

 **REVOLUTION ROAD** 20 YEARS
AFTER THE FALL
MELTDOWN • GORBACHEV'S LAME AFTERLIFE • A KREMLIN BUILT FOR TWO

Three Days in Foros

In August 1991, Soviet hardliners held Mikhail Gorbachev captive at a Crimean resort in a last-ditch effort to save the crumbling Soviet empire. Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev's foreign policy advisor was there when it happened. In this excerpt from the diary he kept at the time -- newly translated into English -- he tells the story of the coup attempt that destroyed the USSR.

BY ANATOLY CHERNYAEV | JUNE 21, 2011



On Aug. 18, 1991, four Soviet government officials arrived at Zarya, Mikhail Gorbachev's dacha at the Crimean coastal retreat of Foros, where the Soviet president was on vacation, and informed him that he was under house arrest. A coup d'état was under way, led by a group of hard-liners in the Soviet civilian and security leadership who were trying to stop Gorbachev from signing the Union Treaty, an agreement that would cede more authority to the Soviet Union's constituent republics; the hard-liners were convinced that it could only lead to the union's dissolution.

*The putsch lasted for three days and failed, taking the entire Soviet Union down with it. Russians and the international community rallied around Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who stood up to the coup plotters in a dramatic confrontation in Moscow. (For the inside story of Yeltsin's stand, see Gennady Burbulis's "Meltdown," in the **July/August 2011 issue of Foreign Policy**.) Meanwhile in Foros, Gorbachev, his family, and his closest advisors struggled to find out what was happening and get their message out to the outside world.*

*Among the members of Gorbachev's inner circle present at Foros was Anatoly Chernyaev, the Soviet leader's 70-year-old foreign-policy advisor, who wrote the first insider's account of the incident in his diary the day after the coup collapsed. The following excerpt comes from the **first English translation** of Chernyaev's diary, translated by Anna Melyakova and edited by Svetlana Savranskaya of the National Security Archive at George Washington University, and published online in May.*

THE CAST

Gorbachev's circle:

Mikhail Gorbachev (also referred to in Chernyaev's diary as "M.S." or "Mikhail Sergeyevich"), president of the Soviet Union

Raisa Gorbacheva (also referred to as "R.M." or "Raisa Maksimovna"), Gorbachev's wife

Irina Virganskaya ("Ira"), Gorbachev's daughter

Anatoly Virgansky ("Tolya"), Virganskaya's husband at the time

Olga Lanina, Gorbachev's assistant

Tamara Aleksandrova ("Tamara Alekseyevna"), Chernyaev's assistant

The coup plotters and accomplices:

Valery Boldin, Gorbachev's chief of staff

Oleg Baklanov, member of the Soviet Defense Council

Oleg Shenin, chief of Gorbachev's Communist Party staff

Valentin Varennikov, deputy defense minister and commander in chief of land forces in the Soviet Army

Vyacheslav Generalov, officer in Gorbachev's personal KGB detail

Yury Plekhanov, head of KGB security services

Around 5 p.m. [on Aug. 18], Olga [Lanina] ran into my office, saying, "Anatoly Sergeyeovich [Chernyaev], what's going on? [Valery] Boldin is here, together with [Oleg] Baklanov and [Oleg] Shenin, and another general, tall and in glasses -- I don't know him." (Later we found out it was [Valentin] Varennikov.) I looked out my door.... There was a congregation of cars at the entrance to our building, all of them with antennas, some with emergency lights ... and a crowd of drivers and security personnel. I looked out the window facing M.S.'s house and saw a gloomy Plekhanov walking down the path. From a distance, I could see Boldin on the balcony.

Olga said, "Anatoly Sergeyeovich, something is going on here.... You know that communication lines have been disconnected?" I picked up the receiver.... The first, second, third, including the secure line -- silence. We started guessing. Aloud, I brainstormed that there might be some new power plant accident (because Baklanov was among those present); recently there was a report of some failures at the Tiraspol power plants and on one of the Chernobyl blocks.

[...]

The phone lines were disconnected completely.

Earlier, when we were on the way to the office, Olga asked to be released early, around 5 p.m., so she could go for a swim, etc. Now, the car did not arrive to get her. I told the driver to pick me up at 6:30, but he did not come for me either. I asked the security guard on duty to get whoever was in charge to explain to me what was going on.

About 10 minutes later, Vyacheslav Vladimirovich Generalov showed up. We became well acquainted during Gorbachev's trips abroad, where he usually was in charge of security. He is very polite. He asked Olga to leave us alone and took a seat. "Anatoly Sergeyeovich, don't get me wrong. They left me in charge here. I have orders not to let anyone out. Even if I allowed you to leave the premises, you would be immediately detained by the border guards: There is a triple semicircle [of guards] from one seashore to the other. The road to Sevastopol-Yalta is closed off around here. You can see, there are three ships already at sea...."

I asked him an innocent question: "What about signing the Union Treaty tomorrow?"

He replied: "It will not be signed. The plane that came for M.S. was sent back to Moscow. The garages with his cars are sealed, and they are guarded not by my people, but gunmen who were sent over here. I cannot even allow the extended service staff (local people -- gardeners, cooks, cleaning ladies) to go home. I don't know where I'm going to house them."

I again asked a naive question: "But how can this be -- my things are in Yuzhny [the nearby resort where Chernyaev was staying], and finally, it is time for dinner! Tamara Alekseyevna is there; she is probably worried and doesn't know what's going on." [...] He said: "There is nothing I can do. Please understand me, Anatoly

Sergeyevich. I am a military man. I have my orders.... Nobody is to leave the premises! And no calling."

[...]

It was getting dark when handsome Boris, Gorbachev's new guard (replacing Medvedev), told me that M.S. is asking me to come outside. He was nearby, Boris said, taking a walk around the dacha.

M.S., R.M., their daughter Ira, and her husband Tolya were standing by the entrance to the dacha. [...] He was calm, even-tempered, and smiling. "Do you know what happened?" he asked.

"No, how would I know! I only watched from my window. I saw [Yury] Plekhanov, Boldin. I heard there was another one, some general, tall and in glasses ... and Baklanov."

"The general was Varennikov. He was the most active of the group. Listen, I want you to know what happened."

R.M. said, "They walked in without asking, without warning. Plekhanov was leading them and the guards stepped out of his way. It was completely unexpected. I was sitting in an armchair, they walked by me and only Baklanov said hello. Not Boldin! We were on the best of terms for 15 years! He was like a relative to us; we trusted him with everything, even the most intimate things!!!"

M.S. stopped her and said to me, "Listen. They sat down. I asked them, 'What have you come to me with?' Baklanov started speaking, but Varennikov talked the most. Shenin was quiet. Boldin tried to say something once -- 'Mikhail Sergeyevich, don't you understand what kind of the situation this is!!' I told him, 'You're a scumbag and better keep your mouth shut. You came here to give me a lecture on the situation in the country.' [...] In a word, they offered me two options: either transfer my powers to [vice president and top civilian coup plotter Gennady] Yanayev and agree to a state of emergency, or renounce the presidency. They tried to blackmail me" -- he did not explain how. "I told them, 'You could have guessed that I would not agree to either option. You are trying to arrange a coup d'état. What you want to do with this committee and such -- it is unconstitutional and illegal. It is a gamble that will lead to blood and a civil war.' The general started to argue that they will 'ensure' that it does not come to that. I said, 'Excuse me, Cde. Varennikov, but I don't remember your full name....'

"He replied, 'Valentin Ivanovich.'

"So, Valentin Ivanovich -- society is not a battalion. No 'Left and march step,' for you. Your undertaking will resound with a terrible tragedy; all the things that started coming together now, they will be broken. Let's suppose you put everyone down, you disband the government, you install troops everywhere ... and then what? You caught me as I was working on an article. [...] In the article I consider the course you are pursuing now -- the emergency situation. I thought through everything. I am convinced that this is a disastrous path; it could turn into a bloody path.... And it would lead not just to nowhere; it would lead right back to pre-perestroika times.' With that they left."

[...]

What was the level of our isolation in Zarya? This was a question I got often from journalists and friends after we got back to Moscow.

The people Generalov brought, "his" men, were not very many. Some of them he put by the garages, which contained the presidential cars with autonomous communication systems. Some men were stationed by the gates, and they also had guns. The border towers on the beach were already there -- at both ends of the semicircle of the dacha's territory. Border guards were on duty there. But two or three days before the coup, their numbers increased along the highway. Only later, Olga and I recalled that we did not attach any importance to it at the time. Also, people in unusual uniforms appeared along the highway -- in sailor's striped vests, with trousers worn over high boots, and wearing shoes instead of boots. They looked like the riot police. Later we figured out what this meant. It was enough to step out from our office and look at the edge of the cliffs along the Sevastopol-Yalta road to see that border guards stood every 50-100 meters along the road, some of them had dogs.

We were closely monitored. [...] On the 19th during the day I went to visit Gorbachev. The guard in the booth on the way to the dacha stopped me.

"Who are you?"

"I'm an advisor."

"Where are you going?"

"It's easy to guess," I said, pointing at the presidential dacha.

"It is not allowed."

I lost my temper and started cursing at him. Suddenly, Oleg (one of the bodyguards) jumped out from behind me and told him: "You -- get back in your booth! And never get in his way again (pointing at me). Go ahead, Anatoly Sergeevich."

[...]

On the morning of the 19th, as soon as I heard about the emergency situation over [the Soviet radio news service] Mayak, I started thinking how to act toward M.S. -- to wait for summons? That is, follow the same chain of command? No, that will not do: He must be convinced of my loyalty. I went to him. I wandered around the house for a long time, until his granddaughter saw me and took me upstairs to her grandfather. He was lying in bed after a routine procedure for his sciatica.

"You know, Anatoly," he said right away, "when I spoke with them, I did not flinch. I was completely calm. Even now, I am calm. I am certain that I am right. I am certain that this is a gamble, and God forbid there will be blood..."

He was quiet for a while. Then, "They will not be able to restore order, nor to harvest, nor get the economy

going.... They will not succeed! It is a criminal gamble! Think about what we should do, and come by after lunch."

I came over as we agreed. We went to the beach with the whole family. It was impossible to talk in the house anymore because it was bugged everywhere, as Raisa Maksimovna kept constantly warning us in a panic.

[...]

R.M. took M.S. and me into a small pavilion and sent everyone else to the sea. Feverishly, she ripped a couple clean pages from a notebook and handed them to me; then for a long time she searched in her purse for a pen. Finally she found a pencil and gave it to me. "I will leave you," she said. "Yes, yes," M.S. said impatiently (which is unusual for him when talking to her), "we have to work." She smiled pitifully and waved to me.

M.S.: "Tolya! We have to do something. I will pressure this scoundrel." (He was talking about General Generalov.) "I will make demands every day, and I will increase them."

I: "Yes M.S., I agree. I doubt that the gang in Moscow will react to it, but you cannot let them think that you've resigned to this situation."

M.S.: "Write this down. Firstly, I demand the immediate restoration of government communications. Secondly, I demand an immediate dispatch of the presidential plane, so I can get back to work. If they don't respond, tomorrow I will insist that they send journalists, both Soviet and foreign."

I wrote it down. He said, "Watch out that they don't confiscate this from you on the way back!"

"They won't," I said confidently.

On the 20th, I went to see M.S. [...] Again I walked around the house for a while until the cook told me that he was in the office. He walked out to meet me, and at the same time Raisa Maksimovna did too, from another room. She immediately dragged us to the balcony, pointing to the lamps, the ceiling, the furniture, indicating that they're bugged. We stood for a while, leaning on the railing. I said, "R.M., you see that cliff with the border patrol tower. Beyond it, after a turn is Tesseli (which is a subsidiary of the Foros retreat -- it contains a dacha in which Maxim Gorky lived in Crimea in the 1930s). Before Zarya was built, there was a wild, deserted "beach" here. In reality, it wasn't much of a beach, just some large rocks, and it was difficult to get in the water. So ... I vacationed in Tesseli several times. And I swam here from that cliff. I would lie here, and then swim back.

R.M. listened absent-mindedly. She was startled when I went on: "You probably know that I am a very good swimmer? It would be no problem for me to swim 5 km, and probably even 10 km. Perhaps we should risk it?"

I smiled as I said this. But she became alert. She looked directly at me for a long time, seriously thinking that such an "option" was possible. Before this, she was rapidly whispering to me about how at 3 a.m. they hid in an internal room in the house and took pictures of M.S.'s statement with Tolya's camera. [...] "So, I will package the film into a small bundle and will give it to you in the evening. But, for God's sake, please do not keep it on you. You could be searched. And don't hide it in your office." [...]

M.S. was skeptical of the idea that I should swim to Tesseli, Foros, or even Yuzhny: "Even if they don't fish you out of the water, when you come out you'll be practically naked. And then what? They will send you to the nearest police station, and the film will be lost." But they discussed it in earnest, though the idea was clearly absurd. And I suggested it as a joke, to somehow relieve their nervous tension.

R.M. gave me the film later. In the meantime, M.S. asked her to look after the children. We went to a different balcony, stood by the railing, and immediately saw how the telescopes from watchtowers turned toward us and the border patrol on the nearest cliff caught us in his binoculars. At the same time, we heard from the booth below the house: "The object under observation is out on the balcony, second from the left." M.S. and I looked at each other; I laughed and cursed at them.... He gave me a look: I had not allowed myself to curse in front of him before.

[...]

He began to dictate a statement -- an address to the nation and the international community. We talked. Discussed and formulated every point. I went back to my office, where Olga typed it on the special thick stationery intended for presidential notes. In the evening I asked him to sign it and add the date and place. At the top he added a note, requesting anyone who finds this statement to make it public through any means possible. [...]

We discussed the possible reactions of the world community. We guessed what [German Chancellor Helmut] Kohl might be thinking, or [U.S. President George H.W.] Bush. Gorbachev believed unequivocally that there would be no support for the junta. All the credits would be withdrawn in a moment. And our banks would immediately go bankrupt. Without these credits, which were given practically under the security of his name, our light industry would be emaciated. Everything would come to a halt. He called the conspirators mouse-brained because they could not calculate basic things. [...]

The Gorbachevs' mood changed depending on the news from the radio. For example, when some guys from the personal security unit turned on the TV with the help of some wires, we saw Yanayev & Co.'s press conference and heard them say that Gorbachev is gravely ill. This made a terrible impression. Everybody became guarded. The common opinion was that if "those people" allow themselves to utter such wild lies for all the world to hear, that means they've closed off any way back and will go through to the end; they burned all bridges. I told M.S. that Yanayev is looking for an alibi in case "something" happens to Gorbachev. He added: "Now they will make reality fit the lie they told publicly."

But when the BBC reported on the events around the White House, the Russian parliament -- that the people are protesting in defense of Gorbachev and that [Russian President Boris] Yeltsin took the lead in organizing the resistance -- naturally the mood sharply improved. Actually, even on the 19th, before we knew any of this, M.S. told me that Yeltsin will not give in and nothing will break him down. Russia and Moscow will not allow the coup members to emerge victorious. I remembered his words, "I am certain that Boris Nikolayevich will show his character to the full extent." [...]

We got our bits of information from the small Sony radio transistor that Tolya had on him. We sat in a circle: M.S. and I on the couch, Tolya squatting, Ira sitting right on the floor, and Raisa Maksimovna across from us on a chair. With our heads close together, we tried to make out the voices. The transistor was very bad and the batteries nearly dead. Tolya moved it around to try to catch a signal.

[...]

This is how our imprisonment ended.

Around 5 p.m. on the 21st, all three women burst into my office: Olga, Larisa, and Tatyana, extremely excited. "Anatoly Sergeevich, look, look what's happening!" We rushed out on the balcony.... Several cars were coming from the ramps at the entrance of the dacha's territory. Two boys from security came out to meet them, with Kalashnikovs at the ready. "Stop!" they called out. The cars stopped. "Stop!" More security guys came out from the bushes. A driver and somebody else came out from the first car.... They said something. The security's response was "Don't move!" and one of the guys ran toward Gorbachev's dacha. Soon he returned, and the cars moved to the left, behind the service building where my office is located.

I stepped out from my office, which is on the second floor. There is a stairway that goes directly from my door to the main entrance to the house. I was standing there in a rumpled undershirt and worn-out sports pants. A thought flashed through my mind -- I look like an inmate in a prison camp!

[The coup plotters Supreme Soviet Chairman Anatoly] Lukyanov, [Communist Party General Secretary Vladimir] Ivashko, Baklanov, [Defense Minister Dmitri] Yazov, and [KGB head Vladimir] Kryuchkov filed into the door downstairs. They looked beaten, their faces gloomy. Each one bowed to me!! I understood what was going on -- they came to plead guilty. I stood there, stony-faced, boiling over with anger. Even before they disappeared in the room on the left, I turned around and showed my back to them. Olga was standing next to me, all red, devilish triumph playing in her eyes. [...]

I got dressed and ran over to M.S. I have to admit, I was afraid that he would receive them.... Which must not be done, because we saw on TV that a delegation from the Russian parliament was on their way here. Gorbachev was sitting in his office and giving orders over the phone. He paused for a second to tell me: "I gave them an ultimatum: If they don't connect the phone lines, I will not speak with them. And now I won't speak with them anyway."

[...]

[Gorbachev's bodyguard] Boris reported that the Russian delegation entered the territory of the dacha.

"Invite them in," M.S. said. "Let them go to the cafeteria." A couple minutes later we joined them there. The scene that followed I will remember for the rest of my life. [Russian Prime Minister Ivan] Silayev and [Russian Vice President Aleksandr] Rutskoi rushed to embrace Gorbachev. There were exclamations and some big words. They interrupted each other in a rush. Soviet National Security Council members Vadim] Bakatin and [Yevgeny]

Primakov, the deputies, were there as well. I looked at them. Some of them had railed against Gorbachev in the parliament and in the press more than once; they had argued with him and indignantly protested against him. But now, the misfortune instantly brought to light that they are a part of a whole and that the country needs exactly this whole. I even said, while watching this collective joy and embraces, "Thus finally the center and Russia have united, without any Union Treaty...." (Here and below I reproduce my diary entries made immediately after arriving in Moscow.)

We sat down at a table. We vied with each other in telling what [had] been happening in Moscow and here. It turned out -- for some reason I was surprised by this -- that they did not even know who came to the president with an ultimatum, or what kind of an ultimatum it was.

Silayev and Rutskoi were against Gorbachev receiving Kryuchkov & Co., who were in essence sitting under guard in the service house below my office. M.S. replied that he will most likely receive only Lukyanov and Ivashko, who seem to have come separately.

It was a long conversation. It was already nearing 10 p.m. when Rutskoi took the initiative. He is a strong and handsome man; it's a pleasure to observe him. "Mikhail Sergeyeovich," he said, "it is time to discuss what the next step will be. We will not let you go on the (presidential) airplane on which those types (!) got here. We shall take my airplane. It is at the same airport, but far from yours. It is securely guarded. I brought 40 lieutenant colonels with me; they are all armed. We'll make it."

I should say a word about these lieutenant colonels. According to Rutskoi's plan, M.S. was supposed to make a false exit from his car near the presidential plane. He did this, and then quickly got back in the car, which rushed toward Rutskoi's plane, standing 3 to 5 km away. When M.S., in his wool sweater that people saw on TV when he appeared at [Moscow's] Vnukovo [airport], came toward Rutskoi's plane, these officers stood with guns in the open until he was inside the plane. Looking at this scene, I thought: There is still genuine officer's honor in our army. There is a high intelligence in the army, too. One only has to talk to someone like Colonel N.S. Stolyarov, who came with the group of deputies to rescue his president. We drove to the airport in one car.

Then there was the flight. Rutskoi was in charge of the flight; he kept summoning the pilots [to discuss the details]. M.S. and his family settled in a small bay of the plane and called me over. There was so little space that the little granddaughters lay down on the floor and quickly fell asleep.

When I came in, he cheerfully asked me, "So, who are you now?" I replied, "I am a simple Soviet prisoner, but an ex-prisoner." Everybody laughed excitedly. [...] R.M. was telling us what happened to her when they heard that the coup members were coming over to ascertain the condition of Mikhail Sergeyeovich's health.... Now she was feeling better, but still had poor command of her arm. There was an animated conversation about people, and how they are tested in such circumstances, about immorality, which is the source of all crimes and misfortunes. There were toasts to continuing life.... For the first time then, M.S. said the words: "We are flying to a new country."