

One man's view of coup from inside Russia

■ The following is a view of last week's abortive coup from Vladimir Orlov, 22, a Moscow News correspondent who was part of an exchange with the Post-Intelligencer last spring. Moscow News, one of the most reform-minded Soviet newspapers, was briefly banned by the coup leaders.

By Vladimir Orlov

Special to the P-I

MOSCOW — It was 7 a.m. on Aug. 19 when I switched on the radio, and instead of the usual musical Monday program I heard the rough voices of announcers: "Mr. Gorbachev is seriously ill. That is why the new Soviet leaders are Mr. Yanayev, Mr. Pavlov and Mr. Baklanov. . . ."

When I heard those names I instantly understood that a Communist-military coup was under way. Every analyst in the country had written about the "possibility" of a putsch, but very few actually believed it could happen.

My first reaction was, "Oh damn, they killed Gorbachev, they killed Yeltsin, they'll kill the freedom in a couple of days. This nightmare can continue for

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months and months."

I didn't know yet that Russian President Boris Yeltsin was at that moment in his country home about 25 miles west of Moscow, with Russian Parliament Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov and Russian Prime Minister Ivan Silayev. They were working on an appeal to the people of the Russian Federation.

At 7:30 a.m. Col. Gen. Konstantin Kobets, chairman of the State Committee for the Defense of Russia, rushed into Yeltsin's house and made all three leave for the Russian House of the Soviets in Moscow, known as the White House.

"The headquarters of the resistance must be in the center of the capital," he said.

He was absolutely right. Twelve minutes after they had left (with only eight of Yeltsin's security service) a special group of KGB troops surrounded the house. A KGB aircraft was prepared to bring him to some unknown place. An "execution list" was signed by members of the junta, and most of the Russian leadership was among the first dozen names.

Twelve minutes not only saved Yeltsin's life, but Russia's young democracy as well. And also, paradoxically, it saved the life and power of Yeltsin's No. 1 rival, Mikhail Gorbachev.

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That tragic morning he was sitting in his residence in Poros in the southern Crimea, under arrest and for the first time in many months thinking about his ideals and his friends who had betrayed him in a very different way.

'LIBERTY OR DEATH'

10 a.m. Monday, Aug. 19: I was in the Russian White House. Very few people. Tense silence. A public-address system called "Radio White House" gave information about the movement of troops and tanks in the center of Moscow. On the third floor military resistance was organized. All that they had — all that we had — were 150 Kalashnikov rifles and a few other weapons near Alexander Rutskoï's room. He is the vice president of the Russian Federation, a colonel, a hero of the Afghan war. He knew well how to defend the White House and fight against the putschists. To the end.

Later, 10 tanks appeared. They decided to support Russia in spite of the Defense Ministry's orders. Their presence was important as moral support, but they had no practical role. All the tanks were without weapons.

The only real force was the force of Muscovites. More than 20,000 people stayed near the White House. "Liberty or death," they shouted. Most of the people were teen-agers. It's part of the Russian character: If Yeltsin had been arrested or killed there wouldn't have been any strong resistance. Russians need a charismatic leader, and not dead, certainly. That day Russians had one, and they followed him.

Noon: Moscow News and other democratic mass media were prohibited. I was unemployed. But the editorial staff still worked. With the help of photocopiers we printed leaflets with protests and information from all over the country and from abroad. Correspondents distributed them in central streets and squares. Two Moscow News reporters were arrested by the militia. But after taking a glance at the contents of leaflets, a young militiaman asked: "Couldn't you give me another issue? It's so interesting." Of course. Television and the non-prohibited Communist newspapers gave only news about the "positive role" of the junta.

5 p.m.: The crowd around the White House was growing. The mood inside was improving. But at the same time, gas masks were being distributed to people's deputies and others.

That day the junta gave a "gift" to the Russians. There was no attack, no military concentration near the White House. No more than psychological pressure.

MORNING

AUGUST 29, 1991

A HEARST NEWSPAPER

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'GOD SAVED US'

Tuesday, Aug. 20: The hardest day. Everybody was nervous, tired, exhausted. Nobody closed their eyes.

Noon: Perhaps 700,000 Muscovites, despite the threat of death, came to the square near the White House. I saw their faces — still without belief in victory, but already without fear. They shouted: "Junta never! Long live Yeltsin!"

2 p.m.: No panic, no chaos. There was a good lunch for everyone. A lot of guys appeared in the corridors — with Kalashnikovs in their hands and calm and decisive expressions on their faces. Five to seven years ago they returned from Afghanistan, and now they had a mission to defend not the "brother Afghan regime" but their own Fatherland.

5 p.m.: Urgent information from Radio White House. A powerful attack was expected. All the women had to leave the building in 10 minutes.

10 p.m.: Konstantin Kobets told me he had just received information that KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov gave an order to storm the White House after midnight. A terrible night began: No light, difficulties with communication. A second night without sleep.

Crowds of people near the center of resistance to the coup. And mist and rain. Maybe that is the most important detail. Later on, military men who defended the building would say: "God saved us. Thanks to the mist they

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2 minutes saved Yeltsin's life and Russia's young democracy

couldn't use the helicopters."
2 a.m. Wednesday, Aug. 21: The critical hour. A column of tanks moved toward the White House. If they broke the fence line it would take 15 to 20 minutes to finish the operation.

They did not break the fence line. They were stopped by barricades. This hour was the first step toward the victory. Only a few hours later, an extraordinary session of the Russian Supreme Soviet opened, and soon afterward the junta ran away. There were more foreign journalists, more information, rumors, joyful moments. . . .

But I can't write "The End" until I describe the most tragic event of that night. I must tell about the young guys who saved Russia. And who were killed.

'STOP IT!'

I saw it all firsthand. I talked

to those who saw it alongside me and taped their words.

Armored cars sped round and round out of control. I screamed at one driver, "Stop it!" But the vehicle went on mangling a body.

Troops were firing in the air with tracer bullets, shooting out of fear. They thought they would be torn to pieces after running over people.

I don't think Moscow had ever seen things like this. There were sudden sounds of shots being fired — if you didn't know, it sounded like cloth tearing.

A sergeant staring with mad white eyes sat on top of the car nervously swinging his automatic, the barrel pointing at potential victims in the crowd.

His finger trembled on the trigger.

"Get off the vehicle. Go away, I tell you, I'll shoot," he yelled.

The guy was more dead than

alive from fear. He knew the danger was real. Inside his car were the killers.

"They tried to scale the barricade inside the traffic tunnel near the U.S. Embassy," said another witness who identified himself as Zhenya. "They scaled it and fired tracer bullets from automatic rifles. Then they stopped at another roadblock farther on and were surrounded by people. One young guy tried to climb inside the hatch. The officer shot at him and blew off half his head, and the vehicle went into a spin, carrying the body around."

"The crowd then started to throw Molotov cocktails. The vehicle burst into flames. The officer tried to get out. People rushed at him, and he shot another two in the crowd. The crew climbed out and got into another army vehicle and sped away down the tunnel. There they stayed, waiting in-

side."

Someone ran up and told of some strange vehicles parked outside the U.S. Embassy.

"About 20 of us set up a roadblock in the tunnel, using buses and street-cleaning trucks to stop any tanks that might try to reach the Russian parliament building," the witness said.

"We formed a human chain and moved toward the front armored car. We wanted to talk to the troops, but then the troops started to fire tracer bullets and drove right at us.

"We gave way, and the vehicles started to ram the trolley buses, ignoring the people on top. Some guys fell right under the wheels. I pulled out one young guy whose scalp was smashed by one of the vehicles. There was another guy whose head and chest were smeared with blood. We took them to police vans, and they

carried the casualties away. God forbid I ever see it again.

"When the crowd set the vehicles on fire, the soldiers got out and scurried to another armored car, firing shots as they ran. I didn't see if they killed anyone. All I saw was a guy killed next to me and another who was shot in the shoulder. The one who shot and killed him was hiding inside the vehicle in the tunnel.

"I also noticed a black Volga limousine in front of the vehicle. I didn't see the license plate. It stopped and then pulled over to one side. That tank drove at us and the black car sped away."

Nobody knew where that Volga came from or why it was in front of the armored cars. But witnesses agree that it was leading the army vehicles.

There were pools of blood on the road. A trickle in one spot and a big puddle in another.

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