Remembering Anatoly Sobchak

ALAN HOLIMAN

Anatoly Aleksandrovich Sobchak died on Sunday, 20 February 2000. The former mayor of St. Petersburg, on a campaign visit to Kaliningrad Oblast for then–presidential candidate Vladimir Putin, was in the town of Svetlogorsk to give a lecture at a local university. In the evening he felt chest pain and returned to his hotel at 10 P.M. An aide entered his room at approximately 11 P.M. to discuss his schedule for the following day and found him dead. According to autopsy results, Sobchak died of a massive heart attack. He was sixty-two years of age.

Sobchak's body was taken to St. Petersburg, where it lay in state in the Tauride Palace, the former seat of both the Imperial Duma and the Petrograd soviet. Members of Moscow's political elite were among the many prominent mourners, including Grigory Yavlinsky, Anatoly Chubais, Boris Nemtsov, Irina Khakhamada, and Boris Berezovsky. Foremost among those who came to honor Sobchak was Acting President Vladimir Putin. Putin stood for several minutes with head bowed before the coffin of the man who not only was his former law professor but had also given him his start in politics. According to some estimates, nearly fifty thousand local residents came to pay their respects in a line extending at times to 1.5 kilometers. On 24 February, Sobchak was interred in the Nikolsky Cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, next to Galina Starovoitova.

Sobchak was born on 10 August 1937, in the city of Chita. In 1959, he graduated from the law faculty of Leningrad State University. After a brief stint as an attorney working in Stavropol Krai, Sobchak returned to Leningrad, where he taught law at the Leningrad Special Militia School and the Leningrad Technological Institute of the Cellulose-Paper Industry. In 1982, he returned to his alma mater as chairman of the department of economic law, at the law faculty of Leningrad State University.

The name of Anatoly Sobchak is intimately linked with the history of democratic political reform in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and like the movement itself, he leaves a mixed legacy. His political career unfolded in two stages.

Alan Holiman is an assistant professor in the department of political science at William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri.

Anatoly Sobchak first came to public attention in 1989, when he ran for a seat in the new USSR Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) from Leningrad's forty-seventh district on Vasilievsky Island. Sobchak attracted attention immediately by running a spirited campaign. A strong supporter of perestroika, he joined the Soviet Communist Party shortly before becoming a candidate for office. He was not, however, a typical Communist. He spoke forcefully and eloquently about the need for greater democracy and economic reform in the USSR. Voters were impressed by his progressive ideas and obvious intelligence. As one Russian colleague put it, "*On krasivyj i padezhej ne putaet*" ("He is handsome and does not confuse his grammatical cases").

Having won election to the CPD, Sobchak distinguished himself on the national stage. Elected subsequently to the USSR Supreme Soviet, he chaired a subcommittee on economic law. When sessions of the parliament were televised nationally, Sobchak's became a household name. Skilled in debate and in rational argumentation, he launched withering criticisms of the old guard, official corruption, and various other abuses by the Soviet regime, much to the surprise and delight of a large television audience.

It was Sobchak who was given the task in parliament of leading an official inquiry into the massacre of demonstrators by the police in Tbilisi in April 1989. Pressing the inquiry with vigor, Sobchak questioned not only local party leaders in Georgia, but even high officials of the Soviet military. Sobchak's determined investigation even implicated Politburo member Yegor Ligachev as partially responsible for the use of force in the incident. Sobchak taught the Soviet people the invaluable lesson that those in power, even the very highest authorities, could and should be held accountable for their actions by the people's elected representatives.

Along with Andrei Sakharov, Boris Yeltsin, and Galina Starovoitova, Sobchak played an important role in organizing the Interregional Deputies' Group, the first loyal opposition faction in the Soviet parliament. So impressive was Sobchak's performance in Moscow that he was often mentioned as a future national leader, perhaps even a successor to Mikhail Gorbachev. Circumstances, however, would soon call him back to his native Leningrad.

In 1990, democratic activists won majority control of the Leningrad city soviet in a free and competitive election. The challenges of organizing the new city council and of wresting control over city affairs from the local Communist Party leadership were formidable. The democrats needed a visible symbol, a dynamic leader around whom they could rally. Sobchak was persuaded to run for an open seat in the Leningrad soviet, which he won handily. He was quickly elected its chairman.

Sobchak zestfully took up the cudgel of reform. Along with Boris Yeltsin, he resigned his membership in the CPSU in 1990. He was instrumental in the effort to change the city's name from Leningrad to its original St. Petersburg, and he persuaded the city's voters to endorse the move in a referendum on 12 June 1991. On the same day, Boris Yeltsin was elected Russia's first president and Sobchak was elected to the new position of mayor of St. Petersburg. Such was his popularity locally that he did not have to campaign strenuously for the post and won the office with 66.13 percent of the vote.

When, in August 1991, coup plotters attempted to remove Gorbachev from power and stop the reform movement in the USSR, Sobchak found himself in Moscow. As Boris Yeltsin led the struggle against the coup in the capital, Mayor Sobchak returned to St. Petersburg immediately to mobilize local opposition to the coup plotters. Displaying genuine personal courage and risking his own detention, Sobchak went to military headquarters, where he confronted the commander of the Leningrad military district and other local security officials who had received orders from Moscow to introduce troops into the city. Sobchak warned the local conspirators that they were in violation of the law and would be subject to trial when the coup attempt failed. In the strongest possible terms he directed them to halt to the movement of troops into the city, and they complied with his demand. No troops appeared on the city's streets.

Sobchak went on local television to encourage popular support of democracy. He addressed a massive and enthusiastic rally on Palace Square, condemning the coup and expressing unqualified solidarity with Yeltsin's resistance in Moscow. With the failure of the coup and the collapse of Communist power, Anatoly Sobchak, no less than Boris Yeltsin, became to many the living embodiment of hopes for democracy and a better future. He stood at the zenith of public esteem and popularity. His public career, however, entered a new and much less romantic phase: the day-to-day grind of governing a city beset with problems in a country reeling from chaos.

St. Petersburg is not an easy city to govern and was even less so during the Sobchak administration (1991–96). It is likely that no one could have lived up to the hopes placed on Sobchak as the city entered the postcommunist era. While the population, the mayor, and an overwhelming majority of the deputies of the St. Petersburg soviet strongly favored both democracy and market economic reforms, institutional, political, and personal factors frustrated local governance.

The institutional relationship between the mayor and the soviet was rather ill defined. Deputies guiding the work of the Soviet believed that they should not only pass legislation but should set the direction of policy and exercise strong oversight of the newly created executive. While acknowledging the legislative role of the soviet, Mayor Sobchak vociferously asserted the right to set local policy priorities and resented legislative oversight of his administration. He felt free to ignore resolutions and directives from the soviet and to disregard laws that he found inconvenient. His administration frequently withheld information from the legislators and rebuffed attempts at what was regarded as unwarranted legislative interference in executive matters. Almost daily, allegations surfaced of shady and corrupt dealings in the city's privatization program. Most were ignored.

Sobchak had a city to run. In doing so, he made peace with the directors of St. Petersburg's largest industrial enterprises, many of them related to the military-industrial complex, and utilized their expertise in his administration. Some officials of the former Communist administration were also retained for their expertise and skill, which produced a great deal of rancor and suspicion in the soviet. Sobchak, however, also brought many new persons into city government who would later go on to prominent careers in national politics. Anatoly Chubais, Ger-

man Gref, Alexei Kudrin, Sergei Beliaev, Dmitri Kozak, and Vladimir Putin all got their political starts in Sobchak's administration.

For his part, Sobchak publicly derided the soviet as an amateurish lot of windbags. His barbs were often pointed, and they were answered in kind. The personal acrimony was, unfortunately, nothing new. Even during his brief tenure as chairman of the Leningrad city soviet, Sobchak made many enemies with his sharp tongue, sarcastic wit, and what was perceived by many deputies as his imperious manner. The mutual enmity grew worse. Sobchak was not a man who took criticism well, and he was unwilling to embrace the daily grind of bargaining and compromise between executive and legislature that are the essence of democratic government. This he clearly resented, and his attitude permeated his administration.

As Russia's economic transformation stumbled along and daily life in St. Petersburg grew increasingly difficult, the constant public squabbling and acrimony between the mayor and the soviet led to rising levels of public disappointment and disgust. The situation was made worse by the city's lack of strong political parties and citizens' organizations that could have put pressure on city officials, disciplining them to focus on public concerns more clearly.

Clear institutional relationships, or rules of the game, are essential if a democracy is to work. It is regrettable that Sobchak and the many gifted members of the St. Petersburg soviet did not understand that better and devote concerted efforts to institution-building early on. One would think that Sobchak's experience in parliament and his legal training would have encouraged him to take the lead. But as they took the reins of power, the democrats missed an invaluable opportunity to build democracy locally. The acrimony between mayor and soviet came to an abrupt end, however, in December 1993. President Yeltsin dissolved the St. Petersburg soviet and ordered new elections as part of his plan to reform regional legislatures in the wake of his successful dissolution of the national parliament and introduction of a new constitution.

As head of administration in St. Petersburg, Sobchak was given the authority to implement presidential directives for elections to a new city assembly. According to a directive that Sobchak helped draft, the new legislature would have only fifty seats, down from the nearly four hundred-member soviet. The new assembly would also have considerably less power than the mayor, and its deputies would serve on a part-time basis.

The March 1994 elections to the city assembly, however, were a fiasco. Sobchak had authored an electoral law making it so easy to become a candidate that over seven hundred people registered to compete for fifty seats. Voters found it nearly impossible to distinguish among them and, consequently, stayed away from the polls in droves.

According to the electoral law, 25 percent of voters citywide needed to turn out to make the election valid. On the first day only 19 percent voted, putting the entire election in jeopardy. In a surprise move, Sobchak issued a decree extending the voting for an additional day and permitted students and soldiers not permanently residing in the city to vote. Additional efforts were made to troop people to the polls, and the total turnout reached the required minimum—just barely.

However, 25 percent of voters in each electoral district were required to participate to make the elections in that district valid, so the Election Commission had to void the races in twenty-five of the fifty electoral districts due to low turnouts. Elections to fill the remaining seats were not held until November 1994, which meant that the city assembly was left without a quorum for most of the year. In the interim, Mayor Sobchak was free to govern the city and spend public money as he saw fit, without any legislative oversight.

As mayor, Anatoly Sobchak devoted much time and money to promoting St. Petersburg as a major center for world tourism and banking. He once quipped that "if Hong Kong can do it, why can't we?" The problem was that St. Petersburg, a city with an aging population, dilapidated infrastructure, and antiquated industrial base was no Hong Kong. Moreover, it could not compete with Moscow in terms of attracting international investment and profiting from the private wealth created by Russia's privatization process. Nonetheless, Sobchak traveled tirelessly around the world promoting his vision. In 1994, he made twenty trips abroad; in 1995, twenty-six trips.

Sobchak clearly relished the role of St. Petersburg's ambassador to the world. He hosted numerous international festivals and exhibitions. He loved to be seen and photographed with national and international celebrities and did his utmost to attract them to the city. In 1995, he published a history of the Communist Party of the USSR that was filled with color photographs of himself, as mayor, posing with notables such as Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Charles, Helmut Kohl, Jacques Chirac, Ronald Reagan, Al Gore, singer Edith Pekha, Ted Turner, and supermodel Claudia Schiffer. Just what connection the photographs had to the collapse of the Communist Party was a mystery.

In 1994, Sobchak diverted substantial sums of public money in a cash-strapped city to prepare to host the summer Goodwill Games. This was not forgotten when in 1995 a tunnel in the city's aging subway system collapsed, probably due to a lack of maintenance, and left a district of over 500,000 residents without direct train connections to the downtown area. Moreover, no funds were available to repair the tunnel. Understandably, the mayor's plan to make a bid to host the 2004 summer Olympic Games provoked considerable resentment in the city. One wonders whether legislative oversight might have prevented some of this.

Mayor Sobchak was preoccupied by his own vision and ambitions. His priorities somehow did not correspond well to those of most residents of St. Petersburg. During his administration, they had witnessed visible structural decay. The city's bureaucracy suffered bloat, while the number of bus and tram lines was cut, and the city's overburdened subway system barely coped with the demands placed on it. Public roadways barely deserved the name. Many voters sensed that Sobchak was more concerned with cutting a big figure on the national and international political stages than with fixing potholes.

In 1996, with the post of mayor now christened as "governor," Sobchak faced an unexpected reelection challenge from Vladimir Yakovlev, who served in his administration as first deputy mayor. Sobchak viewed the challenge as a person-

al betrayal, and consequently the election campaign was characterized by invective, mutual accusations of corruption, and other forms of scandalmongering.

Sobchak touted his accomplishments as mayor, reminding voters how he had prevented violence in the city during national political upheavals in 1991 and 1993. He defended his vision of St. Petersburg as a major center of international tourism, praised his administration's efforts to keep the city running during very difficult times, and stressed the city's need for a political leader of national and international stature. Posters blanketed the city proclaiming, "The Mayor for Governor!"

Yakovlev, on the other hand, ran on a straightforward platform of fixing potholes, rebuilding infrastructure, and working to increase local production and jobs. He appeared in ads with shirtsleeves rolled up and his jacket slung over his shoulder, and used a simple but effective slogan: "Fewer Words. More Deeds." Yakovlev won the election with 47.5 percent of the vote; Sobchak had 45.7 percent. Although Sobchak respected the result and left office, he remained bitter toward Yakovlev and refused to attend his inauguration.

Sobchak's years out of power were anything but tranquil. The new city authorities issued reports about the massive budget deficits left to them by the Sobchak administration. Accusations were made in the press about Sobchak's involvement in corrupt property dealings and other questionable business practices. Sobchak vigorously denied any and all corruption allegations. In 1997, the local procuracy opened an inquiry into Sobchak's business dealings and called him in for questioning. While under interrogation, he suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized. Several weeks later he left Russia on a chartered plane and took up residence in Paris, where he was reportedly seeking medical treatment.

While in France, Sobchak gave numerous lectures and wrote a political memoir (due to be released in summer 2000), reportedly titled *A Dozen Knives in My Back*. Sobchak returned to Russia in July 1999 after the prosecutor's inquiry petered out.

Despite many assurances to the contrary, Sobchak never abandoned the dream of resuming public life. In December 1999, he made a renewed attempt to get back into politics. He ran for a single-mandate seat in the Duma from St. Petersburg and lost. He played an early and public role in promoting Vladimir Putin's bid for the presidency. It is ironic that he died on the eve of his protégé's election to that office. Sobchak, at least, believed that he still had contributions to make to improve Russia's future and would likely have been given another lease on political life by his friend.

Russians can be very unforgiving of their politicians, but they do not forget the good that they do. It seems that the tens of thousands of St. Petersburg citizens who braved the long lines to bid farewell to Anatoly Sobchak did so not only to honor a man who loved their city passionately but to remind themselves of the hope that he once inspired and that perhaps might live again.