



# Lessons in Liberty

by Cathy Young

One year after a gang of hardliners botched their coup and the Soviet empire dissolved into proto-plasm, the jailed plotters busy themselves composing verses, memoirs, and op-ed commentary, and are often quoted in the still-kicking *Pravda*. Just as there are governments in exile, suggests *Novoye Vremya* editor Alexander Pumpyansky, these men are acting like a "government in prison." Gorbachev's hapless prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov (whose official employment record, *Novoye Vremya* reveals, bears a unique entry: "Resigned in connection with changes in the Constitution of the USSR") has also published a memoir, *Perestroika: A History of Betrayals*, a book said to be selling briskly.

The once-almighty Communist Party of the Soviet Union is defending its record in a Moscow court; what public interest there is in the case, notes Kronid Lubarsky in *Novoye Vremya*, resembles the public's morbid fascination with the trial of the "Rostov maniac" Andrei Chikatilo, the serial killer/rapist/cannibal. Moscow newspapers advertise auctions of state properties slated for privatization (bidding for a donut shop in Moscow starts at 1.2 million rubles, or about \$5,300). A cartoon in the generally pro-capitalist *Izvestia* shows two bloated *biznesmeni* toasting each other as they sit on tall bar stools from which chickens, sausages, and vodka bottles are suspended, while befuddled ordinary citizens scramble along the floor to get at these goodies.

In the August 18 *Independent Gazette*, several Moscow intellectuals ponder the question, "What did the new revolution give our country?" Valeria

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Novodvorskaya, the impetuous leader of the Democratic Union once known for her ritual public immolations of portraits of Lenin and Gorbachev, hasn't mellowed out: she finds the new régime corrupt, mendacious, and guilty of "the overthrow of the democratic government of Georgia" (oh, please!), and is "impatiently waiting for a third revolution." Animated feature director Yuri Norshtein probably speaks for the majority: "I've had it up to here with revolutions; I want a normal, quiet life." Mikhail Roshchin, playwright: "We remain serfs of the state, of its structures, its vacillations and whims." Marietta Chudakova, literary critic: "Freedom does not distribute rations; it is merely a precondition for a life of dignity. . . . Only fools and cynics who cannot see beyond their immediate self-interest continue to assure the world that it was all in vain."

The weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* posed a similar question to the man in the street. Only one of the half-dozen respondents, 41-year-old factory worker R. Zainulin, lamented "the disintegration of a great state." The most optimistic, curiously, were the oldest, such as V. Gudkov, a 50-year-old locksmith: "What we have is freedom. Freedom of speech, for instance. True, we're as poor as we always were. But that summer, when we learned about [the coup], my wife and I were scared that for the rest of our lives, we'd be disenfranchised people, dependent on the government." Less cheerful was V. Slavina, a 36-year-old clerk: "In the past, we used to live in fear, afraid to say a word and getting kopecks for our work. Today, it's shout whatever you want and no one listens."

A more scientific and very comprehensive poll, though conducted back in April, was reported in the *Independent Gazette* on August 8. Asked about their personal situation, 13 percent said that

things were "good"; 63 percent, "fair"; 15 percent, "bad"; 3 percent, "intolerable." The country's condition was viewed as more dire: 33 percent rated it as near-critical, 60 percent as critical or catastrophic, and only 3 percent as normal.

All but 11 percent said they had been strongly (56 percent) or somewhat (33 percent) affected by the changes. Twenty-three percent thought life had become "fuller and more interesting," and 22 percent said that they had been able to improve their and their families' economic situation. Twenty-three percent also felt that they had managed to "get rid of the constant feeling of dependence on the bosses." As for specific benefits, 32 percent (mostly outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, presumably) had received a plot of land enabling them to feed themselves and their families. Eight percent had been able to "become entrepreneurs, invest money, and receive profits," while 10 percent—whether or not they overlap with the preceding eight is unclear—had become "property owners, shareholders, or partners in a cooperative." Not quite the picture of passive, fatalistic Russians we keep hearing about.

Respondents were also asked about their attitudes toward the Yeltsin government. Overall, just 15 percent expressed support for the current government, while 27 percent condemned its policies as "damaging to Russia's interests" and 58 percent were undecided. On economic reforms, both the positives (at 30 percent) and the negatives (at 43 percent) were higher, with 27 percent undecided. As for specific measures, military cutbacks were favored by 62 percent with 15 percent opposed; encouragement of entrepreneurship, by 54-23 percent; privatization of state properties, by 47-23 percent; privatization of housing, by 46-

24 percent. Cons outweighed pros, I am delighted to report, only on the question of higher taxes: 50 percent opposed, 23 percent in favor.

On the basis of these numbers, sociologists concluded that the solid base of support for the Yeltsin government amounted to just over 10 percent of the population, while the hard-core opposition was around 21 percent. Not very comforting, it would seem, though we are told that Yeltsin supporters are a more "active," "dynamic," and "energetic" segment of the population.

Coup anniversary commentary was quite varied, proving that reports of the death of dissension in the mainstream media have been greatly exaggerated. In the "hope betrayed" category, former dissident Yulia Vishnevskaya, now living in Munich, points out in a polemic ominously titled "Restoration" (*Independent Gazette*, August 18) that the new democratic state has been awfully slow in getting rid of such Communist mainstays as residency registration, the "ethnicity" category in identity documents, and even the criminal code article under which "escape across the border" (even to the newly independent former republics? the writer sarcastically wonders) is punishable by death. Her other arguments are rather specious: thus, she singles out as an example of undemocratic practice the fact that the number-two man in the Russian government is not the elected vice-president but secretary of state Gennadi Burbulis. And what is one to make of Vishnevskaya's sky-is-falling conclusion, "There are signs that the same system of power that existed in the USSR prior to 1985 is being reborn—the very same totalitarian régime, only in governmental rather than party structures"? A skeptic might say that the publication of her article in a major newspaper weakens her case. Then again, one can always fall back on the "repressive tolerance" explanation.

For more evidence that the post-Soviet press has not rolled over, there is the interview with Burbulis in *Argumenty i Fakty* (August 20). The questions journalists Natalia Zhelnorova and Vladislav Starkov fling at Yeltsin's powerful aide would make a Sam Donaldson blush. Repeatedly they needle him about his fancy Kremlin digs ("Looks like

Communist-style shenanigans"). They jump all over his latest privatization plans ("It's window-dressing, not privatization"). When Burbulis testily replies that it's foolish to think the Russian economy could be privatized "overnight," they fire back, "Who's talking about overnight? It's been a year and nothing has been done!"

Burbulis's pronouncement that "a plan of action can be good only if it dovetails with real-life conditions and if there are people capable of carrying it out" is greeted with another volley: "This is straight out of Lenin. You're saying the obvious as if it were revelation." An editorial note reports that Burbulis "wasn't happy with all [the] questions" (really!), but put up with them patiently and took no phone calls during the interview. Which is not to say that the interviewers were able to pin him down on any specifics of the reform program—but, hey, welcome to politics.

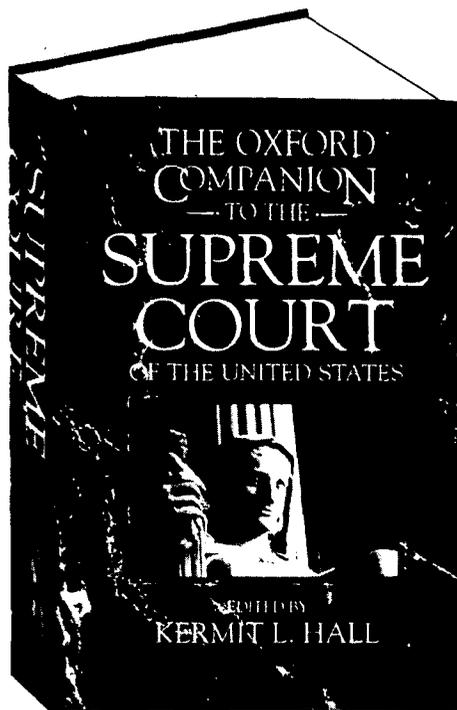
The advent of politics as usual, Kronid Lubarsky argues in *Novoye Vremya* (No. 34, August 1992), is an indication of social health.

"Consumed with daily cares, the pessimists fail to see the most important thing: for the first time in the past 75 years, we are beginning to live in a normal society"—one in which people's lives are to a large extent shaped by their own choices, not by the state.

The profound gratitude many Russians felt toward Gorbachev early on, says Lubarsky, was also a symptom of an "abnormal" society where people saw themselves as wards of the state: "Reminders that we 'owed' our freedom to somebody elicited no internal resistance." That no such worshipful gratitude is directed at Yeltsin is healthy: the Russian president is perceived simply as a public servant fulfilling his obligations. Even the waning of rallies and strikes is "not a sign of social fatigue but of social maturity": there are other forms of political action, and people are overcoming the "gimme" syndrome.

So fares Russia at the start of Year II of Liberty, as the French of 200 years ago—who had a more grandiose vision of their enterprise, striving as they were to build a perfect society, not rebuild a normal one—would have called it. □

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## A New York Couple

by Richard Brookhiser

**A** drink in the lounge of the Algonquin Hotel was the setup for the best birthday present I ever got my wife.

I am terrible at presents, especially birthday presents. Christmas comes the same day every year, that I can plan for. But the effort of remembering any birthday except my own, combined with the burden of picking an appropriate present, makes the birthdays of my loved ones botched and dreaded occasions. I have forgotten my wife's altogether. Other years, remembering at the last minute, I've grabbed presents that were cheesy or drab. One year I repeated the gift I'd gotten her the last Christmas. My wife, if she chose, could ponder a long ledger of my failings.

The bright shining mark in the credit column was the year I took her for an evening drink at the Algonquin. My wife was tired from work; so far that day, there had been no present, not even a card, so she was cranky, too. I said, as if to humor her, "Let's go out for a drink." She demurred; I insisted. Reluctantly, she allowed herself to be persuaded. We took a cab to 44th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, and settled in for a drink. In time, her mood improved to the point where she might have admitted that I wasn't such a bad catch after all. "Wouldn't it be fun to stay here some night?" I offered. She agreed. Whereupon, I played my lifetime ace of trumps, by tossing a room key on the table before her. In the room to which the key belonged, I had pre-positioned a dozen roses, a box of

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chocolates, and a bottle of champagne. I'd even remembered her hairdryer. The hairdryer was to show the maid, if she was curious, that we were really married. Mistresses only get frills. Wives need the basics, too.

The reason I picked the Algonquin for my venue is that it's one of the few hotels in New York, or anywhere, with a lounge attractive enough to have served as bait.

**T**hey recently finished renovating the Algonquin. The Blue Bar, a little nook that used to be on your right as you walked in the front door, has



been moved and enlarged. The old Blue Bar was small, snug, dark, perfect for the kind of intimate drinking that fuels male camaraderie and pick-ups. There you could bare your soul or pat a woman's knee. For general conversation or romancing with a dash of gentility, you went to the lounge, which looks

untouched. If you're the kind of person who's always being blackballed, it is the next best thing to a club. Dark wood trim makes the high-ceilinged room cozy; so do the columns, more numerous than seem structurally necessary, which split the space into pools of privacy. Some of the chairs have fringe; so do some of the lampshades. They look as if they should be threadbare, but they aren't. Each table has a bell fastened to the top, for summoning a waiter, though I've never rung: when the after-theater crowd is here, it couldn't be heard, and at quieter times you'd feel as if you were disturbing the peace. When a waiter does pass by, the *arrière-garde* atmosphere of the place practically requires you to order a cocktail, preferably a martini. Think of its presence before you as part of the dress code.

The Algonquin has a literary reputation—better say, a literary past. The Algonquin Round Table met there, and the *New Yorker* used to be located in a building that had a rear exit across the street. James Thurber wrote that Harold Ross's

famous and busy friends of the Algonquin Round Table and its fringes took his fond enterprise lightly. . . . A few of them helped now and then, with left hand, and tongue in cheek. "The part-time help of wits is no better than the full-time help of half-wits,"

Herman Mankiewicz is reported to have said at the time. When I reminded Ross of this line years later, all he said was, "God knows I had both kinds."

Time has adjusted that balance: I can't recall offhand any members of the Round Table, except Dorothy Parker, but the *New Yorker* is still with us; though I