

# Anniversary of Coup Quietly Remembered

August 21, 2011



A World War II veteran and his son outside the White House on Saturday. **Ivan Sekretarev**

Russia quietly marked the 20th anniversary of the start of the attempted coup that led to the Soviet collapse, with only about 100 people gathering Friday evening at the spot where tens of thousands of protesters rallied in 1991.

Neither President Dmitry Medvedev nor Prime Minister Vladimir Putin mentioned the coup anniversary in their public appearances Friday, reflecting the deep ambivalence of many Russians about the events that plunged them into both anxiety and exhilaration.

The coup attempt was initiated by a coterie of Communist hard-liners who placed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev under house arrest at his vacation home, fearing that his pending agreement to allow wide sovereignty for Soviet republics would lead to the U.S.S.R.'s disintegration.

But wide public opposition quickly weakened the putsch, notably the tens of thousands who gathered around the Russian government headquarters where President Boris Yeltsin

famously defied the coup while standing atop a tank.

The coup collapsed three days later and Gorbachev returned to Moscow, but his power and credibility were fatally dissipated. Estonia and Latvia declared independence during the coup and, along with Lithuania, were allowed to split off from the Soviet Union weeks later. The entire Soviet Union was signed out of existence in December.

Many Russians who defended Yeltsin in 1991 now say they would not have done so if they had known what would happen to the country under his leadership.

But those who turned out for Friday evening's rally are among the people who still remember those days as a proud moment in Russia's history.

"We did the right thing," said Lyudmila Skryabina, who was traveling through Moscow on her way back to her home in St. Petersburg on Aug. 19, 1991, and decided to stay. "After glasnost, after all we had learned about our past, I simply didn't want to go back to what we had."

She recalled spending three nights sleeping on a tank under an umbrella and feeling sorry for the young soldiers who had come in the tanks on the coup plotters' orders.

Oleg Varlamov, at the time a 25-year-old lieutenant from a military research center, also had joined the "live circle" around the government building to fend off a possible attack.

"I was there to defend myself, my motherland," said Varlamov, who went on to earn a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence. "But my motherland does not equate with the state."

Some politicians took note of the anniversary Friday.

Just Russia founder Sergei Mironov visited the cemetery where three men who died defending the Russian government building are buried, praising "all those who believed in the necessity of freedom for Russia."

State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, in a comment reminiscent of the Marxist belief in the inevitability of historical progress, said the coup plotters were doomed from the start because "they tried to change the course of history."

Police were seen detaining three protesters on Red Square to stop them from shouting anti-government slogans.

State television channels ran documentaries about the period late at night. In a peculiar reminder of Soviet television practice, the Kultura channel broadcast a performance of the ballet "Swan Lake" — the same performance that state television showed even as columns of tanks ground through Moscow's streets two decades ago.

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