Fighting the Nomenklatura's Privileges

The Rhetorical Campaign of 1986–88

When Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in March 1985, the Soviet Union was facing two simultaneous crises, one domestic and the other foreign. The domestic crisis was caused by inherent inefficiencies in the Soviet command economy. The foreign policy crisis was the result of the collapse of détente and the new challenge to Soviet expansionism posed by President Ronald Reagan’s “peace through strength” strategy. Together, the two crises suggested that changes to traditional Soviet policies were critical to the regime’s survival.

Reagan became the first U.S. president in the Cold War era to call for changes in the internal structure of the Soviet Union as a precondition for improved U.S.-Soviet relations. Aware of Reagan’s demands, Gorbachev also recognized that internal reform was necessary if the USSR were to compete internationally and preserve the integrity of its socialist community. Remarkably, the two leaders had arrived at similar visions of the Soviet Union’s future by very different paths. Both deemed internal change in the Soviet political and economic systems to be essential to transforming international affairs. Later in his tenure as general secretary, Gorbachev would advocate a radical vision of Soviet
foreign policy that would provoke a backlash from the country’s conservative forces. But it was his domestic reforms, not his suggestion to abandon the concept of international class struggle, that determined Gorbachev’s political fate and the destiny of the USSR. The demise of the Soviet Union was attributable in large measure to internal political competition resulting from Gorbachev’s conflicting attempts to liberalize the country while preserving its core Communist ideology.1

The series of domestic events that precipitated the end of the Soviet superpower are investigated in this chapter and the next. Rather than concentrating on Soviet or U.S. foreign policies, we show how internal political competition caused the disintegration of a Cold War rival, and we trace the origins of this competition to the very onset of Gorbachev’s rule. In late 1985, at the suggestion of his deputy, Yegor Ligachev, the new Soviet leader invited a provincial first party secretary from Sverdlovsk, Boris Yeltsin, to run the city of Moscow. In five years, Yeltsin would be running for the presidency of the Russian Federation while Gorbachev would be desperately fighting to retain his quickly diminishing power. Political rivalry between these two men, exacerbated by their deep-seated personal animosity, contributed mightily to ending the decades of superpower contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. And once again, Riker’s propositions about the principles of campaigning have a great deal to tell us about this global outcome.

Political competition under Gorbachev took place within a changing institutional structure. It involved a gradual expansion of the selectorate and the winning coalition responsible for keeping the leadership in office. Institutional changes also led to the redistribution of power from the Kremlin to the governing bodies of the Soviet republics, thus adding another dimension to the already-widening political space. Initially, however, the meaningful Soviet selectorate was limited to several hundred party functionaries in the Politburo and Central Committee, who directly participated in the process of selecting and sustaining the CPSU general secretary. Moreover, the relationship between the Central Committee and the Politburo was characterized by mutual bureaucratic accountability, which limited political competition in the Soviet Union to a power struggle within the highest party ranks.2 In such cases where the winning coalition remains small, the range of policy preferences will generally be limited to satisfying the wants of the small coterie of essential supporters. This in turn greatly reduces the space for
political maneuvering by aspiring leaders, even as it expands their discretion with regard to policies aimed at the general public. Such an institutional setup discourages politicians from taking radical positions on resource allocations that might alienate their core backers.

Pursuing his own reform agenda, Gorbachev decided to expand his baseline coalition and the national selectorate beyond the confines of the party leadership. He started with the introduction of multicandidate elections to the new legislative body, the Congress of People’s Deputies, and subsequently introduced the office of president, whose occupant would be elected by the congress. Gorbachev also organized direct competitive elections to the legislative bodies in each republic, thus creating an additional layer of representative institutions accountable only to the local population. The selectorate’s expansion was completed after some republics, including Russia, decided to have their republican heads elected by popular ballot.

Each stage of institutional development opened up wider opportunities for coalition-building and political contestation, since politicians could now appeal to a broader range of policy preferences among the electorate. This made pursuit of Gorbachev’s broad policy objectives (especially perestroika) more feasible at the same time that it facilitated—we believe unwittingly on Gorbachev’s part—the creation of viable political rivals for power that ultimately would lead to his downfall. After a period of personal political failure, Boris Yeltsin successfully used these opportunities to revive his career and divide Gorbachev’s winning coalition of reformers and conservatives, bringing many of its members over to his side. In the process, Yeltsin won three election campaigns, thereby expanding his support group from the largely reform-oriented residents of Moscow to the more ideologically diverse population of the Russian Federation as a whole.

Yeltsin’s initial attempts to climb the old Soviet institutional structure failed. During his period of failure, Yeltsin relied primarily on popular rhetoric rather than on the strategic choice of issues. As a result, he lost the support of key individuals whom he needed if he was to succeed. This period in Yeltsin’s political career is important to consider for reasons similar to those that led us to address Reagan’s 1968 campaign: it sets the scene and provides the context, as well as the emotional charge, for Yeltsin’s later political battles. Here Yeltsin introduced and honed the issue that eventually defined him as a politician and showed his potential as a heresthetician. Through vigorous political maneuvering, he fractured the seeming unity of the top Soviet lead-
ership. The ideological divides that resulted characterized further political competition and gave shape to his future coalition of support. His personal rivalry with Gorbachev, too, was destined to exhibit ramifications far beyond Soviet borders.

Radical-Conservative Split

In March 1985 the Communist leadership, recognizing the need for change, brought together reformist coalitions in the Politburo and the CPSU Central Committee (CC). They became Gorbachev’s support base during his first two years in office. Gorbachev was able to take advantage of uncertainty about his policy goals and his own extremely cautious approach to domestic reforms to maintain solidarity within the coalition. He successfully preserved this unity for a time despite varying levels of commitment to reform among members of the two groups. In fact, the first two years of Gorbachev’s term as general secretary were marked by greater policy continuity than anyone who had heard his speeches in the year before taking office would have expected. He resorted to traditional measures to improve administrative efficiency, adopting a policy of acceleration, calling for changes in the allocation of resources, and enforcing greater workplace discipline. Moreover, in his initial period of rule Gorbachev avoided questioning the ideological and organizational bases of the Soviet state, which looked to the Communist Party as its main guiding political force. Party conservatives took note of these differences between Gorbachev’s revolutionary rhetoric and his policy decisions, and gradually warmed to his leadership. The first sign of Gorbachev’s break with politics as usual came in December 1986, when he personally called the country’s most prominent dissident, Andrei Sakharov, to inform him of his impending release from exile in Gorki. But the coalition held even despite this unorthodox step. It was not until the following year that the first cracks began to surface.

During the January 1987 CC Plenum Gorbachev put forward plans to democratize the party and introduce multicandidate elections for party secretaries in the regions. If implemented, the elections would have been a momentous change in the decades-long practice of central party control over regional appointments and would have threatened the job security of current party bosses. The strong opposition to Gorbachev’s reform ideas was reflected in the failure of the participants in
the CC Plenum to endorse the principle of multicandidate elections, allowing instead only a few limited experiments. Their opposition reflected any politician’s natural concern for changes that jeopardize his or her hold on power.

By the end of Gorbachev’s third year in office his support coalition was undergoing a tripartite split, sectioning off the factions who would engage in the emerging political battle. Two defining events were responsible for this split. The first was Boris Yeltsin’s brief speech to the CC Plenum in October 1987. Yeltsin criticized the inability of the party apparatus to reform itself, and the resulting sluggishness of perestroika. In response, CC members, including Gorbachev, condemned Yeltsin’s views and later relieved him of both his position as first secretary of the Moscow Party Committee and his Politburo candidate membership. These actions catalyzed the formation of a radical reformist wing within Gorbachev’s coalition.7

Then, in March 1988, the ultraconservative newspaper Sovetskaja Rossiia published a letter by a committed Stalinist, Nina Andreyeva.8 Comrade Andreyeva condemned the rise of political pluralism and called for the Communist Party to return to its role as the workers’ champion. Her letter, entitled “I Cannot Forsake Principles,” was vigorously denounced by Gorbachev and repudiated in a Pravda editorial. However, it quickly became an ideological manifesto for the conservatives, including the highly regarded and powerful Yegor Ligachev. It also reflected the growing unease of the conservatives with Gorbachev’s attempts at liberalization.

The two episodes had much in common. Yeltsin’s speech and Andreyeva’s letter both criticized the pace of domestic reforms, albeit for opposite reasons. Gorbachev dismissed both incidents as irresponsible and ideologically erroneous attempts to reverse perestroika. And the whirlwind of public discussion that each episode produced delineated new divisions within Soviet society between the hard-line conservatives, gradualist reformers, and radical reformers. Ligachev commanded the loyalty of many party conservatives, Yeltsin monopolized the radical wing, and Gorbachev occupied the center.9 Although Gorbachev attempted to prevent this tripartite split by reshuffling party apparatus members, his alliance was already beginning to come apart by early 1987.10

The tactics of Yeltsin and Ligachev each demonstrated certain her- esthetical qualities. Gorbachev could not embrace either of their positions without alienating core parts of his own coalition. Conservatives
viewed Yeltsin, campaigning against the privileges of the party elite, as a threat to the bedrock of the Communist hierarchy. Acceptance of Yeltsin’s demands would have left Gorbachev without needed support from conservative majorities in the Politburo and the CC. On the other hand, repudiation of the Soviet totalitarian past was an indispensable element of Gorbachev’s reform agenda. It was a matter of faith for Gorbachev’s closest and most trusted allies, as well as for the wider Soviet intelligentsia. Granting the validity of Ligachev’s concerns would therefore have tarnished Gorbachev’s image as a committed reformer and estranged the very people Gorbachev was counting on to lead his reforms. The confrontation between Yeltsin and Ligachev had forcibly made Gorbachev into a centrist, a position that would soon become politically irrelevant.

Fighting Out the Differences

The most intense debates among conservatives and reformers swirled around Gorbachev’s call to reform the party’s governing bodies. The Soviet leader wanted to transform the party’s organizational structure and its role in affairs of state, but was constrained by the intransigence of the party apparatus. The nomenklatura naturally feared losing power and influence, and Ligachev assured them of their continued dominance over the Soviet political system. Yeltsin shared Gorbachev’s commitment to reform, but advocated more sweeping changes. Less than a year after Gorbachev assumed power, Yeltsin began to demand substantial reductions in the privileges given to the nomenklatura.

In February 1986, only two months after he was appointed first secretary of the Moscow Party Committee, Yeltsin condemned nomenklatura privileges at the Twenty-seventh CPSU Congress. Addressing the congress delegates, he pointed to the problem they were all familiar with but that none ventured to discuss in public: “Hearing of any manifestations of injustice—be they current or already chronic—makes one uncomfortable. But it is particularly painful when people talk bluntly about special benefits for leaders.”†† No doubt realizing the sensitivity of the issue he had raised, Yeltsin substantiated his concerns by citing Lenin’s dim view of those Communist leaders who “lose the qualities they need—justice, party-minded modesty and complete selflessness.” But his proposed change, abolishing all “unjustified” benefits for party officials, sounded almost heretical. Such a measure, in his view, was
“bound to lead to a growth in people’s labor and social agility” and would “give our ideological enemies no excuse for various speculations.” One important indication of how far Yeltsin had moved into forbidden territory can be found in the fact that the transcript of his speech, published in the Communist mouthpiece Pravda, contained no trace of his criticisms of privileges.

Ironically, the subject had first surfaced in an article in Pravda several days before the congress. The article “Cleansing—the Frank Discussion” was an overview of readers’ letters with critical comments on various perceived negative policies within the party. One of these letters, written by a rank-and-file veteran Communist, took on the issue of excessive nomenklatura privileges. The writer accused “party, Soviet, trade-union, and Komsomol leaders” of exploiting access to special restaurants, stores, and clinics. While the author did not object to party bosses receiving higher wages, he disagreed with their access to any special privileges: “If the boss goes to the regular store and would stand in line as all other people,” he wrote, “the lines might soon disappear.”

The letter did not escape the notice of Politburo conservatives. Addressing the party congress, Ligachev accused Pravda of “lapses” that pushed the critique too far. He emphasized that “criticism should be aimed at strengthening and developing socialist democracy and our social system.” In contrast, the abolition of privileges would only weaken party discipline, because, according to Ligachev and other conservatives, the provision of perks helped ensure obedience at all levels of the Soviet power structure.

This premise was in line with the traditional party policy. According to Georgi Arbatov, adviser to several CPSU general secretaries, “Privileges have been an effective instrument for the maintenance of totalitarian rule ever since the revolution. The very existence of privileges brought along the fear that they could be lost and that your living standard could decline radically. Their weak side is the extremely negative reaction of envy and hatred from those who do not enjoy them.” By choosing to fight privileges, Yeltsin was appealing to the suppressed resentment of ordinary Soviet citizens. But he was also provoking outrage from those who held the reins of Soviet power.

Gorbachev could not afford to emulate Yeltsin’s provocative rhetorical style. In his report to the party congress, delivered a day before Yeltsin’s speech, he interpreted the issue of social justice in strictly ideological terms, proclaiming that “social justice permeates every aspect of socialist relations in society.” The essence of social justice was
embodied in Lenin’s famous slogan: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his labor.” Therefore, the only expression of social injustice that Gorbachev acknowledged in Soviet society was “when the labor of a good worker and a negligent worker is remunerated equally,” a practice known in party jargon as “leveling.” Following the party line, Geidar Aliev, then the first secretary of Azerbaijan’s Communist Party and a Politburo member, vehemently denied that Soviet leaders enjoyed any special privileges. At a press conference during the congress, Aliev argued that his salary was “no greater than that of a business manager,” and that privileges simply compensated for the additional effort he and his party colleagues contributed to their work.16

Despite vehement disapproval from the party leadership, Yeltsin continued to portray himself as a selfless “fighter of privileges” throughout his short-lived tenure as Moscow’s party boss. Moscow was an ideal place for Yeltsin to start his struggle for social justice, since in the Soviet capital alone 40,000 people were supplied with “special packages,” including special buffets and access to normally unobtainable goods at half price; priority in the distribution of housing and summer vacation homes; free transportation; and the opportunity for one’s offspring to attend specialized schools and the most prestigious universities.17 These four types of privilege—food, housing, transportation, and education—would become the primary targets of Yeltsin’s campaign.

In order to ward off criticism, Yeltsin linked his assault on privileges to Gorbachev’s efforts to root out corruption and patronage from within the party. For example, he ordered an investigation into the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) to which children of the nomenklatura were given exclusive access. Yeltsin’s memoir recounts his dismay at the investigation’s results: “They [MGIMO] were riddled with nepotism and malpractice of every kind and it was our aim to bring proper order into these organizations, which for years had been immune to inspection and criticism.”18 So Yeltsin charged MGIMO’s dean, N. I. Lebedev, with abuse of his position and removed him from his post.

Yeltsin applied similarly radical measures in his efforts to fight other forms of social injustice. One of the local party bosses in Moscow’s districts was fired after Yeltsin learned that he had built “a magnificent place for himself” within a regular apartment building.19 Yeltsin also shut down an exclusive store located inside the building that housed
Moscow City’s CPSU Committee, advising its employees to be “more sensitive to the outside shortages.” Then, just eight months into his job, Yeltsin held an unprecedented meeting with journalists at which he condemned special cafeterias and shops and other privileges for ranking officials as an “outrage in [a] workers’ state.” He called on reporters and citizens at large to publicize any examples of unequal treatment. Yeltsin was attempting to diminish private benefits to party insiders at a time when the country’s exclusive, small-coalition institutional structure relied on the dispensation of privileges as the means to retain power. While his campaign might have been popular among the general public, the existing institutional arrangements were not favorable to his short-term political advancement.

As Yeltsin was waging his war on privileges, his political antagonist, Yegor Ligachev, was campaigning against excessive drinking. The antialcohol campaign started in May 1985, just weeks after Gorbachev came to power. It was viewed as a resumption of the fight against sloth and inefficiency that had been launched by Gorbachev’s predecessor, Yuri Andropov. Presenting the antidrunkenness drive as a moral crusade, Ligachev advocated the adoption of tough administrative policies, including a drastic rise in alcohol prices, cuts in production, and restrictions on consumption. The results were endless queues, a black market for alcoholic beverages, and, for the first time since World War II, the introduction of nationwide rationing of sugar, which could be used for illicit distillery. A measure that was initially directed only against drunkenness had expanded to affect the entire population. In his memoirs, Ligachev acknowledged his responsibility for these policies, which “turned out to be excessively harsh and bureaucratic.” He also recognized their damaging effect on his public image: “[I]nitially I appeared as a radical in the anti-alcohol campaign.”

The antialcohol campaign proved to be Gorbachev’s first major policy disaster. His efforts to revitalize the Soviet economy through traditional methods—greater discipline and workplace sobriety—had failed. And the more radical economic measures Gorbachev introduced in late 1986 ran into considerable resistance from all levels of the party bureaucracy. So by the end of his second year in power Gorbachev had come to realize that only prompt liberalization of the political system could produce a much-needed economic turnaround. In January 1987 at the CC Plenum he unveiled his plan to democratize the party. The centerpiece of his proposal was an effort to increase the influence of rank-and-file party members by providing for secret, competitive, multican-
didate elections for party secretaries at every level, from the local to the national. He carefully avoided imposing similar election procedures on the CPSU CC itself. Nevertheless, top party nomenklatura felt seriously endangered by Gorbachev’s proposals.22 As mentioned earlier, the extent of elite opposition to his reforms first became apparent in the CC’s final resolution at this plenum, which declined to adopt the principle of competitive elections.

It was also during the January 1987 plenum that Gorbachev was first publicly criticized from the radical flank. Yeltsin, in his address to plenum members, charged that perestroika had not yet even started. His speech was a complete surprise to Gorbachev’s liberal allies, who, nevertheless, thought that Yeltsin would make Gorbachev look less radical to the Politburo hard-liners.23 Gorbachev, however, was distressed by Yeltsin’s remarks and later criticized him for “extreme conservatism.”24 As recounted by Alexander Yakovlev, a Politburo member and eventual architect of perestroika, Gorbachev was concerned that Yeltsin’s radicalism would scare the real party conservatives away from further democratization.

As the next CC Plenum—in June 1987—approached, rifts within Gorbachev’s reform coalition were coming to the fore. Beyond his resistance to institutional changes within the party, Ligachev was also trying to limit the scope of glasnost and prevent a reassessment of Soviet history. He argued in Pravda against exaggerating the mistakes of the past, and demanded recognition of the Soviet achievements since the 1917 Revolution.25 Ligachev also positively assessed Brezhnev’s rule, which the reformers viewed as a period of economic stagnation. He obviously disagreed with Gorbachev’s demands to eliminate all “blank spots” in Soviet history.26

By contrast, Yeltsin hailed Moscow’s initial experiment with multi-candidate elections as a success, and scorned the party nomenklatura for its exorbitant privileges. In an interview with the Moscow daily Moskovskaia Pravda, he pledged: “We must never again allow some people to live under the law, and others to live above the law. For that is precisely what happened. Not only fathers holding high posts in the party and Soviet apparatus or in trade were immune from the law. Their children and grandchildren sheltered in the shadow of their parents’ immunity and did whatever they wanted.”27 He also argued that a campaign for social justice should accompany Gorbachev’s reform policies since “this struggle [against privileges] will strengthen the unity of all strata of society, and perestroika will begin to pick up full speed
if this unity becomes monolithic.” The Soviet general secretary, however, was not tricked by Yeltsin’s proreform rhetoric. Careful not to alienate nomenklatura, Gorbachev refused to accept the issue of party privileges as a legitimate criticism. In an interview with the Italian Communist newspaper *L’Unita* in May 1987, he argued that the privileges of party leaders were no worse than the existence of a workers’ canteen in a factory.28

In the face of resistance to his reform agenda from conservative CC members, Gorbachev decided to present his plan at the CPSU conference scheduled for the summer of 1988, in the hope that the conference would take “measures for the further democratization of the life of the party and society.”29 Delegates to the party conference, last held in 1941, were to be elected by secret ballot at local party meetings. By engaging rank-and-file party members in the selection of delegates, Gorbachev hoped that the new party forum would be more sympathetic to his reforms than the rigid Central Committee.

While pushing for democratization and economic change, Gorbachev refrained from taking sides in the intensifying confrontation between Yeltsin and Ligachev in the Politburo. The two represented opposite visions of the reform process, but in open discussions they clashed mainly over the issues central to their individual campaigns. At Politburo meetings, when Ligachev would enthusiastically report on plummeting alcohol sales, Yeltsin would cite shocking reports of citizens drinking moonshine and even hair tonic.30 And according to Yeltsin’s close aide Mikhail Poltoranin, Ligachev considered the campaign against privileges to be social demagoguery, arguing that “one should not touch existing privileges but should improve conditions for those who do not enjoy certain opportunities.”31

Yeltsin presented his conflict with Ligachev as a struggle between the supporters and adversaries of democratization. Gorbachev, however, viewed it differently. In a speech at the June CC Plenum he admonished those who used the new openness for narrow, self-serving purposes. Gorbachev believed that Yeltsin was attacking the party elite not out of idealism, but in order to curry support among Muscovites. Rather than accepting him as an ally, Gorbachev treated Yeltsin as a threat. Where Gorbachev demanded restraint and caution, Yeltsin favored bluntness. Where Gorbachev preached compromise and understanding, Yeltsin was stubborn and unforgiving. And while perestroika for Gorbachev was a gradual project, Yeltsin wanted it now.

The general secretary’s distrust of Yeltsin was also reflected in his
staff promotions. After coming to office, Gorbachev reshuffled leadership positions so that his personal appointees would form a majority in the Politburo and the CC. By March 1986, five out of the 12 full members of the Politburo had joined it under Gorbachev. Similarly, five out of the seven candidate members, including Yeltsin, owed their promotions to the new general secretary. The overall renewal rate was approximately 52 percent in just twelve months. And Gorbachev continued to make personnel changes throughout 1987. Two Brezhnev appointees were removed from the Politburo and Secretariat at the CC plenums in January and June of that year, while three Politburo members were moved from candidate to full status. Although all three had become candidate members after Yeltsin, they were promoted to full membership with voting rights in less than a year. By the fall of 1987, Boris Yeltsin was the only candidate member of the Politburo who had not advanced from the position he had been granted in February 1986. Yeltsin was effectively excluded from the country’s main decision-making body, and his political prospects were uncertain. Gorbachev and Ligachev, his contemporaries, had reached the top of the party hierarchy, while his own power was confined to Moscow’s boundaries. Not only was Boris Yeltsin less successful than his politically moderate party comrades, but Gorbachev was quietly tolerating Ligachev’s constant interference in Yeltsin’s Moscow affairs. Despite his immense popularity among Muscovites, Yeltsin was heading toward a political fiasco. He had masterfully enraged the only selectorate in the Soviet Union that mattered at the time.

How could a politician who later turned out to be such an exceptional campaigner miscalculate so badly? Yeltsin, as Reagan before him, and other, similarly skillful politicians, failed miserably in their early forays into high-level politics. Their heresthetical abilities may not always become manifest until after they have been plunged into, and seen how to escape from, the political wilderness. Institutional context matters as well. Rhetorical ingenuity and policy inventiveness, which herestheticians have to rely on, were not essential elements of success in Soviet politics. Reaching the apex of power mainly required political loyalty and conformity with the party line. As an experienced regional party boss, Yeltsin should have known as much.

While in Moscow, Yeltsin betrayed the instincts of an innate populist rather than a party apparatchik. This tendency would eventually serve him well, once his selectorate expanded beyond the Kremlin’s
walls. But in 1987, Yeltsin’s only hope for saving his sinking career was to appeal directly to the general secretary.

Yeltsin’s showdown with Ligachev reached a critical point in early September 1987. Ligachev questioned Yeltsin’s tolerance for public demonstrations in Moscow and ordered a special commission to investigate. Two days later, on September 12, Yeltsin wrote a personal letter to Gorbachev about what he perceived as “indifference to the matters concerning Moscow and coldness toward me personally, especially in several members of the Politburo and some secretaries of the Central Committee.” He pointed to Ligachev as being responsible for the “party’s go-slow attitude to perestroika,” and accused Politburo conservatives of insincerity in their support for Gorbachev’s policies. Yeltsin also requested that the general secretary relieve him of his positions as Moscow party chief and Politburo candidate member—hoping, as he explained later in his memoirs, that his request would push Gorbachev toward a radical cadre reshuffle. The next CC Plenum was scheduled for October 21. Yeltsin asked Gorbachev to make a decision on his request before that meeting so that he would not have “to submit my request directly to a Plenum.”

With the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution looming, Gorbachev obviously preferred to avoid major personnel changes that might expose intraparty conflicts. Therefore, he promised to consider Yeltsin’s request some time “later.” Apparently, Gorbachev was unaware that Yeltsin’s confrontation with Ligachev had reached a critical stage.

During the one-day October CC Plenum, Yeltsin decided to air his disagreement with Ligachev in front of all the members of the Central Committee. The primary function of the Central Committee was to lay down party policy in the five-year intervals between party congresses. With almost 500 members, the CC was largely a rubber-stamp body for the Politburo and the Secretariat, which held the real decision-making power; but in times of crisis the CC could facilitate the decisive resolution of conflicts within the party leadership. As long as Politburo members could agree among themselves, the CC exerted little influence. When Politburo members pursued conflicting agendas, however, they
would turn to the CC members for support. Since Politburo members were formally selected by the CC, the composition of which was tightly controlled by the Politburo, the members of the two bodies were mutually dependent.\textsuperscript{36}

The CC increased its influence during the decades after Stalin’s death, and played a key role in several power transfers. Committee members defeated an attempt by Nikita Khrushchev’s adversaries to oust him in 1957 and successfully removed the offenders from the Politburo. Seven years later, Politburo members Brezhnev and Podgorny sought the support of the CC majority to depose Khrushchev himself. And in March 1985, Gorbachev’s selection as the general secretary was facilitated by strong support for his candidacy from within the CC. Yeltsin, as the first secretary of the party committee in Sverdlovsk oblast, had been a member of the CC at the time. In his memoirs, he points out that Gorbachev became the party leader as a result of support from a large number of the first secretaries in the CC.

In October 1987, the CC comprised 307 voting members and 170 candidate members, all of whom had been elected by the CPSU Congress a year earlier.\textsuperscript{37} Almost half were in their first term.\textsuperscript{38} They included high-ranking party and state officials, representatives of the party and state bodies from the republics and provinces, leaders of trade unions and the Komsomol, as well as notable figures from the scholarly and artistic communities. The majority of career party apparatchiks at the CC were not only newcomers there, but also came fresh from the regions. As a result, conservatives within the party leadership could no longer count on their full support. Rather, it was Gorbachev who held sway. When Yeltsin unexpectedly took the floor during the October plenum, the thrust of his biting speech was directed against the top party leadership. He accused the CC Secretariat, headed by Ligachev, of lacking a “revolutionary energy” that the rest of the party displayed.\textsuperscript{39} At the same time, Yeltsin conspicuously spared the Central Committee from his criticisms, calling it “the most trustworthy and open-minded assembly.” He also pointed out two new and supposedly disturbing trends: the continued absence of tangible results from perestroika, and the increasing glorification of Gorbachev by the top leadership. In conclusion, he reasserted his inability to work within the Politburo due to the lack of support, “especially from Ligachev,” and asked for permission to resign. The implication of his speech was clear: perestroika had been stalled by party hard-liners centered around Ligachev. They were only paying lip service to Gorbachev’s reforms.
From Yeltsin’s perspective, support for his resignation was a vote of confidence for the antiperestroika forces within the Politburo. And given that the largely conservative central party leadership was in the minority at the CC Plenum, most delegates might have been sympathetic to Yeltsin’s charges. In order not to alienate potential supporters, Yeltsin shrewdly avoided his favorite subject, nomenklatura privileges. But by taking Ligachev on so publicly, Yeltsin left himself no room for political retreat. As revealed in his memoirs, he had no doubt that the odds were against him, yet he also knew then that the tone of the CC’s response had to be set by the general secretary.

Gorbachev faced a difficult choice. After all, the inevitable result of Yeltsin’s removal would be a strengthening of conservative elements in the party leadership. However, Yeltsin’s speech was a challenge not only to Ligachev and conservatives, but also to Gorbachev’s own reform strategy. During the earlier CC Plenum in June, Gorbachev blamed the slow pace of perestroika on the passivity of lower-level officials. He tried to avoid direct criticism of the central party apparatus, realizing that he would need its support in order to convene the 1988 party conference, where the radical reorganization of the party was to take place. Yeltsin’s challenge undermined this evolutionary strategy by requiring Gorbachev to rid the party of the very conservatives he was relying on to implement his plan. By asking Gorbachev to choose between himself and Ligachev, Yeltsin was pushing the Soviet leader to expunge the conservatives from his coalition.

When the time came to speak, Gorbachev positioned himself as a defender of the interests of the party elite. He summarized Yeltsin’s statement, emphasizing that it criticized not only the Politburo but the Central Committee as well. Setting the defamatory tone that would characterize his subsequent speeches on the topic, Gorbachev concluded: “This sounds like a wish to fight the Central Committee.” He then encouraged members of the Central Committee to respond to Yeltsin’s remarks. But first he gave the floor to Ligachev. The ensuing discussion made it readily apparent that even reformers like Alexander Yakovlev or Eduard Shevardnadze were unwilling to extend token support to Yeltsin. As one witness of the proceedings recalls, “I saw a completely different Central Committee then—many had been negative toward Yeltsin before, but this time it all burst through. The speeches were harsh, uncontrollable, full of aversion.”

The split between Yeltsin, now clearly perceived as a radical, and the moderate-conservative coalition behind Gorbachev was final.
Yeltsin was removed as a candidate member of the Politburo and Moscow first secretary. In his place Gorbachev appointed moderate loyalists, showing his preference for conformists over firebrands. Yeltsin’s resounding political defeat was underscored by his new appointment as the first deputy chairman of the USSR Construction Committee, a position bereft of political weight. In a subsequent telephone conversation, Gorbachev made his intentions clear, vowing that he would “never let him [Yeltsin] into politics again.” Yeltsin’s challenge to Gorbachev’s coalition had failed. But, as the next chapter will reveal, the lessons of this episode were not lost on him.

Changing the Rules of the Game

What impact did Boris Yeltsin’s political defeat have on Gorbachev’s support coalition? Conservatives and moderate reformers were united in their rejection of Yeltsin’s radical challenge. However, since the hard-line elements in the party leadership were the primary targets of his criticism, it was conservatives who went on the counteroffensive. Ligachev’s new assertiveness was reflected in an interview he gave to *Le Monde* while visiting France. He emphasized that he, rather than the general secretary, chaired the meetings of the Secretariat at the behest of the Politburo, implying that he was nearly as powerful as Gorbachev.41

The publication of Nina Andreyeva’s letter in March 1988 was a natural by-product of this conservative backlash. The power of the backlash also signaled to perestroika supporters, especially rank-and-file party members, that they should exhibit greater caution in calling for reform. And it showed that, rhetoric aside, Mikhail Gorbachev might not have been as serious about political change as he had professed to be. Sensing this shift in perceptions of his position, Gorbachev admitted to journalists two months after the Yeltsin affair that it came to be viewed among the intelligentsia and young people “as a blow to perestroika.”42 The moderate party leadership’s willingness to side with conservatives against Yeltsin’s radicalism was not shared by the more reform-oriented members of Gorbachev’s coalition at the lower levels. For the first time since coming to power, Gorbachev risked losing his core support from the general public. Yeltsin’s maneuver had failed, but it had instigated rifts in Gorbachev’s coalition.

Public sympathy for Yeltsin’s reform agenda was expressed in a series of unprecedented protests over his resignation. Pamphlets were
distributed in his hometown of Sverdlovsk during early November, asking city residents to send protests to the Soviet government to prevent his resignation. They warned that if Yeltsin were allowed to step down, “the saboteurs of perestroika would gain a free hand and political repression and dogmatism would return.” Similar petitions were circulated in Moscow, where students demonstrated against Yeltsin’s removal. Public suspicions about the reversal of glasnost were reinforced by the Kremlin’s refusal to publish Yeltsin’s plenum speech. Various samizdat versions of the speech were circulated around the country and leaked to the international press. These versions differed in their interpretation of exactly who had been the intended targets of Yeltsin’s criticisms, with opinions ranging from Ligachev and KGB chairman Chebrikov, to Gorbachev’s wife Raisa and the general secretary himself. Ironically, the only topic all of them attributed to Yeltsin was the unjust nature of nomenklatura privileges, a subject that Yeltsin had not even raised in his speech. In the presumed text of Yeltsin’s address that circulated in Moscow and was published in Le Monde, Yeltsin was said to have blasted his Politburo colleagues by saying: “It is difficult for me to explain to a factory worker why, on the seventieth anniversary of the Socialist Revolution, he is forced to stand in line to buy sausages, which contain more starch than meat, whereas our tables are loaded with sturgeon, caviar and all kinds of delicacies easily acquired from a place he cannot even approach.” The privilege issue had become Yeltsin’s trademark, and was seen by many as the true reason for his dismissal.

In order to limit potential damage to his coalition, Gorbachev quickly distanced himself from both the conservatives and the radicals, by portraying them as enemies of perestroika. Several weeks after the 1987 October plenum, the liberal Soviet weekly Moscow News published an essay by Gavriil Popov, a progressive economist from Moscow State University, who argued that in times of transition there was a need for “the unity of all forces . . . for solving the key tasks.” In Popov’s view, Yeltsin’s attempt “to counter the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee with his ‘special stand’” aimed to undermine such unity. A month later Popov published a longer article in which he argued against Yeltsin’s position even more vigorously, defining it as “authoritarian conservative avant-gardism,” “the haven for the devils of perestroika” and even tracing his views to Trotsky and Stalin. He concluded by calling for unity behind Gorbachev and urging efforts to overcome any resistance to perestroika.
But Yeltsin continued to press the issue of privileges throughout 1988. In an interview with BBC Television in May, he reasserted the need to abolish all privileges, arguing that everyone in the Soviet Union should experience shortages to an equal degree. He was also most outspoken about his differences with Ligachev, calling him “one of the main opponents on questions of social justice.” Unwilling to abandon his politically costly confrontation with Ligachev, Yeltsin insisted that the number two man in the party should resign.

Yet Nina Andreyeva’s letter had rendered Yeltsin’s attack against Ligachev less controversial than it had been earlier. In her letter, the teacher from Leningrad criticized attempts to revise Soviet history and defended Stalin’s cultural and historic achievements. Although she professed support for perestroika, Andreyeva also attacked “left-liberals” and argued that the working class, rather than the intelligentsia, should be at the vanguard of the reform process. Since many in the Politburo thought that Ligachev was behind the letter’s publication, they read it as his attack on the moderate reformers in the Gorbachev coalition.

Gorbachev recognized the threat and launched his own counteroffensive. Days after the letter’s publication, Pravda printed an official rebuttal from two Politburo moderates, Alexander Yakovlev and Vadim Medvedev. Gorbachev also took immediate steps to downgrade Ligachev’s role in the Secretariat, transferring most of his other responsibilities to moderate reformers. According to Anatoliy Lukianov, then a Politburo candidate member, Ligachev’s marginalization in the party leadership was the direct result of the conflict surrounding Andreyeva’s letter, and brought about the first serious divisions within the Politburo. Despite this serious blow, Ligachev still tried to use Gorbachev’s apprehension about Yeltsin to rehabilitate himself. During a speech in Togliatti he linked Yeltsin’s thesis about resistance to perestroika to Stalin’s idea that “as socialism is built the class struggle is exacerbated.” In an apparent effort to play on reformers’ sensitivities, he concluded by reminding the audience about the “grave consequences that ‘theory’ led to.”

Ligachev continued to position himself as the most outspoken of Yeltsin’s critics during the Nineteenth CPSU Conference later that summer.

The July 1988 party conference marked Yeltsin’s first public return from imposed political exile. Despite Gorbachev’s attempts to prevent his opponent from speaking, Yeltsin managed to take the floor. His
speech was even more significant because the conference was being broadcast live on Soviet television. Yeltsin therefore perceived it as his “last chance to break political isolation.” Yeltsin, ever the radical, insisted on the need to abolish “the food ‘rations’ for the so-to-speak ‘starving nomenklatura,’ eradicate elitism in society, eradicate the substance and the form of the word ‘special’ from our vocabulary, since we do not have any special Communists.” As in his BBC interview, Yeltsin reiterated his call on Ligachev and other conservative Politburo members to resign in order to quicken perestroika. He concluded by asking the stunned conference delegates for political rehabilitation. As Yeltsin later wrote, he hoped that the conference delegates could somehow reverse the decision to expel him from the Politburo, enabling him once again to strive for higher political office.

His hopes were dashed when, after a short break, Gorbachev announced the first speaker: Yegor Ligachev. As he had done in October, Ligachev inveighed that Yeltsin had not drawn proper conclusions from his past errors. And he rejected Yeltsin’s plea for rehabilitation, arguing that there were no grounds for changing anything in the wording of the October plenum’s decision. He also vigorously defended the system of nomenklatura privileges, claiming that party workers were grossly underpaid—“twenty-sixth in the country in terms of average wage.” Ligachev then rejected Yeltsin’s proposal to eliminate privileges, calling it an attempt to win support from the masses that would lead to “parasitism.” Subsequent speeches were filled with similar diatribes.

In conclusion, Gorbachev flatly rejected Yeltsin’s request to review the plenum’s decision, while ignoring Yeltsin’s calls for the eradication of privileges. Instead of a turning point, the conference had become yet another political failure for Yeltsin. As he later recounted, “I felt that they are satisfied, they beat me, they are victorious. At that moment I was overcome with apathy. I did not want any further struggle, any explanations, only to forget everything and be on my own.”

Although the party conference was a major setback for Yeltsin, its decisions opened the way for Yeltsin’s political comeback the following year. The single most far-reaching resolution of the gathering created a new legislative structure, the Congress of People’s Deputies, consisting of 2,250 deputies, of which 1,500 were to be installed through direct popular election. Congress and the smaller Supreme Soviet, chosen from among the congress deputies, were expected to make the principal decisions on the political and economic development of the country.
This institutional innovation was a part of Gorbachev’s design to transfer decision-making powers from the party to state bodies, in order to override conservative resistance to his reforms. Even more importantly, it provided Gorbachev with an alternative source of legitimacy. He could no longer rely on an increasingly uneasy and unstable coalition of moderates and conservatives within the party leadership to sustain his power. However, by creating the first multicandidate election in Soviet history, Gorbachev also enabled others to seek political power through public support rather than party approval.

Yeltsin, already sensing the full extent of his popularity, seized the opportunity to form a winning coalition drawn not from the party elite, but from the public at large.

Yeltsin’s first attempt to gain political ascendancy in Moscow failed for reasons similar to those that had contributed to Reagan’s failure in the 1968 presidential race. Both men had to compete in institutional settings with narrow selectorates and small winning coalitions of top party officials. In order to succeed they needed to appeal to the private interests of party bosses, rather than emphasize issues of concern to the wider public. Both Reagan and Yeltsin had misguidedly chosen to campaign on issues that resonated with the rank and file, but were irrelevant or even alarming to the elite. Even so, these early experiences established them as viable candidates, and prepared them to win future political battles under new institutional rules.