[**Soviet twilight**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642518/soviet-twilight)

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WHEN the Red Army finally exited Afghanistan in February 1989, crossing the Friendship Bridge into Uzbekistan with somewhat more dignity than witnessed in this year’s American exodus, the last in line was the commander of the occupying forces, Boris Gromov.

A little more than two years later, he was on the periphery of the attempted putsch that sought to preserve the old Soviet Union. Gromov was deputy interior minister in 1991, and his boss, Boris Pugo, was a key conspirator. Gromov and fellow general Pavel Grachev had drawn up plans to storm the Russian parliament based in what was known as Moscow’s White House.

However, both generals changed their minds on the day after the coup, earning the gratitude of Boris Yeltsin. The plot was masterminded by KGB chief Vladimir Kryu­chkov, and the idea broadly was to either topple Mikhail Gorbachev or, preferably, compel him to capitulate, and to roll back most of the reforms instituted since 1985.

By that stage, the USSR was in a mess. Gorbachev’s reforms had unleashed unanticipated forces. Glasnost had been a tremendous success — and it meant that all those critical of the government’s direction saw no reason to hold back. Perestroika though had floundered.

A coup bid sounded the USSR’s death knell 30 years ago.

As Gorbachev laments in his various memoirs, local branches of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) decided they were no longer under any obligation to religiously abide by Moscow’s diktat. So where it interfered with their vested interests, they simply flouted the party line, knowing that the repercussions would not be drastic.

The Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, accor­d­ing to his son, described Gorbachev as “an idiot” for pursuing this path. In Deng’s view, any meaningful economic reforms were doo­med to failure without the Communist Par­t­y’s coercive clout; political reform could wait.

We have seen, though, how that has wor­ked out in the context of China, where state-sanctioned capitalism has thrived whereas political deviations from the decreed party line entail various forms of punishment. Giv­en his reformist predilections, this is not the kind of arrangement Gorbachev could have lived with.

In the run-up to 1991, he was struggling to maintain some kind of balance between the forces pushing him to speed up his reforms and the voices advising restraint, epitomised in the Soviet parliament by Yeltsin on the reformist flank and Yegor Ligachev on the opposing side.

Gorbachev valiantly strove for a compromise, but he was out of his depth by 1990, occasionally tacking to the right, sometimes shuffling to the left, broadly overwhelmed by the forces he had unleashed. Asked in late 1990 which side he was leaning towards, he res­ponded that he was going around in circles.

The sense of humour eluded him when he was effectively imprisoned at his holiday home in Crimea in late August 1991, absorbing the betrayal by a wide range of his appointees, ranging from his chief of staff to deputy president Gennady Yanayev — whose inebriated visage and trembling hands betrayed the nervousness of the coup makers as they announced their takeover.

It was all over three days later, after Mus­c­o­vites streamed on to the capital’s streets, and crucial elements of the armed forces ref­used to shoot fellow citizens. In what was his finest hour, Yeltsin clambered atop a tank outside the White House to articulate his resistance to the coup. His deputy Alexander Rutskoi was among those dispatched to the Crimea to rescue Gorbachev, who returned to Moscow in the early hours of August 22.

The coup was over. Pugo and his wife committed suicide, but the rest of the leading plotters were impriso­n­­ed, only to be amnest­i­ed less than three years later. In the mea­nwhile, Russia’s post-Soviet regime went where the coup conspi­rators had hesitated to go by bombarding the White House in 1993 to thwart an attempt to impeach Yeltsin.

What the Soviet Union’s fate might have been minus the abortive coup is hard to say. Its disintegration had already been set in motion by the Baltic states — occupied in the wake of World War II — and may well have proceeded anyhow, albeit at a slower pace. Gorbachev had a union treaty, incorporating far greater autonomy than the Soviet Union previously permitted, up his sleeve in 1991. It was due to be signed by the remaining constituent republics, including Russia under Yeltsin, on Aug 20.

That was pushed back by the coup, and pre-empted early in December by an agreement between the USSR’s Slav components — Russia, Ukraine and Belarus — to effecti­v­­ely dissolve the Soviet Union. The CPSU had been disbanded back in August, and Gor­­bachev, the head of a state that effective­ly no longer existed, resigned on Christmas Day.

The geopolitical repercussions continue to resonate 30 years later. Vladimir Putin’s Russia has sought to resurrect some of the least desirable aspects of the Soviet entity, but most of its redeeming features have been irrecoverably lost.

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