

THREE DAYS IN AUGUST: REFLECTIONS ON THE SOVIET COUP AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

by Alan Geyer

Dr. Alan Geyer (United Methodist) is professor of ecumenical theology at the Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC. He is a former editor of the Christian Century and a prolific writer. He is the author of Christianity and the Superpowers (Nashville: Abingdon Press and Washington, DC: The Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, 1990). An article of his appeared in OPREE, Vol. X, No. 4.

Surely the three days of August 19-21, 1991, and the runaway train events thereafter, must be reckoned one of the most extraordinary dramas of this century. If that much is a certainty, the burden of this paper is to suggest that not much else is certain to me. Every day in the weeks since being asked to write this paper, I have tried to reorganize my thoughts and start writing. But every day has bombarded us with a whole new array of stunning developments.

I was in Moscow early this summer and stayed, for the umpteenth time, in the "Ukraina Hotel," right there at the Kutuzov Prospekt's bridge over the Moscow River, just across from the Russian Federation White House. The week before the coup, I led a workshop on the USSR at Montreat, the main theme of which was "the razor's edge between freedom and chaos" in all Soviet institutions, but I was hardly preparing my hearers to expect the happenings of the very next week.

Yet we have all known for several years, at least, that Soviet politics has been marked by severe turbulence. Mikhail Gorbachev's survival to date, even if it should end tomorrow, is one of the greatest political juggling acts of all time. Marshall Goldman, Russian studies professor at Harvard and Wellesley (no particular fan of Gorbachev) just last week expressed amazement at all that Gorbachev has produced since the coup. "Gorbachev," he said, "has more rabbits in his hat than Imelda Marcos has shoes."

My own recent book in this field, Christianity and the Superpowers, published over a year ago but actually written two years ago, should have warned me to expect something like the shocks of August 19 and after. In my preface, I had written: "I have been made almost breathlessly aware of the daily ups and downs of the struggle for liberalization in the Soviet Union ..., as well as the contradictory prophecies of U.S. official and pundits. This is either a very bad or a very good time for such a book." In a chapter on Russian political history, I entertained the notion that "the new wave of de-Stalinization and de-Brezhnevization" might "sweep on to become de-Gorbachevization or even de-Leninization," and that "would surely leave the Russian Revolution without its own icons."

Now I have been so ungracious as to quote myself, not to prove that I am a prophet (nor to promote sales of a book that really is not very much out of date), but to suggest that we have lived through such unendingly momentous events in Europe and the USSR, one after the other, or rather ten at a time, in the past three years that we keep being shocked anew, even though we have known all along that history itself has gotten unhinged in large areas of the world.

The only honest way I know even to attempt any useful contribution to our reflections on these most recent events is to suggest a series of platitudes that may help keep us open both to fresh understandings of those days of August and to the surprises yet to come.

My list of platitudes is sevenfold:

1. The contingency of historical judgments
2. The double-edged power of communications systems
3. The precariousness of constitutional integrity
4. The moral ambiguity of Russian nationalism (and all other nationalisms)
5. The robust yet problematical resurgence of Russian Orthodoxy
6. The perils of ideological triumphalism
7. The residual Cold War in American politics and policies.

1. The Contingency of Historical Judgments

All of us are disposed to make our own assessments of the personalities, conflicts, and consequences we have witnessed in these weeks, largely through TV lenses, but in some cases from personal presence amidst the turmoil or from private intelligence systems. A dominant image from the tube is the heroic figure of Boris Yeltsin atop a tank and behind the barricades, rousing the youthful crowd in defiance of the coup and then a triumphant Yeltsin, proudly saying that Russia had saved the Union, the constitution, and the Union presidency. Yeltsin claimed to work in harness with Gorbachev, even while repeatedly seeking to humiliate Gorbachev by sarcasm, while signing arbitrary decrees in Gorbachev's face, and while accusing Gorbachev's culpability for betrayal by his closest aides. Whether the show of civility and even good humor that Yeltsin and Gorbachev displayed toward each other during ABC's midnight "town meeting" last week is a foretaste of future amicability, who can say, but it was certainly a prudent show on their part for an American audience just now.

Perhaps it is too much of an all-American game to remain obsessed with this question as to who won and who lost the coup and who is Number One now. I suspect, however, that the question really is significant after all, but it is too early to answer it with confidence.

Challenging the mainstream of media reportage have been such Russian studies specialists as Stephen Cohen of Princeton and Jerry Hough of Duke and the Brookings Institution, both of whom continue to view Gorbachev as a very positive and empowering leader. Hough, not many days ago, forecast the reemergence of Gorbachev as a strong and indispensable president committed to constitutional legitimacy and civil liberties, while judging Yeltsin to be an intemperate opportunist of questionable democratic commitment. Other Yeltsin-observers, acknowledging his past reputation as a populist demagogue without a coherent program or political philosophy and given to racist antipathies toward Soviet Asians, now claim that Yeltsin has greatly matured as a political leader and has surrounded himself with sagacious liberal advisors.

Another perspective held to which Gorbachev resorted, whether by design or not, were tactics of accommodation that continued to create time and space for the more aggressive reformers to form political organizations, master the media, wage campaigns, win elections -- in short, to practice the more democratic political arts which were so long denied. From this perspective, extraordinary political transformations became possible just within the past year or two. Had the coup been waged a year or two ago, it might well have succeeded, given the fragility of democratic alternatives then. Boris Yeltsin, as the recently elected president of the Russian Federation, was in a much stronger position in August 1991 than he was in 1989 or even 1990. If Gorbachev now owes his political survival to Yeltsin (as well to his own courage), it is just as true that Yeltsin owes his own opportunities to the political reforms engineered by Gorbachev.

In contrast with the very visible public drama of Yeltsin's bravery before the barricades, surrounded by legions of aides and fervent supporters, was the invisible private drama of Gorbachev's bravery at Foros in the Crimea. In defenseless and incommunicable isolation, he firmly resisted the coup and withstood its personal and family terrors. Upon return to Moscow, Gorbachev was visibly worn down and seemed caught in a time warp, only to receive much more abuse than sympathy for his ordeal. Yet he soon recovered his customary vigor, repeatedly confessed his own past judgments of both policies and personnel, gave up the party leadership that had been the summit of his whole career, and performed a remarkably effective mediating role among discordant republics and factions, fabricating an interim governmental edifice that may offer the only alternative to chaos. Thomas Naylor of Duke University, shortly after Gorbachev returned to Moscow, observed: "What truly differentiates Gorbachev from previous Soviet leaders is his sophisticated approach to conflict. . . . Time and time again he has transformed complex zero-sum conflicts into win-win situations."

On September 3, the president of Turkmenia treated the Congress of People's Deputies to a fable said to be well known among his compatriots. It provided one of the few merciful moments for Gorbachev since his lonely restoration. The fable tells of a khan who had been refused the support of one of three neighboring villages in his domain, even though he had courageously and repeatedly come back to the village and listened to the people's complaints and endured their violent assaults against him. They said: "We've thrown stones at you three times, you've tolerated it, you have the reserve, the patience, and the democratic way of presenting yourself." After that, the villagers stopped throwing stones

at him. And the president of Turkmenia added: "We've thrown too many stones at Mikhail Sergeyevich."

In truth, one of Gorbachev's most important roles has been to serve, and to endure, as a scapegoat for all of the discontents of all the peoples and factions of the USSR: the hardline Unionists and the impatient separatists, the Leninist remnants and the populist democrats, the privileged elites and the exasperated consumers. Boris Yeltsin has made especially good use of Gorbachev as a scapegoat.

George Kennan, whom I revere above all other interpreters of Russian and Soviet matters, said that he was essentially finished as a strong leader. Kennan may be right, but I have been wondering in these subsequent weeks, as Gorby has ridden the tiger of a constantly changing power struggle, whether that judgment may have been premature.

It remains true that both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, extraordinarily talented politicians apparently now in earnest about democratization, were, just a few years ago, major cogs in the Communist Party machine and its monopoly of power. What shall we say now about all these more sudden conversions of conservative top party leaders in the Ukraine (Leonid Kravchuk), Byelorussia, Azerbaijan, and other republic in the wake of the coup and the dismantling of the Communist Party? Their motives are at least suspect, as is their credibility as patrons of democracy.

We can hardly know right now who most genuinely speaks for freedom and for justice in the Union of the Sovereign States.

We can hardly know now whether democratic reform is irreversible and tyranny a thing of the past.

There is a heavier question of historical judgement, looking backward to 1917. How categorical a verdict shall we now make about the Russian Revolution? Was it all an unmitigated evil? Or can we still, with Nicholas Berdyaev, view the "militant godlessness" of the Communists as a response to the "historical sins" of Christianity, its official conservatism and its slavish subjection to the old regime? And imagine that wherever Communism captivated a people, at least for a time, the failure of churches and of Christians to be faithful to their own prophetic Gospel culpable? Can we still be open to the evidence that millions of Soviet citizens, Christians and non-Christians, even under Demon Stalin, were inspired by a vision of social justice and humanization in a transformed society and, in fact, achieved some good thing?

The contingency of historical judgments means an openness to both the future and to alternative readings of the past. That is such a broad platitude that all my other six platitudes may be comprehended by it, and may even be much more briefly explicated.

2. The Double-edged Power of Communications Systems

The addiction of many of us to the TV tube in recent weeks testifies not only to the power of that medium over us but also to its intrusiveness, even decisiveness, in a cataclysmic political event. We discovered again, as we had during the Gulf War, that not only mass publics around the world but the major governments involved were dependent on CNN and other broadcast media.

Hardly less remarkable was the unobstructed flow of telephone and FAX communications, a yet-to-be explained lapse on the part of the coup leaders. Yeltsin could talk to Bush, Major, Mitterrand, and other world leaders, and TV and radio could broadcast that fact. Then, too, Gorbachev's makeshift radio helped overcome his total isolation, thanks to BBC and VOA.

Still another benign effect of communications technology came from the US military's satellite monitoring of the Soviet military. When these national technical means discerned no extraordinary flow of Soviet communications or troop movements during the coup, US authorities could take an increasingly relaxed attitude toward the security implications of the coup.

Communications systems, therefore, were determinative strategic assets for the coup's registers and their supporters around the world. Some caveats are in order, however, especially with regard to TV. Television has great power to obscure and distort historical perceptions.

Television could not cover all the major actors: not the coup plotters, nor the divided military commanders, nor Gorbachev in his isolation, nor the leaders of most other republics (especially the Asian republics), nor the provincial and rural communities.

TV's preoccupation with the immediate, visible, and sensational dramas tends to forfeit to others the interpretation of historical background and social analysis -- except for the hired commentators who, for fat fees, try to wrap up events in colorful packages of demonstrative expertise. While my own sampling was incomplete, I have the impression of a tedious procession of conservative and neo-conservative commentators who also tended toward a near-monopoly of the Op-Ed pages, of persons who had long majored in anti-Sovietism, who were quick to discount Gorbachev's achievements and/or his survivability, and to anoint Yeltsin as the Great Liberator: Zbigniew Brzezinski, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, Frank Gaffney, Marshall Goldman, Jim Hoagland, William Hyland, Jeane Kilpatrick, Henry Kissinger, Charles Krauthammer, A.M. Rosenthal, William Safire, Dimitri Simes, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, George Will. I must say that I have felt so often misled by most of these persons, most of the time, that I'm convinced we should look to others for more authentic expertise and wisdom.

3. The Precariousness of Constitutional Integrity

Whatever the limits of the media in helping us to form historical perspectives, the volatility of polity in the post-coup regime still presided over by Gorbachev should further deter our certitude. There is a discombobulating mishmash of an amended Soviet

Constitution, a *de facto* coalition between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, a series of decrees, an interim government, a committee to design a new government, a growing fabric of bilateral accords between republics, an Inter-Republic Economic Committee, and a dissolved Congress of People's Deputies whose continuing self-importance has been fortified by the retention of their salaries, secretaries, and travel perks for three more years but without legislative authority. No doubt that list is an oversimplification.

Gorbachev has cheerfully characterized this evolving polity as "a truly voluntary union, a federation on some issues, a confederation on others, an association on yet other questions." It has also been depicted as a "multitiered union," and again as a series of concentric circles moving out from a federal political core, to a confederal security state, to an economic community that may include the now liberated and independent Baltic states and perhaps other Eastern European countries. If this confounding of traditional notions of sovereignty succeeds, it would be unique in all the world. Richard N. Gardner, professor of international law at Columbia University and former assistant secretary state, is frankly baffled by the implications: "I must say, after teaching international law for 33 years, coming across this problem really baffles me....What is a state? I'm going back to the basic books to test this new thing that's emerging." Some day, but not now, we may better judge whether "this new thing" is only a desperate makeshift in the face of collapsing structures of authority or an imaginative model for a world whipsawed between global and ethnic pressures.

The interim governmental structure approved last week by the Congress of People's Deputies includes these components: (1) an executive State Council, headed by Gorbachev, composed of the leaders of the republics, with primary responsibility for defense, foreign policy, law enforcement, and coordination of domestic affairs; (2) a bicameral Supreme Soviet composed of a Council of the Republics (twenty deputies from each republic except Russia, allotted fifty-two to reflect its autonomous districts and regions but each delegation with only one vote) and a Council of the Union (deputies chosen by republic legislatures and enjoying the same apportionment as the dissolved Congress of People's Deputies); and (3) republic legislatures with the right to suspend within their borders any law adopted by the Supreme Soviet that contradicts their own constitutions.

These designs reflect at least a provisional shift of power away from the center to the republics, most of whom have declared their independence in some form. How close these declarations will really approach a plenitude of sovereignty is not yet clear. Stephen Cohen believes that most of them were "actually ploys for negotiating union relationships, not steps toward disunion." The eventual strength of the residual union will likely be measured by the republics' confidence in Gorbachev and other union leaders, their security interests concerning neighboring republics and states, and their economic stakes in the union. The New York Times in a September 4 editorial proposed three tests for the survival of the union as an economic entity: the free flow of goods, tight currency controls, and protection of private contracts.

There will be other severe tests of the constitutional integrity of the new regime. The prosecuting of personnel accused of treason in the coup must reach far enough but not too far, and it provides the opportunity for public spectacles of fair trials. A free press and an open political party system (even for Communists) would vindicate the democratic rhetoric of reformers.

A particularly troublesome matter is the republics' treatment of their own minorities. There are 30 million non-Russians in the Russian Federation, while ethnic Russians are numerous in all the republics. There are more Russians than Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, more Russians than Ukrainians in the Ukrainian Crimea; nearly a third of the population of Moldavia is Russian or Ukrainian. The Russians and Ukrainians of Moldavia have declared independence for their own Dniester Republic. The Ossetians are seeking independence from Georgia, as in Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. In all these cases, prospects of civil strife are serious, especially if civil rights are not secure. Border changes, a further proliferation and miniaturization of sovereignties, and mass displacements of population are all conceivable.

There is one especially ironic possibility already in process. In 1944, Stalin sought United Nations membership and votes for every one of the then-sixteen Soviet republics. At Yalta in 1945, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to bargain at the time. Now the disintegration of Stalin's Union may result in many of the UN votes Stalin sought but for republics with more legitimate claims to sovereignty. (Or has Stalin's ghost played this trick on the world?)

Speaking of the UN, the Charter specifically designates the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a permanent member of the Security Council, with veto power. The name change will force a Charter amendment, but who will retain the veto power? And in this amending process, will the pressures, already mounting for several years, for the German, Japanese, and perhaps Indian status as permanent members be rewarded?

4. The Moral Ambiguity of Russian Nationalism (And All Other Nationalisms)

The visible vanguard of resistance to the August coup came from Russian leaders who professed to be democratic reformers. Of their personal courage there can be no doubt. But the chauvinistic appeal to the Russian tricolor and the tsarist two-headed eagle was a reminder of the darker side of Russian nationalism which Boris Yeltsin has been slow to repudiate: strong currents of authoritarianism, even of Christian monarchism, anti-Semitism, racism, and a New Right paranoia about "Russophobia." Yeltsin's push for Russian leadership in most key posts in the Union Center, his peremptory decrees concerning all-Union institutions; his bullying of Gorbachev, his hint of irredentism concerning Russian minorities in other republics, and his proposal that all Soviet nuclear weapons be confined to his own territory have stirred anxiety and resentment in non-Russian republics.

Nationalism is a powerful motive force for liberation from external control. Its interior ethos is likely to be morally ambiguous. There remains an uncertain equation between

freedom for the republics and freedom within the republics. Hardly any of the republics can draw on heritages of democratic values and institutional practice. The unknowable is whether the brief experience of glasnost has so fortified familiarity with liberty that the impulses toward repression, in the name of nationalism, will not prevail.

5. The Robust yet Problematical Resurgence of Russian Orthodoxy

We all know how much the dramatic convergence of *glasnost* with the 1988 Millennium of Russian Christianity has increasingly liberated religion itself from Communist repression. The Russian Orthodox Church has not only been engaged in opening and reopening thousands of churches and establishing new seminaries; it has been blessed (and burdened) with new opportunities for education, publishing, social services, hospital administration, and TV and radio ministries. Three months ago at Zagorsk, my participation in conversations with Patriarch Alexei II confirmed my impressions that he is a remarkable vigorous, knowledgeable, and articulate successor to Pimen, whose last years were devoid of strong leadership. Alexei, for example, spoke of his previous day's conversations with the rector of Moscow State University and their plans to integrate religious studies in higher education. Not long after, he blessed the inauguration of Yeltsin as Russian president, admonishing Boris Nikolayevich to follow the "law of Christ" in all things.

Alexei had already become a very popular and esteemed hierarch before the coup. His forthright opposition to the coup in response to an appeal from Yeltsin has surely enhanced his moral authority. His speech before the Congress of People's Deputies, in which he spoke of the long suffering of the Church under Communism, was notable for his insistence that Christians, of all people, should not be seeking vengeance. Priests, including Gleb Yakunin, visibly ministered to troops at the barricades and distributed thousands of Bibles, almost all of which were accepted gladly. Yeltsin's testimony that he is now a frequent churchgoer, if not a creedal believer, and his proposal to return the Kremlin cathedrals to the Church, are bound to be heartening to Russian Christians.

But there are some vexing questions beneath these hopeful developments. The new clericalism in Russian politics, parties, and parliaments will surely produce new tensions, as will religious studies in schools and universities. (These Russians may violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution!) Orthodoxy is not a monolith, and the splintering of Orthodoxy itself along ethnic, ideological, and generational lines diminishes the moral authority of the Church. The renewed ascendancy of Orthodoxy could further the marginalization of Protestants and Catholics, although Alexei himself has been an irenic ecumenical leader, most demonstrably as president of CEC (the Conference of European Churches). Similarly, Orthodox resurgence could intensify hostility with Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists.

Our prayer must be that the good news of Russian Christianity is greater than the bad news. I have never been quite sure that the good news of American Christianity is greater than the bad news.

6. The Perils of Ideological Triumphalism

Two summers ago, many pundits announced that the Cold War was over and that the US had won. To Francis Fukuyama, that presumed victory was eschatological: liberal democratic capitalism's victory over Soviet Communism had brought us to "the end of history." As if that were not enough of a boost to American triumphalism, the euphoria generated by "Operation Desert Storm" ushered in (we were told) a "new world order."

Now the apparent final collapse of Soviet Communism after the coup, the dismantling of the Party and its organs, the toppling of the Party's icons, the purging of the KGB, the reversion of Leningrad to St. Petersburg, of Sverdlovsk to Ekaterinburg, and other wholesale name changes -- all tend to confirm capitalist Christian Americans in self-congratulations.

Whether the new Union of Sovereign States can justly contain vengeful anticommunism as a vigilante force is now another serious test of its constitutional integrity. Blatant anti-communism has been a pernicious force in Nazi Germany, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the United States; it could well become so in the post-Soviet Union.

Notwithstanding all the literature to the effect that socialist ideology had long been reduced to ritual rhetoric in the USSR (a proposition to which I have tended to subscribe), the coup revealed a residue of true believers. Gorbachev himself, unlike Yeltsin, honestly continued to describe himself as a socialist and pointed to various European countries guided by such a program. Then there were nameless citizens in street interviews who confessed utter bewilderment at the loss of Leninism's and Communism's moral authority for their lives.

As the statues of Lenin and other old Bolsheviks were toppling, I thought of the toppling pedestals of the US economy: the banks, the Savings and Loan Associations, the holding companies, the airlines, the commercial bankruptcies, and all this while more and more cities and states were approaching bankruptcy, urban infrastructures were deteriorating, the escalating costs of the medical-industrial complex were ravishing almost every other institution (including the churches), federal budget deficits were still uncontrolled, and the US was experiencing a double-dip recession.

There is simply no credible case for ideological triumphalism in America right now.

7. The Residual Cold War

There is more than a little misdirection in the presumption that the Cold War is all over. Whatever the persisting suspicions of some communist hardliners like deposed KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov that the US had been deliberately fomenting the disintegration of the USSR, the US continues to maintain most of the military and institutional paraphernalia of the Cold War: the governmental security structures, overseas deployments, strategic weapons, defense industries, high level of arms exports, and the same \$300 billion level of military expenditures of recent years.

While Presidents Bush and Gorbachev signed the START (Strategic Arms Reduction) Treaty in Moscow in July, that 750-page opus is more political symbol than military substance. The parties have seven years to trim their arsenals to treaty limits. However, the US even then might retain as many as 10,000 strategic nuclear weapons, down from 12,000 -- thanks to counting rules that exempt sea-launched cruise missiles, half the air-launched cruise missiles that can be carried by US bombers, attack missiles, gravity bombs, not to mention thousands of tactical nuclear arms. The START Treaty does not preclude any major US nuclear system -- not MX or Midgetman, or Trident, or B-2 bombers, or cruise missiles. Moreover, it does not restrict SDI "Star Wars" programs, except that Moscow reserves the right to withdraw from the treaty in the event of SDI tests or deployments in violation of the ABM Treaty of 1972. In fact, SDI has just gotten a fresh boost in Congress, based on a spurious citation of the performance of Patriot missiles against Iraq's Scuds in the Gulf War. Not many days ago, Secretary of Defense Cheney offered still another argument for SDI: the spectre of nuclear proliferation among separatist republics in the former Soviet Union. Similarly, the B-2 stealth bomber has a new lease on life on account of enthusiasm over the performance of F-117A stealth fighters against Iraq.

This endurance of Cold War arsenals after the rapprochements of recent years -- and even after the severely diminished superpower status of the former Soviet Union -- is depressing evidence of the great gap between military habits and political realities. Of course, more than the Washington-Moscow connection is at stake in this gap. The possibility of any kind of peach dividend, with all the domestic and international claims upon it, depends on closing the gap. All of which is to say that the churches and the erstwhile peace movement, for all their tendency to celebrate the end of the Cold War and now the defeat of the Soviet coup and to move on to other issues, must somehow and very soon get back into the public struggle over military and disarmament issues.

There is, finally, a residual Cold War in the slowness of the Bush administration, for rigid ideological reasons, to commit itself to timely economic and food assistance to the hard-pressed Union of Sovereign States. That, too, reveals a great gap between habit and political reality. The prospects for continuing democratization of the Union and for avoiding another reactionary coup with perhaps much more mass support out of desperation for authoritarian order, clearly depend on the viability of this fragile new regime in meeting the most basic human needs, especially in the long cold winter just ahead. Václav Havel has said that "instability, poverty, disaster and chaos" in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe could threaten the West just as much as the arms arsenals of former Communist governments. Surely the churches should speak to this reality, too-- and very soon.