

1991

# Tanks in Moscow

An analysis of eight Dutch newspapers' coverage of the August Coup, 1991.

By Vera Meuleman

Under the supervision of Dr. J.H.C. Kern  
Leiden University  
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## Introduction

On August 23, 1991, a short article appeared in the newspaper *Nederlands Dagblad*. The piece was titled: ‘Newspapers sell well, weeklies slightly less’ and was based on an inquiry by the newspaper at a ‘Bruna’ shop in Rotterdam. The article read:

De dagbladen, met name de grote ochtendkranten, doen het uitstekend. “De verkoop is de hele week veel groter dan gewoonlijk”, aldus Bruna in Rotterdam. “Normaliter gaat de verkoop de hele dag door, maar nu zijn de dagbladen aan het begin van de middag weg. De ochtendbladen gaan nog veel sneller.”<sup>1</sup>

The daily newspapers flew off the racks all because of an event that lasted only a few days: an impressive coup attempt in the Soviet Union. A group of eight high-ranking Party members made a final effort to restore the old communist status quo. By organizing a putsch that would eventually go down in history as the ‘August Coup’, they strove to take over the power of the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, who was held at his dacha in Crimea. As we know now, this bold attempt, designed to halt the weakening of the centralized USSR, failed and only accelerated the Union’s disintegration.

In his book, *Russians: The People Behind the Power*, American journalist and former Moscow correspondent Gregory Feifer writes about the failure of the coup: “[...] it was supremely difficult to believe the plotters had been faced down, their last attempt to save communism foiled. Soviets had waited for this day for decades. An impossible dream had come true: Russia was free!”<sup>2</sup> And although Feifer might sound overly positive, he was not the only one to applaud the new found freedom of the Russians after the failed August Coup. In the book *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* historian David Foglesong cites the American Secretary of State James Baker who claimed in 1991 that the Russian people had shown their desire for freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that Russia was free after 1991 and ready to become a democratic state, was rather undue. An example of a different view of the events in Moscow is the documentary by the American filmmaker Robin Hessman: *My Perestroika*.<sup>4</sup> The film tells the story of five schoolmates from Moscow who experienced the coup as children and saw what happened when the Soviet Union ceased to exist and Russia began to change. Through the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Kranten verkopen goed, weekbladen iets minder’, *Nederlands Dagblad*, August 23, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> G. Feifer, *Russians: The people behind the power* (2015) 5.

<sup>3</sup> D. S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (2007) 204.

<sup>4</sup> The documentary *My Perestroika* was directed by Robin Hessman and premiered in 2010, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1557720/?ref\\_=ttpl\\_pl\\_tt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1557720/?ref_=ttpl_pl_tt) (June 2018).

stories of the five main characters, it becomes clear that many people in the Russian capital had no idea what they were protesting against in 1991 and that no one knew what it would mean if the system actually fell apart. In the documentary Hessman interviews Olga, a Russian woman who once was the prettiest girl in class, but now works at a company that rents out billiard tables to bars in Moscow. Olga tells the viewer that she thinks people were protesting for food, not democracy.

The idea that the Russians were finally freed after 70 years and that Russia was heading towards democracy, was very poignant because it reached a large audience far beyond the Russian borders. And while the people in Russia were no longer ruled by the powerful CPSU after the August Coup, the new Russian Federation was not treated to an exclusively prosperous future. Nowadays, the West has to deal with an unpredictable Federation that, more than 25 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, still is nothing like the free Russia that Feifer describes in his book.

### *Imagology*

In the Netherlands, like in the United States, historians, politicians and journalists were observing what was happening in the Soviet Union. And like their American counterparts, the commentators in the Netherlands had specific national preconceptions, expectations and ideas concerning the situation in the Soviet Union and the fate of the people living under communist rule.

This thesis will focus on the image that was created in eight Dutch newspapers of the August Coup in 1991. Different aspects of the Dutch interpretation of the events will be discussed. Which correspondents were working for the papers in Russia at the time and what did they write about the coup? How did Dutch journalists, correspondents and experts write about the events in the Russian capital? Did they, apart from the current events, also consider what kind of future the Soviet Union was facing? What can be said about the images that were presented to the Dutch readers during the week?

In order to study these images, the study of imagology, as described by the Dutch literary critic and historian Joep Leerssen and the German scholar Manfred Beller in their book *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters, a Critical Survey* is used to provide a theoretical framework.<sup>5</sup> Imagology is concerned with the textual interpretation of other countries and peoples and the origin and

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<sup>5</sup> M. Beller and J. Leerssen, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: a Critical Survey* (2007).

function of this perception.<sup>6</sup> Leerssen and Beller explain that a set of judgements determine our images of other countries, peoples and societies, which is in turn reproduced in text.<sup>7</sup> For this research, this means that the commentaries printed in the Dutch newspapers were influenced by the perceptions and judgements that existed beforehand. In other words: the pre-existing interpretation of the Soviet Union influenced the work of the journalists and correspondents.

Leerssen and Beller stress that literature demonstrates that ‘national characters are a matter of commonplace and hearsay rather than empirical observation or statements of objective fact’.<sup>8</sup> This thesis is thus focussed on the characterizations presented in the papers, not on the comparison between the journalistic statements and the actual events as they took place. Imagology’s aim is to study a discourse, to study what the two authors call the *imaginated*: that what is outside the area of testable facts.<sup>9</sup> The fact that an abnormal amount of people gathered in front of the Russian parliament building, the White House, on August 22, 1991, is testable. The idea that the Russians were protesting against communism, on the other hand, can be seen as imagined.

### *Methodology*

Since it is impossible to look at all the texts published around the theme of the August Coup for this research, the thesis is based on the articles that were published between August 19 and 26 in eight daily Dutch newspapers. The newspapers are a mix of regional and national newspapers. When we look at the combination of the papers, however, these eight titles provide an accurate representation of the way in which the public in the Netherlands became acquainted with the events in the Soviet Union through the Dutch press. The newspapers used for this research, are *Leeuwarder Courant*, *Limburgs Dagblad*, *Nederlands Dagblad*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, *Het Parool*, *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant*.

The papers were all available either in the Dutch National Archives or online through the website Delpher. The search engine Delpher is a project of the Dutch Royal Library and consists of millions of digitized texts from Dutch newspapers, books and magazines.

The eight newspapers that were found online and in the National Archive have been searched page by page and the relevant articles concerning the August Coup were

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<sup>6</sup> Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 27.

read and copied. This meant that approximately 600 articles were read for this research and roughly 150 articles have been incorporated in this thesis.

The coup attempt as described in the Dutch press between is, in essence, the story of successive power changes. In order to bring some structure to this story, this thesis is based on four ‘main characters’ and the way they were represented in the papers. These four players are Mikhail Gorbachev; the coup plotters, led by Gennadi Yanayev; Boris Yeltsin and the last important stakeholder: the Russian people.

The first and second chapter will be discussing these four players. Since the coup plotters got very little attention after the putsch had failed, Yanayev and his colleagues will not be discussed in the last chapter.

### *Historiography*

Comparative research on the topic of the Soviet Union and Russia, using Dutch newspapers, has been done before. Perhaps the most well-known case is that by the cultural historian and journalist, Thomas von der Dunk. In his book called *Rusland en Europa: Over de betekenis van culturele scheidslijnen*, written on behalf of the Dutch think tank Clingendael in 2003, Von der Dunk examines the relations between Russia and the European Union. He tries to answer a couple of ambitious questions, using articles and commentaries by Dutch journalists, scholars and politicians.

Von der Dunk was not just interested in the image created by these commentators. In his book, Von der Dunk clearly wanted to find answers to his ambitious questions:

‘Waar houdt een werkbare [Europese] Unie op? Hoever (zuid)oostwaarts zal zij zich uit kunnen strekken?’ en ‘[...] hoe staat het, nu het Baltische trio voor zijn toelatingsexamen is geslaagd, in dit opzicht met de kansen van alle andere opvolgerstaten van de in 1991 ontbonden Sovjet-Unie, het immense Rusland bovenaan?’<sup>10</sup>

While Von der Dunk’s book is an interesting example of a research based on written commentaries concerning the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation and Russian society, his book tells the reader more about his own point of view than about the commentaries written in the Dutch press or the Dutch coverage of the relationship between Russia and the European Union.

Though, since Von der Dunk is looking for specific answers in his source material, and he does not conduct research into the Dutch portrayal of the Soviet Union and its several aspects, it is difficult to contribute to his discussion by means of this research.

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<sup>10</sup> T. von der Dunk, *Rusland & Europa: Over de betekenis van oude culturele scheidslijnen* (2003) 7.



A more interesting Dutch example, in light of this thesis, is an article written by the slavist John Löwenhardt, titled: ‘Vermoedens zijn goedkoop maar ijdel’.<sup>11</sup> In his piece, Löwenhardt describes the way the Dutch press wrote about the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and the deposition of Khrushchev in 1964. By doing so, Löwenhardt tries to find an answer to his final question: did the Dutch journalists express any long-term visions on the domestic and foreign policy of the Kremlin and the development of Soviet society?

In contrast to Von der Dunk, Löwenhardt is capable of limiting himself to describing the characteristics expressed in the Dutch press in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>12</sup> He concludes in 1986:

De oogst is mager. Slechts hier en daar getuigt een auteur ervan over de toekomst van de Sovjet-Unie te hebben nagedacht [...]. Maar meestal schrijft men maar wat op, met buitenlandse commentaren en telexberichten in de hand.<sup>13</sup>

Löwenhardt insists that in 1953 and 1964 authors hardly thought about the future of the Soviet Union and attributes this to a lack of knowledge among Dutch journalists and disinterest among the Dutch public.

An interesting American example is the aforementioned book *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* by David Foglesong. Foglesong's work can be seen as a hybrid of the works by Von der Dunk and Löwenhardt, since the American historian analyses the debate that was held in the United States around the topic of Russia and the Soviet Union since 1881. Subsequently, Foglesong discusses which efforts those debates inspired and how public opinion shaped the relationship between the U.S. and Russia.

On the topic of the coverage of the August Coup, Foglesong concludes that two central misconceptions contributed to excessive pessimism later in the decade. Firstly, there was a widespread belief among American journalists, politicians and religious leaders that a popular revolution had broken out, in favour of liberal democracy and a market economy, while in reality only relatively small groups of people in the major cities opposed the coup. Secondly, Foglesong states that in 1991, liberal universalists tended to exaggerate the Russian enthusiasm for America and American values.

With the merits of Löwenhardt and Foglesong in mind, it will be interesting to see how and if this thesis can contribute to our understanding of the Dutch view and coverage of the August Coup in the Soviet Union in 1991.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Löwenhardt, ‘Vermoedens zijn goedkoop maar ijdel’, in: J. Driessen, M. Jansen, W. Roobol (eds.) *Rusland in Nederlandse ogen* (1986) 255-275.

<sup>12</sup> Idem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 274.

## How it all began

This research is based on one week in August 1991. A week many people in the Netherlands still remember. The coup attempt brings back memories of tanks in Moscow, the resistance of Boris Yeltsin, protesting Russians in the streets and finally, Mikhail Gorbachev returning from his dacha on the Crimean coast. Images that are etched in our public memory by the media.

But what had happened in the Soviet Union in the years prior to the coup attempt, and why the coup plotters chose this exact week to try to change Gorbachev's mind, still remained vague. It might, therefore, be useful to look at years preceding the memorable week in August, a history that began in Stavropol Krai.

Gorbachev had been an ambitious young man when he got the chance to leave Stavropol to study law at Moscow State University in 1950. During his studies, Gorbachev became an active member of the Communist Party and after he graduated with honours in 1955, Gorbachev went back to Stavropol and began to work for the communist youth organisation, the Komsomol, where he was appointed as the deputy head of the agitation and propaganda department. This meant that he had to travel through the entire Krai, spreading the word of the Communist Party. According to Gorbachev himself, this was a sobering experience, because he got to experience first-hand how bad living conditions were for average people in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

During the following decades, Gorbachev managed to climb the ranks within the political system, but he kept wondering whether the country could be run more efficiently, with more attention for the interests of the people. A well-known quote from his memoir reads: "How was it that any initiative which patently served the interests of society was immediately viewed with suspicion and even overt hostility?"<sup>15</sup> Gorbachev had to challenge the apparatchiks and bureaucrats in higher positions whenever he wanted to introduce a new idea. As a result, not everyone was impressed by the young assertive Gorbachev, but he nevertheless managed to attract a lot of attention in Moscow.

In 1970 Gorbachev became First Secretary of the Communist Party in Stavropol, General First Secretary of the Supreme Soviet in 1974, and he became a member of the Politburo in 1979. After the death of Konstantin Chernenko in 1985 he was appointed the general leader of the Politburo, the highest position in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (1996) 93.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

Gorbachev became the leader of a state in bad shape. Soviet foreign policy was troubled by difficult relations with the United States and its president Ronald Reagan on one side and a hopeless war in Afghanistan on the other. Even more worrying was the fact that the Soviet economy was struggling. Thorough change was needed, that had become clear to most people, even the most powerful bureaucrats.<sup>16</sup> Few, however, were prepared to make far-reaching proposals, as the top of the political system benefited from the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

Gorbachev understood that, in order to tackle the economic problems in the Soviet Union, he could not only improve labour discipline, look at military spending or reduce foreign aid, he had to look at the larger problem: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the existing entrenched political structure. The Soviet leadership consisted of men who profited at the highest level from the very corruption that paralyzed the nation. In order to reform the economy, the General Secretary had to look at the Politburo, the Central Committee and the CPSU altogether.<sup>18</sup>

Gorbachev knew he could not change anything without strong supporters in important positions within the Party.<sup>19</sup> One of these supporters was Eduard Shevardnadze who became part of Gorbachev's circle of young reformers when Andrei Gromyko left his post as Soviet Minister of Foreign affairs to become Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. In order to extend this circle of confidants, some of Gorbachev's opponents had to be removed.<sup>20</sup> The first person to go was Viktor Grishin. In 1985, he lost his post of First Secretary of the Moscow City Party to the newcomer Boris Yeltsin. The following year Grishin was removed from the Politburo.<sup>21</sup>

At the end of 1985, Yeltsin was appointed by Gorbachev to be First Secretary of the CPSU Moscow City Committee upon the recommendation of the high-ranking official and Gorbachev's ally, Yegor Ligachev. Subsequently, Yeltsin became a candidate member of the Politburo in February 1986. Yeltsin was now part of Gorbachev's circle of younger Party members that were in favour of Gorbachev's progressive agenda. This agenda became well known both at home and abroad because the reforms had profound consequences for the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West.

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<sup>16</sup> A. Knight, 'The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1 (2003) 70.

<sup>17</sup> A. Brown, *The Gorbachev factor* (1997) 91.

<sup>18</sup> N. Robinson, 'Gorbachev and the Place of the Party in Soviet Reform, 1985-91', *Soviet Studies* (1992), 439.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 423.

<sup>20</sup> T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (2010) 599.

<sup>21</sup> A. Brown, *The Gorbachev factor* (1997) 110.

His experience in Stavropol Krai and his trips abroad had taught Gorbachev that the most important thing he needed to do was transform the declining economy, which unequivocally meant bringing the widespread corruption and inefficiency to a halt. The leaders' first policies were aimed at improving labour discipline and reducing the defence spending and the economic assistance programmes abroad.<sup>22</sup> When these policies did not deliver the necessary results, Gorbachev decided to issue more radical reforms. These new ideas included perestroika (restructuring), uskorenie (acceleration), glasnost (openness) and demokratizatsiya (democratization).

The new policy of openness meant that dissidents were freed from prison or were allowed to return from exile. Furthermore, the omnipresent practise of censoring both the national and foreign press was eased greatly. The Dutch former Moscow correspondent Hans Geleijnse described the situation in the Soviet Union in 1990:

Wat voor iedereen gold: we werkten in een journalistiek Walhalla. Er was een enorme behoefte aan nieuws over de historische ontwikkelingen in het Sovjet-Rijk. Alles wat je produceerde kreeg een prominente plaats in krant of actualiteitenrubriek. Natuurlijk, daar zat veel 'waan van de dag' bij, zeker in de sector Kremlin-watchen. Daar stond tegenover dat door de openstelling je in Rusland zelf en in de republieken op plaatsen kwam die decennia ontoegankelijk waren voor buitenlanders, en zeker journalisten. Je leerde mensen kennen voor wie een buitenlander iemand was van een andere planeet, mensen ook die niet schroomden om over 'staatsgeheimen' met je te praten. Dat heeft mij persoonlijk onvergetelijke ervaringen en ontmoetingen opgeleverd.<sup>23</sup>

As explained by Geleijnse, glasnost was an official encouragement to discuss the problems of the country in the public sphere. And subsequently, this new policy had a direct effect on the way in which foreigners and even foreign journalists were treated.

Glasnost had another important effect, it created a certain degree of public opinion.<sup>24</sup> This new phenomenon was not understood by everyone in the Party, but one member that definitely knew how to use the opinion of everyday Russians to his benefit, was Yeltsin. As one of the most powerful men in the capital of the Russian Republic, Yeltsin became increasingly popular among the people, but at the same time grew more critical of the more conservative members of the Party. In September 1987, after a fallout with his former patron Ligachev, Yeltsin wrote a letter of resignation to Gorbachev. A risky move,

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<sup>22</sup> V. L. Hesli and J. Krueger, 'Gorbachev, Mikhail Sergeevich', in T. Smorodinskaya, K. Evans-Romaine and H. Gosilo (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Russian Culture* (2007) 234.

<sup>23</sup> Quote from an interview I personally conducted with former correspondent for *Gemeenschappelijke Pers Diensten*, Hans Geleijnse, about his time in Moscow. Via email.

<sup>24</sup> A. Brown, *De opkomst en ondergang van het communisme* (2011) 654.

considering nobody had ever voluntarily resigned from the Politburo, but a move he was willing to make because he accurately counted on his popularity in Russia.

Unfortunately, Gorbachev lost some powerful allies as his reforms were being implemented. Ligachev had once been a dominant advocate for Gorbachev, but when it appeared that he could no longer accept the new direction of the General Secretary, he distanced himself from his former protégée and by 1988 Ligachev was part of the growing anti-Gorbachev wing.<sup>25</sup>

It became increasingly apparent, at the end of the 1980s, that Gorbachev was stuck in a balancing act. Yeltsin was asking for more radical reforms in Moscow than Gorbachev was coming up with and on the opposite side, figures like Ligachev seemed to oppose everything Gorbachev asked for.<sup>26</sup> Gorbachev was not backing down, however, despite the pressure both from within and outside the Party.

Another part of Gorbachev's reforms, the concept of *demokratizatsiya*, was further developed by the Soviet leader and his shrinking circle of confidants. He became convinced that people needed a chance to elect their leaders and in order to do this, a new legislative body was created in March 1989: The Congress of the People's Deputies.<sup>27</sup> This congress had 2250 members, representing the different regions and republics, and met for the first time in May 1989.

In March 1990, Gorbachev was elected by the Congress of the People's Deputies to fill the newly created position of President of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup> This effectively meant that the CPSU lost its monopoly of power and that Gorbachev had crippled the Party, of which he was still the leader. Meanwhile, Yeltsin saw an opportunity and announced that he would run for the position of President of the Russian Republic. He could not challenge Gorbachev as the head of the USSR, but he realised that he could challenge him in his own republic: Russia.<sup>29</sup>

In June 1991, Yeltsin won the elections for the President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) with a sound majority and became an increasingly difficult opponent for Gorbachev.<sup>30</sup> The Russian Republic was not only the centre of the

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<sup>25</sup> Judt, *Postwar*, 599.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>27</sup> A. Brown, *De opkomst en ondergang*, 725.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem.* 726.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem.*

Soviet Union, but also covered the biggest part of the USSR, so a Union without the Russian Republic was simply unimaginable. Yeltsin could not be stopped, however, and the Russian President became the most important advocate of Russian sovereignty in 1991.

This quest for sovereignty was related to the 'national question', an issue that had occurred for the first time at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> The issue as it arose in the USSR, revolved around the role of the different nations that were governed by Moscow and their right to self-determination in culture and politics.<sup>32</sup> The national question was thus older than the Soviet Union itself, but most Russian party officials or Russian citizens did not pay much attention to the problem until the late 1980's. Glasnost ensured that the old tensions along ethnic divisions rose again, and because Moscow relinquished some of its control, the people in the republics started to oppose Russian authority. This shocked Gorbachev because he was suddenly confronted with an explosive increase of nationalistic sentiments within the Union and conflicts that broke out because of age-old grievances.<sup>33</sup>

Gorbachev acknowledged the unrest within the various Soviet republics, but at the same time, he wanted to do everything possible to save the Soviet state. In January 1990 the General Secretary proclaimed a state of emergency in Baku and employed military troops to suppress the Azerbaijani independence movement. This resulted in a bloodbath with more than a hundred people killed and more than a thousand injured.<sup>34</sup> Although Gorbachev had used force in Baku and again a year later in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, he understood that he would not be able to keep the republic together with the use of the army.<sup>35</sup>

The solution was a national referendum, held in March 1991, in which the population was asked if they believed in a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics. Apart from the people in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, more than 80 percent of the total population of the Soviet Union cast a vote. The six republics that refused to take part in the referendum indicated that they were taking their first steps towards independence and Gorbachev allowed this tacitly. The result of the referendum suggested that he was able to save the rest of the Union, and that was what mattered most.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Count Sergei Uvarov's 1833 formula of 'orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality led to a rethinking of the Russian Empire to ethno-national terms. See: V. Chernetsky, 'Nationalism' in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Russian Culture*, 414.

<sup>32</sup> Idem.

<sup>33</sup> Idem.

<sup>34</sup> R. Kushen, 'Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaidzhan', *Human Rights Watch* (1991) 3.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *De opkomst en ondergang*, 743.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *De opkomst en ondergang*, 744.

What followed was a plan to establish a “Union of Sovereign States” that contained the Russian Republic, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia and Uzbekistan. By now Gorbachev was widely criticized within the Politburo and in July of 1991, Shevardnadze and Yakovlev warned Gorbachev that there was a coup d’état in the making, but Gorbachev decided to dismiss the warning. A ceremony of the Russian rectification of the new Union was expected to happen on August 20, 1991. But before Gorbachev would sign it into law, he decided to head to the Crimean village of Foros for a vacation that would take a dramatic turn. The coup d’état was no longer just a rumour. On Monday, August 19, tanks rolled through the streets of Moscow and Leningrad and the ‘State Committee on Emergency Rule’ declared that Gorbachev was no longer fit enough to rule.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> W. Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (2017) 608.

## **Chapter 1: The tightrope walker**

On August 18, a group of officials arrived at Zarya, the presidential holiday home of Mikhail Gorbachev, situated on the Crimean coast. The men barged into Gorbachev's office in order to attempt to convince the leader to support a declaration of a state of emergency. Gorbachev however, refused to hand over his presidential powers by signing the declaration. This unwillingness was the first link in a chain of miscalculations made by the coup plotters.<sup>38</sup>

The leaders of the coup, the eight members of the 'State Committee on Emergency Rule'<sup>39</sup> that issued the declaration were Oleg Baklanov, Gorbachev's deputy head of the Security Council and the most important representative of the military-industrial complex, Vladimir Kryuchkov (head of the KGB), Dmitri Yazov (Minister of Defence), Valentin Pavlov (Prime Minister), Boris Pugo (Minister of Interior), Gennadi Yanaev (Vice President), Vasili Starodubtsev (head of the Peasants' Union) and Aleksandr Tiziakov, a leading representative of state industry. The officials seeking to take control of the Soviet Union were men Gorbachev had known for a long time and in many cases, he had appointed them himself. Clearly, the Emergency Committee members already occupied all crucial state offices, except for the most important one: the presidency.<sup>40</sup>

While on Monday, August 19, Gorbachev was held at his dacha, without a possibility to communicate with the outside world, the Emergency Committee sent armoured vehicles into the streets of Moscow. On television and radio, the 'Declaration of the Soviet Leadership' was broadcast which addressed the 'Soviet people':

Compatriots, citizens of the Soviet Union, we are addressing you at the grave, critical hour for the destinies of Motherland and our peoples. A mortal danger has come to loom large over our great Motherland. [...] The policy of reforms, launched at Mikhail S. Gorbachev's initiative and designed as a means to ensure the country's dynamic development and the democratization of social life has entered for several reasons a blind alley. [...] The State Committee for the State of Emergency in the USSR is fully aware of the depth of the crisis that has afflicted the country, it takes upon itself the responsibility for the fate of the country and is fully determined to take the most serious measures to take the state and society out of the crisis as soon as possible. [...]<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> D. Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (1993) 456.

<sup>39</sup> The 'State Committee on Emergency Rule' will be referred to in this thesis as the 'Emergency Committee'.

<sup>40</sup> Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 608.

<sup>41</sup> "Grave, Critical Hour: A Soviet Message", *The New York Times*, August 19, 1991.



Gorbachev was allegedly incapacitated and thus the Emergency Committee took action in order to end the 'deep crisis' the Soviet Union was in. Some of the leaders in the republics went along with the coup but others were hesitant. A few unequivocally rejected the power grab by the plotters. Among these leaders was Boris Yeltsin. The Russian President had been residing at his dacha as well, but immediately returned to Moscow. He made his way to the Russian parliament building and climbed on top of a tank to call for action.

### *Hopes and fears*

The news of a coup attempt in the Soviet Union reached the Dutch public on Monday, August 19. The newspapers that were issued in the evening<sup>42</sup> showed armoured vehicles on the streets, surrounded by ordinary Russians: images that would instantly become iconic. The headlines that accompanied the pictures were a variation to the same bleak theme: Gorbachev was ousted. Several Dutch correspondents in Moscow managed to interview people on the streets about the situation, their hopes and their fears. Sijfra Herschberg, a Dutch journalist writing for *De Volkskrant*, described what she saw in the Russian capital and how the people reacted to the news:

Een man: "Ik weet niet wat ik er van denken moet. Ik begrijp dat Gorbatsjov ziek is. Het lijkt me logisch dat de vice-president de boel dan overneemt. Dat zei de radio vanochtend ook." "Wat doen die tanks dan in de straten," mengt een vrouw zich erin. "Ach dat zijn maar geruchten, zo'n vaart zal het niet lopen", luidt het lakonieke antwoord.<sup>43</sup>

The text describes a scene on the street with people discussing the presence of the tanks and Gorbachev's alleged illness. Rather than protesting, we read about people having no idea what to do with the little information they had.

Moscow correspondent for *Het Parool*, Derk Sauer, illustrated the situation on Monday:

Midden tussen alle telefoongesprekken barst onze Russische redactrice Lena in een huilpartij uit. "Niemand durft de straat op, niemand protesteert. Dit is het einde," snikt ze. Mijn collega's proberen haar te troosten. "Het is nog te vroeg zeggen ze. Eerst moet de situatie duidelijker worden."<sup>44</sup>

Sauer describes the idea that people were afraid and confused, by citing his co-worker saying: 'Nobody dares to take to the streets, nobody protests. This is the end'.

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<sup>42</sup> Some of the newspapers used in this research were issued in the evening. These newspapers were thus publishing slightly different stories because of their deviant deadlines. This applies to: *NRC Handelsblad*, *Het Parool*, *Leeuwarder Courant* and *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*.

<sup>43</sup> 'Jullie schieten toch niet op je eigen volk', *de Volkskrant*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>44</sup> 'Niemand weet op dit moment nog iets zeker', *Het Parool*, August 19, 1991.

Derk Sauer was the correspondent in Moscow for *Het Parool*, but he had a lot more on his plate in the Russian capital. He had been the editor in chief of the Dutch magazine *Nieuwe Revu* for seven years before he moved to Moscow in 1989 to start the publication of the first Russian glossy called *Moscow Magazine*. Sauer's adventure meant that he spent all his time gathering contacts. He spoke with all sorts of writers, politicians, and famous Russians, in order to make *Moscow Magazine* a success.<sup>45</sup>

Before he came to Russia, Sauer had only had a few Russian language lessons and he did not know too much about the country. He was not a historian or slavist, but Sauer had been a successful reporter. He had travelled around the world and visited 'dangerous countries' like Nicaragua and Cambodia.<sup>46</sup> The move to Moscow was thus another adventure for Sauer and his wife Ellen Verbeek, who started working as a correspondent for *Haagse Post* in 1990.

Sauer and Verbeek had only been living in Moscow for a little over a year when the August Coup took place. Since many correspondents had been on holiday in the Netherlands on the day the tanks rolled into the city, Sauer was one of the only correspondents reporting from Moscow on Monday.<sup>47</sup> *Het Parool* was thus not the only news outlet that counted on Sauer's reports from the Russian capital on Monday.

On Monday, August 19, the Dutch public was thus again confronted with the familiar image of the Soviet people they had come to know in previous decades. People that were fearful of the future, Russians that were apprehensive about going out on the streets to protest. To everyone's excitement, the Iron Curtain had been opened, two years earlier, but the articles in the Dutch papers reminded readers that the positive developments of the years prior could be rolled back within days, with or without the help of armoured vehicles.

According to an interview with the Dutch expert on the Soviet Union, Huib Hendrikse, printed in *Limburgs Dagblad*, the Russian people had known a long history of suppression, so it was probably easy for the putschists to scare them again:

De Sovjet-bevolking heeft een geschiedenis achter zich van tientallen jaren van onderdrukking. "De mensen zijn nog steeds bang en het is dan tamelijk gemakkelijk om ze opnieuw bang te maken." Het muilkorven van de pers is daar onderdeel van.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> D. Michielsen, *Moscow Times: Het Russische avontuur van Derk Sauer en Ellen Verbeek* (2013) 33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> 'Soviet-socialisme wordt nationale aangelegenheid', *Limburgs Dagblad*, August 20, 1991.

The people living in the Soviet Union were thus seen as helpless victims of yet another aspect of the authoritarian regime that ruled them. This helplessness was one of the characteristics that was all too well known to the people in the Netherlands. In December 1990, a few months before the coup attempt, the Dutch television broadcast company VARA, had organised a television show aimed at helping the people in the Soviet Union. As a result of the show called ‘Get the Russians through the winter’<sup>49</sup> a lot of people in the Netherlands, as well as the Dutch government, donated big sums of money for food packages. And even though the mayor of Moscow, the Dutch ambassador and the correspondents in the Soviet Union had warned the VARA not to send food, 25 million guilders were raised to send the packages anyway.<sup>50</sup>

The image of the Russians and their reaction to the coup, outlined by the Dutch newspapers, on Monday August 19 and Tuesday August 20, was mainly one of general confusion and anxiety. This characterization fits into an existing image of the Russian people as helpless victims, that were afraid of talking to foreigners.

#### *The man that made it all happen*

The initial news of Gorbachev’s ousting must have been deeply disappointing to the Dutch public since a certain admiration for the young Mikhail had grown in the Netherlands, during the years prior to the coup. And the people in the Netherlands were not the only ones admiring the Soviet leader, a phenomenon known as ‘Gorbymania’ had struck the West after Gorbachev became General Secretary in 1985. The newspapers in the United States and Europe published stories about the man of ‘glasnost’ and ‘perestroika’ visiting the U.S. to meet ‘real Americans’<sup>51</sup>, about people lining up in the streets of New York shouting “I love you Gorby!”<sup>52</sup> and even about an increase in students of Slavonic and East European Studies because of Gorbymania.<sup>53</sup> This popularity reached a peak in 1990 when the ‘Gorby-doll’ hit the European and American market:

Binnenkort komt er een nieuw stuk speelgoed op de Europese en Amerikaanse markt: de Gorby-pop. [...] Gorbatsjov zal als pop verkrijgbaar zijn in spijkerjack, lederenjack en in sweatsshirts.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> In Dutch the VARA programme was titled: ‘Help de Russen de winter door’.

<sup>50</sup> Michielsen, *Moscow Times*, 71.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Gorbachev a Hit With the American Public. . .’, *The New York Times*, December 4, 1987.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Signature Gorbymania’, *The Washington Post*, October 26, 1996.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Gorbymania floods into universities’, *The Sunday Times*, June 25, 1989.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Gorby Pop’, *Het vrije volk*, May 19, 1990.

Gorbachev was popular because he knew how to present himself to the public and because of his willingness to approve the Soviet ties with the West. Gorbachev was synonymous for ‘change’ and so the West welcomed the leader.

In the absence of Gorbachev on August 19, 1991, some newspapers looked back on the time Gorbachev had been in power in the Soviet Union. They published articles and commentaries about his remarkable attitude and a number of journalists praised his domestic reforms. Regional newspaper *Leeuwarder Courant* described Gorbachev's reforms as a “Second Russian Revolution”, a revolution that was in danger, now that Gorbachev seemed to be removed by the ‘hawks’:

Is het proces dat Michaël Sergejevitsj met de ‘Tweede Russische Revolutie’ in gang heeft gezet, onomkeerbaar of niet? Laten de reeds uiteengedreven Sovjetvolken zich weer onder de knoet brengen? Al deze vragen dringen zich vandaag aan de wereld op. De Sovjet-Unie en de rest van de wereld gaan een zeer spannende tijd met hachelijke momenten tegemoet.<sup>55</sup>

The fact that the editor called Gorbachev’s reforms a “Second Russian Revolution”, means that the reforms were seen as a changing point in history. The term also indicates that the writer felt like Gorbachev was truly different from the other men that had led the Soviet Union, the “first” Russian Revolution had taken place more than 7 decades earlier after all.

Calling Gorbachev’s reforms revolutionary pointed to a certain bravery as well. Another newspaper, *Limburgs Dagblad*, published a similar article that applauded the Nobel-prize-winner’s fearless political choices:

Mogelijk dat de Winnaar van de Nobelprijs voor de Vrede in de toekomst zal worden gezien als een politicus die gedurfd inhaakte op het verlangen naar maatschappijvernieuwing dat de Sovjetburgers aan het einde van de jaren zeventig en begin jaren tachtig steeds openlijker lieten zien. Gorbatsjov, de man die alles in gang zette, maar ook degene die met de uiteindelijke praktische organisatie van de Sovjetunie van vijftien deelrepublieken steeds minder te maken had.<sup>56</sup>

Gorbachev is called: ‘the man that made it all happen’, but at the same time, this excerpt shows that the Dutch press was not blind to the downside of perestroika. The reforms had

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Haviken smoren de ‘tweede revolutie’’, *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 19, 1991.

<sup>56</sup> ‘De koorddanser is gevallen’, *Limburgs Dagblad*, August 20, 1991.

changed Soviet society and Soviet politics, mostly for the better, but Gorbachev had gradually lost control of his own policy and so the writer calls him: 'the one that eventually got disconnected to the practical organisation of the fifteen republics.'

This article thus shows a two-sided attitude towards Gorbachev, that was not uncommon in the Dutch press. Gorbachev had done a lot of good, but people realised, however, that the dismantling of the dictatorial system was accompanied by hardship, felt by a lot of people in the Soviet Union. Or like a journalist in *NRC Handelsblad* put it: 'Opposite the Gorbymania here were the rows over there, the cramps of a long and unpredictable process of disentanglement'<sup>57</sup>

But the Dutch journalists seemed to be apprehensive about blaming the long rows and food shortages on the popular Soviet President. A number of newspapers emphasized that the failure of Gorbachev's policy was due to the opposition of conservative forces within the Party. One of these newspapers was *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*:

Michail Sergejevitsj Gorbatsjov, 60, die aan de kant is geschoven door een "Comité voor de Noodtoestand" onder leiding van vicepresident Gennadi Janavev, 54, bracht zijn land tot dusverre ingrijpende politieke verandering en een revolutie in de buitenlandse politiek van de Sovjet-Unie. Maar in de afgelopen tijd liep hij met zijn beleid gericht op "perestrojka" en "glasnost" voor "hervorming" van en "openheid" in de samenleving steeds meer vast op hardnekkig verzet daartegen van marxistische haviken.<sup>58</sup>

The author seems to suggest that the only opponents of Gorbachev's reforms were the conservative bureaucrats. By ignoring the fact that glasnost and perestrojka had lost a lot of support in society, the article places Gorbachev on the side of progress and the Soviet people, and the 'marxists' on the side of decline and recession. The Dutch press, in short, went to great lengths to preserve Gorbachev's positive image. This preservation did not only impact Gorbachev's characterization. His popularity also impacted the way his opponents were described.

#### *Old fashioned apparatchiks*

Most Dutch articles about the Emergency Committee were worrisome and negative in tone. A clear example of this emphasis is the fact that the Committee supposedly consisted of so-called 'hawks': warmongering chauvinists, willing to make an end to the years of

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<sup>57</sup> 'Exit Gorbatsjov', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 19, 1991.

<sup>58</sup> 'Gorbatsjov: hervormer loopt vast op haviken', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, August 19, 1991.

relative peace within the Soviet Union and abroad. Headlines like ‘Baltic States fear military intervention’<sup>59</sup>, ‘Nato: coup in Soviet Union Threat to Europe’<sup>60</sup> and ‘Coup d’état has consequences for budget Ministry of Defence’<sup>61</sup> informed readers that the new leaders were the opposites of the peaceful and Nobel-prize winning General Secretary.

Although the Dutch newspapers were characterizing the Emergency Committee as warmongers, it was clear that the timing of the coup was no coincidence:

[...] het is dan ook meer dan symbolisch dat de staatsgreep van de behoudende krachten plaatsheeft op één dag voordat de handtekeningen zouden worden gezet onder de eerste verdragen van verregaande autonomie voor de deelrepublieken. Niet toevallig is ook dat Gorbatsjov meer en meer sprak van de Unie van Soevereine Sovjet Republieken en dat in de verklaring van de nieuwe machthebbers de Unie van Socialistische Sovjet Republieken weer wordt genoemd.<sup>62</sup>

The piece points out that Gorbachev had spoken about a ‘Union of Sovereign Soviet Republics’ but his rhetoric was reversed by the Committee which spoke of the ‘Union of Socialist Soviet Republics’ again. This was a telling example according to *NRC Handelsblad* because it meant that the Soviet Republics would soon lose their prospect of autonomy. There was a big chance, however, that the Republics would not let go of their forthcoming sovereignty and therefore several newspapers warned that a new civil war in the Soviet Union was to be expected. A journalist working for *De Telegraaf* ominously wrote: ‘Uncertainty, destabilization and oppression are on the way. A civil war cannot be ruled out. Poor people.’<sup>63</sup>

Apart from being ‘hawks’, the Dutch press accused the men behind the coup of being old-fashioned bureaucrats, types that reminded them of the old days when the public could see the old Brezhnev on the evening news, dressed in an army uniform with a chest that seemed too small for all his decorations. A cartoon in *De Telegraaf* shows a figure many people in the Netherlands likely imagined when they thought about the communist coup plotters. The drawing depicts a large surly man in army uniform, with medals on his chest. In his hand he holds a flag with a hammer and sickle and the text “peace and order”. The caption next to the cartoon reads: “Forward comrades, we have to go back!”<sup>64</sup>

This reference to the past was not entirely unjustified. The Dutch press recognized the putsch: the expulsion of Nikita Khrushchev showed many similarities with the disap-

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Baltische Staten vrezen militair ingrijpen’, *de Volkskrant*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Nato: coup in Sovjetunie bedreiging voor Europa’, *Limburgs Dagblad*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Staatsgreep heeft gevolg voor begroting Defensie’, *Nederlands Dagblad*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Exit Gorbatsjov’, *NRC Handelsblad*, August 19, 1991.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Drama’, *De Telegraaf*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Voorwaarts kameraden, wij moeten terug!’, *De Telegraaf*, August 20, 1991.

pearance of Gorbachev. The reference to 1964 was made in more than twenty Dutch newspaper articles between August 19 and 24. Headlines ‘Khrushchev ousted during holiday as well’<sup>65</sup> and ‘Gorbachev awaits same fate as Khrushchev’<sup>66</sup>, reminded the reader of the situation 27 years earlier.

Like Gorbachev, Khrushchev had implemented a number of unpopular reforms by 1964 and by doing so he had antagonized his colleagues in the Central Committee. His opponents chose to take action when he was on holiday on the Black Sea coast in Pitsunda, Georgia. On October 12, Khrushchev received a phone call from the Second Secretary at the time, Brezhnev, who told him to come to Moscow to attend a meeting of the Central Committee. Khrushchev had been warned that a group of people in Moscow wanted to oust him, but until that phone call, he had dismissed the prediction. On October 13 he attended the meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee, where he was widely criticised. The next day the Presidium met again and Brezhnev organised a vote to remove Khrushchev from the political stage. Nobody voted against the proposal. In order to avoid suspicion, the Party suggested that Khrushchev himself had requested to retire because of his “deteriorating health”.<sup>67</sup>

When reading the newspapers that were published in the week of the coup, one can conclude that the coup plotters were portrayed in a very negative way. This had three main reasons. Firstly, the men were seen as hawks, warmongers, ready to impose their rule with the help of the army. Secondly, the coup plotters reminded the Dutch journalists of the old days, of repression and conservatism. And perhaps the most important cause of the negative stereotype was the idea that the men behind the putsch were the polar opposites of the popular leader Gorbachev.

### *The popular Russian*

An important opponent of the Emergency Committee was Boris Yeltsin. The Russian leader whose popularity among the people in the Russian Republic had grown rapidly in the prior years immediately took action and denounced the coup and the group of men behind it. The newspapers in the Netherlands certainly published reports on Yeltsin, but not as intensively on the first day as they would in the days that followed. It soon became clear that he led the resistance. But what that meant, if he was able to avert a large-scale crisis and whether he would be able to appeal to the Russians on the streets was still unclear.

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Chroesjtsjov óók tijdens vakantie aan de kant gezet’, *Nederlands Dagblad*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Gorbatsjov zelfde lot beschoren als Chroesjtsjov’, *De Volkskrant*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Opkomst en ondergang*, 354-356.

*Limburgs Dagblad* was one of the newspapers that put Yeltsin on its front page, with an accompanying caption that read:

Staande bovenop een Sovjet-tank leest de president van de Russische Federatie Boris Jeltsin [...] een verklaring voor waarin hij fel uithaalt naar de nieuwe machthebbers en oproept tot een landelijke staking van onbepaalde duur.<sup>68</sup>

Boris Yeltsin standing on a tank would soon turn out to be an important event in the larger context of the dismantling of the Soviet Union. On Monday, August 19 it was still unclear what Yeltsin's act of disobedience could bring about.

Yeltsin was a well-known figure in the Netherlands. He had visited Amsterdam after the publication of his book *Against the Grain*<sup>69</sup> in March 1990 and interviews with the Russian politician were published in numerous newspapers. Yeltsin became a prominent advocate for the independence and self-determination of Russia and he travelled the world to draw attention to his cause. After he was elected by popular vote to the newly created post of President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, on 12 June 1991, *NRC Handelsblad* published an essay on Yeltsin titled 'A go-getter from the Urals'. In this article, correspondent Hubert Smeets writes:

Nu de serieuze maar ook saaie bestuurlijke fase aanbreekt waarbij Jeltsin zich in eerste instantie als overgangspresident zal moeten ontpoppen, zal gaan blijken welke gemoed van Jeltsin dominant is. In die zin is de nieuwe Russische president altijd trouw gebleven aan zichzelf. Het is er op of er onder. Jelstins derde leven is begonnen.<sup>70</sup>

Yeltsin's power was not underestimated by Smeets, who pointed out to the readers that they could expect important steps from Yeltsin as the Russian president.

It is safe to say that Yeltsin did not lack attention in the time that preceded the coup. The reason why he was absent in the Dutch reports during the first phase of the coup, must, therefore, be found in the fact that the situation in the Soviet Union was too uncertain to place any hopes on Yeltsin. It seems like the newspapers were more focussed on the mysterious disappearance of Gorbachev and the villains in the Kremlin than on the Russian President. The only small pieces about Yeltsin that appeared in the newspapers were short general statements.<sup>71</sup> This indicates that the feelings of uncertainty and fear

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<sup>68</sup> 'Staatsgreep in Moskou', *Limburgs Dagblad*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>69</sup> The book was published in the Netherlands under the title *Getuigenis van een opposant* (1990).

<sup>70</sup> 'Boris Jeltsin: Een doorbijter uit de Oeral', *NRC Handelsblad*, June 14, 1991.

<sup>71</sup> Other articles mentioning Boris Yeltsin: 'Jeltsin stelt KGB en leger onder bevel', *Nederlands Dagblad*, August 20, 1991. 'Jeltsin roept op tot staking en burgerlijke ongehoorzaamheid', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 19, 1991. 'Jeltsin roept op tot staken', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, August 19, 1991.



were still too substantial to understand that Yeltsin would become a key figure in the future of the Russian Federation.

## Conclusion

The image that arises when one examines the newspapers that were published on Monday 19 and Tuesday, August 20, is one of uncertainty and tension. A new grim period seemed to be approaching, now that a number of old-fashioned communists had seized power. The correspondents and editors seemed to be convinced that the coup plotters wanted to revive old times, times characterized by stagnation and repression.

The newspapers all brought similar stories. Most correspondents in Moscow tried to talk to as many Muscovites as they could, but all with the same result: people were confused, anxious and did not know whether to support Gorbachev, believe the coup plotters or fear the armed vehicles in their streets. In order to bring some useful information, the newspapers consulted specialists like Huib Hendrikse, affiliated to Clingendael. These experts were just as puzzled and were hesitant to make any predictions, but instead focussed on the past and what they knew had happened to the last leader that was toppled: Khrushchev. While these articles indicated that there was a good understanding of Soviet history, the references to Khrushchev's fate did not cause a lot of hope for Gorbachev.

The articles on the Soviet President indicate that his supposed disposition was the most important event on the first day of the coup attempt. The shock of his sudden disappearance from the political stage ensured that the press mostly focussed Gorbachev's victories and likeability. The newspapers emphasized that he had been a great leader who had tried his best to change the Soviet Union, the surrounding countries and the world as a whole. The Dutch journalists were not blind to Gorbachev's flaws and failings, but they blamed the downside of glasnost and perestroika on the conservative bureaucrats in the Party rather than on its General Secretary.

This focus on Gorbachev on Monday makes sense when seen through the lens of imagology as described by Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller in their work *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters, a Critical Survey*. As the authors explain: the way in which one views or criticizes the "other" is simply a reflection of the way one sees oneself.<sup>72</sup> It is therefore understandable that Gorbachev was seen as a good leader, he was the first General Secretary that appreciated Western values like freedom and democracy and thus embodied the qualities people in the Netherlands, and in the West, liked about themselves.

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<sup>72</sup> Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, 5.

Furthermore, Gorbachev was a leader that behaved like a Western president. What made him popular may have been the fact that, more than any Soviet leader had been able to do before, he reminded the people in the Netherlands of themselves. A critical part of this Western image was Gorbachev's wife Raisa and the fact that she played a very public role. Leerssen and Beller thus provide an explanation for the Dutch admiration for the Soviet president and for the emphasis that was placed by the newspapers on his apparent displacement.

## **Chapter 2: The political street fighter**

While the night fell in Moscow on Monday and the demonstrators around the Russian Parliament Building were waiting for what would happen next, the first cracks in the strategy behind the coup became visible. The Emergency Committee seemingly had forgotten about the man that was chosen by the people of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin had become the most important opposition leader in Moscow on Monday, but he was far from the only one who resisted the orders of the coup plotters. He had surrounded himself with several well-known political figures like former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Gorbachev's confidant, Eduard Shevardnadze, former Party member and "godfather of glasnost" Aleksandr Yakovlev and Gavriil Popov, the progressive mayor of Moscow.<sup>73</sup>

Another supporter of the opposition was United States' President George H. W. Bush. The American president had expressed his support for Yeltsin over the phone, but he had also stressed that Mikhail Gorbachev should regain his presidential powers. Although this was a well-meant suggestion from Bush, nothing had been heard from Gorbachev, who was still being held captive in his dacha in Crimea.

Yeltsin, on the other hand, expanded his power and on Tuesday evening he declared that he would take control of the Russian troops and their entire territory of the RFSFR.<sup>74</sup> And while the opponents of the coup strengthened their positions, the Emergency Committee slowly disintegrated. The first ones to falter were Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov and Defence Minister Dmitri Yazov. The two men left the political scene in a cloud of obscurity. Rumours about their alleged health problems spread fast.<sup>75</sup> However, this did not mean that the threat was averted. Around the building of the Russian Parliament, the situation became increasingly grim at the end of Tuesday.

The idea that there would be a clash between the army and the demonstrators had gained ground and everybody expected the military to strike during night-time. The tank-group that had defected the previous day was still in place around the Russian White House, but it was a relatively small group so the situation remained uncertain.

In the middle of the night, armoured vehicles tried to break through the two rings of barricades that had been raised around the Parliament Building. The regime had ordered its military forces to stage an unprecedented show of strength. The tanks that had been waiting on the streets came to action and were ordered to remove the pieces of metal,

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<sup>73</sup> M. Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup: The Death of the Soviet System* (1991) 36.

<sup>74</sup> G. M. L. Harmans (ed.), *Staatsgreep in Moskou: Het begin van het einde van de Sovjetunie* (1991) 127.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, 143.

concrete blocks and trolley buses that were used by the people on the streets to create a protective barrier. Many of the barricades were pushed away by the tanks with ease. In other places, however, clashes between the tank brigades and the demonstrators got out of hand. The most dangerous confrontation took place in an underpass on the Garden Ring in the city centre. Eight tanks were trapped in the underpass and in an attempt to get out, one of the armoured vehicles ran over a protester, thirty-seven-year-old Volodya Usov.<sup>76</sup> Another protester, twenty-six-year-old Ilya Krichevsky was hit by a bullet, fired by one of the soldiers.<sup>77</sup> The third victim fell when the protesters tried to surround the tanks. Twenty-three-year-old Dmitri Komar was drawn under the tracks of one of the tanks and was crushed to death.

In order to avoid more bloodshed, a deal between the commanders of the tank group and the demonstrators was negotiated. The anxious soldiers inside the tanks would get safe passage, provided they would hoist the Russian tricolour, in support of the protesters.<sup>78</sup> At six o'clock in the morning, the tanks were driven away by the demonstrators and the darkest hours of the coup had passed. On Wednesday, August 21, the fact that the coup attempt had failed became apparent. When it appeared that both the Russian people and a large number of soldiers had joined the opposition, the power of the Emergency Committee was broken.

The coup plotters now seemed to be embarrassed by their failure and were aware of the fact that they had to deal with Gorbachev, who anxiously awaited what the next step of the Emergency Committee would be. As a last resort, a small group of men flew to Foros in an attempt to restore their relationship with the Soviet leader. At the very same time, some of Yeltsin's allies, led by Vice President of the Russian Republic, General Aleksandr Rutskoi were flying to Foros in order to protect Gorbachev against anything the coup plotters could have planned.<sup>79</sup>

For Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev, Wednesday morning was one of the most stressful moments of the week. The couple had received very little information on the events in Moscow and were in agony when Kryuchkov, Yazov, Baklanov and Lukyanov arrived at the villa.<sup>80</sup> The fact that the coup plotters looked exhausted appeased Gorbachev somewhat, but he still refused to meet the group.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> M. Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>78</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>79</sup> Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 612.

<sup>80</sup> Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 612.

<sup>81</sup> Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 613.

Rutskoi and his Russian delegation updated the Soviet President on the situation in the country, and what had taken place in Moscow. By the time the night fell on Wednesday, Gorbachev was invited to fly back to Moscow on Rutskoi's airplane, guarded by 40 armed lieutenant colonels.<sup>82</sup> On the plane, Gorbachev seemed to have felt that nothing would ever be the same again. His advisor, Anatoli Chernyaev, wrote in his diary: 'For the first time then, M.S. said the words: "We are flying to a new country."'”<sup>83</sup>

### *The junta*

Once Gennadi Yanayev had informed the public in the Soviet Union on Monday, August 19 that: 'A mortal danger had come to loom large over the great Motherland', Gorbachev's former right hand and his 'State Committee on Emergency Rule' were seen as the ultimate bad guys. It was clear to the Dutch press what the group was planning and their statements were never trusted to be true.

Every newspaper published references to the past and the way in which Nikita Khrushchev, responsible for the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union, was ousted in October 1964. The references to history were thus an important part of the image that was created by the Dutch press. Another noteworthy part of the perception of the Emergency Committee, were the references to their military power. The commentators were well aware of the fact that the Minister of Defence, Dmitry Yazov was one of the men behind the putsch, so there was a justified fear of military actions. The emphasis placed on the military power of coup plotters, however, turned into a one-sided narrative about the 'junta'. By hinting that the men were out to install a military dictatorship, a lot of emphasis was placed on the role of the army in the coup attempt. This military aspect was also reflected in the cartoons in which the coup plotters appeared. In many cases the men were depicted in military uniforms, not in the grey suits the conservative apparatchiks actually wore.

This emphasis on the possible use of the army is striking, since the coup plotters were ultimately lacking in military strength. When the Committee declared the state of emergency on Monday, most military commanders had acquiesced and followed the plotters' orders. But although the military commanders were willing to deploy forces and send soldiers out into the streets of Moscow, problems arose when it came to taking action against the people resisting the coup. An important cause of these problems was the fact

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<sup>82</sup> A. Chernyaev, 'Three Days in Foros', *Foreign Policy*, 20-06-2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/20/three-days-in-foros/> (June 2018).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

that Yeltsin and most of his supporters were ethnic Russians, like 80 percent of the Soviet army.<sup>84</sup> Eventually, the military was immobilized and the majority of the units chose to stand aside without intervening.

While the Emergency Committee failed to persuade the military that it was legitimate and necessary to take action, the idea of the Emergency Committee as a junta or warmongers became central to the narrative in the Dutch newspapers. This not only made the situation more unpredictable for the Dutch public, it caused Yeltsin to be seen as a courageous freedom fighter, since he dared to take on the army. Likewise, the Muscovites on the streets were applauded and praised for rejecting the junta.

### *The man of the people*

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Boris Yeltsin was not as prevalent in the first reports on the coup. However, the Dutch press soon picked up on the leaders' actions and on Tuesday, August 20 and Wednesday, August 21, Yeltsin had become the most important symbol of the opposition against the coup.

The pieces on Yeltsin that were published in the Netherlands during the coup, all had some striking similarities. Firstly, Yeltsin was described in every newspaper in terms like strong, rebellious, inflexible and pugnacious. On Wednesday for example, *Leeuwarder Courant*, published an article on Yeltsin titled: 'Boris Yeltsin: a political street fighter', in which the journalist, Steef Brüggemann, characterises the Russian President as a born opposition leader:

Een dwarsligger is Boris Nikolajevitsj Jeltsin. Hij is dat volgens zijn autobiografie altijd geweest. Al jong placht de in een boerendorp in de Oeral geboren Boris bluffend zijn leraren op het verkeerde been te zetten.<sup>85</sup>

Brüggemann writes that Yeltsin had been a rebel ever since he was a child living in a village in the Ural mountains. This trait, his rebelliousness, attributed to Yeltsin by himself in his autobiography, made the leader a figure of hope in the eyes of the Dutch press. The uncertain times the Soviet Union, and by extension, the world was facing, asked for an unconventional figure, a strong man, a street fighter.

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<sup>84</sup> H. Matthee, 'A Breakdown of Civil-Military Relations: The Soviet Coup of 1991', *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, 29 (1999) 7.

<sup>85</sup> 'Boris Jeltsin: politiek straatvechter', *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 21, 1991.

The photo's accompanying the articles depicted a similar figure. A stern Yeltsin waving at large crowds<sup>86</sup>, or with his fist firmly in the air<sup>87</sup>, adorned the pages of the papers. This strong-man image is best summarized by a cartoon printed in the *Leeuwarder Courant* on Thursday. The drawing shows a muscular Yeltsin standing next to a pile of knocked out communist apparatchiks: the suggestion being that Yeltsin has just given them a beating with his bare hands.<sup>88</sup>

But apart from being strong and rebellious, the newspaper articles suggested that Yeltsin had another attractive trait: he was a man of the people. Or, as *Het Parool* wrote on Tuesday: 'Russian workers embody the army of Boris Yeltsin':

Zijn enige leger zijn de Russische arbeiders, de mijnwerkers voorop. Als die massaal gehoor geven aan zijn oproep het werk neer te leggen en de straat op te gaan, kunnen zij het nieuwe bewind in ernstige problemen brengen.<sup>89</sup>

Would the Russian workers decide to follow Yeltsin and respond to his call to strike, the new government could be in real trouble, journalist Bert Lanting stated. On Thursday, *De Telegraaf* stepped it up and wrote in bold letters: 'Boris Yeltsin knows what the people want':

Hij schuwt het grote gebaar naar de man van de straat niet, door bijvoorbeeld regelmatig op te duiken in de lange rijen voor de – lege – winkels en, zoals de modale Moskoviet, met de metro te reizen. Zijn tegenstanders maakten hem uit voor populist, het volk vindt het prachtig. In deze periode steekt ook voor het eerst een belangrijke verworvenheid de kop op: Jeltsin spreekt de taal van het volk, kent de wensen van de kleine man.<sup>90</sup>

Apart from being strong and courageous, *De Telegraaf* praised Yeltsin's ability to appeal to the 'common Muscovite', the 'little man'. This was not just a positive trait, it was a new phenomenon. For decades Soviet leaders had been powerful men at the top of an intricate political structure without any regard for their constituents. An opposition leader with the ability to appeal to the people was exciting to the Dutch press. This excitement is the subject of a piece on Yeltsin in *NRC Handelsblad*, called 'Boris Yeltsin: The unyielding'. The editor describes how Yeltsin became unassailable to the 'junta':

De burgemeester van Lenigrad, Sobtsjak, kan worden afgezet, de Balten kunnen tot zwijgen worden gebracht, de Moskouse intellectuelen die zich hebben opgeworpen als leiders van de democratische beweging — zij spreken een andere taal dan

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<sup>86</sup> 'Boris Jeltsin: politiek straatvechter', *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 21, 1991.

<sup>87</sup> 'Staking enige wapen van Jeltsin', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>88</sup> Cartoon Boris Yeltsin, *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 22, 1991.

<sup>89</sup> 'Russische arbeiders vormen het leger van Boris Jeltsin', *Het Parool*, August 20, 1991.

<sup>90</sup> 'Boris Jeltsin weet wat het volk wil', *De Telegraaf*, August 22, 1991.

de massa's. Jeltsin is echter een andere categorie. Niet voor niets is hij eerder dit jaar met een absolute meerderheid tot president van Rusland gekozen. Jeltsin is in de loop van gisteren de held en de hoop geworden van de democraten die hun argwaan tegen de 'demagoog' en 'populist' hebben laten varen — de held van de 'gewone' Russen — boeren, arbeiders, mijnwerkers — was hij al. Het geeft hem — niemand weet voor hoe lang — het aura van de onaantastbaarheid: tegen Jeltsin kan de junta even niets doen.<sup>91</sup>

Yeltsin, according to the profile, was able to speak the language of the ordinary Russian. This made him the hero of the common people, the farmers, workers and miners. But he also became the hope of the democrats, who relinquished their aversion to the Russian president.

### *The man of the Party*

While the characterization of Yeltsin got more and more positive, the newspapers were getting increasingly critical of Gorbachev on Tuesday, August 20, and Wednesday, August 21. In contradiction to Yeltsin, 'the man of the people', Gorbachev was seen as a bureaucratic leader that had focussed too much on the Party politics in Moscow. One author describing this side of Gorbachev was Lithuanian émigré and essayist Felix Kaplan. In an interview with *Leeuwarder Courant*, Kaplan explained what had been happening under Gorbachev's rule and what he expected would happen in the Soviet Union in the days and weeks to come:

Gorbatsjov vervaagde alles. Hij had het centralisme tot zijn manier van regeren verheven. Maar daardoor heeft hij zich vervreemd van de bevolking. Jeltsin heeft de mensen een voor een weer opgeraapt. Als de coup mislukt heeft hij de meeste macht. Gorbatsjov kan wel terugkomen, maar Jeltsin zal de sterke figuur zijn.<sup>92</sup>

Apart from the fact that Kaplan made a very accurate prediction in this interview, it is striking that there was room for a more critical view of the Soviet President. According to Kaplan, Gorbachev had alienated himself from the people in the Soviet Union, only for Yeltsin to pick them back up, one by one. This opinion clearly deviated from most of the main ideas newspapers printed about Gorbachev on the first day of the coup. Kaplan also compares the centralist leader Gorbachev to the new hero Yeltsin. Because it was so obvious that these leaders were two different types, and because they had been political opponents in the previous years, Gorbachev's flaws immediately emerged: had lost sight of his people.

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<sup>91</sup> 'Boris Jeltsin: De onbuigzame', NRC Handelsblad, August 20, 1991.

<sup>92</sup> 'Uitgeweken Litouwer geeft plegers van coup weinig kans', *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 20, 1991.



In Gorbachev's absence, the Dutch press thus seemed to become more apprehensive when it came to Gorbachev. A couple of newspapers dared to print more critical commentaries on Gorbachev, but no one was more cynical than the renowned Russian critical writer Aleksandr Zinovyev, who wrote a piece called 'Dumb perestroika reveals equally dumb contra-perestroika' for *De Volkskrant*. In the article Zinovyev writes that the Soviet authorities were conducting a crime against the people and the state:

Voor het Westen is de omwenteling een ernstig verlies. Het heeft zijn man op de post van staatshoofd van de Sovjetunie verloren. Als hij zich nog een jaar of twee had gehandhaafd, zou er van het Sovjet-imperium geen spaan meer over zijn. Maar is het voor de Sovjet-Unie zelf een verlies? Gorbatsjov is samen met andere kameleons en draaikonten van het partijapparaat een van de laagste voortbrengselen van het Sovjet-stelsel. De perestroika begon als een in de geschiedenis ongekend dom avontuur. Alle plannen zijn op niets uitgelopen. Terwijl ze hun positie, reputatie en huid redden, hebben de hervormers de perestrojka gemaakt tot een even ongekende misdaad van de autoriteiten tegen de belangen van hun volk en hun land.<sup>93</sup>

Zinovyev states that the turmoil in the Soviet Union might have been shocking to the West but that the loss of Gorbachev was not as worrisome for the people that had experienced Gorbachev's reforms themselves. Perestroika had failed to bring upon positive change and the people behind the policy were nothing more than crooks acting in bad faith.

Zinovyev's critique of both Gorbachev and the West might not have changed the minds of the readers completely, but the fact that *De Volkskrant* printed the commentary, shows that there was room in the press for a fundamentally different view of Gorbachev and his reforms. The Dutch newspapers had thus shifted their focus and their praise from the deposed Soviet President to the powerful Russian one.

### *The demon of apathy*

Yeltsin might have played the main role on Tuesday and Wednesday, he derived his power from the people in Moscow that were willing to get out on the streets and gather around the Parliament Building in the heart of the Russian capital. The Dutch journalists and commentators, aware of the importance of the attitude of the population, waited to see what the people would do. In *NRC Handelsblad*, historian Hans Renner posed the question everyone in the West was grappling with:

[...] hoe vastberaden en politiek bewust zullen miljoenen gewone Russen, Oekraïners, Wit-Russen en andere volkeren zich in deze dagen tonen? Zijn zes jaren van

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<sup>93</sup> 'Domme perestrojka baart even domme contra-perestrojka', *De Volkskrant*, August 21, 1991.

perestrojka en glasnost voldoende om hen, nu de crisissituatie een hoogtepunt bereikt, uit hun apathie wakker te schudden?<sup>94</sup>

Did people in Russia care enough about the situation in the country? Were the six years of perestrojka and glasnost enough to ‘wake them up?’ The notion of Russians being apathetic or indifferent towards the political state of the Soviet Union was as old as the Union itself. Between 1922 and 1991,<sup>95</sup> several newspaper articles were published describing the indifference of the Russian people. This passive behaviour was often put in contrast to the political engagement of the people in the West. Western citizens were politically involved because they could actually influence what happened in their democracies. Political apathy was thus seen as a result of the communist system and the inability of the Soviet citizen to affect change.

A telling example of this characterization is an article in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, published in 1960. The newspaper article contained a summary of a book by the German journalist and travelwriter Klaus Mehnert, ‘*Der Sowjetmensch*’, about the Soviet Union and the people he encountered while traveling:

Mehnert waagt zich niet aan speculaties wat betreft de toekomstige ontwikkeling. Hij gelooft bepaald niet dat het regiem vandaag of morgen ineen zal storten. Allerlei feiten wijzen op het tegendeel. De sterkste steunpilaar, waarop het bolsjewistische regiem rust, acht hij het sterke patriottisme der Russen. Daarnaast is er een afkeer van de (ongezonde) politiek — een haast algemene apathie — en probeert de Rus zich zoveel mogelijk te verzoenen met de werkelijkheid. [...] Bovendien is de Rus gewend aan gehoorzaamheid. “Russen aanvaarden geredelijk hetgeen van hogerhand over hen beschikt wordt. Het is een grondtrek van hun volkskarakter. Van kindsaf werd de Russen vroeger ingepompt dat gehoorzaamheid aan het gezag een der grootste deugden was. Deze opvoeding tot discipline is door de bolsjewieken overgenomen”.<sup>96</sup>

Mehnert emphasizes the civil obedience of the Russians and the fact that the willingness to accept the rule of the people in power was a character trait of the people in the Soviet Union. According to Mehnert, the apathy of the ‘Soviet man’, was a pillar on which the Bolshevik regime rested. This characterization was still widely seen as accurate in 1991 and the idea that the situation in the Soviet Union could never improve unless the people would ‘wake up’ and rebel against the communist oppressors is an idea that was mentioned again during the coup attempt:

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<sup>94</sup> ‘Om de kracht van het volk: Augustus 1968 – Augustus 1991’, *NRC Handelsblad*, August 21, 1991.

<sup>95</sup> In an article in the Marxist newspaper *De Tribune*, de Russians are characterized as apathetic people who could profit from help from Western ‘fellow travellers’: ‘Het werk der Friends of Soviet Russia’, *De Tribune*, December 23, 1922.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Voortreffelijk, objectief boek van Klaus Mehnert over Russische Mens: Groeiend verlangen naar welstand en persoonlijke veiligheid’, *Trouw*, July 09, 1960.

De grootste zegen en de ergste vloek van de Russen is hun gelatenheid. Maar als de demon van de apathie hun niet opnieuw parten gaat spelen, hebben de Russen de toekomst voortaan in eigen hand.<sup>97</sup>

The writer of the commentary in *Het Parool*, British journalist Rupert Cornwell, plainly states that the Russians would be able to regain control of their future, but only if they proved able to shake off the ‘demon of apathy’. On Wednesday, Cornwell seemed to get his way. When one looks at the newspapers that were published after the crisis of Tuesday night, the image of a compassionate population arises. The people in Moscow were fighting, literally, against communist power. The correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad*, Hubert Smeets, described the nightly scene:

Twee van de tanks zijn dan al door de Jeltsin-aanhangers veroverd. Op de tanks staan een man met een megafoon, die wanhopig probeert het publiek op afstand te houden, en een legerofficier die met een inderhaast gemaakte witte vlag zwaait. Er omheen staan minder bezonnen jongeren. Voor het eerst sinds maanden is nu eindelijk ook de jeugd op de been gekomen om de democratie te verdedigen. Tot voor kort waren de betogingen van Jeltsin voornamelijk een aangelegenheid van ouderen.<sup>98</sup>

According to Smeets, for the first time, younger Russians had sprung to action ‘to defend democracy’. This statement clearly indicates that Smeets foresaw a change in Russian society and expected a more democratic future, based on the new participants he saw. And Smeets was not the only one witnessing the tumult in the Russian capital. Every newspaper printed photos of the clashes between the tanks and the Muscovites on the streets and almost every Dutch correspondent seemed to have witnessed the tumult first hand.<sup>99</sup> The stories about heroic Muscovites armed with makeshift gasmasks and Russian flags must have reached everybody in the Netherlands on Wednesday, August 21. The correspondents, like Hubert Smeets, thus turned these hours into a historic event.

Hubert Smeets arrived in Moscow as a correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad* at the end of May 1990. According to Smeets, he did not have a lot of knowledge about the Soviet Union since he was a historian, not a slavist. He had researched the history of Communism and

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<sup>97</sup> ‘Gorbatsjov verlost de mensen van hun angst’, *Het Parool*, August 21, 1991.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Op straat ligt een stuk mens’, *NRC Handelsblad*, August 21, 1991.

<sup>99</sup> Examples of the accounts by the Dutch correspondents in Moscow: By Hubert Smeets: ‘Daders coup Moskou op de vlucht’ *NRC Handelsblad* August 21, 1991. By Derk Sauer: ‘Daar ginds in die tunnel staan ze: de moordenaars’, *Het Parool*, August 21, 1991. By Hans Geleijnse: ‘De tanks komen, meisje, zorg voor je veiligheid’, *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 21, 1991.

the Communist Party of the Netherlands, but he was new to the ins and outs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Soon after his arrival in the Russian capital, however, Smeets witnessed a number of important events in the run-up to the August Coup.

First, there was the 28th party congress of the CPSU in July 1990. At the congress, that would eventually prove to be the last one, Gorbachev and the highest ranked officials were asked to resign. Smeets remembers that he felt that the end of the CPSU was near because the Party officials started to ‘fumble’. He was not aware, however, that this would mean the entire Soviet Union would fall apart. And he would not have liked the idea either. As Smeets recalls: ‘I was a child of European unification, the disintegration of the Soviet Union really did not seem like a good idea to me.’

During the year that Smeets now calls ‘the most important year in my life’, he virtually never left Moscow: ‘I never dared to leave the city for a long time. It was the place where everything happened, and remember, I was all alone’. He thus stayed in Moscow, up until the summer of 1991 started and Smeets left for France for a cycling holiday. He crucially missed the first day of the coup. Hastily, he returned to Moscow to see with his own eyes how the people barricaded the streets. According to Smeets, he tried to describe what he saw as well as he could. ‘But you still carry your own history with you, I was just a Dutchman’.<sup>100</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After the reports on the first day of the coup attempt on August 19, 1991, the way the newspapers wrote about the situation in the Soviet Union in the newspapers significantly changed. Still, nothing could be said about the intentions of the eight coup plotters or the future of the Soviet Union, so the correspondents continued to focus on the events they witnessed and the editors back home interviewed more Soviet experts.

The continuing absence of Mikhail Gorbachev ensured that there was room to doubt his leadership qualities. Although he had been a good diplomatic partner for the West, it became more and more clear that Gorbachev had lost his credit in the eyes of a lot of people living in the Soviet Union. Surprisingly enough, however, this did not create a moment of self-reflection for the Dutch press. The piece by the critical writer Aleksandr Zinoviev was the only commentary that really indicated that it was possible to criticize the Western admiration for Gorbachev.

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<sup>100</sup> The information concerning Hubert Smeets’ background was obtained through an interview with the former correspondent for the purpose of this thesis. The interview was conducted in June 2018.

Additionally, the reports about the disappearance of Soviet president Gorbachev made way for new articles about the “street fighter”, Boris Yeltsin. The Russian President was a new phenomenon since he was the first directly elected figure in the Soviet Union. In addition, during the uncertain days in Moscow, he fulfilled a distinctive, new role: that of an opposition leader.

The Dutch accounts of Yeltsin, his character and his actions during the fearful days of the coup attempt, came close to a form of myth-making. By paraphrasing Yeltsin’s own heroic stories about his childhood, the papers created an image of a president that simply had to be a born leader. Calling Yeltsin tough, heroic, and courageous, gave the leader a mythical status and a lot of responsibility. In other words, through the photographs, cartoons and articles, Yeltsin turned into a caricature of the hero that Moscow and the Soviet Union needed. He became the Dutch mainstay.

When we look at the newspaper articles published on Monday, August 19 and Tuesday, August 20, through the lens of ‘imagology’ as described by Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller,<sup>101</sup> a few issues fall into place. Leerssen and Beller write: ‘Our images of foreign countries, peoples and cultures mainly derive from selective value judgements [...] as expressed in travel writing and in literary representations’.<sup>102</sup> This mechanism can also be discerned in the articles that were incorporated in this chapter. The writing on the people living behind the iron curtain, for example, the work by German travel writer Klaus Mehnert, instilled in the people in the Netherlands a fixed idea that the people in the Soviet Union were helpless victims of their rulers and apathetic towards their fate. This characterization proved hard to debunk and it resurfaced in the articles published during the first two days of the coup attempt.

This image resulted in the idea that nothing had to be expected from the people in Moscow, which in turn caused a lot of anxiety in the Netherlands. When the people in Moscow suddenly seemed to be prepared to go out on the streets, these protests really excited the correspondents in Russia and the commentators in the Netherlands. After all, it had never been expected that Muscovites would take on the army. This surprise and excitement thus was a result of the fact that the expectations were greatly exceeded.

The impact of the sudden ‘awakening’ of the Russians and the protests on the streets of Moscow should not be underestimated. The people in the Netherlands had not only been used to the stereotype of the apathetic Russian that had been described by the

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<sup>101</sup> Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, 5-7.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

media since the 1920's, they had gotten used to the idea that people in the Soviet Union were helpless victims of a merciless regime. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a lot of people in the Netherlands had actually been willing to support the Russians by donating money for food packages.<sup>103</sup> Seeing these citizens fighting for change thus must have caused a lot of excitement in the West because it indicated a thorough change in the Soviet Union.

The events in Moscow were thus extensively reported in the newspapers by means of articles, commentaries, cartoons and photos. What this meant for the expectations the Dutch press had of the future of the Soviet Union and will be investigated in the next chapter.

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<sup>103</sup> The television support programme: 'Help de Russen de winter door', organised by broadcasting station VARA, was described in the previous chapter. See: Michielsen, *Moscow Times*, 71.

### **Chapter 3: Small, tired and alone**

Three days after his initially scheduled return to Moscow, Mikhail Gorbachev stepped off an airplane in the early hours of Thursday, August 22. Officially, Gorbachev still was the leader of the Soviet Union, but it soon became clear that he was not prepared for the new situation that had emerged after the 72-hour long crisis.<sup>104</sup>

The fact that Boris Yeltsin really was the one who had ascended to power during the previous days and nights, added to the fact that no one was talking about perestroika anymore, had not settled with the Soviet President. He emphasized that he had resisted the coup leaders' orders, but that did not impress the people that had endured the troubles in Moscow's city centre the day before.<sup>105</sup> During the press conference that followed later that same day, Gorbachev called the coup the greatest test perestroika had had to withstand in all the years that had passed. It furthermore became clear that he was fundamentally disappointed in the men he personally had backed.<sup>106</sup>

It seemed that, after years of balancing between the conservative Party members and the more radical progressives, Gorbachev finally sided with the forward pushing crowd, albeit a little bit too late. He was not the one in charge anymore. The leader calling the shots was Yeltsin. His first public appearance on Thursday morning was to compliment the tanks that had defended him during the attempted siege of the parliament building. This praise went hand in hand with festivities indicating that the coup was finally over. The people in the streets celebrated their victory and so did Yeltsin. The Thursday session of the Russian parliament was opened with a standing ovation for the opposition leader.<sup>107</sup> One of the most important points on the agenda was the fate of the coup plotters. Yeltsin was unrelenting. He stressed that there would be no forgiveness for any official who had supported the coup. The session had not ended when Yeltsin was informed that a crowd of supporters had showed up outside the White House. BBC Moscow Correspondent, Martin Sixsmith, described the scene on Thursday afternoon:

It was the moment of triumph Yeltsin had been seeking: as soon as he appeared on the balcony, the crowd below became a sea of waving hands and tricoloured Russian flags; the roar of cheering could be heard a mile away.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 494.

<sup>105</sup> Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, 122.

<sup>106</sup> Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 301.

<sup>107</sup> Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, 126.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

Yeltsin was not the only one addressing the exalted mass of people. Eduard Shevardnadze, former Minister of Foreign Affairs recalled his own warning about the danger of a conservative putsch. He furthermore congratulated the Russian people on their exciting achievement: 'A new democracy has been born: long live democracy!'<sup>109</sup>

If the roar of the crowd outside the White House on Thursday was the most exciting part of the week, the most important one followed on Friday afternoon. Yeltsin had invited Gorbachev to attend a session of the Russian parliament. The meeting, which turned into a historic confrontation between the two protagonists, was televised so the entire Soviet Union could see how Yeltsin cornered his old nemesis.

Gorbachev kept trying to defend Communism and its representatives in the Supreme Soviet<sup>110</sup> and by doing so he further alienated himself from the people in the room and the Russians on the streets. Yeltsin, in turn, showed no mercy and decided to crush his opponents' hopes for the future: 'On a lighter note [...] shall we now sign a decree suspending the activities of the Russian Communist Party?'<sup>111</sup> With the idea of banning the Russian part of the CPSU uttered on television, it was clear that Yeltsin would not back down.

On Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup>, the files and records from the Central Committee building had been handed over to Gorbachev, who could now finally see the extent of the Party's support for the putsch. The Soviet President had no choice but to admit that nearly all his supporters and old confidants had been in on the plot. Gorbachev likely realised that he had no other choice but to accept defeat and that evening he stated that the Central Committee of the Communist Party would have to dissolve itself.<sup>112</sup>

This last chapter will be focused on the examination of the predictions published by the Dutch press during the weekend following the coup attempt. The articles that have appeared in the Dutch newspapers, discussing the future of the Soviet Union, covered four topics: the fate of Gorbachev, the power and future of Yeltsin, the relationship between Moscow and the republics and finally, the future of the Russian people and the possibility of democratization.

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<sup>109</sup> Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, 128.

<sup>110</sup> Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 495.

<sup>111</sup> Idem.

<sup>112</sup> Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 301.



### *The tragedy of Mikhail Gorbachev*

The front page that most strikingly depicted the situation in Moscow on Thursday was the front page of *Limburgs Dagblad*. Two photos adorned the page: one portrays Gorbachev dressed in leisurely clothing and with a wary smile on his face, stepping off an airplane. The other photo shows a massive crowd outside the parliament building being addressed by Yeltsin.<sup>113</sup> The two photos represent a striking shift. Gorbachev suddenly seemed to have lost all public support, while tens of thousands of people were waiting to hear Yeltsin speak.

This shift was rather difficult to comprehend for the Dutch press, now that the once popular leader Gorbachev was back in Moscow. When the news about the coup attempt had spread on Monday, the correspondents in Moscow and journalists in the Netherlands had been afraid that Gorbachev's hard work had been in vain. The fear that his reforms, like the well-known policies of glasnost and perestroika, would be reversed, seemed very likely to become reality. No one outside the Soviet Union could have imagined that, only three days later, Gorbachev would be the one opposing the will of the people.

The Dutch newspapers were thus confronted with a dilemma. Gorbachev had done a lot for the international community after all. But was that enough? What sort of role was there for Gorbachev to play, now that Yeltsin had presented himself as the strong leader Russia needed? A commentary in *Nederlands Dagblad* shows how hard it was for the Dutch press to part with their admiration for the Soviet leader:

Gorbatsjov zal de geschiedenis ingaan als de man die de opening schiep voor het drastisch veranderen van de Sovjetunie en de internationale verhoudingen. Maar de toekomst is aan Boris Jeltsin, van wie — volgens sommigen — Gorbatsjov slechts een marionet zal blijken te zijn. [...] Tegelijk zou het, naar onze inschatting, een slechte zaak zijn, wanneer voor Michail Gorbatsjov voorlopig geen belangrijke taak blijft weggelegd. De taak die bij uitstek door Gorbatsjov dient te worden uitgevoerd, ligt voor een deel in het buitenland. De Sovjetrussische president heeft internationaal enorm krediet. Terecht: hij heeft Oost en West op het spoor gezet van 'partnership', waarbij staten belang hebben bij het gezamenlijk uit de wereld helpen van problemen. Ook in de toekomst beschikt Gorbatsjov, méér dan Jeltsin, over de persoonlijke en grondwettelijke kwaliteiten om dat werk voort te zetten.<sup>114</sup>

The anonymous writer, 'A.K.', describes why Gorbachev was such a popular leader in the West. He was, after all, responsible for the 'partnership between East and West'. A.K. also points to Gorbachev's 'constitutional and personal qualities' and thus seems to imply that Yeltsin was not as amicable or neighbourly as Mikhail Sergeyevich had proven to be.

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<sup>113</sup> Voorpagina, *Limburgs Dagblad*, August 23, 1991.

<sup>114</sup> 'Dat was het dan?', *Nederlands Dagblad*, August 23, 1991.

In the days that followed, it became more and more clear that Gorbachev's time had passed. While the newspapers had published positive accounts on Monday, by the end of the week, Gorbachev was reduced to an unfortunate figure. Headlines like: 'Tragic hero: Gorbachev believes in lost cause'<sup>115</sup>, 'Festive Moscow ignores Gorbachev'<sup>116</sup> and 'Gorbachev: small, tired and alone'<sup>117</sup> reveal that the Dutch newspapers knew Gorbachev was losing control of the situation. On Saturday, *Leeuwarder Courant* published a piece by GPD correspondent Hans Geleijnse, who describes the atmosphere in Moscow:

“Aftreden”, schreeuwt de menigte voor het Witte Huis donderdag als Moskous burgemeester Popov zegt dat Gorbatsjov uit de partij moet stappen. De man met de 'vriendelijke glimlach, maar stalen tanden', zoals Gromyko Gorbatsjov in 1985 aanpreeft in het Politbureau, lijkt er nog niet aan te denken. Maar hoe lang nog?<sup>118</sup>

Geleijnse openly questions whether Gorbachev could stay in office and how long it would be before he would leave the political stage, seemingly suggesting that Gorbachev would step down soon. As we now know, Geleijnse's prediction was not far off. Gorbachev retired from his position as General Secretary on the same day the article was published.

By the time the August Coup unfolded in Moscow, Hans Geleijnse had been working in the Russian capital for about a year. As mentioned, Geleijnse was a correspondent working for a Dutch news agency called *Gemeenschappelijke Pers Dienst*. GPD was established in 1936 under the name *Groote Provinciale Dagbladen* and later renamed. In 1994 this agency merged with *Stichting Pers Unie* and was named *Geassocieerde Pers Diensten*. In contrast to agencies like ANP and Reuters, GPD was aimed at delivering background stories to newspapers in the Netherlands and Belgium and it contributed to radio broadcast station VARA.

Geleijnse began working for GPD a few years earlier without an academic background or a degree in journalism. As a novice, he started working as a 'dictophonist' trusted with typing out what others had written. Later Geleijnse worked as a correspondent stationed in Budapest, before he moved to Moscow in April 1990 to work as the agency's correspondent in the Soviet Union. By that time he had learned a lot about Eastern Europe and Communism, but he was not specialised in Russia or the USSR. With the help of a very skilled Russian assistant, Geleijnse evolved into a very skilled correspondent and analyst.

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<sup>115</sup> 'Tagische held: Gorbatsjov gelooft in verloren zaak', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, August 23, 1991.

<sup>116</sup> 'Feestend Moskou negeert Gorbatsjov', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, August 23, 1991.

<sup>117</sup> 'Gorbatsjov: klein, moe en alleen', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 24, 1991.

<sup>118</sup> 'Sovjet-Unie houdt op te bestaan', *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 24, 1991.

According to Geleijnse, his time in Moscow thought him how deeply rooted Soviet socialism was in the thinking of ‘ordinary people’. In interviews he came across the power of conservative thinking and old habits. He was therefore apprehensive towards the idea that Russia would transform itself into a kind of Western democracy. As Geleijnse says nowadays: ‘I do not want to say that I saw this very sharp at the time, I was sceptic, that probably is the right term.’<sup>119</sup>

### *Strong, stronger, strongest*

While Gorbachev was described as ‘small, tired and alone’, The Dutch respect for Boris Yeltsin had grown considerably in a weeks’ time.<sup>120</sup> The correspondents in Moscow had witnessed Yeltsin standing on a tank to resist the ‘hardliners’ and had been impressed. As described in the previous chapter, Yeltsin had been given an almost mythical status by defying the ‘junta’. Once the coup was averted, however, the following developments raised some critical questions in the newspapers.

Like *Leeuwarder Courant*, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* published an extensive commentary by GPD correspondent Geleijnse on Saturday. Geleijnse in his commentary called: ‘Soviet stronghold in a state of dissolution’ shifted his focus from the situation in Moscow to the future of the Soviet Union. The once almighty bloc was falling apart, but whether this meant that a bright future awaited remained to be seen:

Betekent de eventuele begrafenis van het communisme de geboorte van echte democratie? Hoeveel democratische leiders zijn er, na ruim zeventig jaar autoritair bewind? Is Jeltsin niet wat al te voortvarend bezig zich steeds meer bevoegdheden toe te eigenen?<sup>121</sup>

The three issues Geleijnse raised in his piece were the questions that played a central role at the end of August 1991. Was the Soviet Union going to be a democratic state, now that Communism had lost its appeal? Was it even possible for a democratic leader to ascend to power after 70 years of authoritarianism? And, crucially, was Yeltsin maybe too powerful?

This last topic was raised by multiple Dutch journalists and specialists. Yeltsin’s reaction to the communist coup attempt had impressed people outside the Soviet Union, but the way he treated Gorbachev in the Russian parliament, once the crisis was averted,

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<sup>119</sup> The information concerning the background of Hans Geleijnse was obtained through an interview via email with the former correspondent for the purpose of this thesis. The interview was conducted in June 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Examples of the Dutch appreciation for Yeltsin: ‘Jeltsin viert met aanhang overwinning’, *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 22, 1991, ‘Moskou bejubelt Jeltsin’, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, August 23, 1991, ‘Tijdperk Jeltsin breekt aan’, *De Telegraaf*, August 23, 1991.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Sovjet-bolwerk in staat van ontbinding’, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, August 24, 1991.

led to concerns. On Monday, a section in *Het Parool* called “Vrij, Onverveerd”, was dedicated to Yeltsin and the future of the Soviet Union. The writer openly questioned Yeltsin’s actions and motives:

Om een nieuwe staatsgreep te voorkomen, heeft hij de media onder toezicht geplaatst van de Russische KGB. Dat lijkt een recept voor nieuwe censuur. Ook zijn meedogenloze behandeling van Gorbatsjov op de zitting van het Russische parlement, afgelopen vrijdag, en de collectieve loftuitingen aan de nieuwe sterke man, doen de vrees rijzen dat het nog lang zal duren voor Rusland zich van zijn verleden heeft losgemaakt.

The writer fears a new wave of censorship in Russia and points to the connection between Russia’s problematic past and the political situation in 1991. *Het Parool* was not the only newspaper that condemned Yeltsin’s new strategy. In *NRC Handelsblad*, left-wing political scientist and publicist Paul Scheffer compared the scene in the parliament on Friday to the drama the putschists had executed on Monday.

En zo ging het van de ene staatsgreep naar de andere, dit maal namens het volk. Het was een fascinerend, maar geen prettig schouwspel afgelopen vrijdag in het Russische parlement. [...] Werd hier een symbolische executie gevoerd om straks echte doodstraffen te vermijden? Of was deze publieke vernedering de eerste stap in een hardhandige afrekening, waarbij uit naam van het aangedane onrecht nieuw onrecht wordt begaan?<sup>122</sup>

Scheffer sharply denounces Yeltsin’s actions and even calls his treatment of Gorbachev a ‘public execution’. He furthermore states that Yeltsin is organising another coup, ‘this time in the name of the people’. He is thus implicating that Yeltsin’s actions were not legitimate and that Scheffer would have liked to see Yeltsin to respect the political status quo in the Soviet Union. The period of transition was vital if a democracy was ever going to develop in Russia, Scheffer states. He continues:

De stijl waarmee het ancien régime wordt afgeschaft zegt veel, zo niet alles over de aard van het nieuwe bewind. Daarom is juist in revolutionaire situaties een zo zorgvuldig mogelijke omgang met de rechtsstaat van groot belang. [...] Hopelijk komt aan de decreten-regen van Jeltsin een einde voordat verdere inbreuken op de parlementaire beginselen worden gepleegd.<sup>123</sup>

By chastising Gorbachev publicly, Yeltsin appalled the Dutch journalists who had rooted for him during the coup attempt. This disapproving attitude towards Yeltsin indicates that

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<sup>122</sup> ‘Een vacante sokkel’, *NRC Handelsblad*, August 26, 1991.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Een vacante sokkel’, *NRC Handelsblad*, August 26, 1991.

there was a more profound reason on the part of the Dutch press for disliking the Russian president. This contempt for Yeltsin was rooted in the idea that he was Gorbachev's ultimate counterpart. A charismatic figure and a strong opposition leader, but lacking Gorbachev's likeability and diplomatic zeal. The commentators had dared to admit that Yeltsin was what the people in Moscow needed when the hardliners took over, but he had never been flawless in their opinion.

Yeltsin thus had been described as a mythical figure but fell off his pedestal when the Dutch commentators realised his traits were not contributory to Russia's future and the relationship with Gorbachev. The desire for a more Western president can be detected in every article and says a lot about the fact that, even though the correspondents and other analysts wanted Russia to have a leader that was popular among the Russian population, their own Dutch background and their Western values played a role in their scepticism of Yeltsin's tough attitude.

### *The new Russia*

Yeltsin's political course was not the only aspect of Russian politics that was viewed with scepticism. The relationship between Moscow and the various Soviet republics raised some important issues as well. Various views on the 'new Russia' were discussed by correspondents and other experts. GPD correspondent Hans Geleijnse, among others, explained to the readers of the *Leeuwarder Courant*, why Yeltsin might struggle to arrange Russia's future internal affairs and what challenges he faced:

Er ontstaat het beeld van een nieuw tsaristisch Rusland, dominerend over de andere republieken, met in de buitengewesten, zoals de Kaukasus, het wapengekletter van de etnische conflicten. Zelfs als Jeltsin zijn doel bereikt, Gorbatsjov van het toneel verdwijnt, zal het er in zijn rijk niet rustiger op worden.<sup>124</sup>

Geleijnse describes the latent ethnic conflicts within the Soviet Union and points to the fact that these were going to play a role in the future. These remarks are interesting, not only because they give an accurate prediction of the future, but also for the fact that he expects Yeltsin to rule like a new 'tsar', ruling over the empire. This paints a bleak portrait of Yeltsin and also says a lot about his expectations for future democratization.

While Geleijnse describes a 'new tsarist Russia', *NRC* correspondent Hubert Smeets talks about 'the decolonization of the tsarist empire'.

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<sup>124</sup> 'Op weg naar een nieuw tsaristisch Rusland', *Leeuwarder Courant*, August 26, 1991.

De paradox is deze: het herboren Rusland moet nu het Russische rijk ontmantelen. Het gaat nu niet alleen om de ontbinding van de ooit door Lenin en vooral Stalin bijeengeraapte Sovjet-Unie. Nee, thans is de dekolonisatie van het tsaristische imperium aan de orde. Die taak rust op de schouders van Boris Jeltsin, de man die de afgelopen jaren juist zo populair was geworden door een appel op een renaissance van tradities van de Russische natie.<sup>125</sup>

Although the rebirth of the so-called tsarist empire and its decolonization are two contradictory visions, both Geleijnse and Smeets recognize that Moscow needs to find a new way to deal with the surrounding republics. In addition, they both see that this new status quo could lead to problems in the future. The question that they are in fact both posing in their articles is: Which parts of the Soviet Union will become independent of Moscow in the future and which parts will not?

Besides Geleijnse and Smeets, Paul Scheffer raises the same issue in *NRC Handelsblad*. His central question is: 'Where does Russian nationalism draw its own limits?'

Maar misschien dat de allerbelangrijkste vraag straks wel is: waar trekt het Russische nationalisme zijn eigen grenzen? Dat nationalisme is natuurlijk heel dubbelzinnig. Het wil af van de rol van Moskou als centrum van het Sovjet-imperium, maar tegelijk is dit wereldrijk een produkt van datzelfde Russische nationalisme. Rusland poseert als onderdrukte republiek, terwijl het in de ogen van de andere republieken de oorsprong van de onderdrukking is.<sup>126</sup>

Scheffer raises two important points. Firstly: which republics and territories will be engulfed by Russian nationalism? Secondly: is Russia the oppressor or the oppressed?

Thus, in several newspapers, a number of problems are identified that would come to play a large role in the near future. The issues raised by the different commentators tell the readers a few different things. Firstly, these issues are all linked by the commentators, to Russia's history. They refer to the tsarist expansion of the Russian empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the problems that arose during that period, as well as to the 'nationality question', an issue that, as explained before, had first cropped up in Russia in the nineteenth century. The extensive knowledge of the commentators concerning Russian history and the fact that the newspapers adopted the expertise of these commentators, ensured that the predictions that were presented to the Dutch public, were more than just simple guesses.

Secondly, the articles show that there was considerable attention paid to the rest of the Soviet Union, not just to Moscow. Newspapers like *NRC*, *Het Parool* and some local

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<sup>125</sup> 'Dekolonisatie van tsaristische imperium niet meer te stuiten', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 26, 1991.

<sup>126</sup> 'Een vacante sokkel', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 26, 1991.

newspapers depending on news agency GPD, pointed to the situation in the Caucasus, the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>127</sup> and the importance of Ukraine for the stability in Russia<sup>128</sup>. There had already been newsworthy conflicts in these regions, but the articles that appeared in August 1991 show that the commentators were aware of the inner workings of the Soviet Union and the importance of the stability in the republics for the coherence in the new Russia and the strength in Moscow. The readers in the Netherlands can thus be expected to know that there was a considerable chance that conflicts would break out between Moscow and the former Soviet republics in the decades to come. But the most prevalent concern of the Dutch press was not the relationship between Russia and the republics, but the one between the Kremlin and the people.

### *Democracy?*

While Yeltsin grilled Gorbachev in parliament and communist authority began to crumble in the republics, the newspapers in the Netherlands picked up on the popular vengeance of the Muscovites against the Party. On the streets, hundreds of people began destructing communist symbols and statues. The pages of the newspapers were adorned with photos of sculptures of Lenin being professionally removed by cranes. Headlines like the one of *De Telegraaf*: ‘Moscow: the power of the masses’<sup>129</sup> could be found in every newspaper.

The commentators wondered, as described earlier, whether it was possible to allow a democracy to flourish in Russia. The lack of experience with democracy not only applied to the political leadership of the Russian republic, but also to the people that had lived under the communist yoke, as Gerard Jacobs explained in *De Volkskrant*:

De Sovjet-Unie bleek uiteindelijk bestand tegen een staatsgreep, maar klaar voor de toekomst is het land nog lang niet. Waar moet de hulp beginnen? Zeventig jaar communisme had de mensen murw gemaakt, en de nieuwe vrijheid is minstens zo verlamdend als de knoet.<sup>130</sup>

The fact that the people in the Soviet Union were entirely unprepared for democracy made the future very uncertain in Jacobs’ eyes. The fact that the coup was averted by the people in the streets of Moscow did not make matters more positive, since ‘the new freedom is at least as crippling as the knout’.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> ‘Leve Rusland’, *Het Parool*, August 26, 1991

<sup>128</sup> ‘Dekolonisatie van tsaristische imperium niet meer te stuiten’, *NRC Handelsblad*, August 26, 1991.

<sup>129</sup> ‘Moskou: De macht van de massa’, *De Telegraaf*, August 24, 1991.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Het dronken land’, *De Volkskrant*, August 24, 1991.

<sup>131</sup> Knout: transliteration of the Russian word кнут meaning “whip”.

Jacobs based his scepticism on the encounters he experienced during his travels around the Russian far east. He wrote about these experiences in an article unfavourably called 'The drunken land'. By traveling around, Jacobs assumedly saw a different kind of Russia. He therefore added an interesting different angle to the debate in *De Volkskrant*.

Apart from Geleijnse, Smeets, Scheffer, Jacobs and some semi anonymous journalists writing commentaries for a couple of newspapers, other correspondents and commentators paid more attention to the events that unfolded in Moscow at the time. Philippe Remarque, correspondent in Moscow for *De Telegraaf*, dedicated his articles to the people he encountered in the streets of Moscow's centre in the days after the coup:

Olga, die haar kleinzootje gisteren in de middagzon de wisseling van de wacht bij het Leninmausoleum liet zien, wilde niets weten van de geruchten die gaan, dat het massieve marmeren gebouw met de mummie van de revolutieleider opgeruimd gaat worden. „We houden allemaal van opaasje Lenin, hè Sasja, zei ze tegen de kleuter van vier. „Zeg maar tegen de meneer hoeveel opaasje Lenin voor Rusland heeft gedaan, hoe hij gestreden heeft". Het jongetje verborg zijn gezicht in de rokken van zijn oma, die net wilde uitleggen dat het een schande zou zijn de heilige Lenin, over wie haar kleinzoon zulke mooie liederen leert op de kleuterschool, te onteren, toen een man achter haar keihard in haar oor tetterde: „Ze hadden die smerige terrorist al veel eerder moeten opruimen".<sup>132</sup>

In his reporting, Remarque did not set out to predict what Russia's future would look like, but by depicting the atmosphere in Moscow, a lot becomes clear with respect to the hurdles Russia had to take before it could become a democratic state. One important issue was, as this anecdote shows, how Russians could come to terms with their past. Remarque did not reflect on his own opinions regarding the future in any of his articles, but his reports still paint a clear picture of the events in Russia at the time, and the expectations for the future.

Like Remarque, Derk Sauer, focussed on the scenes he encountered in Moscow. His pieces tell the contemporary reader a lot about the mood in the capital and the new found freedom among the Russian people and we can thus assume that Sauer was reasonably optimistic about the future. However, like Remarque, Sauer was reluctant to speculate about the future.

## Conclusion

In the days following the coup attempt, the events in the Soviet Union unfolded rapidly. As expected, the articles printed in the newspapers were a blend of reports on the events

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<sup>132</sup> 'Moskou nam afscheid van zijn drie helden', *De Telegraaf*, August 26, 1991.



as they happened and more analytic pieces by Dutch commentators and correspondents in Moscow. Not all of the pieces contained extensive prognoses since there were daily developments that deserved attention as well.

Remarque and Sauer wrote about the aftermath of the coup and by doing so they paid attention to the obstacles and victories of ordinary Russians. Other correspondents, most notably Hubert Smeets and Hans Geleijnse, wrote more extensive analyses in which they explained their ideas about the future.

The most striking conclusion that can be drawn from the research into the newspapers that were published over the weekend, is that many authors were more sceptical and reserved than one would expect after the excitement of the days before. As mentioned in the previous chapter, most commentators were surprised by the popular uprising against the coup plotters and the armed vehicles they sent out on the streets of Moscow and Leningrad. The rigid idea that the people in the Soviet Union were apathetic towards the political situation in their country suddenly turned out to be a prepossessed caricature. In fact, the encounter with the willingness of Yeltsin and a lot of Russians to resist the coup, ensured a pleasant surprise and arguably caused the week to be the 'historic' event a lot of people in the West still remember.

It is thus rather remarkable that the commentators quickly grew sceptical. The two correspondents that best described their restraint, were Hans Geleijnse and Hubert Smeets. Both Geleijnse and Smeets had witnessed Yeltsin's condemnation of the coup and the protests in the streets. They both had been impressed by the events, but during the weekend, they became increasingly pessimistic. And they were not the only ones. Commentators like Paul Scheffer and Gerard Jacobs expressed their scepticism in elaborate articles

The concerns expressed by the commentators were based on two notions. Firstly, a couple of authors mentioned fact that Russians had little experience with the concept of democracy and explained that this could cause problems. They were well aware of Russia's history and used this as an explanation for the idea that the people still had a long way to go. The idea that the newly acquired freedom for the Russians could be overwhelming, as described by journalist and writer Gerard Jacobs, was related to this notion.

Secondly, The critics were sceptical towards Yeltsin's manners and the way he maintained himself in the Russian Parliament. The Russian president increasingly began to resemble the autocratic leader they hoped Russia would resist. The clearest example of his inflexibility was his condemnation of Mikhail Gorbachev.

More than anything, the articles incorporated in this chapter tell the contemporary reader a lot about the background of the correspondents and commentators writing for the Dutch newspapers. All of them were born in the Netherlands of the 1950's<sup>133</sup> and had therefore not only been raised with the post-war appreciation of the parliamentary democracy, they had also witnessed the evolution of European integration which started with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951.<sup>134</sup>

The fact that Yeltsin began to show authoritarian character traits, astounded the Dutch commentators and discouraged them. The way they subsequently wrote about their expectations thus tells the reader as much about their point of view as it does about Yeltsin, the Russian people and the future of Russia. Or, as Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller wrote in their work *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*: 'Valorizing the Other is, of course, nothing but a reflection of one's own point of view'.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Apart from Hans Geleijnse (1944), the commentators mentioned in this chapter: Gerard Jacobs (1953), Hubert Smeets (1956), Paul Scheffer (1954) and Derk Sauer (1952) were born in the 1950's.

<sup>134</sup> This appreciation for the European Union was something Hubert Smeets mentioned in his interview conducted for this thesis.

<sup>135</sup> Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, 5.

## The bitter end

When Mikhail Gorbachev returned to Moscow after the chaos of the coup attempt, he said he felt as though he had returned to a different world.<sup>136</sup> His world had definitely changed in three days' time, but the tumult in the Soviet Union had not been solved yet. During the Autumn of 1991, a number of important events took place which together laid the groundworks for the official dissolution of the USSR. In the end, it took four more months before the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin.

Between August and December, ten republics declared their independence. This process was far from flawless. On August 27, Boris Yeltsin affirmed that Russia would reserve the right to redraw its borders. With this statement, he immediately raised anger from Kazakhstan and Ukraine in particular, since these two republics housed the largest groups of Russians which Yeltsin ostensibly wanted to protect.<sup>137</sup>

In order to keep the republics together, albeit loosely, Gorbachev tried to compose a new Union Treaty. This time, however, he had to take into account the demands of Yeltsin and another powerful figure: Leonid Kravchuk, the leader of Ukraine. While the Ukrainians had voted in favour of a renewed Union Treaty in March of 1991, six months later, 90 percent of the Ukrainian electorate voted in favour of complete independence. This was a setback for Gorbachev because he now had to settle for a model that looked more like that of the European Union.<sup>138</sup>

On December 8, Yeltsin, Kravchuk and the leader of Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich decided to form a Commonwealth of Independent States. This Commonwealth was to become the successor of the Soviet Union and by making this decision, the leaders disqualified Gorbachev and his attempts at saving the Union. The Soviet leader eventually lost all control when it became clear that he had not been invited to the negotiations between several Soviet republics in the Kazakh capital Almaty. During these talks, the republics that wanted to join the Commonwealth of Independent States declared that the Soviet Union would cease to exist by the end of the year. Gorbachev thus would be the president of a bloc that no longer existed.

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<sup>136</sup> Sixsmith, *Moscow Coup*, 159.

<sup>137</sup> Harmans, *Staatsgreep in Moskou*, 339.

<sup>138</sup> Brown, *De opkomst en ondergang*, 751.

## Conclusion

### *Findings*

When the news of the coup in the Soviet Union broke on Monday, August 19, it immediately became clear that the Dutch press was shocked by the fact that the Soviet president had likely been ousted. Mikhail Gorbachev was praised in every newspaper, without exceptions. Popular, in the Netherlands, were the leader's foreign policy and innovative reforms. On Tuesday, when the initial feelings of shock and disturbance passed, and the chaos in Moscow worsened, the newspapers became more critical of Gorbachev. A new idea cropped up: the Soviet president knew how to deal with the leaders in the West and therefore became very popular, but in Russia he had abandoned his constituents. He was 'the man of the Party', not 'the man of the people'. At the end of the week, Gorbachev was not portrayed as a bad guy. Most commentators simply felt sorry for the leader. He had become the victim of his own reforms.

The obvious bad guys, in August 1991, were the members of the Emergency Committee. Only a few Dutch commentators investigated the motives of the coup plotters. More often, the men were described as conservative communists and hardliners. This characterization meant that there was little eye for the existing problems in the Soviet Union, which in turn might have resulted in high expectations for the future. If the men operated on their own, rather than on behalf of a large part of the Russian population, the situation was understandable. Good versus evil, the people versus communism.

The newspapers were full of praise for the people on the streets of Moscow and their willingness to stand up against the coup plotters. This fighting spirit was linked to a craving for democracy and further reforms. The Dutch critics were even more impressed since, for decades, the people had been depicted as apathetic and indifferent towards the political situation in the USSR. The idea that the Russians had 'woken up' was thus widespread on Wednesday and Thursday and various commentators described their high hopes for the future. A few commentators remained sceptical. They pointed to the lack of a democratic tradition in Russia and claimed that the sudden freedom might cripple the Russian population.

This population was led by the man of the hour: Boris Yeltsin. The newspapers reproduced an image of Yeltsin that he had previously presented of himself in his autobiography. This image, that of a stubborn and fearless leader, was subsequently over-coloured as the situation in Moscow became more frightening on Monday and Tuesday evening. In Yeltsin, the commentators saw the long-awaited opposition leader that the Russian

people needed. And he not only embodied the resistance against the Soviet status quo, importantly, the fact that there finally was an opposition leader, also indicated that Russia was taking the first steps towards becoming a real democracy. The tables turned when, after the coup, Yeltsin remained inflexible and crude. While, at first, it seemed a positive point that Yeltsin was the counterpart of the decent apparatchik Gorbachev, this was not seen as a positive trait once Gorbachev returned in Moscow.

### *The newspapers*

The central question of this research was: What image was created in the Dutch press of the coup attempt in the Soviet Union in August 1991? The eight newspapers that were examined for this thesis were different in terms of their theological backgrounds, readership numbers and distribution areas, but viewed as a group, a number of things can be said about the coverage of the August Coup.

The first conclusion to be drawn on the basis of the research, is that the newspapers mainly focused on the situation in the RSFSR and limited to the large cities: Moscow and, to a lesser extent, Leningrad. This, due to the fact that the Dutch correspondents mainly resided in these cities. What Russians in Samara, Novosibirsk or Vladivostok thought about Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, or the Emergency Committee, hardly came to light. There were some interesting exceptions, however. The writer Gerard Jacobs, for example, travelled around Siberia in 1991 and wrote about his findings in *De Volkskrant*. His story painted a distinctly gloomier and more negative image of, in particular, the Russian population and their possible democratic future.

The fact that the news was primarily gathered in the big cities, had a clear effect on the depiction of the coup attempt. The image became largely one-sided which must have made it difficult for the Dutch readers to put the events into perspective. It was impossible to ascertain how many Russians supported Yeltsin, how many people condemned Gorbachev or who opposed the coup.

Secondly, most stories of the correspondents focussed on the 'here and now': they described what they saw, who they encountered and what they thought of the situation in the Soviet Union in August, 1991. This gave their readers a rather narrow view of the events. They looked at the situation through the eyes of the correspondent, but most of these journalists were apprehensive about looking at the coup from 'bird's-eye view'. They rarely stepped back to look at the situation from a more distant perspective.

Two remarkable exceptions were the correspondents Hubert Smeets and Hans Geleijnse. Smeets and Geleijnse wrote longer opinion pieces in which they considered the Soviet Union's past and future, its leadership, its inhabitants and its outskirts. And by doing so, they told the readers more about the situation during the crisis in August 1991 than most other correspondents did.

Their different form of reporting seemingly had to do with the fact that they were offered more room in the newspapers to expand on their findings and expectations. *NRC Handelsblad* published more pieces on the August Coup in general, and according to Smeets, there was a lot of demand for his reporting.<sup>139</sup> In the case of Geleijnse, he explained that GPD was not a newspaper so there was no precise limit to what he could send the news agency:

Omdat we geen krant waren, was er (niet tot vreugde van de aangesloten kranten vaak) ook geen fysieke beperking in de zin van, je verhaal mag niet langer zijn dan zoveel woorden, want meer ruimte hebben we niet. En zoals je hebt gemerkt, ik was en ben een langschrijver. Afgezien van schrijfstijl vond ik ook dat er nuances moesten worden weergegeven en dat eist vaak meer ruimte.<sup>140</sup>

The exceptional articles by Smeets and Geleijnse were the results of their personal knowledge and experiences, their personal belief that nuance needed to be incorporated in their writing as well as the room given by their employers.

Apart from the correspondents on the spot, a number of different experts and pundits were asked for their opinions as well. These critics, because they had different backgrounds, expanded the image that was created by the newspapers. Furthermore, many newspapers took an effort in finding sources from the Soviet Union, like Lithuanian essayist Felix Kaplan or Russian writer Aleksandr Zinovyev, to record their ideas about the coup. The fact that even the Russian artist 'clown Popov' was asked for his opinion by *NRC Handelsblad*<sup>141</sup> indicates that the Dutch editors wanted to prevent a one-sided image being outlined in their newspapers. The contemporary reader will conclude that the Dutch newspapers anticipated a lot of interest from the Dutch population.

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<sup>139</sup> Hubert Smeets explained in the interview conducted for this thesis, that there was a high demand for his stories.

<sup>140</sup> An answer Hans Geleijnse send as part of an interview conducted via email in light of this thesis.

<sup>141</sup> 'Clown Popov: Als burger ben ik heel bedroefd', *NRC Handelsblad*, August 20, 1991.

### *Imagology*

If one looks at the reporting on the August Coup through the lens of imagology, it becomes clear that the readership was treated to reports that differed from the commentaries that had been published for decades.

The August 1991 articles, informed the public that the times in the Soviet Union had changed enormously over the previous years. A transformation that was attributed to the efforts of Gorbachev. The reforms had cleared the way for Yeltsin, a born opposition leader who, more than any Russian leader had done before, supported the cause of the Russian people. And according to the newspapers these people were, often literally, ready to fight for democracy. The developments in Moscow apparently impressed the Dutch critics, since these changes clearly altered the age-old characterization of the Soviet Union, its leadership and the Russian people.

An example is the widely described transformation of the Russians from an apathetic population into a dedicated and vigilant crowd. This new image of the Russians was so extraordinary, that it instilled in many commentators a hope for a positive and democratic future. Imagologically speaking, the Russians had transformed into a version of themselves that the people in the Netherlands recognized and appreciated. They were no longer foreign and strange, but instead started to mirror Western values and accomplishments.

The interviews conducted with Smeets and Geleijnse underscored the fact that the background of the journalists involved played an important role in refining the optimism that prevailed after the coup faltered. The writers used their own convictions and experiences to warn the reader about Yeltsin, Russia's future and its relations with the other republics. It indicates that, even though the pre-existing ideas about the Soviet Union and its inhabitants caused high expectations after the failure of the coup, scepticism and worry were never absent.

### *Historiography*

Two different works formed the historiographic cornerstones of this thesis. First was the article written by the Dutch slavist John Löwenhardt: 'Vermoedens zijn goedkoop maar ijdel'.<sup>142</sup> In the article, Löwenhardt researched the Dutch press coverage of the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and the deposition of Khrushchev in 1964. Through this research, Löwenhardt answered the question: did the Dutch journalists express any long-term visions on the domestic and foreign policy of the Kremlin and the development of Soviet

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<sup>142</sup> Löwenhardt, 'Vermoedens zijn goedkoop maar ijdel', in: *Rusland in Nederlandse ogen* (1986).

society? Löwenhardt concluded that in 1953 and 1964 Dutch authors hardly thought about the future of the Soviet Union and he attributed this to a lack of knowledge among Dutch journalists and a certain disinterest among the Dutch public.

It is safe to say that, hardly four decades later, the situation among the Dutch journalists as well as the Dutch public had changed completely. The amount of written content about the coup attempt in 1991 was very high and indicated that the newspapers counted on the engagement of their readers. The disinterest Löwenhardt describes had been replaced by empathy and attraction, partly because the media continued to develop. In 1991, for example, the events could easily be followed on television. And also, glasnost had ensured that much more information was available to present to the Dutch public. This availability had thus sparked interest in the events in the Soviet Union in 1991.

On top of that, most Dutch journalists were very knowledgeable and knew a lot about Russian- and Soviet history and the political circumstances in the USSR. Not all journalists expressed long-term visions, but the ones that did, did so in a well-informed way.

The second cornerstone was written by the American historian David Foglesong. In his book, titled: *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire"*, Foglesong described the American coverage of the August Coup. He concluded that in 1991, two central misconceptions erupted in the public debate in the United States. Firstly, there was a belief among American journalists and politicians that a popular revolution had broken out, in favour of democracy and a market economy. Secondly, Foglesong stated that in 1991, commentators tended to exaggerate the Russian enthusiasm for America and American values.

These two misconceptions can be discerned in the Dutch press as well, albeit in a watered down form. The fact that many of the journalists and columnists had been living in the West, certainly influenced their opinions and expectations, but the Dutch press was a lot more nuanced and left room for different sources and stories.

Altogether, the works written by Löwenhardt and Foglesong undoubtedly show that the Dutch newspapers did everything they could, during the August Coup in 1991, to inform their readers as well as possible. Many different commentators were asked for their opinions, the correspondents in Moscow got a lot of room for their reports and the curiosity was omnipresent. If there is anything the contemporary reader can learn from this research, it is that knowledge is the press' most important weapon in times of crisis.



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