

# WebMemo



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## Boris Yeltsin's Historic Role

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Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, who passed away on April 23 at the age of 76, was a controversial ruler to whom the Russian people owe a debt of gratitude. U.S. leaders worked closely with Yeltsin to keep Russia on track during the hardest days of the post-communist collapse, to prevent the former Soviet Union from becoming a Yugoslavia-style bloodbath, and to keep over 20,000 nuclear weapons under control in an impoverished country.

Yeltsin was an unlikely revolutionary. Like his predecessor, Mikhail Gorbachev, and his handpicked successor, Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin was a transitional figure on the long road from Russia's communist empire to some destination still unknown.

The U.S. will remember Boris Yeltsin as someone who, despite his limitations, meant well and worked to bring his country back to the family of nations, to freedom and humanity, which have been so often lacking in Russia's tortured history.

A successful member of the Soviet ruling class, he did his utmost to bring down the communist system. In the process, he led the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, attempting to create, for the first time in Russia's 1,000-year history, a modern nation state. He almost succeeded.

Yeltsin, the son and grandson of peasants from the Ural Mountains who were punished by Stalin, was a loyal apparatchik in the big industrial city of Sverdlovsk, the heart of the Soviet military-industrial complex. He zealously surpassed construction quotas and led the effort to destroy the Ipatyev House, where Nicholas Romanov, the last czar, his

family, and his entourage were held and brutally executed by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

But when promoted to Moscow under Michael Gorbachev to become the country's construction boss and later, Moscow city Communist Party secretary, Yeltsin turned into a populist and challenged the ruling Politburo. He was kicked out in 1988, only to return as an elected member of Supreme Soviet and as the first competitively elected chairman of the Russian Parliament. In 1991, he won Russia's presidential elections.

Yeltsin valiantly led the Parliament and the throng of citizens who stood against the Russian tanks of the August 1991 communist hardliner coup. As the coup failed, Yeltsin sidelined Gorbachev and managed the divorce of the Soviet Union member republics, which was finalized in December 1991. Shortly thereafter, on Christmas Day in 1991, the Soviet Union expired.

The new state that Yeltsin led, the Russian Federation, faced empty coffers, pillaged by communists. It had no working institutions and runaway inflation. Communists and their nationalist allies wanted revenge. The country was in turmoil.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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By firing his leading economic reformer, Yegor Gaidar, in December 1992 and appointing former gas minister Victor Chernomyrdin as his Prime Minister, Yeltsin slowed the pace of reforms and allowed corruption to flourish. Unlike Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Baltic states, Russian reforms were piecemeal and lacked a serious legislative base.

Russia also lacked a constitution, and the anti-reform Supreme Soviet threatened to impeach Yeltsin as it sought to amass power. In the spring of 2003, Yeltsin took his political reform plan to a popular referendum, which he won, and later ordered the Supreme Soviet disbanded. He sent troops to prevent the legislature from gathering. The Supreme Soviet and its supporters attempted an armed insurrection. Yeltsin's power was in danger for the second time in two years.

Despite having put down the insurrection, Yeltsin failed to disband the Communist Party or purge the system of its supporters. Unlike Solidarity leaders in Poland, Vaclav Havel in the Czech Republic, and the Baltic anti-communists, Yeltsin was a part of the old system and did not and could not fill the government with anti-communists, who lacked any administrative or security experience.

Yeltsin failed to see through legal proceedings against the Communist Party and launched a war against separatist Chechnya, which would play a key role in Russia's slide back toward authoritarianism. He never managed to put together an effective economic reform package, and the brief recovery of 1996-1997 ended with the disastrous financial crisis of August 1998, which brought the hard-liner Yevgeny Primakov to the Prime Minister's office and set the reformers back even further.

Nevertheless, Yeltsin did not use power to suppress opposition parties, and he allowed unprecedented freedom of the media. After Primakov was fired, he appointed former Interior Minister Sergey Stepashin as Prime Minister, only to replace him with the loyal and tough head of the secret police, the Federal Security Service. The new prime minister, appointed in summer of 1999, was Vladimir Putin.

By then, Yeltsin's health had deteriorated. He had suffered two heart attacks, both connected to

his political battles, the first in 1988, when he became the first man to oppose the Soviet Politburo and come out on top. The second happened during the touch-and-go presidential election campaign of 1996. In the fall of 1996, Yeltsin underwent a quintuple bypass. The media and acquaintances have reported serious problems with alcohol abuse.

Yeltsin often bristled at U.S. foreign policy assertiveness but never confronted it openly. This is why NATO enlargement and NATO involvement in Yugoslavia were relatively painless. But under Yeltsin, the truculent security elites launched broad military and nuclear cooperation with Iran, a major irritant in bilateral U.S.-Russian relations. Yeltsin failed to reform Russia's security and foreign policy.

Yeltsin left Russia weak but relatively free. The country had a diffuse power structure, which included the presidency, the legislative branch, elected regional governors, and outspoken media. However, unlike in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, the communist security services and police were left intact, leading to today's abuses.

Under Yeltsin, the middle class began to grow, and freedom of religion and movement were enshrined. Today, Russia is much wealthier, growing steadily at about 7 percent annually since 2000. It has a flat income tax of 13 percent and a corporate income tax of 24 percent. Foreign investment is flowing in at unprecedented rate, and capital flight is mostly ended.

Yeltsin, however, failed to secure his most precious gain—freedom—beyond his presidency. The constitution he rammed through in late 1993 granted unprecedented powers to the president. The post-Yeltsin centralization of power includes the appointment of governors, a pliant parliament, state control of all TV channels and most radio and print media, and the breaking of the oligarchs' political power.

Mass demonstrations which took place under Gorbachev and Yeltsin today are inconceivable; recently, 9,000 heavily armed riot police broke up a 2,000-strong peaceful demonstration. While Yeltsin failed to leave behind the rule of law, his successors dismantled what was left.

If Russia evolves toward a model of Western democracy, Yeltsin will be remembered as its founding father. Like Gorbachev, he will be credited primarily as the destroyer of the horrendous Soviet legacy. If, however, Russia freezes in authoritarianism, Yeltsin's legacy there will remain that of a weak and erratic ruler.

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