

Feting a Failed Coup and Those Who Resisted

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While the West marks the 20th anniversary of the demise of the Soviet Union, for most Russians a loss of a country is not a cause for celebration. But Russians and their neighbors do have a significant date to remember — the day when the popular resistance to the coup attempt did not allow hard-line conservatives to reconstitute authoritarian rule and led to the end of communism in the country.

The victory over the coup attempt deserves to be celebrated as a national holiday. The heroes of those days ought to be remembered in history and find their way into textbooks. Those events should be commemorated in film, particularly since they were very cinematographic.

On the morning of Aug. 19, 1991, Muscovites found themselves driving to work from their dachas alongside tanks. (Tank tracks remained on the highways for many months afterward.) Like many, my best friend was returning in a car with her husband and children from a vacation in Crimea and was puzzled by strange announcements on the radio. She wasn't able

to tell what was happening from the reports. It was only closer to Moscow that they had access to Ekho Moskv, the only independent radio station transmitting the actual news. On television, viewers were treated to “Swan Lake,” repeated over and over throughout the day.

After returning to Moscow, my friend and her husband, like many, went to the White House to see what was happening, and they stayed there. People were arriving throughout the day, individually and in groups, from their offices and homes. At night, they burned fires. It rained for three days. News reports later said that this was the only reason the authorities did not use gas against the people on the streets. There was light around the White House and a radio transmitting Ekho Moskv from the building, but farther away from the building it was dark and very frightening. In the middle of the night, foreign radio stations reported that the attack on the building had begun.

Later, it emerged that the Alpha special forces refused to obey orders to open fire on the people. In the morning, some defenders of the White House went home to rest before more night duty. After coming home, my friend and colleague from a research institute locked the doors and asked his wife to tell everyone that he was not in. Meanwhile, the official radio stations were denouncing the defenders of the White House, calling them alcoholics and hooligans.

In the streets, Muscovites brought food to the soldiers in tanks and armored vehicles and stuck flowers into the tank muzzles. Street protests against the coup attempt were also taking place in St. Petersburg and other cities. The three young men who died under armored vehicles late Aug. 20 and early Aug. 21 seemed to personify the diverse groups that supported democratic changes. Ilya Krichevski was an architect and poet, Vladimir Usov was an entrepreneur in a cooperative, and Dmitry Komar was a blue-collar worker and veteran of the Afghan War.

On Aug. 21, the putsch was defeated, and thousands came out to the streets. People pulled down the huge statue of Cheka head Felix Dzerzhinsky in front of the KGB building on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, a giant tricolor was carried by dozens through the central streets of the city, and Boris Yeltsin climbed up on a tank to address cheering crowds before the White House, which was not yet surrounded by walls as it is now.

This popular revolt against the putsch, to paraphrase Alexander Pushkin, was not senseless and not merciless. Communism ended without blood, and a democratic revolution took place in Russia. New opportunities opened up for millions. For the next decade, Russia remained the most democratic of all the former republics of the Soviet Union, with the possible exception of the Baltic states.

Although the victory of the people over the coup attempt and the disintegration of the Soviet Union were only four months apart, the first did not necessarily predetermine the second. The rebuff to the putsch was a “revolution from the bottom,” while the disintegration of the Soviet Union occurred through a lack of political will at the top. There were political ambitions at play and an erroneous perception among the Soviet Union’s top bureaucrats that the other republics were living off Russia. Once the Kremlin stops “feeding them,” the argument went, Russia’s development would skyrocket. It was also widely believed that the other 14 Soviet republics would have no alternative but to return to Russia anyway.

The August putsch and the December dissolution of the Soviet Union should be disentangled in the historic memory, just as the February 1917 Revolution did not predetermine the October Revolution and the disintegration of the Russian Empire that followed. Nor should the popular revolt against the August 1991 putsch be blamed for the inconsistencies in later policies. While Russian media and Western observers alike were writing about radical political reforms and economic shock therapies, in reality Yeltsin moved too slowly, which became one of the causes of the “birth trauma” of the nascent democracy. After the failure of the coup there were long months of passivity that gave Communists and apparatchiks the opportunity to recover and reconsolidate their ranks.

In any case, the opponents of the putsch were heroes. They should be remembered, like the Decembrists of 1825 or the brave few who came out to Red Square in 1968 to protest the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops. It is they who should have received medals from President Dmitry Medvedev at a recent state award ceremony, although they were not seeking recognition then and are not seeking it now.

Will the time ever come when the people’s victory over the August 1991 putsch will be celebrated widely in Russian streets and squares? Perhaps yes, but only if free elections, democratic institutions and popular rule — and not “popular fronts” — take root in the country. Meanwhile, it should be preserved in the national memory that the participants of the popular revolt against hard-line Communist reactionaries 20 years ago showed tremendous courage and responsibility. This gives hope for the future, as any holiday should.

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