

# Boris Yeltsin, Russia's First Post-Soviet Leader, Is Dead

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Boris N. Yeltsin, the burly provincial politician who became the first freely elected leader of Russia and a towering figure of his time when he presided over the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Communist Party, has died at the age of 76, the Russian government said today.

A Kremlin spokesman confirmed Mr. Yeltsin's death but gave no details about the circumstances or cause. The Interfax news agency quoted an unidentified medical source as saying the former president had died of heart failure.

In office less than nine years and plagued by severe health problems, Mr. Yeltsin added a final chapter to his historical record when, in a stunning coup at the close of the 20th century, he announced his resignation, and became the first Russian leader to relinquish power on his own in accordance with constitutional processes. He then turned over the reins of office to his handpicked successor, Vladimir V. Putin.

Mr. Yeltsin left a giant, if flawed, legacy. He started to establish a democratic state and then pulled back, lurching from one prime minister to another in an effort to control the levers of power. But where his

predecessor, Mikhail S. Gorbachev sought to perpetuate the Communist Party even as he tried to reform the Soviet Union, Mr. Yeltsin helped break the party and the state's hold over the Russian people.

Although his commitment to reform wavered, he eliminated government censorship of the press, tolerated public criticism, and steered Russia toward a free-market economy. Not least, Mr. Yeltsin was instrumental in dismembering the Soviet Union and allowing its former republics to make their way as independent states.

The rapid privatization of Russian industry led to a form of buccaneer capitalism, and a new class of oligarchs usurped political power as they plundered the country's resources. But Mr. Yeltsin's actions assured that there would be no turning back to the centralized Soviet command economy that had strangled growth and reduced a country populated by talented and cultured people and rich in natural resources to a beggar among nations.

His leadership was erratic and often crude, and the democrat often ruled in the manner of a czar. He showed no reluctance to use the power of the presidency to face down his opponents, as he did in a showdown in 1993 when he ordered tanks to fire on the parliament, dominated by openly seditious Communists, and in 1994 when he embarked upon a harsh military operation to subdue the breakaway republic of Chechnya. That costly and ruinous war almost became his undoing, and it flared ferociously back to life in 1999, continuing to rage long after his resignation.

The Yeltsin era effectively began in August, 1991, when Mr. Yeltsin clambered atop a tank to rally Muscovites to put down a right-wing coup against Mr. Gorbachev, a heroic moment etched in the minds of the Russian people and television viewers all over the world. It ended with his electrifying resignation speech on New Years Eve, 1999.

Those were Mr. Yeltsin's finest hours, in an era marked by extraordinary political change, as well as painful economic dislocation for many of his countrymen and stupendous wealth for a privileged few.

Expressing condolences today to Mr. Yeltsin's family, Mr. Gorbachev described him as a man "on whose shoulders rest major events for the good of the country, and serious mistakes," and said he suffered "a tragic fate."

President Bush said today that he and his wife were "deeply saddened" by Mr. Yeltsin's death, calling him "an historic figure who served his country during a time of momentous change" who "helped lay the foundations of freedom in Russia." "I appreciate the efforts that President Yeltsin made to build a strong relationship between Russia and the United States," Mr. Bush said.

To turn around the battleship that was the Soviet Union, with its bloated military-industrial establishment, its ravaged economy, its devastated environment and its antiquated and inefficient health and social services system, would have been a Herculean task for any leader in the prime of life and the best of health. But in Russia, the job of building a new state from the ashes of the old was taken on by Mr. Yeltsin, a man in precarious health whose frequent, mysterious disappearances from public life were attributed to heart and respiratory problems, excessive drinking and bouts of depression. These personal weaknesses left a sense of lost opportunity.

A former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack F. Matlock, cited the difficulty of managing a transition where there was no prototype and no road map.

“The change is so profound that probably no one leader could have sorted it out,” he said in an interview. “I suspect it will take more than one generation of politicians to do it.”

But he said that Mr. Yeltsin, along with his predecessor, Mr. Gorbachev, deserve full credit for what he called a “tremendous achievement.” Together, he said, “they destroyed the most monstrous political system in the history of the world, a regime with extensive resources to keep itself in power.”

Mr. Yeltsin was the most populist of politicians, and rejected the notion of forming a political party of his own, insisting instead that he was elected by “all” of the people. This rendered him weak at the task of building coalitions to support efforts to initiate necessary reforms.

He sometimes played with the truth, surrounded himself with cronies, and appointed and dismissed one Prime Minister after another. Then, in failing health and under suspicion of enriching himself and his inner circle at the expense of the state, he surprised the world with his resignation, asking forgiveness for his mistakes.

He turned the government over to Mr. Putin, a loyal aide and former officer of the K.G.B. In return, Mr. Yeltsin, and it was rumored, his family, received a grant of immunity from criminal prosecution and credit for leaving the Kremlin voluntarily.

Mr. Yeltsin left with his fondest wish for the Russian people only partly fulfilled. “I want their lives to improve before my own eyes,” he once said, remembering the hardship of growing up in a single room in a cold communal hut, “that is the most important thing.”

In fact, in the dislocation and chaos that accompanied the transition from the centralized economy he had inherited from the old Soviet Union, most people saw their circumstances deteriorate. Inflation became rampant, the poor became poorer, profiteers grew rich, the military and many state employees went unpaid and flagrant criminality flourished. Much of Russia’s inheritance from the Soviet Union stubbornly endures.

Image

Boris Yeltsin at a rally to celebrate a failed military coup in Moscow in 1991. Credit...Boris Yurchenko/Associated Press

Mr. Gorbachev had sought to preserve the Soviet Union and, with his programs of glasnost and perestroika, to give Communism a more human dimension. Mr. Yeltsin, on the other hand, believed that democracy, the rule of law and the market were the answers to Russia’s problems.

A big man with a ruddy face and white hair, he was full of peasant bluster — what the Russians call a real muzhik — and came to Moscow with a genuine warmth and concern for his countrymen.

During a visit to the United States in 1989 he became more convinced than ever that Russia had been ruinously damaged by its centralized, state-run economic system, where people stood in long lines to buy the most basic needs of life and more often than not found the shelves bare. He was overwhelmed by what he saw at a Houston supermarket, by the kaleidoscopic variety of meats and vegetables available to ordinary Americans.

Leon Aron, quoting a Yeltsin associate, wrote in his biography, "Yeltsin, A Revolutionary Life" (St. Martin's Press, 2000): "For a long time, on the plane to Miami, he sat motionless, his head in his hands. 'What have they done to our poor people?' he said after a long silence." He added, "On his return to Moscow, Yeltsin would confess the pain he had felt after the Houston excursion: the 'pain for all of us, for our country so rich, so talented and so exhausted by incessant experiments.' "

He wrote that Mr. Yeltsin added, "I think we have committed a crime against our people by making their standard of living so incomparably lower than that of the Americans." An aide, Lev Sukhanov was reported to have said that it was at that moment that "the last vestige of Bolshevism collapsed" inside his boss.

Mr. Yeltsin became etched in the minds of the Russian people and, indeed, became a world figure, with one act of extraordinary bravery on the day in August 1991 when he clambered atop a Red Army tank and faced down the right-wing forces who were threatening to overthrow Mr. Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader.

Long a thorn in Mr. Gorbachev's side and soon to become his most powerful rival, Mr. Yeltsin on that day was Mr. Gorbachev's most powerful and effective ally.

"Citizens of Russia," he declared. "We are dealing with a right-wing, reactionary, anti-constitutional coup d'etat We appeal to citizens of Russia to give an appropriate rebuff to the putschists."

Thousands of Muscovites came out in the street to support him, he defeated the coup and saved Mr. Gorbachev. But not long after, he became the instrument of Mr. Gorbachev's political downfall and with it the dissolution of the Soviet state.

Mr. Yeltsin's accomplishments are all the more remarkable given the odds against him. Bill Keller, who covered the Soviet Union for The New York Times from 1986 to 1991 and is now the newspaper's executive editor, observed that when "Yeltsin emerged in the mid-1980s as the Communist Party boss of Moscow, a rambunctious, crowd-pleasing reformer, Western officials viewed him as an uninvited guest at the Gorbachev honeymoon.

Mr. Keller wrote, "To scholars on the left, he was an irksome distraction from the attempt to humanize socialism; to scholars on the right, his origins as a Communist functionary in the hinterlands made him deeply suspect — 'a typical provincial apparatchik' was the dismissive judgment of Dmitri K. Simes," a leading Russian scholar.

Mr. Yeltsin survived expulsion from the Communist Party Politburo in 1987; the Communist coup attempt in 1993; the failed effort to subdue Chechnya in 1994; a new challenge from the Communists in 1996; Russia's economic collapse in 1998; and a Communist-led drive to impeach him in 1999.

He also survived frequent bouts of influenza, bronchitis and pneumonia, quintuple bypass surgery in 1996 with continuing heart problems, a bleeding ulcer, a bizarre near-drowning before he ever achieved high office, uncounted missed appointments and even the spectacle of toppling over at official ceremonies, due, it was widely believed, to overindulgence in vodka and bourbon.

As Celestine Bohlen reported from Moscow for The New York Times, Mr. Yeltsin was a master of drama and of the political moment, who “dominated the Russian political stage like an erratic, lumbering bear, emerging from periodic bouts of poor health with surprise moves calculated to confound his opponents and dazzle his political allies.”

Mr. Yeltsin often seemed overwhelmed by the long road Russia had yet to travel, and he may well be remembered less as a builder of institutions than as a destroyer of them.

He broke up the Soviet Union. He laid the Communist Party low, removing the bottom brick from the one-party Soviet system. He upended the centralized Soviet economy that had impoverished his country, and he crushed the putsch that threatened to return the country to the old system.

But Mr. Yeltsin could only begin the transition to a democratic, capitalist Russia based on the rule of law. The system he put in place survived legislative and military challenges but remained personal, incoherent and fragile, prone to corruption and easily bent away from its ideals.

Even so, he brought about fundamental economic change in Russia, instituting a market economy, however distorted, fostering an emerging younger class of business executives, and in the last years of his presidency, achieving a gradual reduction in crime.

Politically, too, his reforms had impact. The legislature began to shape politics, the news media largely kept their newly acquired freedoms, and political rivals competed openly in elections. Though Mr. Putin has since reinforced the Kremlin’s sway over some of these areas, from hemming in the news media to toppling some of the new “oligarchs” of business who were not his political allies, the worst that many in Russia and the West had feared — a Communist revival or a new fascism built on chaos — has not materialized.

Mr. Yeltsin failed, though, in the undramatic work of hammering together a political and economic framework that could consolidate and stabilize the new Russian state, not least by refusing to establish his own political party, leaving him with no structure to see through many of his reforms.

“Yeltsin’s understanding is a tabula rasa,” said Vitaly T. Tretyakov, editor of Nezavisimaya Gazeta, one of Moscow’s most respected newspapers. “In economics, his knowledge is nil — nil. In how to construct a state, zero. It’s really the same in all fields. It’s not his fault, of course. To come to power, he had to contest everything. But leading is a different matter.”

#### Image

Mr. Yeltsin with the Russian writer Viktor Astafyev, right, in 1996. Although his commitment to reform wavered, Mr. Yeltsin eliminated government censorship of the press, tolerated public criticism and steered Russia toward a free market. Credit...Associated Press

Mr. Yeltsin embodied both the best traits attributed to the Russian people — warmth, loyalty and shrewdness — and some of the greatest faults — an inability to plan, an affection for chaos and an excessive love of alcohol.

And though he possessed a populist's skill with symbolism and drama, he sometimes retreated to govern in isolation.

Though Mr. Yeltsin had more natural aptitude as a politician than Mr. Gorbachev, he never received the respect and affection in the West that Mr. Gorbachev did, perhaps because of his boisterous style, so unlike the cultivated Western manner of Mr. Gorbachev.

Old habits from his years in the Communist Party apparatus led Mr. Yeltsin to surround himself with loyal acolytes who rarely told him what he did not want to hear, and led him into adventures like Chechnya. He was ultimately stymied by the fierce opposition that developed to his reforms, and to the war in Chechnya, which he was unable to win but unwilling to end.

The campaign to subdue secessionists in Chechnya left as many as 80,000 people dead and undermined Mr. Yeltsin's moral authority. It exposed the breakdown of Russia's once-vaunted military machine, and raised concern about the stability of a country still in possession of a huge nuclear arsenal. The killing of civilians and widespread human rights abuses tainted the image of a democratic Russia in the West.

As President, Mr. Yeltsin showed that he could shift his domestic political alliances with great skill, moving to the right of center after the surprisingly strong showing of the ultranationalist Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy in parliamentary elections in December 1993, and then turning in 1995 to assemble a centrist block with leaders like Viktor Chernomyrdin and Ivan Rybkin after the Chechnya war cost him the support of many liberal democrats. Such changes in political direction could unnerve his supporters in the West, but they succeeded in extending Mr. Yeltsin's hold on power.

Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin first came to widespread public attention in 1985, when Mr. Gorbachev called him to Moscow from the provincial city of Sverdlovsk (now once again known by its pre-Communist name, Yekaterinburg), where Mr. Yeltsin was chief of the local party organization.

Mr. Yeltsin was soon jumping on to trolley buses in the capital and demanding to know why they were not running on time, and charging into stores to harangue managers over their empty shelves while the back rooms were filled with meat and vegetables and soap. He was a breath of fresh air from the steppes, and people loved it.

When Mr. Gorbachev appointed him to be head of the Moscow City Party Committee, Mr. Yeltsin wrote that he felt he had a mandate to clear away old debris, including party hacks who opposed Mr. Gorbachev.

Mr. Yeltsin declared war on the bribery and corruption that was endemic in the capital, fought against the privileges claimed as entitlements by the party elite and worked to get food — particularly fresh vegetables — into the city's state-run stores and private markets.

He sought to make the city more attractive and livable, with street cafes and fruit stalls. He met with citizen's groups to answer questions. He encouraged a freer press and welcomed new television programs.

It was when he brought his brusque manner and open criticism to the inner workings of the Communist Party that he fell afoul of his mentor, Mr. Gorbachev, creating a rupture that was never healed.

Mr. Yeltsin took the unusual step at a closed party plenum in 1987 of mounting a scathing personal attack on a conservative rival, Yegor K. Ligachev, and denouncing the lethargic pace of reform. His speech was not published, but his words percolated out through the Moscow rumor mill, destroying the image of party unanimity.

Mr. Yeltsin's break with the party had begun, and it was that moment that Mr. Gorbachev chose to humiliate him. He called Mr. Yeltsin away from his sickbed, where he was recovering from heart trouble and a "nervous collapse," to face criticism from the Moscow Party organization, which then dismissed Mr. Yeltsin as the city's party leader and forced him to resign from the Politburo. Mr. Gorbachev then appointed him to a relatively unimportant job in the construction bureaucracy.

A year later, Mr. Yeltsin had his nerves back under control when he reappeared at the 19th Party Congress and made a televised appeal for political rehabilitation "in my lifetime."

Mr. Yeltsin never was formally rehabilitated by the party. But Mr. Gorbachev and the party unwittingly provided the vehicle for his resurrection by establishing an elected parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies. Mr. Yeltsin saw his chance and ran for a seat as a political underdog and victim.

Skillfully campaigning on television, he denounced the special privileges of the party elite, and in 1989 won a Moscow citywide seat in the congress with a stunning 90 percent of the vote.

Once in the parliament, Mr. Yeltsin showed his political savvy, winning the admiration of pro-democracy intellectuals, building alliances with nationalist leaders and establishing himself as the vital voice of Russia's future, while casting Mr. Gorbachev as the ghost of the Soviet past.

Then in the spring of 1990, in another landslide, Mr. Yeltsin was elected to the legislature of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, by far the largest of the Soviet Union's constituent republics. The legislature named him president of the republic.

But that was not enough for Boris Yeltsin: he wanted a popular mandate, and called for elections. He stunned his fellow delegates when he resigned from the Communist Party and still won the popular vote for the presidency on June 12, 1991, getting more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round.

That made him the first legitimately elected leader in a thousand years of Russian government, and provided him with an extraordinary forum for attacking Mr. Gorbachev's policies.

Image

Mr. Yeltsin, seen in a 1995 news conference, left a giant, if flawed, legacy. He started to establish a democratic state and then pulled back, lurching from one prime minister to another in an effort to control the levers of power. Credit...Michael Evastafiev/AFP -- Getty Images

It was two months later, in August 1991, that Mr. Yeltsin strode from his office in the Russian republic's headquarters, an office building known as the White House, to thwart the right-wing coup, an act of heroism that saved Mr. Gorbachev from overthrow but also sealed the Soviet Union's doom.

Standing on the tank, Mr. Yeltsin declared: "The legally elected president of the country has been removed from power. We proclaim all decisions and decrees of this committee to be illegal."

With his bold stand, Mr. Yeltsin came to embody the last hope of his people. His ability to rally Muscovites that night suggested that a democratic spirit was taking hold in a land that had known little but czars and commissars. His ability to attract support from segments of the Soviet armed forces demonstrated the breakdown of centralized control. Five days later, Mr. Gorbachev effectively closed the Bolshevik era when he resigned as general secretary of the Communist Party and dissolved its Central Committee.

In an interview with Reuters in September 1991, Mr. Yeltsin described his feelings at the moment of the coup attempt: "At that time I had only one thought on my mind, and that was to save Russia, to save this country, to save democracy and the whole world, because otherwise it would have led to chaos, to another cold war — or a hot war, for that matter. And that would have been disastrous for the whole world.

"And this is again something that we should always remember: The roots are still there, the roots of the old totalitarian system are still there.

We need to pull them out, and we should continue along the road of a rule-of-law state, so that the people live better."

He saw himself as a man with a mission. "The system gave birth to me, and the system changed me," he once said. "Now it is time for me to change the system."

Toward that end, days after he thwarted the coup, Mr. Yeltsin signed a decree suspending the activities of the Communist Party. And he created a constitutional court as a guarantee against the arbitrariness of the Soviet system, though the court later proved a pliable reed and revived the party.

But even as Mr. Yeltsin had taken for Russia the mantle of Soviet power, he entered uncharted territory, and his country was already in shambles.

"This is a bear, a giant bear," he said. "And this wheel needs to be put in motion. And this is what I want to do, to set it in motion."

He had to build a state in a country where all the people with experience had been loyal to the system he had just destroyed. "I can't say that we had to start from scratch," he wrote, "but almost."



Mr. Yeltsin set about almost immediately to negotiate the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the independence of its constituent republics. Mr. Yeltsin started by ending Mr. Gorbachev's increasingly violent efforts to keep the three Baltic republics, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, tied to the Soviet empire.

By the end of the year, working with the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine, he had scrapped the Soviet Union in favor of a much looser confederation, which became the Commonwealth of Independent States. Even that grouping, dominated by Russia and plagued by ineffectiveness and lingering suspicions, was eventually all but abandoned.

Faced with an embittered and potentially explosive Russian nationalism at home, Mr. Yeltsin reasserted Russian economic prerogatives and tried to defend the rights of ethnic Russians left stranded and unhappy in the new republics. Under his command, Russia organized an independent (if demoralized) army, and took control of most of the Soviet nuclear inheritance, as well as the Soviet Union's seat on the United Nations Security Council. Russia also assumed responsibility for the Soviet Union's debt.

Mr. Yeltsin continued Mr. Gorbachev's policy of cooperation with the West, not least because economic aid could come only from that direction. He reaffirmed Russia's adherence to arms control treaties and to extensive arms reductions. In his second term, despite persistent protests from nationalists, he acquiesced in an expansion of NATO toward Russia's western border, trying at the same time to maintain an independent foreign policy.

But Mr. Yeltsin's critics complained that he deferred too often to the West, and that he had been outmaneuvered by Ukraine over control of the former Soviet Black Sea fleet and the Soviet nuclear weapons based in Ukraine. If Mr. Yeltsin and Mr. Gorbachev had not hated one another, the critics charged, the union itself need never have collapsed.

David Remnick, in his book "Lenin's Tomb," (Random House, 1993) wrote that "Gorbachev began accusing Yeltsin of running a government not dissimilar to 'an insane asylum,' and Yeltsin's aides began chipping away at Gorbachev's (generous) retirement deal, first taking away his limousine and replacing it with a more modest sedan, then threatening worse. 'Soon,' one newspaper cracked, 'Mikhail Sergeyevich will be going to work on a bicycle.' "

In time, the Boris Yeltsin who was admired for his ability to grow with each new responsibility seemed to become less flexible as president: more impulsive, less democratic, ever more reliant on cronies. It was said, for example, that he frequently took the advice of his longtime bodyguard, Aleksandr A. Korzhakov, a former K.G.B. officer with a sinister reputation who monitored everything that went in and out of Mr. Yeltsin's office.

In 1995 Natalya Ivanova, editor of *Znamya*, a highly regarded journal of literature and comment, said in an interview: "Some people learn all their lives, and some people stop learning. Sadly, Yeltsin stopped learning in 1991."

Mr. Yeltsin said in his autobiography that he initially felt uncomfortable in the lush surroundings of the Kremlin office suite that came with his leadership, and that while security concerns dictated that he work there, the luxurious trappings contradicted his populist election platform.

Furthermore, the abandon with which his subordinates parceled out the traditional perquisites of power — the cars, the country houses, the resort vacations — suggested that for all the talk of change, things were looking very much the same.

The bureaucratic elite that ran the Soviet Union had gotten over its shock and had begun to reestablish new ties to Mr. Yeltsin and the government.

With that, the intellectuals whose support Mr. Yeltsin had won became alienated. Ordinary Russians chafed under the steep price increases he ordered in the initial phase of his bold economic gamble, and many questioned the competence of the people he chose to carry out his reforms.

In December 1991, Mr. Yeltsin backed a young economist, Yegor T. Gaidar, and eliminated price controls entirely in early January 1992. This was brutal economic shock therapy, Mr. Yeltsin acknowledged in his autobiography. “They expected paradise on earth,” he wrote, “but instead they got inflation, unemployment, economic shock and political crisis.” To say nothing of crime and corruption.

But the hard medicine was applied for only a few months, leaving Russia to fall into a period of stop-and-go economic reform that was meant to ease the pain of transition but only prolonged it. When Mr. Yeltsin decided that Russia could take no more social strain, and in the face of severe criticism from the holdover Soviet parliament, he removed Mr. Gaidar as Prime Minister in December 1992, replacing him with Mr. Chernomyrdin, a more reassuring, older-style figure who was head of the state natural-gas monopoly.

Mr. Yeltsin again put himself and his policies to the people in a referendum in April 1993, and again won a big vote of confidence. But by the autumn, he was forced to defend himself and his reforms in a bloody confrontation with more conservative nationalist legislators, whose own views of reform Mr. Yeltsin generally ignored. The struggle became a serious fight for power and ended with the indelible image of tanks firing at the parliament building itself.

Mr. Yeltsin dissolved the Russian legislature in September 1993, declaring that the “irreconcilable opposition” of its large number of Communist holdovers had paralyzed his reforms and his ability to govern.

He acted after a member of the opposition, in a gesture with clear meaning to Russians, indicated with a flick of the index finger that Mr. Yeltsin was drunk. But there was also strong evidence that the parliament’s leaders intended to remove him under the old Soviet constitution and empower Aleksandr V. Rutskoi, whom Mr. Yeltsin had chosen as vice president but had later summarily dismissed.

Mr. Yeltsin announced elections to a new parliament. The Supreme Soviet, the parliament’s day-to-day policy making arm, responded by voting overwhelmingly to depose him. Mr. Yeltsin then ordered the police to surround the parliament and cut off the electricity to the building, setting the stage for a violent confrontation.

It came two weeks later, in October, after parliamentary supporters, urged on by Mr. Rutskoi, broke through police lines and rampaged through Moscow, taking over the main television tower in what became a street battle. With Mr. Yeltsin at his dacha and his government inattentive, the demonstrators could probably have taken the Kremlin if they had tried.

Mr. Yeltsin moved to win over the reluctant backing of his top generals to oppose the coup, but only after an all-night session at the Defense Ministry. Elite troops were summoned to the White House building, the same location where Mr. Yeltsin had stood on a tank to oppose the coup against Mr. Gorbachev in 1991. This time, a 10-hour barrage of fire by tanks and armored personnel carriers routed the rebellious opposition, leaving dozens of people dead and the vast White House building windowless and burning.

It was the worst civil strife in Moscow since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

A different Yeltsin emerged from the affair. He imposed an overnight curfew on the capital, banned extremist opposition parties and closed down Pravda and a number of other newspapers that had supported the rebels. But censorship was soon ignored and the papers and parties reopened, sometimes under different names. Mr. Rutskoi and other leaders were jailed, but were soon pardoned by the new parliament.

The Yeltsin optimism was gone. "Do not say that someone has won and someone has lost," the shaken leader warned his people. "These are inappropriate, blasphemous words. We have all been scorched by the deadly breath of fratricide."

By 1996, the threat of a Communist resurgence behind his chief rival for the presidency, Gennadi A. Zyuganov, energized Mr. Yeltsin again. He threw himself into the campaign like a much younger man, flying all over the country, shaking thousands of hands and performing everything from peasant dances to a widely televised version of the twist.

To ensure his victory, Mr. Yeltsin made a pact with Aleksandr I. Lebed, a gruff former general whom he had fired for insubordination. Mr. Yeltsin identified Mr. Lebed as a likely successor and made him chairman of the powerful National Security Council. But to insure that Mr. Lebed would not become a rival, he then saddled him with trying to find an honorable end to the Chechnya fiasco.

Just before the final round of voting, Mr. Yeltsin had a relapse — what his doctors later acknowledged to be a heart attack — and he nearly disappeared from sight, unable to receive any visitors other than close relatives.

But the latest setback to his health was hidden from voters by compliant Russian news media, which feared what a Communist victory might mean.

Mr. Yeltsin later admitted that he had reached a point where he was prepared to scuttle democracy completely and outlaw the Communist Party. In his "Midnight Diaries," (Public Affairs, 2000), published in the year after he stepped down from the presidency, Mr. Yeltsin wrote that he had gone so far as to have the necessary decrees drawn up. He said he knew he would "pay a heavy price in credibility" but that it would resolve the main problem of his entire presidency, by assuring that the Communist Party would be "finished forever in Russia."

But he said his daughter and the former prime minister, Anatoly B. Chubais, persuaded him that the step would backfire. In his frail state, he revived sufficiently to beat back the Communist challenge of Mr. Zyuganov and win the election by a substantial majority.

Afterward, an aide described him as “colossally weary,” and Mr. Yeltsin’s poor health rendered him unable to start off his second term with the quick and energetic recommitment to reform sought by Russia’s Western supporters, especially President Clinton. Then Mr. Yeltsin underwent quintuple bypass surgery, and as his health worsened, politicians maneuvered to succeed him.

He responded with his own maneuvers, appointing and firing four prime ministers in two years as he sought to deal with one of the worst financial crises since the demise of the Soviet Union. In August, 1998, the value of the ruble collapsed in international currency markets, taking the Russian stock market down with it. The government postponed paying some foreign debt and started printing money, contributing further to inflation.

Chechen bandits invaded the neighboring province of Dagestan in 1999, and a series of bombings of Moscow apartment houses were attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Chechen terrorists, reigniting the war in the Caucasus.

Image

Boris Yeltsin at the Virchow Hospital Center in Berlin in February 2006. Credit...Miguel Villagran/European Pressphoto Agency

When Mr. Clinton criticized Russia’s large-scale bombardment of civilian areas in Chechnya, Mr. Yeltsin, in his last month in office, intemperately brandished his nuclear arsenal. It seemed, he said, that Mr. Clinton “had for a minute forgotten that Russia has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons.”

Mr. Yeltsin’s health continued to decline. On a visit to Tashkent in Central Asia, he appeared nearly to fall over as he stood listening to a band performance. At an official dinner, he gave a confused version of a speech, reading from the beginning, then the end, and apparently realizing he had finished too quickly, reverted to the middle section.

In 1999, the remaining Communists in Russia’s Parliament led a drive to impeach and remove Mr. Yeltsin on a host of charges including treason (dismantling the Soviet Union, assailing the Communists in 1993, waging illegal war in Chechnya) and genocide (allowing Russian living standards to plummet, causing millions of early deaths). The impeachment effort failed when 100 members of the legislature boycotted the vote and some ballots were thrown out because they were defaced or contained no names.

During his last month in office, Mr. Yeltsin, with the help of the popularity of his chosen successor, Mr. Putin, was able to win enough votes in the parliament to pursue his agenda of economic reform and break the Communists’ hold on legislation. But Mr. Putin was soon making alliances with the same Communists who had gone down to defeat.

Mr. Yeltsin was a moody man, subject to occasional glooms and lassitudes, and wrote in his autobiography of being plagued with worry, of bending under the burdens he carried: “The debilitating bouts of depression, the grave second thoughts, the insomnia and headaches in the middle of the night, the tears and despair, the sadness at the appearance of Moscow and other Russian cities, the flood of criticism from the newspapers and television every day, the harassment campaign at the Congress sessions, the entire burden

of the decisions made, the hurt from people close to me who did not support me at the last minute, who didn't hold up, who deceived me - I have had to bear all of this."

Mr. Yeltsin knew first-hand the misery of the Russian people under Communism. He was born on Feb. 1, 1931, to a peasant family in Butko, a village in the Sverdlovsk district of the Urals, the oldest of six children.

When his father moved to the town of Berezniki to work as a laborer, during what Mr. Yeltsin remembered as "Stalin's so-called period of industrialization," the family was allocated a single room in a communal hut. He recalled in the first volume of his autobiography, "Against the Grain" (Summit Books, 1990), that they lived in that hut for 10 years.

"Winter was worst of all," he wrote. "There was nowhere to hide from the cold. Since we had no warm clothes, we would huddle up to the nanny goat to keep warm. We children survived on her milk. She was also our salvation throughout the war."

Even as a boy, Mr. Yeltsin challenged authority, and tales of his early brashness were woven into the carefully burnished lore surrounding him. Acknowledging that he was something of a "hooligan," he recalled standing up at his graduation from elementary school to denounce a teacher who, he declared, "had no right to teach children because she crippled them mentally and psychologically." He then fought the bureaucrats to get the diploma that was withheld from him as punishment.

He was still only a boy during World War II when he lost the thumb and forefinger of his left hand when he tried to dismantle a grenade that he and some friends had stolen.

At the Urals Polytechnic Institute he studied civil engineering and played volleyball. Competing in one long tournament despite a headcold, he said, he first strained his heart. He refused to go to a hospital and went home instead, and forever after remembered his heart pounding violently in his chest.

Still, he took hikes in the mountains and forests, and spent one summer traveling around Russia by catching rides on the top of railway cars. One day, he wrote, he met up with a group of former prisoners who got him into a poker game and took him for everything but his underpants.

Upon graduation, Mr. Yeltsin returned to Sverdlovsk, where he was offered the job of foreman at an industrial building site. He refused, insisting instead that he work in each trade first, so that when he was in a position to give orders, he would know what he was talking about.

He did not join the Communist Party until 1961, when he was 30 years old, an age at which Mr. Gorbachev was already well on his way up the party hierarchy. For Mr. Yeltsin, membership was a move to further his career in the Sverdlovsk construction agency, not an expression of his fervent belief in Communism.

He vented his disdain for the party in his autobiography when he described the oral examination he had to pass for membership. A member of the local committee, he wrote, "asked me on what page of which volume of 'Das Kapital' Marx refers to commodity-money relationships. Assuming that he had never read Marx closely and had, of course, no idea of either the volume or page number in question, and that he didn't even know what commodity-money relationships were, I immediately answered, half jokingly, 'Volume Two, 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."

Fifteen years later, after serving as a secretary of the Sverdlovsk provincial committee, Mr. Yeltsin became party chief for the region, and stood out in the stagnation of the Brezhnev era as an activist, less interested in the perquisites of office than in rooting out bureaucratic corruption and improving the lot of the people.

When Mr. Gorbachev became general secretary in 1985, he sought out regional leaders like Mr. Yeltsin who were not mired in Moscow's ways. But he may have gotten more than he bargained for in Mr. Yeltsin, who wrote in his autobiography that he turned down the offer of a government dacha that Mr. Gorbachev had formerly used.

"We were shattered by the senselessness of it all," he wrote of the enormous fireplaces, marble paneling, parquet floors, sumptuous carpets, chandeliers, crystal and luxurious furniture in the house. "I lost count of the number of bathrooms and lavatories."

He asked: "What was the point of the whole thing? No one, not even the most outstanding public figures of the contemporary world, could possibly find a use for so many rooms, lavatories and television sets all at the same time."

He concluded that the K.G.B. had paid for it all, and added, "It would be interesting to know how all this expenditure is accounted for and under what heading of the K.G.B.'s budget. Combating spies?"

Mr. Yeltsin had found a subject he could ride, and he later used it — often — as a blunt club. Tartly enumerating all of Mr. Gorbachev's houses and dachas, he suggested that "perestroika would not have ground to a halt ... if only Gorbachev had been able to get rid of his reluctance to deal with the question of the leadership's privileges, if he himself had renounced all those completely useless, though pleasant, customary perquisites."

Mr. Yeltsin could not resist a final shot. "Why has Gorbachev been unable to change 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."

To this he contrasted the simple tastes of his own wife, Naina, and his daughters, Lena and Tanya, who, along with several grandchildren, survive him.

Mr. Yeltsin once said, "As long as no one can build his own dacha, as long as we continue to live in such relative poverty, I refuse to eat caviar followed by sturgeon."

But as Russia's new rich started dotting the countryside with fine brick houses, Mr. Yeltsin too was soon enveloping himself in comfort and relative luxury, enjoying life at a state dacha, playing tennis, wearing trendy Western fashion, using more limousines than Mr. Gorbachev ever had, and allowing those officials around him to live equally well, if not better.

At a time when state employees, army officials and pensioners often went unpaid, a reported \$823 million was spent to restore Kremlin palaces, churches, administrative offices and Mr. Yeltsin's Kremlin residence to

their czarist splendor. By 1999, Mr. Yeltsin, and his family whose frugality and moderation he had so praised, were being accused of accepting kickbacks, with evidence emerging that he and his daughters had used credit cards supplied by a Swiss construction firm that had received Kremlin contracts.

It was Mr. Yeltsin's personal excesses that made him particularly vulnerable. In his 1989 visit to the United States he acted like a vigorous American politician in the middle of a campaign. But reporters also noted the mercurial leader's great thirst for bourbon. In his autobiography, Mr. Yeltsin attributed his slurred speech during that visit to the effects of a sleeping pill and exhaustion from jet-lag, and he insisted that a videotape was doctored to make him look drunk.

In a still puzzling incident before he became President, he turned up soaking wet at a police station near Moscow. According to one version, a jealous husband pushed him off a bridge. Mr. Yeltsin intimated that the K.G.B. was trying to kill him.

In an interview with Barbara Walters during a visit to the United States in January 1992, Mr. Yeltsin regularly denied reports that he drank too much, although he acknowledged that he turned to alcohol to relieve stress. "I am not an ascetic," he told Barbara Walters in a televised interview in 1992, "but I am categorically denying all those rumors."

"Athletic activity and alcohol are two things that are incompatible with each other," he continued, speaking through an interpreter. "I'm very actively engaged in sports, an hour and a half every Tuesday and Saturday, athletic exercise morning and night, a cold shower, and very intensive work for 19 to 20 hours a day."

In the same interview he implicitly aimed an arrow at Mr. Gorbachev when he said he did not consult his wife about political decisions. "In my family, I'm the boss," he said pointedly.

Some attributed his occasionally aberrant actions and his puffy face to the pain medication he took for a severe back problem stemming from a 1990 airplane accident, and the way such medication might interact with alcohol.

There was no such explanation for his erratic behavior some years later, when a visibly embarrassed Helmut Kohl, the chancellor of Germany, had to help Mr. Yeltsin down a flight of steps after he played the buffoon, boisterously picking up a baton to conduct the Berlin police orchestra during a visit in 1994.

Jet lag, sleeping pills and a cold were the excuse a month later when Mr. Yeltsin failed to make it off his plane at a stopover in Ireland, where the Irish prime minister himself stood waiting on the tarmac to greet him.

Then in January 1995, at a summit meeting in Kazakhstan when he mumbled and stumbled and had to lean on aides to stand up straight, the excuse was again the inevitable effect of a long plane trip on a 64-year-old man.

But Mr. Yeltsin was stung by criticism of his drinking, and tried to clean up his act for a while. He put in long work days and managed to make his voice boom when he delivered speeches. But he soon stumbling again, slurring his words and disappearing from the scene again and again for long holidays.

There were also increasing signs of worsening heart disease, including a sudden hospitalization in July 1995, when Mr. Yeltsin complained of chest pain. For the first time, the Kremlin admitted there was a diagnosis for his ailment — myocardial ischemia, a shortage of oxygen to the heart muscle because of narrowed arteries — and Mr. Yeltsin was out of the Kremlin for four weeks. He then took a month-long vacation.

He had another attack of ischemia in October 1995, after a five-day visit to France and the United States, and was hospitalized again. Aides issued implausible assurances that the president was fine, and in time, Mr. Yeltsin returned to his desk.

“A man must live like a great bright flame and burn as brightly as he can,” Mr. Yeltsin said in March 1990. “In the end he burns out. But this is better than a mean little flame.”

He came to recognize how far short of his goals he fell. In his resignation speech, he told the Russian people: “I want to ask for your forgiveness. For the fact that many of the dreams we shared did not come true. And for the fact that what seemed simple to us turned out to be tormentingly difficult. I ask forgiveness for not justifying some hopes of those people who believed that at one stroke, in one spurt, we could leap from the gray, stagnant, totalitarian past into the light, rich, civilized future. I myself believed in this, that we could overcome everything in one spurt. I turned out to be too naïve.”

After leaving office, Mr. Yeltsin worked on his memoir, based on a diary he kept during bouts of insomnia in his years as president.

At the end, he was a man worn down: “I feel like a runner who has just completed a supermarathon of 40,000 kilometers,” he wrote. “I gave it my all. I put my whole heart and soul into running my presidential marathon. I honestly went the distance. If I have to justify anything, here is what I will say: If you think you can do it better, just try. Run those 40,000 kilometers. Try to do it faster, better, more elegantly, or more easily. Because I did it.”