

In 1991, a delegation of hard-line leaders unexpectedly interrupted Gorbachev's vacation on Sunday, August 18th. Speaking for a State Committee, the group demanded that Gorbachev accept emergency rule or resign. When he refused, the plotters returned to Moscow, leaving Gorbachev's compound surrounded by well-armed troops and cut off from the rest of the country.

Although the people of the Soviet Union remained unaware that a coup had begun, they would soon find out. At 6 A.M. Monday morning, the Soviet news agency suddenly announced that Mikhail Gorbachev could no longer perform his duties as President because of "health reasons." Vice President Yaneyev and several other senior officials had therefore formed a State Committee for the State of Emergency to govern the Soviet Union.

The Committee promptly issued a statement announcing a state of emergency. The statement also declared that Gorbachev's reforms had placed the Soviet Union in "mortal danger" by leading it "into a blind alley." Shortly afterwards, the Committee issued a second decree suspending political parties, banning strikes, and closing all independent newspapers. By midmorning hundreds of tanks and armored personnel carriers began rolling into Moscow and the Baltic states.

The August coup marked a turning point in world history. It began as an attempt to restore the old order.

Convinced that ordinary citizens would choose security over freedom; the plotters believed that a show of force would enable them to easily gain control over the country. But they had underestimated the people. Instead of turning the clock back, they changed the Soviet Union forever.

This reading will begin by describing the coup and explaining why it failed. As you will see, the fateful confrontation between the hard-liners and the reformers shattered the Soviet Union. Within days,

Gorbachev resigned his post as General Secretary of the Communist Party, the Baltic states gained full independence, and Boris Yeltsin became the most powerful leader in the Soviet Union. But the changes unleashed by the failed coup had only just begun. This section concludes by describing the events that led to Gorbachev's resignation, the final collapse of the Soviet Union, and the formation of a new Commonwealth of Independent States.

### Turning Points in History: The August Coup

Monday, August 19. The news bulletin announcing the coup sent shock waves of concern around the world.

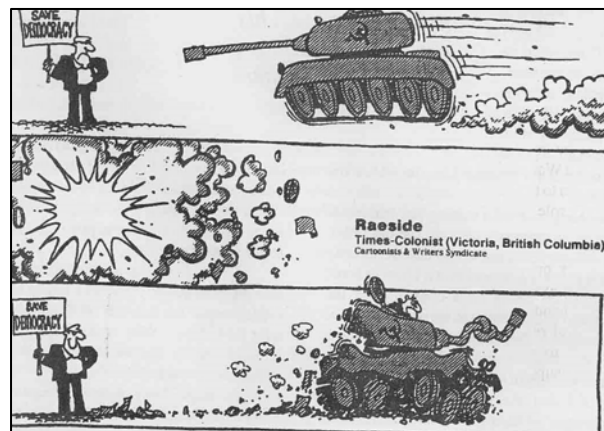
Worried leaders in Eastern Europe wondered if the new Soviet leaders would honor Gorbachev's commitment to withdraw troops from eastern Germany and Poland.

Meanwhile, President Bush and his top advisors held emergency meetings to evaluate the crisis. *"The whole world just went topsy-turvy,"* said one alarmed aide. *"Everything is out the window."* As the world watched and waited, the people of Moscow awoke to the sound of tanks and armored personnel carriers rumbling through their streets.

The State Committee assumed that this show of force would stifle public criticism and ensure obedience. But they were wrong. Gorbachev's reforms had created a new generation willing to speak its mind and defend its freedoms. *"Those fools are out of touch,"* said one contemptuous 32-year-old electronics technician.

*"They do not realize that things have changed and we are not*

*going to stay home just because they have sent soldiers into the streets."* As word of the coup spread across Moscow, the first signs of public resistance began to appear. Angry citizens confronted Soviet soldiers demanding to know who sent them. *"Why*



*tanks?" screamed one furious woman, "Tanks against whom? What are you doing? What do you want?"*

By noon, many protestors began to gather at the Russian Parliament building just two miles from the Kremlin. Nicknamed the White House because of its marble facade, the 19-story building served as Boris Yeltsin's headquarters. *"We are waiting for Yeltsin's response. We are ready to defend him,"* shouted one demonstrator.

The crowd outside the White House didn't have to wait for long. Like everyone else, Yeltsin had been caught off guard by the coup. He narrowly avoided arrest by quickly leaving his home outside Moscow and dashing to his office in the White House. At about 12:30 P.M., he walked outside the White House and boldly climbed atop one of the nearby tanks. As his supporters cheered, Yeltsin defiantly predicted that *"the reactionaries will not triumph."* He then called for a general strike and urged his followers to disobey the State Committee's decrees.

Yeltsin's courageous action helped inspire others to step forward. Fearing that an armed attack could come at any time, volunteers worked feverishly to build barricades around the White House. By Monday evening thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the White House to protect Yeltsin.

Their fears were not misplaced. Yaneyev and his fellow plotters had originally hoped to avoid a bloody confrontation like the one in Tiananmen Square. But they now recognized that the coup would fail unless they stormed the White House.

Determined to seize and, if necessary, kill Yeltsin and his aides, the plotters ordered an elite force of KGB commandos to assault the White House. But the Alpha commanders and their men refused to obey the order. Despite threats that they would be court-martialed or even executed, the Alpha members steadfastly refused to launch an attack that could kill innocent civilians and ignite a civil war. Yeltsin later admitted that if they had attacked, the Alpha force *"would have killed us all."*

Tuesday, August 20. The Committee's failure to seize Yeltsin marked a key turning point in the coup. As the second day began, resistance rapidly spread. Huge crowds in Leningrad and Moldavia denounced the coup.

Despite the presence of heavily armed soldiers, the Baltic States continued to defy Soviet authorities.

While resistance increased in the republics, world attention remained focused on the dramatic standoff between the State Committee and Boris Yeltsin. At noon, Yeltsin told a huge crowd of supporters, *"We will hold out here as long as we have to remove this junta from power. We will win!"* Still fearing that an armed attack could come at any time, volunteers strengthened the barricades surrounding the White House. As the evening hours began, thousands of men and women ignored a cold rain and formed a human shield 30 rows deep in front of the building. A Russian Orthodox priest blessed volunteers who vowed to die defending their elected leaders.

While the tense vigil continued at the White House, the coup leaders frantically ordered tank units to attack.

But once again key units ignored their orders. Although the coup was rapidly unraveling, the volunteers protecting the White House were unaware of the insubordination sweeping through the Soviet military. At midnight, a confused scuffle between troops and protestors broke out on a nearby street. Three civilians died in the brief clash.

Wednesday, August 21. The Army's refusal to attack the White House doomed the coup. In an early morning meeting at the Defense Ministry, top Air Force and Navy commanders demanded that Defense Minister Yazov withdraw all troops from Moscow. After Yazov angrily stormed out of his office, the generals issued an order to begin troop withdrawals at about 3:00 P.M.

Abandoned by the military and confronted by massive public opposition, the coup quickly fell apart. While crowds cheered the departing soldiers, panicked coup leaders flew to Gorbachev's villa to beg for his forgiveness. Gorbachev refused to see them and instead ordered their arrest. Later that night, Gorbachev and his family flew back to Moscow where they would soon discover that the nation was changing far more rapidly than anyone could imagine.

### Why did the coup fail?

The August coup marked a watershed in Soviet and world history. Had the coup succeeded, the West may have faced a new Cold War while the Soviet people faced the prospect of a return to totalitarian controls. Although many forces played a role, three key factors doomed the coup.

1. The coup leaders proved to be disorganized and incompetent. For example, they thought to order 250,000 pairs of handcuffs but neglected to cut the communications of resistance leaders. As a result, Yeltsin was able to monitor events in the Soviet Union and solicit support from President Bush and other world leaders.

2. The coup leaders failed to immediately arrest Boris Yeltsin. Once established within the White House, Yeltsin became a highly visible rallying point for popular resistance.

3. The coup leaders failed to understand how much Gorbachev's reforms had changed the Soviet people. Faced with the choice of submitting to more communism or risking their lives for more democracy, an ever-growing number of people chose to stand up for their freedoms. *"They [the plotters] thought we were sheep, and they were wrong,"* said a proud demonstrator guarding the White House. *"It was terrible to wake up Monday and feel ourselves being smothered. And we simply refused to be smothered again."*

### The Collapse of the Communist Party

The failure of the coup sparked joyous celebrations across the Soviet Union. At a victory rally in Moscow, a huge crowd roared its approval as Boris Yeltsin condemned the Communist Party for supporting the coup. Yeltsin's speech captured the mood of anti-

communism sweeping the country. *"We are all sick of the Communists,"* said one retired worker. *"They have been strangling us for 70 years."* As public anger shifted from the eight leaders of the coup to the Communist Party, the crowds became more militant. After listening to Yeltsin, thousands of demonstrators marched to the KGB headquarters where they tore down a 14 ton statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police.

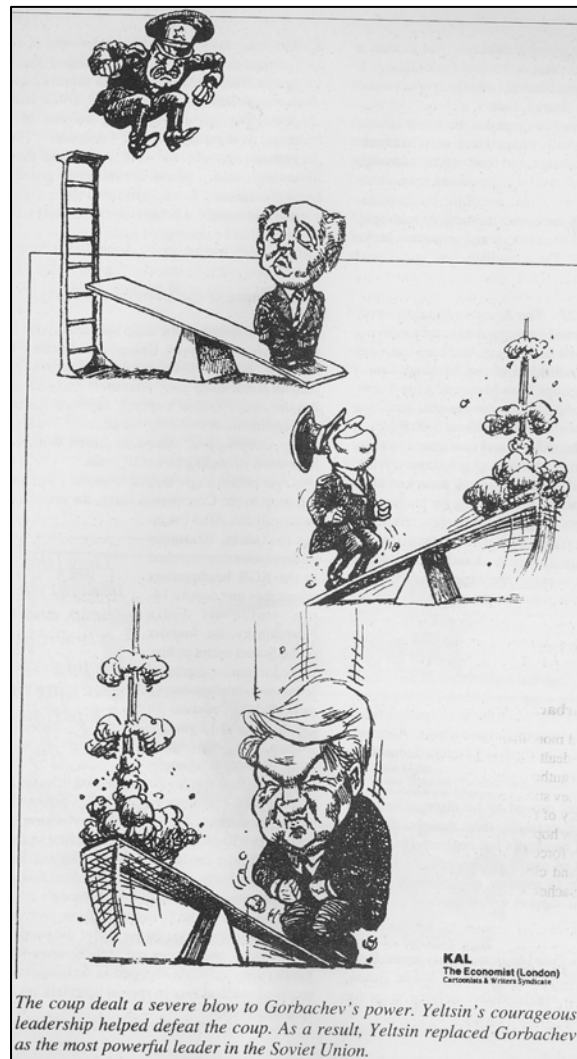
In the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, a jubilant crowd pulled down statues of Lenin. *"I spent 12 years in Siberia,"* said one elderly man. *"But this is a happier day for me than the day I was released from the camps."* Public resentment against the

Communist Party had been building for a long time. The Communists first seized power in 1917. Under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, the Communist Party completely dominated Soviet political, economic, and social life. Although never more than 10 percent of the Soviet population, party members enjoyed privileges denied the rest of the people. While most Soviet citizens waited in long lines for scarce goods, party officials shopped in well-stocked stores, received medical care in special hospitals, and lived in spacious homes.

At first, Gorbachev tried to curb the outcry against the party. In his first appearance after the coup, he argued that most party members were loyal citizens who should not be blamed for the coup. Saying that he still believed in *"the socialist choice,"* Gorbachev contended that the Communist Party could still

be reformed.

Gorbachev's attempt to defend the Party seriously damaged his credibility. Outraged delegates



in the Russian Parliament heckled him during a speech two days after the coup. *"Had come here immediately, we would have carried him on our shoulders,"* said one dismayed delegate. *"Instead, he started saying that he is still a Communist. He missed a great opportunity."* Gorbachev soon realized that public sentiment was not on his side. On August 24, 1991, he resigned as General Secretary of the Communist Party and called upon the party's Central Committee to disband. Five days later, the Soviet Parliament voted to suspend all party activities. Stunned Muscovites watched in amazement as officials sealed the Central Committee's headquarters near the Kremlin.

Having first seized power in 1917 in a coup that succeeded, the once all-powerful Communist Party now collapsed in the aftermath of a coup that had failed.

As the Soviet Union spun apart, Gorbachev desperately pleaded for unity. *"We should not destroy! We should not break things down! We do not have the right to make a mistake of this proportion."*

### The decline of Gorbachev and the rise of Yeltsin

The coup did more than just discredit the Communist Party; it also dealt a severe blow to Gorbachev's power. Although his authority had been dwindling prior to the coup, Gorbachev still exercised great influence as the General Secretary of the Communist Party. Gorbachev hoped to reform and revitalize the party. But the coup forced him to give up his post as General Secretary and close down the party. Without party support, Gorbachev's power began to evaporate rapidly.

While Gorbachev lost power, his longtime rival Boris Yeltsin suddenly surged ahead. Prior to the coup, Yeltsin had enjoyed great popular support while exercising limited power. But the coup dramatically enhanced Yeltsin's stature. His courageous

leadership won him global praise while vastly increasing his authority.

Yeltsin moved quickly to use his new power. In the days following the coup, he issued a series of decrees seizing Communist Party property and stripping the Kremlin of its authority within the Russian republic.

Yeltsin also forced Gorbachev to replace his cabinet with advisers loyal to him. Criticizing Gorbachev as a *"lover of half-measures and half-steps,"* Yeltsin promised to launch a vigorous program of political and economic reforms.

### The collapse of the Soviet Union

By shattering the Communist Party, the coup reduced Gorbachev's power while enhancing Yeltsin's position. At the same time, it also played an important role in accelerating the breakup of the Soviet Union. Hard-liners tried to overthrow Gorbachev to prevent him from signing a new treaty granting more power to

the republics. But the coup's failure helped cause the very outcomes it was intended to prevent.

As the coup began to unravel, both Estonia and Latvia declared their unconditional independence. *"Things are happening so quickly,"* said an amazed Estonian official. *"We are taking advantage of opportunities we didn't have before."* The three Baltic states did not have to wait long for international recognition. Within two weeks, the United States

joined over 30 nations in recognizing Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as independent nations.

On September 6, 1991, the Soviet government officially granted them their independence. The Baltics thus reclaimed the freedom they had lost in 1940 as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Other republics soon followed the example set by the Baltic states. On August 24, 1991, the Ukrainian Parliament declared full independence subject to a popular referendum to be held on December 1, 1991. The drive toward independence from the Soviet Union soon gathered more



momentum. During the next three days, Byelorussia and Moldavia also left the Soviet Union.

As the Soviet Union spun apart, Gorbachev desperately pleaded for unity. At a special meeting of the Soviet Parliament on August 27th, he stressed the high cost of disunion: *"We should not destroy! We should not break things down! . . . This collapse threatens the lives and property of millions of people, and the defense potential of our country, which is a superpower. We do not have the right to make a mistake of this proportion."* Gorbachev then urged the republics to sign a new Union Treaty that would create a *"renewed union, a reformed union."*

Gorbachev's plea for unity failed to stem the tide of secession. By the end of August, three more republics chose to leave the Soviet Union. Only 5 of the 15 Soviet republics still retained formal membership in the union.

As the Soviet Union slid toward chaos, Gorbachev declared that the nation was *"on the brink of catastrophe."* At an emergency meeting of the Congress of People's Deputies, he and Yeltsin presented a plan transferring all central authority to a State Council. The new executive body would include Gorbachev as union President and the leaders of all participating republics.

The Council would be responsible for coordinating foreign policy and overseeing the armed forces. On September 5, 1991, the Congress of People's Deputies reluctantly approve the new republic-controlled government, thus voting itself out of existence.

### Why did the republics leave the Soviet Union?

Like all of the great empires you have studied, the Soviet Union collapsed and broke apart. But while the Roman, Ottoman, and Spanish empires slowly retreated over a period of centuries, the Soviet Union fell apart with astonishing speed. Three key factors explain why the republics were so eager to leave the Soviet Union.

1. The Soviet Union had always been held together by fear and force. As Gorbachev's reforms eroded the power of the Communist Party, more and more people enjoyed the right to speak and worship freely and to elect their own leaders. The coup marked the first successful defense of democracy in Russian

history. Having tasted freedom, the republics demanded full independence.

2. The Soviet Union's 285 million people were divided into over 100 ethnic groups. Despite repeated efforts to promote uniformity, a desire for independence always existed beneath the surface of Soviet society. For example, many Lithuanians had secretly taught their children to revere their national flag and heroes as symbols of a once great past. When the coup broke the power of the central government, long suppressed national feelings swiftly broke out.

3. The Russian Republic contained half of the Soviet population and three-quarters of its land area. Russia's great size and vast resources always gave it a dominant voice in the Soviet Union. The fear of continued Russian domination motivated many of the republics to declare their independence.

### "An awesome, awesome mess"

The collapse of the coup and the republic's declarations of independence produced jubilant celebrations across the Soviet Union. But the public's optimistic hopes for the future soon collided with harsh economic realities. *"The Soviet economy is a mess,"* reported an American economist, *"an awesome, awesome mess."* This bleak description did not exaggerate the problems facing Gorbachev and his new government. Gorbachev's program of perestroika, or economic restructuring, was designed to reform the Soviet Union's inefficient command economy. While perestroika succeeded in dismantling the old command economy, it failed to replace it with a new market system. As a result, the nation's economy plunged into chaos.

Grim economic statistics showed how far the economy was falling. During 1991, the Soviet gross national product (GNP) plummeted by 10 percent.

While industrial production fell, the annual rate of inflation soared to over 300 percent. At the same time, oil and coal production dipped by 10 percent.

Soviet agricultural news was equally bleak. Although farmers produced an adequate supply of food, they couldn't get it to market. For example, milk spoiled in un-refrigerated trucks while potatoes rotted on the ground because of a shortage of harvesters. Since the military had long spent at least 25 percent

of the GNP, farmers did not have enough money to build modern storage facilities. As a result, one-fourth of their grain harvest decayed in open-air bins.

Empty food stores presented the most visible evidence of this economic breakdown. Pictures of frustrated shoppers waiting in long lines to buy scarce goods symbolized the country's growing plight. *"Never forget that empty pots can be more threatening to democracy than tanks,"* warned one Russian reformer.

Although Gorbachev was acutely aware of these problems, there was little he could do to solve them. As the nation's economic crisis worsened, the powers of the central government shrank. On November 29, 1991, the Soviet State Bank announced that it had only enough money left to pay government workers for just three more days. Faced with the imminent bankruptcy of the Soviet government, the Russian republic agreed to finance temporarily the central government.

### The end of an era

While Yeltsin prepared to assume his new responsibilities, Gorbachev prepared to give up the job he had fought so hard to save. Realizing that he was now a leader without a country, Gorbachev chose to resign on December 25, 1991. As a world-wide television audience watched, he began by calmly announcing, *"I hereby discontinue my activities at the post of the President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."*

Saying that this was his "last opportunity" to address the people, Gorbachev admitted that he had made mistakes during his six years as President. But then he proudly reviewed his achievements, declaring, *"We're now living in a new world."*

Gorbachev was right. The world was vastly different than when he first took power in 1985. At that time the Soviet Union was the world's most feared totalitarian dictatorship. But Gorbachev quickly recognized that *"something was wrong."* Blaming poor living conditions on the country's rigid political and economic system, he launched a bold program of reforms.

Both glasnost and perestroika brought revolutionary changes to the Soviet Union. Dissidents were released from confinement. Soviet citizens were encouraged to speak; write, and worship freely. And for the first time in Soviet history, citizens were allowed to vote in free elections.

Gorbachev's "new thinking" also brought sweeping foreign policy changes. He allowed the Berlin Wall to fall, freed Eastern Europe, accepted German reunification, and slowed the arms race. As a result of these dramatic changes, the Cold War thawed and then melted away.

Gorbachev's historic achievements earned him global praise. Western leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, and Ronald Reagan hailed him as a leader with whom they could work. At first, Gorbachev was also popular in the Soviet Union. However, his popularity began to erode as the Soviet economy failed to improve. Although Gorbachev wanted to reform the Communist system, he did not want to abandon it. But this goal may have been impossible. *"He tried to reform the un-reformable,"* concluded one leading Soviet politician.

Although Gorbachev failed to completely reform Soviet society, he did help to transform it. Like other great leaders, Gorbachev proved that

individuals can make a difference. A leading Russian author wrote that future generations will look back on Gorbachev's political career as *"a gripping drama of a man who changed his country and the world...a man whose name will forever remain in history for putting an end to Communism*

*on earth."*

A few minutes after Gorbachev's resignation, Kremlin guards lowered the Soviet flag for the last time. The red flag bearing the distinctive gold hammer-and-sickle emblem had flown over the Kremlin since the Russian Revolution in 1917. The guards then raised the white, red, and blue tricolor flag of the Russian Republic.

Chimes from the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower rang for several minutes to mark the historic event that had just taken place. The Soviet Union had passed into history.

