Introduction to Volume Two

Unless readers have a professional interest in the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, it is unlikely they have a clear understanding of how quickly the USSR collapsed and ceased to exist as a nation, devolving into its constituent parts.

Mikhail Gorbachev was named General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on March 11, 1985, the third to hold that post in quick succession after the deaths of Yuri Andropov (November 12, 1982 to February 9, 1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (February 13, 1984 to March 10, 1985). The Soviet Union was already in severe decline both economically and as an empire controlling its own territory and the subjugated countries within the Warsaw Pact.

The Chernobyl nuclear accident occurred just thirteen months later (April 26, 1986), followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. Many observers—including the authors of this series—believe Chernobyl hastened the final demise of the USSR, and opening Eastern Europe to the Western world in 1989 signaled the practical end of Soviet domination. As the years have passed, it is increasingly easy to forget that 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall did not mean the end of the Soviet Union, although it did presage that momentous event. Even so, the destruction of the wall and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Germany and Eastern Europe were occasions that mesmerized those of us who came of age in the post-World War II Cold War.

We remember when the wall was built and, as we grew up, that wall symbolized what seemed to be the immutable barrier between Eastern and Western Europe, between the USSR and the United States; rapprochement appeared an impossible goal. So its demise was, we hoped, symbolic of a new relationship.

Boris Yeltsin was named Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR in 1989; in June 1990, the First Congress of People’s Deputies of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) passed a “Declaration of Sovereignty” (125) for the Republic of Russia, which stated that
its laws took precedence over the laws of the Soviet Union. The date this legislation was passed—June 12—was later declared Russia Day, considered to be the Independence Day of the Russian Federation.

A year later, in August 1991, reactionary Communist leaders in the Soviet Union attempted a coup, which was not successful in large part thanks to Yeltsin’s rallying the populace in opposition to those who had plotted the takeover of power. Most of the world probably remembers having seen pictures of Yeltsin standing on top of a tank in Central Moscow waving a Russian (not Soviet) flag—an act that drew worldwide acclaim and cemented his popularity throughout Russia (if only temporarily).

Almost immediately, the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania) declared independence, which was formally recognized in September 1991. Within four months of the failed putsch, on December 8, 1991, the Belavezha Accords were signed by Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, officially withdrawing from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The remaining Republics (except Georgia) declared their independence and charted a new course in the CIS in the Alma-Ata Protocol, signed December 21.

Four days later, on December 25, 1991—less than seven years after he had first assumed control of the USSR—Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union, leaving Yeltsin in control of the Kremlin and the country—and the nuclear launch codes. The Soviet flag over the Kremlin was lowered and the tricolor flag of Russia raised in its stead. Technically, the USSR survived on paper until the next day, when the Soviet of the Republics, the upper chamber, passed Declaration 142-N, recognizing the independence of the various Soviet Socialist Republics and formally dissolving the Union—hence voting itself and the USSR out of existence.

In the Preface to Volume One, reprinted here as well, we describe how we came to be interested and involved in this line of research. As we note there, one of the drivers of that interest was the opportunity to test Western theories of argumentation and rhetoric against formerly information-restricted societies. The vehicle for that research, and for our collaboration with Professor Alexander Yuriev, was the International Center for the Advancement of Political Communication and Argumentation (ICAPCA). We broadened our mission to incorporate research into
the development of a language and lexicon of politics where none had previously existed; we were also interested in fostering the study of rhetoric and argumentation in Russia as a means of promoting democracy.

Watching the news reports about the transition taking place in Russia, we quickly became concerned about the ways in which the development of a market economy was being conflated with the development of democracy. Thus, a corollary theme that emerged in our writing was illuminating the connection between communication and the public sphere—communication as a requirement for democracy to flourish. However, we did not abandon our original goal of examining rhetorical and argument theory in situ. Two essays included in this volume highlight the connections described here. In “Democratization and Cultures of Communication,” we, along with then graduate student Scott Elliott, elaborate on the connection between a “culture of communication” and the development of democratic traditions; and, in another essay, “Argumentation, Globalization, and the New Nationalism,” we describe the need to locate rhetorical and argument conventions in the culture, so that they can illuminate the connections among these concerns. These two foci quickly became a feature of the work of ICAPCA.

This volume focuses on the 1990s in Russia, as Communism breathed its last breath and Russia attempted to reinvent itself as a democratic nation. Many of these studies were written contemporaneously; others are more retrospective. Because they were written at different times—and for different audiences—there is of necessity some overlap and redundancy.

We now know what experts and intelligence officials already knew: that the Soviet economy was buckling under its own weight. When Gorbachev came to power in 1986, we watched in wonder as his new doctrine of perestroika and glasnost (and the mostly ignored uskorenie) unleashed pent-up forces that ultimately undid the Soviet experiment.

Boris Yeltsin thus became President of the Russian Federation, suddenly an independent country—the largest and most consequential of the Soviet Republics. In this volume, we take a rhetorical look at the path Yeltsin charted as he tried to lead the nation to recast itself as democratic, with a market economy. Accordingly, this analysis provides a different take on the end of the twentieth century in Russia than Volume One did on 1980s USSR. Building on some of our work about the Chernobyl nuclear accident, we use rhetorical and argumentation theory to examine the democratization process and Yeltsin’s tenure as president.
This approach presents some problems that we had not encountered earlier. Namely, how to communicate enough of the situational factors extant in 1990s Russia for our readers to appreciate the rhetorical constraints, while balancing that against the actual analysis. Rhetorical analysis generally takes a deep dive into the linguistic choices that rhetors make, teasing out the ways in which the speaker constructs arguments, uses evidence, and creates the audience. Over the years, various scholars have developed theories of rhetoric that provide a framework for this analysis; some of these theories have their origins in classical Greek and Roman treatises, while others are the product of a modern understanding of communication processes.

At the same time, the present approach enables us to envision how an example of rhetoric “works,” in the sense of inspiring, persuading, informing an audience(s). But the process is made more difficult when working across languages. Most contemporary rhetorical scholarship relies on Western models and is designed to elucidate Western texts that have originated in English. Addressing the texts that stem from any language other than English imposes some constraints, which limit the depth of analysis available to the critic. No nonnative speaker can ever completely understand the nuances of a language other than her or his native tongue. As a result, the conclusions drawn must necessarily be more broad with respect to appeals made and their (potential) effect. Working in translation, even with “official” translations, presents an additional layer of difficulty, as the words of the translation are those chosen by the translator and are sometimes selected to achieve particular effects, which may be different than those derived from the original text. That is, they may be constructed to appeal to an audience other than the primary, or immediate, audience.

Nevertheless, we believe there is much to be gained from analysis of the Russian texts we have examined here. They are official addresses rendered in official translation and published for foreign consumption; to that end, we have no doubt that the words of the translation are carefully chosen. If nothing else, they tell us the story that Russia wished to present to the outside world. Further, these analyses can reveal differences between Russian and Western approaches to argumentation, evidence, and other persuasive appeals; these differences can become pathways to the discovery of cultural links to Russian rhetorical and argumentative style by a native speaker of Russian.
In our analyses we have relied on a number of theorists, most prominently the philosopher Kenneth Burke. In addition, we found valuable insights through the work of Edwin Black, Walter Fisher, Lloyd Bitzer, and others. Burke’s theories of identification were especially useful as we examined the efforts to construct a new national identity for Russia; similarly, Hammerback’s notion of reconstituting the audience provided insights into the ways Yeltsin and others asked Russians to rethink their identity as a people.

This volume consists of four thematic sections. In the first, we set the stage, through a series of reviews of the situation in Russia—ecological depredation, economic challenges, the press, and national identity. The second section looks at politics and political argumentation during the Yeltsin years, while the third section examines Yeltsin as leader and campaigner. In the final section, the focus is on what has been achieved and what has not—the future and how it is informed by Russia’s past.

Kenneth Burke (400) and, later, Lloyd Bitzer (73), teach us that all rhetoric is situational. That is, according to Bitzer, rhetoric is “called forth” in response to exigencies found in situations. Some of those situations are formal requirements, such as a State of the Union Address (United States) or a Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (Russia), while others are reactions to crises or other situations that involve the rhetor or speaker. In turn, each of those situations occurs within a context that constrains and animates the rhetor. Very few speeches outlive the situation that created them, a realization that underscores the situational, and, therefore, transitory nature of oratory or rhetoric. Most are forgotten as people and nations move on; others are enshrined in an archive because they mark some formal occasion. A small number are preserved as historical markers that moved the audience—both present and future, immediate and remote—in some way.

Thus, in the first section of this volume, we present for the reader several discussions of the context—the reality—that confronted Yeltsin and the reformers as they embarked on the task of remaking Russia as a democratic nation with a market economy and the rule of law. That reality served as a constraint not only on the plans for reform, but also on the rhetoric that accompanied the reform efforts. Thus, the rhetorical lens through which we consider the material analyzed in this book is informed with that context in mind.
Woven throughout sections two through four are a number of themes that recur as we examine the 1990s and the attempts to redefine the future of Russia. Perhaps foremost of these is the effort to reconstitute Russian national identity from an authoritarian state with a controlled economy to one with greater individual freedom and the elements that make such freedom possible, along with a market-based economy. The search for identity, both for the individual and for the nation, is so central to the reordering of Russian society that it becomes more than a leitmotif; it is, rather, an overarching quest that dominates the discourse and makes an appearance in one form or another in virtually all the essays in this volume. Other themes that emerge thus become vehicles through which one can examine that search. For example, three chapters (8, 9, and 10) analyze the 1993 and 1995 Duma elections and the inability of political parties to accommodate themselves to the arithmetic of the electoral procedures in effect at that time. This failure meant that the parties also failed to coalesce around candidates, thus helping to keep the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in a position of influence, thereby confounding the search for a new national identity. In contrast, the presidential election campaign of 1996, particularly in the runoff, clearly asked voters to choose an identity for the future of Russia.

Another theme running through the volume is an emphasis on Yeltsin himself, including a view of him as a complex individual, both personally and politically—both a democrat and an autocrat, a leader who dissolved the Duma (Parliament) and shelled its “White House” in 1993, calling for new parliamentary elections in order to resolve intransigence over reforms, yet who campaigned as a democrat for reelection three years later. In Section Three, for instance, three differing views of Yeltsin are presented: as an autocrat, as a democrat, and as a “man of the people.” In addition, we present a broad view of the entire Yeltsin era, extending into the early days of the Putin administration.

We emphasize the Russian presidential election campaign of 1996, as it was not only pivotal for the future of Russia, but turned out to be the only truly competitive national election to date in Russia. In that campaign, Yeltsin's diminishing popularity became clear, as the CPRF's Gennady Zyuganov garnered more votes in the first round and the President barely managed to force a runoff. Changing tactics for the second round, Yeltsin focused on the youth vote and what would be lost were Zyuganov to win; he traversed the country reminding voters of life
under Communism and asking them to choose a different future and a new identity.

Some have argued that election fraud, intimidation, media bias, lavish spending, and misuse of public resources are the reasons for Yeltsin’s victory. Likhachova discounts this claim in the excerpt from her master’s thesis (Section Three). It has always been true that the better funded candidate has an advantage, and there was no reason for Russia’s elections to be any different. There is evidence of intimidation and ballot stuffing, but there is no question that Yeltsin campaigned tirelessly throughout Russia, asking his countrymen and women to make a stark choice for their future. Additionally, McFaul supports Likachova’s conclusion, noting that the sheer magnitude of Yeltsin’s margin of victory could not have been produced by fraudulent means alone. (209: 73) The size of that margin indicates that Yeltsin’s message resonated with voters young and old.

It is important, too, to recall the real import of the 1996 presidential election. As noted above, the way things have turned out, this was the only competitive presidential election Russia has held. Its significance lies in that fact, and in the fact that four years later, for good or ill, it produced a peaceful transfer of power to Yeltsin’s successor, a feat replicated eight years later, when Vladimir Putin followed the Constitution and allowed his successor to assume power.

In Section Four, we turn our attention to an overall assessment of Russia’s progress towards a democratic form of government and what remained to be done. Democracy is always a work in progress, no matter the setting, and Russia is no different.

The final entry in this volume is an essay by the late Alexei Salmin, former President of the Russian Public Policy Center in Moscow and a close adviser to Gorbachev. Salmin, a friend and collaborator, did much to facilitate the work of the International Center and always made himself available during our trips to Moscow. Sadly, he died too young, in 2005. We owe him a great debt of gratitude for his friendship and his contributions to our work. In the essay included here, Salmin examines the impact Russia’s nine-hundred-year history, its progress toward democratization, and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York had on foreign policy going forward.

Whatever one’s assessment of Russia’s current situation vis-à-vis democratization, there can be little doubt that things changed dramatically in the decade of the 1990s after the dissolution of the USSR. The economy
tanked and the ruble was devalued; Russia lost its international standing; corruption abounded; a wealthy class was created; the war with Chechnya raged and then faded; national identity was in flux. At the same time, a president was elected and reelected via popular vote. A Constitution was ratified and amended. A Duma was elected, dissolved, and elected again. The press enjoyed great freedom to report. National symbols, such as the flag, the state seal, and the national anthem were updated.

Nevertheless, in recent years, what little progress had been made in the '90s appears to be diminishing in favor of Putin’s “strong state,” a topic we examine in the next volumes in this series.

NOTES

1. See also (6).
2. And where did all those little Russian flags—the small ones waved by people in the crowds that gathered in Red Square and elsewhere—where did those flags come from?
3. The Baltics had already replaced the Soviet flag with their own national flags.
4. The lower house (the Soviet of the Union) failed to achieve a quorum and simply faded away. (341)
5. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was initially outlawed on Russian territory in November 1991, but was allowed to return to politics in the form of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in 1993. (340)