

# BORIS YELTSIN

MAN OF THE PEOPLE



*A People in Focus Book*

ELEANOR H. AYER

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to *To Russia with Hope*, one of many programs started in the United States early in 1992 to help the Russian people make the difficult transition to democracy. Projects like *To Russia with Hope* are people-to-people programs—American people sending Russian people food, medical supplies, and other items to help them through these hard times. If you'd like to be a part of helping the Russian people during this very important period in history, here's how you can get involved:

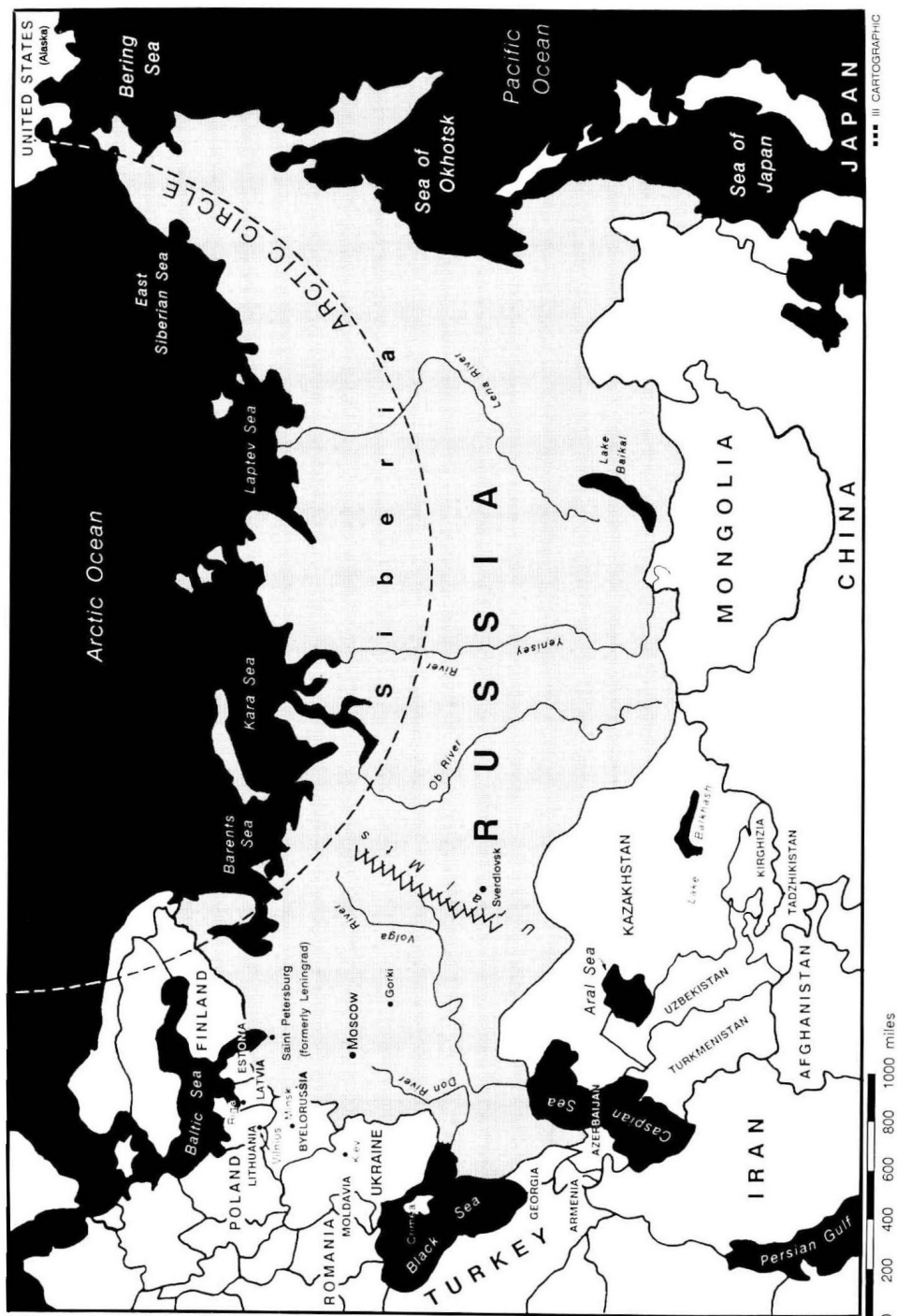
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Washington, DC 20036

You'll receive a newsletter, "Call to Action," which has information about the fund's many programs and an explanation of what your school or community group can do to help.

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*A victorious Boris Yeltsin and his supporters*

# Chapter / One

## *A Fairly Joyless Time*

YELT-sin! YELT-sin! YELT-sin! thundered the joyous crowd as its new leader wedged his way to the microphone. It was a day of unimagined triumph, a day that no 20th-century Russian ever expected to see. Never before had the people been able to choose their own president in a free election. Now they had done it. More than half of the Russians who paraded to the polls voted for the man they hoped would lead them out of Communism.

They liked Boris Yeltsin because he listened to them. It was something no Russian ruler had ever done. Not only did Yeltsin listen, he acted. He was not afraid to speak his mind. And if his words ruffled the feathers of Communist Party leaders, well, that was just too bad.



On this day, July 10, 1991, Yeltsin made his first speech as the new Russian President. He told his people that he could not express in words his great feeling of pride and faith. Russian citizens had placed their deepest trust in him, and he promised not to let them down. Leaders should be responsible to their people, Yeltsin believed. "The great Russia is rising from its knees!" he shouted to the cheering crowd. Together, he assured them, they would turn their country into a successful, democratic, peace-loving state, ruled by fair laws. "Russia will revive!"<sup>1</sup> vowed Yeltsin.

He didn't need to tell the people what a precious price they had paid for 74 years of Communist rule. He didn't need to remind them how many of their fellow citizens had died at the hands of tyrants. The names Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and others were still very fresh in people's minds. They were fresh in Yeltsin's, too, for he had been born into the same oppressive system. His own childhood, he admitted, had been "a fairly joyless time."<sup>2</sup>

That joyless time began on February 1, 1931, in the Russian province of Sverdlovsk. For genera-

tions, Yeltsin's family had lived in the little farming village of Butko, scraping out a living from the soil. Raising wheat had never been an easy or rewarding business, but in the early 1930s it was particularly grim. Harvests were poor and food was scarce. This was the world into which Yeltsin was born.

The name Boris was given to him by the village priest. In the little church baptisms were held only once a month. By Russian custom, the baby's parents offered the priest a glass of home-brewed beer or vodka at the ceremony. But by the time little Yeltsin's turn came around late in the afternoon, the priest had already had several glasses. Slipping the baby into the baptismal font, he turned to argue with one of the church members. Yeltsin's mother, realizing her baby had been forgotten, ran to pull him from the water. "Well," remarked the unruffled priest, "if he can survive such an ordeal, it means he's a good, tough lad—and I name him Boris."<sup>3</sup> The name came from a Slavic word meaning "to fight." After that, Yeltsin confessed, religion never played a major role in his life.

What did play a major role was hardship. In the late 1920s, dictator Joseph Stalin and his Com-

munist government began forcing on peasants a new system called collective farming. Under this system the government took control of farms throughout the country. It seized all property except personal items such as clothing and furniture. Peasants were forced to move onto huge collective farms where they worked together to raise crops for the government. Several families lived on each farm, earning barely enough money to keep themselves alive. "The collective farm system proved to be a terrible misfortune," wrote one bitter survivor many years later. "It brought ruin, degradation, and millions of deaths."<sup>4</sup>

Like other peasants, the Yeltsin family was forced to join a collective farm. Fortunately, Boris's father also found work as a construction laborer, helping to build a potash plant. This job kept the family from total, hopeless poverty. The Yeltsins moved from Butko into a communal hut near the farm, the kind the government provided for laborers. The hut had 20 or so small rooms with a hall down the middle. In one of these tiny rooms lived the entire Yeltsin family—Boris, his parents, his younger brother and sister, and the goat that sup-



*Making it legal: An official shows two peasant women the document authorizing the takeover of their private farm. In 1935, when this photo was taken, the women were 100 and 104 years old. They were forced to work on a collective farm.*

plied their milk. The six of them slept on the floor, huddled together to keep warm. Outside was the hut's one primitive toilet and the well from which water had to be drawn.

Hauling water was one of Boris's chores, along with watching his younger siblings. The boy knew he had to take good care of the little ones or he would suffer his father's wrath. Boris's father was

quick-tempered, like his grandfather, and he blamed his son for whatever went wrong in the neighborhood. No matter if a prank or accident had not been Boris's fault—he was whipped for it all the same. Knowing that it irritated his father when he didn't cry, he did his best to stay dry-eyed during his whippings. Later in life, when he became a father himself, Boris was gentle with his own children, just as his mother had been with him. But like his father, he had a quick temper and a rough, immediate way of speaking his mind.

Boris also inherited his father's interest in new ideas. The elder Yeltsin loved to create plans for new machinery, drawing first in his head, then on paper, then refining and redrawing. His dream project was a machine that would lay bricks, and he was determined to make it work. But such creative thinking and questioning caused him to be hauled from his home late one night by Stalin's terrorist police. Under Stalin, no one was allowed to think for himself or question the way things were. The event was mysterious and terrifying to Boris, then only six. Although his father was eventually returned to the family, that night would mark Boris's memory forever.



*This photo, retrieved from an old family album, shows Boris with his parents and younger brother.*

For ten tough years, the family lived in the communal hut, Boris and his mother working the collective farm. During the summers, their job was to cut, stack, and prepare the hay for market. They were paid with half the crop; the other half went to the farm. The Yeltsins then sold their hay to buy bread at tremendously high prices, and the next summer the work began all over again.

Despite the family's poverty, Boris and his brother and sister were able to stay in school. He was a good student, if not always well behaved. It was during his graduation from elementary school that his outspokenness first became well known. Some 600 people had gathered for the graduation exercises when Boris asked to make a speech. After thanking some of his better teachers for their work, the boy began a verbal attack on his homeroom teacher. He accused her of mentally crippling and humiliating her students. On and on he went until at last the graduation program ended in disaster, and an irate school board refused to give Boris his diploma.

The incident didn't end there. Boris made sure the government investigated the teacher's conduct,



and before long she was dismissed. When, at last, he did receive his diploma, Yeltsin counted it as the first of his many political victories. It was also the first of many times that his outspokenness would get him into trouble.

Boris headed for secondary school despite the turmoil that World War II was then wreaking on Russia. Being too young to join the army, he and his friends decided to make their own weapons, one of them a cannon. It was Boris who volunteered to break into the local church where the ammunition was stored and steal the supplies they would need. Under the eye of a lazy guard, he slipped out with two hand grenades, which the boys carried to a forest 40 miles away to dismantle. Unfortunately, they didn't realize how dangerous it was to take apart a weapon. In the explosion that followed, two of Boris's fingers were destroyed and he was knocked unconscious. Frightened comrades carried him to the hospital, where surgeons removed the useless fingers from his left hand. It had been a close call for Boris Yeltsin—but it wouldn't be the last.

Always the leader, Boris organized annual

summer hikes with his schoolmates. Each trip had a purpose. The boys' mission the summer after ninth grade was to find the source of the Yaiva River, high in the Ural Mountains. A few days into the expedition, the group ran out of food, but they forged ahead, living off berries and plants they found in the woods. The trip took much longer than they expected, but at last they found the object of their search—a natural spring. Mission accomplished, they rested a bit and gathered their strength to head home.

It was the return trip that nearly brought disaster. So tired were the boys from the first half of their journey that they decided to find a boat to carry them home. In a remote village, they traded what few possessions they had for a flat-bottomed craft, and headed back. A short way into the trip, they stopped to explore a cave and the hills around it. Had they not taken this side trip, the expedition might have ended safely. But soon they became lost and wandered for nearly a week in the wilderness without food or fresh water. At last, desperately thirsty, they drank some stagnant water from a small pond, which made them extremely ill. Being