues by this point must have realized that they were in a standoff with Gorbachev and that he would not back down. But their choices were few. To do nothing would mean that the union treaty would be signed, rendering the Soviet Union a meaningless entity. The KGB and other central organs would be stripped of their authority, ceding it to the individual republics. Faced with this imminent threat, the power ministers decided to proceed with emergency measures while at the same time making one last-ditch attempt to enlist Gorbachev.

It is important to note that some KGB officials had reservations about introducing a state of emergency. Kryuchkov had commissioned Vyacheslav Zhizhin, deputy chief of the KGB's First Main Directorate, and Aleksei Egorov, assistant to the first deputy chairman of the KGB, Viktor Golushko, to study the situation. Together with General Pavel Grachev, the first deputy commander of the airborne forces, they drafted a report warning that the population would not go along with emergency measures at this time and that extensive preparation would be needed.46 Once the decision had been taken, however, there appears to have been little dissent within the KGB. In the words of Russian journalist and KGB expert Yevgenia Albats:

As for the bruited “resistance from within,” the State Commission to Investigate the Activity of the KGB During the Coup (of which I was a member) has confirmed my suspicion that tales of mass mutiny from within the ranks have been wildly overblown. The investigators found that on 19 August, the first day of the coup, only a few isolated Chekists opposed the GKChP [the emergency committee]. The majority either took part in the coup or sat it out.47

The Finale

The story of the attempted coup is well known in its basic outlines, although there are major discrepancies in the details. On Sunday, 18 August, the newly formed State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) sent a five-man delegation—General Valentin Varennikov; Central Committee Secretary Oleg Shenin; Gorbachev’s chief of staff Valerii Boldin; the first deputy head of the Defense Council, Oleg Baklanov; and the chief of the KGB Main Guards Directorate, Yurii Plekhanov—to Foros to try one last time to persuade Gorbachev to back its efforts. Gorbachev’s account of what occurred, not surprisingly, differs significantly from the accounts of other participants. According to Gorbachev, he bluntly told the men that they were criminals and should abandon their plans: “As they were departing, I lost my cool and swore at them, Russian-style.” Henceforth, Gorbachev says, he and his family were in complete isolation at Foros, with no communication whatsoever.48

The emissaries from the emergency committee gave a different impression of the visit when they called Kryuchkov on the way to the airport from Foros. They said that Gorbachev had not given his unequivocal support for the operation, but that he had been calm and matter-of-fact, and had declined their invitation to fly to Moscow solely on the grounds that he was not feeling well. “As expected,” Kryuchkov writes, “the answer was thus: both yes and no.”49 Boldin, who had been close to Gorbachev for many years, expected that he would come around and fly to Moscow in a day or two, but the others were not so hopeful, and they were right. As Valentin Pavlov later said:

Gorbachev decided to play a game that he could not lose. If he stayed there [at Foros] and the state of emergency worked, he would come to Moscow later, having recovered from his illness and in a position to take charge. If it didn’t work, he could come and arrest everyone, and once again as president take charge. In either case he would show the people that his hands were squeaky clean.50

The official story was that Gorbachev was held captive at Foros, completely isolated and unable to go anywhere. Kryuchkov acknowledges that he ordered the special government communications lines to Foros to be cut right before the emissaries arrived on 18 August and did not restore them until he himself went to Foros on 21 August. The reason, he says, was that he did not want Gorbachev to call Bush.51 (Apparently Kryuchkov was concerned that

Bush would put pressure on Gorbachev to do something to stop the emergency committee.) But there is strong evidence to indicate that Gorbachev had other means of making calls from Foros. The head of the Scientific Industrial Union, Arkadii Vol’skii, a Gorbachev ally, stated that Gorbachev called him in Moscow on the city telephone line between five and six p.m. on the 19th, well after communications were said to have been cut off. According to testimony by Gorbachev's own bodyguards at the trial of Varennikov in July 1994, special telephones in the president's cars were working, as were those in the administration building just a hundred meters from Gorbachev's house.52

Gorbachev in his memoirs quotes excerpts from the diaries of his wife, Raisa Gorbacheva, supposedly written at Foros during the coup attempt. She laments that they have no radio or television on 18 and 19 August, only a small pocket Sony television that her husband uses when he shaves, and they have to keep it hidden from their captors. How lucky they are, she says, that Mikhail Sergeevich brought it; otherwise they would have no idea what was going on. But in his book The August Coup, written just days after their return from Foros, Gorbachev says: “My son-in-law Anatolii managed to listen to a Western station on his pocket Sony... Everything was cut off except the television, on which statements from the emergency committee alternated with feature films and orchestral concerts.”53 These are small details, perhaps, but the discrepancies in the stories of Gorbachev and his wife suggest hasty improvisation. They can hardly be attributed to failings of memory, because both accounts were written either during or right after the events occurred.

Raisa Gorbacheva claimed that her husband insisted on having a plane take him to Moscow and asked KGB guard Vyacheslav Generalov to arrange it, to no avail. But, according to numerous sources, neither Gorbachev nor his bodyguards ever gave any indication that he wanted to leave Foros.54 After listening to extensive testimony from witnesses, including Gorbachev, the Russian Federation Supreme Court acquitted Varennikov of all charges of being involved in the alleged coup attempt, concluding, among other things, that Gorbachev was not a captive and might easily have left Foros or communicated with the outside world.55 This impression was shared by Leonid

52. For further details on those days in Foros, see Amy Knight, Spies without Cloaks: The KGB’s Successors (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 12–30.
54. The commander of the fifth brigade of patrol ships around Foros, observed, for example: “We never offered help to the president. And never received a request for help.” Urushadze, Vybrannye mesta, p. 400.
55. See the Supreme Court ruling on Varennikov’s trial in Nezavisimaya gazeta (Moscow), 19 August 1994, p. 5.
Shebarshin, who was named by Gorbachev as acting head of the KGB after Kryuchkov’s arrest. Shebarshin met with Gorbachev on the day after his return from Foros: “Mikhail Sergeevich looked terrific. He was full of energy, speaking concisely and clearly. His eyes shone. He looked just like someone who had had a restful vacation on the shore of a soft, warm sea, not at all like a person who had just been freed from captivity.”  

The emergency committee members would have had no purpose in preventing Gorbachev from leaving. On the contrary, they were desperately hoping that he would come to Moscow and give his endorsement to the state of emergency. Without his endorsement they would have had to impose their will on the people with violence, something that all of them, including Kryuchkov, were loath to do. To be sure, even with Gorbachev’s support, the imposition of a countrywide state of emergency might well have resulted in bloodshed, but in such a case the KGB and the emergency committee would have been acting on the president’s orders. This clearly was the reason that Kryuchkov took it upon himself to make a futile plane trip to Foros on 21 August, in yet another last-ditch effort to persuade Gorbachev to support the emergency committee.

The most puzzling question is why Kryuchkov and the others allowed themselves any illusions that Gorbachev would change his mind and back them. Kryuchkov’s memoirs are replete with examples of how Gorbachev oscillated, hinting that something should be done and some strong measures taken to prevent the slide of perestroika into chaos. Gorbachev promised on many occasions that he would defend the union and would not allow the individual republics to secede. But whenever push came to shove he could not bring himself to take a firm stand. Kryuchkov had observed this behavior of Gorbachev time and again, and yet there he was at Foros, once again asking for the impossible. Gorbachev refused to see him and then allowed him to be arrested on the plane going back.

Was Gorbachev’s support for the emergency committee absolutely essential to its success? What would have happened if he had flown to Moscow on 18 August and assumed the leadership of the state of emergency, instead of remaining at Foros? It is doubtful that Gorbachev’s presence could have rallied enough support for the emergency committee to make it viable. His public standing was at an all-time low; those who opposed the Union Treaty (and there were many) felt betrayed by him; and the democrats would have been outraged if he had reversed himself. In short, he had by this time lost almost all of his credibility as a leader.

It is possible, however, that the members of the emergency committee could have succeeded in their efforts if they had not called military troops into Moscow (Kryuchkov admits that this was their biggest mistake) and if Yeltsin had not been astute enough to reap great political advantage in his role as defender of the people’s will. Yeltsin himself later acknowledged that the majority of regional authorities accepted the emergency regime: “The central structures of the Soviet Union worked mightily in favor of the GKChP: . . . With one phone call from Moscow, emergency bodies made up of party leaders, military officers, and state economic managers were created in every city and town in the country.”

By all accounts the situation in Moscow was calm until the night of 20 August. The KGB had made no attempt to arrest Yeltsin, and Kryuchkov had assured the Russian president in several telephone calls that no troops would storm the White House. But Yeltsin portrayed himself and his allies at the White House as being under siege, threatened by imminent attack, and he called on the public to defend them.

Even if Yeltsin had not been so deft, the presence of Soviet tanks in Moscow obviously contributed to the atmosphere of threat and crisis. The end result was the death of three civilians who attempted to climb atop tanks that were moving along the Ring Road in the early morning of 21 August. As Kryuchkov’s first deputy, Viktor Grushko, later recalled:

This had an oppressive effect on Kryuchkov. He argued about all aspects of it, how it could have happened, whether it wasn’t some sort of a provocation. He interpreted it as the worst possible development, an extraordinary occurrence. After all, the main principle of Vladimir Aleksandrovich was: that there should be no bloodshed. In general it seemed to me that if troops hadn’t been brought into Moscow, the situation would have turned out differently.

Later that morning Yazov ordered all army troops to be pulled out of Moscow, and the Emergency Committee declared itself defunct.

The Aftermath

In the end, of course, the scenario did not play out favorably for Gorbachev. Yeltsin emerged as the hero of the whole affair, powerful enough to inflict a humiliating political defeat on Gorbachev and to lay claim to the spoils, which eventually included the USSR KGB. In May 1991 Yeltsin had signed an agreement with Kryuchkov creating a Russian Republic KGB. (Previously

the USSR KGB had direct jurisdiction over Russia and over the KGB branches that existed in the fourteen non-Russian republics as well as in major cities and regions.) The chief of the new Russian KGB was Viktor Ivanenko, a career KGB professional, whom Yeltsin had co-opted. Not surprisingly, Yeltsin began talking about getting rid of the USSR KGB and transferring the bulk of the organization to Russia. On 5 October 1991 Yeltsin issued a decree stating that the legal successor to the USSR KGB on Russian territory was the Russian Republic KGB.59

By the time large Russian crowds surrounded the 15-ton statue of Feliks Dzerzhinskii in front of the Lubyanka on the night of 22 August, the KGB had become the symbol of all that was wrong with the Soviet Union. A giant construction crane, supplied by the U.S. embassy, was brought in to take down Dzerzhinskii’s statue, signaling an end to the aura of fear that the statue and the Lubyanka had inspired. Gorbachev realized that the KGB, as the focus of popular discontent, had to be dismantled. The newly appointed head of the agency, Vadim Bakatin, came up with a program at the end of September calling for a division of the KGB into several separate agencies. He also dismissed more than a hundred top KGB officials.

At the same time, Bakatin knew that the agency would function better if experienced professionals were at the helm, and he did not want to “start a witch-hunt.” Hence, the vacated posts were, for the most part, filled by insiders. As Leonid Shebarshin described it:

The KGB reformed itself. A feverish shakeup of officials took place. The old ones left, grumbling. Earlier the CPSU had sent its best cadres to strengthen the organs. Now another political force sent its best cadres there. Formerly inconspicuous people from the second and third echelons of leadership (the KGB leadership had many echelons and structures) were promoted into the committee’s leadership. They brought with them people who were loyal to them. True, the promotions took place without the incantations of loyalty to the party and references to the almighty Old Square (the site of the former Central Committee headquarters). It was simply given to understand that influential forces stood behind a candidate.60

Although the new officials were KGB professionals, they owed their promotions to the failure of the coup attempt and the victory of the democrats. They were not about to stand in the way of reform, no matter how unpalatable it might have been to them. At the end of October Gorbachev issued a decree abolishing the USSR KGB and creating three new agencies in its place: an Interrepublican Security Service for internal security, a Central Intelligence

59. Knight, Spies without Cloaks, p. 33.
60. Shebarshin, Ruka Moskvy, p. 291.
Service for foreign intelligence, and a new Committee for Protection of the State Border to replace the old KGB border guards. He also placed the KGB’s Main Guard Directorate directly under him, along with the elite Alpha special troops. But these changes were of relatively little import because the entire Soviet structure was about to collapse, and with it these newly formed security agencies. By the end of the year all the security organs would be under the control of the Russian president.

To be sure, the KGB and its successor agencies were not happy to see the Soviet Union disintegrate and their personnel and resources remanded to Yeltsin. Nonetheless, there was little they could do to stop the process. Bakatin recalls in his memoirs that he was fighting a losing battle against the Yeltsin forces throughout the autumn. John Dunlop has noted that “Yeltsin’s ‘autumn putsch’ against the ‘center’ was devastating in its effects.” The Russian leader was gradually whittling away at the powers of the Soviet center until finally, on 8 December, Russia joined with Ukraine and Belarus to form a new Commonwealth of Independent States, throwing the center aside completely.

Dunlop writes of a plot to seize power by high-ranking military, MVD, and KGB officials at this time. He cites a statement by Sergei Belozerstev, a member of the Soviet parliament, on preparations by a hard-line group to engineer a coup. It seems unlikely, however, that there could have been a widespread conspiracy among security officials. The KGB had been dissolved, and its functions were fragmented. Many of its top officials had been fired or had left of their own accord, replaced by a second tier of leaders who owed their jobs to the Yeltsinites. There was little likelihood of a successful, concerted effort to save the Soviet Union from collapse at this point, even if carried out jointly with the military.

Moreover, it was clear that, for all of Yeltsin’s talk about a complete reform of the security services and a total reduction of its powers, he would not destroy the powerful political weapon that was now in his hands. The former KGB officers who remained in the organization would still have a job to do and would be given the resources to do it well. A more plausible explanation for the rumors of a KGB plot is that they were circulated to bring the process of disbanding the Soviet Union to a head. Those who wanted to dissolve the USSR could then make the security services a scapegoat.

In the autumn of 1991, after the KGB was disgraced and demoralized as a result of its role in the attempted coup, few could have imagined that two

61. Knight, Spies without Cloaks, pp. 32–34.
63. Ibid., pp. 273–274.
years later its main successor organization would again be drawn into an in-
tense political battle, this time with considerable bloodshed. In fact, when
confronting the recalcitrant Russian parliament in October 1993, Yeltsin had
a great deal of trouble enlisting the security services on his behalf, mainly be-
cause the memories of what happened to Kryuchkov and his group were still
fresh. Minister of Security Nikolai Golushko refused to do anything but give
verbal support to Yeltsin in his struggle with the Russian parliament, and he
was fired not long afterward. Yeltsin finally had to enlist the services of the old
KGB Alpha group to storm the parliament.

In August 1991, by contrast, the security services had a firm purpose. An
essential component of their job was to protect the integrity of the Soviet
Union and prevent the union-republics from breaking away. For them it was
crucial to preserve political and economic stability and take all measures in
their power to stem the tide of chaos that had emerged by the summer of
1991. Gorbachev knew this only too well, and he seems to have expected the
KGB to come to the rescue. What he evidently failed to understand was that
the KGB, accustomed as it was to following the orders of the party leadership,
would not in the end launch into forceful action without him.

The attempt by the KGB and its allies to declare a state of emergency
brought the situation in the country to the breaking point and thereby inad-
vertently accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But the crisis had
been brewing for a long time, and, in the absence of a strong and resolute
party leader, the KGB was incapable of acting effectively to stop it. Re-
spending to allegations that the KGB deliberately misinformed Gorbachev,
Kryuchkov observed later that the situation was so bad there was no need to
exaggerate the danger: “Did the information from the Committee about the
deadly threat to the union turn out to be deceit, deza (disinformation)? The
collapse of the union became a fact, the development of events provide the
tragic answer to this question.”64