

'A party vanishes' from Der Spiegel (26 August 1991)

Caption: On 26 August 1991, commenting on the failed putsch led by conservative leaders against President Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow the week before, the German daily newspaper Der Spiegel assesses Gorbachev's political strategies and considers the role of Boris Yeltsin, Russia's new President.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. Augstein, Rudolf ; R Herausgeber Dr. Kaden, Wolfgang; Kilz, Hans Werner. 26.08.1991, Nr. 35; 45. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Eine Partei verschwindet", auteur:Augstein, Rudolf , p. 134.

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A party vanishes

Rudolf Augstein

After the events of the past week in the shadow of his rival and saviour Boris Yeltsin, Mikhail Gorbachev is no longer held in very high esteem. George F. Will, writing in the *International Herald Tribune*, thinks that he acted too hesitantly, that he ‘bungled’ the situation and ‘trimmed his sails’. He first let his enemies into the house and then went away on holiday. That is possibly true.

However, his former Foreign Minister, Edward Shevardnadze, threw himself into the debate perhaps a little too passionately when he insinuated that Gorbachev himself might have instigated the putsch against him. This would have been Borgia-Renaissance politics Russian-style and would have totally ignored the prevailing chaos in the Soviet Union. Just imagine what Shevardnadze might have got up to if, one day, he had become Head of the Politburo in place of his friend Gorbachev. Attempts to get rid of him might have been made very much sooner.

After all, Shevardnadze was no charismatic military leader like Napoleon, who lifted the French Revolution out of its own very individual quagmire. Nor might he have been able to ensure that the population had the basic essentials for life. The innovators have been unable to do that to date, they did not learn to do it when they were in charge of the planned economy.

It may be true that, with the arrival of Alexander Yakovlev, an ex-Communist like Shevardnadze, a more conceptual intellect than Gorbachev had taken office. However, he was obviously sufficiently self-critical to recognise that he might not have the ability to succeed either at home or in foreign affairs.

Triumph might have eluded Boris Yeltsin, the hero of the day, had not Gorbachev opened the way for him with ‘Glasnost’. It was his own personal tragedy that ‘Glasnost’ — transparency in public affairs — and ‘Perestroika’ — the restructuring of society — obstructed him and, indeed, made things virtually impossible. Which of the leading personalities in the Soviet Union would have had an answer to that?

It is said that, in spite of his tactical feel, Gorbachev has put himself in a very difficult position, yet Abraham Lincoln, too, at the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861, was in a difficult position, until the rebels from the South fired the first shot at Fort Sumter. George F. Will even believes that, originally, he might not have intended to abolish slavery. Within 18 months, however, events had taken their own course.

That also applies to Gorbachev. He must take a long, hard look at a Communist Party that has, to all intents and purposes, already ceased to exist. Nonetheless, he would like to revive it, if only in a rather half-hearted manner. But who was it that deprived the party of power in the first place? None other than its own General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev. During the putsch, it was nowhere to be seen.

Then there was the KGB. Who, without the power of an Ivan the Terrible or a Tsar Peter I — he who personally attended and helped with the impaling of his alleged enemies — could have chosen the ‘right’ Head of the KGB? Is there not something in the autonomous nature of this colossal machine that forces every new Head to submit to its internal dynamic? What would Beria have been without Stalin?

And the army? Had it not kept quiet for far too long? For even if it had had a charismatic leader, did the military take the view that there were, in fact, no grounds for a putsch? Lenin and Trotsky, those experts on revolution, would presumably have viewed the spectacle in Moscow and Leningrad with total astonishment. Had they not always warned in the past of the danger of ‘Bonapartism’?

That miserable rogue Yasov was anything but a Bonaparte or any kind of charismatic military leader. It is surely plain to all that he was a much safer choice for Gorbachev than, for instance, someone like Marshal Tukhachevsky would have been.

Shortly before his death, Lenin had lamented the brutal action of Stalin and his pal Ordzhonikidze against

national Communist Georgia. But, did a healthy Lenin have something more in his head than simply the unity of the Party and the Soviet Union? Might he have allowed the Baltic States, Georgia and the Ukraine to break away peacefully, even though he had the power to stop them? That shows how little we know about Lenin.

By virtue of the weakening of Moscow's central power — a process carried out by Gorbachev himself — and the — possibly unintentional? — support of the centrifugal forces in the republics, Gorbachev has simply put Boris Yeltsin in a position where he could become his saviour. Lenin's Russia no longer exists, but Yeltsin's personal courage and the courage of the population made a deep impression, and the affair itself took place only recently. In the long term, there will be no place for two Presidents and equally no place even for one of the two. They will fade away naturally.

We can only expect Yeltsin to provide bread and fill the shelves in the shops in the short term and then only with the certain reservations. The motto 'Freedom does not equal a free market' applies to the Soviet Union rather than the Chinese motto 'Free market does not equal freedom'.

Naturally members of the 'Old Boys' Club' now want to have their say. Helmut Schmidt prophesies that, for decades to come, the economy of the Soviet Union will be inherently weak. Henry Kissinger always warns against betting exclusively on one man.

May one ask whether Kissinger had wanted to bet on Yeltsin at the same time as he supported Gorbachev or, in addition, the Ukraine, as Helmut Schmidt suggests? Will they rush into the jungle of Soviet internal politics totally ill-equipped? They really ought not to, but, after all, they are only writing and it is acceptable to give advice from the safety of Hamburg or Washington.

George F. Will thinks that, originally, Abraham Lincoln was concerned only to preserve the Union. So every Russian President should be similarly concerned. However, no one has made a greater contribution towards the disintegration of the Union than Yeltsin. At the outset, the very last thing de Gaulle wanted was independence for Algeria, but, in the end, he actually valued his autocratic rule more.

Everyone has been carried along by events. Yeltsin will also have to swim with the tide, whatever the cost. If he visits Germany, he will quite justifiably be feted enthusiastically, and yet his problems will be greater than those of Gorbachev, if that is possible.