

The passing of a Russian legend: Boris Yelstin

London, Monday, 23 April, 2007

Boris Yeltsin, the former President of Russia who died today aged 76, led Russians away from the bondage of Communism, but was never to see the promised land of a thriving market economy and a state ruled by law.

He took control of a Russia in chaos and left it in a different kind of chaos when he suddenly resigned on the last day of 1999.

During his time in office two very different Yeltsins etched themselves on the world's consciousness. There was Yeltsin the fighter, who climbed on top of a tank in August 1991 to raise the standard of liberty against the Soviet putschists who wanted to restore Communism.

And there was the later version, another broken-down Brezhnev, puffy-cheeked, stiff gaited, who disappeared from view when most needed, paralysed by heart disease, a fondness for the bottle and bouts of depressive indecision.

Yeltsin thrived in opposition, but aged visibly in power.

His finest hour was his campaign in 1991 to unseat the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, in the course of which he killed off the Soviet superpower and ushered in the modern Russian state.

Once in power, Yeltsin seemed less comfortable.

As the challenger he enjoyed popularity: the more he upset the West, then in the grip of its love affair with Gorbachev, the more old women begged to kiss his feet.

But Yeltsin was not a naturally popular figure in the West. With his bear-like frame, growling voice and unpredictability he embodied the more disturbing traits of the Russian male character.

In opposition, Yeltsin was caricatured in the West as an axe-wielding Russian peasant and rarely appeared in cartoons without a vodka bottle.

Yet for a time it seemed that he had done more to make possible movement by Russia towards a modern economy than anybody else. Where Gorbachev dithered about economic reform, Yeltsin grasped the nettle, freeing state-controlled prices in 1992, and engaging in a massive privatisation of Russian industry the next year.

But the Russian economy remained chaotic, and intractable; there was nothing that Yeltsin could do, even during periods when he was capable of consistent action. His political opponents held up reform; Western bankers drew the line at pouring money into an undefined morass. The disastrous collapse of the Russian stockmarket and currency in 1998 came when Yeltsin seemed to be one of the walking wounded. The busiest entrepreneurs in Russia were the mafia.

Crises punctuated Yeltsin's career. In August 1991, when he was the elected President of the Russian Federation, then still part of the Soviet Union, hardliners from the KGB and the army incarcerated the then Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in his Crimean holiday home, and declared a coup.

It was typical of the bone-headed (and often drunk) coup leaders that they did not arrest Yeltsin at dawn.

He drove into the heart of Moscow, and the flag of resistance was raised at the Russian parliament, based in the Moscow White House. Television cameras showed Yeltsin clambering on to a tank.

"We appeal to the citizens of Russia to give a worthy answer to the putschists," he roared. "Dictatorship will not pass."

From that moment, the putsch was doomed — and the fate of Gorbachev and the Soviet superpower with it.

Using his new prestige to humiliate Gorbachev, Yeltsin became undisputed leader of Russia.

On August 23 he signed a decree which suspended the Communist Party. The next day Gorbachev, unable to deny the complicity of Communist leaders in the plot, resigned as general secretary of the Party, and called on the central committee to dissolve itself. By the end of the year the Soviet Union had collapsed and its 15 constituent republics found themselves as nation states.

As befitted someone who served the Communist Party for most of his working life, Yeltsin set to work introducing change in 1992 in a rough, Bolshevik fashion. The aim was (as Lenin would have said) to "smash" the Communist system and ensure it never returned.

The poor lost their life savings in the massive price rises and hyper-inflation. Privatisation was manipulated by old party bosses and the criminal mafia; it became a synonym for theft. But there was no turning back to Communism.

It was not long before Yeltsin's reforms spawned another opposition coalition, based this time inside the White House. By the end of 1992 the Congress of People's Deputies had forced the resignation, against Yeltsin's will, of the reforming prime minister Yegor Gaidar. Viktor Chernomyrdin, who succeeded him, immediately froze the prices of basic foodstuffs, revived central planning and slowed down the privatisation programme.

Yeltsin seemed to be losing many of the battles to the hardliners, led by his vice-president, Alexander Rutskoy, and the speaker of parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov.

By March, 1993, Yeltsin made a vain attempt to rule by decree, and in September he ordered the assembly dissolved, but Rutskoy and Khasbulatov stayed in the building. Few people believed Yeltsin when he mumbled that he would soon set his big guns on the rebels. But within days he ordered his security ministers to storm the White House, which, after some hesitation, they did.

With the glistening building in flames from dozens of rounds of tank fire, the rebellion collapsed; 176 were killed.

Yeltsin set about creating a new constitution and a more orderly parliament. But the elections of December 1993 yielded a nasty surprise. Many of his old enemies from the White House turned up in the new parliament, while almost one quarter of the votes went to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party. Western-style reformers were now out of fashion, though the West was kept sweet by the government's continued policy of fighting inflation.

Power was once again in the hands of the old Soviet nomenklatura. Yeltsin gathered around him associates from his days as Communist Party boss in the Ural city of Yekaterinburg. Membership of the inner circle depended principally on loyalty in the 1993 uprising. The Kremlin became a court, filled with intrigue where real power was wielded by the most unlikely people.

Alexander Korzhakov, who rose from being bodyguard to become chief of presidential security, was seen as the second most influential man in the land.

A tougher stance was adopted in foreign affairs, with Russia making every effort to appear a superpower, even if it was not. This was particularly clear in dealings with the former Soviet republics, in which the Kremlin arrogated itself the right to use all means, including force, to defend Russian interests.

The apogee of General Korzhakov and like-minded men suspicious of the West came in December 1994, when the might of the Russian armed forces was turned against the rebellious republic of Chechnya, a small territory on Russia's southern border which declared itself independent in 1991. The bungled planning, inept execution and sheer brutality of this campaign shocked the world.

Yeltsin, who had been told it would be over in days, absented himself to hospital for a nose operation at the start of the campaign in the hope of avoiding the fuss. It dragged on for 21 months, causing some 40,000 casualties, mostly among civilians. Yeltsin himself suffered three heart attacks during the months of war with Chechnya, but he never lost the support of the West.

He knew that the deaths of thousands of Chechens counted for little in international relations, provided Russia steered a generally pro-Western economic course and ensured that its nuclear arsenal was in reliable hands. Yeltsin later admitted it was his greatest mistake.

Yet in 1999, Russia launched another offensive against Chechnya, on the grounds that Islamic militants were using it as a base to infiltrate its neighbours. An air offensive followed by ground forces destroyed the capital, Grozny, and created hundreds of thousands of refugees. Yeltsin disappeared for a time into hospital, ostensibly with flu. This time, though, since a more wary strategy protected Russian forces from such large casualties, the attack on Chechnya gained Yeltsin public support and set his successor Vladimir Putin on his way to the presidency.

Yeltsin had in the meantime been obliged to make an urgent decision about what to do when his presidential mandate ran out in July 1996. His belief in his own popular appeal, coupled with a desire to humiliate the Communist opposition, swayed him.

The Korzhakov clan was sidelined, and Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana, stepped in to the vacuum, ensuring that modern-minded advisers took over the campaign. Yeltsin himself, sustained by a \$10 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, scattered bribes like confetti, and thanks to ruthless manipulation of the media, was re-elected with a handsome majority on the second round of voting in July 1996. But the effort of campaigning, which had the old man jiggling on the stage at a rock concert, had caused a heart attack — his third — in June, after the first round of voting.

He was out of action for most of the rest of the year.

For the first time, a Russian ruler had staked his position on the will of the people. Yet Russia seemed stuck and few people really believed that they could change anything. When in March 1998 Yeltsin dismissed his Prime Minister, Victor Chernomyrdin, and the entire government, it caused a great stir. But such moves became habitual.

Having failing to gain the necessary constitutional confirmation for the appointment of his own candidate for Prime Minister, the 35 year-old Sergei Kiriyenko, Yeltsin accepted the assumption of the prime-ministership by the former Foreign Intelligence Service director Yevgeny Primakov. So it went on.

In August 1999 he sacked the sitting prime minister, Sergei Stepashin, and installed Vladimir Putin, the fourth prime minister in 18 months, another former KGB man, whom he also annointed as his chosen successor in the presidential elections due in 2000.

Yeltsin was not a modern politician. He was camera-shy. The only times when the television caught his larger-than-life personality was when he was behaving badly. In August 1994, while in Berlin for ceremonies to mark the withdrawal of the last Russian soldier from that city, he was seen grabbing the bandleader's baton and singing a Russian folksong. Russians were understanding of his love-hate affair with vodka, but Western Europeans and Americans found his public drunkenness embarrassing.

In September 1994, Yeltsin had stopped over at Shannon airport in the Irish Republic but had failed to disembark from his aircraft; he was widely assumed to have been drunk – though in fact he had suffered another heart attack. Yeltsin insisted repeatedly that he would serve out his term, which would have ended in the year 2000.

But by the autumn of 1998 he was having to cancel foreign trips, including one to India.

Political enemies such as the Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov gloated at his incapacity to rule. Yeltsin's "colds" became more frequent, and by the summer of 1999 he often seemed heavily drugged or drunk.

This did not stop him appointing Putin as the fourth new Prime Minister in 18 months. Parliament confirmed the appointment rather than face the greater disruption of Yeltsin dissolving it. Then, while the world prepared to see in the year 2000, he suddenly resigned, naming Putin as acting president and his preferred successor.

"I ask you to forgive me," Yeltsin said in his resignation statement, "for not fulfilling some hopes of those people who believed that we would be able to jump from the grey, stagnating, totalitarian past into a bright, rich and civilised future, all at one go."

Yeltsin's instincts were authoritarian, though he often kept them in check. He could not live up to the Russians' yearning for an all-knowing and utterly self-confident leader.

In his memoirs, *The View from the Kremlin* (1994), Yeltsin wrote of the pains of office: "The debilitating bouts of depression, the grave second thoughts, the insomnia and headaches in the middle of the night, the tears and despair, the sadness at the appearance of Moscow and other Russian cities, the flood of criticism from the newspapers and television every day, the harassment campaign at the Congress sessions, the entire burden of the decisions made, the hurt from people close to me who did not support me at the last minute and who deceived me — all this I have had to bear."

Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin was born into a poor peasant family on February 1, 1931, in the village of Budko, in the Sverdlovsk region of the Urals. He grew up in extremely modest circumstances which left an indelible mark on him.

In his grandfather's time the Yeltsins had run a successful farm, with their own mill and five horses. In 1930, during Stalin's campaign to collectivise agriculture, the family were declared "kulaks" (rich peasants) and driven off the land. In 1934 his father, who had been working on a building site, was arrested in the middle of the night and sent to labour camp for three years. The family never talked of the matter.

The boy Boris was a skilled sportsman and toured the country playing volleyball. He was frequently in trouble at school; later he would confess to having been "a little bit of a hooligan as a boy". In one of his childhood escapades he lost the thumb and index finger on his left hand while playing with a hand grenade which he had stolen from a weapons warehouse.

He trained as a construction engineer at the Urals Polytechnic Institute and from 1955 to 1968 worked on various construction projects; in 1961 he joined the Communist party, at that time the only way to progress. He rose quickly in the regional party hierarchy of Sverdlovsk, now called by its former name Yekaterinburg, and in 1976 was elevated to the role of regional party secretary — effectively the governor of a key industrial area — by Leonid Brezhnev.

Over the next few years he made great use of television to promote his image and became popular by introducing rationing as a more just way of distributing scarce goods.

The big change came in 1985, at the start of the Gorbachev era, when he was given a seat of the communist party's central committee, and then became Communist Party boss of Moscow, giving him a seat on the Politburo as a non-voting member. The Moscow job was notoriously difficult: Gorbachev needed an outsider to sweep aside the mafia which had ruled the city's bureaucracy under Viktor Grishin, Yeltsin's predecessor.

Yeltsin threw himself into the task, resolved to wage war on privilege and corruption. He adopted an extravagantly populist style, eschewing limousines to travel to work on public transport and queuing up to go to the local doctor instead of being whisked to the Kremlin hospital. Lazy or inefficient officials were publicly berated.

He earned the thanks of Muscovites when he cut through layers of middlemen to ensure that fresh vegetables would reach the capital rather than be left to rot in warehouses. This Latin American approach to politics made him an instant hero, but he was soon at odds with the Communist Party hierarchy. Singularly lacking in tact and often temperamental, Yeltsin made enemies easily.

In order to gather information, he had top bureaucrats shadowed by the police. His detractors accused him of making changes with an impulsiveness which verged on demagoguery.

Yeltsin and Gorbachev clashed with increasing regularity. In the autumn of 1987 Yeltsin took the floor after Gorbachev at the Central Committee plenum. To a stunned audience, he made a critical speech claiming perestroika was proceeding too slowly, and asked to be removed from the Politburo — a wish eagerly acceded to.

Gorbachev reprimanded Yeltsin for his "petty bourgeois outburst", stripped him of his post as Moscow party boss and threw him out of the Politburo — fanning Yeltsin's reputation as a David fighting the Goliath of the establishment. To keep him quiet, Gorbachev gave him a deputy minister's job. But in the era of glasnost Yeltsin was able to speak his mind and further increase his support.

In 1989 he bounded back, winning a Moscow constituency with 89.4 per cent of the vote in the elections that year for the Soviet parliament. The official Communist Party candidate managed 6.9 per cent. Yeltsin also joined the pro-reform Inter-Regional Group of deputies, alongside the late Andrei Sakharov, and became the scourge of the indecisive Gorbachev. The next year he was elected to the Russian parliament, and got himself voted as its chairman, a stepping stone to election by popular ballot as president of Russia in 1991.

With a direct mandate from the people, he had outmanoeuvred Gorbachev.

In 2002 Yeltsin launched a vain political comeback, claiming to be alcohol-free and three stones lighter.

In 2005 it emerged that while president he had killed a man in a hit-and-run accident while drunk.

In addition to *The View from the Kremlin*, Yeltsin wrote an autobiography, *Against the Grain* (1990). In 1992 he published *Three Days*, and in 2000 a further set of memoirs, *Midnight Diaries*.

Yeltsin was well supported by his wife, Naina, an astute but retiring woman — “a very necessary contrast to my fairly extrovert nature.” They had two daughters.

Source: *The Telegraph*