SEVEN

_Perestroika_ and the End of Party Rule


We begin with a question. Could the powerful state system that Gorbachev inherited have continued unchanged? The slowing economy was certainly creating problems, but there is no reason to suppose that the administrative-command system under Communist Party rule could not have retained its essential features for ten, or perhaps twenty years. More than that, given economic decline, must be considered very unlikely. Although such a statement is of doubtful value because it assumes no major change in either the West, the Arab world, or in China, any of which could have had a decisive impact upon economic and political developments in the Soviet Union, it has a point in emphasizing that there were powerful factors working to preserve the administrative-command system. The stability of the Brezhnev system was real enough as long as certain key props remained in place, and these were undermined by a combination of largely fortuitous factors. Without any doubt, action by the Gorbachev leadership was the crucial one. This does not, of course, mean that Gorbachev intended the outcome to be the collapse of central authority and a primitive struggle for control over resources of all kinds. Far from it.

The question then becomes: could the system have been reformed in a gradual and orderly fashion under one central authority? That is more difficult to answer. It is a question which will long preoccupy citizens of the former Soviet Union. For some Gorbachev is a hero because he brought an unworkable and corrupt system to an end, for others, a traitor, because he undermined a stable, ongoing system, which could have reformed itself. We shall approach it by considering the _perestroika_ strategy, the Gorbachev strategy that was intended to result in a
manageable reform process, and show why it failed. As we shall see, it was extremely unlikely that it could have worked, but the reasons for this are not straightforward.

Perestroika is best understood as a combination of policies put forward by the Gorbachev leadership during the period from the XXVIIth Party Congress in 1986 until the end of 1989, policies intended to produce major changes in the economic and political system. In the economy, the aim was to introduce elements of a market mechanism, and a variety of forms of ownership; in the political sphere, the vision was of a reformed Communist Party, still firmly in control, but a party whose officials both at central and local level would, to some degree, be accountable to elected bodies. Greater freedom of discussion, and scope for autonomous social groups would characterize a society in which party–state institutions no longer owned and managed all spheres of activity. There was never any doubt that the political unit would be the Soviet Union.

It is helpful to ask how the perestroika policies differed from Khrushchev’s attempt at reform. First, as concerns the economy, the general aim was the same—setting the economy on a path to catch up with the Western economies and now with Japan, and encouraging the introduction of new technologies, all vital for the maintenance of the Soviet Union as a world power. Gorbachev suggested, however, that radical reform was necessary, thus indicating that the measures were to go further than anything previously attempted. In clear contrast to any earlier discussion, the sanctity of state ownership as the socialist form of ownership was first queried, and then abandoned in favour of the argument that a combination of different property forms—state, co-operative, and private—was the more appropriate. The centrally planned system came in for damage, criticism, and the necessity of market mechanisms was accepted. Since the 1930s, as we have seen, the state had taken over the management of all economic resources and had provided an extensive state welfare system, and Khrushchev had never doubted that socialism meant the extension of state ownership and state provision.

In the West too, in response to popular pressure after the Second World War, governments had begun to intervene much more directly in the economy, to nationalize industry, and to take on a responsibility for welfare. The welfare state, as a term, passed into popular usage. By the 1970s, however, with the cost of services rising and management of the economy proving more difficult than had been foreseen, advocates of privatization, deregulation, and cutting back the welfare state had gained a hearing. The issue of redefining the boundaries between state and society, of the state withdrawing, became a key one in liberal democracies, with socialists on the defensive because they had championed the idea of a popularly elected government using the state to redress the economic and social inequality in society. The gaining of universal suffrage had been seen by the labour movement as a way of countering, with political power, the power and privilege that came with wealth and possession of economic resources. It had turned out not to be so. Making political power responsible had resulted in a large state but not an end to privilege and unequal opportunities. The state had shown itself to be too blunt an instrument to redress the wrongs in society, a poor advocate for socialism.

In the Soviet Union, where the identification of socialism with the extension of state power had been greater than anywhere else, the problem was more acute and the issue highly contentious. The new privatizers found themselves ranged against those who took it for granted that state property was the bedrock of a socialist system. The leadership insisted that change was necessary but, as far as policy was concerned, there was hesitation and plain inaction. We do not have the space to cover the zig-zag economic policies of those years; suffice it to say that by 1989 nothing radical had been done in the economic sphere, the old system was still creaking on, and the debate over its future was growing sharper. The conviction, however, that the almost total state ownership and control was what was wrong with the present system influenced the reformers’ views of other state–society relations too. It was not necessary, they argued, in fact it was old-fashioned to think that everything should be controlled and organized by the state. If there should be scope for entrepreneurial economic activity, there should also be scope for autonomous social groups. How much, and what kinds of activity, were unclear, but the Gorbachev leadership implied that it was time to adopt a more flexible approach to social initiatives. The principle, whatever is not forbidden is permitted, should be applied rather than only permitting what had been officially sanctioned.

The policy of glasnost, of encouraging a greater openness of discussion, accorded with this view. It was prompted by the belief that the airing of opinions was vital for new ideas to come forward, and that the existence of conflicting views was a normal phenomenon in a modern
civilized society. In his argument that a pluralism of ideas was an essential attribute of society, Gorbachev went further than Khrushchev. He still insisted that the general framework of discussion had to be socialist but he was operating with a much vaguer concept of socialism, one which, for example, allowed for different types of property. Indeed Gorbachev’s views on what Soviet society might look like at the start of the twenty-first century (the revised party programme spoke of creating a modern society rather than stressing anything to do with Communism) were very similar to those of some Western statesmen, and this had important consequences. Given the lack of any clear criteria of what ‘socialist’ meant, it became transparently clear that it simply meant whatever the political leadership decided was appropriate. To put it another way, it seemed that all that remained of ‘socialism’, as its undisputed characteristic, was political control under one-party rule. Gorbachev was adamant on this: pluralism of ideas, and some autonomous social activity, did not mean political pluralism. There was no place for competing political parties in a socialist society.

But how were these new economic and social characteristics of socialism to be combined with Communist Party rule? What kind of political reform was required? Before he could engage in any real initiatives Gorbachev, as any new First Secretary, had to secure his position and replace those who would stymy any attempt at change. He was helped by the age, and sometimes senility, of leading personnel and by the awareness even among those in favour of minimal change that, after years of inaction, there had to be some new policies. With great skill Gorbachev edged individuals out, and brought new energetic individuals into the Politburo and Secretariat. They were not all reformers, indeed Yegor Ligachev, a regional party secretary from Siberia whom Andropov had brought into the Secretariat, was to become the spokesman for a conservative opposition within the party, but, by 1988, Gorbachev had a Politburo and Secretariat in which he could command a majority in favour of reform.

During this early period he employed what we can call the classic strategy, the one adopted by Khrushchev (and practised by both Stalin and Mao at different times). This was the natural strategy for a Communist Party leader striving to extricate the party from a system of bureaucratic state administration, and to make it again take up the task of acting as a dynamic vanguard. There was a call for strong leadership, and for the clearing out of corrupt or old personnel and their replacement by morally and politically sound individuals at all levels. An attack upon the bureaucratic state apparatus, the ministries in particular, for being responsible for inertia and policy failings, accompanied an appeal to the population to join with the leadership in the great endeavour. During 1985–8 Gorbachev adopted this strategy: a high leadership profile, a sweeping out of party and state officials, campaigns against alcoholism and corruption, and targeting the ministries as the bureaucracies of the system.

There was nothing very new here. The underlying assumption of such a strategy was that the structural or constitutional arrangements of the system were sound: that there should be one party leading and controlling the state apparatus. As long as there was good leadership and the right people in place then the system should work well, but the party must avoid involvement in the institutional wrangling and detail of everyday administration. Its tendency to become so involved had been a concern of successive leaderships, as witnessed by the repeated injunctions from on high against the practice of podmëna, or the party officials substituting for, or simply taking over, state administration. It was, however, an inevitable consequence of the constitutional arrangements themselves: if the party was to be responsible for and to control state institutions, it necessarily interfered and took charge.

Supposing, however, the size of the state and its control over the economy and society was lessened, and greater scope allowed for private and social initiatives? Could not this solve the problem? The party would have less to interfere in, and less to oversee, and could then play a purely political role. The eagerness with which reformers took up the theme of NEP as having been a viable socialist alternative (different forms of ownership, pluralism of views) suggested that some saw this as possible. Had not the move to introduce all-embracing state ownership been the mistake that had produced the bureaucratic administrative-command system in which the party could not play the role Lenin had envisaged for it? But let us think for a minute. Although it was true that, with the extension of state control, the party could not act as a vanguard, what would the party’s political programme consist of if the relationship between state and society were redrawn and state control reduced? NEP had presupposed moving on to socialism; now such temporary arrangements were being offered as the model of a desirable society. If that was so, what did one need the party for? The basis for its
legitimacy was that, as a vanguard party with a mission, and committed followers, it was able to plot the path for the transformation of society, and lead it forward to socialism. Without such a goal, there was no basis for its claim to the right to rule.

In 1988 all the key elements of the system were still in place. Society's response to perestroika had differed in certain respects from reactions to the Krushchëv reforms. Little happened in the economic sphere, and the official approval of new co-operative ventures in agriculture met with a minimal response. Nor did anything change in inner-party relationships. Glašnost, however, produced a different response from that following Krushchëv's authorization of the airing of certain forbidden themes. The first voices to be heard were those of writers and intellectuals who had been young, and some of them active, during the Krushchëv period. Indeed it was this generation, the children of the XXth Party Congress as they were dubbed, who became the inspiration behind, and the champions of, the perestroika policies. Having seen their adult professional life constrained or stifled during the Brezhnev years, they had nothing to lose by a final commitment to reform. They were prepared to speak out, far more critically, on economic, social, and political issues; to vote the conservatives off the boards of the various professional and cultural unions, and, as editors, to introduce a new style of lively and critical journalism. The Politburo authorized the screening of films (such as Repentance), made earlier but never shown, and Trotsky appeared on stage. The writers and journalists were still conscious that they owed these new-found freedoms to the political leadership, and they thought in terms of a system in which politics and the press went together. In the spring of 1988, in Gorbachev's absence abroad, an article appeared in one of the more conservative newspapers, Sovetskaya Rossiya, which read like a manifesto for a return to the old well-trodden paths, and an end to the damaging criticisms of the Soviet past and present. It was clear that it had backing from within the Politburo, and indeed it was from Ligachev. The press fell largely silent. The reformers failed to mount a counter-attack until, three weeks later, Pravda came out with an official criticism of the piece, and all breathed again.

If, in this respect, the response was largely similar, other developments were different. Unlike in the Krushchëv period, young people did not go to organized poetry readings and listen to scratchy tape-recordings of Okudzhava, but expanded their pop groups and the range of activities, from ecological concerns to youth clubs, that had begun to emerge in the early 1980s. The freer atmosphere allowed them to express their frustration with local authorities who put obstacles in their way, and a pioneering television programme brought an outspoken and critical youth face to face with officials. Television played a crucial role in breaking down the official public language—whether it was in giving young people a voice or, for example, screening, live, a discussion at a factory meeting of candidates for election as director. In general, though, old ways and words held sway. The new phenomena were still the exceptions, and were recognized as breaking the rules. When in 1987 students in Leningrad demonstrated against the demolition of a historic building, the Angleterre Hotel, they were arrested, and the demolition went ahead. Protests or demonstrations were few and far between, and very quickly suppressed by the police and security forces. But far more clubs, groups, and associations of one kind or another, an alternative culture, were coming into being, and some of these, in Moscow and Leningrad, were concerned with economic reform and with the political issue of Stalinist repression. In these clubs a generation, previously silent, the professional intelligentsia in their thirties and early forties, Brezhnev's children, began to come together.

That Soviet society had changed since the 1950s no one would dispute. Commentators disagree, however, over both the nature of the society and over the role social change played in the transformation of the political system. It is an important question, both because the answer affects our view of the relationship between politics and society during the period from 1917 to the mid-1980s, and because it may influence our thoughts about the future. We shall consider some contrasting views once we have seen what happened, but the reader might like to start thinking about it.

Back to Gorbachev and political reform, however. At the XIXth Party Conference which met in July 1988 to discuss the question of reform within the party, Gorbachev proposed reforms of the soviet or government structures, which inadvertently had the consequence of undermining the party's leading role. Whatever he may have intended, they tore apart the perestroika package, and put on the agenda the possibility of a democratic future for the Soviet Union—although, at the time, few either within or without the Soviet Union recognized that they had this potential. The novel and unexpected proposal related to the Supreme Soviet, and its role in the political system. First, Gorbachev suggested,
there should be a Congress of People's Deputies, in which two-thirds of the seats should be open to competition on the basis of universal suffrage. Second, the Congress should elect a smaller body from among its members to serve as a Supreme Soviet, to sit for eight months of the year and act as a legislature, discussing, amending, and voting on legislation. Ministers, as government officials, should no longer be eligible for election as deputies and, indeed, their appointment should be scrutinized by the Congress, which would also be responsible for electing the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, the titular head of state. The Congress should elect a Constitutional Court, with the authority to oversee the legality of any constitutional amendments. The idea clearly owed a good deal to a separation of powers doctrine, as practised in the United States: the executive should be separate from the legislature, and a third body, the Court, should be responsible for constitutional legality. At this time too Gorbachev emphasized the importance of a legal state, a state in which even the Communist Party would be subject to law.

These reforms were unlike anything proposed earlier in Soviet history. Here was an attempt to combine the party's institutional power and authority with a new basis of legitimacy: electoral accountability. And therein lay a problem. If the party was to retain its power and authority anyway, it was difficult to see what was the purpose of the legislature. In his elaboration of the proposals, Gorbachev made it clear that the party was to remain in charge. The local party secretary, he suggested, should stand for and have to win election to the chairmanship of the local soviet (and what if he did not?), and a third of the seats to the Congress of Deputies would be reserved for representatives of the social and political organizations (the Communist Party, Komsomol, trade unions, professional associations, etc.). The new elected assemblies, it seemed, were envisaged as bodies which would bring more energetic, perhaps reform-minded, activists into the discussion of policy, and make party officials at least aware of popular grievances. There was no idea of a legislature in which competing parties, representing different interests and programmes, would put up candidates, win seats, and either form or control a government. Missing from what looked like a familiar Western constitutional arrangement was any provision for competing parties.

Let us, however, pause for a moment. In the United States and in Britain the legislature has traditionally been a body in which élite sections of society have sought to defend their interests, and have seen their function to be limited to one of exerting control, where necessary, over the executive. The idea that the US Congress or the British Parliament should be democratic assemblies, representative of all opinions within society, is relatively new, as is the acceptance of political parties as desirable phenomena. So should we perhaps see the Gorbachev proposal as one, from a reform-minded section of the élite, for a legislature, representative of élite elements in society, but able to exert a check upon a conservative and unaccountable executive? In other words, as one which Montesquieu and the Founding Fathers, now being quoted approvingly by Soviet academics, would have seen as appropriate? Such a limited and elitist notion of representation was, however, hard to square with either Soviet or current liberal notions of democracy. 'Soviet democracy', whatever the practice had become, was associated with a concept of directly elected assemblies of ordinary people who took decisions and then carried them out (checks and balances were unnecessary) while, in the West, 'democracy' meant universal suffrage and competing parties.

Not surprisingly the proposals were greeted with a great deal of scepticism: here was another administrative rearrangement, elections would be overseen by the party, and little would change. They went through an obedient Supreme Soviet, and preparations began for elections to be held in March 1989 to the Congress of People's Deputies. Initially the election campaign aroused little interest. The electoral commissions still lay in party hands and in many constituencies only one candidate was nominated. At some nomination meetings, however, heated discussions broke out as candidates were nominated to run against those either from, or proposed by, the party apparatus. Given the lack of clarity in the rules, there was opportunity enough for the local authorities to fix the nominations, but sometimes chance intervened. At a meeting in Leningrad, which the party apparatus hoped would result in the single name of a key party official on the list, an elderly man made an impassioned plea for the nomination of a young engineer, Iurii Boldyrev, a party member supported by an unofficial 'democratic' organization in the city, on the grounds that this was the last chance society had to introduce democracy, and collapsed with a heart attack. When the news of his death reached the meeting, Boldyrev's name was included, and he subsequently won the election. Sakharov, whose exile in Gorky had been ended by Gorbachev, was
included among the deputies from the Academy of Sciences after an outcry at his exclusion. In Moscow, Boris Yeltsin, the ble bleu de la Moscow party apparatus, stood despite official opposition. Yeltsin, regional party secretary in Sverdlovsk (originally Ekaterinburg), a city in the Urals, had been brought by Gorbachev to head the Moscow party, and onto the Politburo. Energetic, outspoken, quick to dismiss subordinates, and with corruption and privilege as its targets, he antagonized party and city officials. When he vented his anger and irritation on Politburo members, and then raised the matter inappropriately at a Central Committee meeting in 1987, Gorbachev resolved that he was more trouble than he was worth. His resignation as Moscow secretary took place at a meeting of the city apparatus at which he was publicly hounded and humiliated; Gorbachev was present and, although discomfited, made no attempt to save him. He took up a post in the construction industry but, already seen by some as a ‘real’ reformer, was persuaded to stand in the 1989 election. His campaign meetings brought a degree of debate and competition into the political arena which had not existed before. His calls for an end to the special privileges and his attacks upon the party apparatus, his ability to establish a rapport with a crowd, and the campaign waged against him by the authorities, made him the people’s hero in Russia.

Although in many constituencies the electorate turned out as usual and voted an unopposed candidate or a party secretary in with a massive majority, Yeltsin swept in, and the phenomenon of important party secretaries losing to little known individuals or failing to get the required 50 per cent of the vote sent a shock wave through the system.

In Leningrad, Solov’yov, the First Secretary of the Regional Party Committee and a deputy member of the Politburo stood unopposed. It never entered his head that he could lose. When the result, together with others that were damaging for the city party elite, came out, there was a stunned silence from the party headquarters, while the voters realized that the elections were, after all, for real. The subsequent campaigns for the undecided seats (the 50 per cent rule meant that a large number went to a second round), came to life.

The most important consequence of these first elections was the blow to the party’s claim that it spoke for the people. When more than 50 per cent of the voters in a constituency crossed the party secretary’s name off the ballot, both the claim and the apparatus’s self-image took a knock. The elections were revealing in other ways too. First, the party apparatus did not know how to fight an election campaign; as a ruling party, it had never had to. The huge ideological Goliath of lecturers and propagandists could not counter the campaign tactics of the little Davids, who pasted up satirical leaflets or asked difficult questions at the campaign meetings. The Leningrad party newspaper, for example, gave publicity to its opponents by referring to such leaflets and quoting the questions asked by ‘clearly irresponsible elements’. Party activists complained that they could not answer impromptu questions because they had not had time to check back with party headquarters.

The behaviour of the rank and file membership also demonstrated that theirs was a different kind of organization from that of a party in a competitive environment. Most of the candidates who stood, and against each other, were party members. The new Congress of Deputies had a higher percentage (80 per cent) of its members who were Communists than had the old Supreme Soviet. Almost all the ‘democratic’ challengers to the apparatus belonged to the party. Thinking back to the Brezhnev period, we see that this was not surprising. All and sundry belonged to the party with the consequence that it could not wage a united campaign: its members had nothing to unite around. This meant that the Yeltsin victory was enormously important because it provided an alternative figure around which the emerging ‘democratic’ opposition could subsequently rally. However, it must be emphasized, although in some places there was an ‘anti-apparat’, anti-government vote, nothing approaching an alternative programme existed, except possibly in the Baltic republics. Votes registered discontent with apparatus rule, rather than support for something else.

Let us pursue the question of elections a little further. The absence of competing parties affects both candidates’ and voters’ behaviour. Where there are no competing parties, with candidates clearly identified for the voter, the electorate has to decide how to vote on some other basis. In 1989 there were some ‘visible’ candidates, i.e. party secretaries, who could be voted against (or for); there were others who had acquired a high public profile, for example two prosecutors who had been active in uncovering corruption in high places. In many instances, however, the electorate simply made choices on the basis of profession or sex: workers and women did badly, for example. As far as the candidates were concerned, most saw themselves not as representing a particular sectional interest, or political position; rather they offered themselves to their constituents as individuals.
At an election meeting I attended in a Moscow apartment block, the candidates were allowed three minutes to outline their programmes and, as was traditional, started by giving their autobiographies. Some never got on to their programmes. A youngish man, who had abandoned a Komsomol career to head a co-operative which bought up apartments and rented them out to foreign tourists, remarked that it did not matter since he was unlikely to get many votes anyway; a professor of physics stated that he would not bother to outline his programme since it differed little from others. A middle-aged woman announced that she would press for better housing for residents, for ending the influx of migrant workers, for more provisions, a special fund for Moscow, more money for hospitals, cleaner streets, higher pensions, and price-linked wage increases: all popular demands, and ones that she saw herself fighting for as an individual deputy. One candidate did present a recognizable political programme: investigation of the Procuracy, greater rights for deputies and for informal associations, and the handing over of all religious buildings over to religious bodies. The only issue to arouse debate was that of co-operatives. A middle-aged woman attacked the co-operative chairman for having abandoned teaching the young for the sake of money, and his argument that the taxes paid by the co-operative to the city government were of more benefit than unimaginative Komsomol activities cut no ice with some present. In him, and in one other candidate—an energetic, slightly aggressive, skilled worker with a chequered career of party education, expulsion, problems with the authorities, and a spell working in the Far North, who advocated enterprise autonomy and a free rein for entrepreneurial talent—a new political generation made their appearance.

If the candidates revealed both new and old attitudes, so too did the conduct of the meeting. When a candidate asked if he could speak ahead of his turn because he had to leave early, all semblance of order broke down. The chairman ruled against, but a noisy minority (among whom the worst offenders were elderly intellectual men who shouted through their cupped hands) accused him of being formalistic and undemocratic. Many joined in, on one side or the other. The chairman tried a vote, and unwisely declared that a spotty show of hands looked like a majority; the candidate headed for the microphone, but was shouted down by those who held that following the agreed order was the more democratic procedure; others argued that the order had been decided undemocratically. By then the candidate was putting on his coat to leave, but a young candidate (whose action was subsequently claimed to symbolize the intelligentsia's willingness to sacrifice itself for the people) rushed to the microphone and begged him to take his three minutes instead. Somehow, the dispute subsided, and the meeting continued. To what extent, we need to ask, do 'democratic' practices mean the following of agreed procedures?

But what had happened to the Communist Party? If the 1989 elections had undermined the party's assumption of its unqualified popular support, the Congress itself dealt an even worse blow to its authority. The sessions were televised live across the Soviet Union. Work came to a standstill as, with no holds barred, deputies criticized the government, the KGB, attacked and defended the Afghan war, hounded Sakharov, and brought up nationality issues. Suddenly public political discussion opened right up. The old practice of an official line, carefully agreed speeches, and unanimous approval was gone for ever. This was enormously important. The party's ability to pronounce upon the one, correct, policy for the country had been publicly challenged. Political authority began to slip away from the leading party bodies to the Congress of Deputies, and thereafter the existence of an ever more critical media played a crucial role.

The party's loss of control over parts of the press, and over some television channels, in an environment in which a host of young journalists and TV producers were anxious to try out their skills, and had a free hand, produced a wave of campaigning journalism and television, innovative, sensational, and sometimes irresponsible. The young Leningrad TV producer, Nevzorov, took investigative journalism to new heights (or depths), first in uncovering corruption, and then with his interviews with criminals dying from shot wounds, and by zoning in on a policeman clipping the nails of the corpse of a woman lying in a park; he made full use of his popular following to heighten anxiety over rising crime and to put across an ultra-right, Russian nationalist message. The Communist Party still controlled most of the newspapers through its ownership of publishing houses, presses, and access to stocks of paper, and the contrast between the content of the local media, where the apparatus held all the resources, and that emanating from Moscow or Leningrad was marked. But the provinces received the television programmes, which revealed a party leadership squabbling and unable to compete, in ideas or words, with its very different critics.
By the winter of 1989, when the second session of the Congress was due to meet, it was clear that the party was fighting a losing battle to retain its place as the political authority in the system. Glasnost and the elections had resulted in its losing control of two key resources: authority and undisputed control over the media. Discontent among some sections of the apparatus with what they saw as policies that were endangering the achievements of socialism and the Union surfaced in criticism of the Gorbachev leadership, and produced an all but acknowledged split between the conservatives and the reformers. The party held together but, in the face of both public criticism and demands from its own more radical members, the Central Committee voted that the party should no longer be identified in the Constitution as the leading institution in the political system. This opened the way to the legalization of political parties in the summer of 1990, but that was after the republican and local elections.

When, in March 1990, elections took place to the republican parliaments and to the regional and district councils, all seats were open to competition, but still only one political organization, the Communist Party, existed legally. Emboldened by the experience of the past year, those (both party and non-party people) who were concerned to push reform forward faster formed associations of Democrats or of People's Fronts to nominate and campaign for individual candidates. Recognizable platforms appeared in a few major cities in Russia, and in some of the republics, the Baltic states being a key example. In the latter, where by then fully-fledged national independence movements had emerged, the election was a two-party, competitive election in all but name, and the People's Fronts won. There and in Leningrad, for example, where one of the newspapers published a list of the candidates that the Democratic Bloc was supporting, the electors could choose on the basis of a political preference. In most places, however, this was not the case, and party officials, quite sensibly, had decided not to stand. Some results suggested an anti–elite vote (against high-ranking government or management officials) but the picture was very mixed (KGB and police did rather well) and differed between urban and rural areas.

The crumbling of an official truth, in an environment in which there had previously been no opportunity for political ideas to compete with each other, revealed a fragmentation of views, a wide spectrum of political beliefs, and an absence of coherent political programmes. Many of the Democrats were clear that they had an opponent in the party apparatus, and in the emerging Patriots, the nationalist right-wing groups, but were not at all anxious to belong to 'narrow' political parties. As certainties crumbled and beliefs were called into question, people began to search for new answers, and for something with which to identify. Religion saw a revival. And this brings us also to the question of nationalism, which was to play such an important role in undermining the continued existence of the Soviet Union. We deal with it here because of its role as a 'political identifier' and the part it played in displacing the authority of the Communist Party and of any central government.

Nationalism is the belief that the political unit (the state) should be based on an ethnic or cultural community; that people should be ruled by those of the same ethnic group. We have not space to discuss the arguments for and against such a view; suffice it to say that, since the sixteenth century, it has emerged as a political doctrine, with a considerable following in different parts of the world, and at different times. It seems to flare up, sometimes more predictably than others. At the end of 1986 riots in Kazakhstan followed the appointment of a new Russian republican First Secretary; in 1988 Armenians and Azerbaijans were fighting over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, inhabited largely by the Christian Armenians but physically an enclave inside Azerbaijan; in the spring of 1990 Lithuania declared independence and by the summer the assertion of ethnic identity as the basis for either political autonomy or sovereignty was pulling the Union apart.

Should this have been predicted? Some scholars always portrayed the Soviet Union as a prison of nationalities, a powder-keg waiting to explode. In 1990 it did. We shall never know whether thirty years earlier the same would have happened, but we can ask whether there were factors in the more immediate Soviet past and present which could explain why nationalism came so strongly to the fore in the late 1980s. Glasnost, and elections, were clearly essential to its expression. But the question, however, is whether the consequences would have been the same had those policies been introduced under Khruschev. If one assumes that people naturally think of themselves primarily in ethnic or cultural terms, and consider that such a community should be the political unit, then the answer has to be yes. Given, however, that people throughout history have not necessarily viewed themselves and political rule this way, the question remains an open one.

At any time in the post-war period, nationalism would surely have
had a popular appeal in the Baltic republics which, as sovereign states, with very clear cultural identities, had been incorporated into the Soviet Union at the beginning of the war. It would also have been strong among some of the smaller persecuted nationalities. It is difficult though to make a general claim with confidence. The administrative structures of the Soviet Union had been constructed on an ethnic basis (republics on the basis of major language groups) and thus, inadvertently, had perpetuated or crested a national identification. Can we identify any developments during the Brezhnev period that could have encouraged nationalism? New local political élites, the result of affirmative action, had grown used to running their regions or republics, and were increasingly frustrated by the bureaucratic centre; some were apprehensive of a reforming leadership that might threaten their powers and privileges, and of plans for economic reform that could undermine their control over economic resources. Others wished to wrest control away from a central authority whose policies were seen to be damaging local resources and interests. Some were prepared to appeal to their electorate in national terms, in order to establish a new basis for themselves; a republican basis. There were also intellectual élites, anxious to defend language and culture, who were quick to offer national independence as a political solution to a republic's economic and social problems. The distant, alien centre that was Moscow was an obvious target. Perhaps too the example of countries in Eastern Europe winning their independence influenced some.

Why, though, should the electorate be swayed by such sentiments? The success of any political message depends, in large part, on who its competitors for the political allegiance of the people are. In the Soviet Union, in the 1980s, apart from the 'democrat' versus 'apparatu' identification, there was little on offer. The Brezhnev period left a wasteland of ideas as its legacy. Long denounced as a negative phenomenon, nationalism stepped forward; it both gave people a group identity and was a way of expressing opposition to the over-centralized existing system. One potential competitor was noticeably absent. In the twentieth century social class has been a powerful forger of group identity, and produced political movements opposed to nationalism. In 1917 the socialist parties found an audience among people looking for a way to identify with each other; in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, it was very different.

The official categories of worker, peasant, and intelligentsia had been discredited; no one wanted to listen to the language of class. With the exception of the miners who went on strike in the summer of 1989 in the Ukraine, in Siberia, and in the Far North, and in 1990 set up their own Federation, Soviet workers showed little signs of organized action along class lines. Why was this? Miners in any society tend to live in a tightly knit community, and to recognize their fellows as sharing the same interests, hence their solidarity was not surprising. Other sections of the labour force, however, had serious grievances too. Why, as Communist Party rule has faltered, and with the exception of the shipyard workers in Poland, working-class protest has been so limited still requires an answer. Repressive management may be one reason, another may be the division between skilled labour force with a great deal to lose (not merely jobs, but apartments and social security benefits) and an unskilled element (desperate to acquire urban resident permits). But in other societies, including Russia before the revolution, workers have risked their livelihood. Although not the only reason, the difficulty of finding a language of protest has probably played a part. It is difficult to organize a campaign to 'defend the interests of the working class' against a government which has long claimed that as its rationale.

Nationalism became the medium through which discontent with the centrally planned and politically controlled system could be expressed, and the elections to the republican parliaments in March 1990 provided an institutional framework for it. The results produced majorities in favour of independence in the Baltic republics and Moldova, and during the following months: the Ukraine, Armenia, and Russia itself issued declarations of sovereignty and demanded, at the very least, a renegotiation of the federal arrangements. Although the centre of the empire, and identified as such by the other republics, the newly elected Russian parliament was as anxious as some others to distance itself from the central government. Within Russia there were voices arguing that Russia had suffered, more than most it was claimed, from Communist Party rule: its culture, countryside, and religion had been damaged or destroyed. Although the ardent nationalists did poorly in the elections, many of the democrats who saw nationalism as a threat were in favour of a voluntary, rather than a forced, union and for greater rights for the Russian parliament. Yeltsin was elected as its Chairman, albeit by a narrow majority and after a struggle, and the parliament resolved that its laws should take precedence over all-union laws if there were a
conflict of interest between the two. It also voted to recognize the Baltic states, something to which the central government was strongly opposed.

By the summer of 1990 a 'war of laws'—conflict over whether authority lay with the centre or a republic—was under way. Political authority was shifting from the centre, the Congress of People's Deputies, to the new republican parliaments. This reminds us that political authority may rest upon very different things: upon rules, traditional acceptance, or the beliefs of the members of a state as to whom they owe allegiance. The Union government continued to insist that the Soviet constitution took precedence; the majority of the citizens of the Baltic states saw rightful political authority to lie with their elected representatives; the Russian parliament struggled to resolve the dilemma.

Now, perhaps, the necessary conditions were present for a democratic order? But it takes more than competitive elections, a free press, and the legalization of political parties to produce a stable democratic order, and to see why this is so we need to look at the role played by those who controlled the other resources of power as political authority became ever more dispersed.

EIGHT
Dispersal of Power

Political authority had passed from the party to the elected soviets, initially to the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union, and then to the republican soviets or parliaments, but authority did not mean power. In the spring of 1990 too many important resources lay in the hands of others. The chiefs of the military and the security forces answered to the President. The party and state apparatus, which controlled the economy, still took its orders from the Secretariat and the central ministries which, as we noted, were tightly intertwined at the top and formed closely knit elites at regional level. The party no longer had undivided control over the media and communications, but it possessed the lion's share. The original centralized apparatus of decision-making was still in place: a 'government' over which the soviets had little control.

By the spring of 1991 this was no more. The central leadership was struggling desperately to retain its control over the two resources it had left—coercion and economic resources—and, under challenge from the republics, increasingly demonstrated its inability to function as a government at all. The struggle for power was now for control of all key resources—coercion, authority, economic resources, and communications—and the soviets, lacking the ability to back up political decisions with sanctions or to cope with the worsening economic situation, were steadily pushed to one side. During 1991 (a year of revolution?) we observe two processes at work: the disintegration of central control over all resources—as in 1917 power again lay scattered over the face of society—and attempts by the new republican leaderships to establish their power and authority.

In this, the final chapter, we trace this dual process, concentrating on Russia. Although the collapse of the centre affected all, the response in
different republics and in different regions varied. In Georgia, as 1991
drew to a close, a popularly elected President was under siege in the
capital; in Estonia more than one government had tended its resigna-
tion to the parliament; in Tadjikistan the Communist Party re-
mained in power. Even in Russia there were significant differences
between regions: in some the Democrats had won, in others the
nomenklatura had shifted the jobs around but still retained all those
that mattered. Moscow and St Petersburg may have been the decisive
political actors at key moments but activities there were far from
representative of provincial Russia. We begin, however, with the
demise of the central government, something which affected all.

The Congress, and the Supreme Soviet, were meant to make the
government more accountable. Where, however, was the government?
Under the old system the Politburo was the cabinet, the key decision-
maker. Now, however, Gorbachev, the First Party Secretary, was the
elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, in permanent session. Still
head of state, and chief executive, he now also became responsible for
chairing the meetings, involved with agenda, and with votes, in other
words acting like the Speaker in the House of Commons. Meanwhile
the ministers whose appointments had been ratified by Congress in
no way constituted a cabinet operating as a policy-making body; the
Council of Ministers was far too large, and had never worked like
that. The Politburo still met but its authority as policy-maker was now
questionable, its members were divided on policy issues, and it was
not appropriate that it should be sending proposals, in its name, to the
Supreme Soviet. By the end of 1989 both reformers and conservatives
were bewailing the fact that the country had no government.

In March 1990, recognizing this, Gorbachev brought proposals to
the Congress for the creation of a new post, the Executive Presidency,
similar to that in the United States or France. The President was to be
elected by the Congress (although in five years time the election
should be a popular one, and the holding of office limited to two
terms) to an Executive Office, separate from the Congress and
Supreme Soviet; he would appoint a Presidential Council, bring for-
ward legislative proposals, be Commander-in-Chief, etc. A minority
of deputies proposed making the election a popular one immediately
but this was outvoted, and the Congress voted Gorbachev into office.
The creation of the Presidency clearly made sense in structural terms:
it produced a legitimate and clearly defined Executive policy-maker.

By now, however, March 1990, the newly elected republican parlia-
ments were about to challenge any central authority. By midsummer
the key questions had become the continued existence of the Union,
and how to prevent economic collapse.

Could this situation have been avoided? If the question is whether
glasnost, an elected legislature, and the Gorbachev leadership could
have produced economic policies to lift the economy and make a
Communist Party government more answerable to the people within
the framework of the Union, the answer has to be that, although con-
ceivable, it is extremely unlikely. The constitutional arrangements
which failed to provide for any real government accentuated the prob-
lem but they were probably the least important factor. Supposing the
Constitution had, from the start, provided for a popularly elected
Executive Presidency. Could it then have worked? It is very doubtful.
On the one hand there were powerful vested interests opposed to econ-
omic reform (sections of the party apparatus and within the ministries)
and, on the other, why should a democratically elected legislature vote
for an economic reform package that would necessarily involve higher
prices, unemployment, and welfare cuts? Even the most committed
government would have had an uphill fight. Furthermore, the nation-
ality issue was already squarely on the agenda. Although we should be
wary of any account that concentrates too heavily on the role of an
individual leader at a time like this, it is just possible that, had Gorba-
chev, backed by a committed, reform-minded government, put econ-
omic reform proposals and plans for a looser Union before the Con-
gress in 1989, he would have got the support of reformers and party
loyalists who still felt a duty to support their party leadership. But this
would have entailed, as a consequence, splitting the party because many
within its ranks were bitterly opposed to such policies. This, however,
was an idea that Gorbachev was not prepared to entertain because of his
conviction that only one party, the Communist Party, was needed.

In 1989 the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had nearly 20
million members. In some republics, notably the Baltic, whole sections
were shedding their allegiance to the central party leadership. During
the course of the next two years the giant organization began to shrink,
ever more rapidly. The mass membership of the politically apathetic
just quietly drifted away, ceasing to pay their dues once it was no longer
necessary; some of the Democrats, including Yeltsin, left in protest
against an organization that showed no signs of yielding up its power
and privileges. By the summer of 1990 the party was openly split between a Democratic platform in favour of democratic procedures within the party and the conservatives who, in Russia, had won the leadership of a newly organized Russian republican Communist Party. The party apparatus looked to Ligachev but dared not revolt against Gorbachev, who continued to insist that the party had a future. By the spring of 1991, as a political organization it was dead, but it still owned vast amounts of property.

In his role as President, Gorbachev adopted the same strategy of compromise that he did as party leader. Throughout 1990 he prevaricated, trying to reconcile irreconcilable interests. He appointed an ill-assorted collection of leading politicians, writers, academics, and party spokesmen of different persuasions to his Presidential Council, with the consequence that it proved useless as a policy forum. In September 1990 he wavered between supporting a radical economic reform programme and a more cautious one and, with his insistence that they be reconciled, prevented any action to remedy an ever worsening economic situation. It was at this point he requested, and was granted, the power to rule by decree—but to no effect: soon he was issuing a decree that his decrees must be implemented. In November 1990 came further constitutional changes: the abolition of the Presidential Council, and the creation of a new Federal Council of republican representatives (which not all attended) and a smaller Cabinet of Ministers, which he appointed. By the end of the year he had antagonized leading reform-minded politicians such as Shevardnadze, the Foreign Minister, who resigned, and had appointed a team of conservative ministers, led by the unpopular Pavlov. This was too little and too late to save his reputation with the stalwarts of the party apparatus, by whom he was seen as a weak, vacillating figure who had betrayed the system and, when, in January, he failed either to take responsibility for or to denounce the actions of the security forces in Lithuania he lost any remaining support from the reformers. Too late he put forward proposals for a new Union treaty. By the summer of 1991 Yeltsin had won a decisive mandate as the popularly elected President of Russia, and by August Gorbachev had agreed to sign a new treaty that left the centre with few powers. It was, however, clear to all that the issue of centre-republican power was far from solved, whether over economic resources or arms.

If 1989 saw the Communist Party lose political authority and its ability to control the media, and 1990 witnessed the War of Laws whereby authority was slipped away from any central institution down to the republics, the Property War was only just beginning. If change was coming, those who controlled the resources wished to make sure they retained them. Proposals came from the directors of large enterprises for the turning of the enterprise into a share-owning company, with individual directors written in as key shareholders, and this was authorized by a ministerial ruling. Some achieved it, others were blocked. Ministries began to set up consortia, joint ventures, and commercial banks. The party apparatus, a major property owner, began to shift its resources at both central and regional level. In Leningrad the regional party committee invested 5 million roubles in a new commercial bank, and pursued the idea of buying a TV channel; in Perm, a city in the Urals, the party committee set up a firm (which paid its shareholders dividends) which began to rent out party property— including the party hotel (still supplied by the state wholesale network), and based a lucrative taxi service for foreign businessmen on its car pool (using state petrol). Individual party officials left the apparatus and moved into new business ventures with long-term colleagues from the ministries. Meanwhile the shops grew emptier and industrial production declined as supply networks broke down.

We now reach August 1991. The one resource left to the centre, by this time, was control over the means of coercion: the armed forces, police, and security forces. Authority and the media had gone, economic resources were being divided up. From the republics talk was coming of republican armies. If central control and defence of the territory, the key rationale of a state, went, then everything went. The coup was an attempt to prevent the dispersal of the last remaining centrally held resource, coercion, and to thus maintain the central state and its empire. The War of Laws had turned into the Property War and, by August, the struggle for power had reached the essential one, the ability to command the use of force.

In the early hours of 19 August, a group of Gorbachev's ministers, including Yazov, the Minister of Defence, Pugo, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and Kruchkov, the head of the KGB, proclaimed a state of emergency. Gorbachev's health, it was announced, prevented him from acting as President and, given the grave economic and political situation in the country, a State Committee had assumed extraordinary powers. The Central Committee of the party responded by sending out instructions that nothing should be done to provoke disturbances, in
other words, to oppose the Committee. Gorbachev was isolated in the President's holiday villa on the Black Sea; television and radio were taken over, and tanks rolled into the centre of Moscow. The coup failed as its members lost their nerve, and Yeltsin acted to rally the democratic opposition. None of the leading Democrats was arrested, the telephone network continued to work, and by lunch-time faxes from the White House, the Russian parliament, were reaching the provinces; by evening Sobchak, the mayor of Leningrad, had appeared on television with a damning indictment of the 'former ministers' as he called them. There was a very tense two days while all waited to see if the security forces or the army would move in to take the White House and the Leningrad City Council. The coup leaders backed down. By Wednesday it was over, and Gorbachev back in Moscow; the members of the State Committee were arrested with the exception of Pugo, Minister of Internal Affairs, who shot himself. Yeltsin's stature rose even higher. He used the opportunity of Gorbachev's appearance at the Russian parliament to humiliate him before a television audience of millions and, with a wicked grin, signed a decree banning the Communist Party in Russia. Shortly afterwards Gorbachev resigned as First Secretary, the party was dissolved, and its assets impounded.

The behaviour of the army and the security forces was crucial: Relations within the army high command, assessment of the reaction of the officer corps, and morale among the troops, all played a part. We know little enough about this crucial institution. From 1990 onwards there was endless discussion of attitudes within the army; would disillusion and anger with a government that had let Eastern Europe go result in political action from the generals? Would the troops fire upon fellow Russians if so ordered? At the time of the coup, the high command was divided, and Yazov indecisive, but the questions are still pertinent. There is evidence that the security force, the KGB, was no longer the tight, centrally controlled, institution it had been, even in Russia. Regional KGB chiefs had competing loyalties—to the central leadership, or to the Russian—and, in the absence of instructions from the centre (one of the most extraordinary features was the failure of the plotters to issue instructions to their own organizations), they were prepared to wait and see, and then to link their fortunes with Yeltsin. This in no way denies the bravery of those who printed leaflets, joined demonstrations, and signed protests, because they did not know what the outcome would be—and their actions, in Moscow and Leningrad, contributed to the leaders' nervousness—but it suggests the outcome might have been very different with a more streamlined army and KGB command. Had they picked up a thousand or so of the democratic activists in the early hours of 19 August, something which they easily could have done, there would probably have been no defence of the White House. The point is important for two reasons: it indicates that central control over the means of force was already slipping by August, and it reminds us that in a future situation where the security force or army has but one loyalty (to a new republican government) it may have no hesitation in moving fast against potential trouble-makers.

The industrial directors reacted ambivalently to the attempted coup, with some taking steps to ensure there were no protests from their work-force. More important, however, it seems that few heads rolled in consequence. The coup attempt, inadvertently, had the consequence of speeding up the process of dismantling the central ministries and of privatization as the republican governments now claimed control over the resources. It also meant that the Communist Party lost its economic power: the buildings, car pools, higher party schools, presses, and publishing houses passed into the hands of the new republican and city governments.

With the coup's failure, the dispersal of control over the remaining resource, coercion, became a reality. The question of republican independence, the end of the Soviet Union, was only a matter of time; the republics could dictate to the centre. The issue that mattered was control over the armed forces, the security forces, and nuclear weapons, and Yeltsin had already claimed and won the right to participate in appointments. The election of Kravchuk to the Presidency of the Ukraine, which possessed nuclear weapons, a substantial part of the Soviet armed forces, and on whose shore the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was based, followed by the declaration of Ukrainian independence in early December 1991 made the issue an urgent one. The vital question was whether the individual sovereign states could agree on who should control the weapons, and whether relations between them could be maintained without recourse to force. The situation was and still is a highly dangerous one. There is an army without a government, and governments without armies. The Soviet high command and officer corps feel no allegiance as yet to any of the new republican governments, and they in turn cannot rely on the loyalty of the military units.

In a swift and quite unconstitutional act, the leaders of Russia, the
Ukraine and Belorussia set up a new Commonwealth which would, at least for the time being, provide a framework for unified control over the armed forces and for discussion of economic links, and invited others to join. Eight did so. The future of the Commonwealth must be very uncertain. It is unlikely, given the economic and political instability within the whole of the former Soviet Union, that anything devised at the end of 1991 will persist unchanged. The issues of weapons and economic resources are necessarily highly contentious. A government which does not control the armed forces on its territory is hardly worthy of the name. The only grounds for optimism are that the present governments recognize that if the conflicts of interest cannot be settled diplomatically, the consequences will be far worse than in Yugoslavia. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of 1991 was that a powerful state should have fallen apart with so little violence. The danger, however, is that 1992 will witness the final stage in the drama: the uncontrolled disintegration of the armed forces.

What, then, of the attempts to build a new political order? During 1990–1 the newly elected parliaments, and their presidents, struggled to establish the civilian aspects of rule and to create effective governments, even though they possessed no force to back up their decisions and had little control over economic resources. Hardly surprisingly, they achieved little. In another respect too they were at a disadvantage. There were no conventions on parliamentary behaviour, political bargaining, or party loyalties. In Russia, by the late spring of 1991, the discussion at central and regional level was of the need to strengthen executive authority, and to limit the soviets' insistence that they discuss matters great and small. Government officials and the public joined in a chorus of criticism of the ineffective soviets. A popular charge brought against the deputies, at whatever level, was that they were inexperienced, amateur politicians: it is true that discussion within the Congress of People's Deputies and the taking of decisions was often chaotic. When sessions of the Russian parliament or city soviets were televised viewers watched with dismay as hours were lost over procedural points, and key issues abandoned for want of a quorum. But was inexperience the problem? A more sophisticated analysis suggested that the absence of political parties was to blame.

The majority of those elected to the Congress of People's Deputies had been supporters of the existing system, many lukewarm towards Gorbachev's reforms, but divided on a number of issues. There was a small minority of more radical deputies with Yeltsin and, until his death, Sakharov as key figures, who formed themselves into an Inter-regional Group of Deputies and had some kind of political identity, but even they found it hard to work together. The deputies divided along all kinds of lines, sometimes supporting, sometimes rejecting proposals. This problem persisted after parties had been legalized in the summer of 1990. In the Russian parliament, where, by 1991, something approaching a two-party division existed, a small majority supported the more radical position (on economic reform, republican rights, and restricting the rights of the Communist Party), spearheaded by Yeltsin, now head of government. These deputies, however, saw themselves in no way bound to support Yeltsin's government on issues they disagreed with, and their opponents refused to consider themselves as an 'opposition'. Not merely were parties with clearly defined policy positions absent from the legislative arena but the idea of operating in such a way was antipathetic to many. 'We must stop seeing each other as political enemies, particularly at such a time of crisis' was a common refrain from politicians in 1991.

A democratic order, however, requires the existence and acceptance of political parties. Neither in 1989 nor by the end of 1991 had viable political parties or conventions on party competition been established. In the post-authoritarian Soviet environment, dozens of small parties (even more fragmented and with smaller memberships than in 1917) emerged. Some attempted to refound the pre-revolutionary parties, the Cadets for example, or monarchist parties, others looked to Europe and created the Christian Democrats, Liberal Democrats, or Social Democrats. In 1990 many of the Democrats, including a Democratic Party of Russia, combined in a Democratic Russia movement. Then there were the different Patriot parties, the Russian nationalist ones, which included Pamyat and Fatherland, and the People's Party of Russia. All these, however, periodically split, and regrouped. The Communist Party spawned a United Front of Workers, demanding a return to a Leninist system and, after the party was dissolved, a Communists for Democracy. By the end of 1991 there were still no signs of coherent parties with an organized following. The Democrats were in disarray, now that their main target, the nomenklatura, had lost political office and Yeltsin was in power. The perestroika Communists were disorientated and lacked a programme; the United Front, although noisy, and linking up with some of the Patriots, lacked any real following.
Dispersal of Power

There was much talk, as there had been ever since 1989, of a Russian nationalist backlash and it was clear that Yeltsin felt he needed to pre-empt any such appeals by stressing that his was a government of all of Russia. Time will tell, but, as of 1991, the Russian electorate had shown itself remarkably unswayed by such appeals. The problem, however, remains: where are the parties going to come from in a society where groups are poorly defined and there is such a fragmentation of ideas?

When systems of rule break down, leaders struggle to retain or regain control over resources, to create some instrument through which they can rule (the issuing of decrees is a sign of the weakness of their position, rather than strength), and grow impatient with their own powerlessness. By the end of 1991 Yeltsin had gained unwilling agreement for the postponement of any elections until the end of 1992, appointed his ministers, and regional governors to be responsible for the implementation of policy, and was embarking upon economic reform. As Gorbachev before him, he requested and obtained, grudgingly, the right to issue decrees. In November, on television, he was arguing:

I cannot imagine how one can implement a reform directed at democratization and improvement of life in the future without having power. Vertical power. And we are creating this vertical power now, from the president, and to executive officers, to the very bottom. There should be responsibility. And if somebody does not deliver the goods, he must be answerable. That is the case in any democratic civilized state ... that is why I have asked [the parliament] for the right to appoint local heads of administration. I have appointed him but I shall sack him if he does not implement a decree or a resolution by the government ...

Interviewer: Does it mean you are in the course of replacing the power of soviets and changing the power system?

Yeltsin: No, no, this is executive power. A soviet is, as it were, a legislative part of power, one branch of power, and this is the executive power which should implement decrees, resolutions and laws adopted by the Supreme Soviet and so on ...

The key question, however, is how much control the elected assembly has over the executive's decisions, whether a strong government means a weak parliament, and vice versa, and if so, which is desirable. It is not only former Communist Party leaders such as Yeltsin who insist on the importance of a strong executive. Sobchak, the law professor from Leningrad University, one of the liberal democrats, has become an authoritarian mayor of St Petersburg. After the coup failed he moved the mayor's office into Smolny, the party headquarters and, arguing that the mayor in any normal city had a newspaper, struck a deal with the editorial board of the party newspaper: Leningradskaya pravda became The Saint Petersburg Chronicle. He also set up an Economic Council which included leading figures from the city's defence industry, some of whom had held places on the regional party committee, in order to try to devise an economic future for the city. A request from the City Soviet, at its opening session in October 1991, that he report on his mayoral decisions brought the reply:

Therefore I want to say, straightaway, that I shall not be making any report at all. Any attempt to interfere in my actions, including actions regarding property, will be rebuffed by me. I do not intend to share power with anyone and, equally, am not prepared to discuss the question with you, respected deputies.

In trying, in a situation of economic collapse, to create and run a government whose decisions are implemented, even democratic rulers became domineering, and are irritated by their former political allies in the soviets who try to curb their actions. They need a block of support, a solid party behind them, and it is not there. It is difficult to be a democrat and rule. The democratic deputies, in turn, know that Russia needs a government but they also know that power must be checked. What should a democrat do in that situation?

Inevitably we find ourselves making comparisons with 1917, and rightly so because in 1991, as in 1917, a system of rule collapsed. Have we then witnessed a revolution? Why do we hesitate? Is it because we are too close to developments and cannot see the contours of the new? Possibly. Perhaps developments in 1917 looked, at the time, equally inconclusive and confusing. Depending on developments in the next few years, we might well change our views but, looking at the events of 1991, there are grounds for hesitation. Where, in Russia, was the evidence of significant action by new social groups that resulted in power passing out of the hands of the old rulers? Would the central government have collapsed had it not been for the challenge from the outlying republics? In Russia political office passed into the hands of a new group of people, the Democrats, who included within their ranks members of the professional intelligentsia (lawyers, academics, engineers) and estate and party officials. The government had certainly changed, and the old system of total control had gone. But, argued some, was not a
regrouping under way, a merger of the old party-state élite with sections of the professions and new commercial talent which would organize economic and political control in a new but far from democratic way? Yeltsin had appointed his governors, and was ruling by decree; out in the provinces the old élite was reorganizing itself. We might want to call this a revolution—the emergence of a new group in control of key resources—but revolutions involve attempts to construct a qualitatively new order of things, whereas here the social and economic élite remained largely intact. Unlike the revolutions of 1789 or 1917, there was no vision of a new era opening for mankind. The new rulers did not offer grand ideas of a new order but rather dwelt on the need to undo the mistakes of the past.

Are we then, perhaps, witnessing a restoration rather than a revolution? Have the fears of the early Bolshevics that after revolution comes reaction finally been realized? Trotsky had argued in the mid-thirties that the new stratum of office-holders would aim to consolidate their power by cloaking it with legality. One group within the democratic opposition had argued from 1987 onwards that perestroika was an attempt by the nomenklatura to transfer its power over economic resources into legal power, jettisoning the outdated Communist Party system which had begun to limit its activities. Privatization, state deregulation in an environment in which democratic control would be weak, chaotic, and confused, would give the apparatus new opportunities for wealth and privilege, and the legal right to pass these on to its heirs. According to such reasoning, the Democrats had been duped by a wily strategist. They won elections to the soviets, and then discredited themselves in the eyes of the population when they were unable to provide any goods at all, thus paving the way for a new authoritarian government once they had carried out the task of privatization. The argument gains a certain plausibility from the fact that such a process may be occurring, but that does not mean it was consciously engineered. It assumes a too far-sighted and united entrepreneurial élite, whereas one of the consequences of Communist Party rule has been a society of groups, weak on self-identity, and poor at defending or furthering their interests. If the forces of revolution seem lacking, so too are those of restoration. Certainly the renaming, the attempts to revive pre-revolutionary cultural institutions, and the insistence that status and rewards should go with culture and talent in a stratified society, all hark back to an earlier past, but, in Russia, there was little left of pre-revolutionary groups or institutions, the monarchists remained very few, and attitudes towards the state's responsibility for welfare, or towards property and wealth suggested a very different society. Neither revolution nor restoration seem appropriate terms to describe what happened in 1989–91.