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Yeltsin Ally Saw 'Swan Lake' as Call to Arms

By Alexander Bratersky

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Children crawling over a tank in direct view of the Kremlin on the first day of the ill-fated coup attempt by hard-line Communists on Aug. 19, 1991. **Igor Tabakov**

The first thing that Sergei Filatov did as the leader of a group of lawmakers defending the Russian White House from a coup in August 1991 was turn on all printers and copy machines.

He understood the need after seeing ballet dancers performing "Swan Lake" on state television.

"I turned on the TV and saw the swans dancing. For five minutes, 10, for an hour. Then I realized that something had happened because we learned to read between the lines in Soviet times," Filatov said in an interview.

He was relaxing at the southern resort of Zheloznovodsk on Aug. 19, 1991, but the looped

broadcast of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" made him jump on the next plane to Moscow — where an anti-perestroika coup by Party hardliners was in progress.

The coup failed after a three-day standoff between its organizers and the White House. The Soviet Union was disbanded four months later, and the political leader of the putsch resistance, Boris Yeltsin, became the first president of the newly independent Russia.

Filatov stood by Yeltsin's side outside the White House legislative building and beyond, serving as chief of staff of the Kremlin administration from 1993 to 1996, when he largely left active politics following Yeltsin's re-election.

But it all might have gone differently had he stayed in Zheloznovodsk in front of his television set during the "Swan Lake" broadcast, sipping the mineral water that the town is known for.

"I understood that access to information was the most important thing," said Filatov, now 75, an engineer by education.

The coup plotters had seized control of state radio and television, which then ran time-filling broadcasts such as "Swan Lake," interspersed with statements from the coup leaders.

Filatov, who in 1991 served as a lawmaker in the Russian Republic's legislature, saw the need to break the information blockade, which was why the White House's printing equipment worked hard to reproduce orders from Yeltsin, who just weeks earlier soundly beat Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's preferred candidate in an election to become Russia's president.

The printouts were then distributed among Muscovites, thousands of whom rallied in defense of the White House, making up a formidable, even if weaponless, public militia.

But Filatov knew that conflicts were not won on propaganda alone, and so envoys, picked from fellow legislators, were dispatched to airports, train stations and military units to win the hearts and minds of their staff.

Filatov himself traveled to a military unit based outside Moscow, where soldiers and commanders offered assurances that they would not take part in the shedding of blood.

"They tried to calm us down, saying nothing was happening and they were remaining in their barracks," Filatov said. "We wanted to tell them that they would face resistance and blood couldn't be avoided if they moved in."

The danger was, indeed, real. The State Committee for a State of Emergency, as the eight coup plotters styled themselves, moved more than 4,000 troops, 360 tanks and 420 armored personnel carriers into Moscow.

But some of the troops crossed over to Yeltsin, and none saw any direct military action. An attack on the White House was planned, but never carried out — largely because Generals Pavel Grachyov and Alexander Lebed, who commanded airborne troops ordered into Moscow, did not support the operation.

"I think that if it weren't for this fact, the storm couldn't have been avoided," Filatov said.

Grachyov later became defense minister, and Lebed ran for president in 1996 and later served as Krasnoyarsk governor.

The only three casualties of the coup were chance victims from the crowd that successfully blocked a tank column from moving toward the White House on the Garden Ring.

"I had a feeling that something would click and minds would turn sober only after blood was shed," said Filatov, who got barely a wink of sleep during the three-day standoff.

Historians remain puzzled about the lack of decisive action from the plotters. Even Yeltsin, who died in 2007, dubbed their actions "highly controversial" in his memoirs, where he wrote that they had failed to reach agreement even among themselves.

"They looked very depressed," Filatov said about the plotters' news conference broadcast live on state television at the start of the coup attempt on Aug. 19. The famous broadcast at one point shows the visibly shaking hands of Gennady Yanayev, who was the nominal head of the State Committee for a State of Emergency, though most historians consider KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov as the real mastermind of the coup.

The plotters not only besieged Yeltsin, but also managed to isolate Gorbachev, who was at the time vacationing on the Black Sea island of Foros.

Valery Boldin, Gorbachev's former chief of staff who sided with the plotters in 1991, has claimed that Gorbachev, embroiled in a political battle with Yeltsin at the time, was aware of the plot and hoped to use it to his own advantage. But Filatov dismissed the allegation.

"They were irritated that Gorbachev couldn't overpower Yeltsin," he said. "If Gorbachev and Yeltsin had acted together, they could have achieved a lot. But the plotters believed that the fight between the leaders had gone too far and wanted to get rid of both of them."

As for the other 14 Soviet republics, their leadership chose to distance themselves from the coup in Moscow, Filatov said. He recalled his anger at a phone call from a lawmaker in the Kazakhstan legislature who told him local lawmakers were "debating" the coup.

"I told him to stop debating and help us because if they could win over here, they would do the same over there, too," Filatov said.

But the crisis was resolved in Moscow. On Aug. 21, the State Committee for a State of Emergency admitted defeat and ordered troops out of the capital. Gorbachev returned from his brief exile the next day, accompanied by Yeltsin's vice president, Alexander Rutskoi, and ordered the arrest of the plotters.

The thousands of Muscovites who came out to defend the White House in 1991 made a display of public activity unimaginable in pre-perestroika Soviet days, and Filatov praised those who took part.

But he admitted that a similar gathering posed a problem for the Kremlin when, two years later, hundreds flocked to the White House again, this time to support Yeltsin's political enemies.

The crisis in October 1993 saw Filatov's former boss in the Russian legislature, Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov, and Vice President Alexander Rutskoi attempt to seize power after a political standoff with Yeltsin. At least 123 people died during the street fighting that followed, and Yeltsin, apparently drawing lessons from 1991, ordered tanks to fire at the White House.

"When we came to power, we didn't realize that all of us had different views and our own understanding of democracy," Filatov said ruefully about the split of the former allies.

The mistakes did not end there, he said, adding that the gravest oversight was Yeltsin's failure to create a strong political party to support him.

The failure has resulted in Yeltsin's successors, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, "engaging in the creation of artificial political parties and organizations that combine artists and youngsters under their flags," Filatov said in a reference to the now-ruling United Russia party and its amorphous electoral ally, the All-Russia People's Front.

Over the years, support for the 1991 putsch attempt has grown, but this reflects disillusionment in the current government, widely accused of fostering stagnation and reverting to old Soviet policies, Filatov said.

"People live with hope. If you don't feed this hope, you might face state breakdowns like in African countries," he said. "Many of us believed that the Communists would turn things back if they come to power. But who would have thought that non-Communists would do the same?"

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