

The Boris Yeltsin of History

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It is, of course, premature to try to assess Boris Yeltsin as a historical figure. Yeltsin's presidency is still a work in progress, and there is even speculation that the Russian constitution may be altered to give him a third term in office.

However, it is a sign of the caution that has befallen ex-Sovietologists that few academics have rushed into print with biographies of the Russian leader. The rise of Gorbachev produced a flurry of instant biographies, quickly followed by edited collections debating the nature of his reforms, and then weightier tomes such as Archie Brown's *The Gorbachev Factor*.¹ Yeltsin's explosive appearance on the Russian political scene back in 1987–91 was greeted by a couple of quick biographies and then silence.²

Admittedly, Yeltsin looms large in political accounts such as John Dunlop's *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire* (probably the best analysis to date of the politics of the Soviet collapse).³ But no one since 1992 has chosen the biographical format to explain Boris Yeltsin's role in the politics of the new Russia. This is a surprising omission, given the popularity of biographies in bookstores and the pivotal role of Yeltsin in Russia's development since 1991.

Even more curiously, against this background of biographical silence Boris Yeltsin himself has produced two volumes of autobiography: *Against the Grain* and *The Struggle for Russia*.⁴ These are well-written, dramatic volumes that have found a deserved place in the reading lists of undergraduate Russian politics courses. Still, it is rather unusual to have a leader—still in office—writing the history books by which he is being judged, all the more so when one remembers that this is a Russian leader, the heir to a state that formerly distinguished itself by the secrecy that surrounded its leaders. Sixteen years ago, when Yurii Andropov became general secretary, the world was not even sure if Andropov was married. Now, in the extraordinary scene that opens Yeltsin's second book, we read how on a long train ride without the child's mother, Yeltsin suckled his baby daughter at his own breast (Boris Nikolaevich as "Mother Russia"?).

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There are several possible explanations for academics' reluctance to tackle a political biography of Yeltsin. Partly, it may be due to structural shifts in the discipline that have accompanied the collapse of Sovietology. Younger scholars will not land tenured jobs if they write political biographies, while older scholars may not be able to carve out the time to do the necessary legwork in Moscow. Both groups may simply be overwhelmed by the many other interesting new topics to investigate, from privatization to Russia's disintegrating federalism. More puzzling is the silence of the journalists. At times, it seems as if every journalist finishes his or her stint in Moscow with a weighty tome, sometimes two (David Remnick, Michael Dobbs, David Satter, Fred Kotz, Jonathan Steele, Fred Coleman, and John Lloyd). Yet none of these writers have chosen to frame their work as a biography of Yeltsin, choosing instead the end of empire/birth of a new nation paradigm.

Why the sudden interest in deep historical structures? It can hardly be because people believe that Yeltsin has played a trivial role in Russian history. On the contrary, authors are wary of tackling the topic precisely because Yeltsin has played a huge and overpowering role in the birth of the new Russia. It is hard to unscramble Yeltsin's contribution from the complex and tumultuous wave of events that has swept Russia. The Russian transition is still a work in progress. On one side, there are still concerns that Russia could regress toward its Communist/imperialist past. On the other side, even optimists who argue that the changes are irreversible are concerned that the market transition may have ushered in crony capitalism and Mafia rule. The new Russia may prove to be no more attractive than the old Soviet Union. Observers are understandably wary of committing themselves to a definitive judgment of the health of Russian democracy. Many commentators were caught unawares by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and learned to be very wary of projecting positive trends in the Russian context.

A degree of caution in academic analysis is admirable, but too much caution can lead to a suspension of debate, in which the running is made by polemicists for one side or the other. It is even more difficult to arrive at a moral judgment on Yeltsin's legacy than it is to evaluate the character of Russia's transition as a whole. Yeltsin's most distinguishing feature is his contradictory character.⁵ He is simultaneously an authoritarian and a democrat, a liberal and a conservative, generous but vindictive, resolute and indecisive. Observers have few such qualms about assessing Gorbachev. Although some aspects of his personality and intentions are still unclear (at what point did he realize that his actions would destroy Soviet-style socialism?), the overall thrust of Gorbachev's actions is transparent. Commentators may idolize him or despise him, but they have no problem in com-

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ing to judgment. With Yeltsin, however, it is harder to find Westerners who are unequivocal admirers or determined critics.

In this article, I will look at Yeltsin's role in the founding of a new Russian state, the transition to democracy, and the introduction of a market economy, and at Russia's role in the world at large.

Father of a Nation

What exactly does Yeltsin stand for? One's first thought is that he stands for Russia, since his political persona is inextricably bound up with the emergence of the new Russian state. The second image that comes to mind is that of reform: The new Russia can be distinguished from the old Soviet state. But what sort of Russia has Yeltsin created? How successful are the political and economic reforms that were inaugurated during his watch?

Yeltsin's principal achievement was his realization that the Russian Federation could be carved out of the old Soviet Union. He only stumbled on the realization for self-serving and pragmatic reasons—to work around his archrival Mikhail Gorbachev. But it was a decision that had immediate and profound consequences, undermining the structure of power that had prevailed for seventy-three years.

It may be that there is no “smoking gun,” no single cause that brought about the Soviet collapse. But if one had to pick a single event, one need look no further than Yeltsin's political decision to wager on the Russian state. It was that decision, in the wake of the republican elections of March 1990, that unleashed the political process that brought about the end of the Soviet Union. It created what Alexander Shtromas has called the “second pivot,” which challenged the power of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and created a powerful focus for oppositional actions.⁶

From January 1991 onward, the Russian Supreme Soviet began urging enterprises located within the Russian Federation to pay their taxes to Yeltsin's government and not to the Soviet government. Over the course of 1991, Russia's managers voted with their tax dollars, undermining the USSR even before the June 1991 Russian presidential election that gave Yeltsin the popular legitimacy that his archrival Gorbachev lacked (having been selected by the USSR Congress of People's Deputies). In rival demonstrations on the streets in winter 1990–91, democrats happened upon the pre-revolutionary tricolor as the symbol of the new Russia—while the Communists were still waving the red Soviet flag. The symbolic polarization was important because it meant that the proponents of democratic reform appropriated the symbols (and institutions) of the Russian nation, outflanking the reactionary and racist nationalists who had a very different agenda for post-Communist Russia.

Things could have turned out very differently. Yeltsin's core strategy was the creation of a Russian state at the expense of the pre-existing Soviet federation. He harnessed the creation of the Russian nation-state to liberal policies of democracy and market reform, and not to policies drawn from the communist and nationalist agenda. The outcome could have been very different had it been the reactionaries of the Russian Communist Party (a faction within the CPSU) who stumbled on the idea

of taking the Russian Federation out of the USSR. The likelihood of violent confrontation would have been greater—for example, a gathering of the lands of east Ukraine and north Kazakhstan, where some twenty million ethnic Russians live. But the Communist-nationalists were so reactionary that they were unable to shake their Soviet identity and sought to preserve the old union. Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia provides a vivid example of what can happen when a nationalist leader takes power in a multiethnic socialist federation.

In stark contrast, Yeltsin did not adopt a policy of aggressive nationalism and made no effort to change borders “to bring home” the Russian diaspora. Instead, Yeltsin achieved the near-impossible task of conjoining liberalism and nation building. Such a fusion of liberalism and nationalism was the aspiration of many nineteenth century progressives, but it has been rare in the twentieth century.

There is no evidence that Yeltsin consciously planned to adopt nationalism and liberalism on philosophical grounds. There is nothing in his background as a party apparatchik to suggest exposure to such ideas. It was a combination of force of circumstance and raw common sense that serendipitously drove Yeltsin in that direction. Creating a new nation-state seemed to be a handy way to get rid of Gorbachev, and embracing the market reforms that had already begun in Poland and the rest of East-Central Europe and that were being urged on Russia by the international community seemed the only alternative to the disintegrating command economy. Yeltsin was not a visionary leader along the lines of Kemal Attaturk, implementing a plan for the modernization of his country. Rather, he happened upon a set of policy initiatives that had the effect of forcing the birth of a new Russian state.

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An Imperfect Democracy

Boris Yeltsin is more demagogue than democrat. However, given the absence of democratic experience in Russia’s political heritage, one should be impressed by the degree to which he has accepted the democratic rules of the game. The situation with regard to political and civil rights, as defined and measured by Freedom House, shows a decisive improvement over the late Soviet era, although still lagging behind what one expects of developed democracies.

Russia has experienced six national elections and two referenda in the past nine years, all of them more or less free and fair by the standards of transitional democracies.⁷ Yeltsin accepted the results of the 1993 and 1995 State Duma elections, which saw opposition parties emerge victorious. He ignored suggestions from some of his advisers that the 1996 presidential election be postponed. In 1996–97 Yeltsin permitted the direct election of leaders in Russia’s eighty-nine

regions, most of whom had previously been appointed by presidential decree. Those provincial leaders, together with the heads of regional legislatures, constitute the Federation Council, the upper house of the national parliament, which is emerging as a real check on presidential power.

However, Yeltsin's critics would read the same electoral history rather differently. They note that he refused to hold fresh elections to the Russian parliament in 1991 for fear that his opponents would triumph. As a result, there was no clean break with the past, but the coexistence of a reformist president (elected in June 1991) and a more conservative legislature (elected in March 1990). That contradiction was resolved by force in October 1993, in the wake of a presidential decree dismissing the parliament. Only after he rewrote the constitution to give decisive power to the president did Yeltsin allow the opposition to take control of the State Duma, safe in the knowledge that the lower house exercises no real power. Since then, he has ignored the Duma's policy recommendations whenever they diverged from his own predilections. He has been equally cavalier in disregarding the requirements of the Russian constitution (refusing to sign the law on trophy art despite two Duma votes overriding his veto, for example).

October 1993 represents the low point of the Yeltsin era. Modern politicians prosper and perish by their television image. Yeltsin got off to a good start, climbing on top of a tank in front of the White House during the August 1991 coup. That positive image was displaced, however, by the CNN footage of tanks shelling the White House two years later. One of the strongest arguments in Gorbachev's favor is that he chose not to use force to maintain his power. (Some critics blame him for military interventions in Tbilisi in 1989, Baku in 1990, and the Baltics in January 1991, although Gorbachev denies responsibility.) In contrast, one of Yeltsin's most serious failings is his willingness to resort to force—a willingness that verges on the reckless. Yeltsin was directly responsible for the assault on the parliament in October 1993 and the invasion of Chechnya in December 1994. And yet here, as in nearly every respect of Yeltsin's legacy, the overall record is equivocal. There are several potential areas of conflict in which Yeltsin has had a calming influence, in relations with Ukraine and the Baltics, for example.

Democracy theorists argue that the true test of the authenticity of democracy is when an incumbent is voted out of office. When a sitting president is repeatedly reelected, it may be due to manipulation rather than a genuine reflection of voter views. Even more strictly, Samuel Huntington has proposed a "two turnover" rule, according to which an emergent democracy can be considered stable only if a government that itself was voted into office in a free election is subsequently removed at the ballot box.⁸

Russia has yet to experience a single democratic turnover at the presidential level. Yeltsin's defenders would argue that the two-turnover rule is unreasonably restrictive, that one should not underestimate the distance that Russia has traveled toward democracy over the past ten years or the real threat of a *revanche* to communism or a lurch into fascism, which Yeltsin has managed to avert.

The acid test of Yeltsin's democratic credentials is the 1996 presidential election. Russia's democrats were deeply disillusioned with Yeltsin by fall 1995 but

held their noses and voted for him in June 1996 in the absence of a reasonable alternative. Yeltsin's election victory can be seen as either the consolidation of democracy in Russia or the consolidation of oligarchy and pseudodemocracy. If one believes that Gennady Zyuganov would have abandoned democracy and tried to construct an authoritarian state, then Yeltsin was justified in turning the election into a plebiscite on Russia's Communist past and in using his control over the media and state policy to orchestrate his narrow electoral victory. The counterargument is that Yeltsin's advisers, led by Anatoly Chubais, cynically manipulated the electorate to produce the result they wanted and that the threat of a Communist restoration was a red herring. Yeltsin's team had a huge array of tools at their disposal; both the state-controlled media and the media owned by private businesses rallied to their cause.

Whatever side one comes down on, the 1996 election clearly represents a turning point in the development of Russian democracy. Prior to 1996, in every Russian election people had generally voted against the political elites perceived as controlling the media. In 1989, 1990, and 1991 the majority voted against Communist candidates; in 1993 and 1995 they voted against pro-reform candidates who at that time represented the new "party of power" and controlled the media. Only in the April 1993 referendum on Yeltsin's policies (and the December 1993 constitutional referendum) did they narrowly vote in favor of Yeltsin's position, that is, in conformity with the way the media were urging them to vote. This pattern of voting against the prevailing media message was broken in 1996: Voters followed the media's advice and gave Yeltsin a second term.

Elections aside, there are many other questions that can be raised about the quality of Russian democracy. Yeltsin has turned the presidential apparatus into a labyrinthine bureaucracy rivaling that of the old Communist Party Central Committee. State policy is driven by presidential decrees rather than laws that have passed the scrutiny of public debate. Government ministries and presidential commissions operate in parallel, with access to the presidential signature dependent on an ever-shifting balance of power between rival bureaucrats. Favorites come and go; by 1998, it was Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko, who was playing the key role of presidential gatekeeper. Yeltsin was physically incapacitated with heart trouble and then pneumonia for eight of the twelve months following his reelection in June 1996: a situation that is difficult to imagine in a functioning democracy.

The situation with regard to civil rights is just as ambiguous as that pertaining to political rights. Progress toward rule of law has been halting. The threat of "telephone justice" from Communist-controlled judges has been replaced by the

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threat of “mafia justice”—by assassination on one’s way to work or through subtle criminal penetration of the law enforcement agencies. The courts still offer very uncertain protection against the actions of state agencies. Although most of the human rights restrictions of the Soviet era have been lifted (such as censorship and limits on foreign travel), some infringements remain. Moscow still enforces a residence permit system despite repeated court decisions declaring it unconstitutional; and the KGB’s successor, the Federal Security Service, seems to enjoy a free hand in areas it deems vital to national security (as shown by the arrest of former naval officer Aleksandr Nikitin, accused of leaking information on radioactive waste to the Norwegian Bellona environmental group). In 1997, Yeltsin signed into law a new bill on religious organizations that could severely restrict the rights of “nontraditional” religious groups—including Catholics and Protestants—to organize.

An Imperfect Market

Yeltsin’s ambivalent legacy also extends to market reform. In fall 1991, Yeltsin gambled on market liberalization as the only strategy that seemed to be available to rescue Russia from impending economic chaos. Yegor Gaidar, the architect of the reform, literally walked in off the street during the August coup to make the acquaintance of then-Yeltsin chief of staff Gennady Burbulis. Just weeks later, Gaidar was acting prime minister.⁹ The price liberalization launched in January 1992 caused a hyperinflationary surge but did unleash the forces of supply and demand that brought a kind of balance to Russian consumer markets. Liberalization was followed in summer 1992 by an ambitious program of privatization that saw 70 percent of Russian industry pass from state ownership into the hands of legally private corporations over the next two years.

The privatization process created a constituency for change because it enabled most of Russia’s industrial managers to gain ownership over the plants that they had been running for years as state appointees. The nascent market economy also saw the emergence of an aggressive and corrupt new financial elite, which became an important source of support for the Yeltsin administration. Western advice and money also flowed into the policy vacuum that had opened up with the Soviet collapse.

The emergence of these two political constituencies—the old industrialists and the new bankers—was congruent with the development of two parallel economies. A monetized, market-oriented economy grew up, fueled by Russia’s lucrative energy and metals exports (worth \$80 billion in 1997). At the same time, much economic activity took place in a shadowy parallel economy, often driven by barter trade and always hidden from the taxman. These two economies tend to have a distinct geographical pattern: Control over the monetized economy rests in Moscow, and control over the natural economy rests in the provinces.

Nobody could have deliberately designed the curious hybrid economy that emerged in Russia as a result of Yeltsin’s embrace of market reform. The resulting melange is highly inefficient and has stifled economic recovery. But it seems to be compatible with political stability.

Market optimists are more sober in 1998 than they were in 1992. Predictions of a Russian economic miracle have been tempered by the realization that it will take years to develop the institutional infrastructure of a market economy (clearly allotted property rights, a new civil code, independent courts, and so forth). But seven years into the transition it is worrying that observers are still heatedly debating whether Russia is actually headed toward an open market economy. There are serious grounds for arguing that the market transition has been hijacked by a corrupt elite that has created an institutional structure oriented toward rent-seeking and not conducive to competitive economic growth. Seven years of reform have hardly closed the gap between Russia and its European neighbors, such as Poland. It is only if one compares Russia with its fellow members of the Commonwealth of Independent States that it starts to look good. Russia has pushed market reform further than Ukraine or Belarus, and it is much more democratic than any of the Central Asian republics.

The relationship of Yeltsin to this process of haphazard reform is not clear. At certain crucial junctures, Yeltsin has brought in reformers such as Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais, and Boris Nemtsov and empowered them to pursue radical, long-term goals. At other times, Yeltsin has taken a hands-off approach, and allowed bureaucratic opposition to thwart the best efforts of his reformist ministers. Yeltsin's capacity to distance himself from day-to-day policy decisions makes it hard to hold him responsible for the economic suffering that has afflicted large sections of the Russian population. Yet it also makes it difficult to give him credit for the arrival of the market economy in Russia. The entry of Russia into the capitalist world seems to have been driven more by the collapse of the preceding model than by any conscious decision on Yeltsin's part. One is left to wonder whether any other leader, walking into the Kremlin in the fall of 1991, would have been able to do things differently.

Russia and the World

On the foreign policy front, Yeltsin's record is similarly mixed. At one level, Yeltsin has succeeded in bringing Russia into the international community of nations. Relations with the United States are good and have borne fruit in cooperation in crisis management in Bosnia and Iraq. Arms control is proceeding—slower than one would have hoped but faster than one had any right to expect ten years ago. Still, there are nagging worries. Some have accused Russia of trying to subvert U.S. goals, for example, during the 1998 UN arms inspection crisis in Iraq and in promoting economic cooperation with Iran (especially in continuing work of the nuclear reactor at Bushehr). Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov is a rather sinister figure straight from central casting: former head of foreign intelligence, seasoned Arabist, and friend of Saddam Hussein.

Economic integration has proceeded apace. Russia has liberalized its foreign trade; it has a stable, convertible currency and is seriously negotiating for membership in the World Trade Organization. However, there is still concern over distortions in Russia's market institutions because of which the international community (OECD) still classifies Russia as a "transition economy" rather than a

“market economy.” This ambivalence is exemplified by the partial inclusion of Russia into the G7 (Group of 7 leading industrial nations) at the Denver summit in June 1997. Russia was accepted as a political partner, but it is still excluded from the G7 economic discussions. Nobody seems sure whether Russia is or is not a member, and consequently whether one should refer to the group as G7 or G8.

Despite the signs of progress, there is an undertow of dissatisfaction with this picture of Russia’s global integration. On both sides, suspicion reigns, and Russia’s prestige as a global power is at an all-time low. For most Russians, their country’s integration symbolizes weakness rather than strength and maturity because the integration is perceived as taking place on American terms. Most Westerners still do not accept Russia as a team player. The Russian political elite, from democrats to Communists, is united in opposition to NATO expansion, and progress toward ratification of the START-2 treaty has stalled. In the meantime, Russia sits astride a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons (more, indeed, than the United States), and fears of “loose nukes,” going astray due to crime or terrorism, have arisen to replace the nightmare of a Soviet conventional attack as the worst-case scenario most beloved of Western contingency planners. Needless to say, Yeltsin’s mercurial personality and penchant for spontaneous comments at international conferences have done nothing to calm these fears.

Particularly disturbing has been Yeltsin’s failure to come up with policies to enable the Russian armed forces to adjust to the post-cold war world. There has been no concerted effort to introduce effective plans to restructure the armed forces or to reconceive their role. The old system of Communist Party supervision of the army has collapsed, but no new mechanism of civilian control over the military has been put in place. Yeltsin’s policy on the downsizing of the Russian army can only be described as one of neglect—whether benign or malign is impossible to say. One after another Yeltsin has used and discarded military leaders, creating a growing list of generals with grievances (Aleksandr Rutskoï, Pavel Grachev, Aleksandr Lebed, Lev Rokhlin). It is important to remember that the fate of Russian democracy hung precariously in the balance in August 1991 and October 1993, and if senior officers had chosen not to back Yeltsin in those crises the outcome could have been very different. Experience in Latin America and East Asia suggests that the main threat to emerging democracy is a military coup. No one could say that institutional mechanisms are in place to prevent such an eventuality in Russia. On the contrary, most specialists are amazed at the forbearance of the Russian officer corps in the face of a devastating loss of status and material privileges.

Trapped between Past and Future

The jury is still out on Russia’s transition. Seven years after the disintegration of the Soviet state, Russia remains a curious hybrid of contradictory forces: an authoritarian democracy, a pseudo-market economy, and a truculent but cooperative international partner. In an imperfect world, this hybrid condition may continue for decades, but one cannot be sure that it will not lurch decisively in one direction or the other.

In the face of this lingering uncertainty, it is hard to come to a definitive or even a preliminary judgment on Boris Yeltsin. As the man who helped destroy the Soviet Union, he will be hailed as a hero—although most of the credit for bringing that about will probably go to Mikhail Gorbachev. As the founder of a new Russia, he may receive either encomium or condemnation, depending on the trajectory of developments over the next decade. To a disturbing degree, Yeltsin represents the triumph of symbolism over substance. Yeltsin launched Russia on the path of “market democracy” without apparently having a firm grasp of what either of those terms mean. Like Gorbachev, Yeltsin is a pivotal historical figure who knows not what he does.

NOTES

1. A. H. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2. John Morrison, *Boris Yeltsin, From Bolshevik to Democrat* (New York: Dutton, 1991); Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova, *Boris Yeltsin: a Political Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1992). There are also some biographies written for high school students.
3. John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
4. Boris Yeltsin, *Against the Grain* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990); Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia* (New York: Random House, 1994). These works owe a great deal to ghostwriters, such as Valentin Yumashev. Russian works include a puff-biography by Valentin Fedorov, *Yeltsin, A Political Portrait* (London: Imperial Publishing, 1996); the memoirs of his former security chief Aleksandr Korzhakov, *Boris Eltsin: Ot rassveta do zakata* (Moscow: Interbuk, 1997) and press secretary Vyacheslav Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1997); and Oleg Poptsov, *Khronika vremen Tsarya Borisa* (Moscow: Sovershenno sekretno, 1996).
5. Scott Parrish and Peter Rutland, “The Many Faces of Boris Yeltsin,” *Transition* (Prague), 2, 31 May 1996, 18–22.
6. Alexander Shtromas and Morton Kaplan, eds., *The Soviet Union and the Challenge of the Future* (New York: Paragon House, 1988).
7. Stephen White, Richard Rose, and Ian MacAllister, *How Russia Votes* (London: Chatham House, 1996).
8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).
9. Yegor Gaidar, *Dni porazhenii i pobed* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996).