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The K.G.B.'s Bathhouse Plot

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THE plot was hatched at a bathhouse in downtown Moscow. At midmorning on Saturday, Aug. 17, 1991, the head of the K.G.B., Vladimir A. Kryuchkov, summoned five senior Soviet officials for a highly secretive meeting that he told them would be vital for the future of the U.S.S.R.

Wrapped in towels in the steam room, and later while cooling down over vodka and Scotch, the half-dozen die-hard Communist apparatchiks outlined a plan to overthrow the Soviet government. For the Soviet spymaster, the prime minister, defense minister and the other paunchy, half-naked co-conspirators, the stakes could not have been higher. And they had to act quickly.

The country was in a shambles, and the chaos of democracy and nationalism threatened to destroy it entirely, the K.G.B. chief warned. The Baltic states had already moved toward independence and something had to be done to silence Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, the noisy, newly elected president of the Russian republic, whose belligerent, man-of-the-people style made him by far the most popular politician in the country, mainly because of his attacks on the privileges of the Communist Party elite.

Likewise, the coup plotters insisted, the weak and spineless Soviet president and party boss, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, had to go. He had proposed signing a new treaty that would turn the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics into a looser federation of autonomous states, most of which

intended to turn their backs on socialism. The treaty would mean the end of the U.S.S.R., and that could not be tolerated.

A plan was hastily formulated. One group of conspirators flew to Crimea, where Mr. Gorbachev was on vacation, with the goal of forcing him to abandon the treaty or resign. If he refused, a regiment of K.G.B. troops would hold him captive indefinitely at his seaside villa. The others would stay in Moscow, ready to take over the levers of power and use force to assert their authority if challenged.

A list was drawn up of the names of 200 people who would be immediately arrested, the first of whom was Yeltsin. The Lefortovo prison in Moscow was emptied in preparation for new prisoners, and 250,000 pairs of handcuffs were ordered to be sent to Moscow from a factory in Pskov.

Not one of the conspirators counseled caution or seemed to consider the law of unintended consequences: within a few days their ill-prepared coup attempt would bring forward all that they feared most. Their “patriotic action” would once and for all remove their beloved U.S.S.R. from the map.

The coup was a fiasco from the start. Mr. Gorbachev refused to resign or to shun the treaty. At dawn on Aug. 19, Muscovites woke to the announcement on radio and TV that an Emergency Committee had been formed to govern the country. Then, for several hours, the state-controlled airwaves went dead — except for a continuous loop of “Swan Lake” that played for hours. Most Muscovites were unaffected by the coup; their principal memories of it are the sound of Tchaikovsky.

The drama was confined to one small area — around the White House in Moscow, home of Russia’s Parliament — and lasted a few hours. The bungling putschists failed to arrest any of their targets or to control communications, and soldiers refused to fire on the crowds outside the White House.

To his own amazement, Yeltsin was not apprehended at the start of the operation. Indeed, the central image of the August coup is of a brave and vigorous Yeltsin climbing onto a tank to make a defiant statement denouncing the plotters. And he retained a telephone line enabling him to coordinate his support. This stirring scene was foolishly allowed to be shown on TV that evening, turning the obscure Yeltsin into a figure of world significance overnight.

The joke swiftly went around Moscow that you knew Communism must be through in Russia when the Bolsheviks couldn’t even mount a proper coup. At a news conference that evening, the nominal head of the Emergency Committee, the Soviet vice president, Gennadi I. Yanayev, was seen in public for the first time. A gray 53-year-old bureaucrat with nicotine-stained fingers and a shiny suit, he was visibly drunk. When he told the lie that Mr. Gorbachev was ill, his hands shook and his hairpiece began to slip.

For all the tragedy and farce of those three August days, the world has plenty for which to thank the incompetent conspirators who hastened the fall of an empire. Less than a week after the coup

fizzled, two of its leaders killed themselves, the others were in jail and the Communist Party they sought to save was banned. Yeltsin, the party's principal assassin, was the most powerful man in the country.

For a generation, the failure of Soviet Communism had been evident for all to see. The great experiment that once bred idealism ended in food lines and prison camps. Marx believed that man could be made perfect; Communists found that people had an irritating way of refusing to be perfected.

Yet despite the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989, hardly anyone in the summer of 1991 predicted that the U.S.S.R. itself would fall apart by the end of the year. It might have limped on for decades, as the Ottoman Empire did in the late 19th century, dying slowly amid civil wars. Yet the second most powerful country in the world simply withered away, not in the classical Marxist sense, but it literally ceased to exist. And the manner of its going was one of the best things. The Soviet people destroyed the Soviet Union, not outsiders, and not through violent conflict.

BUT what followed has not been a democratic idyll. Despite the putsch's failure, some Soviet residue remains — a “coup culture” that breeds a winner-take-all view of politics. In Russia today, there is no concept of a loyal opposition, no separation of powers, no mass participation in political life and a news media that is far from free.

There was a fleeting opportunity for liberal democracy and genuine free markets to emerge in Russia after the Soviet Union collapsed. But Yeltsin did little to develop civil society, the rule of law, the emergence of viable political parties or a modernized economy after the failed 1991 coup. A few people became very rich, adopting methods reminiscent of, but even more ruthless than, the 19th-century robber barons in the United States. But a middle class with a stake in how the country is run barely exists.

Yeltsin's corrupt cronyism encouraged a gangster capitalism from which Russia is still suffering. But the few years that he and Mr. Gorbachev led the country together seem today a halcyon period for freedom in Russia.

Yeltsin's handpicked successor, Vladimir V. Putin, reversed the few fledgling democratic reforms that had been made, turning Russia into a country that merely goes through the motions of democracy every few years while power remains concentrated in the same hands. Mr. Putin replaced a one-party state with a one-clique state of people around him — a pattern replicated elsewhere in the former Soviet Union — financed almost entirely by booming oil and gas revenues.

Today, he is one of the few to lament the Soviet Union's passing. Mr. Putin, who in 1991 was a middle-ranking intelligence officer in St. Petersburg, left the K.G.B. during the coup. To him the collapse of the U.S.S.R. was “a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”

But for the millions who had to endure life under the Soviet yoke — born in bloodshed and kept alive for decades through intimidation — its end was long overdue.

Still, 20 years later, as Mr. Putin's continuing influence and popularity attest, the traditional Russian ideal of a strongman in the Kremlin remains. And depressing as it is, if dire economic times come again, a coup d'état still seems as likely a way as any for political change to occur in Russia or many former Soviet states. The Bolsheviks may have disappeared for good when Yeltsin climbed atop a tank in August 1991, but the legacy of authoritarian rule lingers.