CHAPTER II

THE MAKING OF YELTSIN
“I was born tough” claims Yeltsin in his autobiography- Against the Grain. Recounting the story of his baptism in a poor village in Russia’s rural mountains in 1931, Yeltsin says that the village priest had been drinking vodka all day and could barely stand. Clumsily he dropped the infant. Yeltsin’s mother finally realised what was happening and grabbed the gasping baby out of the water. “They then shook the water out of me” Yeltsin writes. The priest was not particularly worried and said “well, if he can survive such an ordeal, it means he is a good tough had and I name him Boris” ¹

Thus does Yeltsin introduce himself, and set the tone of what follows: a tough kid, forever victimized by the mistakes of others, always able to shake off diversity and press forward in triumph.

The son of peasants, he was by his own account a mischievous, garrulous boy, a ringleader who loved hijinks and was quick to fight. And from the start he hated authority.

He was expelled from primary school for castigating a teacher. “Early in my career as a construction engineer. I was given reprimands seventeen times in one year—a new record” he recalls proudly in his biography.²

This show of defiance and toughness was a combination of both personal and political history.

Born and brought up in the Sverdolovsk district in Urals, Boris Yeltsin had a mean childhood. His father was a construction worker who beat him with a belt. His hatred of paternal authority was compounded by the ferocity of the Soviet System. The family lived in a hut near a building site and the entire family of six lived in one room and slept on floor.

The Urals had been turned into one big construction site for the realisation of the socialist dream. At the height of the “Depression” of the 1930s, John Scott a young socialist from

² Ibid. p-6
Philadelphia decided to quit his academic work and join in the creation of what was called “the world’s most gigantic social experiment” 3 Scott arrived in Moscow in 1932 desperate to find a future that worked. Stalin’s bureaucrats sent Scott and other young Americans to the Urals: the place of some of the ‘hero projects’ of the early five year plans.

In his memoir, “Behind the Urals”, Scott described workers doing eighteen hour shifts, families living in tents and ramshackle barracks. 4 The vast majority of Soviet workers had come not out of any ideological commitment to the shining future but because they were forced to. Many of them had been peasants farmers forced out of their private plots during the collectivisation campaign. Scott saw priests in their cassocks digging coal with picks and wheelbarrows and workers killed by falling girders.

As a project of centralized planning, what was important was statistics, the living conditions of people did not enter the calculation of Stalin’s cohorts. This was indeed the spiritual essence of the Stalinist state, an invention of the Kremlin and KGB an administrative mechanism for legitimizing mass repression and dictatorial rule. 5 The entire country was part of the camp system the gulag archipelago – as Solzhenitsyn called it. 6

When Yeltsin was six, he woke up in the middle of might to see his father being led out of the hut by strange men. The family was lucky that the arrest did not lead to a long term in jail 7 That was the reality of the workers’ state, of forced collectivization of the country side brutal industrialisation and purge trials and Yeltsin’s family was lucky to have survived physical decapitation.

Terror commanded the political system in Soviet Union because the source of terror was possibly rooted in the weak social base of the Bolshevik revolution and the semi-feudal

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4 Ibid
7 Yeltsin, Boris “Against the Grain”...p-50
and semi capitalist mature of the state and society which they set out to transform. The long transition period envisaged by Lenin was cut short by Stalin under whom voluntarism and subjectivism intervened in social processes. This abrupt intervention could only succeed by force and force alone.

As Alexander Yakolev, Gorbchev’s ally and the main ideologist of glasnost and Perestroika and new thinking said in an address to party ‘members’ intellectuals and foreign guests: “Today, when we are asking ourselves the excruciating question of how it was possible for this country and Lenin’s party to accept the dictatorship of mediocrity and put up with Stalin’s abuses and the shedding of rivers of innocent blood, it is obvious that one of the factors that nurtured the soil for authoritarian rule and desposition was the morbid faith in the possibility of forcing through social and historical development and the idealization of revolutionary violence.

In-fact the appearance of Stalin according to some sources was no aberration but rather the direct result of Lenin’s revolutionary romanticism that idealized violence as an class struggle and a force of purification. According to one such source, the émigré scholars Mikhail Heller and Alexander Nekrich, it was Lenin and Trotsky who were the first Europeans to use the term “concentration camps”. Three months after Trotsky used the term, Lenin sent a telegram to the Penza executive committee on August 9, 1918, demanding the local red leaders carry out “the ruthless mass tenure against Kulaks, Priests, white guards, and confine all suspicious elements in a concentration camp outside the city”.

Whether “concentration Camp” or not, Soviet system was known to have corrective labour Camps for “Class enemies” and dissidents. This system which originated during the civil war was put to extensive use by Stalin who revived a civil-war like situation with his collectivisation campaign.

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The Kremlin propaganda machine wove the excesses of the regime into a vast fabric of ideology and official history that sustained the regime and its empire. The Kremlin took history so seriously that it created a massive bureaucracy to control it, fabricate its language and content so that murderous and arbitrary purges became a triumph over foreign spies. The regime created an empire that was a vast room, its doors locked, its windows shuttered. All books and newspapers allowed in the room carried the official version of events and the radio and television blared the general line day and might. Those who were loyal servants of the official version of events were rewarded and pronounced “professors” and “journalists”. In the communist party, citadels of the Marxist-Leninist Institute, the central committee and the higher schools the priests of ideology served from the dogma at their peril.

In schools, children were taught to rever Stalin as a “Friend to all children”, “the Great Mountain Eagle”. The immensity of Stalin’s cult was there in all its forms: The parades celebrating Stalin as God on Earth, the history books written by Kremlin ideologist, the rallies and paramilitary drills of young pioneers. Stalin was a kindly deity, omnipresent, a gentle father. He rarely appeared in public, instead his image was painted on banners, zeppelins, billboards and icons. His words filled the school books. Children loved to learn Stalin, the way other children in other places learn to love God. Young Boris grew up in this socialisation.10

Yelstln was twelve when he had his first run with the communist party. It began at his graduation ceremony from primary school. As one of the best students in school Yelstln had the honor of being allowed to sit on the stage. When his turn came to give a short speech Yelstln grabbed the microphone and turned his ceremonial moment into outright harangue. He launched into an attack on a homeroom teacher, who used to smack children with a thick ruler, and made them clean her house. The parents and the staff in

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Heller, Mikhail. "Cogs in the wheel: The formation of Soviet Man", New York: Knopf, 1988 -
the audience listened for a while in a shock. The principal finally jumped out of his chair and snatched away the microphone and sent Yeltsin back to his seat. The day was ruined. And what was more, instead of a diploma Yeltsin received a “wolf’s ticket”, a certificate forbidding him from getting a high school education. At home, Yelstin’s father came at him with the strap”. It was the usual punishment but this time Yeltsin resisted.

Yeltsin went looking for retribution at the local headquarters of the communist party. For weeks, he heard nothing from the local bureaucrats, but rebuke. Finally, he got an official to listen to his complaints and a board of inquiry was established. The teacher was fired and Yeltsin was reinstated as a student in good standing. He had won his first battle and his practical sense soon told him that in a system where the party controlled everything from nurseries to nuclear bombs advancement could come only through enrolment in party ranks.

Joining the party at the late age of thirty, Yeltsin became member of the party only to get ahead at the state construction agency in Sverdlovsk. In his autobiography Yeltsin recounts the preposterous oral exam at the local party committee for his membership: “The examiner asked me on what page of which volume of Das Kapital, Marx refers to commodity – money relationship. Assuming that he had never read Marx closely and had of course no idea of either the volume or page number in question, I immediately answered half jokingly ‘volume VI, page 387’. What’s more I said it quickly without pausing for thought. To which, he replied with a sage expression, ‘well done, you know your Marx well”. After it all, I was accepted as a party member”.

A spunky provincial who wanted to make it big in life Yeltsin did not big as most leaders to with convictions about this or that ideology. Not surprisingly, he remained a “loyal” apparat and rose to the position of provincial secretary of Sverdlovsk.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11} Yeltsin, Boris, “Against the Gram”…… p-75}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.}\]
This was typical of "Shestidesyatiniki" — men of sixties who came of age during the period of thaw under Khruschev and attained high career marks thereafter.14 Most of them were half brave, half cynical careerists, living a life in waiting for the great reformer to come along and bring the Prague Spring to Moscow: while they did not become outright dissidents like Solzenitsyn, Brodsky or Sakharov, they took a few of the risk of the dissidents and found subtle ways of declaiming a measure of independence from the regime. It was as if they had internalized Solzhenitsyn’s counsel in “Live not by Lies. Let no admit it—we have not matured enough to march into squares and shout the truth aloud or to express openly what we think. It is not necessary. It is dangerous. But let us refuse to say what we do not think. This is our path, the easiest and most accessible one, which allows for our inherent, deep rooted cowardice” 15

In the years after Stalin’s death, Khruschev represented good intentions and held Stalinist excesses to scrutiny. However, he was a bumptious peasant who dared to undercut the Stalin cult but then lost his way in the 1960s with a series of capricious decisions that so upset the conservatives in the Politburo that they overthrew him. 16 Moreover, though he eased the rigors of the Stalinist state he retained its essential dogmatic character: the Hungarian invasion in 1956 proved that the thaw was limited and reversible. Khruschev’s successor, Brezhnev began as a Stalinist revivalist. The system under Brezhnev created in the words of Milovan Djilas “a new class of owners and exploiters” and it acted with a ruthlessness of a conqueror.17 The Prague Spring of Alexander Dubcek to create socialism with a human face was slashed with a sneer.

It was during the Brezhnev period that the party mafia structures took shape with corruption forming a pyramidal structure beginning with central committee members and top ministers all the way down, leaving no economic transaction untainted.

In the democratic systems, the mafia historically moves in where there is no legal economy—in drugs, gambling and creates a shadow economy. Sometimes, when it can

15 Remnick, David “Lenin’s Tomb”…… p-266.
17 Djilas, Milovan. “The New Class”
buy the affections of a politician or two, the mafia meddles in government contracts and runs protection scheme. Redressal can be demanded and is given. In the soviet system no much possibility existed. According to Erofeev, the state under Brezhnev itself became mafia.\textsuperscript{18}

The republics also developed a curious mafia structure. From the Uzbeks for example, Brezhnev wanted only cotton and, more important, wonderful cotton statistics. Brezhnev would call on the ‘heroic people’ of Uzbekistan to pick more cotton. The workers could not fulfill the order in the face of falling production. But the local party leaders understood the overriding issue. They assured Moscow that all had gone as planned. The central ministries in Moscow would in turn pay vast sums of rubles for the record crop. The republican leaders would pocket the extra cash.\textsuperscript{19}

The decline of party mafia began with the death of Brezhnev and the brief reign of Yuri Andropov. Andropov was a throwback to a tradition of Leninist asceticism and although guilty of brutality, his main virtue was his crusade against corruption. While he was KGB chief, Andropov conducted wide scale independent investigations, into party business and the general state of the country’s economic system. After Brezhnev’s death, in his few months as to the party General secretary, Andropov ordered arrests of some of the most obvious party and police mafiosi. He frightened the worst elements in the apparatus and routed them.

Much to the relief of the remaining Brezhnevites in the Politburo, Andropov did not live long. When Andropov died in February 1989, Cherenenko became the party general secretary, the ventriloquists dummy of the party mafia.

As a concession to the Andropov faction, Chernenko made Gorbachev the nominal number two in the Politburo. This turned out to be serious tactical mistake. Chernenko held office for only thirteen months and much of the time he was ill and powerless. As

Cherenko wasted away, Gorbachev was carefully consolidating power. He ran Politburo sessions and won the support of two critical figures – the foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and the KGB chief Victor Chebrikov. He also took his famous trip to Britain where he made a lasting impression on Margaret Thatcher and the world press.

When Cherenenko finally died in March 1985, Gorbachev had the backing of the younger party secretaries and a few key members of the old guard including Gromyko and was in a position to head off any potential opposition from the mafia.

Like Andropov before him, Gorbachev, it is said, believed in his ability to master the party and reform it. He began by weeding out corruption in the party but his problem lay elsewhere – restoring a shattered economy and a discredited ideology.

Russia gazers are quick to point out that the Soviet economic system continued courtesy the world wide energy crisis of the 70’s. The plundering of Soviet oil fields ensured the sustenance of the system but by early 1980’s secret reports were declaring that the oil profits were all but gone. Even Cherenenko, considered as a weak premier by the western world and his countrymen warned in a speech in Tbilisi, the capital of Soviet Georgia that the USSR was on the precipice of an internal crisis.

Besides the dynamics of the Soviet system, western policy and notably American policy significantly affected USSR. Way back in 1940s George Kenan, the intellectual father of the policy of containment had said that eventually a contained Soviet Union would “mellow”: it would give up its quest for world domination and thus turn inward to deal with strangulating consequences of its ideology and its political system. More than anything else, Americans believe that it was residents Regan’s extravagant military engagement, the Strategic Defense Initiative that drove Soviet Union to bankruptcy.

21 Beschloss, Michael and Strobe Talbott "At The highest Levels" Boston: Little Brown, 1993, p-34
24 Beschloss, Michael and ……p-16
25 Ibid, p-50
26 Ibid p-75
Gorbachev had no alternative but to disengage militarily, withdraw Soviet orbit by ending subsidizing client regimes in Angola, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, abandon menacing behavior and integrate with the rest of the world. For this he had to retreat abroad and begin reform at home.

However, there is yet not enough evidence to suggest that Gorbachev was out to undermine much less destroy, the basic tenets of ideology/statehood of the Soviet Union. He also knew well that the central committee, the Politburo, and regional party committees were dominated by men whose careers and very being were based on the persistence of a fossilized view of the world, one that did not challenge too hard the official version of Soviet history: the necessity of the brutal collectivization and industrialization campaigns, the glory of Stalin's leadership in war. No wonder, to keep his hold on power, Gorbachev began by upholding the nightlines of the socialist choice and created a new act of icons.

To legitimize his plans for a liberalized socialism, Gorachev emphasized the “late Lenin” of the less dracomian New Economic policy of the early 1920s: Khruschev as the initiator of the anti-Stalinist thaw: Yuri Andropov as the General-Secretary of the party and a technocratic reformer who “died too soon” and most of all Nikolai Bukharin, the relatively flexible Bolshevik ideologue who was executed by Stalin in the purges.²⁷

To ensure that the liberalization agenda was not pushed to the background, Gorbachev relied on a key authoritarian principle of the party-the party discipline to bring the conservatives to heel. However, though Gorbachev was able to manipulate the situation by invoking ‘iron law of the party’ and made defiance to him impermissible, the situation did not enduse.

The reformers were in a minority in the Politburo and Central Committee - Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Alexander Yakolev and Eduard Shevardnadze - hardliners like Yegor Ligachev and moderate conservatives like Nikolai Ryzhkov were in the clear majority.

In private, Yakolev urged Gorbachev to reconsider his attitude towards the communist party. In December, 1985 Yakolev had written a confidential memo to Gorbachev asking

him to consider splitting the party and then side with the more liberal faction. There could be no acceleration of charge, while the dead weight of the party hung on the shoulders of the reformers.

The party was filled with ministers and apparatchiks who swore their fealty to the General Secretary but they were always prepared to betray him in the name of the system. Years later, in retirement Gorbachev would admit that even he did not understand fully the monster he was trying to transform. "At least Ligachev was out in the open," he would say. There were others who would pretend loyalty and then send tanks into the streets of Moscow.²⁹

But in the mid-80s things were different. Gorbachev knew his prerogatives but he also recognised the delicate balance of power. Politics to a large extent meant crafting the rituals of popularity. And Gorbachev had learnt his lessons well in his days as a loyal apparat. As Sergei Inamov, a Soviet scholar of the Byzantine period had pointed out, the rites of communist Russia had their roots in Constantinople, when the leader's rare appearances "before the people were accompanied by thoroughly rehearsed outbursts of delight, specially selected crowds who chanted the officially approved songs."³⁰

But Gorbachev was a new kind of czar. He was trying to create his image as an embodiment of his policy of change and of new thinking - a counter system to the party and its apparatus television was his tool. In his public speeches widely televised Gorbachev was so vigorous compared to his predecessors, so critical of the status quo, so informal that he endeared himself to all. On television, Gorbachev dove into crowds in Moscow, Bonn, New Delhi and Washington. The entire state media was dedicated not to reporting news but rather to the evolution of a personality - open and democratic - and the promotion of a policy. For several years, Gorbachev was the lead actor, producer and director of this political opera.

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³⁰ Remnick, David "Lenin's Tomb"......p-169
The height of Gorbachev's image manipulation in Soviet eyes was his performance at the 19th Party Conference. Not only did he read his own part well, he also directed directed spontaneity to his advantage, sending up absence speakers to excoriate and embarrass hidebound Politburo members, setting up Ligachev against Yeltsin to enhance his own stature as the wise, liberal center franked by ideological and emotional extremes. Gorbachev was the leader of both the ruling elite and of the opposition, he was the custodian of reform. But not for long.

Realpolitik is all about changing the rhetoric of existing debate and building constituencies for the changed idiom. Yeltsin, had made a name for himself as a reform minded apparat and inorder to move ahead took steps to usurp the agenda of reform from Gorbachev.

By 1985, Yeltsin’s reputation as the reform minded first secretary of the Sverdlovsk district central committee had brought him to the attention of Gorbachev. Gorbachev soon appointed Yeltsin as the first secretary of the Moscow city party committee. Thereupon, he settled into a sort of permanent guerrilla warfare with his superiors in the Politburo. In the Politburo he chafed openly at Gorbachev’s go along committee style as he maneuvered to consolidate power. Gorbachev in the late 1987 forced him out of Politburo and humiliated him at a closed plenum of the central committee, after Yeltsin had made an impassioned plea for democracy. Yeltsin resigned in fury accusing Gorbachev of creating a “cult of personality” that permitted too little disagreement within the Politburo.

Lesser souls might have languished indefinitely in the deputy ministerial sinecure that Gorbachev tossed Yeltsin’s way. But Yeltsin mused himself back to political health and bided his time. Though he pleaded rehabilitation in the party, during the fifteen months, he spent in wilderness, he built up a coterie of devoted friends and followers to support him in his political ventures. Boris Yeltsin was the master of populist attack, using the issue of party perks and corruption as a way to discredit everyone at the top, Gorbachev included. In his popular memoir “Against the Grain” Yeltsin writes about the marble-

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lined houses of the politburo members, their porcelain, crystal, carpets and chandeliers. For an audience living in cramped commercial apartments, he described his own house with its private movie theater, “its kitchen big enough to feed an army” and its many bathrooms so many that “I lost count”. And he wrote, “why has Gorbachev been unable to change all this? I believe the fault lies in his basic cast of character. He likes to live well in comfort and luxury. In this he is helped by his wife”. 32

At times, Yeltsin seemed a theatrical populist, the Earl Long of Soviet politics. Relying on the politics of resentment, he won an angry public’s affection. After he had been fired from the politburo for doing to confront the leadership in October 1987, Yelstin was still a member of the Central Committee with all the privileges that it entailed. But in interview with David Remnick, the Washington, Post Correspondent for Russian affairs, Yeltsin said that he had voluntarily given up his dacha, his grocery shipments and his car. “All finished” he stated with the pride of the converted. For a while, he made sure that the Moscowvites saw him moving around the city in a dinky sedan. 33

After his fall from the Politburo, no statement, no amount of verbal explosion was out of bounds. In interviews, Yeltsin would suggest that the KGB could have him killed. His paranoia was comic though understandable. The Kremlin leaders despised him. They formed a commission within the central committee to investigate him and ordered stories in the state run press to disgrace him.34

As the man who would not go away, Yeltsin was for the communist party an intolerable dissident. Despite the Kremlin’s best effort, the history of the Soviet politics shows that it was Yeltsin vain, comic, clever, crude-who accelerated the essential step in political reform: the shattering of the communist party monolith. From the moment, Yeltsin attacked ligachev at the closed party plenum on October 21, 1987, rumors of this assault became the talk of Moscow the façade of unanimity and invincibility, the hermetic code of panty discipline and loyalty began to crumble. 35

32 Yeltsin, Boris. “Against the Grain”.... P-205
33 Remnick, David “Lenin’s Tomb”.... P-305
34 Ibid
Yeltsin became a martyr, there were demonstrations in Moscow state University and Yeltsin took his campaign for revenge and rehabilitation to the public. To any reporter, or crowd who would listen Yeltsin insulted Gorbachev’s “timidity and half measures” and Ligachev “dark motives” 36

In snatching the constituency of democracy from Gorbachev, Yeltsin was helped by the homecoming of Andrei Sakharov, doyen of science and the moral leader of the process of democratisation in USSR. Sakharov was not a man of raw political power, he did not align himself with this or that political group or leader and yet he altered dramatically the level of debate and discourse in Soviet society.

What made Sakharov unique was not his sufferings, others had suffered much more. And what made him unique were not his ideas. He shared his ideas with men and women who were dissidents even before he was – Larisa Bogarz, Pavel Litinov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and even the first opponents of Russian totalitarianism: Alexander Herzen, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Vladimir Solovyov. What made him unique was the fact that despite being honoured highly by the system, he turned against its exploitativeness.

As Tatyana Zaslavskya, a leading sociologist whose views helped shape early reforms said, “For us, he was a figure of the inner spirit. Just the bare facts of his life, the way he suffered for all of us gave him authority that no one else had. Without him, we could not begin to rebuild our lives”. 37

Rehabilitated by Gorbachev, from his exile in the industrial city of Gorky, Sakharov became an exponent of multiparty system and constitutional democracy. In bringing home, Sakharov from Gorky, a act that met much grumbling in the party nomenkla-tura, Gorbachev felt himself to be the kind and benevolent czar. He was proud. But Sakhanov refused to indulge Gorbachev’s vanity. His support was conditional, his decisions were

based not on intraparty realities—though he understood it well—but on a set of moral standards.

In his memoirs, Sakharov recounts his meeting with Gorbachev: “I said, ’Mikhail Sergeivich, it is not for me to tell you, how serious things are in the country, how dissatisfied people are and how everyone expects things to get worse. There is a crisis of trust in the country towards the leadership and the party. Your personal authority and popularity are down to zero. People cannot wait any longer with nothing but promises. A middle course in situations like these is almost impossible. The country and you are at crossroads. Either increase the process of change maximally or try to retain administrative-command system with all its qualities. In the first case you can be sure there will be many brave and energetic people you can count on. In the second case, you know for yourself whose support you will have, but you will never be forgiven the attempt at Perestroika’.”

Perestroika which intended to be a Dubcek like policy of making socialism more efficient and human in order to marshall the Soviet Union into a service based economy turned out to make Soviet Union a multi-party democracy. Unlike the past, when the communist party ran the show, through a civil service cum economic constabulary system, differentiation between the party and the government became unbridgeable.

Despite advises to split the party to separate the progressives from conservatives Gorbachev embarked upon a fresh package of initiatives to push his programme ahead. To overturn the communists he set out to enlist the strongest ally—the Soviet people themselves.

At an extraordinary party Congress held in June, 1988, the first to have been held since 1941, about 5000 party delegates from all the regions gathered in Moscow at the Palace of Congresses to hear their leader hit out at his plans enemies. “We have no right” said

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Gorbachev “to permit peristorika to founder on the rocks of dogmatism and conservatism, on prejudices and personal ambition”.

Gorbachev announced that a mega parliament would be formed for the first time in Soviet history through direct election and the executive powers would be exercised by the Presidency. Gorbachev assumed the responsibilities of Presidency in October 1988. Gorbachev believed that by strengthening the government the new congress-Congress of People’s Deputies (CPD), he could gradually diminish the role of the party regulars.

On March 26, 1989, people noted in multi-party elections for the CPD. The issues were issues were waived. In the Baltics, the emphasis was on sovereignty, the secret Molotove - Ribbentor pact had become public knowledge and the Kremlin stood on a poor wicket; in the Russian provinces, the emphasis was on empty stores, ground level economies. Everywhere the talk was of freedom, of learning democracy.

The Communist Party, of course, wrote the election laws of 1989 to ensure that it would have the majority of seats and that is the way it turned out. More than 80 percent of the 2,250 deputies were party members, the vast majority of them local secretaries, military officers and other loyalists. The reason: every imaginable party front from the Komsomol to the Union of stamp collectors was guaranteed a quota of seats, Only one-third of deputies came from open races. “This was not a democratic election” Sakharov said in an interview to the Washington Post, “it was a quasi-democracy”. The only oases of democracy were where the system was imperfect. In those few sports where the elections were “imperfect” - meaning open the establishment, party candidates invariably lost. Central committee members, admirals, generals, apparatchiks of every sort suffered the humiliation of public rejection.

Yeltsin took on the entire communist party’s machine in the election of Moscow’s delegate for the CPD and his combat campaign won him the support of 89 percent of

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41 Time, January 1, 1990 “The issue named Gorbachev Time’s Man of the decade.
Moscow's six million voters - an astonishing accolade from the usually apathetic and cynical populace.  

The first session of the Congress created another tradition of political opposition and competition. Little more than a month after the Congress Closed in May 1989, Perestroika spun out of Control, first in the coal mines of Siberia, then in mines all across the country. The miners who embodied the vanguard of bolshevism were walking off the job, declaring that reforms had not delivered anything.

After July 1989, the Kremlin could never again have any confidence at all that it was the master of events. After July 1989, the illusion of a gradual, Gorbachev directed “revolution from above” was over. The “revolution from below” had begun.

Just after the strikes broke out in Siberia, Sakharov, Yeltsin, Yuri Afanasyev-the turncoat scholar-politician of Memorial, dedicated to rehabilitation of Stalinist victims, and the economist Gavriil Popov put together a radical opposition faction in the legislature called the Inter-Regional Group. The development only increased tensions between Gorbachev and Sakharov.

In his last speech, on December 14, 1989, to the Inter-Regional Group Sakharov said he was despaired of the current policy of half-measures and an opposition force was the only way to accelerate the reform process. Gorbachev’s government, he said “was leading the country into catastrophe by spreading over the process of perestroika over many years. During this period it will leave the country in a state of collapse, intensive collapse. The only way, the only possibility of an evolutionary path is to radicalize perestroika.” He pressed for the repeal of Article 6, which gave the communist party, a guaranteed monopoly of power.

45 Remnick, p-311
46 Ibid. p-317
Sakharov’s death in 1989 (December 14,) was a serious setback to the proponents of multi party democracy.

By walking just behind Sakharov’s funeral casket, Yeltsin issued a statement of closeness to what Sakharov stood for. It was clear, that he was going to take the lead of political opposition. He knew that Sakharov in his life time and people close to him regarded him with apprehension. Yeltsin was not one of them. He was after all, a member of Politburo, But while Yeltsin already had tremendous support as a populist, he wanted badly to widen his appeal, to learn from the radical democrats and get their support.

The world would have remembered 1989 just for the fact that it brought Soviet Union free elections. But there was more. After 1989, little in Gorbachev’s empire would ever be same again. It was the year of revolutions: The year that for the countries of East Europe the would took fire. And it was Gorbachev himself who put the match to the tinder. During his visit to west Germany in June 1989, Journalists asked Gorbachev about the Berlin Wall’s future. Nothing he told them was “eternal.”

Predictably, the blaze started in East Germany, the communist state that had been created when Germany was divided after world war II. Along its border ran the “iron curtain” An impenetrable barrier of barbed wire and watch towers that marked the western most edge of the communist world.

In the summer of 1989, the East Germans began to push towards the western side. Unlike the earlier times, when they were shot and maimed, new ways for going westward was opening up. The best one was through Hungary, where communist power was itself fading. Thousands of escapers made the journey, them tens of thousands.

It was at this point that on October 6, 1989, Gorbachev flew to Berlin to celebrate East Germany’s fortieth anniversary. In his address at the Berlin’s Palace of Congresses and further in his meeting with the East German leader he said rulers who did not respect

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people's wishes "put themselves in danger. He went on to be blunter still. "Those who delay", he said are "punished by life itself."\textsuperscript{49}

At first East German rulers put up a fight. As the demonstrations grew bigger. Honeckar called in troops to fire on the protestors. But East German communists heeded Gorbachev's counsel and on October 11, 1989 they ousted Honeckar himself and hurriedly started to introduce reforms. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin wall opened and Germany was reunified on October 3, 1990.

The opening of the wall was dramatic enough. But it was only a beginning. Looking back people would call it the "domino effect."\textsuperscript{50}

After East Germany, it was Bulgaria's turn. On November 10, the Bulgarians forced the resignation of President Fodor Zhukov, the Communist world longest serving ruler, aged 78, he had been in power for 35 years. Czechoslovakia - where Soviet tanks had helped crush 1968's "Prague Spring" - was next. By mid December Romania too rid itself of its dreaded dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

Hungary and Poland had already fallen before the domino effect set in. In June, the Poles had voted out the communists and voted in he newly legalized Solidarity party. Moscow meantime had stood idly by. The Hungarians had agreed to do away with the one party rule way back in January. And then too, Moscow had let them do it.

As 1989 drew to a close, the curtains fell over the lengthy cold war opera. The west raised toast to Gorbachev. The 1990 Nobel prize for peace would go to him. But back home the events evoked a mixed reaction. While the conservatives were incensed, the liberal pack led by Yeltsin was realising the need to negotiate crucial western support.

In September 1989, Yeltsin made his first tip to the US. The firebrand of the CPD was on an eight-day speaking tour of New York, Baltimore, Washington, Chicago, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, San Francisco and Los Angels. The trip was

\textsuperscript{49} Govbachev M.S. "Celebration of creative endeavour on German soil" Speech at the Palace of Republic to mark GDR's 40th Anniversary, Pravda October 7, 1989 pp 1.

\textsuperscript{50} Time, London, November 14, 1989
sponsored by the Esalen Institute of California and a Soviet foundation supporting AIDS related research and treatment, Yeltsin's lecture fee ranged up to $25,000. President Bush was not eager to receive him. He feared that a formal meeting might prompt Gorbachev to suspect that the US was dabbling in Soviet domestic politics at his expense. Bush considered Yeltsin to be a loose cannon, with his reputation for heavy drinking, intemperate behavior and impolite outbursts.

However, members of the Presidential administration chiefly, rational security advisor General Brent Scowcroft, his deputy Robert Gates, the Chairman of National Intelligence Council, Fritz Ermarth felt that such a step would unmistakably pronounce the "Gorbocentric" strain in US policy.

Infact Gates, cautioned the other members of the administration, "Don't be so dazzled by Mikhail Gorbachev, Superstar, that you forget we are in the business of making policy toward a country, not an individual. Bear in mind that the guy who is running Soviet Union now, may not be running the Soviet Union ten years from now".

Moreover, skeptical about Gorbachev's longevity and his commitment to political reform Ermarth was impressed by Yeltsin's comeback. Yeltsin might be eccentric and bumptious, he felt, but the 'Russian' was showing great courage - much more than Gorbachev on behalf of the positions that the US should support.

General Scowcroft too agreed that there should be some kind of a low key meeting between Bush and Yeltsin. Scowcroft reminded his colleagues of a similar predicament. In 1975, when Scowcroft was the national security advisor to President General Ford, the President had to decide whether to see Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, iconoclastic novelist and Nobel laureate who had been expelled from Soviet Union, the previous year. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had argued that for Ford to receive such a prominent critic of

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51 Beschloss Mikhail...p-104-110
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid
the Kremlin would be “disadvantageous” and Ford concurred. Solzhenitsyn was kept out of the white house, to the outrage of many conservatives.\footnote{Ibid}

Scowcroft reminded his aides how he and Ford had been “burned” by the Solzhenitsyn affair and refusing to let himself and Bush be put in a similar position over Yeltsin, devised a formula that would keep everyone happy.

Since Yeltsin, as a mere parliamentarian had no automatic claim on the President’s time, Bush and Dan Quayle, the vice President could each simply “drop by” to Scowcroft’s west wing office at white house where he would receive his maverick vision.

There would be no need for publicity or substantive discussions, he told his aides.

Yeltsin was cross, when he realised that he was not going to see the President. As planned Bush stopped in for fifteen minutes and made a point of stressing his “very positive relationship” with Gorbachev: the American people shared the Soviet leader’s hope for the “success” of the reform movement in the Soviet Union”, he said. Yeltsin was on his best behaviour. Afterward, Bush told has aides that the guest had seemed a “jolly good fellow”.

After Bush left room, Scowcroft asked Yeltsin a single question: “what are your objectives on this trip”. Yeltsin’s reply went on non-stop, as he revealed his thoughts on price reform, the convertibility of the ruble, and the possibility of a joint US-Soviet mission to Mars. He would solve Moscow’s housing shortage by “inviting” Western developers to build a million apartment units. He would encourage western investments by reserving 15 per cent of the Soviet economy for private ownership.

Scowcroft had choreographed the meeting to avoid news stories saying that Bush had engaged in any serious dialogue with Gorbachev’s most prominent critic. But Yeltsin emerged from the west wing to tell the press corps that he had presented Bush and Quayle with a “ten-point” to “rescue Perestroika”. Scowcroft complained that Yeltsin was “devious” and a “two-bit headline grabber”.

\footnote{Ibid}
Yeltsin's next stop was the state department. Scowcroft had informed the Secretary of state, James Baker about Yeltsin's streamoller tactics. After the meeting Baker exclaimed to his aides "what a flake! He since makes Gorbachev look good by comparison. And you have got to sympathize with Gorbachev if that's what he's got to deal with. The guy certainly does not know anything about market economies. He makes Gorbo look like an expert".

Following the lead, high ranking US officials privately contrasted Yeltsin's earthly manner and his drinking with the westernized behaviour of Gorbachev. Meanwhile, though the US was infatuated with Gorbachev, his popularity at home was declining, while that of his and rival soaring.

When Perestroika began, Gorbachev and his colleagues set out nearly obvious to the nationalities question. In December 1986, Gorbachev fired the Kazakh party chief Dimmukahmed Kunayav and replaced him with an ethnic Russian, Gennadi Kolbin, never anticipating that the people of the republic would object. The ensuing riots in the republic's capital eventually forced Gorbachev to replace Kolbin with a Kazakh, but the incident did not seem to impress the Kremlin very strongly. Even the massive demonstrations in Armenia and Azerbaijan in early 1988 seemed to Gorbachev a matter of local interest, a petty squabble over Nagorno- Karabakh that could be resolved by replacing the local party leadership.

What changed matters was the Baltic movement for independence. Strangely enough, Gorachev had thought that the Baltic traditions of small -scale farming and business would set an example in Russia. But the Baltic example became the model not for the neutralization of the Union but rather for its collapse; during the course of their struggle the Balts were never violent only stubborn.

They began with demonstrations about environment, then about the need to preserve Baltic languages and cultures. By early 1989, popular non-communists fronts in liviaia, Lithuania and Estonia held sway and by May, their respective parliaments had declared

55 Ibid.
their sovereignty. Nearly all the Baltic representatives declared themselves “interested observers”.

The saying went that the Estonians were the brains of the movement, the Latvians the organizational spine and Lithuanians the heart-the moral force. The key leader of the movement was Vytautas Landsbergis who eventually went on to become the President of the Lithuanian republic. Landsbergis plank of cultural dissidence, of revival of historical memory gave the movement a moral sheen against Kremlin’s toughness.

The Kremlin capitulated and the clinching moment came on July 23, 1989. Alexandr Yakolev as Chairman of a Legislative Investigating Committee conceded that the secret protocols authorizing annexation of the Baltic republics existed.56

The Central Asian republics, Ukraine soon followed suit, while the former accused Moscow of turning the region into one vast cotton plantation in the process destroying the Aral Sea and nearly every other area of the economy, for the latter the Chernobyl incident became the reference point.

But the beginning of 1990, the collapse of the Communist Party monolith was at hand. Sakharov was gone, but his demand to eliminate the party’s guaranteed hold on power had become a banner of growing democratic opposition.

In his speeches Yeltsin said this would be Gorbachev’s “last chance”. The Central Committee on February 7, 1990 abolished Article 6 and spend the way for a multi-party system.57 They really had no choice, they had seen the crowds, the demonstrations and their placards.

The process began in March 1990, with local elections for wards and mayors.

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At the political level, there was an utter disrespect for organs of state power and even state celebrations like May Day was intervened by protestations of the democratic opposition.

This new psychology, independent and defiant sent Gorbachev to the reliable bases of traditional power – the Communist hawks in the Politburo. After the Baltic declaration of independence in mid August 1990, Gorbachev caved in more to the people who had every thing to lose from the reform of the country. In October, after the leaders of the KGB, the police the army, and the defense industry made it clear that it would not tolerate a radical reordering of political and economic power, Gorbachev withdrew his support for the 500 days plan. Soon he would reject all the reformers in his team, he would begin to speak with a sneer of the “so-called democrats”. In December 1990 Edward Shevardnadze resiged as foreign minister. He warned that “dictatorship is coming” and that the democrats had scattered “to the bushes”.

Day by Day, the hard-liners consolidated power Gennadi Yanayev was the vice-President, Shevardnadze was replaced with Alexander Bessmertnykh, a liberal, but without any of the strength or authority of his predecessor. The KGB and the Interior ministry under Boris Pugo gave themselves the right to patrol the streets in all major cities. The defense minister Marshal Dimitri Yazov went on air complaining about provocations and warned that he would strike back whenever and however he deemed necessary. Vladimir Kryuchkov, the KGB chief announced that he might have to spill a little blood to keep the peace in the republics.

The tanks rolled in Lithuania on January 13, 1991. For more than a year, the KGB and the army had been running operations in Lithuania, designed to terrify the popularity elected government and the people.

The hardline fury further deepened with what came to known as “Bloody Sunday” in Vilnius, and with every victory won, their demands became more brazen. All through 1991, Shevardnadze wrote in his memoir it was “none other than Gorbachev who had been spoon feeding the junta with his indecisiveness, his inclination to back and fill, his fellow travelling, his poor judgement of people and his disbelief in the bulwark whose name is people—the very same people who had changed thanks to the perestroika he had begun. That is the enormous tragedy of Mikhail Gorbachev and no matter how much I empathize with him, I cannot help but say that it almost led to a national tragedy.”

In early March 1991, Gorbachev proclaimed victory in a referendum to preserve the union, but Yeltsin trumped him and added a second question to the ballot asking voters of the Russian republic if they wanted direct elections for the Russian President. They voted overwhelmingly for a June election. Yeltsin had been the Russian leader but only because he had been elected chairman of the republican parliament and then only by a narrow margin.

But Yeltsin knew two things: First as the chief spokesperson of democracy, he would run and win; second that such a victory would force Gorbachev who had never been elected to anything by the people to deal more seriously with the opposition.

In February itself, Yeltsin had gone on record blaming Gorbachev for driving the economy “to the edge of the abyss “and for flirting with military dictatorship.” Gorbachev, he said had to step down and power must be transferred to the collective rule of the republican government.

With Yeltsin clearly headed for military and his own percentage in popularity polls nearing single digits. Gorbachev yeilded to the obvious. A document drafted jointly by Gorbachev and the republican leaders (the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia and Moldovia

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62 Shevardnadze.... p-208
64 The Economist, London, February 14, 1990
declined to participate) announced their intention to form a new Union treaty, under which the republics would acquire vastly more political power. 65

In June, Yeltsin won the election. His nearest rival was the moderate conservative former Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov. For his inauguration at the Kremlin’s Palace of Congresses, Yeltsin planned a ceremony, which intended to distance itself from soviet history and aligned it with a new kind of Russian nationalism. Instead of the signs of the Bolshevik state, there was the red, blue and white Russian flag.

Introduced by regal trumpeters, Yeltsin swore himself in“ Citizen of the Russian Federation…. Great Russia is rising from its knees” he began. “The President is not a God, not a monarch, not a miracle worker. He is a citizen and in Russia, the individual will become the measure of all things”66

Yeltsin was trying to impress upon Gorbachev that there could be no future in an alliance with Kryvchko, Yazov, Pngo and the old guard. Alternately, he was understanding and bullied Gorbachev with Russian’s economic demands. Gorbachev had already agreed to give republics more power and make it possible for the Baltic states to become independent. Yeltsin wanted more, the power of the purse, that the republics and not Moscow should have the ability to levy taxes and distribute the funds as they saw fit. The new Union treaty envisaging all this was to be signed on August 20, 1991. 67

What was happening was an anathema to the hard liners and predictably they struck.

With Gorbachev on his summer vacation at his retreat in Foros in Crimea, Kryuchkov got ready the draft declaration of the State Committee for the State Emergency, despite being informed by his officials that a state of emergency would be an extremely complicated affair. The members of the State Committee for Emergency were vice-President Yanayev, KGB Chief Kryuchkov, Defence Minister Yazov, Prime Minister

66 Remnick, David….. p-405
Pavlov, Politburo chief Oleg Shenin, military industries chief Oleg Baklanov, Interior minister Broris Pugo and Presidential chief of staff Valrey Boldin.\textsuperscript{68}

The plot seemed excruciatingly simple to the coup leaders: hold Gorbachev captive in Crimea, arrest political opposition gain public affection through short-term popular economic measures. However as events unfolded, from the beginning it was a slipshod affair with lack of planning and inability to be ruthless, Factors which one essential for the success of a coup.

On August 18, 1991, Gorbachev was held captive captive in his Gimean retreat. The coup went on air at 6.00 am on August 19, 1991.\textsuperscript{69}

Once it happened Yeltsin decided to act without hesitation to shore up resistance to the coup. He called the leaders of the biggest republic and was taken aback by their back of revolve. They told him they did not have information enough to act. Yeltsin was on his own.

Yeltsin and his aides headed for “the white House”, the massive Russian parliament. They planned to use the parliament building as a barricade, turn it into a symbol of democratic resistance and communicate with the outside world by whatever means possible. Yeltsin told his aides to convene immediately a non stop session of the Russian parliament.

When history was recorded, scholars of yore relied on the written word, on memoir, epic for, source material but scholars desirous of constructing the history of the collapse of the USSR would have to rely on videotape. It not only became a record of events but a vehicle of opinion in the days of the resistance.

Yeltsin, Ruslan Khasbulabov, the Chairman of the parliament and Ivan Silayev, drafted an appeal “To the Citizens of Russia” denouncing the: “putsch” as a “reactionary unconstitutional coup d’etat” and called for a nationwide strike. Khasbulabov and vice

\textsuperscript{68} Time, August 24, 1991.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
President Alexander Rutskoi, a war hero in Afghanistan began broadcasts from a makeshift radio station inside the parliament building. Yeltsin dispatched his foreign minister Andrei Kozyre to Paris to secure Western support and establish a Russian government abroad if the resistance was crushed.

As the resistance got under way, Yeltsin Clambered up on T-72- Tank No 116 of the Taman Guards. It was an indelible image that would act the tone for the next days. “Citizens of Russia” he declared, “The legally elected president of the country has been removed from power. We are dealing with a right wing, reactionary anti-constitutional coup d’etat. Accordingly, we proclaim all decisions and decrees of this committee to be illegal. We appeal to citizens of Russia to give an appropriate rebuff to the posttests and demand a return of the country to normal constitutional development.”

Yeltsin had been criticized for consorting with the military. During his campaigns he had spent much time in places like the Tula military bases and over the objections of many radicals in the parliament had made Rutskoi, the Afghan war hero, his vice-president. Now he was counting on the special relationship to pay dividends. He appealed to the military to obey their oath to the people.

The middle and the upper-middle ranks of both the secret police and the army had no faith in their leaders. They saw them as muddled, not to be trusted. They saw how time and again the leadership conceived its schemes – the war in Afghanistan, the assaults in Tibilisi, Baku and Vilnius – and then avoided all blame. They refused to have blood on their hand for the sake of such leadership. The success of coup depended on the support of local commanders and this was near absent.

Meanwhile Yeltsin signed a decree creating a backup shadow government and dispatched a team of twenty-three civilian and military leaders in the Russian government to set it up in a secret headquarters thirty-five miles outside his home city of Sverdlovsk in the Urals.

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70 British Broadcasting Corporation, “The Second Russian Revolution” (Television Six Hours), 1990-91
The leader of the Urals military district was one of the most reactionary generals in the country. Albert Makashov. Makashov had run against Yeltsin for the presidency on a purely Stalinist Platform. Makashov’ orders of rounding up resistors was paid scant attention by his troops. The passions of the city of Sverdlovsk were with Yeltsin. More than 100.00 staged a demonstration defying the junta. There were no arrests

The Putschists had hoped that by drawing on military reserves, they would flood the stores with goods at lower prices. However such was not the case. The reserves were just enough for the forces. On the other hand popular pressure was mounting.

Given the reality of the situation and the reluctance on the part of the armed forces, the coup leaders could not firm up on the storming of the White House. Further the political opposition was and till free to mobilise resistance. The dithering took its toll. By August 21, 1991 the Emergency Committee was planning to put the shutters down on the coup.

Kryuchkov got in touch with Yeltsin to relieve Gorbachev of his captivity. Yeltsin deputed Prime Minister Silayev and Vice-President Rutskoi to fly to Foros. Once Gorbachev returned to Moscow, the arrests of the coup leaders began.

However, even after returning to Moscow, Gorachev defended the communist party and talked of its ‘renewal’. On August 23, 1991, at a raucous session of the congress Yeltsin used the opportunity to flay and humiliate his opponent. He forced Gorbachev to read aloud a transcript of the August 19, 1991 council of ministers meeting at which nearly all ministers had pledged their hearty support to the coup. Yeltsin was not finished and mocked Gorbachev to sign a decree suspending the activities of the communist party. On August 24, 1991, Gorbachev too resigned as general secretary of the Communist party and declared in essence, an end to the Bolshevik era.  

Comeuppance was what it was. In 1987, Gorbachev had dragged Yeltsin from a hospital bed and made him stand before the Moscow city party committee for hour after hour of denunciations. Yeltsin subsequently had to be hospitalised suffering from nervous exhaustion. When given the chance to humiliate Gorbachev, Yeltsin grabbed it.

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71 Ibid
In early September 1991, Gorbachev assembled the Congress of People’s Deputies for what it would be its last session. With Baltic States, Moldova and Georgia already considering themselves independent, the remaining ten republican leaders decided with Gorbachev to dissolve the Congress and create the basis for a new decentralized Union. Gorbachev envisioned the Union with Moscow retaining some functions as a coordinator of common defense and foreign policy. Yeltsin differed and said that the Union presidency would be ceremonial. The stalemate persisted and eventually with Ukraine pulling out of regulations, Gorbachev’s hopes for a place for himself as President ended. Instead the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia patched together a plan for a new Commonwealth on December 26, 1991. The plan envisaged, cooperation and coordination on economic, defence and foreign policy matters. The Commonwealth of Independent States as the new Union was called had no role for the center. The republican leaders voted on Gorbachev’s retirement package which included a dacha, a pension, and the former party institute would be used as a base of research. Not political opposition.  

The CIS was later joined by the five Central Asian Republics, Georgia and Armenia. It was headquartered at Minsk. Dismantling the system, Yeltsin emerged as the author of a new one. However, the task that lay ahead was arduous. There were crucial issues of price reform, monetary policy, enterprise restructuring the administration, defence regulations, drafting a new constitution, foreign exchange arrangements with republics, the pending trial of coup leaders, and trickiest of all, negotiating the borders, determined by the former rulers. Above all the defender of democracy had to establish its basic credential – rule of law.

Several Kremlinlogists in understanding the politics of the erstwhile Soviet Union from 1986-91, choose sides, to be pro- Gorbachev or pro-Yeltsin. They fail to see that without Gorbachev, the agony of the system would have gone on indefinitely, not forever though, there was no money for that – but another ten, twenty years. What would the world look like in that case? But without Yeltsin, Gorbachev might well have dallied

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72 Ibid
more than he did, the radical democrats might never have found a single strong leader, the coup might have succeeded. As much as they had come to despise each other, Gorbachev and Yeltsin are linked in history.