BOOKS & THE ARTS

All the President's Mien

ABRAHAM BRUMBERG

YELTSIN: A Revolutionary Life.
By Leon Aron.
St. Martin's. 934 pp. $35.

Leon Aron, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, has over the past few years become known as an authority on Boris Yeltsin, a man he patently likes and has vigorously defended against his detractors, mostly on television programs such as *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*. Regularly identified by his TV hosts as author of a forthcoming biography of Yeltsin, Aron has now produced the long-promised volume, and the least one can say is that it does not disappoint: The author is as generous in the assessment of his subject, as charitable in "accentuating the positive," as one would expect from his television performances.

Aron's book, more than 900 pages long, fairly brims with data and reflections—copious quotations from Yeltsin's speeches and interviews; minute descriptions of the circumstances under which they were delivered; faithful reconstructions of Yeltsin's moods, varying from euphoria to dark depression; apposite quotations from other thinkers (Isaiah Berlin, for one); historical digressions and comparisons pondered by the author during the book's lengthy gestation. The intellectual fare produced by such cogitations—I might as well lay my cards on the table—is not very compelling. But it testifies to Aron's earnest investment in his subject.

Aron also devotes a fair number of pages to Yeltsin's childhood, youth and formative years as party first secretary in Sverdlovsk. Which is to the good, inasmuch as some of the traits that became so prominent during Yeltsin's presidential (cum, for a time, prime ministerial) tenure were already sprouting during his apprenticeship. Yeltsin's stamina, ebullience and industriousness were evident—as was his habit of running roughshod over subordinates who failed to meet his exacting demands, his scant concern for the niceties of democratic procedure and his uncanny ability to project a populist image combining scorn for the privileged higher-ups with concern for the man on the street. Notwithstanding Yeltsin's stern criticism of his superiors' bourgeois appetites, he earned their blessings and substantial popular support as well. Clearly, here was a man who knew how to get things done.

Aron is not merely an undiscriminating groupie. He takes note, for instance, of Yeltsin's fawning attitude to his onetime boss Leonid Brezhnev, whose "wisdom, giant talent for organization, human charm and bubbling energy" he extolled. Yeltsin's speeches also bristled with mordant condemnations of the mistakes, ineptitude and grandiloquent claims made by party and government bureaucrats, some of them—this by implication—high-level colleagues. All this, however, was typical of Soviet rhetoric, with its pattern of extravagant praise for this or that achievement, immediately followed—with the mere introduction of the word "however" (*odnako*)—by a litany of criticisms and denunciations. (In time the "*odnako* syndrome" became a favorite subject of Soviet cartoonists.) In Yeltsin's case both the censure and acclaim tended to excess (as did much else in his behavior), but Aron offers little evidence for his observation that astringent remarks about bureaucrats should be interpreted as a presentiment of Yeltsin's future "revolutionary" challenge to the *verkhushka* (top leadership).

Aron argues that Yeltsin is like Lincoln and de Gaulle: a rare 'authoritarian democrat.' Tantalizing term, but how does he get to it?

Indeed, the term "revolutionary," which Aron uses in the title of his book and to describe the bulk of Yeltsin's tenure, encapsulates the author's basic approach to his subject. "Revolution," after all, is a good word

Abraham Brumberg has written extensively on Russian and Eastern European developments.

(forget 1917). Yeltsin, Aron acknowledges, committed many horrendous errors. Some of them arrested the country's political and economic progress, some resulted in misery for millions of people, some vitiated the very democracy he vowed to uphold. Yet in Aron's view, these were bound to be temporary and were indeed justified by their "revolutionary" end: to bring Russia into the realm of freedom and plenty.

Like Lincoln and de Gaulle, two men the biographer reveres, Aron is confident that Yeltsin will come to be regarded as a member of a "club, perhaps history's most exclusive, consist[ing] of those who took over great countries on the very brink of a national catastrophe, held them together, repaired and restored them, and, in the process, changed them fundamentally for the better." Both de Gaulle and Lincoln, he says, did not "hesitate to deploy large-scale and often indiscriminate violence," and both regarded "the acquisition, retention and aggregation of personal power…[as] inseparable from the good of the nation." Ditto presumably for Yeltsin who, like de Gaulle and Lincoln and other (unnamed) members of the "club," never "crossed the line beyond which fundamental democratic principles were irreparably compromised. 'Dictators' to their 'critics,'" they all "belong instead to that rare political breed: authoritarian democrats."

A tantalizing term, but how did Aron arrive at it? For one thing, by his predilection for seemingly compelling but in fact misleading comparisons. I am not an authority on either Lincoln or de Gaulle, nor have I read the rather sparse sources on which Aron based his comparative reflections, but I find it difficult to see how Yeltsin's career, first as a Communist believer and then as an authoritarian (all right, democratic authoritarian) anti-Communist, has much in common with the political biographies of those two men.

Moreover, Yeltsin wielded power under turbulent but quite different circumstances. In 1993, perhaps the most crucial year of his tenure, he repeatedly used arbitrary methods and blatant lies (such as indiscriminately labeling his adversaries "fascists," "Communists" or both) to hobble the democratically elected legislature, many of whose members were at first highly sympathetic to him, and to concentrate more power in his own hands. (In his autobiographical *The View From the Kremlin*, published in 1994, Yeltsin gloats about preparing to give the Parliament "a good horse-whipping.")

Yeltsin's rhetoric was applauded by many "democrats" who demanded the abrogation of all political rights enjoyed by their right-wing adversaries. As the year drew to a close, he finally succeeded in dissolving the Congress by force, in the process causing more than a hundred casualties, gutting the Supreme Court and foisting a new Constitution on the country with enormous powers vested in the presidency. The legitimacy of the vote approving that Constitution has been challenged by a number of distinguished Russian intellectuals; Yeltsin, however, managed to sidestep this criticism, and the critics finally gave up. The biographer writes not a word about this.

Aron's roseate view is unsupportable: A third of Russians are below the poverty line, and the state of public health has never been so grave.

It is true that in 1991 a severe shortage of goods afflicted food stores and living standards were ravaged, but Aron offers no evidence to demonstrate that these forces determined Yeltsin's behavior. Nor is it helpful to speculate that Yeltsin truly believed in the "retention and aggregation of personal power" as "inseparable from the good of the nation." So, one can assume, did Stalin. So certainly did Lenin (if we substitute the word "proletariat" for "nation"), and so thought many other would-be and actual dictators.

Aron pays scarcely any attention to Yeltsin's personal ambitions and dubious methods. Although he does not give his hero an entirely clean bill of health, he generally portrays the events of that year, 1993, in Manichean terms, a struggle between Boris, Angel of Light, and the multiple demons of Darkness. He never considers the possibility, one that has been convincingly argued by the former *Guardian* correspondent in Russia, Jonathan Steele, that Yeltsin himself deliberately precipitated the violent confrontation between the Supreme Soviet deputies and the Russian armed forces that October (see Steele's *Eternal Russia*, 1994, a book not listed in Aron's bibliography—which is in general very short on works critical of Yeltsin).

Aron stresses Yeltsin's rejection of traditional Russian nationalism and gives him credit, rightly, for helping to remove all restrictions on Jewish cultural, religious and political activity, and thus for being instrumental in reviving Jewish life in a part of the world long infected with anti-Semitism. He also points approvingly to Yeltsin's settlement of many fractious issues between Russia and Ukraine, capped by the 1997 treaty of friendship and cooperation between the two countries. (Though it is hardly surprising that Yeltsin was sympathetic to the country that stood by him in December 1991, along with Belarus, in a secret meeting at which Yeltsin and his cohorts, with a stroke of a pen, announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union and thus dealt a powerful blow to Yeltsin's main rival, Gorbachev.) Finally, he mentions Yeltsin's consistent support for the national aspirations of the Baltic peoples.

All these points are true—to a degree. But the major credit for bringing about the end of imperial Russian behavior—that is, in Eastern Europe and in Soviet relations with the West—belongs squarely to Gorbachev, to his new foreign policy and "new political thinking." True, there were differences between the two men: Yeltsin, eager to undermine Gorbachev, was bent on bringing about the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, on the other hand, wanted to preserve it in one form or another—though emphatically not (Aron to the contrary) by resort to force. It is Gorbachev, not Yeltsin, who was the major architect of the Soviet Union's and then Russia's foreign policy, of establishing the era of peaceful relations (rather than the specious "peaceful coexistence") with the West. Similarly, when Aron praises the vitality of political pluralism (as evidenced by regular elections) and the relaxation of censorship, he attributes both to Yeltsin, thus minimizing the enormous importance of Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*.

Perhaps the signal instance in which Aron lets wishful thinking dim reality is over Chechnya. "One momentous precedent," he writes, "has already been established: the end of the war in Chechnya." And he adds: "Never before in Russian history had non-violent political competition and free electoral choice borne so directly and effectively on the Kremlin's major national security policy."

The end of the war in Chechnya? Two years after signing a peace treaty with his minuscule adversary, and months before the appearance of Aron's book, Yeltsin launched another invasion, under cover of mendacious assurances that it was just a "temporary action." The Russian generals wanted to avenge the humiliating fiasco of 1994–97. Chechnya obliged by becoming mired in chaos and murderous infighting. Several Chechen warlords launched raids into neighboring

Dagestan (without the approval of Chechnya's president), and explosions devastated several apartment houses in Moscow and other cities, with shocking loss of life. There is no proof that Chechens were responsible for them, and it is altogether likely, as some observers have speculated, that they were caused or tacitly condoned by those who yearned for a showdown with the Chechen guerrillas. Whoever was responsible, the explosions exacerbated "antiblack" feelings in Russia (never far from the surface) and official language quickly branded Chechens "murderers," "terrorists" (shades of the old "enemies of the people") or, in line with the Russian predilection for "earthy language," "pure shit."

During the first Chechen war, Yeltsin had to contend with hostile Russian and foreign media. In the interim, however, the oligarchs seized control of the major media. (They had negotiated a notorious "loans for shares" agreement with the regime, receiving almost unlimited state financial aid and the right to manage their affairs with little government interference as payment for their unqualified political support for Yeltsin—a colossal piece of criminality glossed over in Aron's book.) Censorship of war coverage became severe, with Russian television purveying misleading stories and falsified data, and correspondents warned against objective, let alone sympathetic, coverage of the Chechen side. This gave Yeltsin—and subsequently, Vladimir Putin—a free hand to pursue a war that Russia's human rights defender, Sergei Kovalev, has labeled "genocidal." Under Yeltsin, too, the circulation of periodicals declined by 40 percent, and about three-fourths of all human rights organizations were denied the standing to initiate legal actions. In addition to the reimposition of censorship and restrictions on human rights groups, the war served to revive the myth of Russia's national greatness and military prowess, which Aron was so confident Yeltsin had banished.

Aron's weakness for partisan history (his own version of the "*odnako* syndrome") is perhaps most blatant in his discussion of Yeltsin's economic policies. He notes some of their deplorable features but in general pronounces the "reforms" a ringing success. In fact, much the opposite is true. The "shock therapy" urged upon Russia by a group of Harvard economists, above all Jeffrey Sachs, supported by the US government and energetically implemented by several young Russian economists, proved a disaster. The swift elimination of most price controls and subsequently a sweeping privatization program resulted in hyperinflation and wiped out, in several installments, all the savings of average Russians. About one-third of Russia's population thus found itself living below the poverty level, while a few have grown enormously rich, sending their profits to Swiss banks (an estimated $65 billion over the past few years) instead of plowing them back into their country's sagging industries. And that's not to mention the money laundered—estimated to be at least $7 billion—through the Bank of New York by some of the country's elite, now under investigation. The massive privatization program was fueled by huge sums of American money, which under the direction of Yeltsin protégé Anatoly Chubais were used to transfer the lion's share of the state-owned economy into the hands of a small number of business tycoons (the "oligarchs") who—as noted before—gained enormous political power.

Chubais & Co. have benefited greatly from this program. The oligarchs paid Chubais a $3 million fee in the form of an interest-free loan. Subsequently it turned out that two members of the Harvard Institute for International Development, which ran the privatization program, were "using [their] personal relations…for private gain," thus in fact compounding the corruption they helped bring about. Both were summarily dismissed from their jobs, and the HIID terminated its "missionary" activities in Russia. This January, Harvard officials announced that HIID will be dissolving in June, but denied that the move is related to a Justice Department investigation of possible insider trading. (For an excellent analysis of Russia's economic disasters and the role played by Western economists, see Janine Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe*.) [See also her *Nation* treatment of the subject,"The Harvard Boys Do Russia," June 1, 1998.]

A brief digression: Economic blight is ubiquitous in Russia—though not, to be sure, in Moscow, leading many Western visitors to assume, after noting the number of furs and Mercedes on the streets, that conditions in other parts of the country replicate those in Moscow. Wrong. To be sure, the city's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, has done an impressive job. More apartments have gone up in Moscow than in any other city, restaurants and night spots proliferate, the stores are full and the prostitutes more expensive than anywhere else. But in addition to the fact that Russia's small number of nouveaux riches—whose income, according to the deputy mayor in charge of social affairs, is 61 percent higher than the income of the poorest inhabitants—all congregate in Moscow, the truth is that other regions have been forced to pay for the capital's expansion. (The deputy mayor also reported, on February 28, that 52 percent of all Muscovites live below the poverty level—this in the showcase of Russia's new capitalism!)

Furthermore, the city gets a large subsidy from the central government, and 80 percent of the banking capital is concentrated there, as are all the major oil and gas companies, which pay regional taxes on corporate profits in Moscow, while regional subdivisions of those same companies cannot afford to pay profit taxes in their home regions. Also, half of all foreign direct investment has gone to Moscow (see "After Yeltsin Comes…Yeltsin," by Daniel Treisman, *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1999–2000). I can report from my own travels there and to other Russian cities last summer that the capital is hardly a model for the rest of the country.

It should be clear from all this that the evidence does not bear out Aron's roseate view of a country being "changed fundamentally for the better." But the fuller truth is even grimmer. The criminalization of Russia has reached, according to an eminent sociologist, Nikita Pokrovsky, "the reverse of public and personal morality in

RIDDLE

By all accounts miscounted, I am counted on by you,
as if words weren't meant to mean what they do,
as if my uprisings were a promise coming true
in the semblance of a riddle, in the name of one too.

(Baker's Dozen)

Sherod Santos

which criminal deviations are not only permissible but 'normal'" (think, in addition to the pervasive corruption, of the assassinations of competing mafiosi, bankers and journalists, none of which have been solved). Has Aron, I wonder, seen the 1999 report *Confessions at Any Cost: Police Torture in Russia*, published in 1999 by Human Rights Watch, about the brutal extortion of confessions from prisoners, which "the courts commonly accept…at face value" and use "as a basis for convictions"?

The condition of public health in Russia has never—repeat, never—been so grave as it is now. The enormously higher rate of deaths over births, of infants born with serious health problems, the rapidly growing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, of alcoholism and tobacco consumption, pulmonary and coronary illnesses, and of hard drug use is mind-boggling. All this, along with the shocking rise in suicides, one of the highest incidences in the world (a few weeks ago in Moscow alone ten suicides were recorded, all by people hurling themselves from the roofs of their apartment buildings), has led the eminent American demographer Murray Feshbach, based on figures provided by one of Russia's most eminent epidemiologists, to predict a marked decrease of the population, possibly to as low as 80 million (!) by the year 2050 (from a base of 148 million in 1990).

Yeltsin, of course, cannot be held responsible for these developments, whose roots go back to conditions existing in czarist Russia and more so to the horrors caused by a succession of Communist regimes virtually bent on destroying civil institutions, sowing cynicism, the cult of selfishness, hypocrisy and tolerance of brutality, all of which, despite the progress that has taken place over the past two decades, have remained deeply rooted in Russian society.

But at no time in history is the path to the future predetermined, and in all circumstances alternatives are available. This was certainly true in the mid-eighties, when the country could easily have gone on vegetating, with the bulk of the population assured of its daily bread and sausages and the *nomenklatura* of its corrupting privileges, but instead produced a leader, Gorbachev, who craved change no less than many ordinary citizens. Yeltsin, too—in 1991, when he had reached the pinnacle of popularity, and two years later, when he reached the pinnacle of power—had alternatives, such as opting for a gradual tempo of economic reform combined with a strengthening of legal institutions (as was urged by the head of the Yabloko political party, Grigory Yavlinsky) that would have provided guarantees for economic and political progress. Instead of pouring billions of rubles into genocidal ends, he could have used some of the available funds to improve the sagging healthcare system, avert the further deterioration of the environment or halt the monstrous spread of criminality, to mention but a few of the monumental ills that afflict Russia today. Instead, he succumbed to ambition and greed, surrounded himself with unscrupulous supporters (soon to become known as "The Family") and kept changing his prime ministers, all the while engaging in bouts of drinking that sapped his mental and physical powers and helped rob him of much of the popularity he had once enjoyed. He was fortunate in finding in Putin a successor who fully agreed with his policy in Chechnya, absolved him of all wrongdoing (which had come to threaten Yeltsin with criminal investigation) and began where his predecessor had left off.

All this was food for a clearheaded, dispassionate and indeed fascinating and thoughtful biography. Instead, we have some valuable pages with a heavy admixture of Panglossian cant. What a pity. ■

Executioners' Songs

JoANN WYPIJEWSKI

CONDEMNED: Inside the Sing Sing Death House. By Scott Christianson. NYU. 184 pp. $24.95.
WITHOUT SANCTUARY: Lynching Photography in America. Photographic Collection by James Allen. Edited by Twin Palms Publishers. 211 pp. $60.

The Control Equipment such as Voltage Regulators, Auto Transformers, Oil Circuit Breakers, Panel Board, etc., was designed by and supplied by General Electric Company. Prior to the Institution going to Alternating Current, a Consulting Engineer, Mr. G.M. Ogle, aided the design of the Electric System. The design for the present system using the Institution supply of Alternating Current was by a Mr. H.M. Jalonack in 1931, an engineer employed by General Electric.

—J.J. Shanahan, chief engineer, April 10, 1942, on the electric chair, Sing Sing Prison, Ossining, New York, quoted in Condemned

The "living body" was the name given a condemned prisoner by authorities at the Sing Sing death house. "It" was measured, numbered, photographed, accounted for by age, crime, personal claims as to the crime (innocent, etc.), trial judge, sentencing date, receiving date and, ultimately, date of execution. Sometimes this *curriculum mortis* included as well its accomplices, next of kin, marital status, habits, rap sheet, education and, almost always, the occupation at which it might also have been considered a "living body," with the difference that, as a worker, it would have been measured in terms of its productive value.

Most all the men represented in Scott Christianson's excavation of Sing Sing's long-sealed archive of the dead, 1891–1963, have by way of identification only their conviction and their former status as "laborer," "stamper," "laundry worker," "machinist," "button maker," "button-hole maker," "waiter," "messenger boy"—age, 17; education, fifth grade; crime, strangulation; claims, innocence; execution, 1-9-56—"counterman," "truck driver," "handyman," "transient," "unemployed." The only representatives from outside the conventional working class are Louis "Lepke" Buchalter and his lieutenants in Murder, Inc., and Julius Rosenberg. The only women represented are a "housewife, rooming house" and the notorious: Martha Jule Beck (*a k a* the "Miss Lonely Hearts Killer"), Ruth Brown Snyder (adulteress/spouse killer and subject of the only known photograph of an electrocution) and Ethel Rosenberg.

As routine, the administrators of the death house filed reports from guards and from the Governor's Lunacy Commission. They archived letters from the Bureau of Prisons and from the prisoners' advocates, enemies and loved ones. They authenticated the prisoners' papers—"this is to certify that the attached marriage certificate submitted in the above case has been examined under the office detectoscope and appears to be without alteration"—and re-

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