

Coup Ends, Problems Begin

By [Steve Gutterman](#)

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My rented flat had no television or radio, and the blank faces on the bus sputtering into central Moscow betrayed no hint of the news that had broken that Monday morning on Aug. 19, 1991.

But there it was when I walked into the office of the U.S. newspaper where I worked as an assistant. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was ill and something called the State Committee for the State of Emergency had taken charge of the country.

Suddenly, a power grab by hard-line Communists seeking to turn back Gorbachev's reforms and halt the disintegration of the Soviet Union turned a sleepy summer into a defining moment in the history of Russia and the world. Like many plans in Russia, the coup plotters' conceit went awry fast. Their abortive putsch only hastened the collapse of Communist rule and the breakup of the world's largest country.

But on that first day, nobody knew the coup would fail — not Gorbachev, not Boris Yeltsin, president of the Soviet Russian Republic, and certainly not the people I met on Moscow's

streets. I found a mix of apprehension, hope and resignation intruding on the weary routine of survival in a country staggering under the system introduced after Russia's other great 20th-century upheaval — the 1917 Revolution.

In the drab capital of what had become a bad parody of a workers' paradise, Muscovites made the rounds of poorly stocked shops, looking for a rare bargain or unexpected bounty amid piles of overripe onions and tins of mystery meat. But there was also a sense, perhaps sharpened by hindsight, of an unfolding drama with far-reaching consequences.

"It's a real coup d'etat," one elderly woman told me. "Nothing good will come of this."

Real, yes, but spectacularly unsuccessful.

It took just three days for the putsch to unravel, defeated by the defiance of Yeltsin and the citizens who rallied around him outside the parliament building, desperate to avert a return to hard-line rule.

Poor organization and half-hearted execution dogged the plotters. The first sign of trouble came at a Aug. 19 news conference by Vice President Gennady Yanayev, who said he was taking over the interim presidency because of Gorbachev's "illness," which Yanayev could not name or explain after being pressed by a reporter from Newsweek magazine.

Yanayev's hands trembled and his voice shook. In front of the parliament building, now called the White House, Yeltsin showed far more mettle, climbing onto a tank and rallying a crowd determined not to give up the relative freedoms of Gorbachev's glasnost era.

By Aug. 21, it was clear that the coup had failed. Four months later, on Dec. 25, the official TASS news agency ran a terse bulletin: "Gorbachev resigns presidency of the Soviet Union. IT'S ONLY JUST BEGUN."

The nuclear-armed superpower that had haunted the West from Stalin to the Sputnik had ceased to exist — something that had seemed unimaginable on both sides of the Cold War divide just a few years earlier.

For Russia, it was a difficult new beginning. The economic hardship that had worsened as the 1980s waned intensified in a rough-and-tumble transition to capitalism, leaving many Russians disillusioned and dampening enthusiasm for democracy.

The White House became the site of confrontation again in 1993, when Yeltsin's tanks shelled the building to force out hard-line lawmakers, some of whom were his allies two years earlier.

These days, it is hard to imagine the chaotic scenes that unfolded at the White House in the early 1990s. Now the headquarters of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the Cabinet, it is closed off by a high black fence guarding groomed lawns — a symbol of the relative stability the country has found in the Putin era.

It is an era his critics compare with the 1980s and the stagnation that came before Gorbachev's reforms, the failed coup and the collapse of a country that had seemed destined to live on for decades at least. Still hobbled by the legacy of the Soviet Union, Russia is grappling with a new set of problems spawned in part by its demise, from migration and

ethnic tension to the frayed ties and geopolitical jostling that led to a brief war with Georgia in 2008.

When the coup collapsed in 1991, I called my girlfriend — now my wife — and told her that it was all over. She laughed: “It’s only just begun.”

Steve Gutterman is a journalist with Reuters, which published this comment.

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