

Chapter 37

Changing Patterns of World Power

BABUSHKA AT THE BARRICADES

◆ Section 1 (pages 845–852)

The State Committee overthrew Mikhail Gorbachev on Sunday, August 18, 1991. The next day, the Committee declared a state of emergency and ordered troops into Moscow. The following passage is by a CNN reporter. She provides a vivid description of how Boris Yeltsin and the people of Moscow resisted the coup.

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" the frail Russian voice asked right behind me. We were both standing at the foot of a tank, but upon this tank was Boris Yeltsin, standing tall against gray sky and gleaming white Russian Parliament Building.

"He's reading a Russian government statement. . . He says the Emergency Committee is unconstitutional and to spread the word," I told Marina, the thin *babushka* [grandmother] straining to hear her hero's message.

Tears welled in her eyes, already clouded with age and the tough memories of a Soviet past. Marina was two when the Communists overthrew the failing democratic government that had barely replaced the czars. For Marina, history was repeating itself.

"I heard them on the radio this morning," she said with resignation. "Where's Gorbachev? Why are they playing that music. . . is he dead?"

The man next to her shouted the same to Yeltsin, "Where's Mikhail Sergeyevich?" The cry spread through the crowd.

"My friends, I don't know," said Yeltsin helplessly. "I don't know."

No political rivalry or personal opinion could diminish the human concern you could see in these faces. Even Boris Yeltsin paused, pained at the obvious. They knew all too well that Gorbachev's life was in jeopardy.

There were fewer than a hundred people there, milling about the Russian White House, when it all began. Women, in drab housecoats on their way to shop, stopped to listen. The most hardened Moscow taxi drivers veered off the road, abandoning their dilapidated cabs to catch the "real" news. Even a top Soviet scientist and a few People's Deputies looking somewhat out of place in their best gray suits, were drawn to the one building in Moscow that had come to represent real democracy.

Glancing up the hill toward Kutuzovsky Prospect, they could see the government tanks rolling over the bridge even as Yeltsin spoke of

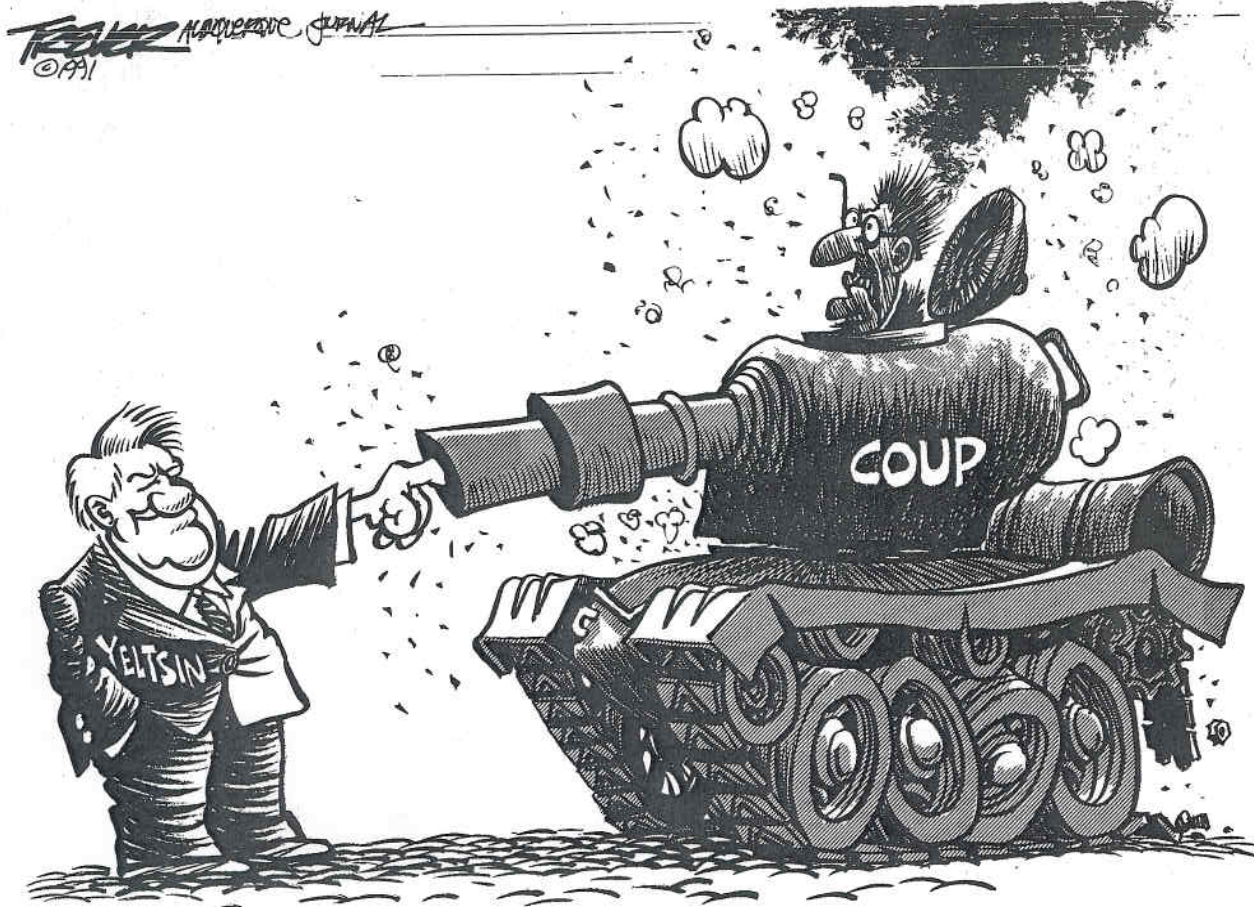
defiance. The din of the tanks could not drown out his booming voice, but the entire city seemed to rumble as the tanks moved in from every direction, like a drum roll to a final act. The tanks were setting up roadblocks, trying to cut the people off from each other and the outside world. Yet the people continued to stream down the hill toward the White House. The word was already spreading. Yeltsin and the people would stand up to the coup leaders.

"We are the constitutionally elected government of Russia," said Yeltsin. "We must get the word out that this Emergency Committee is unconstitutional. We are calling for a general strike until the power is restored to the constitutional authorities, namely Gorbachev." A Russian flag appeared out of nowhere atop a tank and the people began to chant, "Yeltsin, Yeltsin," as he pushed back into the Parliament Building, confident that at least these people had heard the truth. But would they listen?

As Yeltsin disappeared inside, the lawns and steps outside the White House became a fertile field, from which sprang posters and placards, poems pasted on walls, but mainly people. Within hours they were hauling concrete blocks, rusty wire, steel rods, crates, coiled chicken wire. . . anything they could drag to the foot of this tabernacle. They had to protect the covenants it housed: freedom and self-determination. The Russian people knew for once they had it in them to say "No," to the authorities, to say, "We will not be told our destiny."

I have been told often by friends who also went to the barricades those days and by contacts who gave me information that, at first, they had been scared, that they had thought, "I will close the shutters and stay inside." But as one friend put it, "I realized I had to make a choice. I knew that you would be working, getting information. I knew I could help and I thought to myself, 'Now you must decide. Are you really with these people all the time or only when things are pleasant? If you mean what you say, you must act.'"

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Men with new-found strength of purpose dragged a heavy concrete cylinder from the nearby metro station. Stooped over short straw brooms, women swept up the remnants of food and paper strewn in the haste to fortify. Along the bridge, people ran up to the soldiers in the tanks, talking to them, handing them leaflets with the latest Yeltsin statement, and throwing them flowers.

As one earnest young woman in sneakers and jeans drew a crowd of soldiers with her impassioned plea, the group commander came rushing up. "Get back to your tanks," he shouted. "Where is your discipline?" Instead of retreating to their posts, the soldiers stayed to hear the young woman berate the commander, neat in his khakis and salt-and-pepper crew cut. "Why can't we talk?" she asked. "Are you afraid of the truth?"

"No one knows the truth," he smirked.

Each soldier had a different reason for being in Moscow. "We were told it was an exercise," said one. "Gorbachev's sick and needs to rest so we

came in just to keep order," said another, slightly better informed of the "official" version. "As I understand, this is what everyone wants," said another. The more they talked, the more confused they got, but still they said they had to obey orders, a Soviet tradition and excuse.

But the people told them, "That's not good enough anymore." As one middle-aged woman walked away from a tank, she said, "How can they not listen to me? I'm a mother. He'd listen to his mother," she said, gesturing to a young soldier on a tank, looking straight ahead, bewildered, caught between what he was told was his "duty to the Motherland" and what appeared to be the voice of the Motherland itself.

As I walked away from the row of tanks surrounding the White House, passing the very tank from which Yeltsin had made his own impassioned plea, I saw that Marina, that frail *babushka*, had not strayed far. As I watched, I saw her tug on the sleeve of a younger woman bustling by, "Did you hear?" she asked, "Yeltsin was here and said we must fight."

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Class _____

Chapter 37 ♦ Section 1 (pages 845–852)

1. Which government did the Communists overthrow when Marina was two years old? (See text page 649 for additional information). In what way was history repeating itself for Marina?

2. What action did Yeltsin urge the people to take? What was the symbolic importance of his speech from atop the tank?

3. According to the author, what democratic values were housed inside the White House?

4. What was the first reaction many people had when they heard that a coup had taken place? Why did the CNN reporter's friend decide to oppose the coup?

5. Why were the young soldiers confused?

6. Where was Marina when the reporter last saw her? What was she telling people?

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