

The bitter legacy of Boris Yeltsin (1931-2007)

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The first president of post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin, died on April 23 in a Moscow hospital of heart failure at the age of 76. He will go down in history as a world-class political criminal.

Yeltsin, along with the last general secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev and the leading Soviet bureaucrats of the time, played an instrumental role in one of the greatest catastrophes of the 20th century—the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

This event had catastrophic consequences not only for the people of the former Soviet Union, who for two decades have suffered from grinding poverty, the denial of democratic rights, and the humiliating spectacle of the unbelievable enrichment of a criminal ruling clique, but also for the working class of the entire world.

The erasure of the Soviet Union from the political map of the world untied the predatory hands of world imperialism, above all those of the United States. It has given rise to an explosion of militarism, neocolonial aggression, and fierce struggle between the world's powers for control over natural resources. The starkest expression of this process has been the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan—countries where ordinary life has been transformed into something akin to hell on earth.

The escalation of geopolitical violence is proceeding hand-in-hand with a merciless offensive against living standards and democratic rights in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Asia, Africa, Latin America and in the United States, the center of world imperialism. This wave of social reaction has no analogy in history. It threatens the majority of the world's population with ever greater privations.

The fall of the USSR did not in any way signify the “end of history,” the perspective advanced by bourgeois ideologues that the US would now dominate world affairs without opposition. Rather, it has created a dangerously explosive situation, dominated by economic and political tensions similar to those that existed on the eve of World War I.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the internal contradictions of the world capitalist system led to a crisis in international relations and a series of convulsions and upheavals that went on for decades, taking the lives of millions.

The October 1917 Russian Revolution, out of which the Soviet Union emerged, was the answer to the historical dead end of capitalism. Embodying the perspective of social progress and the international interests of the working class, the USSR was founded under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party—the two most important leaders of which were Lenin and Trotsky—as the springboard for a renewal of the entire world system on the basis of social equality and democratic economic planning.

However, this socialist internationalist perspective was betrayed by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which developed in the Soviet state due to the country's economic backwardness and political isolation. The bureaucracy rejected the course of international revolution and, by the mid-1920s, adopted the reactionary national reformist theory of “socialism in one country.” It initiated a policy of collaboration with world imperialism and the suppression of revolutionary movements throughout the world.

Having concentrated the levers of power in its hands, the new ruling bureaucratic aristocracy under Stalin unleashed the Great Terror by the

latter part of the 1930s, physically eliminating an entire generation of socialist intellectuals and advanced workers and suppressing the country's living revolutionary legacy.

From the 1930s to the 1980s, the Soviet Union remained a workers state only inasmuch as the nationalized property relations created by the October 1917 Revolution remained untouched. In every other regard, this was a regime of the privileged bureaucracy, which bowed before the bourgeoisie and was deeply hostile to the spirit, ideals, and methods of socialism.

Yeltsin was the direct product of this social milieu. His conformism, the limited nature of his outlook, the absence of any striving towards critical thought, his immense vanity, adventurism and contempt for ordinary people, were precisely those qualities cultivated by the Stalinist bureaucracy and needed for the restoration of capitalism.

Born into a peasant family in the village of Butka, in the Urals, Yeltsin began his life in relative poverty, moving with his family to Perm, where his father became a construction worker. Beginning work himself as a construction engineer, Yeltsin found his path to the Communist Party apparatus in Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg), becoming a paid official. By 1976, he had become first secretary of the Sverdlovsk party organization, a position he held until he was brought onto the politburo and then made the first secretary of the CPSU city committee in Moscow by Gorbachev.

From the moment when, at around the age of 30, Yeltsin became a senior party leader and bureaucrat, until his election by the People's Deputies of the USSR at the height of perestroika, Yeltsin toed the party line. Indeed, if anything, he was more zealous than others, singing the praises of Brezhnev and giving the order to destroy the Ipat'evskii House in Sverdlovsk where the tsar's family was shot.

The Russian historian Vadim Rogovin described this generation well more than once in his seven-volume series on Soviet history, “Was There an Alternative?”

Yeltsin was among those who succeeded Stalin's recruits of 1937, a bureaucratic layer distinguished by its complete lack of principles. Those promoted by Stalin were ready to “unquestionably abide by and obediently fulfill any order given by the leader, not giving any particular thought to their justifiability, morality, or lack thereof.” (*Konets Oznachaet Nachalo*. Moscow. 2006. pg. 368)

Following in their wake, the Yeltsin “generation of utter cynics” was filled with people “who, without the slightest bit of embarrassment, were thoroughly corrupt and totally indifferent to the ideas that formed the moral foundation of the country” (Lecture by Vadim Rogovin. “Istoki i Posledstviia Stalinskogo Bol'shogo Terrora”. 1996)

Rogovin refused to believe in the “sudden insight” of people like Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Yakovlev, “who until the age of 60 were communists and then all of a sudden became shameless anti-communists” (Lecture by Vadim Rogovin. “Istoki i Posledstviia Stalinskogo Bol'shogo Terrora”. 1996).

All these people became supporters of capitalism because they were faithful servants of their own privileged layer and correctly grasped this layer's changing feelings and moods and ruthlessly defended its material interests. The preparation for the restoration of capitalism in the USSR,

which was led by Gorbachev, was not the product of his own personal improvisation. This was the consensus line of the leading layers in the Soviet bureaucracy, which in the 1980s made a definitive turn in the direction of a union with imperialism and the destruction of the socioeconomic foundations of Soviet society.

Regardless of the sharp differences of opinion that emerged within this layer—which erupted into armed confrontations in August 1991 and the fall of 1993—the questions in dispute were of a tactical nature. They were bound up with determining the most effective means of realizing the rapacious goals of the Soviet bureaucracy.

The qualities cultivated by the Soviet bureaucracy helped Yeltsin perform his role as a champion of socio-political reaction, which he fulfilled from the moment he occupied his post as president of Russia in June 1990 up until his resignation in December 1999.

All the attempts by the mass media to glorify him as a “democrat”—as the one who gave freedom to the people of Russia and the former republics of the USSR—in the obituaries that have been published throughout the world have nothing to do with reality. Regardless of which critical episode one takes in the history of post-Soviet Russia, every single one demonstrates the destructive and anti-democratic character of the actions taken by Yeltsin and those in the circle that surrounded him, all of whom were deeply hostile to the interests of masses of Soviet working people.

One of the first decisions of the Yeltsin administration was the proclamation of state independence in June of 1990. This became the basis for the dismemberment of the USSR. At the beginning of 1991, the Russian government practically ceased paying taxes to the Soviet Union’s budget, provoking similar moves by the leaders of the country’s other republics.

This course was strengthened by the support of nationalist and separatist tendencies in the country’s republics and other regions. Yeltsin’s slogan, “Take as much sovereignty as you can stomach,” appealed to the basest of prejudices and was in direct contradiction to the will of the majority of Soviet citizens, who wanted the preservation of the Union, as expressed in the March 1991 referendum on the matter.

In August of that same year, a part of the Stalinist bureaucracy supported by sections of the military and the KGB staged an abortive coup attempt against Soviet President Gorbachev, an event that set the stage for Yeltsin’s rise to power in the former USSR. The so-called August putsch, which collapsed in just 61 hours, reflected the fears within some sections of the bureaucracy that Gorbachev was losing control, opening up the threat of an independent movement of the Soviet working class, as well as concerns over the divisions the spoils from the ongoing process of capitalist restoration.

Yeltsin, then the newly elected president of the Russian federation, used the episode to boost his own political power, opposing the coup from atop a tank and gaining acclaim throughout the West. Exploiting the powerful anti-bureaucratic movement from below, he prepared to seize the levers of power from the Gorbachev leadership and launched his own form of counter-coup, banning the Communist Party. Four months later, the Soviet Union was dissolved, when Yeltsin joined the presidents of Ukraine and Byelorussia in signing the “Belovezhskii Accord.” While the Soviet masses had anticipated the resolution of their social problems, the abolition of the USSR paved the way to the program of “shock therapy” that spelled misery for millions. This was the Soviet bureaucracy’s final betrayal.

Neither the decision to dissolve the USSR nor the program of capitalist restoration was debated or democratically approved, either by popular referendum or a vote in the parliament of Russia. These decisions, implemented behind the backs of the population and foisted upon them with the backing of world imperialism, destroyed the living standards of the masses, led to the collapse of the industrial base of the country, and

engendered an endless number of national conflicts that ruined the lives of tens of thousands in the post-Soviet sphere.

Within just over two years of standing on a tank to defend the Russian parliament building against the August 1991 putsch, Yeltsin gave the order in October 1993 to shell the same building after elected legislators resisted his unilateral attempt to rewrite the constitution and disband the parliament. Hundreds were killed in the barrage of tank fire. Such were the “democratic” methods of Boris Yeltsin.

In the aftermath of these events, a new constitution was imposed giving the president practically unlimited powers and transforming the parliament into a largely decorative body. On this basis Yeltsin, who had up to this point already been ruling on the basis of presidential decrees, legitimized his power.

In the middle of the 1990s wholesale privatization was carried out, in the course of which the most profitable pieces of industry were transferred through fictitious schemes into the hands of oligarchs for next to nothing. According to one estimate, approximately \$200 billion worth of state property was transferred to private hands for a total of \$7 billion.

This seizure of state property continues to be one of the central sources of hatred by the population of Russia towards its leaders. The wholesale theft of social resources spelled disaster for masses of people.

Pensions and wages went unpaid and poverty, homelessness and hunger soared. Over the course of the 1990s, Russia’s GDP fell by 50 percent, fully 30 percent of the population fell into poverty, the mortality rate increased by 50 percent and life expectancy for men was cut by six years.

Meanwhile, the immiseration of millions and the vast transfer of wealth into the hands of a gangster clique that supported the Yeltsin government have produced, according to the latest *Forbes* report, 60 Russian billionaires, not to mention tens of thousands of new millionaires.

In December 1994, the Yeltsin regime initiated the first Chechen war, bringing the republic in the northern Caucasus to ruin and creating an atmosphere of lawlessness and rule through naked violence.

At the same time criminality and corruption flourished in Russia. One scandal that occurred at the time of Yeltsin’s reelection campaign in 1996 became a symbol of this corruption. At that time, two high-ranking functionaries in the Yeltsin pre-election headquarters were seized with \$500 million of cash that they had been carrying out of a government building. Another similar such scandal, the “Bank of New York” affair, happened three years later when it became known that billions of dollars had been hidden in Western bank accounts as part of a money-laundering scheme to shelter the incomes of Russian oligarchs under the protection of leading government bureaucrats and with the participation of Western businessmen.

The final period of the Yeltsin administration was dominated by the financial crisis of August 1998. The collapse of the ruble, which lost over 70 percent of its value in the course of a month, was another blow to the living standards of the population. This was accompanied by the unleashing of the second Chechen war. Parallel with this, the previously unknown former KGB officer, Vladimir Putin, was elevated to the role of Yeltsin’s successor.

Contrary to the claims of the mass media, Putin was not Yeltsin’s “big mistake.” His appointment was entirely in keeping with the logic of the restoration of capitalism. The new ruling elite did not want to lose its stolen wealth. As the market reforms continued, the level of social inequality in the country deepened. This raised the need for the “strengthening of the state”—that, is the repressive apparatus—and the further narrowing of even the decorative trappings of democratic governance.

Yeltsin fully sanctioned this move, and Putin fulfilled this role, which was worked out by the Kremlin. Putin’s Russia was not the negation of, but rather the logical continuation of, Yeltsin’s Russia.

It is no accident that Yeltsin, upon resigning, never raised any serious

criticisms of the Putin administration. In return for this, Putin, in his brief statement about the death of the first Russian president, described Yeltsin as a man with “noble intentions” who tried to do everything “for the sake of the country and millions of Russians.”

These words are the height of hypocrisy, particularly coming from the mouth of someone who came to power on the bloodshed of the Chechen war and became the head of a bureaucratic, oligarchic, police regime that condemns anyone who criticizes the authorities or the behavior of a particular bureaucrat as an “extremist.”

Expressing total contempt for society and public opinion, Putin stated that thanks to Yeltsin “a new democratic Russia was born—a free, open state to the world; a state in which the government really belongs to the people,” in which people have “the right to freely express their thoughts and freely choose the leadership of the country.” This, just a week after Putin’s riot police clubbed and arrested hundreds of people in Moscow and St. Petersburg for daring to stage peaceful protests against the government

There is an element of political schizophrenia in Putin’s appraisal, inasmuch as he himself has said that the collapse of the USSR was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” In another recent speech, Putin stated that the 1990s were characterized by the great hope of millions of people, “although neither the government nor business has realized these hopes.”

A more clear-eyed assessment of Yeltsin’s passing was provided by Vitalii Tret’iakov, former editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* and current head of the weekly paper, *Moskovskii Novosti*. He writes, “for the greater part of his presidency Yeltsin slept, drank, was ill, relaxed, didn’t show his face before the people and simply did nothing.”

“Despised by the majority of citizens in the country,” continued Tret’iakov, “Yeltsin will go down in history as the first president of Russia, having corrupted (the country) to the breaking point, not by his virtues and or by his defects, but rather by his dullness, primitiveness, and unbridled power lust of a hooligan...” (*Moskovskii Novosti*, 2006, No. 4-6)

Hailed as a “democrat” and a “reformer” by Western governments, the corporate media and the Russian billionaires and millionaires whose fortunes he helped spawn, Yeltsin represented, in the final analysis, the excrescence produced by the betrayals and crimes carried out by Stalinism over the course of nearly seven decades.

The greatest of these crimes, was undoubtedly the systematic repression and destruction of genuine Marxism and socialist consciousness, leaving the Soviet working class politically unprepared to confront and defeat the unprecedented economic and social catastrophe unleashed by the restoration of capitalism and the rise of the clique of ex-bureaucrats and gangster businessmen who formed the real constituency of Boris Yeltsin.



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