

Yu. M. Baturin Satarov, A. L. Il'in, V. F. Kadatskii, V. V. Kostikov, M. A. Krasnov, A. Ya. Livshits, K. F. Nikiforov, L. G. Pikhoia, G. A. *Epokha El'tsina: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2001. 815 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-5-264-00393-6.

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Published on H-Russia (December, 2001)



A Chronicle for the Time of Boris

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By resigning from the Presidency of Russia on the last day of 1999, Boris Yeltsin has given us a good round number to mark the end of Russia's twentieth century. Historians are already beginning to put "the Yeltsin era" into a broader historical context.[1] Those who wish to look at Yeltsin's Kremlin will have plenty of sources to choose from, including several memoirs by close associates and three (partially ghostwritten) autobiographies of the President himself.[2] *Epokha El'tsina*, however, differs from the rest of the memoir literature in both style and breadth.

The authors of this hefty tome are Boris Yeltsin's former press secretary (Viacheslav Kostikov), advisers (Yurii Baturin, Mikhail Krasnov, Aleksandr Livshits, Georgii Satarov), and speech writers (Liudmila Pikhoia, Aleksandr Il'in, Vladimir Kadatskii, Konstantin Nikiforov). They chose to write the work collectively, without claiming individual authorship for the specific parts of the book, although at times the content makes it appear obvious who is primarily responsible for a particular section or chapter. This book is dense and fairly comprehensive—its 800 plus pages read more like 1500. Part I tells us Yeltsin's story up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Much of this is a rehash of Yeltsin's first autobiography, but we also get interesting tidbits on Sverdlovsk in the 1970s and 1980s, when Yeltsin was a prominent Party leader there. (Like many in Yeltsin's inner circle, some of the authors have ties to Sverdlovsk; Pikhoia, for example,

lived there for many years.) Part II covers the period between 1991 and October 1993; Part III continues the story up through the 1996 election; Part IV is wholly devoted to the first Chechen War; and Part V chronicles Yeltsin's second term. Within these sizable parts, the work is organized more thematically than chronologically, but there is inconsistency in this; while some chapters cover broad subjects like the economy, military reform, and legal reform, others deal with specific events, like coup attempts and elections.

The authors' stated aim is to produce an account that is as objective and balanced as possible, but it is clear from the outset that they have a vested interest in presenting a certain image of their former boss and the other major characters of the Administration and the Government. They do not want to embarrass "the first President" with any revelations yet unknown, in the manner of Aleksandr Korzhakov.[3] These are still Yeltsin's loyal people. They take the opportunity to settle some old scores with personal rivals. But that is to be expected. Aside from the authors' personal biases, the institutional bias of the Presidential Advisers Service (*Sluzhba pomoshchnikov Prezidenta RF*), subordinated to Viktor Il'iushin, Yeltsin's chief adviser until after the 1996 election, to which most of the authors (including the speechwriters) belonged, is evident throughout. The authors' dislike for Anatolii Chubais, for example, stems primarily from his role in downgrading the Advisers Service as part of his reorganization of Yeltsin's Administration in 1996-1997, after Iliushin had left the Administration and

was no longer there to protect his old subordinates. But at least the authors do not bother to make an attempt to conceal their biases. Instead, they give us an informative, if partisan, peek inside Yeltsin's Kremlin.

Epokha El'tsina is most authoritative and detailed on the period 1992-1996, when most of the authors were at the peak of their influence. They devote well over a hundred pages to the first Chechen War, but ultimately these pages are disappointing. Far more ink is devoted to defending the positions of Baturin and some others and to condemning the reckless advice of the so-called war hawks than to analysis of the war itself and the degree of Yeltsin's responsibility for it. The book provides little insight into the first Chechen War, except perhaps as a demonstration of just how desperate the Yeltsin team was to create the impression that the war was over and done with in time for the 1996 presidential election.

On the other hand, the book does provide a close look at the day-to-day operations of Yeltsin's Administration. The authors delve into substantial detail on the structure and functioning of the Presidential Administration (before and after Chubais's reforms of late 1996) and its interaction with the Government (particularly when it was headed by Viktor Chernomyrdin), the legislature, and the courts. This is the strength of this book. Its description of the governing apparatus makes it a worthy complement to Hough and Fainsod's work on the governance of the Soviet Union.[4] In order to highlight the novelty of governance in the post-Soviet order, especially after the adoption of the new constitution in December 1993, the authors frequently make explicit comparisons to the Soviet experience.

Despite its partisanship, the book is remarkably frank about some of the abuses of the 1996 presidential election campaign. Both the Yeltsin and the Zyuganov sides blatantly violated election financing laws, the authors proclaim, and how could things be otherwise? Because both sides were complicit in the violations, neither was in a position to accuse the other publicly (p. 572). The authors are quite open about the fact that Yeltsin's campaign used considerable "Administration resources" to win the election. They excuse this violation, arguing that similar incumbent-favoring practices are common in other countries (p. 567).

The authors also recall some of the campaign promises. For example, on May 16, 1996, as the campaign was heading for the home stretch, Yeltsin issued a decree establishing an all-volunteer army for Russia by the year 2000. The authors write that this was a bla-

tantly populist initiative, conceived by the election campaign team, and never meant to be implemented. Baturin protested against this misleading measure; many in the military were also disturbed. Nevertheless, the decree was adopted with much fanfare. The authors see nothing wrong with this tactic. Such are "the rules of the game," they argue, and "most voters" knew that this "promise" was a lie; lies are part of the election "ritual" and are totally acceptable in the context of an election campaign (p. 462).

This kind of glib reasoning displays the cynical side of these Yeltsin camp insiders. After all, at least some people did believe—naively, to be sure—at least some of the lies, and these former advisers know it. The ethics of deceiving voters on such an emotionally-charged issue as the military draft are not as clear cut as they present them here.

Boris Berezovsky is presented as playing an instrumental role in getting Yeltsin re-elected. The importance of Berezovsky and the other so-called oligarchs in the 1996 election is well known, but it is the candid emphasis on his instrumentality that is striking in this account. By contrast, in Leon Aron's biography of Yeltsin, it is Satarov, one of the authors of *Epokha El'tsina*, who is so credited.[5] In Yeltsin's own memoir, he adopts a dismissive and irritated, if revealing, posture toward the billionaire—"I don't like him," Yeltsin writes, "because of his arrogant tone, his scandalous reputation, and because people believe he has special influence in the Kremlin. He doesn't." [6] And yet in *Epokha El'tsina*—even with Satarov as one of the authors—Berezovsky emerges as Yeltsin's savior. Even as the tycoon participated in the meetings of Yeltsin's initial re-election team (coordinated by Korzhakov and Oleg Soskovets), he quickly saw that this team's strategy would lead Yeltsin to certain electoral disaster, and soon convinced Yeltsin's daughter, Tat'iana D'iachenko, who also attended these meetings, of the urgent need to change course (p. 554). It was Berezovsky, the authors emphasize, who then took the initiative at Davos in late January 1996 to organize and unite the oligarchs to back and finance Yeltsin, and to recruit Chubais to head an alternative re-election campaign team (p. 556). The rest is history: the Chubais team's strategy is widely acknowledged with getting Yeltsin re-elected.

The authors speak with disappointment about Yeltsin's second term, complaining first about Chubais, then the oligarchs, and then, especially, the "Family." Former advisers all, the authors also view the decline as somewhat connected to their own waning influence

and, in some cases, dismissals (p. 715). They state emphatically that Yeltsin was preoccupied with finding a successor throughout his later years in the Kremlin, and most poignantly after the default of August 1998; after briefly considering and discarding liberals for the role (notably Boris Nemtsov), the authors note that Yeltsin began, as if to compensate for the loss of his old bodyguard, to look primarily at “young Korzhakov types”; the most prominent candidates were, respectively, Nikolai Bordiuzha, Sergei Stepashin, and finally Vladimir Putin (p. 782).

The final chapter of the book; “Yeltsin—the Myth, the Man, the Politician” (pp. 792-804) serves as the book’s conclusion. Here the authors argue against the common perception that Yeltsin was motivated primarily by the desire to acquire and maintain power (pp. 792-94).^[7] In decisive moments, the authors contend, Yeltsin was primarily motivated by a sense of mission (p. 795). “It is indisputable that Yeltsin loved power and had the ability to fight for it,” they write. “He enjoyed its outward attributes, popularity among the people, and the trembling of his retainers. But when he had to choose between power and mission, he chose mission” (p. 795). As evidence, the authors emphasize Yeltsin’s now famous 1987 Central Committee outburst, arguing that at the time such an outrageous act could not but put an end to one’s career (p. 793). They further argue that had Yeltsin wanted to be a real dictator, he would have had several chances, especially in the aftermath of the confrontation of October 1993, when Yeltsin’s response was to hold the elections at the earliest possible date.

The authors also argue against the myth of Yeltsin’s apparent unpredictability. On a grand scale, they contend, Yeltsin could change tactics endlessly and with great skill but in the long run he invariably returned to the pursuit of the same mission that he chose at the beginning of his coming to power (p. 795). As for the “unpredictability” of his tactics—that too is exaggerated; many of the moves that seemed unpredictable were well thought out long in advance—as an example, they cite the March 1998 dismissal of Chernomyrdin’s Government (p. 796).

This last point needs an explanation. Earlier on in the book, the authors discuss in detail what they call the “experiment” of 1997—Yeltsin’s attempt to combine Chernomyrdin and his team with the team of young reformers. Chernomyrdin was regarded as a strong Prime Minister, the thinking went, and the reformers (Nemtsov, Chubais, and others) could conduct the reforms under

his protection—and his tempering influence. At that time the President liked to praise the Premier publicly, and in April 1997, we learn from *Epokha El'tsina*, Yeltsin even gave an order to his speechwriters to provide assistance in building up Chernomyrdin’s image rhetorically (p. 729). But when Yeltsin did let go of Chernomyrdin in March 1998, he felt that he was late by exactly a year (p. 731). He deemed the “experiment” of 1997 a failure (p. 731).

The authors write that Yeltsin had planned the sacking of Chernomyrdin long in advance. His motives for replacing Chernomyrdin with Sergei Kirienko had everything to do with Yeltsin’s sense of mission—and the desire to go down in history as a great reformer of Russia. He wanted to use the new Government to initiate a fresh round of reforms—like those produced by Yegor Gaidar’s Government in 1992—in time before the dawning of the 1999-2000 electoral season (p. 732). The formation of the Kirienko Government, the authors write, was Yeltsin’s last attempt to push through decisive economic reforms (p. 732).

Earlier in this review, I have argued that the primary value of this book is in the details. Concrete examples now follow, mainly from the section of the book devoted to Yeltsin’s first term. As the authors were, after all, Yeltsin’s advisers, it is to be expected that the President looms large throughout the book. Having observed Yeltsin making strategic and tactical decisions from up close, the authors are in a position to provide insight into his approach to governing Russia. Given Yeltsin’s personalistic governing style, it should come as no surprise that face-to-face interaction between the President and the Prime Minister constituted one of the most effective levers of Presidential power. The President and the Prime Minister held weekly meetings behind closed doors. During these private encounters, the authors write, the President’s word to the Prime Minister was absolute law—it had to be obeyed. Unlike written edicts (*ukazy*), oral orders given by the President to the Prime Minister were implemented without fail. As the authors clarify; “words said eye to eye carried more weight in the apparatus than papers. That, perhaps, is our political tradition” (p. 424).

This “political tradition” went a long way. The authors report that Yeltsin emphasized the oral and the personal in his relations with all the forces he deemed important in Russian politics. Take, for example, their portrayal of his relationship with the military. Yeltsin often visited various military units, especially in times when he felt threatened. In cultivating the armed forces,

the President arranged lengthy banquets with the generals. The generals appreciated this attention. As they raised toasts and drank together, Yeltsin took measure of their willingness to back him should a crisis come up (p. 152). Tellingly, he visited the Tamanskaya and the Kantemirovskaya divisions outside Moscow on August 30, 1993; these would be the military units that would be utilized by the President's side in October 1993 (p. 350). During that visit, the President viewed military exercises—including tanks shooting. After the exercises, he sat down for a long dinner in a military tent with the officers of these divisions and the highest-ranking military officials who had come from Moscow for the event. The officers drank to the President's health, yelled "Hurrah!" and assured him of their support (p. 350).

The authors relate an early episode that sheds another light on Yeltsin's handling of the military. In the turbulent days of January 1992, an all-army officer meeting took place in the Kremlin. The highly emotional meeting brought together well over four thousand participants, from all over the freshly divided Soviet Union. Yeltsin, Nursultan Nazarbaev, and Askar Akaev came to attend in the morning; but after the lunch break, only Yeltsin remained. Visibly nervous, according to his former adviser, he rose to address the officers, telling them that Russia and Kazakhstan were for keeping the CIS military forces united. Yeltsin's speech was able to take off the edge of emotion at the gathering, even though the officers remained anxious about the future. This was the last time such a congress of military officers was held. Russia's minister of defense soon issued an order, whereby officers participating in such meetings were subject to dismissal (pp. 445-446).

Of no lesser consequence has been Yeltsin's equally personalized style of dealing with the country's regional elites. It was by the summer of 1993, the authors report, as Yeltsin's conflict with the Supreme Soviet was coming to a boil, that the President solidified his co-optation strategy for the regional bosses. Part of the idea was to court the regional leaders regardless of their professed ideologies, and then, so the reasoning went, many of them would tone down their rhetoric and come around to his side. So Yeltsin put on the charm offensive, "delicately" reaching out to selected regional leaders. He handed out such perks as prestigious posts, access to the best medical care, cars, dachas and Moscow apartments. Drawing on the experience of his own nomenclatura and regional leader past, Yeltsin had considerable success with this co-optation and patronage strategy (p. 339).

Yeltsin's particular specialty was co-opting and converting the "practical-minded" among the former Communists. Prominent early examples included Yegor Stroeve, the Communist leader of the Orel region, who came into office with strident anti-Yeltsin rhetoric, which was rapidly toned down with the help of the President's "carrots," and Ivan Rybkin, the speaker of the first (post-1993) Duma. Yeltsin saw through the veneer of the rhetoric of these politicians and understood their mentality. Aside from the obvious perks, these politicians were induced to make a move toward the center and increasing cooperation with the Kremlin by pragmatic political considerations. Even Viktor Chernomyrdin, Yeltsin's Prime Minister from 1992 to 1998, whose transformation was perhaps the most successful, fit the pattern (p. 339).

Yeltsin was adept at using the carrot of access to the Kremlin to draw various politicians to his side, especially in times of crisis. He invited important political actors to confidential meetings. A personal meeting with the President was a big deal—politicians of all stripes competed with each other to get this privilege (p. 340). Many of the politicians who detested Yeltsin, "still felt an odd attraction," the authors report (p. 340). Regional leaders who came to see Yeltsin for an audience quickly learned that he liked to make spontaneous on-the-spot decisions, granting favors without consultation with advisers. They thus came to him with requests, which he often granted (p. 435). This kind of personal intervention was not conducive to institution building, to say the least, but, the authors argue, the President's *modus operandi* was politically astute because Russia's regional leaders, brought up as they were in the Soviet order, sought a visible demonstration of "who is the boss." Having the *apparat* appear more powerful than the President would have made Yeltsin appear weak in their eyes (p. 435).

Yeltsin's trips around the regions were dubbed "*poezdki po gubernatoram*" ("visits to the governors"). He also established the practice of meeting the governors semi-officially in Moscow. "As a rule," the authors report, "about 15-20 people at a time were invited to these meetings," which took place in the relaxed settings of cottages well outside the Kremlin walls (most often, in the "ABTs" residence in southwest Moscow), "and constituted an exchange of opinions in a roundtable format. Afterward, there was always dinner, where the conversation would continue, sometimes for several hours" (p. 397). As with the armed forces, Yeltsin played master of the banquet.

Especially after the 1993 constitution went into effect, Yeltsin gave regional leaders plenty of leeway as

long as they supported him, or at least stayed out of the way, as he battled his opponents in Moscow (p. 397). Yeltsin was willing to trade autonomy for loyalty. “In exchange for political loyalty, he could forgive a lot, especially to regional leaders” (p. 339). Aside from the glaring example of Chechnya—and in part perhaps because of it—Yeltsin tried not to challenge regional leaders (p. 397). On some issues, the President even took the side of the regions (or a particular region) against his own Prime Minister’s Government—Yeltsin claimed to seek “balance” in center-regional relations (p. 397). We learn elsewhere—not from *Epokha El’tsina*—that in November 1993, Yeltsin personally inserted an amendment to the new constitution to allow regional governors and republic presidents to become members of the Federation Council. This move opened the door to wide scale corruption for regional bosses. As Lilia Shevtsova has pointed out, “parliamentary status conferred legal immunity from criminal prosecution, so the powerful bureaucrats could use their powers to enrich themselves without fear.”[8]

By 1996, the authors of *Epokha El’tsina* claim, Presidential advisers drafted a proposal for establishing a mechanism for removing from office those governors who were violating laws. Yet, at that time Yeltsin had more pressing problems in Moscow, and the project was shelved (p. 398). It seems that “the Yeltsin era” as a whole—this was, after all, a time when the Soviet Union collapsed yet the Moscow bureaucracy grew—was plagued by a ceaseless succession of such pressing problems.

Notes

[1]. For an early sign, see Stephen Kotkin, *Armaged-*

don Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000 (New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2]. Yeltsin’s three autobiographies, all of them ghostwritten to various degrees by Aleksandr Yumashev, are: *Ispoved’ na zadannuiu temu* (Sverdlovsk: Sredne-Ural’skoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1990), *Zapiski prezidenta* (Moscow: “Ogonek”, 1994), and *Prezidentskii marafon* (Moscow: AST, 2000). One of the authors of the present volume also produced a previous memoir: Viacheslav Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom: Zapiski press-sekretaria* (Moscow: “Vagrius,” 1997).

[3]. Aleksandr Korzhakov, *Boris El’tsin: Ot rassveta do zakata* (Moscow: Interbuk, 1997).

[4]. Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[5]. Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (London: HarpersCollins Publishers, 2000), pp. 580-591.

[6]. Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii marafon* (Moscow: AST, 2000), p. 109. For the English-language version see Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*, trans. by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), p. 98.

[7]. One of the most articulate relatively early presentations of this view is in Tatyana Tolstaya’s review of Yeltsin’s second autobiography: Tatyana Tolstaya, “Boris the First,” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. XLI, no. 12 (June 23, 1994), pp. 3-5.

[8]. Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin’s Russia: Myths and Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), p. 93.

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Citation: Ilya Vinkovetsky. Review of Satarov, Yu. M. Baturin; Il’in, A. L.; Kadatskii, V. F.; Kostikov, V. V.; Krasnov, M. A.; Livshits, A. Ya.; Nikiforov, K. F.; Pikhoia, L. G.; A., G., *Epokha El’tsina: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

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