In the wake of the Soviet drama, many observers concluded that the coup plotters were half-hearted from the start. Peter Feeney concludes that, on the contrary, they were determined and ruthless, but just too late.

For many observers the biggest surprise of the attempted 'coup' in the USSR was not that it happened but that it fell apart so rapidly. Tentative explanations have emphasised the sloppiness and stupidity of the coup leaders, and contrasted it with Yeltsin's near-faultless performance and the undoubted bravery of those youths in Moscow who demonstrated their willingness to risk all for their belief in Russia's, till now, faltering and uneven progress out of totalitarianism.

But stupidity and people-power could have been counter-balanced at any time by a massive and pitiless show of force. The failure of the self-proclaimed Emergency Committee to ensure obedience via repression was not the result of humanitarian restraints. The committee was let down by its own security forces—the army, the KGB and the MVD (Internal Ministry)—and the coup leaders' hesitation, dissension and ignominious end are all attributable to this failure.

The possibility of military interference in the reform process in the USSR haunted observers of perestroika from the beginning. Nevertheless the likelihood of independent military action against perestroika, a coup d'etat, pure and simple, was always slender. Excepting 1917, when the remaining original fragment of the old Tsarist Imperial Army was swept aside by its disaffected rank and file, there had been no tradition in Russia of direct military intervention in politics. More importantly, the process of glasnost and perestroika were, from 1985, increasingly making inroads into the military's integrative forces of discipline and solidarity. As perestroika proceeded it became more and more obvious that the Red Army, just as the rest of society, was divided within itself, and therefore lacked the institutional solidarity to act alone.

From late in 1990 a second scenario did look more plausible. This was the possibility of the military acting as
the backbone to a combined conservative reassertion. On the face of it such a reassertion stood a fair chance of success. Top military leaders shared with like-minded creatures in the KGB and party apparatus a dislike of the changes wrought by perestroika, and a veritable horror of the changes to come. Their institutional power-bases were discredited but still largely unreformed and—at least on paper—still powerful. These conservatives had potential allies among traditionalist forces in society: blue-collar workers fed up with constant and aimless social upheaval, servile peasants, military-industrial employees fearful of their privileges, and so on. Such a coalition might summon up the legitimacy to reassure waverers in the army. The conservatives had already had their dress rehearsal in the crackdown of January 1991. Then, as on previous occasions (Tbilisi and Lithuania), elements within the army proved themselves positively eager to crush civilian resistance.

The coup leaders believed that their appeal would extend beyond the dusty bulwarks of the old order they represented to reach a largeish chunk of the public. Their assumption was a sound one given the psychological exhaustion of the Soviet people. There have been no shortage of public opinion surveys that have charted a growing public yearning for order throughout the USSR. This is not to suggest that crowds were ever likely to throng the streets in support of the State of Emergency; rather the committee was gambling on tact acceptance. By immediately promising an end to shortages, ration coupons, rising prices, and the increasing difficulty of everyday living. The coup leadership was also counting on the unpopularity of Gorbachev and the inability of the democrats to work together in the past.

The counter-argument to the committee’s thinking is that the Soviet Union is no longer a suitable subject for totalitarian rule: the polity is better educated, less homogeneous and more aware of the importance of democratic freedoms. These traits are, however, not incompatible with the kind of ‘wait and see’ attitude that the coup conspirators gambled on. Even the intelligentsia who physically defended Yeltsin see him not as the national saviour but a man who, despite his serious faults, represents the only alternative to Gorbachev. (It is precisely because Yeltsin was for so long the only credible opposition to Gorbachev that groups of widely divergent views have been attracted to shelter under his umbrella. Now that he has become involved in the sordid business of actually governing we should expect his political support and popularity to diminish somewhat.)

So, on the whole, the committee’s gamble on the public mood was well founded (excluding some difficult republics such as Georgia and the Baltics). On the whole, active resistance was left to a very small number of politicians and intellectuals. It was the fact that these figures for several days were seen to be able to go about their business unmolested that overcame people’s fears and brought them out onto the streets. The longer-term durability of the coalition of social forces which the junta hoped to champion was left unexplored.

Along with people-power, plain old incompetence has also been suggested as an explanation for the coup’s failure. Yet both charges actually have their roots in the failure of the coercive organs that the coup leaders relied on. Stupidity is a difficult factor to quantify, but there is no amount of it that a good dose of ruthlessness cannot rectify.

The coup had actually been carefully planned to strike hard at centres of potential opposition, while still maintaining the pretence of legality. The willingness to descend into brutality was there, but the means were lacking. The junta was able to make some arrests, but only of lesser figures, while important persons—Sobchak, Popov, Kalugin and Yeltsin—were left alone. The resultant feeblesness of the media crackdown, in the absence of reliable troops to enforce it, was particularly damaging. Had a curfew been imposed on Monday instead of Wednesday, and the media gagged, Russians would have been left isolated, uninformed and leaderless.

The failure of the coercive organs might seem surprising since the coup leadership represented a core of conservatives grouped within centralised, coercive organisations: the party, KGB, military-industrial complex, and the Ministry of the Interior (MVD). The problem was that this hard-line consensus at the top simply did not exist at lower levels of the hierarchies the conservatives led.

Until the time of the coup, officers and conscripts alike in the armed forces remained restricted to a monotonous diet of anti-perestroika articles in much of the military press. Despite this (or because of it?) the bifurcation in attitudes between senior and lower ranking officers was very marked, constituting a fault-line running contrary to integrative forces of discipline and institutional solidarity within the armed forces. Numerous surveys indicated that the majority of the officer corps at the grass roots level was aligned with civilian reformers on the question of radical military reform including—despite the fact that 75% of the officer corps was, until recently, communist—the issue of depoliticisation. In addition, the army had quite literally been under attack from perestroika for many years. By the time of the coup its morale and prestige was at a near-critical low. There were powerful anti-military sentiments among the young, in many ways reminiscent of America during Vietnam; discipline was poor, with 250,000 weapons ‘lost’ in 1989 alone; junior officers and NCOs shared the social burdens of the people, and many of them were recently returned from service in Eastern Europe to atrocious living conditions back home. The bulk of the army was therefore of highly questionable value to the junta. If pressed to do the work of internal policing many army units would have been rent asunder between the conflicting loyalties of family, nationality, military honour, and basic principles of democracy.

The forces of the Ministry of the Interior were potentially the junta’s most loyal troops. In Moscow, the MVD Dzerzhinsky Division (10,000 strong) remained disciplined, but reluctant to move on Yeltsin. The biggest surprise came from the KGB—the happy home of centralism one might have thought—which turned out to be fragmented not just on generational lines but territorial
ones as well. The KGB top leadership in Moscow supported the coup but officers lower down deliberately sabotaged their directives. The KGB had also begun to exhibit territorial sympathies. The Leningrad KGB declared against the coup; KGB officers of the Lefortovo prison in Moscow referred to Kryuchkov and his crew as "senile reptiles". Ordinary police retained strong local sympathies in defiance of the committee's wishes (the core of Yeltsin's defence force was initially policemen). A great many army commanders remained neutral throughout. Many may have been sympathetic to the conservative cause, but aware of the disunity among their troops were unwilling to risk active involvement.

In the long run, obedience to the emergency committee could have been restored via extensive personnel sackings, but of course there was not time. In all arms of the security apparatus the chain of command tended to disintegrate at the middle and lower levels. The rot of perestroika had come to infect the armed forces and even, so it turned out, the KGB. Unfortunately for them the coup leadership only appeared to have discovered these weaknesses after the coup began.

On the operational side the key to the success of the conservatives' gamble was that popular resistance should be minimal, and that any such resistance that did crop up be snuffed out fast by special troops. This would allow the bulk of the citizen army to remain in the barracks with their conflicting loyalties (to uniform, family, republic and the constitution) safely untested. If neither of these two conditions were met a large chunk of the army, with its doubtful loyalties, would become involved. The result could be civil war.

The coup thus called for an accurate judgment of the public's mood and the utmost in ruthlessness from the coup leadership once committed. As I have argued the first condition would have held if the second had been applied. It was not. This was not through lack of trying but simply because the troops who were counted on turned out to be unreliable. Special troops—of the KGB or MVD—were always more likely to obey orders. They should have been turned to early, on the night of the 19th-20th, when there was a chance they might do so. Regular troops should have been left right out of the action.

The coup leadership was obviously badly out of touch with the mood of the organisations they led. But there is a further explanation for their overestimation of the reliability of the security apparatus, and that is that previous elements of it had performed well. In January in Lithuania the Black Berets had spilt blood without wavering. And in Moscow in March 50,000 men of all branches of the security forces had controlled pro-Yeltsin protests. In the former case, however, the operation had been small-scale; the latter operation had been conducted clearly within the bounds of the law.

At Tiananmen in 1989, conservative communists were content to destroy the flower of China's youth in order to protect their selfish prerogatives. Arguably, that willingness was also present in Moscow last August within the emergency committee. Disturbingly, only a very few, and relatively young, army commanders—Kobets, Shaposhnikov (Air Force) and Grachev (paratroops)—came out early against the coup; very many officers of the rank of colonel and above, judging from opinion polls taken prior to the coup, must have sympathised with the emergency committee. But, despite these attitudes, the bulk of the army, whatever its views, remained true to tradition, and sat out the coup on the sidelines. This neutrality may just have easily worked out to the junta's advantage, had they been more ruthless, more decisive and more lucky.

The outcome of the coup has been a profound vindication of the process of perestroika. Although that process never envisaged the complete emasculation of the party that occurred following the coup, it did nurture the power of the democratic movement and undermined the effectiveness of the forces of coercion, breaking down their chain of command.

Perestroika is now unequivocally over, and the USSR looks primed for thorough-going change (assisted, one hopes, by the West). Nevertheless, the Red Army as a prominent Soviet institution is not about to disappear. Thanks to the committee's bungling, the forces of conservatism in Soviet society seem to have well and truly cooked their goose. By contrast, the prestige of the armed forces may have recovered somewhat thanks to its actions—or rather inactions—during the coup. In fact, with the attack on the party which followed the rout of the conspirators, the army remains, alongside the infant democracies in the Republics, about the only credible pre-perestroika institution left. This is a problem because in its own way the Soviet military's sheer institutional weight is as much an obstacle to change as the conservatives or party were. Soviet society still devotes by peacetime standards an obscene amount of its resources to military productions; the Red Army even now maintains a standing complement of four million troops, 21% of the best and brightest of the USSR's industrial workforce works in defence industries, and perhaps as much as 15% of GNP (up to half the all-Union budget) goes on defence spending.

The time is overdue to take on this resource-hungry Leviathan but this remains a complex task. The military's new post-coup leadership were promoted on the grounds of loyalty, which is not always the same as liberalism. The linked problems of military reform and a reduction in the defence budget together represent a major obstacle to further reform. The end of the centralised Union may assist the break-up and destruction, piecemeal, of this ungainly colossus. Then again, if the break-up is accompanied by tension, defence spending is likely to remain high. Despite the involvement of so many of the top brass in the August coup, much of what the Red Army has come to stand for during perestroika may be preserved in a post-communist environment for some time to come.

Peter Feeney is a researcher in the Centre for Soviet and East European Studies at Melbourne University.