

Is Boris Yeltsin a self-made man?

by Denise Henderson

Boris Yeltsin, A Political Biography

by Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova;

translated by David Gurevich

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Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova have written what they call a "political" biography of Boris Yeltsin, which includes the device of comparing and contrasting the parallel careers of Mikhail Gorbachov and Boris Yeltsin. Begun several years before the August 1991 coup and completed shortly thereafter, *Boris Yeltsin, A Political Biography* does provide a general overview of Soviet politics in the last decade, and may serve as an introduction to the rise of Yeltsin and the fall of Gorbachov, respectively. But those who are hoping that Solovyov and Klepikova, dissidents who left the Soviet Union after their independent news service was shut down in 1978, might offer some unique viewpoint or new material on the subject, will be disappointed: instead, what Solovyov and Klepikova have written is a newsy account of the events.

Solovyov and Klepikova describe Boris Yeltsin as a complete "collectivist," his personality shaped by the fact that he grew up in a barrack with no privacy: "In a barrack, things are in plain sight; no act is left unseen and uncommented. Nuances of the personality are quickly eroded, human quirks disappear, as does sensitivity. But the inmates develop an uncanny ability to adapt, a modesty of demands, and an emotional invulnerability. . . . [Yeltsin's mother] remembers the ten-year-old Boris coming home from school, moaning, 'I am hungry-y-y. I can't go on anymo-o-ore.' There was not a crumb of bread in the house. But the whole barrack starved, too. . . . Barrack morals are based on an unconditional egalitarianism."

One result of this childhood in the barracks, has been that Yeltsin "is not used to privacy, to being by himself, nor is he particularly fond of it. He can be happy among friends in a cramped dormitory cell for four people. . . . Even after he became a family man, he spent one vacation every five years with his college friends—one time with 87 of them. . . . It was as though he were afraid to be idle and by himself—or perhaps was bored by himself."

The issue of statecraft

This profile, to the extent that it is true (and I tend to think it is), should be of concern. What Solovyov and Klepikova have portrayed, is a leader of one of the world's largest countries who would rather engage in busywork or shallow social activity than study (minimally) issues of statecraft. Although Solovyov and Klepikova tell us that, in college, Yeltsin "kept night vigil over Lenin's theoretical works," including those forbidden in the Stalin years—the only conclusion they draw is hypothetical: "It is doubtful that he found the answers to his burning questions in the Communist gospel."

It is clear from this biography, that the larger questions of statecraft have never been in Yeltsin's scope. Policy questions like the significance of Peter the Great's reforms, or even the policies of Count Sergei Witte two generations earlier, seem to have been outside Yeltsin's grasp.

But politics is the art of statecraft, of shaping the future of a nation; and we are left at a loss to discover what Yeltsin's program might be. If Solovyov and Klepikova are correct, Yeltsin really had no other program than to oppose the privileged class, the elite of the Communist Party; which could very well explain why Yeltsin was so easily convinced to go along with the disastrous shock therapy program of Prof. Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard University.

We do learn, however, that one of Gorbachov's tactics was to attempt to pit Andrei Sakharov, who is considered by many to be one of the great political dissidents who transformed the Soviet Union, against Boris Yeltsin in various elections. We come close to learning the truth about Boris Yeltsin's famous midnight swim in the river; we learn that the campaign to portray Yeltsin as an alcoholic was carefully orchestrated by the Soviet KGB and the U.S. State Department.

However, Solovyov and Klepikova leave unexplored clues that might further explain who Boris Yeltsin is, and where he came from. The authors would have us believe that he was a self-made man—who somehow rose to become First Party Secretary of the second largest industrial city in the Soviet Union, Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg)—who at some point decided to challenge the party system and talk directly to the people. Yet we discover that one of the apparatchiks who paved the way for Yeltsin's first visit to America was Georgi Arbatov, the head of the U.S.A.-Canada Institute, a "fixer" who represents a conduit, an interface, for the special interests of the Anglo-Americans and the Soviets. What other assistance was provided to Boris Yeltsin by these special interests? That question remains unexplored.

For those who wish to familiarize themselves with the last days of Gorbachov and the rise to power of Boris Yeltsin, this book will be of interest. But the process of peeling the many layers from current events, to arrive at a deeper grasp of the political processes behind these events, is left to a future historian or biographer.