CONOR O'CLERY

MOSCOW DECEMBER 25 1991

THE LAST DAY OF THE SOVIET UNION

About the Book

History always comes down to the details. And when it comes to the fall of the Soviet Union, the details are crucial, especially when such an era-defining event hinged on the bitter personal relationship between two powerful men, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

On the twentieth anniversary of the end of the Cold War, Conor O'Clery has built his compelling and brilliantly constructed narrative of the fall of the Soviet Union around one day, December 25, 1991, the date Gorbachev resigned and the USSR was effectively consigned to history. From there, O'Clery looks back over the events of the previous six years: Gorbachev's reform policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*; Yeltsin's ignominious fall and then rise to the top; the defiance of the once docile Soviet republics; the failed August coup by the hardliners; and the events that swiftly followed until a secret meeting in a central European forest sealed the fate of the communist monolith and the clock ticked down to the last day.

The result is an intricately detailed, thoroughly researched book, based on interviews with many of the key figures in a drama of Shakespearean intensity, as well as contemporary reportage, the memoirs and diaries of key political figures and official documents. The book is written at a breathtaking, dramatic pace, drawing the reader in as it focuses equally on the personal and historical stories.

Moscow, December 25, 1991 is set to become a defining book on the fall of the Soviet Union.

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Moscow, December 25, 1991

The Last Day of the Soviet Union

CONOR O’CLERY

TRANSWORLD IRELAND

To Stanislav and Marietta

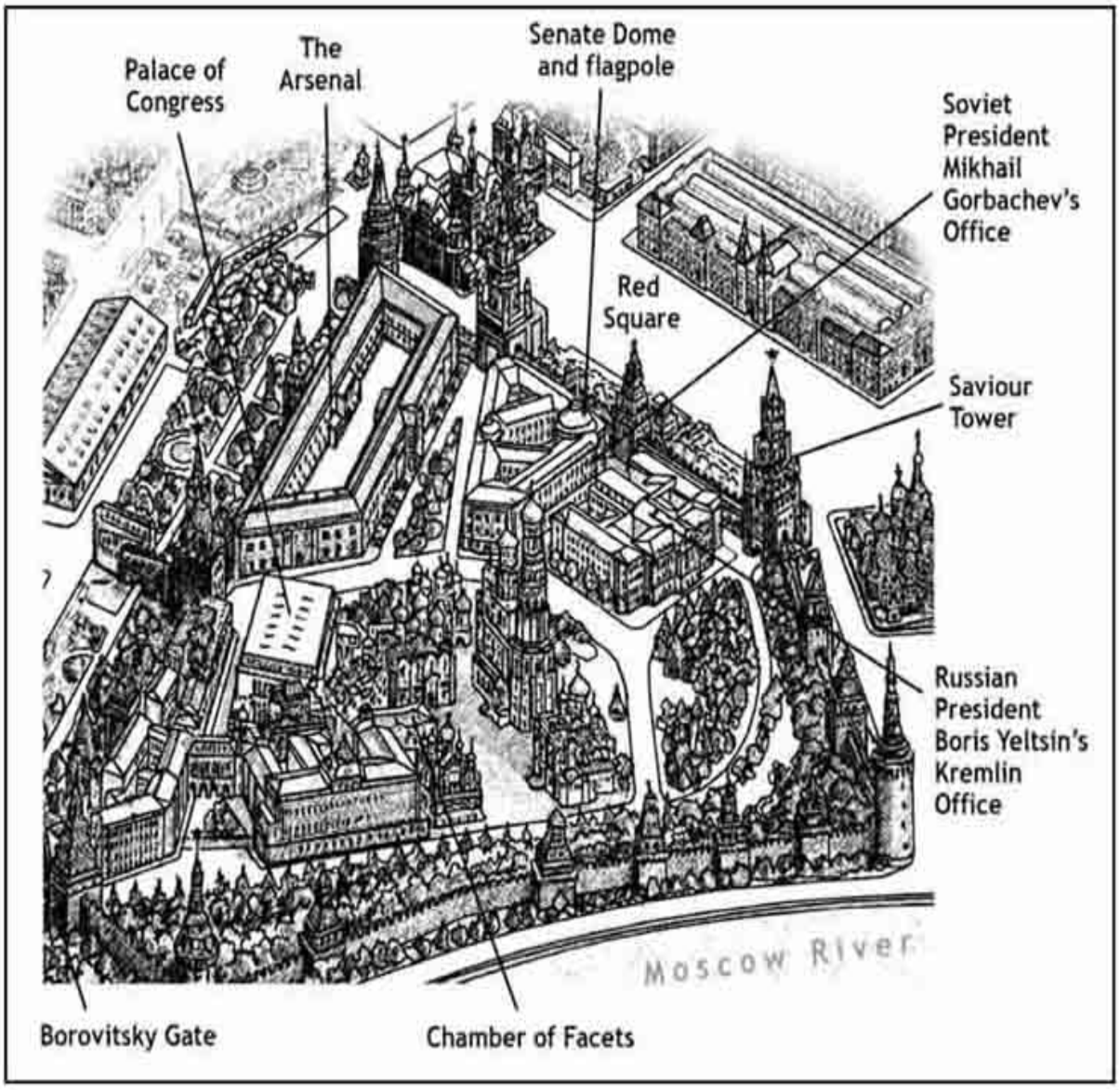
Goodbye our Red Flag.
You slipped down from the Kremlin roof
not so proudly
not so adroitly
as you climbed many years ago
on the destroyed Reichstag
smoking like Hitler's last fag.

Goodbye our Red Flag.
You were our brother and our enemy.
You were a soldier's comrade in trenches,
you were the hope of all captive Europe,
but like a Red curtain you concealed behind you
the Gulag
stuffed with frozen dead bodies.
Why did you do it,
our Red Flag?

I didn't take the Tsar's Winter Palace.
I didn't storm Hitler's Reichstag.
I'm not what you call a 'Commie'.
But I caress the Red Flag
and cry.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Russia, with the former Soviet republics in medium shading



The Kremlin showing the proximity of Gorbachev's presidential office and Yeltsin's temporary Kremlin office on December 25, 1991.

Preface

THIS BOOK IS a chronicle of one day in the history of one city. The day is Wednesday, December 25, 1991. The city is Moscow. It is the day the Soviet Union ends and the red flag comes down from the Kremlin. It is witness to a deeply personal and a politically charged drama, marked at the highest levels, and out of sight of the public, by shouts, tears, reminiscences and melodrama. It climaxes in a final act of surrender by Mikhail Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin, two extraordinary men who despised each other and whose interaction shaped modern Russia.

In reconstructing the events of this mid-winter day, I have combined my interviews and my research in television and newspaper archives with material from over a hundred memoirs, diaries, biographies and other works that have appeared since the fall of the Soviet Union, in English and Russian. I have also drawn on my experience observing Gorbachev and Yeltsin up close in the last four years of Soviet rule, when I was a correspondent based in Moscow. During this period I frequented the Kremlin and the Russian White House where the fight between the two rivals played out. I hung around parliamentary and party meetings, grabbing every opportunity to question the two leaders when they appeared. I interviewed Politburo members, editors, economists, nationalists, Communist Party radicals and hardliners, dissidents, striking coal miners, and countless people just trying to get by. I was a face in the crowd at pro-democracy rallies, at Red Square commemorations and at the barricades in the Baltics. I travelled around Russia, from Chechnya to Yakutsk, and to

the republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, observing the changes sweeping the USSR that would lead to the denouement on Christmas Day, 1991. And since then I have returned to Russia regularly, for both professional and personal reasons.

I was privileged to experience the last days of the Soviet Union and what came after not just as a foreign observer but as a member by marriage of a Russian-Armenian family. The Suvorovs live in Siberia where they experienced the excitement, hardships and absurdities of those turbulent years, and taught me the joys of summer at the dacha. My philologist wife, Zhanna, was a deputy in a regional soviet, and later, when we moved to Washington, she worked in the International Finance Corporation on the post-1991 project to privatize Russia. My father-in-law, Stanislav Suvorov, a shoemaker now in his eighties and still working in a Krasnoyarsk theatre, suffered under the old system. He served five years in jail for a simple act of speculation – selling his car at a profit. He later prospered by providing hand-made shoes for top party officials. My mother-in-law, Marietta, a party member, welcomed the free market that came with the transition from Gorbachev to Yeltsin with the comment, ‘At least now I don’t have to humiliate myself to buy some cheese.’ Nevertheless, I saw the pernicious effect on the family of economic and social chaos. My cousin-in-law Ararat, a police officer, was shot dead by the mafia in Krasnoyarsk. Marietta’s savings disappeared overnight with hyperinflation. My sister-in-law Larisa, director of a music school, went unpaid for months in the post-communist economic turmoil, and one day received, in lieu of salary, a cardboard box of men’s socks. All this, and an attempt by the KGB to compromise me by trying (and failing) to intimidate Zhanna into working for them shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, has given me a unique

insight into what was going on in the society that threw up Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and how it all came to a head.

In compiling the events of December 25, 1991, I have used only information that I have been able to source or verify. None of the dialogue or emotions of the characters has been invented. I have used my best judgement to determine when someone's recollection is misleading and self-serving, or simply mistaken, as the mind plays tricks with the past and witnesses sometimes contradict each other. One person in the Kremlin recalls that it snowed heavily in Moscow on December 25, 1991, others that it didn't (it was a dry mild day, confirmed by meteorological records). Some players have vivid recall, others do not: Andrey Grachev and Yegor Gaidar were able to provide me with detailed accounts of what went on inside the Gorbachev and Yeltsin camps respectively, but Yeltsin's collaborator Gennady Burbulis told me he simply did not have memories of that long-ago day.

A note on names and spelling: Russian names contain a first name, a patronymic and a surname, hence Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev. The respectful form of address is the first name plus patronymic, which can cause confusion outside Russia – once after I politely addressed Gorbachev on television as 'Mikhail Sergeyevich', a friend complimented me for being on first-name terms with the Soviet leader. Among family and friends a diminutive form of the first name is common, such as Sasha for Alexander, Borya for Boris and Tolya for Anatoly. For the spelling of Russian names and words I have used the more readable system of transliteration, using -y rather than -i, -ii or -iy, thus Yury rather than Yuri. Different versions may appear in the bibliography where I have not changed publishers' spellings. For clarity I have included a list of the main characters at the end of the book.

Many people made this book possible by generously sharing their time and insights. I would especially like to

acknowledge Jonathan Anderson, Ed Bentley, Stanislav Budnitsky, Charles Caudill, Giulietto Chiesa, Ara Chilingarova, Fred Coleman, Nikolay Filippov, Olga Filippova, the late Yegor Gaidar, Ekaterina Genieva, Frida Ghitis, Martin Gilman, Svetlana Gorkhova, Andrey Grachev, Ron Hill, Steve Hurst, Gabriella Ivacs, Tom Johnson, Eason Jordan, Rick Kaplan, Ted Koppel, Sergey Kuznetsov, Harold Mciver Leich, Liu Heung Shing, Stuart H. Loory, Philip McDonagh, Lara Marlowe, Seamus Martin, Ellen Mickiewicz, Andrey Nikeryasov, Michael O'Clery, Eddie Ops, Tanya Paleeva, Robert Parnica, Claire Shipman, Olga Sinitsyna, Martin Sixsmith, Sarah Smyth, Yury Somov, Conor Sweeney, and the staff at the Gorbachev Foundation and the Russian State Library of Foreign Literature. A special thanks to Professor Stephen White of the University of Glasgow who provided me with some out-ofprint Russian memoirs; John Murray, lecturer in Russian at Trinity College Dublin who read the first draft and made invaluable suggestions; Brian Langan of Transworld Ireland who edited and corrected the manuscript with forensic skill; and Clive Priddle of PublicAffairs who inspired and helped shape the concept. No words are adequate to acknowledge the research and editing talents of my wife, Zhanna, who travelled with me to Moscow a number of times to help track down archives and sources, and whose involvement at every stage in the composition and editing of the book made it something of a joint enterprise.

Introduction

'During my tenure, I have been attacked by all those in Russian society who can scream and write … The revolutionaries curse me because I have strongly and conscientiously favoured the use of the most decisive measures … As for the conservatives, they attack me because they have mistakenly blamed me for all the changes in our political system.'

Russian reformer Count Sergey Yulyevich Witte,
in his resignation letter as prime minister in 1906.

DURING HIS SIX years and nine months as leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev is accompanied everywhere by two plainclothes colonels with expressionless faces and trim haircuts. They are so unobtrusive that they often go unnoticed by the president's visitors, and even by his aides. These silent military men sit in the anteroom as he works in his office. They ride in a Volga saloon behind his ZiL limousine as he is driven to and from the Kremlin. They occupy two seats at the back of the aircraft when he travels out of Moscow and they sleep overnight at his dacha or city apartment, wherever he happens to be.

The inscrutable colonels are the guardians of a chunky black Samsonite briefcase with a gold lock weighing one and a half kilogrammes that always has to be within reach of the president. This is the *chemodanchik*, or 'little suitcase'. Everyone, even Gorbachev, refers to it as the 'nuclear button'. Rather it is a portable device that connects the president to Strategic Rocket Forces at an underground command centre on the outskirts of Moscow. It contains the communications necessary to permit the firing of the Soviet Union's long-range nuclear weapons, many of them pointed at targets in the United States. The job of the colonels – there are three assigned to guard the

case, but one is always off duty – is to help the president, if ever the occasion should arise, to put the strategic forces on alert and authorize a strike.

There are three nuclear suitcases in total. One is with Mikhail Gorbachev, another is with the minister for defence and a third is assigned to the chief of the general staff. Any one of the devices is sufficient to authorize the launch of a missile, but only the president can *lawfully* order a nuclear strike. So long as Gorbachev possesses the *chemodanchik* he is legally the commander of the country's strategic forces, and the Soviet Union remains a nuclear superpower.

This all changes on December 25, 1991. At 7.00 p.m., as the world watches on television, Mikhail Gorbachev announces that he is resigning. The communist monolith known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is breaking up into separate states. He has no further role. Immediately afterwards Boris Yeltsin, the president of newly independent Russia, is scheduled to come to his Kremlin office to take formal possession of the suitcase, whereupon the two colonels will say their goodbyes to Gorbachev and leave with Yeltsin. This will be the final moment in the disintegration of the superpower that has been ruled by Gorbachev since 1985, and that dominates a land mass stretching over eleven time zones and half the globe. Thereafter Russia, the largest of the fifteen republics, will be the sole nuclear power. Boris Yeltsin will acquire the legal capacity to destroy the United States several times over. It is an awesome responsibility. The Soviet arsenal consists of 27,000 nuclear weapons, of which 11,000 are on missiles capable of reaching the United States. One of these warheads alone could destroy a city.

The handover is to be the final act in a drama of Shakespearean intensity. Its major players are two contrasting figures whose baleful interaction has changed the globe's balance of power. It is the culmination of a

struggle for supremacy between Mikhail Gorbachev, the urbane, sophisticated communist idolized by the capitalist world, and Boris Yeltsin, the impetuous hard-drinking democrat perceived as a wrecker in Western capitals.

The ousted president and his usurper behave in a statesman-like manner before the cameras. Yet rarely in world history has an event of such magnitude been determined by the passionate dislike of two men for each other. Some years earlier, at the pinnacle of his power, Gorbachev humiliated Yeltsin publicly. The burly Siberian has never forgotten and in December 1991, the roles are reversed. Gorbachev is the one who is denigrated, reduced to tears as he and his wife, Raisa, are hustled out of their presidential residence. Even the carefully choreographed arrangements for the transfer of the nuclear communications and codes are thrown into disarray at the last minute through Yeltsin's petulance and Gorbachev's pride.

Nevertheless, the malevolence of Yeltsin and the vanity of Gorbachev do not stand in the way of something akin to a political miracle taking place. On December 25, 1991, a historical event on a par with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 or the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 occurs without a foreign war or bloody revolution as catalyst. Communist Yugoslavia disintegrates in flames but the Soviet Union breaks up almost impassively as the world looks on in disbelief. The mighty Soviet army relinquishes an empire of subject republics without firing a shot. It all happens very quickly. Few politicians or scholars predicted, even as the year 1991 began, the scale and scope of the historic upheaval at year's end.

The Soviet Union was born in the civil war that followed the 1917 October Revolution, when the Bolshevik faction led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin seized control over most of the old Russian empire. Industrialized with great brutality

under Josef Stalin, it repulsed invading Nazi forces in World War II and emerged as one of the world's two superpowers. The subsequent Cold War between East and West shaped international politics and assumptions for almost half a century.

But Lenin's great socialist experiment faltered. The economy stagnated and then collapsed. The centre lost control. On December 25, 1991, the country that defeated Hitler's Germany simply ceases to exist. In Mikhail Gorbachev's words, 'One of the most powerful states in the world collapsed before our very eyes.'

It is a stupendous moment in the story of mankind, the end of a millennium of Russian and Soviet empire, and the beginning of Russia's national and state renaissance. It signals the final defeat of the twentieth century's two totalitarian systems – Nazi fascism and Soviet communism – that embroiled the world in the greatest war in history. It is the day that allows American conservatives to celebrate – prematurely – the prophecy of the philosopher Francis Fukuyama that the collapse of the USSR will mark the 'end of history', with the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

Mikhail Gorbachev created the conditions for the end of totalitarianism and Boris Yeltsin delivered the death blow. But neither is honoured in Russia in modern times as a national hero, nor is the date of the transfer of power formally commemorated in Moscow. Contemporary leaders discourage any celebration of December 25, 1991. What happened that day is viewed by many in Russia as, in Vladimir Putin's words, a 'great geopolitical catastrophe'. It is a reminder that the fall of their once-mighty superpower was celebrated in the United States as a victory in the Cold War, rather than as the triumph of a people who peacefully overthrew a totalitarian system to embrace democracy and free market economics. As a former Russian presidential chief of staff, Alexander Leontiyev, put it not long

afterwards, ‘Americans got so drunk at the USSR’s funeral that they’re still hung-over.’

Indeed, what is remarkable is the number of Americans who gather around the deathbed for the obsequies for communist power. Never before or since are Russian and American interests so intertwined. The distrust and enmity of the long Cold War dissolves into a remarkable dalliance between the competing nuclear powers. Americans from the International Monetary Fund and from the Chicago School of Economics are to be found in Moscow collaborating with Russian policy-makers on a new direction for the Russian economy. Their guiding hands are at the elbow of Yeltsin’s ministers as they embark on a mission unprecedented in economic history: the dismantling of the communist model and its replacement with the raw capitalism of neo-liberal economics.

During a visit to Russia just days before Gorbachev’s resignation, US secretary of state James Baker marvels at how in all his meetings, one theme is uniform: ‘the intense desire to satisfy the United States’. With each of the new republics trying to establish positive relations with America, he reckons that ‘our ability to affect their behaviour’ will never be greater than at this time. American president George H. W. Bush observes that the behaviour of the new states is ‘designed specifically to gain US support for what they had done’. The deference to the United States is such that all the emerging new countries declare their adherence to a list of democratic principles laid down by the Bush administration to earn diplomatic recognition.

In the dying days of the Soviet Union, American diplomats and Russia’s political figures enjoy such close relations that they consult each other almost on a daily basis. Gorbachev addresses the US ambassador as ‘Comrade’. James Baker and his opposite number Eduard Shevardnadze dine in each other’s homes and gossip about

world affairs. Friendly contacts take place between the top agents of the CIA and the KGB who have spied on each other for decades. American evangelists show up in Moscow to rejoice and proselytize. A score of Christian leaders visit the Kremlin in the dying days of Soviet communism and the most ardent cleric among them tells Gorbachev, 'You are the person most prayed for in American churches; you are an instrument of God.' The Kremlin corridors echo during the last twenty-four hours with American accents as US television personnel crowd into the president's office to record the final hours. The only televised interviews given by the great Russian rivals are to US news channels.

Mikhail Gorbachev considers himself a personal friend of President Bush, who in the end tried to help him sustain a reformed Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin courts the US president to gain his approval for breaking up that same entity. The former wants the approval of history; the latter craves international respect. Both measure their standing in the world by the quality of their relations with the United States. They are equally keen to assure Washington that the transfer of control over nuclear weapons will not endanger world peace. The Americans are just as anxious to maintain a friendship that advances their global interests and economic and political philosophy.

December 25, 1991, is therefore a high-water mark in Moscow's relations with the Western world, and in particular the United States. Only once before in history has Russia looked to the West with such enthusiasm for inspiration. That was three centuries earlier when Peter the Great introduced European reforms and moved the Russian capital from Moscow to St Petersburg as a window to the West. His legacy survived until 1917 and the triumph of the Bolsheviks.

Many notable events also take place in Moscow this day. The red flag with its hammer and sickle is hauled down

from the Kremlin for the last time, and the white, blue and red tricolour of pre-revolutionary Russia is hoisted in its place. The Russian congress changes the name of the country from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Russian Federation, or simply Russia.

At its close, the colonels say goodbye to Gorbachev and take the little suitcase to its new custodian.

Thus as many Westerners celebrate Christmas Day, 1991, the Soviet Union ceases to exist and Russia escapes from the cul-de-sac into which Lenin led it seventy-four years earlier, and a great country takes its place among the nations of Europe.

1

December 25: Before the Dawn

IN THE FIRST moments of December 25, 1991, The Midnight chimes ring out from the clock on the Saviour Tower inside the Kremlin. This is the signal for the hourly changing of the honour guard at the great red and black granite cubes that form the Mausoleum where lies the embalmed body of the founder of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Curious late-night strollers in Red Square, Russian and foreign, gather to watch as the greatcoated sentinels goose-step off to the Saviour Gate like marionettes, jerking their elbows high in the air. A new shift emerges to take over at what is officially known as the Soviet Union's Sentry Post No 1.

Many of the onlookers on this dry, still Wednesday morning are bare-headed. It is mild by mid-winter standards in Moscow, about 1 degree centigrade above freezing. The bitterly cold spell earlier in December when the temperature dipped to 17 degrees below zero ended with a heavy fall of snow three days ago. The vast cobbled square has since been swept clean, but the snow still gleams on the brightly lit onion domes of St Basil's Cathedral and on the swallow-tailed crenellations of the high brick Kremlin walls. It fringes the dome of the Senate Building inside the Kremlin, from which flies the red flag of the Soviet Union with its gold hammer and sickle emblem,

clearly visible from Red Square. It has flown there since 1918, when the Russian capital was transferred from Petrograd back to Moscow.

A small group of people have assembled at the north-western end of Red Square, close by St Nicholas's Tower. Many of them hold flickering candles and press close to a group of American clerics who are conducting a midnight service. The minister, a middle-aged man in white robes, reads aloud from a large Bible. The preachers have travelled specially to Russia for this Christmas Day so that they can celebrate Christ's birthday in Red Square, in what is still officially the godless Soviet Union, something they could not dream of doing in past years.

Near the Arsenal Tower of the Kremlin stands a tall *yolka*, a New Year fir tree. Some foreigners mistake it for a Christmas tree. However, in Russia the Orthodox Christmas falls on January 7 in accordance with the old Julian calendar.

Even so, on Little Lubyanka Street, a fifteen-minute walk away past the yellow neo-renaissance façade of the feared KGB's headquarters, the strains of 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' in Russian ring out in the night air. More than a thousand worshippers are celebrating midnight Mass in the hundredyear-old Roman Catholic Church of St Louis, crushed into eighteen rows of wooden pews set among squat stone pillars that obstruct the views of the altar. By the door a notice states: 'If you are suffering, if you are tired of life, know that Christ loves you.' A priest conducting the service enthuses about the historical nature of the day, and 'the return of our government to a normal, Christian world'.

The congregation used to consist mainly of foreigners, says Sofia Peonkova, a regular attendee, but she has noticed that in the last two years many Russians have started coming. Yulia Massarskaya, aged eighty-two, tells a visitor that this is her first time in a Catholic church in

Moscow since the 1917 October Revolution, when she was eight years old. ‘I have never felt this good,’ she whispers. ‘It is like coming back home.’

The service ends, the worshippers disperse and the darkened streets of Moscow fall quiet for a few hours. But long before dawn many thousands of people begin emerging from the city’s grim apartment blocks. Dressed in padded coats, scarves and fur hats, they make their way through the icy slush to catch the early trams and metro trains. It is the beginning of a daily search for food that has preoccupied Moscow’s citizens for months. Their overriding goal is to find where deliveries have been made overnight. They form irritated lines in the darkness at grimy stores where the reward for waiting might be a loaf of bread, a scrawny chicken leg or a few wilted vegetables.

Shoppers in Moscow in December 1991 do not look for goods, they look for queues. They obey the advice of the Russian television programme *Vesti*: ‘If you come across a queue, join it and count yourself lucky.’

Not since World War II has Moscow experienced such deprivation. The government has imposed rationing of ‘meat products, butter, vegetable oils, grains, pasta products, sugar, salt, matches, tobacco products and household, bath and other soaps … *where available*’. Three days ago the deputy mayor, Yury Luzhkov, admitted that three hundred and fifty stores in the city have run out of meat.

Everyone in Moscow – engineers, actors, professors, shoemakers, shop assistants, construction workers, poets – snaps up and hoards anything they can find to buy. If a consignment of cheese, or salami, or even just a batch of loaves, appears unexpectedly, people form a queue and take as much as they can carry. Starvation would be a reality for many families were it not for the buckets of potatoes and piles of cabbages kept in their apartments

that were harvested in suburban plots before the snows of winter came.

As Moscow stirs to life, small covered trucks with canvas flaps splutter and cough their way along the city's potholed roads from the newspaper printing houses. They stop at street kiosks to dump parcels of newspapers on the ground. The bundles are much lighter than usual. Most dailies are reduced to four pages, as newsprint and printing ink are in short supply.

The concerns of the populace are reflected in stories about shortages and imminent price rises. A headline in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* says simply, 'Meat has arrived in Odessa'. At least it is more positive than 'No Bread in Krasnoyarsk' on *Pravda*'s front page. There is little in the skimpy newspapers to indicate that this will be a momentous day in the political history of the country, or indeed of the world. There is a clue, however, in *Pravda*. In a single paragraph on page one the Communist Party newspaper notes, without comment, that President Mikhail Gorbachev will make a major announcement, live on state television, before the day is out.

2

December 25: Sunrise

THE HEAVY SNOW on the spruce and fir trees that screen the large dacha west of Moscow has melted a little during the mild winter night. Water drips from the pine needles, and trickles out of the snow piled high along the driveway, giving the tarmacadam a dark sheen.

In an upstairs room, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, president of the Soviet Union, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, puts on a starched white single-cuff shirt and a dark single-breasted navy wool suit with muted stripes, handmade by his tailors on Kutuzovsky Prospekt. He selects from his large collection of silk ties a particular neckpiece, black with a red floral paisley design, which he often wears on important occasions.

Small in stature, with magnetic hazel eyes and silver hair that has long since receded to expose the purple birthmark on his head, Gorbachev this morning is exhausted and slightly hung-over. His duties as president are almost finished, but last night he lingered for a long time in his Kremlin office to reminisce with Moscow's police chief, Arkady Murashev, who called out of the blue to wish him well. Very few people have been taking the trouble to do that in the dying days of his reign, and on an impulse he had invited Murashev, a former political opponent, to join him for a glass or two of cognac. With the

nuclear suitcase sitting an arm’s length away on the table, the last Soviet president took great pains to impress upon his visitor that he had not made any mistakes in his quest to reform the Soviet Union. It was not his fault that it was falling apart.

There is nothing unusual in Gorbachev’s staying late at the Kremlin. Work has always kept him in the office until ten or eleven o’clock. On arriving home, he and his wife Raisa have made it a practice to go for a walk together in the dark before retiring to bed. He tells her of the events of the day as they stroll along the paths around the dacha. He holds nothing back. He once caused a scandal among Russians by saying publicly that he even discussed matters of state with his wife. Gorbachev numbers the world’s leading politicians as his friends, but his only really close ally in life is his companion and soulmate of thirty-eight years. They have always ‘rejoiced at the successes and suffered the failures of the other’, as he put it once, ‘just as if they were our own’.

After breakfast in the morning – in winter it is always hot cereal, served in the upper-floor living quarters by their servant Shura, who wears a headscarf and no make-up, as Raisa requires of all the female staff – the president crosses the corridor to his library, where glass-fronted bookcases reach to the ceiling. In a space in the rows of bound volumes is a framed black-and-white photograph of Raisa, his favourite, taken when she was a rather prim-looking student at Moscow University. There is another of his father, Sergey, posing in simple military tunic decorated with three medals and two Orders of the Red Star for his service in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany. These pictures, and a valuable icon embossed with gold leaf depicting the Archangel Mikhail which the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Alexey II, gave Gorbachev for his sixtieth birthday in March, will have to be packed with particular care when they leave.

Off the library is a small wood-panelled study with a desk of Karelian birch on which sit several white telephones and one red telephone beneath a transparent cover – the hotline for national emergencies, which the cleaners are instructed never to touch. Raisa has learned of late to dread these telephones ringing out, ‘like a gunshot, destroying the peace of the night’, bringing ‘shouts of despair, entreaties, suffering and, sometimes, death’.

Petite and attractive at fifty-nine, Raisa too is showing the strain of this period of political upheaval. It has, as she puts it, tested her spirit, her mind and her will, and brought her incurable heartache and sleepless nights. Her health has been poor since she collapsed with a stroke during the attempted coup against Gorbachev in August. The stroke affected her power of speech and the movement in her right arm. The wrinkles on her once-porcelain complexion reveal the torment of watching her husband shrink in stature day by day.

To Raisa, Mikhail Gorbachev is a man of destiny. Indeed many superstitious people have interpreted the distinctive birthmark on his head as an omen. But Mikhail and Raisa themselves believe they were once given a sign that he is special. When they were in their twenties, both had the same dream. They were in a deep, black well from which they were trying to get out, and they kept falling back. Finally they succeeded in escaping and they saw in front of them a wide road and a huge bright sun. Raisa told her husband then, addressing him by his pet name, ‘Misha, you are destined for greatness.’

Gorbachev has come to see himself as the embodiment of providence. He talks about his mission, of being *chosen* to carry out *perestroika* – a task that began as reconstruction of society and has come to mean for him the revival of his motherland. He sees his forced abdication as the outcome of an epic struggle ‘between good and evil, loyalty and treachery, hope and disillusion, generosity and

vengefulness’. To him the day of his downfall is ‘a black page in the history of Russia’.

While in his study, the Soviet president has an opportunity to cast his eyes for the umpteenth time over his much-annotated resignation speech. It will be one of the most important pronouncements of his career. It will define him and his legacy, and put down a marker for the future of the country. He has little influence over that now of course. He is being forced to transfer power into the hands of ‘incompetent, irresponsible people’, ambitious and ruthless political adventurers, who he is firmly convinced are sacrificing the Soviet Union for the sake of their ardent desire to take over the Kremlin and push him out.

Less than two weeks ago, Gorbachev was telling George Bush on the telephone how confident he was that the Soviet Union would survive. At the time he had reason to believe that he would continue as president and that he would be residing indefinitely in the state dacha here in Razdory on the banks of the Moscow River. The successor to Lenin has done everything to keep the Union in existence since it started falling apart after the August coup four months ago, and the republics one after another began declaring their intention to break away. He has made himself hoarse trying to convince republic leaders, visiting statesmen, journalists and anyone else who would listen that the country should not be split up, that it was absurd, that it would lead to famine, civil war, blood.

The demise of the superpower he inherited finally became inevitable the previous Saturday, when all the republics ganged up to reject even a weakened central authority. Only on Monday, just two days ago, did he decide – he had little choice – that he would announce his resignation this evening. It was only on Monday afternoon that he established the terms for a peaceful transition with his hated rival. This was a painful experience. And he is not

even being accorded the dignity of a solemn farewell ceremony.

At least he does not face the prospect of exile or death, the fate of two other recently deposed communist leaders in Europe, Erich Honecker of East Germany and Nicolae Ceauşescu of Romania. But he knows there are people only too eager to discredit him to justify what they are doing.

Under the transition agreement, the couple understand they have three days to leave the presidential dacha, their home for six years, after which they must give the keys to the new ruler of Russia. They will leave behind many memories, of entertaining world leaders around the dining table and talking long into the night about reshaping the world. There is much to do now of a more mundane nature. They have to sort through books, pictures and documents, and pack away clothes and private things to move to a new home. They have a similar task to perform at their city apartment on Moscow's Lenin Hills, which also belongs to the state.

When Gorbachev moved his family here they expected it would be for life. The dacha, called officially Barvikha-4, was the ultimate symbol of success for the top Soviet bureaucrat. They occupied smaller government dachas during Gorbachev's ascent to the pinnacle of Soviet power. As state-owned residences they were quite impersonal, and Raisa disliked that they were 'always on the move, always lodgers'. But this was to be their final stop. This dacha was different. It was their creation. The yellow three-storey complex was modelled in Second Empire style under Gorbachev's personal supervision after he became general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. In those days the party leader had emperor-like powers of command, and it was built in six months by a special corps of the Soviet army, earning the generals a few Medals of Labour. This had been Raisa's first real home. 'My home is not simply my castle,' she once said. 'It is my world, my galaxy.'