

Many commentators have argued that the West made a near fatal mistake by not being more forthcoming with massive economic assistance to the troubled Soviet economy. It has even been suggested that Gorbachev's failure to secure Western aid at the July meeting of the seven industrialized nations (G-7) in London severely compromised his domestic standing and made it easier for his conservative opponents to contemplate an armed seizure of power, since they knew that they would not be jeopardizing any substantial aid from abroad.

In reality, the coup was triggered by domestic considerations over which the West had little influence. The attempted military takeover was a desperate last ditch effort by conservatives to defend their crumbling position. They were prodded into action by the frantic fear that the tide of events was moving against them and by the sense that they had to act before their positions were even weaker. Three key developments contributed to the hard-liners growing desperation.

FIRST, IN THE SPRING OF 1991, GORBACHEV once again changed political direction. He began to move away from the conservative course that he had embraced the previous autumn, and he sought active partnership with the reformist forces led by Boris Yeltsin. Elections in June demonstrated the growing power of reformers. Yeltsin received an overwhelming endorsement as president of the Russian republic, prominent democrats were elected as the mayors of Moscow and Leningrad, and the people of Leningrad voted to restore the original name for their city, St. Petersburg, thus choosing to honour the long dead Tsar Peter the Great, rather than the founder of the Soviet state.

Second, Gorbachev belatedly recognized that it was impossible to preserve the Soviet Union in its previous form as a highly centralized state in which all decisions of consequence were made by a handful of officials in Moscow. As a realist with an ever-mobile bottom line, he reluctantly came to the conclusion that the only hope for avoiding the total fragmentation of the Soviet state was to negotiate directly with the leaders of the republics for a loose federation in which there was a major devolution of power to them. Just as Gorbachev had eventually acquiesced in the unification of Germany and the establishment of a multiparty system within the Soviet Union, even though he had strenuously resisted these developments at first, he now reconciled himself to the emergence of a genuine federation of highly autonomous Soviet republics.

Despite all the attention that Western analysts have showered upon the impending Union Treaty as a possible trigger for the August



Brian Hughes

coup, a third factor may well have been more critical. While it is true that the coup leaders were distressed by what they saw as the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a unified state, and hence as a major world power, they felt more acutely threatened by the direct assault that Boris Yeltsin had launched against the remaining core of the old system, namely the communist party's continued domination of the military, the KGB and the economic bureaucracy.

In mid-July, Yeltsin issued a decree calling for the elimination of communist party cells within all governmental institutions on the territory of Russia. If this decree had been enforced, it would have been a death blow to communist power in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev spoke out in opposition to Yeltsin's decree, but the conservatives were unwilling to rely on him to protect their interests. Their remaining power and all of their still considerable privileges were under assault. The resort to arms was their response.

THE REFORMERS HAVE BEEN STRENGTHENED immeasurably by the failed coup. The ignominious defeat of the conservatives constitutes a fundamental turning point in the post-1985 revolution. Gorbachev was returned to office, but the "Gorbachev era" is over. Others, first and foremost Boris Yeltsin, will increasingly set the Soviet political agenda.

The failed coup will accelerate precisely those developments that its plotters sought to avoid: the disintegration of the communist party, the strengthening of the republics, the depoliticization of the military and the KGB, the movement toward a market economy, and the victory of reformist forces in the next round of national elections. Indeed, an unprecedented blow will be struck against the Soviet Union's international might if the growing demand of the republics to control the military forces on their soil is met.

As the formerly autocratic Soviet state weakens, and as the power of an autonomous civil society grows, the ability of the Soviet Union to threaten its neighbours will greatly diminish. The world no longer needs to fear Soviet might; rather it is Soviet weakness – with the threat of chaos, civil war, and potentially hundreds of thousands of Soviet refugees fleeing westward – which constitutes the main danger to international stability.

Ultimately it will be political and economic forces within the Soviet Union which will determine the fate of that country. Feuding democrats, who thus far have been divided into no less than several dozen fractious political parties, will have to mute their differences and unite to form an effective alliance. Political leaders will have to summon up the political will to take the painful and unpopular decision (such as allowing prices to rise and accepting increased unemployment) that are unavoidable if a functioning market economy is to be created.

THE WEST CAN PLAY A CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE IN all this not by doling out billions of dollars, but by assisting those dynamic elements in Soviet society that are actively participating in the construction of autonomous institutions: the emerging economic entrepreneurs, the independent communication media, the evolving organs of local government, the lawyers and judges who are endeavouring to establish the rule of law.

Creative and selective assistance is far more valuable than a cascade of undirected funds. Well chosen aid will pay rich dividends in assisting the bold and courageous struggle that the Soviet people are waging to create a humane and democratic society that can take its place as an honoured and peaceful member of the civilized community of nations.

After six years of tinkering, improvisation and tactical manoeuvring, Gorbachev's attempt to reform the communist system has exhausted itself. The real revolution aimed at totally destroying it has begun. The Soviet Union is now where Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were in the fateful autumn of 1989.

Communism has been vanquished, but the triumph of democracy is by no means assured. The first glorious sprouts of democracy are still fragile and vulnerable. If the collapse of the Soviet economy is not reversed, a "Weimar Russia" may fall victim to demagogic political movements. The forces of intolerance, ethnic violence and xenophobia lurk just beneath the surface of the newly emerging democratic political culture. However, thanks to the bungled coup, the prospects for successful economic and political transformation are now far brighter than they were just a few months ago. □