



6 GORBACHEV'S LOST LEGACIES

Do I think I realized my goals, and in this respect am I happy? There's no simple answer to this question. . . . In general, I do not know of any happy reformers.

History will show who was right and who was wrong.

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV, 1993/2000

IN conventional political terms, Gorbachev failed, and did so catastrophically: the “democratic reformation” he tried to enact in the Soviet Union ended in the breakup of his state and country. But that is not the full story of his six and a half years as leader, during which Gorbachev had two unprecedented achievements. He led Russia (then Soviet Russia) closer to real democracy than it had ever been in its centuries-long history.¹ And, with the partners he found in American presidents Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush, he came closer to ending the decades-long Cold War than had anyone before him.

Nor is it reasonable to think that Gorbachev should have completed those undertakings. Few transformational leaders, even “event-making” and “historically fateful” ones, are able to see their missions to completion. This is especially true of leaders of great reformations, whose nature and duration generate more opposition and problems than their initiators (unless they are a Stalin) have power or time to overcome. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, to take a familiar example, a perestroika of American capitalism, continued to unfold and undergo setbacks long after his death. Most such leaders can only open political doors, leave behind

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alternative paths that did not exist before, and hope, as Gorbachev often did publicly, that what they began would be “irreversible.”²

Historic opportunities to modernize Russia gradually and consensually and to end the Cold War were Gorbachev's legacies. That they were missed, or squandered, was the fault of elites and leaders who followed him, both in Moscow and Washington. Indeed, those possibilities were soon misrepresented and then half-forgotten. Despite the democratic breakthroughs under Gorbachev examined earlier, the role of “father of Russian democracy” was soon reassigned to his successor, Boris Yeltsin. Along with the Washington political establishment, leading American journalists now informed readers that it was Yeltsin who began “Russia's transition from totalitarianism,” who “set Russia on a course toward democracy,” and under whom its “first flickerings of democratic nationhood” occurred.³ Remarkably, many academic specialists concurred: “Democracy emerged in Russia after the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1991.”⁴ In effect, Gorbachev's model of evolutionary democratization was deleted from history and thus from politics.

How is this historical amnesia to be explained? In post-Soviet Russia, the primary cause was political expediency. Fearing a backlash at home against their role in the Soviet breakup and worried about Gorbachev's continuing popularity abroad, Yeltsin and his inner circle insisted that the new Russian president was the “undoubted father of Russian democracy” and Gorbachev merely a half-hearted reformer who tried to “save Communism.”⁵ Early on, even a few Russian supporters of Yeltsin understood that this was both untrue and dangerous for the country's future. Recalling Gorbachev's role as “liberator,” one wrote: “Miracles do not happen. People who are not capable of appreciating a great man cannot successfully lead a state.”⁶

In the West, and particularly in the United States, a more ideological politics inspired the revised history. Gorbachev's historic reforms, along with Washington's previous hope that they would succeed, were quickly obscured as the Soviet breakup and purported U.S. victory in the Cold War became defining moments in a new American triumphalist narrative. The entire history of the “defeated” Soviet enemy was now presented in the press as “Russia's seven decades as a rigid and ruthless police state,” a “wound inflicted on a nation . . . over most of a century,”

an experience “every bit as evil as we had thought—indeed more so.” Reagan’s condemnation of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” which he had happily rejected because of Gorbachev’s reforms only three years before, was reinstated. An influential columnist even declared that a “fascist Russia” would have been a “much better thing.”⁷

American scholars, some of them also inspired by “triumphalist belief,” reacted similarly. With few exceptions, they reverted to old Sovietological axioms that the system had always been unreformable and its fate predetermined. The view that there had been promising “roads not taken” in its history was again dismissed as an “improbable idea” based on “dubious assumptions.” Gorbachev’s “evolutionary middle path . . . was a chimera,” just as NEP had been, an attempt “to reform the unreformable,” and the Soviet Union therefore died from a “lack of alternatives.” Accordingly, most scholars no longer asked, even in light of the calamities that followed, if a reforming Soviet Union might have been the best hope for the post-Communist future of Russia or any of the other former republics.⁸ On the contrary, they insisted that everything Soviet “must be discarded” by “razing the entire edifice of political and economic relations,” an exhortation that translated into American cheerleading for Yeltsin’s extremist measures after 1991.⁹

The revised history of the Soviet Union also required a revised memory of its last leader. Once seen as the Soviet Union’s “No. 1 radical” and acclaimed for his “boldness,” Gorbachev was now dismissed as having been “irresolute and unproductive,” as well as insufficiently “radical.”¹⁰ The leader who said of himself while in power, “everything new in philosophy begins as heresy and in politics as the opinion of a minority,” and whose own Communist fundamentalists were “against me, hate me” because his policies were “heresy,” was recast as a man with “no deep convictions,” even as an “orthodox Communist.”¹¹ That persistent ideological response to Gorbachev’s belief in a “socialism with a human face” also promoted the assertion that Yeltsin had “introduced markets and democracy to Russia.”¹²

The notion that Gorbachev’s pro-democracy measures and other reforms had been insufficiently radical misunderstands a fateful difference between his approach and Yeltsin’s. From Peter the Great to Stalin, the dominant leadership method of transforming Russia had been a “revolution from above” that imposed wrenching changes on society through state coercion. Looking back, many reform-minded Russians rejected

those methods as “modernization through catastrophe” because of their extraordinary human and material costs and because they kept the Russian people as subjects of the state rather than freeing them to become democratic citizens. Yeltsin’s “shock-therapy” measures of the early 1990s, though his purpose was different, continued that baneful tradition.¹³

Gorbachev emphatically rejected the tradition. From the beginning, he was determined to “ensure that for the first time in its centuries-long history our country would go through a turning point without bloodshed.” Perestroika, he vowed, was a “historic chance to modernize the country through reforms, that is by peaceful means”—a process “revolutionary in content but evolutionary in methods and form.” Once initiated from above, it meant putting the “cause of perestroika in the hands of the people,” not the state, through “democratization of all spheres of Soviet life.” Readers already know the price Gorbachev paid for choosing a “democratic reformation”—itself a kind of leadership heresy—as an alternative to Russia’s history of imposed transformations.¹⁴

As political and social calamities unfolded under Yeltsin in the post-Soviet 1990s, Russian scholars and other intellectuals, unlike their American counterparts, began to rethink the consequences of the Soviet breakup. A growing number concluded that some form of Gorbachev’s perestroika, or “non-catastrophic evolution,” even without him, had been a chance to democratize and marketize Russia in ways less traumatic and costly, and thus more fruitful, than those adopted by Yeltsin. Russia’s historians (and politicians) will debate the issue for many years to come, but the fate of the country’s democratization suggests why some of them already believe that Gorbachev’s approach was a “lost alternative.”¹⁵

Consider briefly the “trajectory,” as specialists say,¹⁶ of four essential components of any democracy as they developed in Russia before and after the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991:

- Without a significant number of independent media, other elements of democracy, from fair elections and constraints on power to the administration of justice, cannot exist. In 1985 and 1986, Gorbachev introduced “glasnost,” his necessary initial reform, which meant a gradual diminishing of official censorship. By 1990 and 1991, the process had given rise to a plethora of independent publications and, more importantly at the time, to substantially uncensored state-owned national tele-

vision, radio, and newspapers. The latter development was attributable to Gorbachev's committed leadership, continued government funding of national media, and the absence of other forces that might seize those opinion-shaping instruments for their own purposes.

A reverse process began after Yeltsin's victory in the failed August 1991 coup and his abolition of the Soviet Union in December. In both instances, he closed several opposition newspapers while reasserting Kremlin censorship over television. These were temporary measures, but more lasting control of the post-Soviet national media followed Yeltsin's armed destruction of the Russian parliament in 1993 and his "privatization" decrees, which made a small group of men, known as "oligarchs," owners of the nation's most valuable assets, including the media.

The 1996 presidential election, which Yeltsin was at risk of losing to the Communist Party candidate, marked the end of truly free and independent nationwide media in post-Soviet Russia. Though some pluralism and independent journalism remained, mainly because of internecine warfare among the media's oligarchic owners and a residual effect of Gorbachev's glasnost, they steadily declined. As a leading independent editor during both the Gorbachev and post-Soviet years later emphasized: "In 1996, the Russian authorities . . . and the largest business groups . . . jointly used the mass media, above all television, for the purpose of manipulating voter behavior, and with real success. Since that time, neither the authorities nor the oligarchs have let this weapon out of their hands."¹⁷

Other Russian journalists later compared their experiences during the Gorbachev years favorably to what followed under Yeltsin and Putin, but here is the judgment of a knowledgeable American head of an international monitoring organization, written in 2005: "During glasnost, courageous journalism pried open closed doors to history, sparked vigorous debates on multiparty democracy, and encouraged Soviet citizens to speak freely. . . . But in today's Russia, courageous journalists are endangered. . . . Reporting on basic public issues is increasingly restricted, and the public is kept in the dark about corruption, crime, and human rights abuses."¹⁸

•Russian elections naturally took the same "trajectory." The first ever national multicandidate balloting in Soviet history, for a Congress of People's Deputies, took place in March 1989. Though half of the deputies were chosen by institutions rather than popular vote, it was a his-

toric breakthrough in Gorbachev's democratization campaign and was soon followed by more important ones. Voting for a counterpart legislature of the Soviet Russian Republic in early 1990 remains the freest and fairest parliamentary election ever held in Russia.¹⁹ The same is true of the 1991 electoral campaign for the new presidency of that Soviet republic, in which a defiant Yeltsin defeated the Kremlin's candidate by a wide margin.

No further Russian parliamentary or presidential elections occurred until after the end of the Soviet Union, and when they did, each, while maintaining an innocuous degree of competition, was less free and fair than its predecessors. By 1996, Yeltsin's backers had developed enough "political technologies" for the "managed democracy" later associated with Vladimir Putin—overwhelming use of funds, control of the mass media, restrictions on independent candidates and parties, and falsified returns—to assure that effective power remained with whoever already ruled Russia. Even the referendum results said to have ratified Yeltsin's new constitution in 1993, unlike Gorbachev's 1991 referendum on the Union, were almost certainly falsified.²⁰

Most telling, Yeltsin's election as Soviet Russian president in 1991 was the first and the last time executive power was allowed to pass from the Kremlin to an opposition candidate. In 2000, Yeltsin transferred power to Putin by means of a "managed" election, and Putin made Dmitri Medvedev his successor as president in a similar way in 2008. Even an American specialist unsympathetic to Gorbachev's reforms concluded that "Gorbachev-era elections were less fixed and fraudulent than most post-Soviet parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia have been." A Russian commentator was more succinct: "The peak of electoral democracy in our country came toward the end of perestroika."²¹

•But no Gorbachev-era democratic achievement was more important, or decline more fateful, than the popularly elected Soviet legislatures he promoted in 1989 and 1990. Democracy is possible without an independent executive branch but not without a sovereign parliament or its equivalent, the one truly indispensable institution of representative government. From tsars to heads of the Soviet Communist Party, Russian authoritarianism had featured overwhelming executive power and nonexistent or doomed representative assemblies, from the Dumas of the late tsarist period to the popularity elected soviets and Constituent Assembly of 1917 and 1918.

In that context, the Soviet Congress elected in 1989 and its Russian Republic counterpart in 1990—each chose a smaller Supreme Soviet to continue as a sitting parliament—were the most historic result of Gorbachev's prodemocracy policies. The first functioned as an increasingly independent constitutional convention, enacting legislation for the further democratization of the Soviet Union by separating the powers previously monopolized by tsars and commissars alike, while also empowering investigative commissions and emerging as a source of opposition to Gorbachev. The second did the same in the Russian Republic, most importantly by amending its constitution to institute an elected presidency for Yeltsin. Nonetheless, Gorbachev was so committed to real legislatures as an essential component of democratization that he agreed only reluctantly to his own executive presidency in 1990, worrying it might diminish their independence, and he then endured, however unhappily, their mounting criticism of his leadership.²²

Twenty years later, Russia's post-Soviet Parliament, renamed the Duma, had become a near replica of its weak and compliant tsarist-era predecessors, and the presidency a nearly all-powerful institution. Two turning points marked this fateful development. The first was in late 1991, when the Soviet Congress was permitted to play almost no role during the last months of the Soviet Union and then none at all in its dissolution. The second came in late 1993, when Yeltsin forcibly abolished the 1990 Russian Parliament and enacted a superpresidential constitution. Thereafter, each successive parliament, like each election, was less independent and influential, eventually becoming, in the eyes of its critics, a "decorative" or "imitation" legislature, like post-Soviet democracy itself.

- Finally, viable democracies require governing elites whose ranks are open, at least periodically, to representatives of other parties, nonofficial institutions, and civil society. Until the onset of perestroika, the self-appointed Soviet nomenklatura monopolized political power and even participation in politics. Breaking that monopoly by allowing the rise of new political actors from different backgrounds and professions—an academic economist and a law professor were elected the mayors of Moscow and Leningrad/St. Petersburg—was another democratic breakthrough of the Gorbachev years. By 1990, such people made up a significant minority in the Soviet Congress and a majority in the Soviet Russian Parliament.

After 1991, that development was also reversed. The post-Soviet ruling elite soon grew into a narrow group largely composed of the leader's personal entourage, financial oligarchs and their representatives, state bureaucrats, and people from military and security institutions. The growing number of military and security officers at the highest levels of government, for example, is usually attributed to Putin, a former KGB colonel, but it began soon after the Soviet breakup. Before 1992, under Gorbachev, they accounted for 4 percent of the ruling elite; this more than tripled to 17 percent under Yeltsin and then climbed to some 50 percent under Putin.²³

Civil society fared accordingly. Contrary to civil-society "promoters," it always exists, even in authoritarian systems, whether in the form of parties, trade unions, other nongovernmental organizations, or simply the everyday interactive activities of citizens. But in post-Soviet Russia, by the late 1990s, most of its political representatives had lapsed back into pre-perestroika passivity, sporadic actions, or impotence. The turnabout was caused by several factors, including exhaustion, disillusion, the state's reoccupation of political space, and the decimation of once large and professionalized Soviet middle classes, usually said to be a prerequisite of stable democracy, by Yeltsin's shock-therapy measures of the early 1990s. On the eve of the twentieth anniversary of perestroika, Gorbachev's partner in democratization, Aleksandr Yakovlev, spoke "a blasphemous thought: Never in the history of Russia has there been such a deep divide between the ruling elite and the people."²⁴ It was a considerable exaggeration, but an expression of the fate of what Gorbachev and he had begun.

In short, these four indicators document the downward trajectory of Russian democratization after the end of the Soviet Union. Other political developments were in the same direction. Constitutionalism and rule of law were the guidelines of Gorbachev's reforms. They did not always prevail but stand in sharp contrast to Yeltsin's methods, which destroyed an entire existing constitutional order in 1993, from its parliament and fledgling Constitutional Court to reanimated councils of local government. Yeltsin then ruled primarily by decree during the rest of the 1990s, issuing 2,300 in one year alone. There was also the rise and fall of official respect for human rights, always a sensitive indicator of the degree of democracy. On this subject we have a Western study published

in 2004: "Human rights violations have increased dramatically in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union."²⁵

The conclusion seems clear: Soviet democratization, however dictatorial the system's preceding history, was Russia's missed democratic opportunity, an evolutionary road not taken. In the context of American triumphalism and its political correctness, it is a heretical conclusion, but not in post-Soviet Russia. Even early Yeltsin supporters and Gorbachev critics later reconsidered the choices they had made in 1990 and 1991. Looking back, one concluded, "Gorbachev . . . gave us political freedoms, without costs or bloodshed—freedoms of the press, speech, assembly, and a multiparty system." Another pointed out, "How we used these freedoms is already our problem and responsibility, not his." And a third, who had lent his political support to Yeltsin's abolition of the Soviet Union, wondered aloud "how the country would have developed" had it continued to exist.²⁶

TWENTY years after the Soviet state ended, most Western observers agreed that a far-reaching process of "de-democratization" was under way in Russia. Explaining when and why it began again revealed fundamental differences between the thinking of Western specialists, particularly American ones, and Russians themselves.

Unlike Americans, a majority of Russians, as readers already know, regretted the end of the Soviet Union not because they pined for "Communism" but because they lost a familiar state and a secure way of life. Even an imprisoned post-Soviet oligarch, like so many of his fellow citizens, saw the event as a "tragedy," a view that produced the adage: "Those who do not regret the breakup of the USSR have no heart."²⁷ If only for that reason, Russian intellectuals and political figures were less constrained by ideology and politics than were Americans in examining the origins of de-democratization. A growing number joined Gorbachev partisans in believing that the end of perestroika, which had been abolished along with the Soviet Union, had been a "lost chance" for democracy and a "tragic mistake."²⁸

Most American commentators insisted on a different explanation and continue to do so. Having deleted Gorbachev's reforms from the Soviet Union's "evil" history and attributed democratization to Yeltsin, they blamed Putin for having "taken Russia in the opposite direction."

Political, media, and academic commentators who had been vocal cheerleaders for “Yeltsin-era democracy” initiated the explanation, but it became conventional wisdom: “The democratizing Russia that Putin inherited” fell victim to his “anti-democratic agenda” and “blueprint for dictatorship.”²⁹ Only a few American specialists disagreed, faulting Yeltsin rather than his successor for beginning the “rollback of democratic reforms.”³⁰

Wary perhaps of doubting “one of the great moments in history,”³¹ even fewer have asked if the “rollback” began earlier, with the Soviet breakup itself. The failure of journalists and policymakers to consider the possibility may be understandable. But not even established scholars who later regretted their “optimism” about Yeltsin’s leadership have rethought the end of the Soviet Union.³² They should do so because the way its breakup occurred—in circumstances about which standard Western accounts are largely silent or mythical—clearly boded ill for Russia’s future. (One myth is the “peaceful” and “bloodless” nature of the dissolution.³³ In reality, ethnic strife soon broke out in Central Asia and the Caucasus, killing or brutally displacing hundreds of thousands of citizens, a post-Soviet fallout still ongoing in the 2008 war in Georgia.)

Most generally, there were ominous parallels between the Soviet breakup and the collapse of tsarism in 1917. In both cases, the way the old order ended resulted in a near total destruction of Russian statehood that plunged the country into prolonged chaos, conflict, and misery. Russians call what ensued “*Smuta*,” a term full of dread derived from previous historical experiences and not expressed in the usual translation, “Time of Troubles.” (In this respect, the end of the Soviet Union may have had less to do with the specific nature of that system than with recurring breakdowns of the state in Russian history.)

The consequences of 1991 and 1917, despite important differences, were similar. Once again, hopes for evolutionary progress toward democracy, prosperity, and social justice were crushed; a small group of radicals imposed extreme measures on the nation; zealous struggles over property and territory tore apart the foundations of a vast multiethnic state, this time a nuclear one; and the victors destroyed long-standing economic and other essential structures to build entirely anew, “as though we had no past.”³⁴ Once again, elites acted in the name of an ideology and a better future but left society bitterly divided over yet

another “accursed question”—why it had happened.³⁵ And again the people paid the price, including catastrophic declines in life expectancy.

All of those recapitulations unfolded, amid mutual (and lasting) charges of betrayal, during the three months from August to December 1991 when the “dismantling of Union statehood” actually occurred. (Gorbachev felt betrayed by the August coup plotters and by Yeltsin, Yeltsin by his Belovezh partner Kravchuk, and millions of Russians by the Belovezh dissolution of the Soviet Union, leading a foreign correspondent to label post-Soviet Russia “the country of the broken word.”)³⁶ The period began and ended with the coups in Moscow and Belovezh and culminated in a revolution from above against the reforming Soviet system led by its own elites, analogous to, again allowing for important dissimilarities, Stalin’s abolition of NEP Russia in 1929. Looking back, Russians of different views would conclude it was during these months that political extremism and unfettered greed cost them a chance for democratic and economic progress.³⁷ Few thought it happened a decade later under Putin.

Certainly, it is hard to imagine a political act more extreme than abolishing a state of 280 million citizens, one laden with countless nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. And yet, Yeltsin did it, as even his sympathizers acknowledged, precipitously and in a way that was “neither legitimate nor democratic.”³⁸ A profound departure from Gorbachev’s commitment to gradualism, social consensus, and constitutionalism, this was a return to the country’s “neo-Bolshevik” and earlier traditions of imposed change, as many Russian, and even a few Western, writers have characterized it.³⁹ The ramifications were bound to endanger the democratization achieved during the preceding six years of perestroika.

Yeltsin and his appointees promised, for example, that their extreme measures were “extraordinary” ones, but, as had happened before in Russia, most recently under Stalin from 1929 through 1933, they grew into a system of rule.⁴⁰ (The next such measure, already being planned, was “shock therapy.”) Those initial steps had a further political logic. Having ended the Soviet state in a way that lacked legal or popular legitimacy, the Yeltsin ruling group soon became fearful of real democracy. In particular, a freely elected independent parliament and the possibility of relinquishing power in any manner raised the specter of “going on trial and to prison.”⁴¹

The economic consequences of Belovezh were no less portentous. Liquidating the Union without any preparatory stages shattered a highly integrated economy. In addition to abetting the destruction of a vast state, it was a major cause of the collapse of production across the former Soviet territories, which fell by nearly half in the 1990s. That in turn contributed to mass poverty and its attendant social pathologies, from declining longevity to massive corruption, which remained the “main fact” of Russian life even in the early twenty-first century.⁴²

The economic motivation behind elite support for Yeltsin in 1991, which I examined in chapter 5, was even more malignant. As a onetime Yeltsin supporter wrote thirteen years later, “Almost everything that happened in Russia after 1991 was determined to a significant extent by the divvying-up of the property of the former USSR.”⁴³ Here, too, there were foreboding historical precedents. Twice before in twentieth-century Russia, the nation’s fundamental property had been confiscated—the landlord’s vast estates and the bourgeoisie’s industrial and other large assets in the revolution of 1917 and 1918, and then the land of 25 million peasant farmers in Stalin’s collectivization drive in 1929 through 1933. The aftereffects of both episodes plagued the country for many years to come.⁴⁴

Soviet elites took much of the state’s enormous wealth, which for decades had been defined in law and ideology as the “property of all the people,” with no more regard for fair procedures or public opinion than there had been in 1917 and 1918. Indeed, an anti-Communist Russian intellectual thought that the “Bolshevik expropriation of private property looks simply like the height of piety against the background of the insane injustice of our absurd privatization.”⁴⁵ To maintain their dominant position and enrich themselves, Soviet elites wanted the most valuable state property distributed from above, without the participation of legislatures or any other representatives of society. They achieved that goal first by themselves, through “spontaneous privatization” on the eve of the Soviet dissolution, and then, after 1991, through decrees issued by Yeltsin. As a result, privatization was haunted from the beginning by a “‘dual illegitimacy’—in the eyes of the law . . . and in the eyes of the population.”⁴⁶

The political and economic consequences should have been easy to foresee. Fearful for their dubiously acquired assets and even for their lives and families (many were sent abroad to live), the property holders, who formed the core of the first post-Soviet ruling elite, were as

determined as Yeltsin to limit or reverse the parliamentary electoral democracy and media freedoms instituted by Gorbachev. In their place, they strove to create a kind of praetorian political system devoted to and corrupted by their wealth.

The role played in post-Soviet “de-democratization” by the “divvying-up of the property of the former USSR,” which was still under way during the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, is rarely noted in Western accounts. Its full history lies outside the framework of this book, but several milestones should be emphasized. “Privatization” of billions of dollars worth of state assets was a central issue in the struggle between Yeltsin and the parliament in 1993 and its destruction by tank fire in October. It was also a motive for the superpresidential constitution imposed on the country in December of that year, as well as the coalition between the Kremlin and the new oligarchs to keep Yeltsin in power by rigging the 1996 presidential election.

The endangered well-being and security of that Kremlin-oligarchical “Family,” as it became known, then inspired the “democratic transition” of power from Yeltsin to Putin in 1999 and 2000. With demands for social justice, criminal accountability, and impeachment growing in the country and in the new parliament, and Yeltsin in failing political and physical health, the oligarchs desperately needed a new protector in the Kremlin. (In late 1999, 90 percent of Russians surveyed did not trust Yeltsin and 53 percent wanted him put on trial.) The plan was to appoint his successor as prime minister, who would, according to the constitution, become acting president upon Yeltsin’s retirement until a new “election” was held.

Several candidates were rehearsed for the position before the forty-seven-year-old Putin, a career KGB officer and head of its successor agency, the FSB, was chosen. Though he later became a leader unlike the oligarchs had intended, the reason behind Putin’s selection was clear: as FSB chief, he had already demonstrated he was “willing to help” a previous patron escape criminal indictment. And, indeed, his first act upon becoming president was to grant Yeltsin, as agreed beforehand, lifetime immunity from prosecution. For the first time in Russia’s centuries of police repression, thus did a career secret policemen become its supreme leader.⁴⁷ (Yuri Andropov headed the KGB before becoming Soviet general secretary in 1982, but it had not been his original or primary profession.)

The economic consequences of the “divvying-up” were no less profound. Uncertain how long they could actually retain their immense property, the new oligarchs were initially more interested in stripping assets than investing in them. Capital flight soon far exceeded investment in the economy, which fell by 80 percent in the 1990s. This was a major cause of a depression worse than the West’s in the 1930s, with the GDP plummeting by half and real wages (when they were paid at all) by even more, and some 75 percent of Russians plunged into poverty. As a result, post-Soviet Russia lost many of its hard-gained twentieth-century achievements, becoming the first nation ever to undergo actual demodernization in peacetime.⁴⁸

Not surprisingly, as the new elite and its top bureaucrats were increasingly perceived as a rapacious “off-shore aristocracy,” popular hatred of them spread and grew more intense. In a 2005 survey, Russians rated them well below their Soviet-era counterparts in their concern for the nation’s welfare, their patriotism, and their morals. Having unfolded under the banner of “democratic reform,” all of these developments further discredited democracy, now termed “shit-ocracy,” in public opinion.⁴⁹ Twenty years after it began, the political and economic consequences of the “divvying-up of the property of the former USSR”—and the conviction that “property without power isn’t worth anything”⁵⁰—remain both the primary cause of Russia’s de-democratization and the primary obstacle to reversing it.

Considering all these ominous circumstances, why did so many Western commentators, from politicians and journalists to scholars, hail the breakup of the Soviet Union as a “breakthrough” to democracy and free-market capitalism and persist in these misconceptions?⁵¹ Where Russia was concerned, their reaction was again based on anti-Communist ideology, hopeful myths, and amnesia, not historical or contemporary realities. Alluding to that myopia on the part of people who had long sought the destruction of the Soviet state and then “exulted” in it, a Moscow philosopher remarked bitterly, “They were aiming at Communism but hitting Russia.”⁵²

Among the most ideological myths surrounding the end of the Soviet Union was that it “collapsed at the hands of its own people” and brought to power in Russia “Yeltsin and the democrats”—even “moral leaders”—who represented “the people.”⁵³ As I pointed out in the preceding chapter, no popular revolution, national election, or referendum

mandated or sanctioned the breakup, and so there is no empirical evidence for this supposition. Indeed, everything strongly suggests a different interpretation.

Even the most event-making leaders need supporters in order to carry out historic acts. Yeltsin abolished the Soviet Union in December 1991 with the backing of a self-interested alliance. All of its groups called themselves “democrats” and “reformers,” but the two most important ones were unlikely allies: the nomenklatura elites who were pursuing the “smell of property like a beast after prey,” in the revealing metaphor of Yeltsin’s own chief minister, and wanted property much more than any kind of democracy or free-market competition—many had opposed Gorbachev’s reforms—and the impatient, avowedly prodemocracy wing of the intelligentsia.⁵⁴ Traditional enemies in the prereform Soviet system, they colluded in 1991 largely because the intelligentsia’s radical economic ideas seemed to justify nomenklatura privatization.

But the most influential pro-Yeltsin intellectuals, who would play leading roles in his post-Soviet government, were neither coincidental fellow travelers nor real democrats, foremost among them Yegor Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais, and their “team” of shock therapists. Since the late 1980s, Chubais and others had insisted that market economics and large private property would have to be imposed on a recalcitrant Russian society by an “iron-hand” regime. This “great leap,” as they extolled it, would entail “tough and unpopular” policies resulting in “mass dissatisfaction” and thus would necessitate “anti-democratic measures.”⁵⁵ Like the property-seeking elites, they saw the new legislatures elected in Russia under Gorbachev, still called soviets, as a major obstacle. “Liberal admirers of Pinochet,” the general who had brutally imposed economic change on Chile in the 1970s and 1980s, they said of Yeltsin, now their leader, “Let him be a dictator!”⁵⁶

Little else could have been worse for Russia’s nascent democracy in 1992 than a Kremlin belief in the need for a Pinochet-like leader to implement market reforms, a role Gorbachev had refused to play, and a team of “reform” intellectuals to encourage it. From there it was only a step back to Russia’s authoritarian traditions and on to the overthrow of an elected parliament, privatization by decree, a Kremlin-appointed financial oligarchy, and corruption of the media and elections. A Russian law professor later summarized what happened: “The so-called democratic movement ceased to exist at the end of 1991. . . . Some of

its members took part in the divvying up of property and primitive accumulation of capital; others hired themselves out to the new property owners and served their interests politically.”⁵⁷

Certainly Chubais and his “democratic reformers” were there at each stage, planning and justifying the undoing of democratization, including the transition to Putin, while still yearning for a Russian Pinochet.⁵⁸ They became much more (or less) than intellectuals, serving as ministers in Yeltsin’s government, notably Chubais himself, Gaidar, Alfred Kokh, Boris Nemtsov, and a dozen or so others. (Their service and deeds, it should be emphasized, also had the enthusiastic support of American policymakers, media opinion makers, and academic specialists.)⁵⁹

Underlying the Pinochet syndrome among Yeltsin’s intellectual supporters was a profoundly antidemocratic contempt for the Russian people (*narod*). When election returns went against the “liberals,” they questioned the “psychological health of voters”; declared, “Russia! You’ve lost your mind!”; and concluded that “the people are the main problem with our democracy.” And when their policies ended in economic disaster, they pointed to the “rot in the national gene pool” and again blamed “the people,” who “deserved their miserable fate.”⁶⁰ When the Soviet Union ended, however, Russia’s future was not in the hands of the people, who had responded admirably to Gorbachev’s democratic reforms, but in those of the elites now in power.

Political and economic alternatives still existed in Russia after 1991. Other fateful struggles and decisions lay ahead. And none of the factors contributing to the end of the Soviet Union were inexorable or deterministic. But even if genuine democratic and market aspirations were among them, so were cravings for power, political coups, elite avarice, extremist ideas, widespread perceptions of illegitimacy, and anger over the “greatest betrayal of the twentieth century.”⁶¹ All of these factors continued to play a role after 1991, but it should already have been clear which would prevail—as should have been the fate of the democratic alternative Gorbachev bequeathed to Russia.

ON the occasion of Gorbachev’s seventieth birthday in 2001, a Soviet-era intellectual who had deserted him in 1990 and 1991 reevaluated his leadership. After acknowledging that Russia’s democratization was his achievement, she added another: “Gorbachev ended the ‘Cold War’,”

and that fact in itself makes him one of the heroes of the twentieth century.”⁶² Though Gorbachev himself always credited the “key role” played by his “partners” Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, few nonpartisan historians of that process, or participants in it, deny he was the main “hero.”⁶³

Here, too, however, his legacy may have been lost. In August 2008, almost exactly twenty years after Gorbachev delivered a historic United Nations speech disavowing the Soviet ideological premise of the Cold War, Washington and Moscow were fighting a proxy hot war in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Surrogate U.S.-Soviet military conflicts had been a regular feature of the Cold War, in the Third World and elsewhere, but this was a more direct confrontation by half. Washington was represented by Georgia’s military forces, which it had amply funded for several years, but Moscow’s own troops fought (and won) the war. Whatever the view from America, many Russians, Georgians, and South Ossetians, on whose territory it began, “perceived the conflict as a proxy battle between two global powers—Russia and the United States.”⁶⁴

The war caught most Western governments and observers “totally by surprise” primarily because they had failed to understand that a new (or renewed) cold war had been developing long before the U.S.-Russian conflict in the Caucasus.⁶⁵ In particular, American officials and specialists, almost without exception, had repeatedly denied that a new cold war was even possible. Some dismissed the possibility adamantly (in reply to a small number of critics, myself included, who warned of the mounting danger), presumably because they had formulated, implemented, or defended policies contributing to it. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example, announced officially that “talk about a new Cold War is hyperbolic nonsense.” And a *Washington Post* columnist denounced the “notion” as “the most dangerous misjudgment of all.”⁶⁶

Personal motives aside, most commentators apparently misunderstood the nature of cold war, assuming that the one following World War II was the only model. The essential meaning of cold war is a relationship between states in which exacerbating conflicts and confrontation are dominant in more areas than not and usually, though not always, short of military fighting. To take two disparate examples, the fifteen-year U.S. nonrecognition of Soviet Russia, from 1918 to 1933, was a kind of cold war, but without an arms race or other direct dangers to either side. The Sino-Soviet cold war, from the 1960s to the 1980s, on

the other hand, witnessed occasional military skirmishes along a long border. Cold-war relationships vary in form, causes, and content, the last U.S.-Soviet one being exceedingly dangerous because it included a nuclear arms race.

Other misconceptions underlay the assumption that a U.S.-Russian cold war was impossible after the end of the Soviet Union. Unlike before, it was widely argued, post-1991 conflicts between Washington and Moscow were not the product of different economic and political systems, were not ideological or global, and, in any event, post-Soviet Russia was too weak to wage another cold war.⁶⁷ (The “friendship” between President George W. Bush and President Putin was often cited as further evidence, even though Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev had professed the same personal relationship thirty years before.)

All of these assertions, which are still widespread in the United States, are misinformed. Russia’s “capitalism” is fundamentally unlike America’s, economically and politically. Exaggeration of ideology’s actual importance in the previous Cold War aside, ideological conflict, or a “values gap,” between U.S. “democracy promotion” and Russia’s “sovereign democracy”—“autocratic nationalism,” even “fascism,” as new American cold warriors label it—has been growing for several years, along with the number and prominence of ideologues on both sides. And this gap, we are told, “is greater today than at any time since Communism’s collapse.” Indeed, one of the Americans assures us, “Ideology matters again.”⁶⁸ Nor did the Cold War after World War II begin globally, but in Eastern Europe, as did the new one, which is rapidly spreading. As for Russia’s inability to fight it, that assumption was shattered by the 2008 war in Georgia in less than a week.⁶⁹

The tenacious fallacy of deniers of a new cold war is illustrated by their own accounts of the U.S.-Russian relationship, the “worst in a generation,” as it evolved during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Though couched in euphemisms, worsening relations could hardly be mistaken for anything other than a new cold war. Consider the following passages from a front-page *New York Times* “news analysis,” under the heading “No Cold War, But Big Chill,” published a week after the war in Georgia broke out:

“The cold war is over,” President Bush declared Friday, but a new era of enmity between the United States and Russia has emerged

nevertheless. . . . As much as Mr. Bush has argued that the old characterizations of the cold war are no longer germane, he drew a new line . . . between countries free and not free, and bluntly put Russia on the other side of it. . . . Tensions are manifest already, and both sides have done their part to inflame them. . . . The United Nations Security Council has reverted to a cold-war-like stalemate. . . . The Russian offensive—the first outside its territory since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—has crystallized a realignment already taking place in Central and Eastern Europe. . . . The administration dropped its opposition to sending Patriot missiles, which would defend the Polish site [for U.S. missile defense]. . . . A senior Russian general promptly gave credence to Poland's worst fears by saying Friday that the country had just made itself a target of Russia's nuclear arsenal. . . . It may seem outdated to speak of blocs in Europe, but they are emerging just as clearly, if less ideologically, as those that existed on either side of the Iron Curtain. . . . In fact, the alienation between the United States and Russia has rarely, if ever, been deeper.⁷⁰

If so, what happened to the “end of the Cold War?” The next chapter proposes an answer, but this one must end where it began, by emphasizing yet another instance of historical amnesia and revisionism. In this case, it involves the crucial question: How and when did the Cold War end?

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he was already determined to pursue not merely another relaxation of East-West tensions but an abolition of the forty-year Cold War.⁷¹ He was committed to doing so for three reasons: He believed that its most dangerous element, the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race, threatened human existence. He wanted the Soviet Union to become an integral part of the West, of a “Common European Home,” in which he included the United States. And without substantially reducing both the international tensions and economic costs of the Cold War, Gorbachev had little hope of mobilizing the political support and resources at home necessary for his perestroika reformation.

Gorbachev's anti-Cold War mission was informed by what he and his aides called “New Thinking.” Also decried as heresy by Communist Party fundamentalists, it brought about a “conceptual revolution” in

Soviet foreign policy.⁷² Those ideas, together with Gorbachev's remarkable leadership abilities and the essential participation of a U.S. president who also feared the potential consequences of nuclear weapons, Ronald Reagan, quickly transformed East-West relations.

In 1986, barely a year after Gorbachev's rise to power, the two leaders agreed in principle that all nuclear weapons should be abolished, an impossible goal but a vital pursuit. In 1987, they signed a treaty eliminating for the first time an entire category of those weapons, in effect putting the long arms race in reverse gear. In 1988, while joining Gorbachev in other important disarmament initiatives, Reagan absolved the Soviet "evil empire," saying of America's new partner, "That was another time, another era." And when he left office in January 1989, Reagan explained why there was a new era: "The Cold War is over."⁷³

Even if true, it had to be affirmed by Gorbachev and by Reagan's successor, the first President Bush. They did so emphatically in November and December 1989, first when Gorbachev refused to respond with military force, as his predecessors had done in similar situations, to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe; and then together at a Malta summit meeting, which they agreed marked the onset of a "brand new era in U.S.-Soviet relations."⁷⁴ Other formal ratifications soon followed, but ultimate evidence of a post-Cold War era, however brief, was provided in 1990 by two instances of unprecedented U.S.-Soviet cooperation: an agreement on German reunification and Moscow's support for the U.S.-led war to drive Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army, a Soviet client, out of Kuwait.

Three elements of this history were crucial. First, even allowing for the "key" roles of Reagan and Bush, the Cold War would have continued unabated, possibly grown worse, had it not been for Gorbachev's initiatives. Second, objective historians and participants disagree about exactly when the Cold War ended, but they agree it occurred sometime between 1988 and 1990—that is, eighteen months to three years before the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991.⁷⁵ And third, the termination of the Cold War was negotiated in a way, as Bush initially confirmed, "so there were no losers, only winners" or, as future Secretary of State Rice wrote, with "no winners and no losers."⁷⁶

On the American side, however, those historical realities were soon rewritten. Immediately after December 1991, the end of the Cold War was conflated with and attributed to the end of the Soviet Union, and

both were recast for a new American triumphalist narrative. Bush himself wrote the first draft, declaring in his January 1992 state-of-the-union address, "America won the Cold War. . . . The Cold War didn't end—it was won." He repeated the claim, which was noted and bitterly rejected by Gorbachev's admirers in Moscow, throughout his campaign for re-election that year.⁷⁷

George F. Kennan, the iconic (but usually disregarded) authority on U.S.-Soviet relations, later dismissed the claim of a U.S. victory as "intrinsically silly" and "simply childish,"⁷⁸ but virtually all American politicians and the mainstream media followed Bush's lead, as they continue to do today. So have leading scholars who should know better, two even claiming that Boris Yeltsin, who became president of the Soviet Russian Republic only in June 1991, well after the turning-point events of 1988 through 1990, had been the "catalyst for the Cold War's end."⁷⁹

The result was a "new history" written, in the words of a critic, "as seen from America, as experienced in America, and told in a way most agreeable to many Americans"—a "fairytale," another wrote, "with a happy ending."⁸⁰ When future historians search for the beginning of the new cold war, they may find it at the moment when Americans rewrote the end of the preceding one by deleting Gorbachev's legacy.