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Spotlight on the Russian  
Revolution of 1991

August-September 1991

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## Spotlight on the Russian Revolution of 1991

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## Summary

The misbegotten August coup attempt led to the collapse of the centralized Soviet state, marking an end to the system that Stalin had constructed on the pylons of Marxism-Leninism. The republics bolted for independence, just as they had during the previous breakdown of central control in 1917-18, only this time there was no hard-eyed band of leaders in Moscow determined to put the structure back together with fire and steel. The prognosis is for a decentralized association of republics whose final reallocation of the responsibilities and powers of the old order will be contentious and take years to effect.

In the interim, a game and serious group of national and republic leaders led by Boris Yel'tsin has put together a governing structure that must step warily between national aspirations and the resolution of the same economic, technological, and infrastructure problems that contributed so greatly to the USSR's demise. Only it must do so in the midst of an ongoing political revolution. The long-term outlook may be positive, but the short term looks grim, with a poor harvest, energy shortages, and hyperinflation facing the coming winter.

The big losers have been the very institutions the plotters sought to protect—the security services, the Communist Party, and defense industry. Military spending and manpower are sure to decline—probably precipitously—while the party has fragmented and the once dreaded KGB is in the process of doing so. In the final analysis, the plotters had lost touch with the results of the Gorbachev years and failed to realize that the populace was no longer cowed and the republics no longer bound by the writ of Moscow. They were, finally, apparatchiks with the musty smell of the past and were no match for freely elected officials with the courage of their electorate behind them.

The sudden loss of one pole in a bipolar world made itself felt quickly. Gorbachev virtually announced an end to the Soviet-Cuban security relationship when he revealed plans to remove the Soviet brigade, and the US-Soviet agreement on Afghanistan promised to end a bloody cold war legacy. In both cases, a Soviet need to clear the decks of major irritants in order to enhance opportunities for foreign financial assistance was clearly instrumental.

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## The Political Situation

The colossal failure of the 19 August coup attempt brought to an end the Bolshevik experiment begun in 1917. The action of the coup leaders was born of desperation, as they realized that the imminent union treaty would put an end to the authoritarian, centralized state in which they had prospered and believed. Their action, however, demonstrated the extent of their alienation from the changes that had already occurred in the six historic years of Gorbachev's rule. Simply put, the populace was no longer cowed and the republics no longer felt the need to accept the diktat from Moscow. The expectation that, with only a few military units behind them, they could put the old order back together proved foolish in the extreme. The reaction of the Baltic republics was to declare immediate independence, and the writ of the coup leaders never really extended beyond the Kremlin. It was not only Boris Yel'tsin who held firm. Mayors Popov and Sobchak and the city councils of Moscow and the rechristened St. Petersburg, among others, were also defiant and courageous. The plotters ran hard into a phenomenon never before encountered in their Marxist-Leninist experience—that of elected leaders with the courage of their electorate behind them. This time, unlike 1917, the ballot box prevailed over the bayonet.

The leadership politics following the coup attempt displayed a remarkable sophistication. Once again, Yel'tsin and Gorbachev proved themselves the country's most adroit politicians. The difference, however, was that Yel'tsin reacted instinctively and now had the full weight of the dominant Russian Republic behind him, while Gorbachev squandered three days before realizing that his position was based on a no longer existent center whose power had flowed to the republics upon the coup's failure. Yel'tsin set the pace for republic dominance early by taking over union assets in the aftermath of the coup. He was also the driving force behind the effort to fundamentally reconstitute the union. For his part, Gorbachev again did not understand the handwriting on the wall until it was unmistakably clear, and then formed a political marriage of convenience with his old nemesis Yel'tsin. Gorbachev did not lose his tactical adroitness as was most apparent in his handling of the Congress of People's Deputies, which he persuaded to approve a

new government structure and then vote itself out of existence. Yel'tsin and Gorbachev's actions, however, were assisted by responsible behavior by other officials. Ten republic leaders assisted in the movement to a new interim government structure. The formation of new government organs, including a State Council, a radically transformed legislature, and an Interrepublic Economic Committee, however transitional, was a remarkable achievement a mere three weeks following the coup.

The reaction of the republics was the same as it was when central authority collapsed in 1917-18. Now, as then, they bolted, with virtually the same entities proclaiming independence in 1991 as did so in 1918. Outside of Russia, the greatest defiance was in the Baltic republics and Moldova, all of which refused to recognize the Emergency Committee. One of the first actions of the new State Council on 6 September was to recognize Baltic independence. Even as they negotiated some form of a new union, however, potential problems between the republics appeared on the horizon. The border issue flared briefly between Russia and neighboring Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Moldovan President Snegur opened the issue of Romanian territory incorporated into Ukraine in 1940 and sent Moldovan police to Kiev to arrest a leader of the Dnester Slavs. Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh declared themselves independent, and the Estonian leadership rescinded a 1945 decree that ceded more than 1,800 square kilometers of territory to Russia. Moreover, virtually each republic was faced immediately with minority problems. Political turmoil also roiled the waters in various republics. Georgian President Gamsakhurdiya fought efforts to remove or temper his heavyhanded rule, the Uzbek authorities sought to suppress rallying democratic forces, and the Communist government of Azerbaijan found itself facing hundreds of thousands of anti-Communist nationalist demonstrators. Meanwhile, the political divide between the eastern and western Ukraine widened, the Lithuanian government imposed direct rule on districts dominated by ethnic Poles, and an incipient struggle for power and control seemed to be brewing between the Russian presidency and legislature.

## The Economy and Defense

The economy, already in deep trouble, threatens to become a complete shambles because of the breakdown of the center and the major shifts of power caused by political events. Apart from political affairs, the news was bad across the board. The harvest promises to be down at least 50 million tons from last year, to the lowest level since 1984. Output of natural gas remained stagnant and oil production continued to plummet in the third quarter. Coal output was down 11 percent from the first eight months of last year, and as of midyear coal stockpiles were down 20 percent. Simply feeding and heating the populace through the winter would be problem enough, but it has been compounded by events. The financial system is collapsing. A number of republics have stopped paying into the union budget, leading to a combined union-republic budget deficit variously estimated by the Soviets at 10-25 percent of GNP and raising the threat of hyperinflation by yearend. Moreover, the sharp increase in republic sovereignty will make it increasingly difficult to maintain a unionwide market in the short term. Even prior to the coup attempt at least nine republics had imposed internal customs barriers, and interrepublic trade is now likely to fall off sharply. Several republics are already halting shipments of various goods to other republics. In the long term, the move away from the command economy will be beneficial. In the short term, things look grim. This is not to say that the center has been sitting on its hands. The State Council agreed to accept for further discussion radical economist Yavlinskiy's plan for a new economic union, suggesting that the participating republics are willing to accept some central economic structures.

All indications are that the Soviet military-industrial complex is one of the big losers in the new political order. Silayev told British Prime Minister Major that he favors a sharp reduction in defense spending beginning in 1992, and First Deputy Defense Minister Grachev, among others, has proposed reducing the armed forces from its current level of 3.5 million to 1.5-2 million men. Union and republic leaders across the board have been calling for military reductions. Given the fragmentation of the union, the collapse of the center, and the economic situation, the contraction and restructuring of defense production is probably

imminent. Much of defense industry will be taken over by the republics. Moreover, the almost certain cuts in force structure will most likely lead to further cuts in all major weapons categories.

Defense leaders moved quickly to try to control the process. By 11 September Defense Minister Shaposhnikov claimed agreement with republic defense leaders on the basic direction of military reform and central security. He claimed that central armed forces would be retained and that strategic forces would be under central control. Shaposhnikov also claimed that territorial militias would be acceptable but not republic armies. Nevertheless, major battles clearly lie ahead over divisions of responsibilities and budgets. The Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, for instance, has already passed legislation saying that movement of troops on Ukrainian territory must be subject to approval of the Ukrainian cabinet.

## Foreign Policy

The Foreign Ministry appears to be suffering the same blows as the other national security institutions. Such familiar actors to the West as Bessmertnykh and Kvitsinskiy were removed in the coup's aftermath. A relatively unknown ambassador—Boris Pankin—was elevated to Foreign Minister because he refused to follow the instructions of the plotters. Organizational changes have been set in motion that will give the republics a much greater say in foreign affairs, with Russia having the greatest say of all. Moreover, the ministry is clearly facing drastic personnel cuts and will be in turmoil for the foreseeable future. The Soviet delegation to CFE talks in Vienna was reduced from 50 to 12 officers this month—ostensibly because of lack of money—and other Soviet missions will undoubtedly face similar cuts.

The extent to which the new turmoil in the Soviet Union will force compromises on long-held Soviet positions—even of the Gorbachev era—was demonstrated by Foreign Minister Pankin prior to the CSCE conference in Moscow. Following Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev's call for challenge inspections of human rights violations, Pankin told reporters that traditional Soviet insistence on noninterference in a country's internal affairs must be reconsidered. At the conference, Pankin used a somewhat more restricted formula limiting access for CSCE observers to regions in which a state of public emergency has been declared. Both Russia and the Foreign Ministry apparently are motivated by concern over how to defuse ethnic conflicts as the Soviet republics redefine their relationships, but the center is more protective of its options. In Western Europe, meanwhile, a prime topic of concern was the control and disposition of Soviet nuclear forces, with several leaders coming forward with plans to control the situation. Concern over Soviet debt default also grew, apparently with good reason.



The extent to which the formerly bipolar political world has tilted on its axis because of the changes in Moscow was demonstrated by changes in two of the long-running Third World areas of East-West confrontation. Gorbachev's announcement that the Soviet Union would begin negotiations with Cuba on the withdrawal of the Soviet troops indicates that the end of the Soviet security relationship with Cuba has begun, a move that, as much as the removal of the Berlin Wall, would indicate that the Cold War is dead. Even before the announcement, Soviet relations with Cuba were fraying as changes in policy and events in the USSR were moving conditions in Cuba toward the "zero option" scenario that will intensify that country's growing economic problems. The US-Soviet agreement to end military aid to Afghanistan by yearend promises to remove a less hoary but far bloodier cold war legacy. Cost considerations aside, in both cases the Soviets undoubtedly wanted to remove the last regional irritants from US-Soviet relations and improve prospects for US aid. Concern for aid from wealthy Middle Eastern states was also a likely factor in their decision on Afghanistan.

Recognizing the most serious flaw in Russia's Asia policy, Russia quickly turned its attention to Japan, addressing the Northern Territories issue. Russian Supreme Soviet Chairman Khasbulatov delivered a message from Yel'tsin to Prime Minister Kaifu pledging to speed resolution of the issue. Khasbulatov stressed that negotiations should result in a peace treaty and also asked Tokyo to grant Russia large-scale emergency economic aid.

### *Coming Events*

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| 19-28 September | Russian Supreme Soviet meets.  |
| 28 September    | Russian Congress of People's Deputies opens.                         |
| 10-13 October   | World Bank/IMF annual meeting in Bangkok.                            |
| 13 October      | Direct presidential election in Kyrgyzstan.                          |
| 19 October      | Presidential election in Russian Kalmyk ASSR.                        |
| 28 October      | Direct presidential election in Tajikistan.                          |
| 25 November     | Tentative date for election of local administrative heads in Russia. |