How Yeltsin’s Exploitation of Ethnic Nationalism Brought Down an Empire

Boris Yeltsin and his entourage of democrats unleashed and encouraged ethnic-nationalist feeling in the republics in an attempt to wrest central power from the communists — and succeeded instead in destroying the Soviet Union. When Ukraine used the center’s weakness to break away from its tyrannical older brother, the death knell sounded.

by ROMAN LABA

At the First Public Meeting of the Lithuanian National Front, Sajudis, in 1988, a poet asked. “Can a mouse defeat an elephant?” Everyone present knew what he meant. “Yes,” he answered, “one only has to wait for the moment when the elephant is balancing itself on its little toe.” How did the ethno-national mice topple the Soviet elephant?

In assessing the role of ethno-nationalism in the fall of the Soviet Union, there is a distinction to be made among the mice, between those who could leave the union without crippling it severely and those whose departure would destroy it. The ethno-national movements in the Baltics, Transcaucasus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan first tried the lid off the Soviet ethno-national problem. It was they, in 1988 and 1989, who pioneered the strategy, tactics, and organizational forums. They appealed to nonviolence, to the Soviet constitution, and to Soviet and international law. They created national fronts. They put state sovereignty, self-determination, and the future of the union on the political agenda. More ominously, in the riots and pogroms of Almaat, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Sumgait, the ethno-national movements introduced communal violence and offered a terrifying view of the war of all against all that might follow the end of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, even if the Baltics, Moldova, and the Transcaucasian republics left, the Soviet Union would remain. Only two countries by themselves could in leaving bring down the USSR: Russia and Ukraine, which together comprised 70 percent of the Soviet Union’s population and even more of its gross national product. The union of the two eastern Slavic peoples — Russians and Ukrainians — provided a sufficient base to hold power in the USSR. In this sense, the union’s other republics were on the periphery. As destructive forces, Russia and Ukraine entered the political scene only in 1989. After the power of the Communist Party had been eroded and the periphery nations had started their drives for independence.

The forces for Russian sovereignty, Boris Yeltsin and his allies, were a faction of the Soviet communist elite who used the Russian Federation as a way station on their road to central power in the Soviet Union. Just when they thought they had achieved central power in the Kremlin, they found instead that they had destroyed the USSR — an unexpected consequence of their actions. The 16 autonomous republics and other ethno-national formations within Russia played an important role in facilitating Yeltsin’s rise to power by way of the Russian parliament and presidency. In order to establish his power base, Yeltsin made far-reaching promises to them. At the same time, he accidentally facilitated and provoked Ukrainian ethno-nationalism. Ukraine’s refusal to join Russia in a new super-state unexpectedly destroyed Yeltsin’s plans.

Members of the elite used ethno-nationalism to take power at the center from General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and the Communist Party. That is only in part an instrumentalist interpretation: Yeltsin did play the ethno-nationalist card in his conflict with Gorbachev, but in so doing he started a chain of misperceptions and miscalculations forged from Russian and Soviet imperial identity. Such an interpretation explains Russian elite behavior before and after the fall of the USSR better than explanations from civil society, democracy, economy, or simply ethno-nationalism. It also makes more specific the uncertain nature of Russian ethno-nationalism, entwined as it is with more deeply rooted imperial and Soviet identities in the Soviet Union. A major part of that uncertainty is the peculiar relationship with the Ukrainians, the Siamese twins who until 1991 were bound to the Russians in what seemed — to Russians, at least — to be an indestructible tie. Gorbachev’s chief aide, Valerii Boldin, noted that toward the end of 1990, “some old Ukrainian friends of mine told me that one should not worry too much about agitation among representatives of the Transcaucasus region, Moldavia, and the Baltic Republics. But real trouble could start as soon as Ukrainian nationalism reared its head. That would mean the end of the USSR. Such a notion was unthinkable to me. How could our Ukrainian brothers, bound to our homeland by many centuries of friendship and years spent struggling for our common cause, betray the union?”

IMPASSE AT THE CENTER

In September 1989, at the end of the first session of the Congress of People's Deputies, the entire country had been glued to the television for 13 days as the anti-party forces, composed of a heterogeneous band of democrats, anti-communists, reform communists, and nationalists, broke the taboos of the Soviet system in spectacular fashion. It was good theater and propaganda, but the Interregional Group of Deputies, which united the opposition forces, numbered at best 15 percent of the congress. Its members had been excluded from the Supreme Soviet, which would be the sitting parliamentary body creating the new laws for the union. As planned in advance, the congress elected Gorbachev chairman — the Interregional Group of Deputies proved incapable of even putting forward a counter-candidate. The aim of Gorbachev and the communists to manufacture a democratic mandate for their rule seemed to have been accomplished. The opposition faced a long political war of position before the next union-wide elections to the Congress of People's Deputies, five years hence. Even more galling, in spite of all their brave orations, it seemed the opposition deputies had been turned into democratic decorations for Gorbachev and the Communist Party.

There was only one way out of the impasse. The elections at the republic level were due in March 1990. If it could present a viable program and candidates, the opposition had a chance to contest power in the Russian Federation. At that point in 1989, it had the candidates, who had established themselves in the Interregional Group of Deputies. Their leaders were household names after the 13-day session of the congress: Boris Yeltsin, Andrei Sakharov, Gavril Popov, Yuri Afanasyev, Anatolii Sobchak, and others. But because they were Soviet elites, they did not have a Russian program.

As a supra-ethnic ideological state, the Soviet Union closely controlled expressions of ethn-nationalism among all its peoples, including the Russians. On the one hand, an ethn-national Russian with its own political institutions was bound to burst the political formula on which the Soviet Union rested. It was too big and powerful. But on the other, the Russians already dominated in the central institutions. They were the only ethnic group for which all of the Soviet Union was home, and they identified the multinational state as their own ethn-national state.

As the communist state began to unravel, prestigious Russian nationalists began to speak of a Russia that was the greatest victim of communism. There were two visible currents. One asked for Russia to jettison not only communism, but also the empire. Leading dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his letter to Soviet leaders in 1973, was the first in recent times to decouple Russia and the Soviet Union, saying that in order to save itself, Russia had to abandon the empire. In 1990, in a widely read and discussed pamphlet, Rebuilding Russia, he took up that thesis again.

In both works, there was ambiguity surrounding what Russia was to comprise in terms of territory. Ultimately, Solzhenitsyn expected Ukraine, Belarus, and ethnically Slavic northern Kazakhstan to be included in a Great Russia, united by common blood, history, and the Russian Orthodox faith. Still, he admitted that the borders of Russia should be based on a free vote of self-determination.

With the second current of Russian nationalists, there was no such ambiguity. For them, Russia was the Soviet Union. Why not say it openly, why not abandon the communist ideology and system that held Russia down and allow Russia to dominate the Soviet Union — or simply be the Soviet Union?

In 1989, the vocabulary of Russian resentment, of a “Russian ethnic state” or a “Russia with its own state institutions,” was employed only by the right. In 1988–1989, Russian nationalists had already brought into public life some of the symbols that came to signify Russian statehood. The right-wing Russian National Front was the first to use the final chorus from Glinka’s 1830s opera, A Life for the Tsar (in which the “perfidious” Poles fall on their knees before the tsar), as the national anthem. They also were the first to fly the commercial flag of the Russian Empire — the blue, white, and red tricolor — as the flag of Russia at their rallies.

During the session of the Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989, Valentin Rasputin, a writer identified with Russian nationalism, spoke for Russia. “I keep thinking,” he said, “maybe Russia should secede from the union. Then we could use the word ‘Russia’ and talk about national self-awareness without fear of being called nationalists.” Met with derision at the time, Rasputin’s speech was remembered only months later as the first public call for a “Russia First” program.

Boris Yeltsin and his allies used the Russian Federation as a way station on their road to central power in the Soviet Union.

In autumn 1989, the Soviet Communist Party moved to co-opt Russian patriotic feeling and consolidate its own position in its most important base, ethnic Russia. At a plenum of the Central Committee devoted to nationalities, the party proposed a Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Russian academies of science and medicine. It also recommended forming specifically Russian social and political organizations, with a Central Committee bureau for the Russian party as their capstone. Significantly, it also recommended increasing the importance of the ethn-national formations within Russia and eventually dividing the republic into regions. Most likely it feared losing control of the Russian Federation.

In sum, Gorbachev and the party decided to support Russian and republic sovereignty (within limits) as a device to tie the hands of the secessionist republics. It would be done by means of a new union accord that would eliminate the ambiguities and embarrassments of the present constitution — which was not at all clear on the limits of sovereignty of the republics and even guaranteed them the right to secede.

The Russian nationalists created a political program. The Soviet communists facilitated the entry of that program into public life. Now a third group, which had never shown attachment to Russian nationalism — the Russian “democrats” — took it over.

THE MOVEMENT AND THE CANDIDATE

The extent to which many of the Russian “democrats” and reform communists were denatured of conscious national feeling is difficult to imagine today. Afanasiev, who with Yeltsin was one of the leaders of the Interregional Group of Deputies, offered some unintended insight into his ethno-national awareness in interviews given in 1989. Said Afanasiev: “Russian nationalism, if you push it to its extreme consequences, leads to the vision of Russia’s exit from the Soviet Union. This idea has been openly expressed at the Congress of People’s Deputies by the writer Raspuzin, for example. The same idea is defended by Solzhenitsyn. It is, in my opinion, unrealistic because it will encounter many adversaries, powerful adversaries, now and in the future. If the tendency should strengthen, we should expect very serious disturbances and veritable bloodbaths.”

In answer to the question “Do you consider yourself Russian?” Afanasiev answered “yes.” He was then asked, “More than Soviet?” His reply was: “That is difficult to say. I am Russian certainly. I have been educated and brought up as a Russian. But I am more a Soviet, perhaps even an European, because it does not seem either necessary, useful, comfortable or even polite to be in the first place a Russian.”

Boris Yeltsin, like Afanasiev, was a product of the same Soviet milieu where the confusion of Russian and Soviet led to an assumption that one stood for universal values. If you were from the other republics, your voice was parochial. If you were from Russia, like Yeltsin, Popov, Sobchak, or Afanasiev, you spoke for the entire Soviet Union. That is representative of the “cultural imperialism of Great Nations — large ethno-rational groups that preach universalism and see in their own assimilationist, triumphalist progress the inevitable unfolding of Reason in History.”

Born in 1931, Yeltsin had been trained as a civil engineer and was drafted into party work at the age of 31. He had spent his entire career in the heartland Russian city of Sverdlovsk, where he rose to become first party secretary. In 1985, he was appointed party secretary of Moscow and became a candidate member of the Politburo. His campaign against party and state corruption and privileges eventually aroused such ire in the party that he was forced to resign as Moscow first secretary and Politburo member. But he was now famous across the country as a champion of the people against the party. In the 1989 elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies, he was elected by a huge plurality (5 million votes) in a special national territorial district in Moscow. He boasted that 2,000 factories had nominated him. With his apparatchik past, he was viewed suspiciously by the other leaders and members of the Interregional Group of Deputies, but there was no denying his popular appeal. He was like a battering ram next to the professors and writers who predominated among the anti-communist opposition.

Up until autumn 1989, the concepts of Russia, Russian sovereignty, and Russian pride and humiliation had not crossed Yeltsin’s lips. A Russian journalist asked him whether his feelings about Russia were not like hers, explain-

13See the public record of Yeltsin’s speeches and interviews from 1985–1990. For an accessible example, see Yeltsin’s autobiography, Against the Grain (New York: Summit Books, 1990), translated by Michael Glenny.

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Others. Yeltsin and Afanasiev to support Yeltsin and other “democratic” candidates for office in the Russian Republic), the manifesto called for a new Russian constitution, a new treaty of union, and real statehood for Russia.15

Week by week, Yeltsin raised the register of his ethno-national message. By May 1990, he was saying: “The issue of primary importance is the spiritual, national, and economic rebirth of Russia, which has been for long decades an appendix of the center and which, in many respects, has lost its independence.”16

In the March 1990 elections to the Russian parliament, the anti-party opposition united around Democratic Russia, which did significantly better than it had at the union level. It won about 30 percent of the seats in the parliament, as opposed to moribund structures of the Russian Federation, he forged interrepublican ties, signing comprehensive treaties with the other republics that included guarantees of existing borders. At a decisive moment of crackdown in the Baltics in January 1991, he flew to the scene to oppose the repression. The Russian Federation engaged in a “war of laws” with the Soviet Union for institutions, power, and revenues on the principle that Russian laws had priority over union-wide laws.

THE ETHNO-NATIONAL QUESTION

Because the 31 autonomous republics and other ethnonational formations covered about one-third of the federation’s territory, they were very important for Yeltsin in his struggle to establish a solid power base within Russia.17 Some, such as the Yakuts, controlled vast areas of Russia, while others, such as the Volga Tatars, were numerous and strategically placed at the heart of the Russian Federation.

Yeltsin promised autonomy and independence to all the peoples of Russia. Non-Russians remembered his words to the Bashkirs: “Take as much power as you yourselves can swallow.”18 When he spoke of the future of Russia, he said it had to begin with the declaration of the economic independence and sovereignty of each autonomous republic. “The autonomous republics should be granted the right to leave the federation.” In fact, he said, Russia should not be a federation, but a “confederation.”19

By late 1990, half of the 16 autonomous republics (Kareliya, Komi, Tatarstan, Udmurtiya, Yakutiya, Buryatiya, Bashkortostan, and Kalmykiya) had ratified declarations of sovereignty. Even more submerged groups in the Soviet hierarchy of nations, such as the Adygei, the Chukchi, the Koryak, and the Yamal-Nenets, which did not even have the status of autonomous republics, now declared sovereignty.

Yeltsin’s close aide, Pavel Voshchanov, explained Yeltsin’s ability to win decisive votes within parliament despite having only 30 percent of the deputies as his supporters. The parliament in 1990 was divided into three groups: those for reform, those against reform, and a “large group of deputies who defend narrow professional or national interests but do not yet have a particularly clearly defined political orientation.” Yeltsin brought over some of them by “his consent in the event of his election to hand over a number of key posts in the new administration to representatives of national autonomous formations.”20 Those peoples of Russia, of whom even special-

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16. Moscow Radio, 3 May 1990, as cited in Morrison, Boris Yeltsin ... p. 143.
18. Moscow Television, 12 August 1990, as cited in Morrison, Boris Yeltsin ... p. 184.
Yeltsin’s election

Faced with an onslaught of the republics, the central bureaucracies struck back in autumn 1990. Pressing Gorbachev and forcing him to jettison his erstwhile allies, such as Aleksandr Yakovlev and Eduard Shevardnadze, in late 1990, they mounted an offensive that they hoped would lead to a union-wide crackdown. But bloody incidents in Vilnius and Riga in January 1991, provoked by security troops, failed in large measure because of Yeltsin’s decisive interventions in defense of the Baltic peoples.

Yeltsin’s opponents almost succeeded in removing him at an extraordinary session of the Russian parliament in February 1991. But they failed, thanks to a mobilization of popular support by labor, which included nationwide miners’ strikes and a huge rally that drew 400,000 in Moscow. Having turned back his enemies, Yeltsin was able to win a vote from the now-subdued parliament to add a referendum on the popular election of a Russian president to Gorbachev’s 21 March union-wide referendum on the preservation of the union.

In the subsequent election on 21 June 1991, Yeltsin won a popular mandate as Russian president against eight other candidates. Unlike Gorbachev, the Soviet president who never faced an electorate in his entire political career, Yeltsin won democratic legitimacy in the largest constituent republic. Power now resided at multiple levels in the increasingly moshbach Soviet Union. As one commentator put it: “The ground has dropped out from under the union institutions of power.”

At the first inauguration of a popularly elected Russian president that July, several symbolic elements came together. The former apparatchik Yeltsin invited the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Alexii, to give an address—a clever political move because of the deep identification of Russian ethnic identity with orthodox religious identity. Moscow was worth a mass. The flag that flew over the ceremony was the blue, white, and red commercial flag of the Russian Empire, which had been flown in 1888 by the Russian National Front, the opponents of Yeltsin. The band played Glinka’s final chorus from A Life for the Tsar as the new national anthem, but there were no words and so all stood silent during the music. The moment was eerily evocative of the uncertain political identity not only of Yeltsin and his political associates, but also of the undefined ethno-national identity of Russia itself.

In key ways, Yeltsin’s policies repeated Lenin’s tactics and assumptions regarding the ethno-national issue. Until after the August 1991 putsch, Yeltsin’s basic strategy was to call for national sovereignty and/or independence for all the peoples of the Soviet Union. In 1917, Lenin had issued a call to national self-determination, thereby exploiting ethno-national discontent in order to seize central power. After he attained power, it turned out that self-determination was subject to the higher interests of the proletariat as defined by Lenin. What would Yeltsin appeal to when he finally triumphantly entered the Kremlin? Yeltsin also believed that resistance to the national movements would cause separatisms, while concession would encourage integration. Speaking of the separatist movements, he said at one point, “Imagine that you read the people, then the people will further intensify their counterpressure.”

Those [ethno-national] events would have passed off more easily, significantly more easily, if there had been no resistance. Here again, he showed the effects of a long career in the Communist Party and a certain debt to Lenin, who also believed that repression bred resentment, while concessions to the symbolic and cultural realms dissolved ethno-national sentiment. Finally, like most Marxists and Western liberals, Yeltsin assumed that economic ties would eventually prevail over the temporary “irrational” fever of separatism.

A naive, even juvenile, anecdote recounted by Yeltsin tellingly captures his mindset. It occurred during the negotiations of nine republics for a new union treaty in summer 1991.

“While I was defending Russia’s interests at the negotiating table, my aides had to defend them in other, less enjoyable circumstances. They would usually try to put my car [the limousine of the president of Russia] first in line at the entrance. But one evening my automobile ended up at the end of a line of government limousines. My security people sprang forward in alarm, made an incredible U-turn, digging up the Novo Ogarevo lawn in the process, and finally put the car back at the head of the line—Russia first! Of course, boys will be boys. The manager of Novo Ogarevo was furious and threatened to fine us for the ruined patch of grass. Later, he backpedal for some reason.”

The assumption was that Russia and Yeltsin would rule. There were two possibilities: Russia would encompass the union, or Russia would dominate through the facade of a union. Yeltsin was perfectly aware of that. In September 1990, he said, “God forbid [Russia] should rise up. … Understandably, a small republic could not affect the entire union. But with the giant Russia, if it were to assume its real position, it would be difficult to fight it, or rather impossible.”

The negotiations at Novo Ogarevo finally ended in a new union treaty, which was to be signed by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, plus the union center (Gorbachev) on 20 August 1991. Full of gaps and imprecise formulations, it was publicly released only days before the signing was to occur. Six republics—Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia—did not take part in the negotiations at all, as they were on their way to full independence. Ukraine was not planning to sign in August, as it held out for a looser federation or confederation.

The union treaty pushed the defenders of the old-style Soviet Union into desperate action. On 19 August, the union

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22. Yeltsin's appeal to the Kremlin. Yeltsin also believed that resistance to the national movements would cause separatism, while concession would encourage integration. Speaking of the separatist movements, he said at one point, “Imagine that you read the people, then the people will further intensify their counterpressure.”


25. Alla Lukovskaya, interview with Boris Yeltsin, in Morrison, Boris Yeltsin ... p. 142.

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elites around Gorbachev, including the vice president, the ministers of defense and internal security, and the head of the KGB, proclaimed that Gorbachev's temporary incapacity due to ill health and the desperate state of the Soviet Union compelled them to create a State Committee for the Extraordinary Situation, which took the Soviet Union to the brink of civil war. In three days, Yeltsin and the Russian Federation fought and defeated the plotters of the August coup. In defending Gorbachev, Yeltsin pitted the legitimacy of the Russian Federation and its democratically elected president against the self-proclaimed legitimacy of the union centrist.

At the end of the three days, Yeltsin and Russia seemed to be masters of the Soviet Union. Rescuing Gorbachev from his murky and still-unexplained sequestration at his vacation estate in the Crimea, Yeltsin hailed him before the Soviet parliament. Now the hitherto unstated assumption that Yeltsin and Russia would call the tune in the refurbished union became plain. At the end of the long session of scolding, Gorbachev undiplomatically revealed what should have been left unsaid: “Boris Nikolayevich knows my position. When we formulated it in December [1990], I said the president of the country and the prime minister should be representing Russia. The vice president . . . perhaps best of all . . . from Central Asia.” 27 As the country watched, at Yeltsin’s bidding, the heads of the three key security ministries of the Soviet state (army, KGB, and internal affairs) were changed, while Ivan Silaev, who until then had been premier of Russia, became the prime minister of the Soviet Union. To Russians, it meant a historic “democratic defeat” of the communists. To nonRussians, it signified an open Russian hegemony over the nations of the multinational country in which they all lived. The Russians made up half or just less of the population, but in a renewed union, whatever it might be called, the orders would come from Moscow.

UKRAINE MAKES ITS MOVE

Just as Yeltsin and the Russian “democrats” began to seize the central institutions of power in the Soviet Union, Ukraine smashed their expectations. On 26 August, the same day Gorbachev made his indiscernible revelations before the parliament, the Ukrainian parliament voted 346 to 1 for independence. Russia wanted to be the Soviet Union; Ukraine wanted to leave it. Both political formulas — the old one, the Soviet Union as ideological state, and the new one, a union ruled by Russia behind a facade of union or commonwealth — were now dead.

Ukraine would hold a referendum on independence on 1 December 1991. In the meantime, the parliament took legal steps to seize control over the huge body (nearly 1 million men) of the Soviet armed forces on its territory. In September, an unknown general of the Soviet air force, Konstantin Morozov, started work as Ukrainian minister of defense. He had one secretary, a few aides, and one telephone.

The Russian reply was characteristic. In separate statements, Yeltsin, his press secretary, Voskodanov, and his foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, threatened Ukrainian state borders unless Ukraine remained in union with Russia. 28 The contrast between Yeltsin during his “striving for power” stage, when he and Kozyrev freely signed a treaty guaranteeing the inviolability of the Russian border with Ukraine, and Yeltsin and Kozyrev in their new “imperial stage” was more than embarrassing. It was too late and it was counterproductive, as Gorbachev’s indirect revelation to the parliament and Yeltsin’s and Kozyrev’s threats only stiffened Ukrainian resolve to leave the union. 29 It was also premature, because Russia had no army and needed time to take control over the still-dangerous Soviet armed forces, which had lost their political masters. To enter into a quarrel with Ukraine might open Russia to a disastrous attack from those who still hung on to the Soviet Union.

As Yeltsin strove to be more subtle and diplomatic, Gorbachev and the union became fronts for Yeltsin and Russia. Yeltsin supported Gorbachev as he maneuvered and cajoled to negotiate a new union treaty in which the union institutions would be run by Russia. In the background, there was an economic threat, as Russia took control of the Soviet economy on its territory and promised it would impose world market prices on all who left the union. Specifically, Yeltsin unveiled a program for the reconstruction of a new union center. Praising Gorbachev, he called particularly for a unified economic space and the preservation of the union armed forces controlling the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal. The republics could do what they wished, but the army and economic system would be centralized. 30

At the elite level, almost everyone wanted the union to continue, not only Gorbachev and the union power ministries, but also Yeltsin and the Russian “democrats.” That was also true of the Central Asian republics and Belarus, where popular movements were much weaker than in the other republics. Perhaps more surprisingly, the Western democratic states did all they could to help Yeltsin and Gorbachev. As U.S. President George Bush put it in his July 1991 speech in Kiev, which was addressed to all the nations of the Soviet Union, “Freedoms is not the same as independence. Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred.” 31 Bush’s


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stunned incomprehension as the Soviet Union disappeared before his eyes was shared by British Prime Minister John Major, who in autumn 1991 said he could see no reason why the republics of the Soviet Union might need their own armies.

Within Russia, Yeltsin’s appeals to the nations of Russia to take all the freedom they wanted were replaced by attempts to stifle their drives for more autonomy or independence. On 15 November 1991, his decree ordering internal troops of the KGB to seize the breakaway republic of Chechnya was thwarted by opposition in the Russian parliament and the all-too-visible Chechen determination to fight. Three years passed before Russia finally invaded Chechnya, which refused from the very beginning to sign any federation treaty with Russia.

As the Ukrainian independence referendum drew near, the Russian and Soviet leaders still refused to believe it. They placed their hope in eastern and southern Ukraine, which had large ethnic Russian populations. To them, it seemed impossible that the 12 million ethnic Russians living mostly in the southeast and the Russian-speaking Ukrainians who formed the majority in Ukraine would reject union.

On 1 December, the Ukrainian population voted overwhelmingly for independence. Even the Crimean oblast, where ethnic Ukrainians were in the minority, voted for it. As Yeltsin’s adviser for ethnic issues, Galina Starovoitova, admitted: “The size of the Ukrainian vote for independence came as a shock to most Russians, as well as to the union leaders.”

After the Ukrainian vote, Yeltsin had no further use for Gorbachev. In fact, he had to act against him because the Soviet armed forces were still intact and might follow Gorbachev, the Soviet commander in chief, as the Soviet Union crumbled.

If you were from the other republics, your voice was parochial. If you were from Russia, you spoke for the entire Soviet Union.

On 7–8 December, Presidents Stanislav Shushkevich of Belarus, Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine, and Yeltsin of Russia met near Minsk. It was clear that Ukraine was leaving the union. Yeltsin proposed they form a Commonwealth of Independent States, which would have no executive or decision-making power over its members. For the Russians, it was something to build central institutions on in the future. In the meantime, they could claim that unity had been preserved. For the Ukrainians, it was a way to manage the split. When Kravchuk returned home, a suspicious Ukrainian parliament heaped even more restrictive conditions and clauses on the toothless document.

Meanwhile, late on the afternoon of 10 December, Gorbachev met with the top leaders of the Soviet armed forces at the Ministry of Defense in Moscow. He appealed to the commanders, saying, “The union must be preserved.” But they were already a president and an army without a country. Like Stalin, who had appealed to Russian nationalism and the

Russian Orthodox Church for help in 1941, Gorbachev appealed not to the legitimation of the Soviet Union and socialism, but to “our responsibility toward our 1,000-year past.” In an emergency meeting called the following morning, Yeltsin spoke to the same military high command. He, too, appealed to the 1,000-year history of Russia — that is, the Russian Empire — but he said that the commonwealth agreement signed in Minsk preserved the unity built up over 1,000 years. He promised that Russia would not cease its own army or Defense Ministry but would support the unified military of the Soviet armed forces. He then extended a 90 percent pay increase to the entire armed forces on the spot — including those outside the territory of the Russian Federation.

On 25 December, Yeltsin took over the Kremlin, and the blue, white, and red flag of Russia replaced the red flag of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin had attained his goal — the seat of power in the Kremlin — but because of Ukraine, the geographic area he ruled was cut back to a truncated Russia, much like the borders before Peter the Great. The Russian “democrats” now began to understand that democratic reform meant not only the end of the Soviet Union, but also the end of the Russian Empire. As one of their more perceptive thinkers, Aleksandr Tsyplko, ruefully put it, “If democracy means the end of the empire, then democracy is too high a price to pay.”

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Every year before the anniversary of the Battle of Poltava in Ukraine in 1709, where Peter the Great defeated Charles XII of Sweden and his ally, the Ukrainian Cossack leader Mazeppa, the Russian Orthodox clergy thanked God for preserving Ukraine in the bosom of the empire, blessed the tsar, and then pronounced an anathema on Mazeppa for trying to separate Ukraine from Russia. The reasons Ukraine played the role of the ghost in the machine in the destruction of the Soviet Union are closely tied to Russian ethno-national identity. With its population of 52 million people, Ukraine was the only republic besides Russia that could destroy the Soviet Union. But the Russian elites blindly ignored the threat as Ukraine rose up in 1990 and 1991. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, they continued to deprive the Ukrainians, hoping as much as believing that they would soon come to their senses and return to Russia.

Subjective and objective factors prevented Yeltsin from making an accurate assessment of Russia’s relationship to Ukraine. The most important reason goes to the core of the definition of ethno-nationalism. If ethno-nationalism is an imagined blood or kinship bond, then most Russians had grown up believing in their kinship with the Ukrainians. Indeed, the very origin of the Russian people was tied, they assumed, to the medieval state centered in Kiev: were not Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians all descendants of a single Kievan Rus? The other two major components of Russian ethnic identity were the Orthodox faith and empire, which also offered little help to Russians in differentiating the

32 Galina Starovoitova, “Modern Russia and the Ghost of Weimar Germany,” in Isham, Remaking ... p. 134.
Ukrainians from themselves. Orthodoxy and empire spilled over into a wide definition of the Russian nation, which included Ukrainians and Belarusians. On the 300th anniversary of Ukraine’s “reunification” with Russia, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union reinforced the lesson, together with the USSR’s Council of Ministers and Supreme Soviet, when they proclaimed “the consanguineous bond” of the two “fraternal peoples”—Ukrainian and Russian. This was most un-Marxist, a pure expression of the common blood myth of ethno-nationalism. As a nation-builder, the Soviet party’s major effort for decades had been the attempt to gradually fuse the three eastern Slavic nations into one. Practically, this meant russification, with great pressure on culture and language, which intensified under Khroushchev and Brezhnev and continued up to perestroika.

There were nuances to the relationship. If the Ukrainians and Russians were blood brothers, one was superior and one inferior. Since the 18th century, the “Little Russian” was a stock figure for ridicule in Russian popular humor, functioning as the ignorant country cousin. The Ukrainian language was seen as a degraded form of Russian. The language’s disappearance from public life in Ukraine by 1990 (when approximately 60 percent of all Ukrainians spoke Russian) was seen by Russians as a natural phenomenon caused by the superiority of the Russian language. Prior to perestroika, attempts to speak Ukrainian in public in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, were likely to be met with derision by Russian speakers. When Ukrainian President Kravchuk went on a state visit to Germany before the August pushtch, “democrats” from the Moscow intelligentsia burst into guffaws at the idea that the official language of discourse, in addition of course to German, would be Ukrainian. It was, they said, as if Kohl had insisted that his language of state be that of a remote Alpine village in Bavaria. Ukrainians and Belarusians do not occupy the same place and role as Poles in Russian ethno-national identity. It is also worth noting that at one of the few centers for ethnic studies in the Soviet Union, the Institute of Ethnology of the Academy of Sciences, as of 1990 there were specialists for the tiny minority of the Gagauz people, but none for the Ukrainians. The same situation prevailed in other faculties of research institutes and universities.

There were powerful objective reasons to believe that there could not be a strong separatist movement in Ukraine. To those who knew it well, Ukraine seemed terrorized and broken. One of the deputies from Ukraine alluded to this at the first Congress of People’s Deputies. He said: “[I come from] a very meek and loyal republic.” Vitalii Korotich, supporter of perestroika and editor of the perestroika journal Ogoniok, was even more explicit. When asked about Ukraine in March 1990, he replied: “It will be possible to discuss [the real movement for independence] in Ukraine only in the middle of the 1990s, because all Ukrainian experience is punishment. It was punishment, it was execution. It was really terrible years.”

Ukraine had been the most closely controlled of all the provinces of the union. It was the rear of the most reactionary part of the Soviet apparatus. Only when longtime republic party boss Yuri Shecherbtsky retired in autumn 1989 did perestroika really begin there. Its national civic front, Rukh, a movement for the support of perestroika, only fully came into being after the republican election of March 1990.

There were other reasons besides the hold of a conservative apparatus for Ukrainian weakness and passivity. For over 100 years, each political generation in Ukraine had undergone a purge and repression. Some had been entirely wiped out. Ukraine was in many ways the most awful part of Europe in the 20th century. It was the theater of World War I on the eastern front, the main battleground of the Russian Civil War, the place where the Soviet peasantry was annihilated from 1929 to 1933 — and then in World War II it was again the main theater of the war in the east.

Both the 1989 elections to the union-wide Congress of People’s Deputies and the elections to the national parliament in 1990 occurred prior to the formation of a mass movement capable of proposing non-communist candidates and monitoring elections, as had happened in Russia. Communist Party elites maintained control in their bastions, particularly in the countryside. Despite this, the elections showed that western Ukraine was a cauldron of national feeling. But the four oblasts of western Ukraine only comprised about 10 percent of the entire population. The democratic separatists also did well in central Ukraine, especially in Kiev.

But both elections also showed that many areas of Ukraine seemed practically untouched by national feeling. That was, in particular, true of the Crimea, but also of the eastern region, the Donbas, and the southern oblasts of Ukraine — Odessa, Mykolyiv, and Kherson. On a national level, surveys showed that only 13 percent of the national population supported an independent Ukraine before the August pushtch. So how was it possible that 95 percent of the Ukrainian population voted for independence on 1 December of the same year, thus dooming the Soviet Union?

Part of the answer lies in the rapid evolution of popular opinion in 1990–1991 and in the opening of political vistas that only madmen and dreamers could have imagined just one or two years earlier. The price increases of 1989 enacted by Soviet Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov, which were followed by sudden increases announced by his successor, Valentin Pavlov, in April 1991, played an important part. Coming from Moscow, they gravely weakened unionist sentiment, strengthening the already widely held opinion that Ukraine could do better managing its own economy. The sovereignty debates, which had been started by the

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38 Interviews in Moscow, autumn 1992.
40 Yeltsin. Presidency, No “Competitor” to Gorbachev.” ITV. FBIS-SOV-90-046, 8 March 1990, p. 78.
41 Interview with Valeri Khmelko, head of the Analytic Department of the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, National University of Kiev-Mohyla Academy, 15 November 1991, Kiev.
Baltic fronts and facilitated by Russia's actions, fomented such thinking. Sovereignty was especially attractive to engineers and administrators of an economy where over 90 percent of the enterprises depended on commands from Moscow. Thus, sovereignty and independence were not dependent on the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic nationalism of the cultural elites of Kiev or the western Ukrainians. It became a territorial argument for political and economic self-determination, which had been the main current of Ukrainian ethno-nationalism since the suppression of Ukrainian autonomy in the 18th century. That affected Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, which is why arguments using linguistic or ethnic statistics turned out to be so mistaken. In November 1991, the author asked Russian-speaking youths on a railroad platform in Kharkiv why they considered themselves Russians, since they did not speak Ukrainian. They replied with the question, "Are the Irish English because they speak English?" Public opinion supported a looser federation or confederation with Russia. There was a nationalism du país in Ukraine independent of ethnicity. Popular prejudice held that Ukraine was harder-working and better-ordered than Russia, which was lying untended in ruins — and drunk, to boot.

Ukraine also benefited from the powerful miners' movement in the Donbas, which, in alliance with Siberian miners in the Kuzbas coal basin, shook the Soviet Union in July 1989 and June-July 1990. The miners spoke a language of class conflict and stood against party privilege. Their powerful demands for popular participation and bureaucratic accountability prevented the key area least touched by Ukrainian patriotism, the industrial east, from becoming a fortress of reaction.

Nonetheless, the key to Ukrainian developments in 1991 was the elites. That had been expected by astute observers of the ethno-national situation in the Soviet Union. With a weakening of the center, the indigenous elites were expected to reach out for power. Although meant to be instruments of the central power, they would opt to exercise it themselves.

The decisive events occurred in the parliament after the March 1990 elections. The democratic opposition only had 25 percent of the votes in the house, some 153 members, against the "Group of 239" — the communist majority — out of a total number of 442 deputies. As the debate over sovereignty developed in the Ukrainian parliament in 1990-1991, the communist majority began to split into two factions: the centrists and the "national communists."

During the August coup, Kravchuk and most of the "national communists" equivocated, waiting to see who would win. After the coup, with those communist elites loyal to the center in disarray, they jumped into independence. It was a quid pro quo with the "democratic nationalists." The patriots and nationalists of Kiev and Lviv now supported Ukrainian statehood, temporarily (they hoped) giving up democracy and reform for the sake of independence.42

The "national communists" lifted the vocabulary, symbols, and ideology of statehood from the patriots. They now had real political power and control of the state and economy, instead of being the local bosses for Moscow. The two elites together were able to engineer a massive shift in public opinion in favor of a complete break with Moscow.

The alliance of "national communists" and democratic nationalists was aided by missteps on the part of Yeltsin and Gorbachev. From a Ukrainian perspective, the coup was yet another example of how events in Moscow, over which Ukrainians had no control, affected their lives and destiny. Gorbachev's disclosure that he and Yeltsin had divided up the role of the country confirmed these fears. Yeltsin's attempt to bring Ukraine into line by threatening its territory simply backfired, uniting disparate elites of a very divided country. What Russian Orthodox priests had prayed against since the Battle of Poltava in 1709 came to pass. Ukraine separated from Russia.43 The union was dead.

