

# Why Boris the Basher sees red

**A**h, the simple proletarian life. I watched Moscow whizz by as I sipped iced champagne in the back of an elegant, black Chaika limousine, a fine Bukhara carpet under my feet, Michael Jackson on the sound system and Natasha next to me admiring her new French shoes.

Outside, Muscovites queued up miserably awaiting crammed, smelly buses to take them on long, bumpy rides back to tiny suburban apartments. They carried string bags that held a loaf of black bread, a tin of mackerel or sardines and a bag of dirt-encrusted beetles—their dinner.

The surly Muscovites glared at the limo, at me and at Natasha with murderous envy. One yelled at me.

"He called us 'party pigs,'" translated Natasha.

That, in essence, is why many Muscovites will vote in today's Soviet elections for Boris Yeltsin. Boris the Basher has promised to take away the Chaikas and other goodies that make life opulent for the USSR's 25,000 Communist party fat-cats and pretty dandy for 23 million loafing bureaucrats. Yeltsin could very well upset Mikhail Gorbachev's apple cart.

With splendid symbolism, he is running in a Moscow district against the director of the ZIL auto plant that makes Chaika limos.

Yeltsin was the feisty, outspoken party boss of Moscow until he angered too many Politburo bigwigs with his calls for real and faster reform—and an end to privileges for party nabobs. So Boris was fired and given a do-nothing job. That, the party hoped, would be the end of the popular and irritating Yeltsin. But not so.

Everywhere I walked in Moscow's trendy, artsy Arbat section were signs and graffiti saying, "Bring back Boris" or "Boris, champion of the people." Boris is now

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back, with a vengeance. He claims the party will sabotage his election by fixing the vote. Maybe. But I suspect Yeltsin will be a bigger threat to the party from the outside than the inside.

Soviet history is replete with strong, dynamic men who have galvanized popular discontent to become a major challenge to Russia's rulers. One thinks instantly of the great rebels, Boris Gudanov, Pugachev and Stenka Razin. There's also something about Yeltsin that reminds me—and perhaps the Politburo—of Father Gapon, the priest who led the famous 1905 Bloody Sunday uprising, a key event in Russian history.

Russia was at war with Japan in the Far East and was being badly beaten. Japan was despised as a nation of primitives. How could it defeat mighty Mother Russia, asked furious Russians? This anger, and tensions caused by poverty and social stagnation, erupted when Father Gapon led a protest march through St. Petersburg's streets. Troops opened fire, hundreds died and the impromptu revolt was crushed. But Russian autoeracy was shaken to its foundations—and the fuse that led to the 1917 revolution had been lit.

Could Yeltsin turn into another populist rebel figure?

Are there echoes of the shameful defeat of the Russo-Japanese War in the retreat from Afghanistan? Yeltsin claims he wants power only to strip party fat-cats and bureaucrats of their perks and cushy lifestyles. They, says Yeltsin, are Russia's exploiters. His electric words are producing powerful stirrings among ordinary, long-suffering Soviet citizens.

I have seen how the 25,000 party fat-cats live. Huge, majestic apartments with big-screen TVs, Johnny Walker Black and fine art. Limos, maids, nannies and assorted flunkies. Posh villas outside Moscow, walled off and guarded from mere proletarians. Ritzy marble and alabaster spas, complete with liveried servants, rich wine cellars and a private phone system. Special stores stocked with western goods, western movies and electronics.

This is the good life, Soviet style. But only for the senior party elite, 01% of the population, who live like Turkish pashas. The rest of the proletarians live in seedy, Third World backwardness.

What fertile soil for revolution. And this is what Boris the Basher may produce, particularly if he is allowed to run amuck. The party must at all costs close ranks and prevent an opposition from forming. There are simply too many angry, fed up Soviet citizens. The economy is grinding to a halt. The only things the USSR produces efficiently these days are arms and windy speeches.

In the bad old days, Stalin would have had Yeltsin quietly poisoned. Mikhail Gorbachev's Russia doesn't do these things, so a way must be found to either put Yeltsin out to pasture or harness his energies and popularity. If Moscow isn't careful, it may end up with a second Bloody Sunday on its hands.