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Soviet Union's Collapse Gets Revisionist View (Op-ed)

Nostalgia for the Soviet Union and Russia's imperial past are now part of the official Kremlin ideology.

By Leonid Bershidsky

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Boris Yeltsin (Andrei Babushkin / TASS)

Only 27 years after the failure of a coup meant to keep the Soviet Union alive, some of the people who helped crush the revolt are doing their best to blacken their own victory.

It's been many years since Russia celebrated an anniversary of those three days, Aug. 19-21, 1991. Resolute action by Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, and by tens of thousands of Muscovites, stopped an attempt by almost the entire Soviet leadership of the time (minus President Mikhail Gorbachev, locked up by the plotters at his villa in Crimea) to seize power and restore a centralized Communist state.

But nostalgia for the Soviet Union and Russia's imperial past are now part of the official Kremlin ideology: President Vladimir Putin has called the collapse of the Soviet Union, which swiftly followed the collapse of the coup, the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."

Yet there have been few high-profile attempts to contradict the official narrative of the coup, laid out in Yeltsin's 1994 book, "The Struggle for Russia." Putin has never publicly criticized Yeltsin, who chose him as his successor.

This year, however, Alexander Rutskoy, a highly decorated air force veteran and Yeltsin's vice president in 1991, challenged key points of Yeltsin's story. Rutskoy has long since turned against Yeltsin; he took part in an attempt to depose him in 1993. But the first Russian president amnestied Rutskoy and allowed him to continue his political career (he would later serve as a regional governor) — not least because, as Yeltsin wrote, "during the [1991] coup Rutskoy showed military firmness, which helped him win my trust."

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That makes the former vice president's new account of the coup more than a mere act of belated political vengeance (Yeltsin died in 2007).

Many remember Yeltsin as the hero who, on Aug. 19, climbed on a tank summoned by the coup plotters to the Russian Parliament building and denounced the illegal takeover. But in the interview, Rutskoy, who was next to Yeltsin throughout the coup, described the president's behavior as a "three-day drinking binge with multiple attempts to escape to the American embassy."

Yeltsin, Rutskoy said, tried to seek protection at the U.S. Embassy every time news spread that the coup plotters were about to storm the parliament building, known as the White House. The former vice president says he prevented Yeltsin's flight.

Yeltsin's story in "The Struggle for Russia" was that he'd nodded off in his office from extreme fatigue in the early hours of Aug. 20, when his aides woke him and led him, still drowsy, to his limousine in the basement. When he asked them where they were taking him and they mentioned the U.S. Embassy, he flatly refused: "People's reaction, if they learned I was hiding in the U.S. embassy, would be unambiguous. It would be like emigration in miniature."

This version is corroborated by Yeltsin's chief bodyguard at the time, Alexander Korzhakov, who says he hustled Yeltsin to the limo. Korzhakov also ended up on bad terms with his former boss, but his version of what happened during the coup doesn't veer too far from the official one. But Ruslan Khasbulatov, speaker of the Russian Parliament at the time of the coup and another anti-Yeltsin renegade in 1993, confirmed Rutskoy's version, claiming it was he who dissuaded Yeltsin from running to the Americans. "He tried to persuade me to escape with him," Khasbulatov told the Russian news site RBC. "When I refused, he, too, was forced to refuse."

These details are suddenly relevant because Putin's Russia is accused of interfering in U.S.

political life. Many in Russia – and many far closer to Putin than the has-beens Khasbulatov and Rutskoy — believe the U.S. has no right to complain given its role in the end of the Soviet Union. In this narrative, Yeltsin was an American puppet, a traitor, and Gorbachev at best an American dupe. Evidence of U.S. support for Yeltsin during the 1991 coup has been reported before, but putting on the record that he was constantly on the verge of seeking U.S. asylum takes the narrative to a different level.

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The Yeltsin Center, set up by his family and friends to celebrate the former president, seems aware of the threat to his legacy. "No amount of slander will turn Rutskoy and Khasbulatov into heroes and Yeltsin into a coward," the center said in a statement. "The country will always remember that, in a critical situation, its first president showed himself to be a man of exceptional personal courage without which victory over the coup plotters wouldn't have been possible."

I witnessed the events of Aug. 1991 from outside the Moscow White House. I was among the thousands of people inspired by Yeltsin's speech from the tank. I know there wasn't an American plot. By reviling Yeltsin, Rutskoy — and current regime figures who mourn the Soviet Union — are, in effect, reviling those of us who defied a curfew and tanks on the streets to take part in a genuine revolution with real achievements, even though many of those have been erased since.

Yeltsin was an important actor, and U.S. support may have been important for him. But it was the Moscow crowd that won the day, showing the coup leaders they couldn't retake control without significant bloodshed. Were we deluded or deceived by a foreign power? I'll probably speak for most of us if I say we were thinking perfectly clearly on our own.

Narratives of foreign plots are usually no more than facile explanations for tectonic events. Countries don't change unless their people want them to. Rutskoy appears to have forgotten that — but perhaps only because Russia has changed again, this time to fit his revisionist version of 27-year-old events.

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