

# Ordinary Russians? Rethinking August 1991

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**Abstract:** A specialist in Russian history and politics reexamines the prevailing conventional wisdom that only a few Russians in Moscow and St. Petersburg resisted the attempt coup in August 1991. Press accounts at the time indicate a higher level of opposition across the country than is generally assumed, along with significant levels of resistance and subversion, but the structure of broadcast media fostered an impression of activism in the capitals and apathy elsewhere. Compared with other coups and coup attempts in the twentieth century, Russians evinced an unusual willingness to face down a military takeover. The conclusion considers reasons for downplaying the significance of opposition in historical memory and its impact on the prospects for democracy in Russia.

**Key words:** August 1991, coup, democracy, media, protest, Russia

**W**hether perestroika was in flux or at the end of its life by summer 1991, it was decisively terminated by the August 1991 coup. The dominant narratives about August 1991 suggest that an ill-conceived and poorly executed attempt to seize power failed because of its leaders' incompetence, their serious miscalculations of public opinion, or Gorbachev's failure to support political allies whose actions he had previously endorsed. The interpretation presented here—that the forces bent on restoring “order” and preventing further devolution of central power were defeated by a combination of direct opposition, resistance, and subversion—now amounts to a revisionist approach. Yet, in the context of the breakdown of democratic regimes in the twentieth century, Russians' opposition to the August 1991 coup provides a striking example of resistance to forces that more often succeed in suppressing democracy.<sup>1</sup>

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Considering the August 1991 events in a comparative context has not been the standard approach. Russians have difficulty accepting that they are not unique. Whether in the form of Moscow as the Third Rome (accompanied by assurances that there would not be a fourth), Stalin's repackaging of the world socialist revolution for a single country, Berdyaev's insistence that all countries are unique but Russia is more unique,<sup>2</sup> or the persistent folk wisdom that Russia is a *strana zagodochnaia* (indicipherable or puzzling country), Russians continue to believe that Russia is exempt from generalizations derived from social science. Many of the specialists studying the country share and reinforce that view.

Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in December 2004 provoked yet another round of breast-beating by the Russian intelligentsia, decrying the Russian inability to overcome the masses' slavish desire for a strong leader. Yuri Levada, comparing the events in Kyiv with the neostagnation in Russian political life, stated that there would be nothing comparable in Russia in the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> This sort of pronouncement should give us pause. As Levada himself acknowledges, the events of the twenty years following Mikhail Gorbachev's March 1985 election as general secretary overturned practically every "law" and prediction regarding Soviet politics. Shortly before Gorbachev came to power, the U.S. government's (and MacArthur Foundation's) favorite Sovietologist, Seweryn Bialer, concluded the politics chapter for the Center for Strategic and International Studies' *After Brezhnev* project by predicting more stagnation:

In summary, I anticipate no fundamental changes during this decade, despite intensive and divisive discussion concerning economic reforms, a number of organizational policy initiatives, experimentation with economic structure, and significant political conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Given the rapid, dramatic, and far from linear changes of the past two decades, we should all be reticent in offering sweeping predictions about politics and society even one or two, much less ten decades hence.

Rather than being a basis for pessimism about Russia, Ukraine's Orange Revolution can provide additional perspective on the events of August 1991, further encouraging us to view that experience in a comparative context. It also forces us to consider why an observer as astute as Yuri Levada would be prompted to offer such a sweeping and potentially demoralizing generalization. Levada's assessment of Kyiv includes a view of the events of 1991 that minimizes the scale and importance of popular mobilization in Russia.

Levada's pessimism reflects a Russian intelligentsia view of the populace that has been persistently double-edged. On the one hand, Russians are seen as dumb cattle, unable to think for themselves or see through the heavy-handed propaganda purveyed by their leaders. Yuri Afanasyev stated this directly: "Many of our people seem reduced to a condition resembling that of cattle and, what is more frightening, they do not ask to live any other way."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Russians can be the world's most sophisticated readers, because they have had to learn to read between the lines for decades. This confirms George Kennan's comment about Russians being able simultaneously to embrace two mutually contradictory views.<sup>6</sup>

Absence of a middle ground in assessments of 1991 is an indication of how politicized analysis of the events has become, and it also reflects Russian and Soviet officials' persistent difficulty with unbridled discussion. Except for a few months in 1917, freedom of the Russian press has been a matter of negotiation. The term *glasnost* would not have been coined during the 1860s if Alexander II had intended to allow freedom of speech or the press. Glasnost' after 1985 involved openness with adjectives—greater openness, which was better than openness, but not as good as complete openness. In this, at least, Gorbachev succeeded. If he had believed in freedom of speech he could have said so. Glasnost' demonstrated the incomplete nature of Gorbachev's revolution. Gorbachev rather quickly lost control of the process and was outflanked by politicians and cultural figures willing to go much further in posing difficult questions and analyzing the Soviet past. The period from 1987 to 1990 was marked by pushing back the limits, sometimes in a zig-zag path. In some parts of the Soviet empire outside of Russia, the limits vanished. But in Russia, countervailing pressures quickly appeared.

The opportunity for limited or controlled change in Russia, whether dependent on Gorbachev or not, was eliminated by the same event that destroyed the Soviet Union—the August 1991 coup. The failure of the coup so weakened what was left of the Soviet control mechanisms that a negotiated devolution of power became impossible.<sup>7</sup>

### Impaired Memory

Memories of this period have become increasingly selective and political. For example, when Soviet Interior Ministry troops attacked demonstrators in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989, police authorities were criticized for refusing to tell medical personnel the composition of the gas that they had used on the protestors. The officials who ordered the attack on hostages at the Dubrovka theater in 2002, using a gas that is still "secret," could have learned something important from the earlier episode. Sometimes, selective and repressed memory can be fatal.

Another lost memory in Vladimir Putin's second term, with a (thus far) rubber-stamp legislature and docile media, is the excitement that accompanied the first session of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, from May 25 to June 9, 1989. Public interest in the legislature's discussions was so intense that work stopped in many places, and factory production declined by 20 percent. Live coverage of Supreme Soviet legislative sessions was ended due to the negative impact these broadcasts had on labor productivity.

Memory impediments encourage the replacement of history with myth. One of the most politically debilitating myths about August 1991 is the claim that few people supported Yeltsin or opposed the coup. At a briefing on the human rights situation in Russia in February 2005, Moscow Helsinki Group leader Liudmila Alexseeva categorized opposition to the coup as involving only "10,000 people in Moscow."<sup>8</sup> This view invites assessments that ordinary Russians are somehow ill-suited or unprepared for democracy. It might be understandable that in the aftermath of massive economic dislocations, the shelling of the White House on

Yeltsin's orders in October 1993, and general dissatisfaction with the course of change in Russia, people's memories have blurred. This does not explain why many Western scholars discount the scale and importance of the opposition. Jerry Hough wrote, "Everyone agrees that there was no significant resistance outside Moscow and that the storming of the White House would have been a relatively easy military operation."<sup>9</sup> Hough's "everyone agrees," offered with no supporting evidence, should set off the same sort of alarm bells as *Pravda* starting a paragraph with, "As is well known," usually a sure indication that what followed was new material and perhaps a change in the party line. Michael McFaul, who had close relationships with many of Yeltsin's team, stated:

Resistance organizations . . . did not form nationwide. On the contrary, only democratic activists in Moscow and St. Petersburg publicly mobilized against the Emergency Committee. In other cities, democratic activists followed their local leaders in adopting a wait-and-see approach.<sup>10</sup>

Like Hough, McFaul offers no evidence for this assessment. His sole reference is to an article by James Gibson, which McFaul describes as discussing "varying levels of popular resistance to the coup."<sup>11</sup> In the article that McFaul cites, Gibson states explicitly that although "activism was indeed greater in Moscow and Leningrad . . . political activity clearly was not confined to Moscow and Leningrad, even if the proportions of respondents engaging in political protest were smaller elsewhere."<sup>12</sup> John Dunlop provides a more balanced but also contradictory analysis, noting the strong support for Yeltsin in Yekaterinburg and Nizhny Novgorod, but stating that "other areas were passive or apathetic."<sup>13</sup> Yet, Dunlop also notes that Yeltsin's appeals to the Russian people elicited "a stronger response . . . than was generally realized in the West." Although some areas supported the coup, "in other parts of the republic, significant support for democracy developed." Dunlop contrasts Tambov, where only 70 people showed up to support Yeltsin and the call for a strike fizzled, with the pro-Yeltsin stance of local governments in Kemerovo, Volgograd, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and the formation of a strike committee in Ukhta, Komi Republic. He concluded, "Virtually everywhere, it seemed, there were to be found people willing to take risks on behalf of democracy."<sup>14</sup>

Moscow and St. Petersburg were the key sites. The capital is the prize in any revolution. Paris was the key venue in 1789. The revolutions of 1848 were essentially stories of capital cities. In both February and October 1917, Petrograd was the most important story. Whether a revolutionary government retains power may depend on events throughout the country, but the decisive seizure of power generally takes place in the seat of government. Activists from other parts of the country are more likely to seek to get to the capital to join the crowds there than to organize demonstrations in less significant cities.

A most thorough student of the politics of protest in the Soviet Union, Mark Beissinger offers a nuanced assessment based on statistical records of popular demonstrations:

Strikes in protest of the coup broke out in many places, but outside Moscow and Leningrad demonstrations involving more than fifty thousand were rare (occurring only in Kishinev and Sverdlovsk)—in part because many preferred to wait and see

whether the regime would enforce its ban on demonstrations, in part because outside of Moscow the State Emergency Committee did so little to warrant major street action.<sup>15</sup>

Beissinger may be setting too high a bar in making 50,000 participants the measure for a significant protest. To get that many people onto the streets without creating chaos requires more than a single day's planning. Beissinger's focus on large-scale collective action gives us one important benchmark, but it is not the only way to measure political support or opposition. There may be a different standard for judging the numbers needed to prove political strength and the numbers sufficient to demonstrate determined resistance.

Expectations of popular behavior also matter a great deal. In protests against monetization of social benefits in early 2005, crowds of five hundred were viewed as a serious threat to the political authorities and led to changes in government policy. In the wake of protests on this order of magnitude in most regions of Russia, commentators began to

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talk about replacing the government.<sup>16</sup> The political importance of crowds depends on their background and context. In the Soviet Union in 1968, a half-dozen people in Red Square protesting the invasion of Czechoslovakia was a significant event, mainly because there had been nothing comparable for a long time and the regime staked its claim to legitimacy on the myth of collective support. In the same way that reports of violence in the North Caucasus or suicide bombers in Israel or Iraq have become a regular part of nightly news, protest can become routine. Large numbers are required when the objective is replacing a government or regime. But when the goal is to stop a coup before the shooting starts, the number of bodies needed may be far less. The crucial tipping point comes in demonstrating that a coup will require bloodshed and entail the risk of civil war. Given that the number of people needed to create this situation is not that large (thousands or tens of thousands, not hundreds of thousands), it is remarkable how few examples we can find of successful popular resistance to antidemocratic coups in the twentieth century. The East European and post-Soviet cases provide important and thus far too little explored examples of effective social mobilization defying many of the tenets of the “collective action problem.”<sup>17</sup>

One personal story undoubtedly has colored my own perception of this period. My driver met me at Sheremetevo in September 1991, a few weeks after the coup, and on the ride into town he recounted how on August 19 he had taken the store of hard currency he had been saving to open his own business and bought a Kalashnikov automatic rifle for \$1,500. He claimed that had the coup lasted longer, he would have used the weapon to defend his right to private economic activity. At

the end of August he sold the gun for 25,000 rubles (about the same value as the purchase price, but not in hard currency). Without detailed survey research, we have no way of knowing how common this was in Moscow or elsewhere. But it is striking that this was the reaction of someone who only hoped some day to have his own business, rather than someone already operating one.<sup>18</sup>

The conventional wisdom that only a small number of property-grabbing Yeltsin cronies in the capital(s) resisted the putsch is inadequate on at least two levels. First, it ignores a significant body of evidence that people did protest. These protests were not well organized and may not have resulted directly from the leadership of “democratic activists.” But should we expect a well-organized protest movement to have materialized within the first thirty-six hours? The coup was over before some activists managed to return from their *dachas* (this was, after all, mid-August, and even Gorbachev was on vacation).<sup>19</sup> Second, a focus on public demonstrations of opposition ignores other, equally important forms of opposition that contributed to the coup’s failure. In addition to direct confrontation, indirect resistance and subversion played a crucial role. A sense of momentum (what Soviet jargon would describe as the “correlation of forces”) was important in determining the outcome,<sup>20</sup> but it is also much more susceptible to memory erosion. Public demonstrations were only part of the story. During a visit to Moscow in September 1991, several friends described people staying out on the streets after curfew “as a way to protest” during the August coup. There is not a scientific way to verify this memory, but it is quite plausible: there were innumerable instances of indirect resistance to the coup. None by themselves could possibly have been decisive, but together they contributed to a sense that the attempted seizure of power was tenuous, illegitimate, and therefore not something deserving of support. Along with demonstrations protesting against the coup and supporting Yeltsin and the Russian government, resistance and subversion by members of two key groups—the media and the security forces—played a crucial role and helped to encourage the public protests.<sup>21</sup>

### Opposition and Protest

Significantly more direct opposition to the coup developed across Russia than current mythology suggests. In Moscow on August 20, some two hundred thousand people participated in a demonstration outside the Moscow Soviet, while more than fifty thousand gathered at the White House. In St. Petersburg, two hundred thousand assembled on Palace Square.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere in the Russian Republic only Yeltsin’s home town of Yekaterinburg had crowds that would meet Beissinger’s standard of fifty thousand for meaningful protest. But there were smaller demonstrations against the coup in many cities. In addition, local governments were not the passive wait-and-see hedgers described in so many accounts of the coup. The Supreme Soviet commission that investigated the coup determined that some 70 percent of the territorial subdivisions of the RSFSR did not support the coup.<sup>23</sup>

In evaluating the character of opposition to the coup, the timing of protests is as important as their existence. A variation on the “little support for Yeltsin” argu-

ment is that many people, and particularly many political figures, opposed the coup only after it was clear that it would fail. The difference between August 20, when the outcome was far from clear, and August 21, when the coup crumbled, is crucial in determining whether opposition was “real” or just a case of joining the winning side. Many assessments, however, fail to take account of the time differential across the Soviet Union. Events in the Far East, six hours ahead of Moscow, were not necessarily a direct response to the drama in the capital.

The coup organizers began moving troops into Moscow around 6:00 AM on Monday, August 19. Muscovites not awakened by the rumble of tanks probably learned the news around 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning. In the Far East, this was the middle of the afternoon. Vladivostok and Yakutsk are six hours ahead of Moscow. Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg are three hours ahead. Tomsk was four hours ahead. These time differences are crucial in gauging how long it would have taken for resistance to appear. The earliest any protest might have been expected in eastern regions would have been on August 20, and protests did materialize in a number of cities. By August 21, the list had expanded significantly. Accounts dismissing these public actions as an effort by local leaders to ingratiate themselves with the new winners generally ignore the time differential.

Everyone expected an assault on the White House in the early hours of Wednesday, August 21. The time difference meant that news of its failure to materialize would have reached eastern regions later in the day local time. In most cases the decision to convene a protest had to have been taken before the outcome in Moscow was clear. After the assault on the White House failed to materialize, the coup attempt unraveled quickly. Marshal Yazov resigned at about 9:30 AM on the twenty-first. Even if reported instantaneously, this would have been after 3:30 PM in the Far East, and afternoon in the Urals.<sup>24</sup>

In a world where media presence is crucial in determining what is news, the concentration of Western press representatives in Moscow reinforced an impression that everything of real importance transpired in the capital, or at most in the two capitals. But August 1991 was not just about Moscow.<sup>25</sup> Coal miners in Vorkuta and the Kuzbass quickly heeded Yeltsin’s call for a strike and closed their mines by the morning of August 20. Demonstrations took place in many cities on the twentieth, and more on the twenty-first. In other locations there were sharp divisions between supporters and opponents of the attempted putsch. In many cities and regions that did not have demonstrations on the twentieth or twenty-first, local authorities expressed support for the Russian government against the coup. In calculations of whether to use force and how much force would be needed, reports of these declarations may have been just as important as public protests. Giving orders to shoot in support of a cause that would not be victorious could have resulted in serious punishment. In some locales, the official response and the demonstrations were mutually reinforcing; in others, demonstrators demanded that local officials take a stand.

The night of August 20–21 was decisive in Moscow, and probably determined the fate of the Soviet Union. Despite the deaths of three demonstrators, there was no widespread violence and the special forces did not attack the White House. By the morning of August 21 Moscow time, rumors reported the leaders of the putsch

being in jail or having fled to Central Asia (several were en route to see Gorbachev to seek a way out of their dilemma). But when Echo Moskvy went off the air around 1:00 AM on the 21, the most fraught moment in Moscow, it was already morning in the Far East.

The following (far from exhaustive) list of public protests and opposition to the coup outside Moscow and St. Petersburg conveys a sense of the widespread opposition at the time. It suggests that the assessments of “no significant resistance outside Moscow” are incomplete at best.<sup>26</sup> Approximating the size of demonstrations is a highly political and notoriously inexact exercise whenever it occurs. The numbers cited here were those reported by Russian sources at the time. The quantity and geographical diversity of the protests rather than the size of any individual demonstration is important as an indicator of widespread opposition to the coup.

### **August 19:**

**Nizhny Novgorod:** A large rally listened to readings of Yeltsin’s decrees. The participants then marched to the local television center and demanded that the Russian government decrees be read over the air. A group of deputies organized a strike committee.

**Perm:** A conference of the Regional Soviet Executive Committee acknowledged the authority of the Russian Republic government. Representatives of the local police, prosecutor’s office, and KGB attended the session.

**Irkutsk:** Yuri Nozhikov, chairman of the regional Soviet executive committee, appeared on local television to announce that the Soviet’s executive committee had declared the GKChP [State Committee for Emergency Situation] to be an unconstitutional attempt at a coup. He called on the people to demonstrate in support of Yeltsin and the Russian Republic government.

### **August 20:**

**Vladivostok:** Approximately two thousand residents rallied against the GKChP and in support of Yeltsin.

**Tomsk:** A rally in support of Yelstin drew five thousand to six thousand people. The presidiums of the oblast’ and city soviets declared the coup illegal and published Yeltsin’s appeals.

**Nizhny Novgorod:** There were rallies held to support a strike against the GKChP at several enterprises, including GAZ [Gorky Automobile Factory]. One local paper published Yelstin’s decree; a second paper was subjected to censorship and published a blank page, but posted the decree on its public information board.

**Murmansk:** The merchant marine declared a strike on August 20, announcing they would deliver only essential goods.

**Voronezh:** The local government declared support for Yeltsin and called for a general strike against the GKChP. Local TV was avowedly pro-Yeltsin. *Voronezhskiy kuryer* published results of a survey indicating that although no more than half the population supported Yelstin’s call for an unlimited strike, one-third of local residents favored acts of civil disobedience as a sign of protest. Only 12 percent stated that the local government should obey the GKChP, and four out of five saw no reason to institute a state of emergency.



**Ryazan:** Mayor Valery Ryumin stated that he had ejected representatives of the GKChP from his office. He ordered twenty thousand copies of Yeltsin's decrees printed and had them distributed to local enterprises.

**Volgograd:** City and regional governments held a joint meeting at which they agreed to abide by Russian Republic law and boycott the GKChP. The regional soviet expressed full support for the leadership of the Russian Republic.

**Arkhangelsk:** The regional soviet expressed full support for the leadership of the Russian Republic.

**Tiumen:** The regional soviet declared the GKChP unconstitutional and ordered all government bodies in the region to abide by Russian Republic law.

**Omsk:** An information center supporting the Russian government was opened.

**Cheliabinsk:** The regional soviet declared the supremacy of Russian Republic law over USSR law.

**Yakutsk:** Opened an information center supporting the Russian Republic government.

**Koryak Autonomous Region:** Local authorities stopped transmissions on the USSR radio channel, limiting local reception to the regional radio station which broadcast Russian Republic statements. Commanders of the local KGB, MVD, and border guards stated their loyalty to the Russian Republic president.

**Magadan, Sakhalin, and Kamchatka** had situations roughly similar to the Koryak Region.

#### **August 21:**

**Magadan:** A pro-Yeltsin rally attracted more than five thousand demonstrators.

**Vladivostok:** More than five thousand people attended a rally. Paratroopers arrived that night, but three thousand rallied for Yeltsin the next day (August 22).

**Yekaterinburg:** Yeltsin's home town had experienced essentially continuous rallies beginning on August 20. On August 21 there were rallies at more than four hundred enterprises. A large meeting attracted over one hundred thousand.

**Tiumen:** More than one thousand people signed a petition against the GKChP.

**Tula:** Opponents of the putsch organized a protest march.

**Novosibirsk and Barnaul:** Rallies against the GKChP were described as "large."

**Novokuznetsk:** Approximately three thousand people participated in a demonstration supporting the Russian Republic government.

**Voronezh:** Local papers came out with pro-Yeltsin statements, published RSFSR materials, and ignored communications and demands from the GKChP.

**Nizhnyi Novgorod:** Hundreds of people picketed a session of the local Soviet to protest against the GKChP.

**Khabarovsk:** A morning rally in front of the regional soviet headquarters attracted several thousand people. They voted unanimously in favor of expressions of support for Yeltsin and opposition to the GKChP.

The reaction to the coup was not the same everywhere in Russia. In Rostov the regional soviet set up an emergency committee modeled on the GKChP, which took control of all media in the province.<sup>27</sup> Saratov's city soviet executive committee supported the putsch, took control of local media, and sought to prevent a

rally by Yeltsin supporters on August 20. One of the most notorious cases was Kazan, where the Tatar Republic president, Mintimer Shaimiev, returned from a meeting with Gennady Yanaev on August 18 and declared that USSR and Tatar Republic laws would be recognized, while Russian Republic laws would have no effect in the region. On August 20 Shaimiev appeared on local media to call for support of the GKChP. However, activity in Kazan was not one-sided. Approximately six hundred demonstrators gathered on Central Square (renamed Freedom Square) on the 19th to distribute copies of Yeltsin's decrees and demand Gorbachev's release. After the coup was defeated, some thirty thousand people gathered in the same square to sign a petition demanding that Shaimiev resign for having supported the putsch.<sup>28</sup> A

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separate meeting organized by the republic leadership and the group “Sovereignty” supported Shaimiev and demanded that Tatarstan sign the Union Treaty as an independent entity.<sup>29</sup>

In many places the authorities were divided. This is more difficult to trace, because in the immediate aftermath of Yeltsin's victory almost everyone scram-

bled to demonstrate that they had never supported the GKChP or, at worst, they simply sought to preserve order. In Tula, the city soviet supported the Russian Republic government, as did the police, whereas the local KGB and military authorities supported the GKChP. Enterprise directors in Vladivostok were adamantly against Yeltsin's strike call. In Novosibirsk, the city and regional soviets adopted resolutions supporting Yeltsin, but the Communist Party controlled the publishing houses and prevented publication of local papers containing the information. The local government resorted to underground printing establishments to publish Yeltsin's decrees. In Kursk, the city soviet was not able to agree on an official position, but its chairman issued a call to obey the laws of both the Soviet Union and Russian Republic.

On August 22, large rallies were held in Ivanov-Frankovsk, Krasnoyarsk, Yakutsk, and Aldan.<sup>30</sup> In the week following the coup, leaders who had supported the GKChP were targets of protests. In many of the non-Russian republics of the RSFSR, including Chechen-Ingush, Buriatia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Moldova, crowds demanded the removal of leaderships that had failed to support Yeltsin.<sup>31</sup>

These data point to significantly more protest and opposition than Moscow-centric accounts have suggested. This not only helps in reconstructing a more accurate history of the events of August 1991, but it is crucial to Russians' image of their own political capabilities, orientation, and sense of empowerment. It should give pause to those who assume that Russians are so conditioned to an “iron hand” that they will not mobilize when provoked. At the same time, it is important to note that the number who took to the streets in active defiance of the GKChP was far exceeded by those who resisted in a plethora of subtle ways.

### Resistance

Not only the number of protests or protesters but also the character of opposition to the coup has been a subject of dispute. Many commentators, such as Hough, assumed that the barricades rapidly constructed by coup opponents could not possibly have deterred tanks. Hence, the opposition must not have been serious. This argument misses the carnivalistic elements in the resistance to the coup. Ironically, one of the few observers to pick up on this atmosphere was the nationalist publicist Aleksandr Prokhanov, although he certainly did not comprehend its significance. In an interview with *Komsomolskaia pravda* some two weeks after the failed coup, Prokhanov described his visit to the White House during the siege:

the first thing that struck me was the 'pop culture' atmosphere—some kind of a youth or rock revolution. It was the protest culture: students, hippies. It was Paris in 1968, with Sartre and Marcuse, the existentialists. And it seems to me that they were defending the romance of the situation.<sup>32</sup>

The carnivalistic and nonviolent character of opposition to the coup was crucial to facing down the security services. In contrast to descriptions of 1991, some of the best analysis of 1989 draws on this approach.<sup>33</sup>

Yeltsin's supporters succeeded in creating a widespread sense of the coup's lack of legitimacy. If most of the rallies were attended by fewer than five thousand people, a much larger number simply refused to support the GKChP. Resistance and subversion were among the most important weapons employed by those who opposed a restoration of communist power. It is, of course, possible to argue that these people were hedging their bets in an effort to make sure that they were not on the losing side. Even if this was the case, the effect was the same—absence of support for the putsch.

During a visit to Tallinn in June 1991 I was shown the granite boulders that had been carted to key intersections, especially on streets leading to the parliament building, during the January 1991 assaults in Riga and Vilnius. These large rocks appeared to have been chosen as much on aesthetic as practical grounds. They would have been at most a minor inconvenience for armored vehicles (and detouring around them would probably have caused much greater property damage than using the streets). These "barricades" had now been arranged in sculptural forms that seemed to have more to do with evoking memory than with their possible utility in a future attack. Yet, it was clear from conversations with local residents that they had an enormous emotional significance. The barricades at the White House in Moscow were a statement of resistance, a symbol of willingness to confront an unequal power configuration, and a clear indication that victory for the coup would have required bloodshed. It was psychological warfare. One American at the White House who asked people how they knew to construct the makeshift barricades was told that they drew on the example of defenders of the Lithuanian parliament in January 1991: "Vilnius taught us."<sup>34</sup>

When the forces staging a coup lack a sense of their own legitimacy, symbolic resistance can be a tremendously powerful weapon. Valeriya Novodvorskaya, who was in Lefortovo prison during the August coup, reported that her prison guards disapproved of the coup and of Kryuchkov in particular.<sup>35</sup> Many of those on the

streets of Moscow who talked with soldiers riding in the tanks got the impression that they would not shoot. As one soldier told a TV interviewer, "I'm human too."<sup>36</sup> Some defenders of the White House carried signs reading "Glory to the RSFSR tank drivers." A carnival can include psychological warfare.

Another form of resistance appeared in numerous meetings convened at factories. Some Soviet enterprises were enormous, employing tens and even hundreds of thousands of workers, and meetings were a characteristic form of activism in communist countries. Probably the most famous example of activism at an individual enterprise playing a key role in broader political events was the role of the Gdansk shipyard in Poland's Solidarity movement. Russia had nothing like Solidarity, but there was more activity at individual enterprises than has been reported in most accounts. Miners at forty-one enterprises in the Kuzbass went out on strike. Although this was nothing like the two hundred enterprises that had struck in support of Yeltsin in April, it was an impressive showing for exhausted workers on short notice in a confusing situation. As Dunlop notes, it takes time to organize a general strike and "the strike movement was just gearing up at the moment that the coup was crushed."<sup>37</sup> The miners who traveled to Moscow to help defend the White House arrived only after the coup had collapsed.<sup>38</sup>

### Subversion

Along with active protest and more subtle resistance, subversion by key groups was also responsible for defeating the coup. In the same way that tram drivers helped paralyze Warsaw, thereby turning the 1980 shipyard worker protests into a city-wide and then national confrontation, printers, broadcasters, and members of the security services and military played a crucial role in August 1991. In the complex psychological warfare of those few days, the actions of journalists and media personnel became just as important as those of demonstrators and *siloviki*. Numerous individuals and groups made decisions that undermined the GKChP and conveyed critically important information to people who could then make their own decisions about whom to support.

David Remnick describes the actions by printers at the *Izvestiya* publishing house, who refused to publish the August 20 edition unless it included Yeltsin's decrees in addition to those of the GKChP.<sup>39</sup> Other accounts state that *Izvestiya* published two different editions on August 20: the first (No. 197) printed the resolutions of the GKChP and the second (No. 198) condemned the coup, sided with Yeltsin, and devoted much of its space to accounts of resistance to the coup across the Soviet Union.<sup>40</sup>

In their portrayal of August 1991 as a *televorot*, Victoria Bonnell and Gregory Freidin demonstrate how the images that were broadcast to the provinces hardly conveyed an image of impregnable power. "The camera work, the mocking attitude of the journalists, and the words and gestures of the plotters combined to deprive them of the appearance of authority and legitimacy that they sought to create."<sup>41</sup> The dominant visual of August 1991 was Gennady Yanaev's shaking hands. The program director at *Vremia*, Elena Pozdnyak, opted to rebroadcast this footage, directly ignoring orders to edit out the embarrassing elements. However, central television did con-

form to the coup organizers' "Soviet script" when broadcasting coverage of other republics and provincial cities.<sup>42</sup> Thus, there was a striking contradiction: Scenes of events in Moscow undermined the GKChP's authority across the country, while the censored images of what was happening elsewhere in Russia conveyed an impression that resistance was limited to Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In addition to the media, subversion by members of the security services played a crucial role. The lack of violence was largely due to decisions by military and interior ministry officers rejecting the use of force, whether because they thought it was wrong or, more likely, because they doubted the reliability of their troops, were uncertain about the chances for success, or feared opposition by other elements of the power ministries. Preventing violence also depended on the behavior of the crowds and their capacity to participate in a game of high-stakes brinksmanship. It required discipline, a postmodern ethos of carnival, and probably sheer luck to avoid incidents that might have produced bloodshed and could have provoked more serious conflict and even civil war.<sup>43</sup> In his testimony to the Supreme Soviet's Ponomarev Commission, Air Force Commander Yevgeny Shaposhnikov stated that sending tanks into such a fraught environment had been "insane," and "only the self-restraint of people, civilians and military, avoided more painful consequences."<sup>44</sup>

After the coup failed, an assortment of KGB and military officers proclaimed that they had played a key role, or even the decisive role, in preventing an armed assault on the White House. Stephen Meyer provided one of the most complete early assessments:

As is now known, the senior command ultimately fractured in several directions. Some, such as the commanders of the Baltic and Moscow military districts, actively supported the coup. Others such as the chiefs of the Air Force and Airborne Forces actively plotted to resist the coup. Most, however, followed the path chosen by the commanders of the Leningrad and Far East Military Districts; they decided not to align their commands in either political direction.<sup>45</sup>

Several accounts at the time reported that someone in Kryuchkov's office alerted Yeltsin's staff to his impending arrest, allowing Yeltsin to leave his dacha and get to the White House before police arrived. Without the subversion, there would have been no direct confrontation. Comments by key military and security officials in the aftermath of the coup indicated their desire to claim credit for preventing bloodshed.<sup>46</sup> In an interview published in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* on September 12, 1991, Shaposhnikov stated that Yazov had told the defense ministry collegium that "we don't want blood." Shaposhnikov added, "I understood already on the morning of the 19th that Yazov would not order the troops to shoot at civilians."<sup>47</sup> In his memoirs, KGB head Vladimir Kryuchkov states that members of the GKChP were determined to avoid a violent confrontation and curtailed their activity when the danger of bloodshed became apparent.<sup>48</sup>

Events in Kyiv in December 2004 offer striking parallels to the August 1991 experience in Moscow. In both cases distinct narratives seem to explain the outcome to those involved in different parts of the story. But neither a hagiographic celebration of democratic "people power" nor a murky weaving of conspiracy the-

ories involving shadowy machinations by “power ministries” conveys the full picture. Multiple narratives were part of the equation and it was the interaction between them that proved decisive. People who were in the streets are convinced that popular collective action brought about important changes, both in the political system and in the relationship of “ordinary people” to power in the society. A separate narrative, much more comforting to elites, detailed the discussions among members of the security services and military concerning possible use of force against the demonstrators. In retrospect, a large number of military and police officials involved in both 1991 and 2004 believe that they personally played the crucial role in preventing bloodshed. Although it is easy to mock accounts that inflate an individual’s importance, the more interesting issue is the way that these accounts combine to create a convincing master narrative of the interaction among leaders of the opposition, the street, the old regime, and the *siloviki*.

Rather than attempting to sort out conflicting claims about who deserves credit or blame for avoiding violence, we might do better to heed the comments by General Drizhchany about the events in Kyiv: “Because so many calls were made that night by and to so many people, it was impossible to tell which calls were decisive.” More likely, he said, “was that the calls had a cumulative effect.”<sup>49</sup> This judgment of events in Ukraine may be especially valuable, since it was produced quickly and the key participants did not have much opportunity to reflect on their historical roles. A recent assessment on the twelfth anniversary of the August coup, based on archival materials, is strikingly similar:

Former KGB officer Igor Naumenko, who has worked with some of the documents in state archives, [said] the materials show that the KGB was the primary force behind the plot. Naumenko said the KGB began working on the putsch in December 1990 and that it authored the famous “Word to the Soviet People” declaration that was issued by the coup plotters. He said the KGB had issued clear orders to destroy the leaders of Russia’s democratic forces “in the event of resistance.” However, the plot unraveled because the middle echelons of KGB officers, especially those commanding the elite Alfa antiterrorism force, refused to obey orders. These officers came to distrust the Soviet leadership—and, in particular, Gorbachev—after it sent them to Vilnius to crack down on Lithuanian independence demonstrators and then later refused to take responsibility for the violence that occurred.<sup>50</sup>

Few question that in Moscow in August 1991 or in Kyiv in December 2004, an organized assault could have dispersed the crowds supporting democratically elected leaders, or that this would have resulted in significant casualties. But this underscores the crucial point that something prevented the military and security forces from intervening. The key factors were: (1) calculations of the cost, in bloodshed, reputation, and self-image, of resorting to violence; (2) questions about whether the middle-rank officers of the military and security services would have ordered their troops to shoot, (3) questions about whether the police or soldiers would have obeyed orders to shoot, and (4) questions about whether all of the officers leading forces of the power ministries would have been on the same side. In both Kyiv and Moscow a complex dynamic was at work involving perceptions of power, legitimacy, and costs, including the willingness of people to put their bodies on the line to raise the costs of repression. It is doubtful that any one decision,

conversation, or action was decisive. Avoiding bloodshed involved a complex series of calculations by multiple actors who only knew which way they would finally jump after the events were over. Although some military and police officials sided with Gorbachev or Yeltsin from the outset, many hedged. But no one wanted to be the butcher, the agent of repression, or the instigator of a civil war.

Retrospective statements that “we could have cleared the White House in fifteen minutes” were undoubtedly important to alpha leaders’ professional self-esteem and to their continuing role in providing security. No one really knows how the barricades and their defenders would have fared against a serious assault. The fate of Russian tank columns in Grozny in December 1994 ought to at least give pause to those who assume the White

House defenders would have been quickly swept away. Some accounts suggest that the barricades were flimsy and symbolic; others that they were serious and continuously improved. But the White House defenders had no more desire than the *siloviki* to see a resort to force. The more convincingly they demonstrated a willingness to

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resist and make an attack something that would involve serious bloodshed, the greater the chances that supporters of the GKChP would back down. If Kryuchkov was telling the truth when he claimed that the GKChP leaders discussed the need to avoid bloodshed, then the tactic of forcing them to resort to an armed assault was precisely what was needed to defeat the coup.

Some analysts have suggested that, like Gorbachev, the GKChP leadership was willing to accept a small amount of bloodshed, but rejected “*bol’shaya krov’*.” Dunlop dismisses this idea, arguing that Kryuchkov had proved his willingness to use force previously, but this time he was thwarted by the reluctance of Yazov and other military and police officials to resort to violence. Unlike the Chinese leadership at Tiananmen Square in 1989, neither the Russians in 1991 nor the Ukrainians in 2004 could bring in peasant recruits who knew nothing of the situation in the capital and were prepared to follow orders without question.

### **Russian Protest in Comparative Perspective**

Locating Russians’ behavior in 1991 in a comparative context helps us to understand that resistance to the coup represented a significant and successful level of social mobilization, having much more in common with the 1989 “*refolutions*” in Central Europe or the Serbian (2000), Georgian (2003), or Ukrainian (2004) events than with the coups that ended democracy in so many countries during the twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> Most important, it represented a balanced form of opposition, strong enough to defeat the coup attempt without being so vigorous that it provoked widespread repression or civil war. Nancy Bermeo’s *Ordinary People*

focuses on democratic breakdown in Europe and Latin America, a process frequently involving a coup. Bermeo's central argument is that ordinary people were not the key actors in the breakdown of democratic governments in interwar Europe or postwar Latin America. Rather, it was the actions of elites that were the key. For our purposes here, the crucial lesson from her data is that there were few instances in which ordinary people acted to prevent an antidemocratic coup. Despite impressive documentation that ordinary people were not enemies of democracy and rarely engaged in direct action to end democratic regimes, Bermeo finds few examples of their actively defending democracies under assault. Being "loath to take direct action" against democracy is far less demanding than placing one's body in front of tanks to defend democracy.<sup>52</sup>

In Brazil in 1964, "Brazilians did flood the streets as the military took control, but only to learn more about the coup itself. They listened to radios and to one another in cafés, bars, and parks, but did little or nothing to defend the elected regime. Democracy seemed to die undefended."<sup>53</sup> In March 1973 thousands of Argentines poured into the streets to celebrate Héctor Cámpora's election victory. Less than three years after the jubilation over Cámpora's election, when a military coup removed Isabel Perón from power, "the same streets and plazas that were sites of celebration just three years before were calm or empty. The day after the coup, production records rose to new highs."<sup>54</sup>

Bermeo suggests that "we should not equate popular passivity with democratic defection." This would support a significantly lower standard than Beissinger's fifty thousand participants for meaningful protest when the objective is preventing or stopping a coup. In most instances, a coup elicits no public response. It is precisely the sizable but still moderate and nonviolent response seen in Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, and Kyiv, as well as in Moscow and St. Petersburg, that makes possible a peaceful resolution. Bermeo cautions us to avoid equating popular passivity with absence of support for democracy.<sup>55</sup> But she also notes that "ordinary people generally were guilty of remaining passive when dictators actually attempted to seize power."<sup>56</sup> Other than in Spain and Uruguay, resistance to coups was minimal.

Bermeo's work encourages us to contemplate the level of resistance that can successfully defeat a coup. Passive resistance and a willingness to force the military to inflict casualties on an unarmed population may be far more effective than armed opposition. When there is serious armed resistance, the result, as in Spain in 1936, may well be civil war. Comparing the Spanish outcome in 1936, when the nation descended into a prolonged civil conflict, and in 1981, when opposition by King Juan Carlos quickly brought the coup attempt to an end, suggests that resistance by key actors and a demonstration of resolve to resist may produce better outcomes than armed confrontation. The Spanish case is particularly apt for perspective on Russia in 1991, given that the context in both instances was a struggle for power between the center and the regions. Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque region were about to get limited self-rule when the Spanish coup was attempted in 1981. In the seven hours that democracy's fate hung in the balance, a clear signal was transmitted to regional leaders that preventing a coup required preserving "the unity and territorial integrity of Spain." The battle was won chiefly through the actions of one



individual, the Spanish monarch. Spaniards did not support the coup, but they did not rush to defend democracy. “The political class reacted as a whole with extreme moderation. There were no calls for a general mobilization, and there were no spontaneous uprisings. The nation gathered in front of its radios and television sets. The drama was acted out by the king and the army.”<sup>57</sup>

In Spain in 1981 as in Russia a decade later, the threat of civil war helped dissuade the military from violence. But in the Spanish case no mass protests materialized to convince coup supporters of the danger of their actions. Perhaps if Gorbachev had been in the Kremlin in Moscow rather than incommunicado in Foros he might have been in a position to broker some sort of negotiated settlement. By cutting off his communication links before confronting him with news of their coup attempt, the GKChP made compromise all but impossible. With the USSR president essentially under house arrest, Boris Yeltsin had to choose between open resistance and his own arrest.

### Explaining Malleable Memory

The puzzle here is that Russia’s experience in August 1991 puts it in an unusual and not particularly large class of cases where popular resistance played a key role in defeating a coup; yet the prevailing view of August 1991 emphasizes the weakness rather than the strength of opposition to the GKChP. How are we to account for this discrepancy and the tendency even for some participants retrospectively to denigrate their action in 1991? Is this a way of expressing disillusion with Yeltsin’s subsequent governance? Does it reflect widespread dissatisfaction with the economic results of the subsequent decade? Kathleen Smith notes that by 1996 conservatives had gained greater confidence in interpreting August 1991 as a tragedy due to destruction of the Soviet Union. (I have always been struck by their failure to consider that if the end of the Soviet Union was a tragedy, the coup plotters were the ones primarily responsible for this outcome.) Smith cites polls by *Moskovsky komsomolets* indicating that in 1993, 78 percent of Muscovites stated that they had supported Yeltsin in his confrontation with the legislature, but in (retrospective) polls in 1996, only 39 percent claimed to have supported him.<sup>58</sup> We do not have comparable survey data for 1991. Smith cites surveys showing that in 1999 only 9 percent viewed 1991 as a victory for democracy, while most thought of it as one more struggle among competing elites. This represents a major shift from the survey data from 1992–93 reported by Gibson.<sup>59</sup>

Surveys on the tenth and twelfth anniversaries of the coup indicated a continuing shift not just in peoples’ assessments of the events and ability to recall the participants, but more strikingly in their memories of their own activity and whom they supported at the time. A decade after 1991, 28 percent of the Russians surveyed said they had supported Yeltsin, while 13 percent said they had supported the putsch.<sup>60</sup> Retrospective evaluations of the events of 1991 seem particularly subject to the influence of subsequent events. In 2001, 61 percent of fifteen hundred Russians surveyed by the *Fond obshchestvennogo mnenie* could not name a single member of the GKChP. Many conflated 1991 and 1993. The second most frequently mentioned individual as a member of the GKChP was Aleksandr Rut-

skoï, who in 1991 was Yeltsin's vice president and one of the defenders of the White House. The only person named more often than Rutskoï was Dmitry Yazov (15 percent), who was indeed a member of the junta but was far from the leading player. The GKChP member most responsible for the coup attempt, Vladimir Kryuchkov, was named by 6 percent. Other members of the GKChP were also in single digits: Boris Pugo at 5 percent and Gennady Yanaev and Valentin Pavlov at 4 percent each. Few could recall Oleg Baklanov.<sup>61</sup> In a poll taken in August 2003, some 11 percent claimed to have sympathized with the GKChP, 22 percent said they had supported Yeltsin, and 27 percent claimed to have supported neither side (15 percent said they could not remember whom they supported and 12 percent said they were too young to have been involved).<sup>62</sup>

Russians find it increasingly difficult to decide if the country would have been better off had the GKChP managed to seize power in August 1991.

**TABLE 1. Public Opinion on the State of the Country if the GKChP Seized Power in August 1991**

	2001 (%)	2003 (%)
Better	20	17
Worse	31	26
Hard to answer	49	56

A decade and a half after the attempted coup, Russia in many respects looks as if the coup plotters had succeeded. Many of their aims have been achieved and most of the plotters have had successful careers. Their primary objective, preservation of union, was not achieved, but this was not a realistic goal short of war. Much of the rest of the agenda outlined in the GKChP's "Appeal to the Soviet People" sounds remarkably similar to Putin's policies.<sup>63</sup>

Another reason for confused memories might be the subsequent rehabilitation of the surviving members of the GKChP. Most have done rather well in the new environment:

**Gennady Yanaev**, elected vice president of the Soviet Union at Gorbachev's insistence and the individual most closely associated with the coup and its failure, serves as a consultant to pension funds.

**Vladimir Kryuchkov**, the KGB chief who repeatedly complained that Gorbachev was failing to react to the developing situation, was the GKChP member least averse to bloodshed. He had been at the Soviet embassy in Budapest in 1956 with Yuri Andropov, and participated in suppressing the Hungarian uprising. Now a pensioner, he wrote his memoirs and serves as a consultant with clients including AFK Sistema. He was received at the Kremlin at Vladimir Putin's inauguration in 2000.

**Boris Pugo** was found dead in his apartment on August 21, 1991. His death was officially ruled a suicide, but rumors persist that there might be another explanation.

**Dmitry Yazov**, the defense minister who failed to keep the armed forces unified in support of the coup, retired from the military after being amnestied in 1994. He serves as an adviser to Russian arms exporters.

**Valentin Pavlov**, the finance minister and then prime minister under Gorbachev, became a banker. In some interviews he expressed regret that he had not found an opportunity to pursue private activity earlier in his life. Pavlov held a number of positions in commercial firms, including head of the Doveriye consultancy firm, a brief stint managing Rublyovskiy bank, and the presidency of Chasprombank. Pavlov served as a financial consultant for Promstroibank and as head of the Delovoi Mir (Business World) concern and as vice president for business development of the New Jersey-based software developer Business Management Systems. He became a vice president of the Free Economic Society of Russia and the International Management Academy. He was director of the Institute of Research and Support for the Development of Regions and Businesses with the International Union of Economists. He died March 30, 2003.

**Oleg Baklanov**, head of the Military-Industrial Complex, is generally listed as having no known occupation. The former minister of machine building gave a lengthy interview to the Russian cold war history project in which he expressed no regrets about the coup. He heads a Russian-Ukrainian friendship association and thinks that “the state should recognize that the putschists were historically and politically right.”

**Vasily Starodubtsev**, was head of the USSR Peasants’ Union. After he was released from jail in 1994 he returned to the Tula region to head the same collective farm and agricultural-industrial union he had previously directed. He successfully ran for governor of Tula in 1997, winning 62 percent of the vote, and was reelected for a second term in 2001 with 72 percent. He was elected chairman of the Agricultural-Industrial Union that was spun off from the Union of Russian Agrarians. He is among the top leaders of the Communist Party and served on the Federation Council’s commission on agricultural policies. He is author of the book *Do We Need Collective Farms?*

**Alexander Tizyakov**, president of the Association of State-Owned Enterprises, ran unsuccessfully for the State Duma in 1999 on the Movement in Support of the Army ticket.

**Anatoly Lukyanov** was one of the people closest to Gorbachev, and served as chairman of the Supreme Soviet. He was not officially a member of the GKChP, but was arrested for his role in the coup and was in jail until December 1992. He was elected to the Duma on the Communist list and served as chairman of the parliament’s construction commission. He also published several volumes of poetry, including *Poems from Jail*.

Yazov, Yanaev, Baklanov, and Pavlov appeared together at a news conference at the offices of the nationalist newspaper *Patriot* in July 2001, several weeks before the tenth anniversary of the coup. They praised President Putin and made the case that the Russian president was essentially engaged in implementing the program of the GKChP. “The current leadership is making efforts to restore control over the country,” said Valentin Pavlov. “Today they are trying to do what we attempted to

do in the Soviet Union in 1991.” The surviving members of the GKChP claimed the coup failed because they were poorly prepared and were too cautious to use force. “We didn’t want to fight against our own people,” said Gennady Yanaev, who was viewed as the formal head of the state emergency committee.<sup>64</sup> In a recent interview about the Bratislava summit, Kryuchkov suggested that the United States is not a suitable partner for Russia and expressed his belief that President Putin would defend Russia’s interests during his meeting with President Bush.<sup>65</sup>

Politics and economics do not fully explain the prevailing image of August 1991. Another reason for the shifting memories involves the treatment of history during perestroika and afterwards. The fashion for examining blank spots was neither uni-

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linear nor all-pervasive. Exploration of the Stalinist past peaked before 1991, and declined thereafter.<sup>66</sup> As Rubie Watson notes, much of the story of glasnost, and of 1989 in particular, was about “recovering” the past.<sup>67</sup> In the twenty-first century far greater effort seems to be devoted to “re-covering” the past. Rather than filling in the blank spots, leaders are

endeavoring to establish their own narratives as the dominant interpretations of events, both recent and more distant. Access to archives is again being restricted.

In any society, the fashion for particular episodes or figures from the past is as telling an indicator as the spin imparted to them. Gorbachev’s reforms drew historians’ attention to the “reform era” of Alexander II. Vladimir Putin’s regime has stimulated a cottage industry of books about Petr Stolypin. This is rather curious. Just what is it about Stolypin that is so “relevant?” His agrarian reforms, which sought to help “strong and sober” peasants escape the continuing embrace of village communes? His program to encourage migration to Siberia? His repression of those involved in the 1905 revolution, when the hangman’s noose came to be called “Stolypin’s necktie”? His role as a strong prime minister serving a tsar generally considered to be lacking in strength of character? His service as an appointed governor? Surely not his death at the hands of an assassin? One may suspect that what most resonates about Stolypin is the speech he delivered to the Duma when he took office, proclaiming the need for a “great Russia.”

Vladimir Putin has embraced all of Russian and Soviet history, refusing to judge any of it.<sup>68</sup> In some instances, this may be a wise course. Leaving Lenin’s body where it is until most of the aging Communists who care passionately about the issue are gone could be viewed as a reasonable solution to a thorny problem. But in many cases the refusal to make judgments entails explicit acceptance of behavior that deserves to be condemned. In all cases, the failure to engage in frank, open-ended discussion of the issues represents the most serious problem.

Small signals matter. One of Putin’s first acts as president was to restore the

bust of Yuri Andropov to its place in the FSB headquarters. In early 2003, he instructed officials to alter the memorial to World War II hero cities, replacing the name Volgograd with Stalingrad. Claims that this represents a correction to the historical record must be weighed against the costs incurred by sending such signals. Smith notes that “study of the mobilization of collective memories by an elite can provide insight into an important aspect of the process of forming a national identity—the proffering of potentially acceptable beliefs about what it means to be a member of a certain nation.”<sup>69</sup>

A clearer perspective on the contradictory accounts of the August 1991 coup would represent an important step toward a more general examination of complex issues in Russia’s history and could help to reverse a disturbing trend away from open debate. The Putin government is devoting much energy to restoring limits. Putin himself appears to hope that this can be largely voluntary—that Russians will recognize what is “right” and will choose to behave “responsibly.” During Putin’s first term, press minister Mikhail Lesin often sounded like Gorbachev in his calls for journalists to voluntarily recognize the need to write “responsibly.”<sup>70</sup>

Restricting open debate and discussion damages not just understanding of the past but also important policy initiatives. One of the most important policy reforms of Putin’s second term, the conversion of social benefits to cash payments, is a prime example. This reform is desperately needed. Studies indicate that approximately half of the funds allocated for social programs never reach their intended recipients. In the case of housing subsidies, 80 percent of the benefits go to the most affluent 20 percent of the population—in other words, to people who do not really need them. Well-organized rackets derive enormous profits from corruption in the prescription drug system.

The benefits reform touches practically every family in the country. It is also unimaginably complex, involving changes to some two hundred existing laws. The Russian government and its policy consultants are so intimidated by the intricacy and sensitivity of the legislation that they hurried it through the Duma quickly, in the summer, when many people are on vacation and less inclined to pay attention to politics. (The government also took advantage of high oil prices and of Putin’s recent reelection. In two years, his lame duck status might make it more difficult to sway reluctant legislators. The government took no chances, cutting off the referendum option and resorting to a plethora of dirty tricks to distract, if not eliminate, Communist opponents.)

As so often in complex policy changes, the problems are too intricate and too important to be left to the “specialists.” One of the most damaging legacies from Soviet times is the belief that five experts sitting around a table are capable of solving complex problems. This is hardly unique to Soviet Union—technocracy enjoyed its fullest exposition in the United States and Germany, and technocratic policy approaches appear with depressing regularity. But the Soviet Union elevated positivism to the level of an administrative religion. Colleagues involved in the reforms told me directly that in Russian conditions it would not be possible to permit extensive public debate—this would kill the legislation. But the costs of pre-

cluding public debate are high, both in terms of legitimacy and in practical elements of the legislation. For example, the first draft of the new legislation provided for payments to invalid children under age eighteen, and payments to adults certified as invalids, but it failed to provide coverage for children who reached eighteen and lost their status as child invalids.<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusion

Demonstrating the extent of direct and indirect protest by Russians in August 1991 should help us to better frame the potential for collective action. Debra Javeline documented that Russians are willing to protest when they know whom to blame.<sup>72</sup> Russians mobilized to resist in August 1991 in greater numbers and with more positive effect than populations in Europe and Latin America who were faced with military coups. The Russian experience is at least as compelling as the “refolutions” of 1989 in Central Europe, given that crowds have far more often mobilized to demand regime change than to defend democracy from a country’s own security forces.

Assessing Russians as “non undemocratic” tells us little about their willingness to face down an armed threat to democracy. But the experience of August 1991 suggests that given the right mix of leadership, hope, and incentives, Russians could again act in support of a democratically elected regime. These “ordinary Russians” probably deserve a less irresponsible and more responsive elite. However, they will get a more responsible elite only when they insist on it and are able to identify a portion of the elite who find it in their interests to meet the demand for representative governance.

### NOTES

1. This is not an argument that the Soviet Union was a democracy (although Boris Yeltsin was elected president of Russia in June 1991) or that Russia now is a democracy. A coup is not the only way democracy may be dismantled, and Boris Yeltsin missed important opportunities to consolidate the democratic potential in Russia’s political system. My own concerns about problems with Russia’s democratic trajectory were expressed most fully in “Managed Pluralism: Vladimir Putin’s Emerging Regime,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 3 (July–September 2003): 189–226. Since the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in October 2003, a slew of articles have discussed the deficit of democracy in Russia.

2. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992).

3. Yuri Levada, “Chto mozhet i chego ne mozhet sotsiologiiia” [What sociology can and cannot do] (lecture for *Polit.ru*, December 16, 2004), <http://www.polit.ru/lectures/2005/01/04/levada> (accessed January 10, 2005).

4. Severyn Bialer, “The Political System,” in *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s*, ed. Robert F. Byrnes, 32 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

5. Yuri Afanasyev, “The Coming Dictatorship?” *New York Review of Books* 38, no. 3 (January 31, 1991): 38.

6. George F. Kennan, foreword to *Russia: My Native Land: A U.S. Engineer Reminisces and Looks at the Present*, by Gregory P. Tschebotarioff (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), xi.

7. In the epilogue to an edited volume on perestroika, I noted that the threat of a coup was a far more effective political weapon than a coup itself. Unfortunately, the leaders of the GKChP were not able to read this analysis before they attempted their putsch. Harley Balzer, epilogue to *Five Years that Shook the World: Gorbachev’s Unfinished Revolution*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 207–19.

8. Remarks by Liudmila Alekseeva, leader of the Moscow Helsinki Group, *RFE/RL*, February 2, 2005.

9. Jerry Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991* (Washington, DC: 1997), 443.

10. Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 109.

11. *Ibid.*, note 141. Gibson's article is James L. Gibson, "Mass Opposition to the Soviet Putsch of August 1991; Collective Action, Rational Choice, and Democratic Values in the Former Soviet Union," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 3 (September 1997): 671–84.

12. Gibson, "Mass Opposition," 675. Gibson's main point is "that attitudinal commitments to the preservation of democracy in Russia motivated people to take action against the August coup" (672).

13. John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 237.

14. *Ibid.*, 237–38. The comments about people being passive or apathetic and their willingness to take risks appear on the same page, further indicating the contradictory and contested nature of the events.

15. Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 427.

16. This was almost certainly an overreaction. China has experienced far larger protests by pensioners during a number of years without serious political consequences. William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," *China Quarterly* no. 170 (2002): 345–60.

17. The classic statement of the collective action problem is in Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). Gibson discusses recent collective action literature in the context of the August coup in "Mass Opposition," 672–73.

18. This individual did not establish a private business. He did upgrade his car, exchanging his Lada for a Ford and then eventually an Audi. I ran into him outside one of the five-star Moscow hotels in July 2004. He is still working as a driver but now charges rates only businessmen will pay.

19. Gibson makes a similar point, "Mass Opposition," 675, note 8.

20. For a recent Russian scholar's confirmation of this view see V. V. Sogrin, *Politicheskaiia istoriia sovremennoi Rossii, 1985–2001: ot Gorbacheva do Putina* (Moscow: Ves' Mir 2001), 89–90. "Among their main errors in the first instance was the inability of the GKChP to realistically evaluate the potential reaction to its activity on the part of the Russian population, which did not support them, and a majority of whom demonstrated support for Yeltsin."

21. Little research has been done on the composition of the crowds, either in earlier demonstrations or in August 1991. Many of the participants in demonstrations were members of the intelligentsia or the Soviet middle class. Marc Garcelon has described the period 1989–1991 as the "specialist rebellion." Marc Garcelon, "The Estate of Change: The Specialist Rebellion and the Democratic Movement in Moscow, 1989–1991," *Theory and Society* 26, no. 1 (1997): 39–85. The involvement of many government officials in protests and particularly in resistance provides some evidence for Gordon Hahn's characterization of a "revolution from above"; Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Revolution from Above: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002).

22. Gibson, "Mass Opposition," 671.

23. The transcripts of what is sometimes known as the Ponomarev Commission were not published in Russia. The editors of *Demokratizatsiya* obtained a copy of the stenographic record and published an English translation in four parts under the heading "Supreme Soviet Investigation of the 1991 Coup: The Suppressed Transcripts," part I: *Demokratizatsiya* 3, no.

4 (Fall 1995): 411–50; part II: *Demokratizatsiya* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 109–38; part III: *Demokratizatsiya* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 271–311; and part IV: *Demokratizatsiya* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 603–22. Parts I and II were subtitled “Concerning the Role of Repressive Organs in the Putsch of 19–21 August 1991”; part III deals with “Illegal Financial Activity of the CPSU”; and part IV with “Participation of the Leadership of the Soviet Armed Forces.”

24. Iu. M. Baturin et al., *Epokha El'tsina: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), 148.

25. The following account is drawn from *Express Chronika* and from interior ministry press center reports.

26. The following data are compiled by the author from interior ministry press center reports, *Moskovskiy novosti*, August 21, 1991, 6–8; *Literaturnaya gazeta*, August 21, 1991, 2–3; *Izvestiya*, August 21, 1991, 2; *Obshchaya gazeta*, August 20–22, 1991, 3; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August 22, 1991, 3; and *Izvestia*, August 23, 1991, 4. I have focused on instances where at least two sources reported the events and have adopted the lower estimate when there was more than one version of the number of demonstrators involved. This topic still deserves a thorough examination by someone with access to the regional press archives.

27. The consistency in regional political behavior over time is striking. Rostov and Krasnodar were among the few places where demonstrators turned out to support the government's policy of monetizing social benefits in January 2005. Analogies to the Vendée in France immediately come to mind.

28. One member of his inner circle, in a personal communication, suggested that Shaimiev's support for the coup was secured by a promise to elevate Tatarstan to the status of a sixteenth Union Republic. This is also noted in an interview with historian and coauthor of the Tatarstan Constitution Indus Tagirov, *Kazanskie vedomosti*, August 30, 1995, 4. Achieving republic status outside the RSFSR was a longstanding Tatar aspiration, and this was one of the reasons for Stalin's harsh treatment of Sultan-Galiev. See Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 397.

29. RFE/RL daily report, no. 165, August 30, 1991.

30. Interior ministry press center reports.

31. RFE/RL daily report, no. 164, August 29, 1991; no. 166, September 2, 1991.

32. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 3, 1991, translated in Bonnell, Cooper, and Freidin, 249–52, quoted passage on 251.

33. Michael D. Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation, and War* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

34. Mark H. Teeter. “An American's Story,” *Woodrow Wilson Center Report* 3, no. 3 (November 1991): 3.

35. Interview in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 28 (1991), reported in RFE/RL daily report, no. 168, September 4, 1991.

36. Teeter, “An American's Story,” 3. Beissinger's analysis of the coup's success depending on avoiding significant numbers of casualties corroborates the importance of symbolic opposition. Making it clear that a GKChP victory was not possible without bloodshed was probably enough to cause their defeat.

37. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia*, 237. Dunlop's use of the word “crushed” in this context is striking. It implies active opposition that defeated the coup, rather than withering away or a change of heart by lukewarm supporters.

38. Simon Clarke, Peter Fairbrother, Michael Burawoy, and Pavel Krotov, *What about the Workers? Workers and the Transition to Capitalism in Russia* (London: Verso, 1993), 163, 173.

39. David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993), 470–71.

40. RFE/RL daily report, no. 163, August 28, 1991.



41. Victoria E. Bonnell and Gregory Freidin, "Televorot: The Role of Television Coverage in Russia's August 1991 Coup," *Slavic Review* 52, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 810–38, here 821.

42. *Ibid.*, 826. They also note that on Wednesday (August 21), *Vremia* again broadcast scenes of tranquility in the provinces but also included some interviews with people opposed to the junta, 831.

43. In Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Prague in 1968, and Poland in 1980, Warsaw Pact forces were deployed and were willing to use force. In Russia in 1991 and Ukraine in 2004, the threat was civil war, which is a qualitatively different phenomenon.

44. Shaposhnikov's testimony is in part IV of the transcripts, *Demokratizatsiya* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 606.

45. Stephen M. Meyer, "How the Threat (and the Coup) Collapsed: The Politicization of the Soviet Military," *International Security* 16, no. 3 (Winter 1991–92): 5–34, quoted passage is on 30.

46. See the comments reported in Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 489–90.

47. Victoria E. Bonnell, Ann Cooper, and Gregory Freidin, eds. *Russia at the Barricades: Eyewitness Accounts of the August 1991 Coup* (Armanak, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994) 201–2.

48. Vladimir Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo, chast' vtoraya* (Moscow: Olimp, 1996), 180–84. Kryuchkov's assertion that the plotters discussed the need to avoid bloodshed before dispatching troops to Moscow should be weighed against Shaposhnikov's judgment of the "insanity" of that decision cited above. In Tbilisi, Baku, Vilnius, and Riga there had been no reluctance to shed blood.

49. C. J. Chivers, "Back Channels: A Crackdown Averted; How Top Spies in Ukraine Changed the Nation's Path," *New York Times*, January 17, 2005. For an account that accepts the view that most Ukrainian SBU officers preferred Yushchenko but dismisses much of what Chivers was told as an intelligence service attempt to whitewash SBU chief Ihor Semashko's role, see Taras Kuzio, "Did Ukraine's Security Service Really Prevent Bloodshed During the Orange Revolution?" *Jamestown Monitor* 2, no. 16 (January 24, 2005).

50. Victor Yasmann, *RFE/RL* daily report, August 19, 2003.

51. The term "refolution," a hybrid of reform and revolution, was coined by Timothy Garton Ash, "Refolution: The Springtime of Two Nations," *New York Review of Books* 30, no. 10 (June 15, 1989) 3–10.

52. Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 52.

53. *Ibid.*, 69.

54. *Ibid.*, 178.

55. *Ibid.*, 219.

56. *Ibid.*, 235.

57. Víctor M. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 203.

58. Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory During the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 49, 53.

59. Gibson, "Mass Opposition."

60. T. Yakusheva, "The Putsch: 10 Years After," report on a poll by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 9–10, 2001, [http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/rus\\_im/recurrences\\_past\\_/putsch/eof013004](http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/rus_im/recurrences_past_/putsch/eof013004) (accessed January 12, 2005).

61. G. Kertman, "The Putsch: 10 Years Later," report on a poll by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 9–10, 2001, [http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/rus\\_im/recurrences\\_past\\_/putsch/eof013029](http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/rus_im/recurrences_past_/putsch/eof013029) (accessed January 12, 2005).

62. "Remembering the August 1991 Coup," population poll, August 14, 2003, [http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/rus\\_im/recurrences\\_past\\_/putsch/eof033211](http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/rus_im/recurrences_past_/putsch/eof033211) (accessed January 12, 2005).

63. The "Appeal to the Soviet People" was signed by the members of the GKChP on

August 18, 1991, and broadcast repeatedly on August 19. An English translation is provided in Bonnell, Cooper, and Freidin, 33–38.

64. Vladimir Isachenkov, “Coup Plotters Defend Their Case,” *Associated Press*, July 4, 2001.

65. *RFE/RL* daily report 9, no. 35 (February 23, 2005).

66. Kathleen Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 158–72.

67. Rubie S. Watson, “Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism: An Introduction,” in *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism*, ed. Rubie S. Watson (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1994), 1–20.

68. Kathleen Smith noted, “In the aftermath of August 1991 those loyal to the old regime could be observed seeking to salvage their dreams by rejecting some aspects of the past and embracing other” (*Mythmaking*, 3). At least this involved choices—a selective approach endeavoring to retain that which was positive while rejecting the elements that deserved to be condemned (or that were politically inconvenient). One might dispute the basis for the choices or the validity of specific decisions, but at least there were choices. Embracing everything creates a moral vacuum.

69. Smith, *Mythmaking*, 8.

70. I discuss the intentionally arbitrary aspects of the Putin regime in Harley Balzer, “Managed Pluralism: Vladimir Putin’s Emerging Regime” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2003): 189–227.

71. Among the scholars who have documented the need for public discussion of complex projects, two of the best are Loren R. Graham, *What Have We Learned about Science and Technology from the Russian Experience?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

72. Debra Javeline, “The Role of Blame in Collective Action: Evidence from Russia,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 107–22.