



INTRODUCTION

A Matter of Life and Death

IT WAS DECEMBER 1991. I was in a hunting lodge deep in a vast forest, and I had to make a phone call that would change not just my life but the lives of millions. In a detail that might seem astonishing today—not least to younger readers—I had nothing more technologically sophisticated than an ordinary landline on which to make contact with a center of power that most of my fellow countrymen and women had viewed for decades as the enemy. Sitting on the end of the phone looking at the pine tree wilderness outside the window, I realized I was being put through, first to the White House in Washington, DC, and then to the president of the United States himself, George H. W. Bush.

I had two important pieces of news for Bush. The first was that his former Cold War opponent, the Soviet Union, was to be divided into twelve newly independent states. The second, and equally crucial piece of information was that only Russia would inherit and control the Soviet nuclear missile capability, which even today could destroy America.

Like the baby boomers in the United States, my generation in Russia felt as if it had lived permanently on the brink of annihilation. For almost half a century, both sides in the Cold War had stockpiled nuclear arsenals in an

equation that had earned itself the moniker of mutual assured destruction. The acronym—MAD—felt entirely appropriate.

The story I tell in this book remains acutely relevant today, not least because MAD is still in place. Although about 4,860 miles separate Moscow and Washington, it has increasingly been observed in recent years that what happens in Russia remains vitally important for the United States (and consequently, for the rest of the world). Recent political analysis has overwhelmingly focused on Russia's online influence. Yet it should not be forgotten that it remains a political big beast by sheer virtue of its geography, since it borders America and Japan by sea, and China, Central Asia, and Europe on land. The country also possesses tremendous wealth in natural resources and human talent that shore it up as a global player even when its economy underperforms. Beyond this, Russia together with the United States, European Union, and Canada, is a key supplier and operator of the International Space Station.

When I made that phone call at the end of 1991, the death of the Cold War and the birth of a new democratic Russia seemed to promise a bright new future for both sides. That was my dream, at least. As Russia's first foreign minister (1992–96) I was in a prime position to pursue it vigorously.

Was I naive? Some critics have since made that allegation, but the truth is inevitably more complicated. I was not naive to be optimistic and, in this book, I want to explain why. I have always been, to my core, a son of my homeland. We have a famous fable about a Firebird that can bring a whole new realm of happiness once caught, despite presenting huge challenges to its captor. In my political career, I feel as if I have chased my own Firebird, believing that sooner or later the Russian people will discover the road to democracy and cooperative foreign policy.

Yet even the greatest optimist has to concede that right now it is the challenges that are most painfully evident. Today it is hard to believe just how promising the initial contacts between the United States and the new Russia were. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Boris Yeltsin signed a declaration only a month after the birth of the new state that declared, "Russia and the United States do not regard each other as potential adversaries. From now on, the relationship will be characterized by friendship and partnership." The document explicitly indicated the basis of this change: "a common commitment to democracy and economic freedom."

Progress remained rapid—at the next meeting between the presidents on June 16–17, 1992, they decided to decrease strategic nuclear arsenals by almost

two-thirds. These cuts greatly reduced Russia's superiority in heavy ground-based missiles (arguably representing a destabilizing first-strike capability) and slashed the US advantage in sea-based missiles and strategic bombers. That groundbreaking arrangement was enshrined in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), which the two presidents signed in January 1993. START I had been signed two years earlier by President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev.

For the United States the era began with a decade of prosperity made possible, in large part, by the "peace dividend" that came with the Cold War's end. Russia, however, had a different fate in store. In transitioning from the Soviet system to capitalism, the Russian people were forced to endure a decade of economic turmoil worse than the US Great Depression. These years also witnessed the Kremlin's failure to cement a sustainable democratic system.

Today, the United States and Russia are, I strongly believe, engaged in a renewed Cold War. Russian aggression toward America and NATO allies in cyberspace, its support of the old Soviet client regime Syria, and its military interventions in Ukraine and Georgia are loud and clear. The repeated pronouncements of US presidents promising better relations with Russia have given little hope for real improvement. President Trump's three predecessors all came into office seeking better relations with a Russia that remained defiant. They all left office with relations worse off.

How did we get to this state? Americans and Russians are right to wonder: What happened to the early days of promise, and is there hope for better relations in the months and years to come. This book is my attempt to answer these questions.

From my position, I witnessed the early rumblings in the Russian bureaucracy of growing hostility toward Russia's new democratic order (or even disorder, as it often seemed at the time). The individuals and concepts (including acrimony toward NATO and a belief in Russia's predicament of authoritarianism in contrast to the democratic West) behind that hostility are essentially at the heart of the US–Russian conflict today. I was convinced at the time that democratic reforms and pro-Western foreign policy were linked, and that if one were to fail, both would fail. Time would prove my assumption to be correct.

Even with all that has passed, I still believe in the words I spoke when I addressed a crowd of over a million of my countrymen who turned out to

protest the hard-liner coup attempt in August 1991: “I was and am convinced that a democratic Russia should be as natural an ally of democratic America as the totalitarian Soviet Union was its enemy.”

My confidence in this ideal is rooted in my own background. I was raised from childhood to have faith in the Soviet system. As the situation stood I was on track for a very successful diplomatic career, but I decided to risk this to join the movement dedicated to a democratic future for Russia.

An Ordinary Soviet Boy

I was born not in Russia, but in Brussels, Belgium, and have paid a certain price for that accident of birth throughout my life. My association with Brussels—NATO’s home and a perennial target of Soviet propaganda—has often raised suspicions against me, whether I’ve been presenting my driver’s license to a cop on a Russian back road or later on in my professional life. Even in America people often wonder how a Russian minister could have been born in Belgium. The truth is my father worked in Belgium for about two years (1949–51) as an engineer with the Soviet trade mission. Three months after my birth in 1951, he returned with his family to Moscow, where I grew up. I never saw Belgium again until I was forty years old.

The story of my family could be considered the Soviet answer to the American dream. My father was the tenth child in a family of Russian peasants. The four brothers and one sister who did not die in childhood grew up strong and good-looking. One by one, they left the village for Moscow, graduated, and found jobs in the city. The brothers had good careers: two became army colonels and one a senior engineer—my father worked in the Ministry of Foreign Trade. All joined the Communist Party. The sister married a man who rose to become a factory director, and they also joined the Party. My father’s side of the family always said that the Soviet system had been favorable to them.

My mother felt the same way. She was a high school teacher and also a member of the Communist Party. It was only in adulthood that I realized that December 24, the day she was born, was also Christmas Eve on the Roman Catholic calendar. Our family was not even aware that Orthodox Christmas was January 7. My father and mother did not care about religion or the church calendar. Orthodox Easter was celebrated, but only as an oppor-

tunity to feast on typical Russian holiday cuisine. My mother would always cook up a banquet and invite over as many friends and relatives as possible to share it.

As she served the guests, she would usually mention her gratitude to her late grandmother, who had taught her the recipes and passed on the tradition. In a cultural twist that I would only later appreciate as ironic, it emerged that the inspiration of this Orthodox tradition was herself the child of a provincial Jewish family. Not that this meant anything to me then. If my Christian references were almost nonexistent, so were my Jewish ones: I had never heard of a synagogue or the Torah.

It is telling that I became most strongly aware of my heritage from the reactions of others. In all my official papers, from birth certificate to passport (which in the Soviet Union indicated nationality as well as citizenship), I, like both my parents, was listed as ethnically Russian. Yet I had inherited a typically Jewish-looking nose. This prompted enemies in street fights to throw in “Jew” along with a whole barrage of other insults.

Thus, at the same time that I became aware of the element of Jewishness in my background, I woke up to the fact that it was not easy to be a Jew in the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. Old habits die hard, and although most Russians are not anti-Semitic, I was convinced that my nose would dictate a practical limit to the scope of my ambitions. Beyond this, my parents’ low status in the Soviet hierarchy made me an unlikely candidate for the elite foreign policy college, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Typically, students of my age were the offspring of high-level Communist Party, government, and KGB officials. Yet I was admitted.

After high school I briefly worked as a fixer in a giant factory. I also joined a youth performance troupe, which comprised ordinary workers like me and people with university education. We produced funny and clever stage performances that did amazingly well in competitions. The director encouraged me to apply to a good college and promised some financial support. I applied to a school that also housed foreign students. After I successfully passed the exams, the local KGB director informed me that the security clearance for access to military secrets I had gained working at the factory precluded contacts with foreigners for three years, which meant I could not accept the place. Amazingly, the officer who had attended (and, I believe, censored) performances by our troupe, felt bad for me and lent strong support to my application to the MGIMO, which at the time was under heavy KGB surveil-

lance. Looking back, I'm surprised that he didn't try to recruit me. Thanks to him I was able to retake and pass the exams and become an MGIMO student.

Five years later I graduated with distinction and, with the help of the influential father of one of my classmates, I got a job in the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

Because my family lacked the Party connections of many of my peers, I initially lagged behind them professionally. To obtain my postgraduate diploma in history, I wrote a thesis on the mechanics of United Nations deliberations, which I hoped would help me get a position. Eventually, I had the opportunity to make myself useful by taking notes at a seminar in Moscow presided over by the USSR's foreign minister Andrei Gromyko. My predecessors had struggled mightily to write down what Gromyko said—he was ailing and spoke only occasionally in abrupt and broken sentences that often made little sense. Browsing my notes, I decided that the only course of action was to pick out key words from his inchoate rambling, and fashion them into statements that reflected what *should* have been said by a Soviet official in accordance with Party policy. After that, my career began to take off.

I managed to join the Communist Party at the age of twenty—quite an achievement, since the earliest age at which one could join was nineteen. I was very proud of this. For me, membership had far less to do with an ideology that was becoming increasingly disconnected from the reality of daily life, than a distinction beneficial for a career in the Soviet system.

The Break with Communism

I had my first taste of “enemy power” in the fall of 1975. I was assigned as a junior staff member to the Soviet delegation to the United Nations in New York. It was a turning point. I fell in love with the city and grabbed any opportunity I could to wander the streets, staring at skyscrapers, shop windows, cars, and occasionally dropping in at inexpensive Chinese restaurants. It all seemed so luxurious in comparison with the dull scarcity of Soviet life.

I soon realized that this “luxury” belonged not just to a small number of wealthy capitalists, as we were taught to believe in the Soviet Union, but to a large number, indeed a majority, of Americans. While the homeless and poor I

had seen so regularly on Soviet TV existed, they constituted a small minority of the population. It was clear that even average Americans had a much better lifestyle than most Soviets could dream of in any foreseeable future. My discovery that capitalism had dramatic material advantages over socialism, in direct contradiction to what I had been taught in the Soviet Union, came as both a huge shock and a revelation. It was the first blow against my loyalty to the Communist Party.

The second was perhaps even more devastating. It was a warm spring Sunday morning and I bought a copy of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* in a bookshop in mid-Manhattan. I sat on a bench in the sunshine in Central Park reading until darkness fell. I then left the book on the bench, afraid to take it back to the Soviet mission where I had my room.

The book thrilled me. It was a wonderful, exhilarating piece of Russian literature and poetry. But why was it banned in the Soviet Union and its author denounced as a hostile dissident? After all, none of the main protagonists had any political views to speak of, nor did they engage in anti-communist activity. The question gnawed uncomfortably at me for days.

Gradually the answer came to me. Pasternak's crime was that the book celebrated personal freedom, the idea that a human being had the right to be independent from the state. *Doctor Zhivago* was a stark illustration of how completely that idea was at odds with the Soviet system.

That was the moment when I lost all my illusions about the political arrangements under which the people of the Soviet Union were living. I knew I couldn't defect, not out of loyalty to the system, but because of the devastating effect it would have on the lives of my relatives back home. Instead I became an "internal dissident," denying the Soviet system in my heart but never challenging it openly. I had always admired Andrei Sakharov and a few other open dissidents but felt I could not join them because of the hopelessness of fighting the system.

Gorbachev and Perestroika

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and introduced perestroika, his plan for "restructuring" the Soviet economy, I saw it as a window being opened in an airless room, nothing more. I was deeply doubtful that in the long term he seriously intended to challenge and change the system.

Soon it became clear that Gorbachev wanted to renovate the Soviet system in order to make it less confrontational with the West, which would allow it to become more competitive economically. The Soviet Union had originally been conceived as economically self-sufficient. But by the 1980s, it was in increasingly poor shape and heavily dependent on exports to the West of crude oil and other mineral resources. The country was unable to feed itself, and in 1984 grain imports from the West, which had been rising since the late 1970s, broke all records. At the same time, government debt was growing dramatically throughout the decade and defense spending was being maintained at unsustainably high levels. It was only when Gorbachev met with resistance from the Soviet bureaucracy that he resorted to the weapon it feared most: glasnost, public debate, and a relaxing of the Iron Curtain. I think he was genuinely surprised by the result. The weapon he used against his foes within the Soviet system proved to be lethal to the system itself. Communism simply could not exist without totalitarian control based on intimidation.

Since Gorbachev sought to become a respected world leader, a task force was set up in the Foreign Ministry to monitor and report to the Kremlin how the world, in particular the United States, assessed Gorbachev's domestic and foreign initiatives. My boss, Vladimir Petrovsky, led the team, and I was on it. Along with a couple of other young participants, we wrote reports intended to be as direct and honest as possible (or, more specifically, to the extent tolerated by our cautious and conservative bosses). Our recurring argument was that relaxing tensions with the West was not enough to gain real acceptance from the world's democracies. Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev had also tried this but were always undercut by the ugly practices of the KGB at home.

Gorbachev had to prove that his changes were genuine in order to win respect from the West, and (more importantly) a reprieve from the arms race that was bankrupting the country.

When preparations were under way for Gorbachev's major address at the UN General Assembly scheduled for September 26, 1989, our group suggested that he endorse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which promoted freedom of speech.

It was a dramatic moment. Clearly, free speech was a principle that ran directly counter to decades of Soviet censorship. Gorbachev had to choose between his liberal rhetoric and his desire to maintain the Party's traditional

control over society. He left the latter task to his hard-line appointees headed by the burly, bullying party hack Yegor Ligachev, who had been summoned to Moscow from Siberia for his “managerial skills.” Ligachev was the designated chief ideologist in the politburo, from which the party ruled. It came as little surprise that he reportedly called our proposal “subversion with formulations.” We were proud to adopt his condemnation as our slogan.

In the end, it was Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze who persuaded Gorbachev to include the passage endorsing the UDHR in his UN address. Shevardnadze was another Gorbachev appointee to the politburo. Moscow gossips dubbed him “the white fox” for his vast head of gray hair and his remarkable ability to navigate the party bureaucracy while promoting detente with the West.

The argument in our group’s next report was born for me ten years earlier, reading *Doctor Zhivago* in Central Park. It warned Gorbachev of the damage that would be done to his credibility and prestige if censorship continued in the Soviet Union. To our amazement, he agreed to publicly endorse the principle of freedom of speech and gave orders to curb censorship as part of his glasnost policy. We were elated: the words of the Soviet leader spoken overseas *had* to be turned into deeds inside our own country! But we were also painfully aware that Ligachev and his comrades retained powerful positions in the bureaucracy and would try to shape and limit the implementation of these freedoms.

Joining the Democratic Opposition

In the summer of 1989, I wrote an article suggesting that we cooperate with the United States instead of supporting rogue regimes like the Syrian dictatorship in the Middle East. First published in the Soviet press, the article was reported and then reproduced in the *Washington Post* and other major news outlets all over the world. This brought me my first recognition, in my own right, on the international stage and in the emerging pro-democracy movement inside the country.

Inevitably, the article came to the attention of my employer. It received harsh criticism from some senior Communist Party officials at home and from staunch foreign “comrades,” notably in Cuba and Milošević’s Yugoslavia. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze defied them all and appointed me to

head the prestigious UN Department. As the youngest department director, I could look forward to a bright future in the Foreign Ministry of the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 1990, Boris Yeltsin won the popular election to become head of the Russian Republic's parliament. He quickly started putting together a government team dedicated to implementing reforms that could end the Soviet system. It is no exaggeration to say that Yeltsin's election set my imagination afire.

I sought an appointment as minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Republic. As a ceremonial post, with virtually no power or responsibility, it had traditionally been assigned by order of the Soviet Foreign Ministry and was occupied by aging ambassadors easing into retirement. But with Yeltsin's election, the appointment would be made by the rebellious parliament of the Russian Federation. By winning the post, I would join Yeltsin's team of reformers.

Yeltsin would later tell me there had been other candidates to choose from, including my patron Vladimir Petrovsky and Anatoly Adamishin, both highly respected and able diplomats. He had originally envisioned me as a deputy to either of them. Yet the group of democratically minded deputies who interviewed me in a preliminary hearing insisted on putting my candidacy to a direct vote at the plenary session in October 1990. The message of my presentation and my answer to the many questions directed to me was that we had to press ahead with reforms. This accorded with the beliefs of the majority of deputies to the Russian parliament. In contrast to the Soviet Union's pursuit of limited rapprochement with the West, I spoke bluntly of a potential alliance with the most developed countries of the West, and of good-neighborly relations with China, Japan, and other nearby countries that could create favorable conditions for domestic social and economic development. The answers must have impressed the deputies, as I received a majority of the votes.

Yeltsin kept me at arm's length at first, unsure of what to make of me. I don't think I gained his confidence until I organized his successful visit to Prague in the summer of 1991. His previous foreign visits, including a rather scandalous one to the United States the previous year, had to that point not gone very well. During that US trip, Yeltsin had spent far too much time with the famous American bourbon Jack Daniels, for which he had been roundly criticized in the press. So, he was horrified when president Václav Havel

suggested they take a walk to a famous pub in Prague, where he and other then-dissidents used to sip famous (and delicious) Czech beers, while discussing opposition strategy. It almost cost me my job to persuade Yeltsin to accept the invitation. I assured him that Havel's invitation wasn't a reference to his drinking but a highly symbolic gesture of confidence in this new democratic breed of Moscow leaders and a vivid departure from previous Soviet officials, whom the Czechoslovaks found both boring and frightening. Following my advice simply to limit the amount of Czech nectar that he drank, the president found he had a good time in the pub. A few days later I was able to show him press clippings confirming that the pub episode had been positively received all over the world, even by the opposition press in Moscow.

Yet important as the Prague trip turned out to be, events later that summer would prove to be far more important to my country and the world.