The dramatic events of August threatened to derail the Soviet Union’s second revolution. Instead, they look to have entrenched it irreversibly. For sheer ‘people power’, the resistance rivalled the Europe of 1848. In the first of our package of features on the USSR’s ‘springtime of peoples’, David Burchell spoke to Alec Nove about the rise and fall of an ill-starred coup.

Alec Nove is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Glasgow, and the author of numerous works on the Soviet Union, including An Economic History of the USSR. He was interviewed for ALR by David Burchell on August 21, shortly after the first indications of the failure of the Moscow putsch.

Why did the coup fail?

It has failed for three very good reasons. The first reason was the crowds in the streets of Moscow and Leningrad. The second reason was the fact that the KGB and the army were, to put it mildly, in two minds about killing people in the streets of Moscow. In other words, it is no use saying that if the army and the KGB had acted ruthlessly, then the crowds in the street would have been unable to hold them back from the Russian parliament. Of course that’s true. The point is, however, that even if the will to act ruthlessly had been present, this depended upon the instruments which were supposed to carrying out the killing being willing to do it — and I don’t think they were. The third reason is that the organisers of the coup were a bunch of lacklustre, uninspiring mediocrities. Imagine, for goodness sake, someone following Yanayev to the barricades. It’s ridiculous.

But Brezhnev was a mediocrity, and he ruled for twenty years.
It's true that Brezhnev was a mediocrity, but he was already in authority and not having to create that authority. In any case the system in the Soviet Union nowadays is quite different. People have made parallels with the ousting of Krushchev, but there are very profound differences between the two cases. Perhaps the only real similarity is that both Gorbachev and Krushchev were on holiday in the Black Sea. Krushchev was booted out by the Central Committee at a time which the Communist Party still ran the show. This was strikingly not the case with this coup. Gorbachev was not sent on sick leave by the Central Committee; it hadn't even met. Indeed, interestingly, the whole affair wasn't organised through the Party at all. And it was the vice-president who took over, not the deputy secretary of the Party.

And the attempt was not to dump Gorbachev as general secretary of the Party, but as president of the government.

Precisely. The point is that to some extent this is a recognition of the downgrading of the Party within the ruling structures. Consequently, when people argue that this was a coup by Communist hardliners, this is a mistake on both procedural grounds and on ideological grounds. That is to say that, when they made their appeal to the people, the coup leaders did not make that appeal as Communists. In their pronouncements they did not once mention the word Communism; nor did they mention Marx or Lenin.

Inasmuch as there was any ideological content in their pronouncements it would appear, would it not, to have
been an appeal to primordial Russian nationalism, and to the old Russian tradition of xenophobia?

That's right. But in this, of course, they had a problem with Yeltsin — because Yeltsin, in his capacity as leader of the Russian republic, can also appeal to primordial Russian nationalism, though in a completely different way. But of course, you are right, it was an appeal to primordial Russian nationalism — though maybe hardline, great power nationalism is a better description. After all, a number of the characters involved were not ethnic Russians; Boris Pugo, the Interior Minister, was a Latvian, for instance. This kind of great power nationalism is very strong among the armed forces, which are also very Russian-dominated.

The other point is that the position of the republics is vitally important. In the Baltic republics, the coup leaders repeated the actions of last January, when Moscow sent in troops to occupy public buildings. But again it would have been difficult for them to oust the locally elected governments by force, both because I don’t think they had the will to do that, and because the local troops would be unwilling to obey orders to kill large numbers of people.

I was in Estonia last January, and even when there were threatening troop movements the Estonian authorities were always very careful to have quite decent, civilised negotiations with the local army commanders. It appears that the same thing has happened again, and that the army commanders promised the Estonian authorities that they would not shoot at people. If you are going to organise that sort of coup, and if you are not able and willing to kill a lot of people in the process, you are going to fail.

The coup's failure would seem to be a fairly ringing recommendation, for all his other faults, of Yeltsin's strategy of building up a mass base outside the apparatus. It would appear that Gorbachev’s problem is that he has been forced to rely upon the support of people whom he could not ultimately trust, and who would not really defend him in this sort of situation.

That is absolutely right. There are parallels, in the history of other countries, of a leader trying to placate the military or hardliners and then being betrayed by them. Even Pinochet, after all, was supposed to have been trusted by Allende. Be that as it may, the position of the party is now extremely odd. They still have some power, but Gorbachev has considerably weakened that power and in some parts of the country the Party has split. In the Baltic republics, the majority of the party became nationalist, and a rump minority of the party remained loyal to Moscow, and the same is happening in the Ukraine.

Does this suggest that the apparatchiks have left their run too late?

Yes. I don’t think enough people want to defend the power of the Party anymore. Where were the Party secretaries in the junta? Pavlov wasn’t a Party secretary; nor was Yazov; indeed Yazov and Kryuchkov were, if memory serves, no longer even in the Politburo. The whole thing has been done as if they had accepted Gorbachev having shifted the focus of power from the Party to the government. It will gravely weaken the party.

If the coup-makers had their own way and been allowed to create a stable government, what would they have done with the economy?

Well, they are split too. Pavlov had an economic program that included marketisation and privatisation, to a limited degree. I think the key to the whole thing would have been the position of the military-industrial complex. As long as they feel safe that their claim on resources will be maintained, they are not at all against markets in other parts of the economy. Colonel Alkans, for example, the leader of the Soyuz group of hardliners thinks that Pinochet is a model for marketisation.

Which suggests that the some of the hard and fast distinctions that have been made by some of the international media about the factions in Soviet politics are over-simplified.

Everybody is split. Among the hardliners, there are some who believe in Russia, in an indivisible glorious past which has been unfortunately wrecked by Lenin and the bloody revolutionaries. Others are neo-stalinists, who obviously don’t agree. Among the radicals, there are, I can assure you, genuine Thatcherites, as well as others who are looking for some form of market socialism. So, all parties Right and Left are split on a whole range of questions, including the nationalist issue, of course. The key here is not the Baltics, they will eventually go their own way. But what about the Ukraine? How many Russians, who are by no means averse to democracy or the market, are prepared to let the Ukraine be totally independent? Some are, some aren’t. Some, like Solzhenitsyn, want to go on bended knees to the Ukrainians to get them to stay in.

Coming back to the economy, even assuming that the coup leaders had some sort of unified program, it would obviously have been impossible to return to the past...

It was and it is impossible. They can’t! They would have stumbled along the road to some kind of regulated market, whoever was in charge. I can’t see what else they could do.

So that sounds more like the Chinese solution, perestroika without the glasnost...

Yes, with all the difficulties that the Chinese have found in trying to go along that particular road. The one area in which the Chinese could do it and the Russians find it much more difficult, is in agriculture. Chinese methods of cultivation, being mediaeval, you can let the peasants get on with it with water buffalo and primitive tools, but you can’t turn a Soviet collective farm on a prairie into Chinese high agriculture or even into traditional Russian agriculture very easily. There’s also obstruction on behalf of officials, and on the part of the management of state and collective farms to the development of private farming.