

Chaim Bermant

# A plot by honest but misguided men

A FUNNY thing happened on the way to the Kremlin . . .

First, there were the very names of the cast — Yazov, Pavlov, Kryuchkov, Yanayev and Pugo — the Fearsome Five. And they had the right faces too.

Then there was their announcement that Mr Gorbachov had stepped down for health reasons. The next day came news that Pavlov was feeling poorly, that Yazov and Kryuchkov were a bit under the weather and Yanayev, from what one could see of him, was less than a picture of health. No details were given but it all sounded like Mad Commissar's Disease.

And finally came the great plane race to the Crimea.

Gogol, thou should'st be living at this hour!

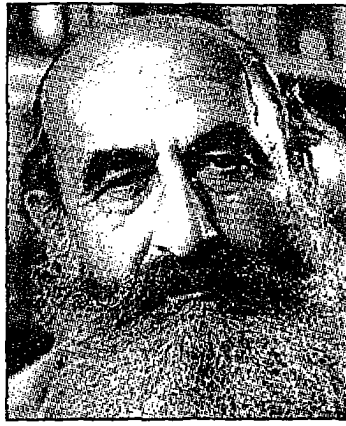
In the absence of Gogol, I have begun to put pen to paper and my work will be called *Mikhail Gorbachov is Unwell . . . or Raisa Laugh*.

They botch everything in Russia, even their coups, yet as the events of 19 August unfolded I could not help seeing parallels between the fall of Mrs Thatcher and the fall of Mr Gorbachov. Both were radicals. Both had made a lasting imprint on their respective societies; both were less popular at home than abroad, and both fell prey to a palace coup. But while Mrs Thatcher was toppled by people who feared for their seats, Mr Gorbachov was toppled by people who feared for Russia. In some respects, therefore, I found the Moscow conspiracy less shabby than the London one.

The fact that Gennady Yanayev and his fellow conspirators acted unconstitutionally is irrelevant, for the whole system within which they worked was itself the product of a monstrous and violent usurpation. To talk of constitutionality in Soviet Russia is like talking of virtue in Sodom and Gomorrah.

The claim that Mr Gorbachov resigned for health reasons was a bit rich, given the fact that during three or four years before he came to power Russia was ruled by something like a necroarchy (if one may coin an ugly expression). Mr Brezhnev was more or less clinically dead for months before they finally buried him. Andropov was dying by the time he took over and was soon dead, while Chernenko was breathing his last — and that with difficulty. Whatever qualifications may be necessary for high office in the Soviet Union, good health is not one of them and bad health may even be a recommendation.

It is, however, the excuse generally used — both in the East and the West — when people are asked to stand down, and it was employed when Mr Khrushchev was forced out of office in 1964.



Yet, while the fall of Khrushchev caused some concern, it was treated as an internal Russian matter. Why then the international furore which greeted the apparent fall of Gorbachov?

First, there was the fear that his fall could mean an end to his many reforms, a threat to the independence of former Peoples' Democracies like Poland and Czechoslovakia, and a return to the Cold War.

Second, Mr Gorbachov, unlike most of his predecessors, looked like a fully paid-up member of the human race. He had wit, charm and grace and an elegant and attractive wife, and one drew reassurance not only from his policies, but from the man himself. We felt that he was one of us, a European, a man, to use Mrs Thatcher's words, one could do business

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with. Of Yanayev and Co, one felt we were back in the bad old days.

Finally, Mr Gorbachov so changed our perceptions of the Soviet Union that we almost think of it as a democratic society, whereas it is nothing of the sort. Mr Boris Yeltsin, numerous mayors and the heads of some of the republics may have been democratically elected, but Mr Gorbachov was not. The Communist Party through whose ranks he rose has finally been rejected by him. But the manner in which it was done showed where his heart still lies. He rose to office through the Party and fell from office by it. The Party giveth and the Party taketh away, but by the time the coup took place it had given too much away to be able to exert its authority and Mr Gorbachov was thus able to make a second coming.

The coup was in essence a misguided attempt by honest but misguided men to save the Soviet Union from political dissolution and economic collapse. And in doing so they took immense personal risks which have not paid off.

Mr Gorbachov may have given Russia freedom of speech, a free press, freedom of movement, and numerous freely-elected institutions, but these things mean little to people involved in a daily struggle to scratch together an evening meal. The police may be less oppressive, but there is no law and order and Moscow has much of the messiness and violence of New York without any of its colour or opulence. Worse than that, one feels that the country is falling apart.

When I travelled fairly extensively in Russia about this time last year, it was difficult to hear anyone utter a good word for Gorbachov, while Boris Yeltsin rarely opened his mouth without denouncing him. Yanayev and Co may have felt that in deposing him they were acting in accordance with the people's will — a popular Russian concept — but in doing so they made two serious errors. They underestimated the democratic fervour which had gripped a large part of the population in the main cities, and they lacked both ruthlessness and resolve. They were unwilling to wound and afraid to strike.

Contrary to many suggestions, they did not overestimate the unpopularity of Mr Gorbachov. Protesting crowds may have filled the streets of Moscow, Leningrad and Kishinev, but as far as I know there were none in Asia, the Urals, the Caucasus, White Russia or the Ukraine, while Mr Yeltsin's call for a general strike was largely ignored. (Some miners came out, to be sure, but then they are nearly always on strike.) Revolutions and coups, however, are lost or won in the capitals, and it was in Moscow that the coup was lost.

When the Russian tanks rolled into Prague 23 years ago, they had immediate effect because everyone knew they meant business. When they rolled into Moscow they had no effect whatever, because everyone knew they did not.

What the conspirators had in mind, I believe, was a Chinese solution to Russia's problems, a command economy coupled with private enterprise buoyed up by foreign investment. But they lacked Chinese ruthlessness and, to their credit, they were not prepared to tolerate another Tiananmen Square to get it.

What began in tragedy soon declined into farce, but it did not end in tragedy, a fact which should be borne in mind when they come to trial as criminals. Moreover, as the coming days may show, misguided men can sometimes achieve more by their errors than wise men by their wisdom. If I were Boris Yeltsin, I would be eternally grateful to Yanayev and his colleagues.