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Originally a supporter of Mikhail Gorbachev, Yeltsin emerged under the perestroika reforms as one of Gorbachev's most powerful political opponents. On 29 May 1990 he was elected the chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet. On 12 June 1991 he was elected by popular vote to the newly created post of President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), at that time one of the 15 constituent republics of the Soviet Union. He won 57% of the vote in a six-candidate contest and became the third democratically elected leader of Russia in history. Upon the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev and the final dissolution of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991, Yeltsin remained in office as the President of the Russian Federation, the USSR's successor state. Yeltsin was reelected in the 1996 election; in the second round of the election Yeltsin defeated Gennady Zyuganov from the revived Communist Party by a margin of 13%. However, Yeltsin never recovered his early popularity after a series of economic and political crises in Russia in the 1990s.

He vowed to transform Russia's socialist command economy into a free market economy and implemented economic shock therapy, price liberalization and privatization programs. Due to the method of privatization, a good deal of the national wealth fell into the hands of a small group of oligarchs.[2] Much of the Yeltsin era was marked by widespread corruption, inflation, economic collapse and enormous political and social problems that affected Russia and the other former states of the USSR. Within the first few years of his presidency, many of Yeltsin's political supporters turned against him and Vice President Alexander Rutskoy denounced the reforms as "economic genocide".[3]

Ongoing confrontations with the Supreme Soviet climaxed in the October 1993 Russian constitutional crisis in which Yeltsin illegally ordered the dissolution of the parliament, which then attempted to remove Yeltsin from office. The military eventually sided with Yeltsin and besieged and shelled the Russian White House, resulting in the deaths of 187 people. Yeltsin then scrapped the existing constitution, temporarily banned political opposition and deepened his economic experimentation. He then introduced a new constitution with stronger presidential power and it was approved by referendum on 12 December 1993 with 58.5% of voters in favour.

On 31 December 1999, Yeltsin made a surprise announcement of his resignation, leaving the presidency in the hands of his chosen successor, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Yeltsin left office widely unpopular with the Russian population.[4] By some estimates, his approval ratings when leaving office were as low as 2%. [5]

Boris Yeltsin was born in the village of Butka, in Talitsky District of Sverdlovsk Oblast, Russian

SFSR on 1 February 1931.[6] In 1932 after the state took away the entire harvest from the recently collectivised Butka peasants the Yeltsin family moved as far away as they could, to Kazan which was over 1,100 kilometres from Butka, where Boris' father, Nikolai Yeltsin, got work on a construction site. Growing up in the rural Sverdlovsk region, he studied at the Urals Polytechnic Institute, and began his career in the construction industry. [7] In 1934 Nikolai Yeltsin was convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and sentenced to hard labour in a gulag for three years.[8] Following his release in 1936 after serving two years, Nikolai took his family to live in Berezniki in Perm Krai, where his brother Ivan, a blacksmith, had been exiled the year before for failing to deliver his grain quota.[9] Nikolai remained unemployed for a period of time and then worked again in construction. His mother, Klavdiya Vasilyevna Yeltsina, worked as a seamstress.

Boris Yeltsin studied at Pushkin High School in Berezniki in Perm Krai. He was fond of sports (in particular skiing, gymnastics, volleyball, track and field, boxing and wrestling) despite losing the thumb and index finger of his left hand when he and some friends furtively entered a Red Army supply depot, stole several grenades, and tried to disassemble them.[10]

From 1955 to 1957 he worked as a foreman with the building trust Uralyazhtrubstroy. From 1957 to 1963 he worked in Sverdlovsk, and was promoted from construction site superintendent to chief of the Construction Directorate with the Yuzhgorstroy Trust. In 1963 he became chief engineer, and in 1965 head of the Sverdlovsk House-Building Combine, responsible for sewerage and technical plumbing. He joined the ranks of the CPSU nomenklatura in 1968 when he was appointed head of construction with the Sverdlovsk Regional Party Committee. In 1975 he became secretary of the regional committee in charge of the region's industrial development. In 1976 the Politburo of the CPSU promoted him to the post of the first secretary of the CPSU Committee of Sverdlovsk Oblast (effectively he became the head of one of the most important industrial regions in the USSR), he remained in this position until 1985.

In 1977, as a party official in Sverdlovsk, Yeltsin was ordered by Moscow to destroy the Ipatiev House where the last Russian tsar had been killed by Bolshevik troops. The Ipatiev House was demolished in one night, 27 July 1977.[14] Also during Yeltsin's time in Sverdlovsk, a CPSU palace was built which was named "White Tooth" by the residents.[15] During this time, Yeltsin developed connections with key people in the Soviet power structure. In January 1981 Yeltsin was awarded the Order of Lenin, the Soviet Union's highest medal, for 'the service to the Communist Party and the Soviet State and in connection with the 50th birthday'.[6] In March 1981 Yeltsin was elected as a full member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.[6]

On 11 March, 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the CPSU by the Politburo after the death of Konstantin Chernenko. Gorbachev's primary goal was to revive the Soviet economy; however, he soon realized that fixing the Soviet economy would be nearly impossible without reforming the political and social structure of the Communist nation.[16] To begin these reforms he immediately began gathering in Moscow a younger and more energetic governing team of Communist Party members. On 4 April 1985 Yeltsin received a call from Gorbachev's leading protege Yegor Ligachev summoning him to Moscow to take up position as Head of the Construction Department of the Party's Central Committee.[17] Less than three months later he was promoted to be Secretary for Construction of the Central Committee, a position within the powerful CPSU Central Committee Secretariat.[6]

On 23 December 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev appointed Yeltsin First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, effectively 'Mayor' of the Soviet capital, and as a result, on 18 February, 1986, Yeltsin was invited to become a Candidate (non-voting) Member of the Politburo. As a politburo member Yeltsin was also given a country house (dacha) which was previously occupied by Gorbachev who now moved to a much bigger and more luxurious purpose built dacha nearby. During this period, Yeltsin portrayed himself as a reformer and populist (for example, he took a trolleybus to work), firing and reshuffling his staff several times. He became popular among Moscow residents for firing corrupt Moscow party officials.

On 10 September 1987, after a lecture from hard-liner Yegor Ligachev at the Politburo for allowing

two small unsanctioned demonstrations on Moscow streets, Yeltsin wrote a letter of resignation to Gorbachev who was holidaying on the Black Sea.[18] When Gorbachev received the letter he was stunned – “nobody in Soviet history had voluntarily resigned from the ranks of the Politburo. Gorbachev phoned Yeltsin and asked him to reconsider. On 27 October 1987 at the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Yeltsin, frustrated that Gorbachev had not addressed any of the issues outlined in his resignation letter asked to speak. He expressed his discontent with both the slow pace of reform in society, the servility shown to the General Secretary, and opposition to him from Ligachev making his position untenable, before requesting to resign from the Politburo, adding that the City Committee would decide whether he should resign from the post of First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party.[19] This was sensational. Besides the fact that nobody had ever quit the Politburo, no one in the party had ever had the audacity to address a leader of the party in such a manner in front of the Central Committee since Leon Trotsky in the 1920s.[19] In his reply, Gorbachev accused Yeltsin of "political immaturity" and "absolute irresponsibility". Nobody in the Central Committee backed Yeltsin.

Within days, news of Yeltsin's actions leaked and rumours of his 'secret speech' at the Central Committee spread throughout Moscow. Soon fabricated samizdat versions began to circulate – “this was the beginning of Yeltsin's rise as a rebel and growth in popularity as an anti-establishment figure.[20] Gorbachev called a meeting of the Moscow City Party Committee for the 11 November 1987 to launch another crushing attack on Yeltsin and confirm his dismissal. On 9 November, 1987, Yeltsin apparently tried to kill himself and was rushed to hospital bleeding profusely from self-inflicted cuts to his chest. Gorbachev ordered the injured Yeltsin from his hospital bed to the Moscow party plenum two days later where he was ritually denounced by the party faithful in what was reminiscent of a Stalinist show trial before he was fired from the post of First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party. Yeltsin said he would never forgive Gorbachev for this 'immoral and inhuman' treatment.[21]

Yeltsin was demoted to the position of First Deputy Commissioner for the State Committee for Construction. At the next meeting of the Central Committee on 24 February, 1988, Yeltsin was removed from his position as a Candidate member the Politburo. He was perturbed and humiliated but began plotting his revenge.[22] His opportunity came with Gorbachev's establishment of the Congress of People's Deputies.[23] He recovered, and started intensively criticizing Gorbachev, highlighting the slow pace of reform in the Soviet Union as his major argument.

Yeltsin's criticism of the Politburo and Gorbachev led to a smear campaign against him, in which examples of Yeltsin's awkward behavior were used against him. An article published in Pravda described him as being drunk at a lecture during his visit to the United States, an allegation which appeared to be confirmed by a TV account of his speech. However, popular dissatisfaction with the regime was very strong, and these attempts to smear Yeltsin only added to his popularity. In another incident, Yeltsin fell from a bridge. Commenting on this event, Yeltsin hinted that he was helped to fall from the bridge by the enemies of perestroika, but his opponents suggested that he was simply drunk.

On 26 March 1989, Yeltsin was elected to the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union as the delegate from Moscow district with a hugely decisive 92% of the vote[6] and on 29 May 1989, was elected by the Congress of People's Deputies to a seat on the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union.[6] On 19 July, 1989, Yeltsin announced the formation of the radical pro-reform faction in the Congress of People's Deputies: the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies, and on 29 July 1989 was elected one of the five co-Chairman of the Inter-Regional Group.[6]

On 4 March 1990, Yeltsin was elected to the Congress of People's Deputies of Russia representing Sverdlovsk with 72% of the vote.[24] On 29 May 1990, he was elected chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), in spite of the fact that Gorbachev personally pleaded with the Russian deputies not to select Yeltsin.[25] He was supported by both democratic and conservative members of the Supreme Soviet, which sought power in the developing political situation in the country. A part of this power struggle was the opposition between power structures of the Soviet Union and the RSFSR. In an attempt to gain

more power, on 12 June 1990, the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR adopted a declaration of sovereignty. On 12 July 1990, Yeltsin resigned from the CPSU in a dramatic speech before party members at the 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, some of whom responded by shouting "Shame!"[26]

On 12 June 1991, Yeltsin won 57% of the popular vote in the democratic presidential elections for the Russian republic, defeating Gorbachev's preferred candidate, Nikolai Ryzhkov who got just 16% of the vote. In his election campaign, Yeltsin criticized the "dictatorship of the center", but did not suggest the introduction of a market economy. Instead, he said that he would put his head on the railtrack in the event of increased prices. Yeltsin took office on 10 July, and reappointed Ivan Silayev as Chairman of the Council of Ministers – Government of the Russian SFSR.

On 18 August 1991, a coup against Gorbachev was launched by the government members opposed to perestroika. Gorbachev was held in Crimea while Yeltsin raced to the White House of Russia (residence of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR) in Moscow to defy the coup, making a memorable speech from atop the turret of a tank onto which he had climbed. The White House was surrounded by the military but the troops defected in the face of mass popular demonstrations. By 21 August most of the coup leaders had fled Moscow and Gorbachev was "rescued" from Crimea and then returned to Moscow. Yeltsin was subsequently hailed by his supporters around the world for rallying mass opposition to the coup.

Although restored to his position, Gorbachev had been destroyed politically. Neither union nor Russian power structures heeded his commands as support had swung over to Yeltsin. Taking advantage of the situation, Yeltsin began taking what remained of the Soviet government, ministry by ministry – including the Kremlin.

In early December 1991, Ukraine voted for independence from the Soviet Union. A week later, on 8 December, Yeltsin met Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk and the leader of Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha. In the Belavezha Accords, the three presidents announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of a voluntary Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place. According to Gorbachev, Yeltsin kept the plans of the Belovezhskaya meeting in strict secrecy and the main goal of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was to get rid of Gorbachev, who by that time had started to recover his position after the events of August. Gorbachev has also accused Yeltsin of violating the people's will expressed in the referendum in which the majority voted to keep the Soviet Union united.

On 12 December, the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR ratified the Belavezha Accords and denounced the 1922 Union Treaty. It also ordered the Russian deputies in the Council of the Union to cease their work, leaving that body without a quorum. In effect, the largest republic of the Soviet Union had seceded.

In a 17 December meeting with Yeltsin, Gorbachev accepted the fait accompli and agreed to dissolve the Soviet Union. On 24 December, the Russian Federation, by mutual agreement of the other CIS states (which by this time included all of the remaining republics except Georgia) took the Soviet Union's seat in the United Nations. The next day, Gorbachev resigned and the Soviet Union ceased to exist – thereby ending the world's oldest, largest and most powerful Communist state. Economic relations between the former Soviet republics were severely compromised. Millions of ethnic Russians found themselves in the newly formed foreign countries.

Just days after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin resolved to embark on a program of radical economic reform. Unlike Gorbachev's reforms which sought to expand democracy in the socialist system, the new regime embarked to completely dismantle socialism and fully restore capitalism – converting the world's largest command economy into a free-market one. During early discussions of this transition, Yeltsin's advisers debated issues of speed and sequencing, with an apparent division between those favoring a rapid approach and those favoring a gradual or slower approach.

In late 1991, Yeltsin turned to the advice of Western economists, and Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury Department, who had developed a standard policy recipe for transition economies in the late 1980s. This policy recipe came to be known as the "Washington Consensus" or "shock therapy", a combination of measures intended to liberalize prices and stabilize the state's budget. Such measures had been attempted in Poland, and advocates of "shock therapy" thought that the same could be done in Russia. Some Russian policymakers were skeptical that this was the way to go, but the approach was favored by Yeltsin's deputy, Yegor Gaidar, a 35-year-old Russian economist inclined toward radical reform.

On 2 January 1992, Yeltsin, acting as his own prime minister, ordered the liberalization of foreign trade, prices, and currency. At the same time, Yeltsin followed a policy of 'macroeconomic stabilization,' a harsh austerity regime designed to control inflation. Under Yeltsin's stabilization program, interest rates were raised to extremely high levels to tighten money and restrict credit. To bring state spending and revenues into balance, Yeltsin raised new taxes heavily, cut back sharply on government subsidies to industry and construction, and made steep cuts to state welfare spending.

In early 1992, prices skyrocketed throughout Russia, and a deep credit crunch shut down many industries and brought about a protracted depression. The reforms devastated the living standards of much of the population, especially the groups dependent on Soviet-era state subsidies and welfare entitlement programs.[27] Through the 1990s, Russia's GDP fell by 50 percent, vast sectors of the economy were wiped out, inequality and unemployment grew dramatically, while incomes fell. Hyperinflation, caused by the Central Bank of Russia's loose monetary policy, wiped out a lot of personal savings, and tens of millions of Russians were plunged into poverty.[28][29]

Some economists argue that in the 1990s Russia suffered an economic downturn more severe than the United States or Germany had undergone six decades earlier in the Great Depression.[27] Russian commentators and even some Western economists, such as Marshall Goldman, widely blamed Yeltsin's Western-backed economic program for the country's disastrous economic performance in the 1990s. Many politicians began to quickly distance themselves from the program. In February 1992, Russia's vice president, Alexander Rutskoy denounced the Yeltsin program as "economic genocide." [30] By 1993 conflict over the reform direction escalated between Yeltsin on the one side, and the opposition to radical economic reform in Russia's parliament on the other.

Also throughout 1992, Yeltsin wrestled with the Supreme Soviet of Russia and the Congress of People's Deputies for control over government, government policy, government banking and property. In the course of 1992, the speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, came out in opposition to the reforms, despite claiming to support Yeltsin's overall goals. In December 1992, the 7th Congress of People's Deputies succeeded in turning down the Yeltsin-backed candidacy of Yegor Gaidar for the position of Russian prime minister. An agreement was brokered by Valery Zorkin, chairman of the Constitutional Court, which included the following provisions: a national referendum on the new constitution; parliament and Yeltsin would choose a new head of government, to be confirmed by the Supreme Soviet; and the parliament was to cease making constitutional amendments that change the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches. Eventually, on 14 December, Viktor Chernomyrdin, widely seen as a compromise figure, was confirmed in the office.

The conflict escalated soon, however, with the parliament changing its prior decision to hold a referendum. Yeltsin, in his turn, announced in a televised address to the nation on 20 March 1993, that he was going to assume certain "special powers" in order to implement his program of reforms. In response, the hastily called 9th Congress of People's Deputies attempted to remove Yeltsin from presidency through impeachment on 26 March 1993. Yeltsin's opponents gathered more than 600 votes for impeachment, but fell 72 votes short of the required two-thirds majority.[31]

During the summer of 1993, a situation of dual power developed in Russia. Since July, two separate administrations of the Chelyabinsk Oblast functioned side by side, after Yeltsin refused to accept the newly elected pro-parliament head of the region. The Supreme Soviet pursued its own foreign

policies, passing a declaration on the status of Sevastopol.

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