

# In Search of a Historic Yeltsin

LEON ARON

I wrote this book because of a most rare concurrence of subjects: a fascinating and complicated man, who in his prime could touch, sway, and lead millions; a great nation at one of the most fateful moments in its history; and the twentieth century's last great revolution. This was a chance to write history while telling an absorbing tale.

Few protagonists are better suited for the man-and-his-times genre than Boris Yeltsin. The great Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva used to say that her dear friend Boris Pasternak looked at once like an Arabian thoroughbred and its rider, the driven and the driver. Yeltsin was both a bellwether of the gathering Russian storm and part of the storm itself. As the pace of the revolution quickened, Boris Yeltsin's personal story and his country's history became tightly intertwined and, in several shining instances, welded together. The revolution was the wind, he the sail. Together they began to turn Russia around.

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But what was that Russia? Without recalling, however briefly, the country, the state, and the nation that Yeltsin inherited from the Soviet Union in fall 1991, both his achievements and his failures, and thus his place in history, are impossible to judge.

The great nineteenth-century Ukrainian and Russian historian Nikolai Ivanovich Kostomarov summarized the effects of the reign of Ivan the Terrible thus:

In moments of personal danger every man naturally thinks only of himself; but when for the Russian people such moments lasted for decades at a time, it was natural that a generation should arise of self-seeking and cruel-hearted egotists, whose every thought, every striving was directed only to their security, a generation for whom no inner truth remained, however much they preserved the external everyday forms of piety, legality and morality. Whoever was cleverer than the rest had to become a model of mendacity; it was a time when intelligence, shackled by the nar-

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Leon Aron is a resident scholar and director of Russian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. This article is an edited and slightly augmented version of the keynote address delivered at the conference "Yeltsin's Legacy and Russia's Future," 17 March 2000, at AEI. The conference marked the U.S. publication of his book *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (St. Martin's Press).

row limits of self-serving motives . . . could show its activity only by skillfully achieving personal ends through deceit. Serious illnesses of human societies, like physical illnesses, cannot be cured quickly . . . only thus can one explain the fearful events of the Time of Troubles when, as it were, those spoiled juices which had built up during the frightful epoch of Ivan's atrocities finally rose to the surface.<sup>1</sup>

Multiplied and strengthened manifold by Stalinism, which killed or starved to death millions of Russians and stretched over four generations, the same pathologies became evident during the 1985–91 transition. As the weight of the police state was lightened, the same “spoiled juices” began rising to the surface.

The centuries of cruel authoritarianism and serfdom; the decades of terror and lies, lawlessness, crushing poverty; the Soviet state's countless atrocities against other peoples and, most of all, against their own had bred servility, callousness, and coarseness of mind and soul. In such a normative wasteland, those who had been brutalized for generations were almost certain to become brutalizers—and did, as the savagery of Russian troops in both Chechen wars has demonstrated so graphically.

At the end of 1982, First Deputy Chairman of Gosplan Nikolai Ryzhkov (Gorbachev's future prime minister and today a leading member of the Communist faction in the Duma) found zero growth both of people's incomes and of the state's revenues (except those from the sale of vodka).<sup>2</sup> “Worst of all” was the country's “moral state,” the “suffocating” atmosphere. “We wallowed in lies,” Ryzhkov remembered. “[We] stole from ourselves, took and gave bribes.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, corruption was one of the key symptoms of this pervasive anomie. In the early 1980s, in his excellent (and undeservedly neglected) book *USSR: The Corrupt Society*, a former leading Soviet lawyer and legal scholar, Konstantin Simis, called the Soviet Union “a land of kleptocracy.”<sup>4</sup> “Skazhi gde ty rabotayesh, i ya skazhu tebe, chto ty nesyosh,” went a popular adage in the 1970s. “Tell me where you work, and I'll tell you what [stolen goods] you are carrying in your bag.” Revealed by glasnost, official corruption, along with inequality (“social justice”), became the most powerful mobilizing theme of perestroika. A leading Russian journalist has recently described the Russia Yeltsin took over in fall 1991 as “a country depraved to the core, a state rotten from top to bottom, a great power of fast thieves and bribe-takers.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, from Ryzhkov's memoirs: “The country was drinking itself into the ground. [People] drank everywhere. Before work. After work. In the obkoms and in the raykoms. At the construction sites and on the shop floor.”<sup>6</sup> Between 1958 and 1984, the production of vodka doubled.<sup>7</sup> Each year, fifteen million drunks were arrested and put in sobering-up stations (*vytrezviteli*). Premature deaths directly or indirectly caused by alcohol accounted for about one-fifth of all deaths in the USSR. Between 1964 and the late 1970s, male life expectancy fell by five years, from sixty-seven to sixty-two years.<sup>8</sup> At least 14 percent of state revenue (and perhaps as much as 25 percent) came from the sale of vodka.<sup>9</sup>

The Russia that was passed on to Yeltsin was also desperately poor. “Upper Volta with nuclear missiles,” the Social Democratic chancellor Helmut Schmidt called the Soviet Union, and he was not far from the truth. Military expenditures

were bleeding the country dry. In 1998, Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov would disclose that 70 percent of Russian GDP in the Soviet times was spent on “defense and defense-related projects.”<sup>10</sup> Counting family members, every third Russian—that is, fifty million people—lived off defense expenditures.

Apart from its tanks, planes, and missiles, Russia was, in effect, a colonial, third-, even fourth-rate economy, which exported raw materials and imported almost everything of quality. Upon becoming prime minister in 1985, Nikolai Ryzhkov was stunned to learn that the country that he considered an industrial world power “imported everything”<sup>11</sup>—from grain,<sup>12</sup> medicines, and computers to furniture, clothes, rolling ball pens, and pantyhose. As to the exports, almost all hard currency sales abroad came from four commodities: oil, gas, gold, and weapons.

The country’s machinery and technology were years, often decades behind Western equipment. It was commonplace, especially in heavy industry, to find equipment imported from the West during the first two five-year plans half a century earlier. The Soviet economy was value-subtracting (or “virtual,” to use the currently fashionable term) on a giant scale: up to 30 percent of the inputs lost value in the production process.<sup>13</sup> There were fewer miles of paved roads in the entire Soviet Union than in the state of Ohio.<sup>14</sup> According to the Soviet minister of health, in 1988 a total of 1,200,000 hospital beds (or 35 percent of the total) were in hospitals with no hot water; every sixth hospital bed was located in facilities where there was no running water at all; and 30 percent of all Soviet hospitals did not have indoor toilets.<sup>15</sup> One hundred million Soviet citizens (a third of the country’s population) had less living space than was prescribed by the minuscule Soviet “sanitary norm” of nine square meters per person.<sup>16</sup>

In 1988, the Soviet Union had a higher rate of infant mortality than forty-nine nations, behind Barbados and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of children, some as young as ten years old, worked twelve-hour days on collective farms.<sup>18</sup> Hundreds of schoolchildren died in labor accidents each year and thousands were crippled.<sup>19</sup> In 1988, there were thirty-five thousand labor accidents among working children under fourteen.<sup>20</sup> Half of Soviet schools had no central heating, running water, or indoor toilets.<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet Union ranked seventy-seventh in the world in personal consumption.<sup>22</sup> In 1989, the last year of relative stability before the crisis became uncontrollable, the average salary in the Soviet Union was two hundred rubles (about \$13) a month. The “official” poverty level was set at seventy-five rubles (U.S.\$5) per person per month, and forty-three million (or 17 percent of the population) had lesser incomes,<sup>23</sup> including retirees, every third of whom in the cities and eight out of ten in villages received less than sixty rubles (or U.S.\$4) a month.<sup>24</sup>

In summer 1989, of 211 “essential” food products, only 23 were regularly available in state stores.<sup>25</sup> In most industrial cities (including Yeltsin’s hometown of Sverdlovsk) meat was available in state stores twice a year: on 1 May and 7 November. Everywhere except Moscow, there was a shortage of milk, which could be purchased occasionally and only after queuing for hours. Millions of Russian children grew up without ever seeing an orange.

The Russians spent, on the average, between forty and sixty-eight hours a month in lines. When under glasnost such things could be reported, we learned of people taken to hospitals with frostbite after queuing for hours in winter and of policemen crushed and seriously injured trying to restrain crowds that stormed stores after shipments arrived (as happened, in 1990, outside a Khabarovsk store that had just received, of all things, pencils for sale). In the ancient Russian city of Kostroma, one could purchase children's soap (no more than three bars per customer) only after showing one's domestic passport with the children's names stamped in it, to prove that there were children under three years of age in the household.<sup>26</sup>

By 1990, virtually every major staple, including sugar, was rationed and could be obtained, when stores had it, only with a ration coupon. On my first day in the Sverdlovsk archives in July 1991, I inquired casually where I could buy something for lunch. There was silence and much embarrassment among the staffers of the Museum of Youth Movements. A few minutes later a young woman archivist gently put in front of me her gift: a small package tightly wrapped in white paper. On the package, in blue ink, was stamped a number and a month. It was her monthly allotment of sausage.

In my book I describe the strike of the Kuzbass miners in summer 1989—an absolutely central event in Gorbachev's rule and one of devastating political and economic consequences. The miners' demands included a towel, eight hundred grams of soap a month for after-shift wash up, and padded cotton jackets (*telogreyki*). As part of the settlement that ended the strike, the government agreed to deliver to Kuzbass ten thousand tons of sugar, three thousand tons of washing powder, three thousand tons of soap, over six thousand tons of meat, five million cans of dairy products, and one thousand tons of tea.<sup>27</sup>

In 1991, production dropped to 79 percent of the 1990 level. No one who was in Moscow in fall 1991 will ever forget the absolutely bare shelves of the stores, the ration coupons for sugar, tobacco, and soap, and the sacks of potatoes stored on the balconies of apartment buildings in the center of Moscow, as their inhabitants prepared to survive famine.

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Like Lincoln or de Gaulle, Yeltsin took over a great nation at the time of a mortal crisis and held it together. In Yeltsin's case, there were three crises at once—political, economic, and imperial. Not only did the country's political and economic systems lie in ruins, the country itself had to be reinvented. Against impossible odds, he succeeded, forging, for the first time in a thousand years, a sustainable Russian state that was neither a monarchy nor a dictatorship.

In the process, Yeltsin did enough to make half a dozen lives memorable. He dissolved the Soviet domestic empire—a stark departure from the national pattern in which state-building (from Ivan the Terrible and Peter, through Catherine the Great, Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev) had invariably included imperial expansion and strengthening of the empire as key components. In May 1997 he signed the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership" with Ukraine, whose

independence he recognized ahead of all other world leaders on 3 December 1991. The territorial and economic concessions that Yeltsin made to Ukraine, which had been part of Russia for almost three and a half centuries, may be without precedent in the relations between metropolises and their former territories. The very special and tragic case of Chechnya aside, one needs only to recall the massive and systemic violence that accompanied the breakup of other colonies—India and Pakistan, Britain and Ireland, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and, of course, Yugoslavia—to appreciate the magnitude of Yeltsin’s accomplishment.

Yeltsin decimated the garrison state by slashing the defense budget to under 5 percent of the GDP and the number of men under arms from four million to one million. He reduced Russia’s nuclear arsenal from 10,000 warheads to 4,500. This past October, the departure of the last Russian soldier from the former Soviet radar base in Skrunda (western Latvia) ended Russian military presence in East-Central Europe and completed Russia’s return to its seventeenth-century borders.

Until Yeltsin, the unity of Russia had been achieved only by rigid and ruthless control from Moscow. Whenever the control loosened and the iron hand grew rusty or shaky, the country swiftly fell apart, descended into fratricide and anarchy, and then was reconstituted by a new tyrant. At Yeltsin’s departure, Russia was, for the first time, both radically decentralized and whole.

Yeltsin presided over the birth of a new Russian politics as well. He institutionalized the vital liberties that Gorbachev had granted only provisionally and often by default. Glasnost became freedom from government censorship for speech and for the press. Gorbachev’s “political pluralism” evolved into freedom of political organization for all, including the regime’s most radical and implacable opponents; free, multicandidate elections, both legislative and presidential; and a parliament, which was dominated by radical opposition during Yeltsin’s entire tenure, save half a year between his inauguration in July 1991 and the beginning of economic reforms in January 1992. His eight and a half years were by far the freest, most tolerant and open period Russia had ever known, except for the eight months between February and November 1917.

Rid of its traditional cruelty and revenge, the new Russian political system, started by Gorbachev and decisively shaped by Yeltsin, granted losers not only their physical lives but their political lives as well. Not a hair fell off the heads of the leaders of the August 1991 putsch. They were never even brought to trial. In February 1994 Yeltsin signed into law the amnesty voted by the Duma for them and for the leaders of the 3 and 4 October 1993 armed rebellion in Moscow. Remarkable in any revolution, in the bloodstained Russian history this act was

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nothing short of astounding: the victorious head of state releasing, unmolested, his violent and unrepentant foes, who would almost certainly have killed him had they prevailed.

Although woefully underfunded and plagued by corruption, Russian courts under Yeltsin were nevertheless homes of a judiciary that was immeasurably more powerful and independent than in Soviet times. Russian citizens by the thousands sued federal and local authorities and won.<sup>28</sup> The courts also repeatedly overruled local authorities who banned “non-native” religious groups following the restrictive 1997 law initiated by the Duma. Even the traditionally most sacrosanct Russian institutions—the military and the secret police—were no longer entirely immune from due process, as the courts threw out dozens of suits brought by the army against “deserters.” Last December, a St. Petersburg court, in an action without precedent, acquitted a Russian citizen, former Navy captain Alexander Nikitin, whom the FSB charged with spying and treason.<sup>29</sup>

Even before the Constitutional Court in effect declared capital punishment unconstitutional, Yeltsin (acting against the dominant sentiment in the Duma and in the country’s public opinion) had commuted all death sentences—this in a country that traditionally executed prisoners savagely and, until a few years before, together with China and the United States had led the world in number of executions.<sup>30</sup>

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And yet, and yet, if amid all these epochal leaps and breakthroughs, the notoriously parsimonious History were to settle on one theme, the leitmotif of Yeltsin’s political life—what Yeats called the “great melody” (and Conor Cruise O’Brien made the title of his first-rate political biography of Burke)—what would it be? What is the place where a search for a historic Yeltsin should begin? I think that theme and that place, that “great melody” is likely to be the furtherance of liberty.

Such a verdict does not necessarily bode Yeltsin well.

On the pediment of the portico of the Paris Panthéon, where, among others, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Zola are buried, there is a bas-relief of France between Liberty and History, bestowing laurels on famous men. If the two—Liberty and History—agree, then good and well. But do they, invariably?

I think rather no than yes. Of all heroes, liberators fare worst. Among the components of progress, liberty, like greatness, is perhaps the most suspect to social scientists (at least those of my generation), who were taught in graduate school that that which cannot be quantified is not worth dealing with. The elusiveness and misperception of the criteria by which liberators are judged bear much of the blame as well. In keeping with his central conviction of the multiplicity and occasional incompatibility of even the most noble of human wishes and values, Sir Isaiah Berlin greatly clarified the matter when he wrote: “Liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience.”<sup>31</sup> (To which, in the Russian case, one can easily add honest and competent bureaucracy, universal sobriety, enlightened and generous captains of

industry, pensioners paid on time, peace in Chechnya, a 5 percent annual growth of GDP, foreign investments, improvement in corporate governance, and decreasing male mortality.) Yet Berlin's injunction remains largely ignored.

Sublime though it is, liberty, of course, can also be terrifying and often cruel. Economic freedom, for one, is the foe of equality, especially equality in poverty. "In much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow," says Ecclesiastes. There is much vexation in much freedom as well, and those who increase it, the liberators, increase sorrow for millions, at least in the short run.

But the short run, the first ten to fifteen years of wrenching postcommunist transition, is all that matters in politics—and not just in Russia. The darling of the Western intelligentsia and the one-time model postcommunist leader, President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic is serving out his second term in office, abandoned and often depressed in the Prague Castle, irrelevant, even a bit of a joke for his people, who are angry at the cronyism and corruption that they blame on the new economic order. "All the Communists who stole were allowed to keep their wealth and today they are captains of industry," a Prague worker complained to an American reporter in 1999. Havel "should have left at the height of his career," the worker added. "He gave people hope but did not fulfill it."<sup>32</sup> Last year, 49 percent of Czechs polled thought Havel should resign<sup>33</sup> and only slightly over half approved of the fall of communism.<sup>34</sup> A third explicitly regretted the demise of the communist regime.<sup>35</sup>

The most painful, most personal disappointment to Havel must be the emergence—ten years after he led the anticommunist "velvet revolution"—of the Communist party of Bohemia and Moravia as the most popular party in the Czech Republic. The party's leaders—gray, mediocre apparatchiks, very much like Genady Zyuganov's colleagues in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation—represent everything that Havel detested on aesthetic and moral as well as political grounds all his life.

A great deal in Yeltsin's sorry public image at the time of his resignation is traceable to these genetic handicaps of liberators. Yet for much, perhaps most, he had only himself to blame: the immense hardships of tens of millions, whose money was made worthless by inflation, whose jobs disappeared, and whose salaries and pensions were delayed for months; the armed rebellion in Moscow on 3 and 4 October 1993, precipitated by Yeltsin's decision to resolve a constitutional crisis by dissolving the Congress of People's Deputies of Russia and scheduling an early election; the indiscriminate brutality of the two Chechen wars; the embarrassingly crude and inept manipulation of Russian politics to enhance his slipping grasp on power in the last two years. That as millions suffered, millions of others gained enormously from political and economic freedom does not absolve Yeltsin of the responsibility for blunders in the strategy of economic reforms and for abetting corruption and a brief but pernicious reign of the so-called oligarchs, the Russian robber-barons, whose presence became synonymous with crooked deals, rigged markets, fraudulent "auctions," and the incestuous relationship between political power and the privatized economy.

There seemed to be two Yeltsins coexisting in the public eye—occasionally overlapping, sometimes clashing and retreating, but always remaining distinct and resilient. One was Yeltsin the leader and the visionary. The other was Yeltsin the politician—an avid and very competent greasy-pole climber, obsessed with power and its many gaudy trappings, petty, and jealous of competitors' popularity. In many ways he ran the Kremlin like a Byzantine court (or like the *obkom*, a provincial party committee, where he spent seventeen years). It was rife with intrigue, back-stabbing, favorites and outcasts, sudden firings and hirings, demotions and promotions.

Yet in addition to the “built-in” features of a historic Yeltsin, as always in the social sciences, observers' biases were at work as well. As he readied his old-fashioned camera to photograph the remnants of the Casa Bertini (Shelley's house in the wooded hills near Lucca), Richard Holmes, who is likely the best literary biographer in the English language today, set the field of focus and aperture to “ten foot to infinity.” He wrote later that this was precisely the range for a conscientious biographer: “ten foot to infinity.”<sup>36</sup> In the case of Yeltsin, the depth of vision was a few inches at best.

Much of what passed for reporting on Yeltsin fell within the genre of political entomology: like insects, political leaders are watched through a magnifying glass within the tiny confines of their personal foibles, petty passions, and daily stupidities, in almost total isolation from their policies, ideologies, agendas—and from their countries at large.

This was history as practiced by those whom Berlin called “the glass and plastic” historians who “regard all facts as equally interesting” and whose product is contaminated by “craven pedantry and blindness.”<sup>37</sup> In a brilliant essay on Chaim Weizmann, Berlin supplied an antidote:

Greatness is not a specifically moral attribute. It is not one of the private virtues. . . . A great man need not be morally good, or upright, or kind, or sensitive, or delightful, or possess artistic or scientific talent. To call someone a great man is to claim that he has intentionally taken . . . a large step, one far beyond the normal capacities of men, in satisfying, or materially affecting, central human interests.<sup>38</sup>

As with Berlin's definition of liberty, this formula remains, for the most part, unheeded.

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No matter what happens in the short run, ultimately History appears to recognize only choice, not luck or accident. The great French socialist and prime minister Leon Blum noted that “life does not lend itself to the simultaneous retention of all possible benefits, and I have often thought that morality consists uniquely perhaps in having the courage to choose.” This might be one of those rare cases where, *pace* Machiavelli, private morality and statesmanship intersect. Making critical choices may not be a sufficient condition for greatness, but it is most certainly a necessary one.

Sooner or later, therefore, a search for a historic Yeltsin must confront the matter of choice. Did Yeltsin, not to put too fine a point on it, know what he was



doing? Or did he, as the currently fashionable Russian and Washington lore directs us to believe, wake up with a hangover after nonstop drinking in Belavezhskaya Pushcha on 8 December 1991 and decide to dissolve the Soviet Union? And did he introduce capitalism by freeing the prices on 2 January 1992 in much the same manner: impulsively, even capriciously, concerned only with petty political gain and unaware of the gravity of the consequences? I believe that the preponderance of evidence assembled in the book demonstrates consistent and considered choices for liberty in Yeltsin's three central decisions about the Russian domestic empire, democracy, and the market economy.

Of these three choices, which laid the foundation of postcommunist Russia, that of economic freedom is generally treated as something almost accidental. Yet it was precisely here that personal choice was both absolutely central and hardest to make. Democratization and the dissolution of the empire had been set in train by Gorbachev (the former more or less consciously, the latter inadvertently). Not so in the economy; by the end of 1991, after four years of tinkering, the market and private property were still a taboo, dealt with by articles in the Criminal Code.

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The choice of economic liberty was unique also because Yeltsin had to abandon the strategy that had served him so well before. Until then, he had sensed the direction of Russian public opinion and followed—as well as guided and molded—it. Yet if democracy was clearly in tune with the sense of the majority, and if the abandonment of the Soviet Union, at least for the moment, seemed a fair price to pay for Russian liberty and prosperity, neither the freeing of prices nor the privatization of the economy was being clamored for by tens of millions. With the market revolution, Yeltsin was, so to speak, on his own.

In the end—after years of debates, recommendations, commissions, and resolutions—it was one man's ability to make a choice and to take the responsibility that tipped the scale. The market economy happened in Russia because Yeltsin wished it to happen (as it did not happen in neighboring Ukraine because its president, Leonid Kravchuk, decided to have a peaceful and uncomplicated presidency).

As Yegor Gaidar remarked to me years later, the freeing of prices, which would turn millions of Russians into paupers overnight (no matter how impoverished they already were because of shortages and inflation that consumed most of their savings), was something that Yeltsin knew Russia “needed” but, he was equally certain, “could not support”—at least not by the majorities to which he was accustomed. For the first time, as an astute Russian journalist noted at the time, Yeltsin the “populist” and Yeltsin the revolutionary became adversaries.<sup>39</sup>

This was, literally, Yeltsin's first major “unpopular” decision. He would con-

fess later that for “two whole months” he and his advisers had searched for “more acceptable,” “less onerous” ways to begin the reforms without freeing the prices—but could not find any.<sup>40</sup> No politician makes such choices lightly, least of all someone who until then had been a national hero, basking in the adoration of millions.

On 28 October 1991, Yeltsin went to the Congress of People’s Deputies of Russia to seek a mandate for the price liberalization and privatization plan (which, as many in Russia and the West would soon so conveniently forget, was granted by an 876 to 16 vote). In one of the best speeches he ever made, Yeltsin declared that the time of “small steps” was past. We must in deeds, he went on, not words, begin extricating ourselves from “the swamp that pulls us deeper and deeper.” Only a “large scale reformist breakthrough” could save Russia’s economy from disintegration, her people from poverty, and her state from collapse.<sup>41</sup>

He called the “unfreezing” of prices the “hardest” measure, but the entire experience of “world civilization,” Yeltsin said, had proved that fair prices could not be set by the bureaucrat, only by the market. He counted on the “support and understanding” of the people of Russia, support that they had so generously given him in the past. Together, the previous August, they defended “political freedom”; now it was time for economic freedom, freedom for enterprises and entrepreneurs, for people to work as much as they wanted and to get as much for their labor as they earned.<sup>42</sup>

“Today, we must make a decisive choice,” Yeltsin concluded.

To do so requires the will and wisdom of the people, the courage of political leaders, the knowledge of experts. Your president has made this choice. This is the most important decision of my life. I have never looked for easy roads in life, but I understand very clearly that the next months will be the most difficult. If I have your support and your trust, I am ready to travel this road with you to the end. The time has come for practical actions in the name and for the benefit of every Russian family, in the name and for the benefit of the Russian state.<sup>43</sup>

On 29 December, four days before price controls were to be lifted, Yeltsin addressed the nation in a televised speech, in which he placed the economic revolution at the center of the general “de-communization” of Russia. Along with prices set by the state, “we are abandoning mirages and illusions,” Yeltsin said.<sup>44</sup> It was clear that the communist utopia “could not be built.” It was not Russia that had been defeated; it was communism. With the state-owned economy, Russia was “riding” itself of “the militarization of our life,” of the “anti-human economy” devoted almost entirely to military production. Russia had stopped “constant preparation” for war “with the whole world.” The “iron curtain” that had been there “between us and almost the whole world” was no more.<sup>45</sup>

We have inherited “a devastated land,” a “gravely ill Russia,” Yeltsin concluded, but “we must not despair.” No matter how difficult things are at the time, “we have a chance to climb out of this pit.” Our people are “no worse, no lazier than any other. It is necessary only to help people find themselves in this new life.”<sup>46</sup>

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Of course, liberty, even if consciously chosen, is not democracy (although it is a necessary condition for democracy)—and a liberator is not a democrat. What label, what shorthand will History settle on in the case of Yeltsin?

Here was the man who ordered troops into Chechnya in December 1994 and for a year and a half prosecuted a war there—incompetently, cruelly, and in complete disregard for the country's public opinion. (Five years later, this time with public opinion on his side, he allowed his handpicked successor to unleash another savage attack on Chechnya.) Yeltsin weakened the nascent constitutional order and cheapened free political discourse with his cynical palace games. He is responsible for a great deal of the alienation of the people from power in the new Russia.

He was also someone who allowed complete freedom of speech and political organization for his most outrageous and crudest critics; who, except for three days in August 1991 and two weeks in October 1993, never closed down a single opposition newspaper; who sought popular mandates for his policies and his office in a referendum and free elections open to those same critics. In the 1996 presidential race, he quite literally risked his life for victory—ignoring the doctors' warnings, suffering a heart attack a few days before the final vote, and undergoing quintuple bypass heart surgery four months later.

He was rife with authoritarian habits and urges—and bound by self-imposed and self-enforced constraints. He thirsted for power, was zealous to acquire and hold it. Yet both the mode of acquisition of that power (by two free elections) and at least some of the uses to which he put it—greatly weakening the state's stranglehold over society and the economy, and Moscow's over Russia—were utterly novel for that country.

The Russia that Yeltsin left behind reflected the contradictions of its founding father. It was a hybrid: a polity still semi-authoritarian, corrupt, and mistrusted by the society, but also one that was governable, in which the elites' competition for power was arbitrated by popular vote, and in which most of the tools of authoritarian mobilization and coercion appeared to have been significantly dulled. Yeltsin's legacy was a collection of necessary, although far from sufficient, conditions for a modern capitalist democracy: free elections; freedom of political opposition; demilitarization of state and society; decentralization of the traditionally unitary state; a largely privatized economy; and a still small and weak but increasingly assertive civil society, sustained by civil liberties, freedom of the press from government censorship, and an increasingly independent and assertive judiciary. The political organism that he forged is full of severe defects, both genetic and acquired, yet capable of development and of peacefully thwarting communist restoration without succumbing to authoritarianism.

Perhaps most important of all, Yeltsin freed Russia from what the great English poet Robert Graves (in an entirely different context) called "the never changing circuit of its fate"<sup>47</sup>—the history that after four centuries appeared to have become destiny: imperialism, militarism, and rigid centralization interrupted by episodes of horrifyingly brutal anarchy. He gave Russia a "*peredyshka*," a time to catch its breath. The traditional attributes of the Russian state—authoritarian-

ism, imperialism, militarism, xenophobia—are far from extinguished. Yet more and higher hedges have been erected against their recurrence under Yeltsin's *peredyska* than at any other time in Russian history.

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Brutalized—the rulers and the ruled alike—by terror and lies, gnarled by fear and poverty, paralyzed by total dependence on the state, the Russians' journey from subjects to a free people will be neither easy nor fast. Yet, like a convalescing invalid, Russia under Yeltsin began to hobble away from the prison hospital that the czars and commissars built, with its awful food, stern nurses, short visiting hours, and ugly uniforms.

She is not out of the hospital yard yet. But if she can no longer be stopped, Yeltsin's name, next to Gorbachev's, will be inscribed by History among those of great liberators.

#### NOTES

1. Nikolai Kostomarov, *Rossiyskaya istoriya v zhizneopisaniyakh eyo glavneyshikh deyateley*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Kniga, 1991), 565. The author is grateful to Sir Rodric Braithwaite, Britain's former ambassador to the Soviet Union and Russia, for pointing out this passage.
2. Nikolai Ryzhkov, *Perestroika: istoriya predatel'stv* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), 33.
3. Ibid.
4. Konstantin Simis, *USSR: The Corrupt Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 248.
5. Il'ya Mil'shtein, "Neudachnik na trone," *Novoe Vremya* 2–3, 23 January 2000, 23.
6. Ryzhkov, *Perestroika*, 94.
7. Vladimir Treml, "Gorbachev's Anti-Drinking Campaign: A Noble Experiment or a Costly Exercise in Futility," *RL Supplement*, 18 March 1987, 8.
8. Ibid.
9. Oksana Dmitrieva, *Moskovskie Novosti*, 15–21 February 2000.
10. Evgeny Primakov, "Russia must be a star player on the world arena" (excerpts from the speech given at the conference of the Council of Foreign and Defense Policy, 14 March 1998, 1; dist. by the Information Department of the Embassy of the Russian Federation).
11. Ryzhkov, *Perestroika*, 236.
12. Every third loaf of bread was made from imported grain. See A. Sizov, "Sverim tsifry," *Kommunist* 15 (October 1989): 63.
13. Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: Norton, 1999), 103.
14. Ibid.
15. Zoriy Balayan, "Kogda bolezn obgoniaet lekarstva," *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 3 February 1988. Two years later, the State Statistical Committee disclosed still gloomier data: 19 percent of the hospitals had no central heat, 45 percent lacked bathrooms or showers, and 49 percent were without hot water. See Barrie R. Cassileth, Vasily V. Vlasov, and Christopher Chapman, "Health Care, Medical Practice and Medical Ethics in Russia Today," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 273 (1995): 1570.
16. *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 31 August 1988.
17. Z. Balayan, "Kogda bolezn obgoniaet lekarstva."
18. O. Drunina, "K chemu privodit bezdushie," *Trud*, 19 January 1988.
19. Ibid.
20. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 13 August 1986.
21. *Pravda*, 30 June 1988.

22. V. Radayev and O. Shkaratan, "Vozvrashchenie k istokam," *Izvestiya*, 16 February 1990.
23. A. Cherniak, "Edoki po statistike i v zhizni," *Pravda*, 1 September 1988.
24. Yu. Rytov, "Kak zhitut pensionery," *Izvestiya*, 20 August 1988. Even before the full bloom of glasnost, Soviet poverty was hardly a secret to the more perceptive Western scholars and analysts. See, for instance, Mervyn Matthews, *Poverty in the Soviet Union: The Life Styles of the Underprivileged in Recent Years* (Cambridge, 1986) and Aaron Trehub, "Poverty in the Soviet Union," *Radio Liberty Research*, 20 June 1988.
25. Vasilii Selyunin, "Soviet Reformer Fears Collapse of Economic House of (Ration) Cards," *Glasnost* 2 (January–March 1990).
26. Ibid.
27. P. Voroshilov and A. Soloviev, "Konstruktivnyi dialog s shakhterami," *Izvestiya*, 18 July 1989.
28. See, for instance, Peter H. Solomon, Jr., "Law and Courts in Post-Soviet Russia," an unpublished paper written for the Project on Systemic Change and International Security in Russia and the New States of Eurasia, Russian Area and East European Studies Program, the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C., 1999.
29. An acquittal in a similar case had been handed down four months earlier by a military court in Vladivostok in the case of Captain Grigoriy Pas'ko. Found not guilty of espionage, he was convicted of "misuse of office" (*zloupotreblenie sluzhebnyim polozheniem*), sentenced, and immediately released, his sentence reduced to nothing by amnesty and by the time he had already spent in pretrial detention.
30. In August 1999, Yeltsin formally asked the Duma to abolish the death penalty in Russia.
31. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 125.
32. Steven Erlanger, "Havel Finds His Role Turning From Czech Hero to Has-Been," *New York Times*, 4 November 1999, A12.
33. *RFE/RL Newswire—Central and Eastern Europe*, 10 February 1999 ([refrl.org/newswire/1999/02/3-cee/cee-100299.html](http://refrl.org/newswire/1999/02/3-cee/cee-100299.html)).
34. *RFE/RL Newswire—Central and Eastern Europe*, 17 November 1999 ([refrl.org/newswire/1999/11/3-cee/cee-171199.html](http://refrl.org/newswire/1999/11/3-cee/cee-171199.html)).
35. Ibid.
36. Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 148.
37. Isaiah Berlin, "Winston Churchill," in *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Penguin, 1982), 17.
38. Isaiah Berlin, "Chaim Weizmann," in *Personal Impressions*, 32.
39. Valeriy Vyzhutovich, "My boyalis' shokovoy terapii. I prishli k shokovoy khirurgii," *Izvestiya*, 29 October 1991, 1.
40. Boris Yeltsin, address to the nation, 29 December 1991 (Moscow Central Television, FBIS-SOV-91-250, 30 December 1991), 29.
41. Boris Yeltsin, speech to the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation, 28 October 1991 (*Sovetskaya Rossia*, 29 October 1991, 2).
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Boris Yeltsin, address to the nation, 29 December 1991, 27.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 28.
47. Robert Graves, "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," in *Collected Poems, 1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137.