The August 1991 Coup and Its Impact on Soviet Politics

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In a book I published in 1993, The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Union, I devoted a lengthy chapter to the failed putsch of August 1991.1 The present essay, written several years later, constitutes a reexamination of the coup and its political aftershocks, the most significant of which was, of course, the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords of December 1991 that marked the end of the Soviet Union.

In this essay I have sought to make use of new materials concerning the putsch that came into my possession after the publication of my 1993 book. (Certain of these materials were published before 1993, but for various reasons they did not reach me until after the book had appeared.) Among these new sources are a spate of memoirs written by the leaders of the so-called State Committee for the State of Emergency (known by the ungainly Russian acronym: GKChP), who sought to take power in Moscow and throughout the USSR on 19 August 1991.2 Although these memoirs by leading participants in the putsch are inevitably self-serving, they should not be dismissed out of hand as worthless, as some Western commentators have had a tendency to do.

When the coup leaders were confined to prison from the time of their arrest in August 1991 until their amnesty by the Russian parliament in February 1994, they had ample time to read through and reflect upon the more than 35,000 pages of interview transcripts and other documentation assem-

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© 2003 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
bled by the Russian Procuracy. In their books on the coup the GKChP leaders—and especially Valentin Pavlov, who emerges as a kind of amateur historian of the putsch—frequently cite case and file numbers of materials collected by the Procuracy that cast doubt upon Mikhail Gorbachev’s (and, to a lesser extent, Boris Yeltsin’s) versions of what transpired during the coup.

One essential 1992 book, based on the 35,000 pages of materials collected by the Russian Procuracy, deserves special mention: *The Kremlin Conspiracy*, by Valentin Stepankov and Evgenii Lisov. Another significant book, which is based in part on the “in-house” investigation by the Committee on State Security (KGB) into that organization’s role in the coup, is edited by Georgii Urushadze and titled *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Enemies*. Although both of these books are of value to historians, they must also be used with caution. The volume by Procurator-General Stepankov and his deputy Lisov seeks, rather baldly, to propagate the authorized view of the Yeltsin leadership concerning the putsch. As for the Urushadze volume, it emulates the tendency of the KGB’s “in-house” investigation to downplay the seriousness and gravity of the coup.

Works by former Soviet President Gorbachev and by current and former members of his “team” also cast useful light on the August events. In addition, Gorbachev’s chief of bodyguards (until 18 August 1991), General Vladimir Medvedev, has published a book of memoirs, with a chapter devoted to the putsch. Former Russian President Yeltsin and his close allies have likewise authored memoirs and analyses that treat the August coup. Two books writ-

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3. A number of the coup plotters were released from prison early, for reasons of health.
4. Valentin Stepankov and Evgenii Lisov, *Kremlevskii zagovor: Versiya sledstviya* (Moscow: Ogonek, 1992). Stepankov, the Russian Procurator-General, and Lisov, Deputy Procurator-General, headed the investigation into the coup. Pavel Nikitin, a correspondent for *Ogonek*, appears to be the one who actually wrote the book, using materials supplied to him by the procurators. Nikitin’s role is discussed in *Komsomolskaya pravda* (Moscow), 22 May 1993, p. 1. The appearance of the book in advance of the trial understandably caused a scandal in Russia.
ten by Soviet generals who played pivotal roles in assisting Yeltsin's victory over the GKChP have also appeared. Works by Western diplomats and policymakers who dealt with the USSR during 1991 represent yet another useful source of information.

In light of this small torrent of new information—to which one might add numerous articles that have appeared in Russian newspapers and journals—it is necessary, first of all, briefly to reexamine the prehistory of the coup, beginning in January 1991, and then to discuss certain problems and continuing riddles connected with the putsch that need further elucidation from specialists. A second aim of this essay is to show how the coup helped to prepare the collapse of the Communist political system and the breakup of the USSR in December 1991.

The January 1991 Crackdown in the Baltics

The planning for what later became the August coup commenced in late December 1990 when the chairman of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, asked two officers from his organization to prepare “the implementation of concrete measures of an emergency character” within the Russian Republic. At around the same time, acting on instructions from Gorbachev, the KGB prepared documents for the introduction of presidential rule in the Republic of Lithuania. There is thus an identifiable link between the January 1991 crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia and the August 1991 putsch in Moscow.

On 8 January 1991 a meeting was held in the office of Gorbachev's chief of staff, Valerii Boldin (who later emerged as a participant in the August putsch), to decide upon a solution to the problem of Lithuanian separatism. Present in the room were a number of figures who would later play leading roles in the August coup: Kryuchkov; the defense minister, Dmitrii Yazov; the

(Moscow: author publication, 1992); and Oleg Poptsov, Khronika vremen 'tsarya Borisa' (Berlin/Moscow: Sovershenno sekretno, 1996).


minister of internal affairs, Boris Pugo; the first deputy head of the USSR Defense Council, Oleg Baklanov; and a member of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) Secretariat, Oleg Shenin. A decision was taken at this meeting to resort to the use of force in Lithuania. On 11 January Gorbachev received a message from the head of the newly formed National Salvation Committee of Lithuania, which intended to crush the separatists in the republic. From then on a crackdown became irrevocable.

On that same day of 11 January, sixty-five officers belonging to the elite KGB antiterrorist unit “A-7” (often referred to in the Russian media as “Al’fa”) departed from Moscow for Vilnius. Once they arrived there, they were apprised that their task was to spearhead an attack on the radio and television center and on other strategic sites in Vilnius. The 76th Pskov Paratroop Division of the Ministry of Defense, as well as Soviet and Lithuanian Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) units, were to be operationally subordinate to A-7. The tactical planner of the assault was Colonel-General Vladislav Achalov, who in late December 1990 had been named Soviet deputy defense minister for emergency situations.

During a bloody assault in the early morning of 13 January (an event that became known as “Bloody Sunday”), 13 Lithuanian civilians were killed and 604 were wounded. One member of the A-7 unit, Lieutenant Vladimir Shatskikh, died of wounds received during the attack.

In a foreshadowing of the August 1991 events, not only Gorbachev but all of the Soviet “power ministers” sought to distance themselves from any responsibility for the assault. On the day of the attack First Deputy Foreign Minister Anatolii Kovalev summoned several Western ambassadors, including Jack Matlock, to the Foreign Ministry and informed them that Gorbachev “wished to assure his foreign colleagues that he had not been responsible for the attack on the television tower. He did not himself know who had given the order.” The day after the attack Gorbachev confided that he had learned of the predawn assault only after it occurred, and he blamed the bloodshed on overzealous behavior by a local military commander. Subsequently, Gorbachev repeatedly “denied any personal responsibility for the bloodshed while still endorsing the need for a crackdown.”

12. Ibid., p. 276.
15. Achalov’s role in Vilnius is discussed in Megapolis-ekspress (Moscow), 27 January 1993, p. 15.
16. See Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, p. 455.
17. Beschloss and Talbott, At the Highest Levels, p. 319.
On 14 January 1991, in testimony before the USSR Supreme Soviet, Defense Minister Yazov and Internal Affairs Minister Pugo insisted that the order to use force had not come from Moscow. Yazov claimed that the order to attack had come from the local military commander in Vilnius, Major-General Viktor Ukropchik.18 The refusal by Gorbachev and his power ministers to take responsibility for the repressive actions of their subordinates would not be forgotten by those same subordinates in August 1991.

It was not long before Gorbachev decided to distance himself from the hard-line policies that had resulted in bloodshed in Lithuania and Latvia. As Robert Gates, then a staff member of the U.S. National Security Council, later noted: “Gorbachev had no stomach for repression. At the end of January 1991, the additional troops sent to the Baltics were ordered withdrawn.”19

The March Showdown

On 28 March a pivotal showdown took place between Yeltsin, who was then chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic (RSFSR), and his supporters, on the one hand, and Gorbachev and his power ministers, on the other. A special session of the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies was called—over Yeltsin’s strong objections—with the aim of censuring him and preparing his ouster. An estimated 50,000 MVD and army troops, supported by large numbers of plainclothes KGB, were then deployed in Moscow to intimidate potential demonstrators.20

Yeltsin and his supporters at the RSFSR Congress managed to stave off the attempt by Gorbachev to remove Yeltsin. The pro-Yeltsin forces achieved a solid 532–286 vote defying Gorbachev’s ban on rallies in the capital. An estimated 150,000–500,000 prodemocracy demonstrators then took to the streets in a peaceful but direct challenge to Gorbachev and the 50,000 troops deployed in the city. In the face of this resistance Gorbachev backed down, as he had previously in the Baltics. Gorbachev’s demeanor during these incidents (and during an earlier controversy in Tbilisi) left little doubt about his aversion to what the Russians call “large-scale bloodshed (bol’shaya krov’).”

The “Novo-Ogarevo Process”

Gorbachev’s unwillingness to use Soviet troops against peaceful demonstrators on 28 March forced him to throw in the towel and to begin working with Yeltsin and the other heads of union-republics on the text of a new Union Treaty that would devolve major political and economic power to the republics. Meetings to draft such a treaty began to be held at a government dacha located at Novo-Ogarevo, outside Moscow.

More than any other factor, Gorbachev’s acquiescence in the drafting of a new Union Treaty was what convinced the future putschists that they needed to take some form of decisive action. In addition to the evolving text of the Union Treaty, the future coup leaders were also alarmed by the election of Boris Yeltsin as RSFSR president in republic-wide voting held on 12 June. Yeltsin now possessed popular legitimacy and a mandate.

Pavlov Attempts a “Constitutional Coup”

On 17 June 1991, five days after Yeltsin was elected Russian president, Soviet Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov asked the USSR Supreme Soviet to grant him extraordinary powers that had previously belonged exclusively to Gorbachev. Under questioning, Pavlov admitted that he had not cleared his proposal with the Soviet president. The Supreme Soviet then went into executive session to discuss Pavlov’s proposal, and, during the discussion, it emerged that his plan was vigorously supported by KGB chairman Kryuchkov, Defense Minister Yazov, and MVD Minister Pugo.21 Gavriil Popov, at the time the mayor of Moscow, has commented: “The putschists had a chance to carry out a coup on behalf of the Center legally, when Pavlov demanded . . . extraordinary powers.”22 Much remains unclear about this strange episode, but four days later, on 21 June, Gorbachev appeared before the USSR Supreme Soviet and delivered a strong speech that led to a decisive defeat of Pavlov’s “constitutional coup” by a vote of 262 to 24. Flanked by his chastened power ministers, Gorbachev then announced that the “coup” (his term) was over. Incredibly, Pavlov and the three power ministers managed to keep their jobs.

On 20 July Yeltsin issued a landmark decree that prohibited organized activity by all political parties on the premises of state institutions located on the soil of the RSFSR. This decree in effect threatened to end the de facto mo-

nopoly of power by the Communist Party. Other union-republics were also flexing their muscles. The Ukrainian Supreme Soviet passed a resolution calling for the republic government to take control of firms and organizations located on Ukrainian soil, all of which had previously been controlled by the central government in Moscow.23

**A Fateful Meeting**

On 29–30 July Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan held an unannounced meeting at Novo-Ogarevo. The three leaders decided to move up the signing of the Union Treaty from September or October to 20 August. This sudden change of date meant that opponents of the treaty found themselves facing a looming deadline.

On 4 August Gorbachev left Moscow for his annual summer vacation at a new luxury dacha complex specially constructed for him at Foros in the Crimea. According to USSR Supreme Soviet Chairman Anatoliy Luk’yanov,

> just two weeks before the “putsch,” Gorbachev, at a session of the Cabinet of Ministers, declared “the presence in the country of an emergency situation and the need for emergency measures.” In so stating, he emphasized that “the people will understand this.”24

(The minutes of this key meeting of 3 August—the day before Gorbachev left for Foros—have not yet been unearthed in the Russian archives, but if they do emerge at some point, they can confirm or refute Luk’yanov’s version of what transpired.)

**Planning the Putsch**

On 5–7 August, just after Gorbachev had departed for Foros on the 4th, Kryuchkov met with several high-ranking subordinates, as well as with Lieutenant General Pavel Grachev, the commander of Soviet airborne forces (VDV), in a safe house located on the outskirts of Moscow. At these meetings they began planning for the introduction of emergency rule.25

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24. Luk’yanov, *Perevorot mnimyi i nastoyashchii*, p. 11. Oleg Shenin has cited these same words of Gorbachev, quoting from “the protocol of a session of the Cabinet of Ministers of 3 August 1991, chaired by Gorbachev.” Quoted from *Novyi vzglyad* (Moscow) No. 8 (1993), p. 4.
25. See Urushadze, ed., *Vybrannye mesta*, p. 311; and Stepankov and Lisov, *Kremlvskii zagovor*, p. 84.
On the evening of 17 August a watershed meeting was held at this same Moscow safe house. Those present included Kryuchkov, Yazov, Pavlov, Baklanov, Shenin, and Boldin. Also in attendance were two deputy defense ministers—General Vladislav Achalov and General Valentin Varennikov, the commander of Soviet Ground Forces—both of whom had played leading roles in the January crackdown in Vilnius. The participants agreed to move ahead with the introduction of emergency rule, initially limited to the two largest cities, Moscow and Leningrad.

During the meeting Pavlov evidently spoke at length about the deteriorating state of the Soviet economy; Kryuchkov shared his concerns about worrisome political trends in the country; Yazov expounded on the decline of the Soviet military; and Shenin and Baklanov presented pessimistic assessments of where the country was going. The participants also discussed the growth of separatist sentiment in the Baltics, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and other regions and emphasized the bleak prospects for the CPSU. They then decided that on the following day, 18 August, they would send a delegation to see Gorbachev and try to convince him to institute emergency rule. The State Committee for the State of Emergency was born.

The Riddle of Foros

The attempted coup, which lasted from 18 August until the arrest of the leading conspirators early in the morning of 22 August, was a complex and fast-paced event that cannot be fully analyzed in an essay of this length. My 1993 book contains a detailed narrative of the coup, and I will not repeat that here. Instead, what I will do in the following pages is to take note of certain questions and riddles that need to be addressed by future historians. Despite what some Western commentators appear to believe, “August coup studies” remain in their adolescence, while “Foros studies”—that is, the study of what took place at Gorbachev’s dacha from 18 to 21 August—are still in their infancy.

The question of the degree of Gorbachev’s isolation or “self-isolation” at Foros remains a vexed and unresolved issue. Russian commentators have often asked why the Soviet president did not arrest the delegation that came to him from Moscow on 18 August. Gorbachev’s wife, Raisa, who died in September 1999, reportedly told Russian prosecutors in 1992 when she was interviewed about the events at Foros: “If the presidential guard had been given

a signal, then the entire 'delegation' would have been immediately arrested.”27 During a talk at Stanford University on 20 November 1996, Aleksandr Yakovlev, who was a leading adviser to Gorbachev in the mid- and late 1980s, confided: “What I don’t understand is why Gorbachev did not just get up and leave [Foros]. The guards would never have tried to stop him.”28

In the memoirs that Gorbachev published in 1995, he came close to admitting that his thirty-two well-trained, loyal bodyguards from the KGB’s Ninth Directorate could have arrested the GKChP visitors plus the five to six KGB officers who accompanied them from Moscow. But he did not deem such an action to be wise. Why? “First of all,” he writes,

I was counting on the fact that my refusal to accept the ultimatums of the GKChP would sober up the authors of the plot. . . . In addition, an attempt to arrest them at the dacha would have decided nothing. After all, the main plotters were in Moscow, and they held the main levers of power in their hands.29

These arguments do not seem especially convincing. The first argument—that Gorbachev wanted to “sober up” the GKChP—seems almost flimsy, particularly in light of the fact that the coup plotters soon spirited away Gorbachev’s “nuclear suitcase” to Moscow. The second argument—that the GKChP held the levers of power in the capital—reveals Gorbachev as a cautious man at a time when boldness and resolution (such as manifested by Yeltsin and the Russian leadership) were essential.

My tentative conclusion with regard to Gorbachev’s isolation at Foros is to agree with the Military Collegium of the Russian Supreme Court, which concluded in August 1994 that Gorbachev had not in fact been under “house arrest” at Foros, because he had not attempted to break the blockade of the dacha complex. In commenting on the court’s decision, the senior prosecutor at the trial, Anatolii Danilov, observed:

Let us take the isolation of Gorbachev at Foros. Yes, certain elements of isolation were present. His communications were cut off, but not all the communications—the telephones were working in the administration building and in the automobiles. The gates of the dacha were blockaded, but no one tried to unblock them. The personal guards [of Gorbachev] declared that they would have carried out any command of the president of the USSR. . . . They could have immediately taken care of the five to six KGB officers who arrived with the dele-

28. Yakovlev had made the same comment to me in private conversation three years earlier, on 24 February 1993, during a visit to the Hoover Institution.
Coup leader Valentin Pavlov devoted more than thirty pages of his book on the putsch to materials assembled by the Russian prosecutors that cast doubt on Gorbachev’s version of events at Foros. In similar fashion, in an interview appearing in the Russian government newspaper Rossiiskie vesti, Lev Tolstoi, the former head of the KGB’s Ninth Directorate branch in Yalta, who later became a security official with the Ukrainian government, notes that, according to official records, during the period from 18 to 20 August, a total of 104 automobiles entered the Foros complex. “If Gorbachev had wished,” Tolstoi affirmed, “he could have left Foros on any one of them.”

It appears that Gorbachev permitted the coup to go forward while declining to associate himself with it openly. If successful, the GKChP would have removed his two chief political irritants, Yeltsin and Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis, from power. To be sure, as Gorbachev knew all too well, the coup leaders were unhappy with him for a number of reasons. But he was aware that the GKChP members intended to convene the Soviet parliament as soon as they had concluded their work of repression, and he may well have believed that, as in June 1991, he could easily outflank them at the USSR Supreme Soviet.

**Gorbachev’s Communications at Foros**

If the question of Gorbachev’s physical isolation at Foros needs further elucidation, the issue of whether he had access to communications seems settled—he did have access. If one is to believe Gorbachev, he discovered that all of his communications, including his special government telephone, had been shut down by the GKChP shortly before 5:00 p.m. on 18 August. In his 1995 memoirs he cites his wife’s diary to confirm this: “At 5:45 p.m. [on 21 August] the communications were restored. After seventy-three hours. The isolation had ended!”

Nonetheless, there is evidence that on 18 August, after Gorbachev supposedly lost all communications, he managed to call Arkadii Vol’skii, a close political associate, and President Nazarbaev, a key ally among union republics.

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32. Tolstoi, interview, in Rossiiskie vesti (Moscow), 15 October 1994, pp. 1–2.
33. Gorbachev, The August Coup, p. 18.
can leaders, by using the regular, intercity telephone. It seems clear that on 21 August Gorbachev’s special government communications were restored some three hours earlier than he reports in his memoirs, and quite likely earlier than that. Gorbachev’s close aide Vadim Medvedev, a former Politburo member who is careful and precise in reporting details, writes in his memoirs about the events of the 21st:

During the second half of the day [conceivably as early as 12:00 noon], it became known that the telephone communications of the president had been restored. That was his first demand after he learned that Kryuchkov, Yazov, Baklanov, Luk’yanov and Vladimir Ivas’ko (the CPSU Deputy General Secretary) were coming to see him. They flew to the Crimea at about 2:00 p.m.

Medvedev continues:

I made an attempt to get through by telephone to Gorbachev via the special communications system. A half hour passed, and I reached an official who said that Gorbachev had booked a number of calls, and that I therefore could not talk to him. I demanded that he connect me as soon as the next call ended. It had an effect. Somewhere between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m., they connected us, and I heard Gorbachev’s voice. I briefly informed him of the basic change in the situation. I insistently counseled him to come to Moscow as soon as possible. . . . I informed him of my calls to [Admiral] Chernavin concerning the rumors of a continuing blockade of Foros, and to [Generals] Moiseev and Gromov, as well as to several secretaries of the Central Committee.

Medvedev also recounts Gorbachev’s response:

The President said that he had already made a series of calls to Moscow and to several republics and would momentarily be speaking with Yeltsin. Here at Zarya [the dacha at Foros] they were awaiting the arrival of the GKChP-isty. I advised him under no circumstances to receive them or to listen to them. Gorbachev said that he would meet with Ivash’ko and Luk’yanov and that he would not receive the others.

According to another published source, at 3:12 p.m. on 21 August assistants to Arkadii Vol’skii reported that their superior had just “spoken with


36. Medvedev, V komande Gorbacheva, pp. 197–198. At a meeting of the GKChP leaders on the morning of 21 August, Yazov reportedly told Kryuchkov: “There is only one conclusion possible: We have to restore Gorbachev’s communications and fly to Foros.” Cited in Ivashov, Marshal Yazov, pp. 96–97.

Mikhail Gorbachev by telephone." What this information, as well as that supplied by Vitalii Moiseev, suggests is that by midafternoon on the 21st (and quite likely earlier than that) Gorbachev, with his special government communications restored, had emerged as a powerful “third force” influencing events during the final hours of the coup. He and his loyal followers, including Vol’skii and Vadim Medvedev, were in touch with key military figures like General Mikhail Moiseev, the chief of the General Staff, whom Gorbachev provisionally named as Yazov’s replacement as defense minister. Gorbachev also was in touch with a number of the leaders of the union-republics (in his book on the coup, Gorbachev specifically mentions Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine, Nikolai Dementei of Belarus, and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan).

In a useful eyewitness account of events, Oleg Poptsov, who was with the Russian White House leadership during most of the putsch, writes:

Gorbachev called Nazarbaev first [rather than Yeltsin] because he wanted to determine whether the victory of Yeltsin over the putchists was already irrevocable and, if one went further, whether Yeltsin’s victory over Gorbachev himself was decisive. . . . In advancing Nazarbaev, Gorbachev opened a second front against Yeltsin. . . . [But] Gorbachev proved to be mistaken.

The Soviet president, it now seems clear, had entered the coup as a major player on the afternoon of the 21st, but it was too late; power had already been torn from his hands.

In a short book devoted to the coup, Gavriil Popov, the former mayor of Moscow, has written that it was above all Yeltsin’s skillful playing of the “Gorbachev card” during the putsch that enabled him to claim victory: “The removal of Gorbachev,” Popov observes,

was the weakest spot for the GKChP, and it was precisely against that spot that Yeltsin struck. There were doubts: Was the GKChP really against Gorbachev, or was there a certain collusion? In demanding that Gorbachev be returned, Yeltsin immediately, on the one hand, deprived the GKChP of the possibility of attaining agreement with Gorbachev and, on the other hand, placed Gorbachev himself in a position in which his agreement with the GKChP would have amounted to betrayal with respect to Russia, which had remained faithful to him. . . . In speaking out on behalf of Gorbachev, Yeltsin also immediately attracted the sympathy of the West to himself. . . . And, finally, the adherents of

40. Poptsov, Khronika vremen ‘tsarya Boris’ , p. 177.
Gorbachev in the USSR . . . (Primakov, Vol'skii and others) sooner or later were obliged to express solidarity with Yeltsin.41

An Attempted Rescue

Few if any U.S. commentators have noted that the RSFSR leadership, which was hunkered down in the besieged White House, conceived a plan to rescue Gorbachev from Foros. According to the memoirs of retired General Konstantin Kobets, who helped lead the White House defenses, the Yeltsin team had worked out a “plan for the liberation of Gorbachev from captivity,” an “ultra-secret plan . . . that did not exclude interactions with other countries.” In the introduction to the French edition of Kobets’s book, Alexandre Adler writes that a commando operation was envisioned—an operation that “would have benefited from the aid of a foreign secret service (without doubt the CIA).”42

Valentin Pavlov’s book on the coup cites intriguing materials collected by the Russian prosecutors showing that “the departure of M. S. Gorbachev and his family from [Foros] was planned for the night of 20 August 1991.”43 According to transcripts of interviews conducted by the prosecutors, the Gorbachev family gathered their clothes and other necessities in the billiard room at Foros awaiting evacuation. For reasons unknown, the evacuation attempt was called off. Interestingly, neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin has chosen to mention this episode, perhaps because of the involvement of a “foreign secret service.”

Other Unresolved Riddles

The remaining chief riddles connected with the coup must be dealt with fairly briefly. We still do not know for certain what happened outside Yeltsin’s dacha at Arkhangel’skoe, just outside Moscow, early on the morning of 19 August. At approximately 4:00 a.m. sixty men belonging to the elite KGB A-7 unit arrived in the vicinity of Yeltsin’s dacha, which was protected by a mere eight guards. Their mission was to take Yeltsin alive and then to escort him to a discussion with representatives of the GKChP, one of whom was to be Yazov. In

41. Popov, August devyashno pervogo, p. 12.
42. Kobets, La vie quotidienne, pp. 19 and 198.
43. Pavlov, Gorbachev-Putch, pp. 43 and 64.
his memoirs Yeltsin states that Kryuchkov called off the operation at 5:00 a.m.: “He had decided not to rush developments.”

Another explanation, suggested by Vadim Bakatin in his book *Deliveryance from the KGB*, is that two of the deputy commanders of the “A” group who were on the ground at the dacha complex did not want to arrest Yeltsin, while a third deputy commander did. The lack of agreement caused them to hesitate.

Other mysteries are raised in the memoir by Yeltsin’s former chief bodyguard, General Aleksandr Korzhakov, who writes that the riskiest moment for Yeltsin came when his limousine raced out of the dacha complex headed for Moscow:

> The most dangerous part of the route was from the gates of Arkhangel’skoe to the highway, three kilometers in total. A tall, dense forest was all around. Behind the trees, as it later became clear, were the officers from Al’fa. They were supposed to fulfill the command issued by the leaders of the GKChP—namely, to arrest Yeltsin. In case of resistance on our part, the president was to die in a crossfire, supposedly accidentally.

To Korzhakov’s surprise, however, no problems resulted:

> Al’fa did nothing—its officers merely watched the cortège sweep past. The Al’fa officers later recounted that [General Viktor] Karpukhin—the head of the special group—sent an order via the radio-telephone for them to stop the vehicles. But on 19 August, the Al’fa troops did not obey their commander. Karpukhin shouted over the radio-telephone: “Why haven’t you arrested Yeltsin?!” But he received only banal, evasive answers in response.

From a number of sources we know that shortly after Yeltsin left Arkhangel’skoe for the Russian White House, a group of eight men, claiming to be paratroopers who had come to assist Yeltsin, showed up at the gates. One of Yeltsin’s guards recognized the leader of this group as Lt. Colonel Zaitsev of the KGB (a deputy of General Karpukhin of the “A” group). The guards let Zaitsev and his men in and fed them a hearty breakfast. But what if this unit had not been a few minutes late? Or did its members intentionally arrive too late?

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46. Korzhakov, *Boris Yeltsin*, pp. 84.
47. Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, pp. 62–63. See also Korzhakov’s comments on this episode in *Boris Yeltsin*, p. 85.
The First Night of the Putsch

Why the coup plotters failed to assault the White House, where the leadership of the Russian government had taken refuge, on the first night of the putsch is yet another riddle. As Yeltsin aptly comments in his memoirs: “The coup plotters had let the day for decisive actions go by.”48 One explanation for this lapse is that the GKChP never took a decision to storm the building, though a 15,000-man force, spearheaded by General Karpukhin’s “A” group, had been formed for the task. Another explanation is that protective forces deterred an attack. On the evening of the 19th, General Aleksandr Lebed of the airborne forces (Pavel Grachev’s deputy) had brought a battalion of well-armed soldiers to the White House. Earlier in the day, somewhere between 6:00 and 7:00 a.m., Yeltsin had called Grachev and asked for his help. (The two had developed friendly relations after a visit by Yeltsin and his adviser Yurii Skokov to the Tula paratroop division in June 1991.)

Lebed’s unit arrived at the White House agonizingly late, but perhaps in the nick of time. The Defense Ministry and the KGB appeared to be uncertain of the loyalties of these well-armed paratroops. When interviewed by prosecutors on 22 August, Marshal Yazov described General Grachev, Lebed’s superior, as “a personal friend of Yeltsin.”49

Korzhakov’s memoirs shed some interesting light on this episode. Korzhakov believes that Lebed’s troops did serve as a key deterrent to the GKChP on the first night of the putsch. However, the departure of Lebed’s forces on the morning of 20 August was seen by the White House defenders as “a harbinger of the storming [of the building].” Why did they decide to leave? Korzhakov reports that, in a personal meeting held with Lebed that morning, Yeltsin had told the general: “I order you to leave the paratroopers [at the White House].” To which, according to Korzhakov, General Lebed had replied:

I cannot carry out your command because I have sworn an oath. I swore that oath to Gorbachev. Now Gorbachev is absent, and it is unclear where he is. But there is a way out. If you, Boris Nikolaevich, the President of Russia, were to issue a decree designating yourself commander in chief, then I would submit to you.50

But Yeltsin, Korzhakov recalls, “declined this proposal,” and Lebed then felt obliged to depart with his troops. This, Korzhakov believes, constituted a

49. Comments by Yazov in Der Spiegel (Hamburg), 7 October 1991, pp. 198–205.
50. Korzhakov, Boris Yeltsin, p. 92.
near-fatal mistake on Yeltsin’s part. By 5:00 p.m. on the same day, Yeltsin was required by circumstances to issue the same decree that Lebed had requested of him. “We [Russians] are eternally late,” Korzhakov laments.51

The Second Night of the Coup

The second night of the coup is the most puzzling phase of the whole episode. On the afternoon of the 20th, a meeting had taken place in the office of Deputy Defense Minister Achalov, attended by Generals Grachev, Karpukhin, and Varennikov, as well as other officers. The participants devised a plan of assault similar to that employed in Vilnius in January. Paratroop and MVD units, supported by armored forces, were to vault three units of KGB spetsnaz (special operations forces) into the building: first the “A” group, then the “B” group (a unit of the KGB First Directorate used for special operations abroad), and then “Volna,” a unit of KGB special forces based in Moscow and Moscow oblast.52

Fortunately for the besieged Russian leadership, the failure of the GKChP to launch an attack on the first night of the putsch had provided sufficient time for the Soviet military to begin to split. As has been noted, Yeltsin and General Grachev had been in touch since June 1991, and Grachev was one of the first people whom Yeltsin phoned on the morning of 19 August. The commander in chief of the Soviet air force, General Evgenii Shaposhnikov, who was also a deputy defense minister, was another top general who decided early on to back Yeltsin. The air force’s transport planes went into a go-slow mode, moving key Defense Ministry and KGB forces at a snail’s pace.53 By the night of 20 August Shaposhnikov was prepared to order several bombers to strike at the Kremlin if the leaders of the GKChP, who were presumed to be there, chose to attack the White House.54

The two key generals on the ground who took a decision not to storm the White House were Grachev and General Boris Gromov, the first deputy minister of the MVD. Their decision effectively handcuffed General Karpukhin’s troops, who were apparently prepared to spearhead the attack. According to Korzhakov,

Officers of the KGB came to us [the White House defenders] and warned us of the impending storming of the building. They also telephoned us. We even

51. Ibid.
53. On the “go-slow” operation, see Shaposhnikov, Vybor, p. 27.
maintained contact with Al’fa; the officers of that group told us that they were sitting in full readiness and awaiting a command [to attack].

But Karpukhin evidently was not prepared to move his men out without support from Grachev and Gromov. The three generals were in frequent contact during the early morning hours of 21 August. “If I had gone,” Grachev has said, “then everyone would have followed after me.”

All three of these generals, as well as other Soviet commanders, seem to have believed that they were being “set up” by their superiors, as had earlier happened in Vilnius and Tbilisi. As Grachev recalled shortly after the collapse of the coup:

> The storming [of the White House] was to take place at 3 a.m. . . . Long before the assault, all the GKChP [leaders] suddenly fell asleep. At midnight we did not move our paratroopers out. An hour passed, and still no one called us. My deputies were joking: “They obviously are sleeping peacefully, and we are being set up for the nth time; they are hoping that we will begin this bloodbath.”

Yurii Luzhkov, the then-deputy mayor of Moscow, has written that when the military commanders tried to telephone members of the GKChP at their homes and dachas, they were told: “We have been ordered not to wake them before 3:00 a.m.”

By early morning on the 21st, thanks to Grachev and Gromov, the paratroopers and the MVD special forces were out of the game, as was the Soviet air force under Shaposhnikov. That left the KGB largely on its own, although Varennikov and General Nikolai Kalinin, commander of the Moscow Military District, and some other military commanders continued to support the putsch. Moreover, the KGB was a potent force even without support.

At about 1:00 a.m. armored vehicles from the Tamanskaya Division tried to break through the barricades to reach the White House. They were acting on orders from Varennikov. This was the well-known incident in which three young male defenders of the White House were killed. Yeltsin has commented on this episode in his memoirs:

> In all their interviews and memoirs about the coup, the military people for some reason stubbornly insist on calling the movement of armored vehicles along the Garden Ring Road, and from Chaikovskii Street to Smolensk Square, the “pa-

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55. Korzhakov, Boris Yeltsin, p. 93.
56. Stepankov and Lisov, Kremlevskii zagovor, p. 176.
58. Luzhkov, 72 chasa agonii, p. 72.
59. See the excerpts from the “Ponomarev Commission Report” in Armiya (Moscow), Nos. 7–8 (1992), p. 25.
trolling” of Moscow’s streets. This was not just “patrolling,” however, but a last-ditch employment of hardware in a desperate attempt to intimidate, dislodge, and scatter the crowd at the White House.60

The evidence strongly bears out Yeltsin’s remarks.

Until approximately 3:00 a.m. the situation around the White House remained exceedingly tense. Varennikov was attempting to get three army helicopters to transport KGB spetsnaz from Moscow and Moscow oblast (probably the aforementioned “Volna” unit) onto the roof of the White House. The driving rain coming down at the time may have thwarted this effort. At the same time, forward units from the 103rd or Vitebsk KGB Paratroop Division, supported by armored forces, were attempting to break through the barricades but were stopped by the expertly constructed obstacles.61

Finally, as is noted in my 1993 book, at about 3:00 a.m. three companies of spetsnaz wearing semicivilian clothing and carrying sports bags attempted to get into the White House posing as volunteer defenders. They were spotted at the last minute by armed defenders from the “Alex” detective agency. Russian special-operations (OMON) forces loyal to Yeltsin and other armed volunteers faced down the intruders, who left without firing a shot.62 (It seems likely that at least some of the spetsnaz troops were from the above-noted KGB “Volna” unit. The KGB commander for Moscow and Moscow oblast, General Vitalii Prilukov, was a hardliner and might well have pressured his men into obeying orders.63)

In Leningrad, where the GKChP also attempted to introduce emergency rule, some 1,500 military paratroopers from the crack Pskov Division managed to conceal themselves in a military institute in the center of the city. At 4:00 a.m. they telephoned the Leningrad police chief, Arkadii Kramerov, who was backing Mayor Anatolii Sobchak and Yeltsin, and asked for safe passage out of the city.64

At 9:00 a.m. on 21 August the Defense Ministry Collegium met and, with Yazov’s consent, formally decided to remove all troops and armor from

60. Yeltsin, The Struggle for Russia, p. 59. See also Kobets, La vie quotidienne, pp. 220–222.
61. See the interview with General Kobets in Moskovskie novosti (Moscow), No. 35, 1 September 1991, p. 4.
62. On this pivotal episode, see the account in Golos (Moscow), No. 33 (1991); pp. 6–9; Aleksandr Nezhdniy, “Nad bezdnoi,” Ogonek (Moscow), No. 37 (September 1991); Natella Voiskunskaya et al., Korichnuyi path kravnykh (Moscow: Tekst, 1991), p. 95; and Demokraticheskaya Rossiya (Moscow), Nos. 22–23 (23 August–4 September 1991).
Moscow. The key officers urging this course were General Shaposhnikov; Fleet-Admiral Vladimir Chernavin, the commander in chief of Soviet naval forces (including sea-based nuclear forces); and General Yurii Maksimov, the commander in chief of Soviet Strategic Missile Forces. As journalist Yurii Shchekochikhin has commented, the GKChP “had the tanks,” but their opponents in the military high command “had the missiles.”

The Role of the United States

The apparent existence of a plan involving the United States to extract Gorbachev from Foros on 20 August was mentioned above. In his memoirs Yeltsin writes that his bodyguards had, without his knowledge, contacted the American Embassy in Moscow about offering the Russian president asylum there. (Yeltsin was to be rushed down a side street to the embassy in a bullet-proof limousine.) “[T]he Americans,” Yeltsin states, “immediately consented to the idea, then ran with it themselves. Later they started calling us on their own, even coming over to see us and offering help.” Yeltsin writes that he scotched this plan out of political considerations.

There may have been other contacts besides the ones described by Yeltsin. In June 1994 the well-known investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh published an article in the Atlantic Monthly claiming that, after the coup was announced, President [George H. W.] Bush ordered that essential communications intelligence be provided to Yeltsin—over the bitter protests of the National Security Agency. . . .”The Minister of Defense and the KGB chief were using the most secure lines to reach the military commanders,” one [U.S.] official [said] . . . “We told Yeltsin in real time what the communications were.”

According to Hersh, an American communications expert was ordered to come to the Russian White House, with his communications gear, and help the Yeltsin team make their own secure calls to Soviet military commanders.

If Hersh’s information is correct—and it of course needs to be carefully checked—then the August putsch, like Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990–1991, can be seen as representing a defining moment for the Bush pres-

65. See Shchekochikhin’s report in Literaturnaya gazeta (Moscow), No. 41 (2 October 1991), p. 11. On the meeting of the military collegium, see also Shaposhnikov, Vybor, pp. 44–46.
66. Yeltsin, The Struggle for Russia, pp. 92–93. For Korzhakov’s comments on this episode, see Boris Yeltsin, pp. 93–94.
idency. Bush’s bold and decisive actions in August 1991 may well affect the way he is viewed by future historians.68

**Endgame**

Although the decision of the Military Collegium on 21 August was a key moment in the defeat of the putsch, a tense endgame was nonetheless played out during the remainder of that day and into the early morning hours of the 22nd. Yeltsin and Kryuchkov were locked in an intricate chess game, as each tried to isolate the other from his supporters, allowing him to be seized and arrested. Kryuchkov, who apparently assumed that Yeltsin was bold to the point of recklessness, encouraged the Russian president to fly with him to Foros. Yeltsin, for his part, invited Kryuchkov to come to the White House and address the Russian deputies.69 A complicating factor in this chess game, as has been noted, was the emergence of Gorbachev as a potent “third force” by midafternoon or earlier on the 21st.

According to Oleg Poptsov’s eyewitness account, Yeltsin learned at about 11:00 a.m. on 21 August that Kryuchkov and other GKChP leaders were intending to fly to the Crimea to see Gorbachev. Yeltsin was alarmed by this development and ordered the Russian MVD to arrest the “fugitives” en route to the airport, but the attempt failed.70 Kryuchkov’s plane took off at about 2:00 p.m. Two-and-a-half hours later another plane carrying Russian vice president Aleksandr Rutskoi, Russian prime minister Ivan Silaev, and USSR Security Council members Vadim Bakatin and Evgenii Primakov took off in pursuit.

Yeltsin desperately hoped that Rutskoi’s party would arrive at Foros in advance of the GKChP group. Kryuchkov, in his memoirs, writes that when he and his colleagues were en route to the Crimea “we received a curious communication that a command had come from the Russian leadership to shoot down the plane on which we were flying to Foros, but that individuals prepared to perform this action could not be found.”71 General Shaposhnikov writes in his memoirs that Yeltsin telephoned him and asked whether there

68. The “nuclear dimension” of the coup will inevitably attract the interest of future historians. Soviet military forces went on high alert during the putsch, and this development naturally concerned the Bush administration. See Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 526, and Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, pp. 423–424. Gorbachev was deprived of his “nuclear suitcase” for seventy-three hours; the two other suitcases were in the hands of Defense Minister Yazov and Chief of the General Staff Moiseev.


was a way for the air force to “arrest or delay the landing” of the GKChP plane. Shaposhnikov replied that such a command would have to be given by the chief of the General Staff, General Moiseev, who was now the highest-ranking officer in the Ministry of Defense. (Shaposhnikov subsequently called Moiseev, but the latter declined to carry out Yeltsin’s request.) Shaposhnikov recalls that during his conversation with Yeltsin, he had offered to send fighter planes to force Kryuchkov’s plane to land at an airport distant from Foros. Yeltsin, he writes, termed that “unacceptable.”72 Yeltsin also attempted in vain to persuade Leonid Kravchuk, the chair of the Ukrainian parliament, to order Kryuchkov’s plane diverted to Simferopol’.73

Once the GKChP leaders had arrived at Foros by car from Bel’bek Airport, they effectively passed out of the game. Gorbachev refused to receive them, with the exception of Ivashko and Luk’yanov, whom he saw before and not after (as he writes in his book on the coup) the arrival in Foros of the Rutskoi group.74 At this point the Russian leadership de facto found itself confronted not by the GKChP but by Gorbachev, whose special communications had been fully restored, and by General Moiseev, who had been named by Gorbachev as Yazov’s acting replacement. Moiseev, and quite possibly Gorbachev as well, did not want Rutskoi’s plane to land at Bel’bek.

Rutskoi’s plane, which was due to arrive at around 6:30 p.m. on the 21st, did not have permission to land at Bel’bek. Shortly before the projected time of arrival, under orders from Deputy Defense Minister Ivan Tret’yak, the commander in chief of Soviet air defense forces, the landing strip at Bel’bek was blocked with heavy vehicles.75 When Rutskoi’s plane appeared in the air, the pilot was informed that he did not have permission to land. At this point the Soviet president suddenly intervened. As Stepankov and Lisov describe it:

Gorbachev, having established contact with the plane, and having elucidated the problem, ordered the Chief of the General Staff Moiseev to open up Bel’bek. At 6:45 p.m., the heavy vehicles were removed from the landing strip, and a unit of marines were quickly ordered out of the area. . . . From the bushes . . . the KGB spetsnaz retreated, as did the supplementary guard attached to them. . . . At 7:16 p.m., [Rutskoi’s plane] touched down unhindered at Bel’bek.76

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74. This is unwittingly confirmed by Gorbachev’s aide Anatolii Chernyaev, who was with Gorbachev at Foros, in his book, Shen’ let i Gorbachevym, pp. 486–487. It is also confirmed by Kryuchkov in his memoirs, Lisnove delo, Vol. 2, p. 212.
75. See “Generaly ni v chem ne vinovaty . . . ,” Novoe vremya (Moscow), No. 19 (1992), pp. 6–7; and Stepankov and Lisov, Kreml’evskii zavon, p. 207.
76. Stepankov and Lisov, Kreml’evskii zavon, p. 208.
According to another account, the order to shoot down Rutskoi’s plane was rescinded a mere seven minutes before it landed.77

As in the past, it was apparently Gorbachev’s proven abhorrence of bloodshed that proved decisive here. With the arrival of the Rutskoi group, the GKChP found itself irrevocably defeated, while Gorbachev’s “third force” option had reached its limit. The political ascendance of the Russian Republic was immediately apparent. In a television interview on 24 August, Rutskoi, who expressed considerable sympathy for Gorbachev and his family, noted that “Gorbachev agreed that I should command a bit [at Foros].” On the plane back from Belbek to Moscow, Gorbachev, according to Rutskoi, resisted arresting Kryuchkov, but, by the time the plane landed, he had changed his mind. Rutskoi added that Gorbachev also “wanted to defend [General] Moiseev,” but soon had to surrender that position as well.78

Why the Coup Failed

The reasons that the coup failed seem reasonably self-evident. The conspirators acted sluggishly, failing to storm the White House on the first night of the coup. The GKChP lacked a presentable leader—Soviet vice president Gennadii Yanaev was a weak man, almost pathetic, while most of the others were either unknown or not respected. As has been noted, the GKChP badly misplayed the “Gorbachev card.”

A major factor influencing the outcome of the putsch was the skill exhibited by Russian leaders and their followers. We know now that the Yeltsin forces had done considerable advanced planning for a coup in the wake of the 28 March events.79 An aide to Yeltsin, a man named Portnov, was assigned to go to General Grachev’s headquarters at 8:00 a.m. on 19 August, and he remained with Grachev until the 22nd.80 Similarly, an officer working for Yeltsin, Lt. Colonel V. A. Burkov, who had been previously acquainted with General Shaposhnikov, established contact with the air force commander in chief on the morning of the 19th and remained in touch with him throughout the putsch.81 Such personal contacts appear to have been the result of advanced planning.

77. See the account in The Times (London), 1 November 1991, p. 1. See also the comments by S. Belozertsev concerning this episode in Armiya (Moscow), Nos. 7–8 (1992), p. 33.
79. See Popov, Avgust devyanosto pervogo, pp. 12—13; and Kobets, La vie quotidienne, pp. 18–19, 75, and 150.
80. Pavlov, Gorbachev–Putch, pp. 121–122.
Many commentators have stressed (correctly) that a “new type of Russian” emerged during the Gorbachev years, thanks to glasnost’ and democratization (demokratizatsiya). These changes had penetrated to the ranks of the military and regular police, and even to the ranks of the secret police, and helped influence the course of the putsch.

Finally, information technology also played a role. Fax machines and, to a lesser extent, e-mail were used by those resisting the coup to send vital information around the country and to the West.82

The Coup and the Breakup of the USSR

There is a direct link between the failed coup and the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords of early December 1991, which precipitated the breakup of the USSR. Yeltsin was exaggerating, but only slightly, when he wrote in his memoirs that “after 19 August the Union disappeared all by itself; it was gone in a day.”83 With similar hyperbole, Oleg Poptsov has observed that “Gorbachev returned from Foros an ex-president.”84

The devastating political consequences of the failed putsch became apparent immediately. During the coup, on 20 August, Estonia declared its full independence from the USSR. On 22 August Yeltsin issued a decree on the economic sovereignty of the RSFSR, bringing all Soviet enterprises and organizations on Russian soil (with a few exceptions) under Russian jurisdiction. Two days later, on 24 August, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet declared Ukraine an independent state pending the results of a republic-wide referendum to be held in December. (This fast-approaching referendum represented a kind of time bomb threatening Gorbachev’s frenetic attempts to preserve the USSR in an altered form.) On 27 August Moldova (formerly known as Moldavia) declared its independence, and three days later the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan followed suit. The next day, 31 August, Kyrgyzstan (formerly Kirgiziya) and Uzbekistan issued declarations of independence.85 Thus, in a real sense, as Yeltsin has put it, the old union was indeed “gone in a day.”

Andrei Grachev, Gorbachev’s press secretary and aide in the postcoup period, has pointed out that the failed coup “paralyzed the [USSR’s] traditional

83. Yeltsin, The Struggle for Russia, p. 38.
84. Poptsov, Khronika vremen ‘tsarya Boris’, p. 222.
85. On these various decrees and declarations of independence, see Mezhdunarodnyi Fond sotsial’no ekonomicheskikh i politologicheskikh issledovanii (Gorbachev-Fond), Soyuz mozhno bylo sokhranit’: Belya kniga (Moscow: “Izdatel’stvo ’Apref’-85,” 1995), pp. 200–203.
mechanisms of coercion and control,” thereby presenting the union-republics with a perfect opportunity “to transform their declarations of sovereignty into real independence.” In the section that follows we shall see how the defeat of the putsch served to handcuff the KGB, the Soviet military, the CPSU, and the institutions of the Soviet state, thus making it possible for the Soviet Union to fragment into fifteen separate states in less than four months’ time.

The KGB

The Committee for State Security had long been the preeminent instrument by which the CPSU both controlled and intimidated Soviet society. By effectively paralyzing the KGB as an instrument of control, the failed coup made the breakup of the Soviet Union physically possible.

On 23 August, just two days after the collapse of the coup, a member of Gorbachev’s Security Council, Vadim Bakatin, was, with Yeltsin’s support, named chairman of the KGB. As Gorbachev’s former close aide Aleksandr N. Yakovlev noted in an interview three days before the attempted putsch, Bakatin was one of “a very short list” of reformers still present in Gorbachev’s entourage. From 23 August until December 1991 Bakatin attempted to reform and defang this most dangerous instrument of Communist rule. His task was aided by the role that his predecessor, Vladimir Kryuchkov, had played as the chief organizer of the attempted coup. When the putsch failed, the KGB found itself in an exposed and vulnerable position. Five of the organization’s top leaders—Kryuchkov and two of his deputy chairmen, Viktor Grushko and Gelli Ageev, as well as General Yuri Plekhanov, the head of the Ninth (Guards) Directorate, and General Vyacheslav Generalov, both of whom had played roles in the putative isolation of Gorbachev at Foros—were arrested. No other Soviet institution had as many of its representatives seized for helping to organize the putsch.

Even before the announcement of Bakatin’s appointment, Leonid Shebarshin, the head of the First Main Directorate, who had been named acting chairman by Gorbachev, held a meeting of thirty-five members of the KGB’s top leadership. “We immediately came to agreement,” Shebarshin has recalled in his memoirs, “that it was necessary to outlaw the activity of party organizations in the system of State Security. There was not a single voice op-

87. For the text of this interview, see Aleksandr Yakovlev, Muki prochteniya bytiya (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), p. 353.
posed and not a single abstention.”88 By aggressively conducting the “de-partyization” of the KGB, Shebarshin and his colleagues sought to refurbish the image of an organization perceived as being the most culpable in the attempted coup.

Bakatin was able to build on the momentum already established by Shebarshin, an official who, unlike Gorbachev’s first choice for defense minister, General Moiseev, was apparently not involved in implementing the putsch.89 In addition to the five KGB generals who had already been placed under arrest, Bakatin oversaw the swift removal of ten others: three deputy chairmen, including Vitalii Prilukov, the official responsible for Moscow and Moscow oblast, and six heads of directorates, plus General Karpukhin, the head of the A-7 unit, which was to have spearheaded the storming of the Russian White House.90

Upon assuming his duties as head of the KGB, Bakatin appointed Aleksandr Oleinikov as his first deputy chairman and asked him to conduct the “in-house” investigation into the KGB’s participation in the coup. In a month’s time, on 25 September, the Oleinikov commission reported its findings. The report led to the dismissal of nine additional high-ranking KGB officials and the reprimand of thirteen others for having exhibited “political immaturity.” The heads of ten regional KGB organizations also were removed from their posts.91 Thus, within a single month, five leading KGB officials had been arrested, twenty-nine had been summarily fired, and thirteen had been officially admonished. This swift retribution served to “decapitate” the KGB and leave it vulnerable to further reform. Realizing that the KGB was too large and too powerful an organization to be left in its present condition, Bakatin also took steps “to ensure that the KGB would not represent a threat to society.”92

In testimony given on 11 October 1991 before the State Council, which consisted of Gorbachev and the leaders of the union republics, Bakatin reported that the Soviet KGB had 490,000 agents and employees, including 240,000 Border Guards.93 The organization’s annual budget was said to be “more than six billion rubles.”94 Bakatin declared to the members of the State

89. See the various documents unearthed by the KGB’s “in-house” investigation into the involvement of the state security apparatus in the putsch: Urushadze, ed., Vybrannye mesta, passim.
90. See Bakatin, Izbavlenie ot KGB, p. 68.
91. Ibid., pp. 73–74.
92. Ibid., p. 75.
Council his intention “not only to decentralize the KGB’s structure, but also to depoliticize it, to keep it in strict compliance with the law, and, of course, to abandon its political surveillance activities.”

After Bakatin’s testimony the State Council agreed to break up the Soviet KGB into three major agencies: the Border Guards; a foreign intelligence service (similar to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency); and an interrepublican internal security service (to be headed by Bakatin). The removal of the Border Guards and the foreign intelligence service (the First Main Directorate) from the KGB signified, according to Bakatin, the de facto disappearance of “the structure that for many years had been called the USSR KGB.” In addition to losing some 240,000 Border Guards, the KGB was also deprived of “several tens of thousands of spetsnaz troops,” among them the renowned A-7 group, which was made part of an independent Presidential Guards Service. As early as 29 August Gorbachev signed a decree taking special government communications away from the KGB and setting up an independent Committee on State Communications of the President of the USSR.

In addition to dividing the KGB into several independent agencies, Bakatin also sought to alter the mentality of that organization. “[S]py mania and the struggle against [domestic] dissent” were to be jettisoned as relics of the past. Unfortunately, Yeltsin did not choose to retain this authentic reformer as head of the secret police after the USSR collapsed in December. Bakatin’s successor, Viktor Barannikov—who was removed by Yeltsin in mid-1993 for plotting against him, and who emerged as a leader of the anti-Yeltsin coup in October of that year—set about rebuilding the same organization that Bakatin had just broken up. Still, the “window of opportunity” represented by Bakatin’s tenure at the helm of the KGB served as an essential precondition for the collapse of the USSR and for the emergence of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December.

Reforming the Soviet Military

Like the KGB, the Soviet military had been deeply compromised by the August coup. At a yet undetermined time on 21 August (most likely by the mid-afternoon), Gorbachev had named General Moiseev as acting Soviet defense minister. After the coup collapsed, Yeltsin and other Russian officials dug in their heels and rejected Moiseev’s candidacy. According to Korzhakov’s mem-

97. Ibid., pp. 77–78.
Yeltsin had good reason to act as he did, since Moiseev apparently was a strong supporter of the coup and took concrete actions to assist the GKChP. The individual who replaced Moiseev, General Shaposhnikov, was, like Bakatin, a genuine reformer. Shaposhnikov notes in his memoirs that he had long been convinced of the need to “departyize” the armed forces. In the period immediately after the coup, he recalls, Gorbachev was reluctant to authorize the departyization of the military, but the Soviet president soon changed his mind and “gave his assent to the preparation of draft decrees to halt the activity of political parties and movements” in the USSR armed forces. Several days later Gorbachev signed the draft decrees into law.

Like Bakatin at the KGB, Shaposhnikov had to deal immediately with the issue of military involvement in the putsch. Two generals—Yazov and Varennikov—were in prison, and the Russian Procuracy wanted to charge a third general, Vladislav Achalov, but could not do so since he enjoyed parliamentary immunity. But obviously more than three military leaders collaborated with the GKChP. “It was necessary,” Shaposhnikov has written,

> to dismiss the army and navy officials who in one way or another turned out to be participants [in the coup]. . . . Such a decision was taken, in particular, with regard to eight deputy ministers of defense, nine chiefs of main or central directorates, and seven commanders of military districts of the army and navy.

In testimony given in February 1992 before the “Ponomarev Commission” of the Russian Supreme Soviet, a body that investigated the military’s involvement in the putsch, General Kobets provided somewhat different figures, maintaining that thirty-one members of the Soviet high command were removed from their posts for supporting the GKChP and that another 316 “generals and officers” had also been dismissed. According to the former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, “by October [1991] over half the members of the Defense Ministry’s Collegium had been replaced.” Like the KGB, therefore, the Soviet military was effectively “beheaded,” and it thus was not able to present a serious obstacle to the breakup of the USSR in December.

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100. Ibid., p. 114.
101. See the transcripts in Armiya (Moscow), No. 6 (1992), p. 24.
102. Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, p. 615.
The Soviet MVD did not undergo as sweeping a purge after the failed coup. Boris Pugo, the minister of internal affairs, committed suicide, thereby forestalling his arrest as a leader of the coup. Pugo’s first deputy, General Gromov, who oversaw the MVD’s special armed units, seems to have come out against the putsch early on, thus shielding himself and his units from retribution. The remarkable political ascent of the once lowly MVD during Yeltsin’s first presidential term thus takes its beginning from the aborted coup of 1991.

**A Debacle for the Communist Party**

In the immediate wake of the failed coup, Gorbachev did what he could to preserve the CPSU. Georgii Shakhnazarov has written that Gorbachev “to the last moment hoped for the possibility of reforming the party on the basis of the new Program published in June [1991].” Shaposhnikov notes that in the initial period after the coup Gorbachev “did not intend to bury it [the Party].” He adds: “[Gorbachev] hoped that in the autumn the regular Twenty-Ninth [Party] Congress would be held, and that a determination of positions would occur at it.” On 21 August, after Gorbachev returned from Foros, he astonished Russian and Western observers when he trumpeted: “I am convinced that socialism is correct. I am an adherent of socialism.” Citing Vladimir Lenin, he had gone on proudly to assert that “socialism is the vital creativity of the masses, that is the model we have to implant.”

After Gorbachev had an opportunity to confer on 24 August with some of his liberal advisers and erstwhile advisers—Yakovlev, Medvedev, Shakhnazarov, Evgenii Primakov, and Grigorii Revenko—he began to back away from his expressed intention of renewing the Communist Party. On the following day he resigned as CPSU General Secretary and issued two decrees, the first of which instructed local soviets (councils) to take party property into custody and to dispose of it in accordance with USSR and republican law, and the second of which ordered the cessation of all activity by political parties in the armed forces, the police, the KGB, and all other law-enforcement bodies, as well as throughout the civil service. This second decree essentially replicated Yeltsin’s 20 July 1991 decree on departyization.

By the time Gorbachev sat down to write his memoirs, which were published in 1995, he had begun to see clearly just how deeply the CPSU, when he was still head of it, had been involved in supporting the putsch. Concerning the involvement of the Politburo in the coup, he writes:

[O]n 20 August, [Shakhnazarov] immediately made contact with Aleksandr Dzasokhov, a Politburo member and also a secretary of the Central Committee, and told him that if the leadership does not want irretrievably to destroy the party, it is necessary immediately to issue a condemnation of the putsch and to demand the freeing of the general secretary.

In a meeting later that day in the hospital room of the CPSU Deputy General Secretary, Vladimir Ivashko, some of the Politburo members, Gorbachev continues, “agreed to declare the necessity of meeting with the General Secretary but refused to come out against the GKChP.”

As for the party Secretariat, Gorbachev reports with regret that, “a majority of the Secretariat of the Central Committee and many local party organs supported the GKChP.” The available sources confirm what Gorbachev claims. According to materials collected by the Russian Procuracy, the CPSU Secretariat convened on the morning of 19 August to study the documents of the GKChP. The Secretariat then decided to send coded telegrams to all republican, oblast, and territorial (krai) party organizations throughout the USSR, requesting them to take measures to assist the Emergency Committee.

What of the CPSU Central Committee itself? It, too, in Gorbachev’s words, “did not pass the test.” Instead of condemning the coup, it “expressed solidarity with the GKChP.” As for the regional party organizations, they sent coded telegrams back to the Central Committee, and personally to Ivashko, for three days in succession supporting the introduction of emergency rule. According to data gathered by the leadership of the Russian Republic, one-third of regional party committees adopted a “wait-and-see” position during the coup, while two-thirds openly supported the GKChP. Not a single party committee came out against the putsch when it began.

That the Communist Party had fully compromised itself during the coup seemed obvious. In late August 1991 Yeltsin overrode the strong objections of Gorbachev (who wanted to preserve the party at the local level) and sus-

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108. Ibid., p. 575.
109. Ibid., p. 575.
110. See excerpts from the telegrams in Pravda (Moscow), 23 October 1991, p. 2.
pended both the CPSU and the ultraconservative Russian Communist Party headed by Ivan Polozkov. In November Yeltsin went further, directly banning both of these parties and nationalizing their buildings, bank accounts, and other property. His two decrees left the party temporarily paralyzed and unable to resist the breakup of the USSR in December. (A year later, in December 1992, the Russian Constitutional Court essentially endorsed Gorbachev’s position of late August 1991 by partially reversing Yeltsin’s decrees, ruling that the Communist Party had a right to reestablish local branches—that is, to rebuild itself “from the bottom up.”)\(^ {112} \)

**Dismantling Soviet State Structures**

The support of Soviet state organizations for the GKChP had been almost as clear-cut as that of the CPSU. When Gorbachev appeared at the RSFSR Supreme Soviet on 23 August, Yeltsin forced him to read from the podium minutes of a USSR Cabinet of Ministers meeting held during the putsch. It turned out that the only member of the Cabinet of Ministers who directly opposed the coup was Nikolai Vorontsov, the minister for the environment, who was also the only member of the Cabinet who did not belong to the Communist Party.\(^ {113} \) As for the USSR Supreme Soviet, it refrained from taking any action at all during the coup.

The Soviet foreign minister, Aleksandr Bessmertnykh, had adopted a “wait-and-see” stance during the putsch, while virtually all Soviet ambassadors came out in support of the GKChP. “Only one ambassador, Boris Pankin in Prague,” Gorbachev’s aide and translator, Pavel Palazchenko, has noted, “clearly dissociated himself from the new government.”\(^ {114} \)

As for the soviets at the local level, Yeltsin’s team discovered that “more than 70 percent” of these bodies in the Russian Republic had failed to support Yeltsin during the coup. Only three oblasts in Russia, along with the special-status cities of Moscow and Leningrad, had openly supported the Russian president against the GKChP.\(^ {115} \) Like the organs of the Communist Party, the structures of the Soviet state were fully compromised by their behavior during the putsch.

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113. See Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, p. 597.
The Collapse of the Soviet Union

Unlike the banning of the Communist Party and the “departyization” of state structures, the breakup of the USSR was not an outcome desired by Yeltsin or other leading officials in the Russian Republic. But certain objective processes that were under way helped guarantee this result.

Even before the August coup had been launched, many observers of the Soviet scene believed that the USSR was nearing its death throes. On 31 July 1991—less than three weeks before the putsch—I predicted to a U.S. congressional subcommittee that

I do not believe that anything will succeed in halting the devolution of power from the Soviet “center” to the [union] republics. Even an all-out assault by elite military and police units will not, in my opinion, prove to be effective. Force was employed in January [1991] in both Lithuania and Latvia, and what did it accomplish? In essence, it only served to speed up the devolution process. . . . The most recent published draft version of the Union Treaty provides for both strong republics and a strong center (this is, of course, Gorbachev’s oft-repeated slogan). Over the long term, I do not expect such an arrangement to prove workable. . . . The projected Union of Soviet Sovereign States . . . will, in my opinion, prove to be a highly unstable and ultimately transitional entity.116

As evidence of the shifting “correlation of forces” in favor of the republics, and especially of the Russian Republic, I noted Yeltsin’s recent legitimization in a popular election compared with Gorbachev’s low ratings in polls—which raised doubts about Gorbachev’s ability to win a popular election for the Soviet presidency (if he had ever chosen to hold one). I also pointed to Yeltsin’s recent departyization decrees aimed at removing Communist cells from all state structures and enterprises and especially from the power ministries.

The aborted coup resulted in the suspension and then the banning of the Communist Party, as well as the effective paralysis of the security organs and the military. Under such conditions Gorbachev found himself in an immeasurably weakened position. Realistically, as Gorbachev’s aide Andrei Grachev has noted, the Soviet leader had only two options before him—either he could “accept the conditions of these leaders [of the union republics], who were starting to act more and more like boyars [domineering noblemen],” or

he could “leave.” But Gorbachev instead fought to retain his position as the dominant political figure in a revived union, an effort that meant he, in Grachev’s words, “signed his own political death warrant, as well as that of the country he was trying to preserve. A second putsch [the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords], this time without tanks, became inevitable.”

Under the “model” favored by Gorbachev, the Soviet president would have remained a powerful political leader and might in the future have hoped to claw back power from the republics. Under the model embraced by Yeltsin and most of the republican leaders willing to participate in a revived “Novo-Ogarevo process,” Gorbachev would become a largely ceremonial figure like, say, the presidents of Germany and Israel; Gorbachev was, however, unwilling to assent to such a diminution of his powers.

Grachev believes that a workable agreement could feasibly have been hammered out between the Center and at least eight of the union republics if the negotiation process had remained focused upon the creation of an economic community. With the formation of an economic community in sight, brought about largely through the herculean efforts of economist Grigorii Yavlinskii, however, Gorbachev “abruptly changed course: ‘We must go straight to a political union [he said].’” This abrupt change of course, in Grachev’s opinion, doomed the Soviet president.

As the notes of another Gorbachev aide, Georgii Shakhnazarov, make clear, the Soviet president’s attempt to create a new quasi-unitary state had little realistic chance of succeeding. At the State Council meeting of 11 October, Leonid Kravchuk, chairman of the Ukrainian parliament, proposed that the participants confine themselves to discussing an economic treaty. Gorbachev, however, insisted that work on the Union Treaty had to go forward. By November Kravchuk had dropped out of the Novo-Ogarevo process.

By the time of the 14 November meeting of the State Council, a yawning gap was opening up between the positions of Gorbachev and of Yeltsin. The following is a section from notes taken by Yuriii Baturin, which were later given to Shakhnazarov (who had been abroad at the time of the meeting):

Nazarbaev [of Kazakhstan]: What kind of Union precisely [are we seeking to create]? A federation or a confederation?
Gorbachev: A Union State. I categorically insist on it.
Yeltsin: We will create a Union of States.
Gorbachev: If there is no state, then I will not participate. I can leave you right now. (Stands up, gathers up his papers).

118. Ibid., p. 19.
Yeltsin: Let's give it a precise name: a confederation.
Gorbachev: You decide. I can't force you.
Yeltsin: We have to make it so that Ukraine does not leave.
Shushkevich [of Belarus]: I think that they [the Ukrainians] will join a confederation. 120

As can be seen, for Yeltsin and his allies (especially Shushkevich of Belarus), it was deemed politically essential that Ukraine continue to belong to some overarching entity, no matter how loosely structured. Gorbachev's quasi-unitary model of a Union State left no room for a Ukraine that was intent on achieving full independence during the fast-approaching 1 December referendum (in which 84 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, 90 percent voted for independence, and 62 percent elected Kravchuk as Ukrainian president against six other candidates. 121)

At the pivotal 25 November meeting of the State Council, Gorbachev, according to Shakhnazarov's notes, began by announcing that there would take place the initialing of the new Union Treaty. Yeltsin then broke in to state his opinion that the Treaty must concern not a confederative state but a confederation of independent states. If it did not, he warned, then the Russian Supreme Soviet could not ratify it. There then ensued a lengthy wrangle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Shushkevich, Niyazov (Turkmenistan), and Karimov (Uzbekistan) supported Yeltsin, while Nazarbaev and Akaev (Kyrgyzstan) backed Gorbachev. Shakhnazarov's notes continue:

Yeltsin: There is another issue of principle—without Ukraine there can be no Union.
Gorbachev: And the contrary is also true. If we repudiate the Union, it will be a gift to the [Ukrainian] separatists.
Yeltsin: Let's wait until 1 December [the date of the Ukrainian referendum].
Gorbachev: I maintain that the leaders of several republics are engaging in unnecessary maneuvers.
(Yeltsin, Shushkevich, and Karimov express disagreement with this statement.)
Gorbachev: . . . Boris Nikolaevich has clearly changed his position. He and I agreed upon a Union State. 122

Gorbachev then stalked out of the hall, taking his staff with him. As Jack Matlock has written, this action—even though Gorbachev soon consented to return to the hall—constituted the “last straw” for Yeltsin and Shushkevich, who had been counting on reaching “an agreement that would be acceptable

120. Ibid., p. 299.
121. Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, p. 632.
to Ukraine.” 123 On 8 December the two republican leaders met with Kravchuk in Belarus and signed the Belovezhskaya Pushcha Accords, which put an end to the Soviet Union. 124 Two days later Gorbachev, unwilling to give up, went to the Defense Ministry, which was now freed of both Party and effective civilian control, to present his case to the military leadership; their decision would prove decisive.

The following day Yeltsin went to the same Defense Ministry to present his counterarguments. “These moves,” former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker has aptly commented, “were the stuff of a geopolitical nightmare: two Kremlin heavyweights jockeying for political power, calling on the army to follow them, and raising the specter of civil war—with nuclear weapons thrown in the mix.” 125 The military decided that it strongly preferred what the Russian president had to say. Gorbachev was out of a job, and on 25 December the Soviet Union came to an abrupt end.

These vivid events in December were the direct result of the failed August coup. The “correlation of forces” between Gorbachev (and the Center) and the thrusting republican leaders—a correlation that had already been tilting in the direction of the republics—was altered irrevocably by the events of August. With the Communist Party, the institutions of the Soviet state, the KGB, the military-industrial complex, and the Defense Ministry all compromised by their support for and collaboration with the GKChP, the Soviet regime found itself in a vastly weakened position vis-à-vis the union republics. By seeking at all costs to preserve a strong central state, Gorbachev unwittingly brought about the final breakup of the Soviet Union.

123. Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, pp. 628–629.