

**British Ambassador Rodric Braithwaite's telegram to FCO "Moscow, August 19:
The First Day of the Coup," Telegram of 20 August**

1. Despite the Cassandra warnings and the benefits of hindsight, it is no good pretending we saw it coming just yet. Coups against Gorbachev have been rumoured for three years at least. The elements have been there for all to see: the failure of the economy, the popular discontent, the bloodshed and chaos in the republics, the smouldering anger of the army, the party, and the Russian nationalists. All were an inevitable by-product of the change which this country cannot avoid if – if – it is ever to become a healthy and effective part of the modern world. But Gorbachev has escaped from his enemies, Houdini-like, on many previous occasions. After his defeat of the “constitutional coup” in June, his triumph in London, and his defeat of the Communist hardliners at the recent Plenum, he must have gone on holiday reasonably sure he could stay on the high wire for another stretch.
2. What has happened is clear enough in on sense. The reactionary barons who began to put pressure on Gorbachev last autumn had their short-lived triumph in the winter with the departure of Shevardnadze, but failed in their attempt to use Lithuania as a trial run for a national takeover in January. Thereafter the influence of the liberals seemed to be growing steadily with the strengthening of the Republican governments; the successive electoral humiliations of the Communist party; and the growing realisation by Yeltsin and Gorbachev that they desperately needed to sink their differences and work together. The reactionaries must have feared that their time was running out. In a sense their choice of timing was almost boringly predictable: when the leader was on holiday, and on the eve of the signature of the Union Treaty, which seemed to point inexorably to the break up of the Empire. It is a pity that neither Gorbachev nor we predicted it.
3. In the past a Kremlin coup was the end of the story. Pravda told us that a new leadership had been installed, the old leader was consigned to oblivion, and that was that. It is quite different this time. This time the Party as such has played no role in the events. The Central Committee headquarters looked deserted throughout the day, and the Party has not figured in any of the public pronouncements of the Emergency Committee. So far no-one has even bothered to tell us whether Gorbachev is still General Secretary, and if not, who is his successor. There could be no clearer sign that we do indeed live in the post-Communist world. The barons are not trying to restore Communism, but to impose law, order, and political and economic discipline in the only way they know. It is a gross over-simplification for the Western media to describe them simply as “hardline Communists.”
4. Despite the mass of armor on the Moscow streets, the first day of the coup had an oddly tentative, even gentlemanly air. We did not wake up in the morning to find the key points of the city ringed with troops in the classical manner. The telephones were not cut off, and potential leaders were not arrested. Instead, after an almost normal start to the Moscow working day, the columns moved in and positioned themselves piecemeal about the city. They took no decisive action,

- and were not backed up by the hordes of footsoldiers which dominated earlier attempts this year to intimidate the street. The soldiers themselves seemed relaxed, even cheerful. There was none of the aggressive military hysteria which accompanied the bloodshed in Baku and Tbilisi. All over the town the soldiers were chatting with the crowd. Several told the television cameras that they would in no circumstances fire on the crowd, and by the evening one military vehicle at least was flying the Russian (i.e. pro-Yeltsin) flag.
5. All these events were bizarrely reflected in the evening news on the first channel of Soviet Central TV (now—since the muzzling of the media—the only one available). Demonstrations against the coup were shown in Moscow and Leningrad. Yeltsin was shown criticising the coup to the crowd outside of the Russian parliament. Ordinary people were interviewed building flimsy barricades to defend him. In reply, the Emergency Committee did no more than express the hope that Yeltsin would stop behaving badly: more like a parent chiding a wayward child than an attempt to neutralise a dangerous political rival. It must be unusual, to say the least, for the leaders of a coup to omit to arrest their most dangerous enemy at the beginning of the first day, still more to give him—even if only by inadvertence—a nationwide platform. It says little for their ruthlessness, selfconfidence, or determination. Perhaps they believe their own words about continuing along the path of political and economic reform started by Gorbachev in 1985.
 6. It does not seem very likely, and it is much too early to say. At the end of the first day all was quiet in Moscow at least. It was not clear whether the day's first sparks of public indignation would develop into fullscale public resistance; whether Yeltsin could continue his defiance while continuing to lack any of the normal attributes of power; whether the confused mood of the troops would lead to disobedience, mutiny, or violence; whether the equivocations we have heard from the leaders of Kazakhstan and the Ukraine would crystallise into support for or opposition to the new men at the centre; whether the Baltics or the Caucasus would flare and trigger off a train of bloodshed; whether the hardliners in the Emergency Committee would overbear those of their colleagues who seem so far to have exercised some restraint.
 7. We should know many of the answers to these questions in the next few days. They will determine whether Russia is relapsing into sullen acquiescence or that she is once again entering a time of troubles, as our friends here have so long feared. I do not think that this is foregone, even though what has already happened is far more ominous, far-reaching and potentially bloody, than the events in Lithuania in January. But whatever now happens, the prescriptions for policy are much the same now as they were in the winter. Our main interest is that there should be no fundamental change in the Soviet Union's international positions. Here I think we are probably safe. The Foreign Ministry may become less cooperative. There must be some worries about the Soviet soldiers in Germany. But the army will surely be far too preoccupied with internal affairs to attempt the reconquest of Eastern Europe or a resumption of a nuclear arms race with the Americans. Internal change, even if it now takes a deplorable turn, is no more open to influence by the West than it ever was. Nevertheless we need to

demonstrate our disapproval in the strongest and most effective terms we can devise, if possible in ways that do not damage our friends and leave hope for the future. On this my telegram ... makes recommendations.

8. The difference is, of course, that last January we could signify our support for "Gorbachev the Reformer," and hope to influence the man. It may be a long time before another such figure appears in Russia to catch the imagination and personify the hopes of foreigners. And Moscow already resounds to the keening of liberal intellectuals who now regret that they did not support Gorbachev while he was still there.