

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

1991: The Year You Could Hardly Believe It Was All Happening

by Derek Ingram

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The year had started with Iraq entrenched in Kuwait and a huge military build-up in the Gulf region by forces of the United States and the so-called coalition. It was eyeball-to-eyeball stuff: either President Saddam Hussein pulls Iraq out of Kuwait or the coalition strikes.

The First Electronic War
Just about everyone expected Saddam to pull out at the last minute, but he did not. On the morning of January 17 the world learned on a crackly CNN line that Baghdad was being bombed. After that, for day after day it was presented, by means of the most sophisticated public relations exercise, with a sanitised picture of the first electronic war.

With perfect precision, it was said, strategic targets were — in the callous military jargon of the day — being taken out by the bombers. Civilians killed and injured were not on view, and for a few days the idea took hold that the new technological age had produced some kind of “clean” war.

Not for long. When a shelter full of refugees was mistaken for a Saddam intelligence headquarters and many families were killed truth was seen to have been, as usual, the first casualty of war. By the end of 1991 it was emerging that the technology had been nothing like as precise as selected shots on TV had tried to make out. In fact, we were now told, it was still rather crude.

The weeks of continuous bombing of Iraq were the prelude to military assault. On February 24 the coalition forces struck into Kuwait and Iraq, by which time huge numbers of Saddam's troops were rotting in their desert bunkers.

The assault was in military terms a brilliant success. In 100 hours Kuwait was freed and the allies were pouring into Iraq. As they bombed and shot the retreating armies, events moved so fast — as they do at times of military collapse — that huge question marks were left for the historians.

President George Bush called a halt to the advance, but by now the devastation and bloodshed had reached terrible proportions. Probably 200,000 had died in the 43-day war. At the same time, Saddam remained in place. The Americans had expected the Iraqi people to topple him. Urged on by Washington, the Kurds came down from the hills and for a few days took over several towns.

They had expected the Americans to sweep on to Baghdad. They were disappointed, and tens of thousands of Kurds retreated into the hills, into Turkey, into Iran, many dying of hunger and cold until some international relief arrived and a British plan to create “safe havens” was adopted. The suffering was immense.

Kuwait was in ruins. Three hundred oilwells blazed for months. An extraordinary international effort to cap them ended the fires by November — long before anyone had predicted. The environmental damage was horrific. Bird and sea life in the waters of the Gulf was devastated.

So what did it all achieve?
At first sight, not very much. Everybody said the Middle East would never be the same again after what had happened, but surprisingly little had changed when the sands had settled.

President Bush thought everything had changed and he began to talk about a “new world order.” He set about trying to pluck a settlement of the 40-year-old Israeli-Arab problem, putting Secretary of State James Baker into an almost ceaseless shuttle to get the parties to do what they had never done — actually sit down at the same table together.

In the war the greatest fear had been that the Israelis would join in. They nearly did. Provocatively Saddam lobbed Scud missiles into Israel. Yitzak Shamir, the uncompromising Premier of Israel, was greatly tempted to respond, but Bush held him off, and Israel was in debt to the US for defeating its most dangerous neighbour, Saddam — even though he had not been removed. But when American power

became evident with the victory in the Gulf and the collapse of the Soviet Union several countries changed position. Syria and Iran became friendly to the US. This was convenient to both sides. Now Syria and Iran were no longer seen in the West as states sponsoring international terrorists.

Indeed, they now became helpful in securing the release of western hostages, some of whom had been held in the Lebanon for more than five years. Months of patient diplomacy, in which UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar was a main player, led to a deal involving Shiites held in Israel and Israeli servicemen. British journalist John McCarthy was freed in August, then in the months following several American and British hostages, including the Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy Terry Walle, blinked their way into freedom.

All these changes in alignment had an amazing sequel. On October 30 a Middle East peace conference was convened in Madrid attended by Shamir and a Palestinian delegation.

The opening session was little more than a formality. If the talking was to continue it would probably last months, if not years. But after 40 years it had happened — the most significant happening in the Middle East since President Jimmy Carter brought Egypt and Israel together at Camp David in 1978.

While all eyes were on the Middle East in the first months of 1991 changes in the Soviet Union were hardly noticed. In the wake of perestroika and glasnost, the reunification of Germany and other changes in Eastern Europe, president Mikhail Gorbachev was running into increasing trouble. He seemed to have lost his way.

The Failed Coup Against Gorbachev
The West began to pay more attention to Yeltsin as he became more powerful. In June he consolidated his position in elections for the presidency of Russia.

Less than three weeks after Bush and Gorbachev had held a summit in Moscow, Soviet radio announced on the morning of August 10 that Gorbachev had been deposed. The plot was ill-planned. Its leaders, headed by Gennady Yanayev, Gorbachev's Vice-President, were a mixed bag. Yanayev appeared at a press conference with shaking hands. He was, it transpired later, full of drink.

Gorbachev was on holiday in his Crimean dacha. He and his family were put under house arrest. Within hours people were out on the streets of Moscow.

Resistance to the coup centred on the Russian parliament building, with Yeltsin rallying support in scenes reminiscent of the 1917 Revolution. Army tanks moved into Moscow, but the soldiers had no heart for the coup. The bulk of the army did not want to be involved and the crack Alpha group of the KGB refused orders to storm the Russian parliament.

On August 21 the coup collapsed and Gorbachev was flown back to Moscow. He had survived, but much of his power had gone. Yeltsin was the hero of the hour and the beneficiary of greater power.

Disastrously, Gorbachev misread the public mood and declared his ambition to reform the Communist Party. Yeltsin took a different line.

He banned it in Russia and three days later Gorbachev resigned as general secretary, suspended the party's activities and dissolved its central committee. Outside KGB headquarters in Moscow crowds pulled down the giant statue of KGB founder Feliks Dzerzhinsky.

Communism was dead and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had all but ceased to exist. The coup had been timed to forestall the signing of a Union Treaty on August 20 under which the Russian Federation, Byelorussia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were no longer to be under effective central control. Now almost all the components of the Soviet empire

sought autonomy or independence. In September of Congress of Peoples Deputies in Moscow passed a document calling for a treaty creating a Union of Sovereign States (USS) and the rest of the year saw declarations of independence and varying degrees of autonomy throughout the country.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia became independent states again after 50 years and in December 1 the richest republic, the Ukraine, voted for independence.

A week later the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia, meeting in Minsk, created a Commonwealth of Independent States, which seemed to scupper the Gorbachev plan for a union of sovereign states of the 12 remaining republics. The three Slav republics make up 70 per cent of the Soviet population.

Gorbachev saw the power slipping from his hands day by day as a direct result of the drastic reforms he had introduced on coming to power in 1985.

The End of Communism
The end of communism in the Soviet Union in 1991 was the second phase of a process that had begun with its collapse in eastern Europe the year before, the beginning of the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the end of the Cold War.

tried to restore peace without much success. The truth was that Yugoslavia was made up into a country after World War One and had only been held together after World War Two by the magnetic personality of President Josip Tito.

Before 1914 it had for long been partly in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and partly in the Ottoman Empire. The Serbo-Croat Enmities reflected that division. Serbia dominated the federal army and historic Croat foes of a Greater Serbia were now in the open again. By the end of the year Europe watched helplessly as one of its most treasured cities, Dubrovnik, was pounded from sea and air.

Europe Wrestling with Change

Everywhere Europe was wrestling with change in 1991. Even Sweden, which for all but six of the last 59 years had been ruled by the Social Democratic Party, voted in September for change. Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson gave way to the little known Carl Bildt at the head of a right wing coalition.

The economically powerful 12-nation European Community found several more countries knocking on its door for membership — Sweden, Finland, Turkey, Cyprus and Malta but also in

ticularly the developing world, became increasingly concerned that it was getting less and less attention not only in the powerful western-dominated media but also in terms of the availability of resources.

The concerns were well justified, but the revolution that was taking place in Europe — and it was nothing less than that — was now profoundly affecting the destinies of countries almost everywhere. The virtual withdrawal of the Soviet Union from the world political game, the emergence of the US as the lone superpower were not long working through in Africa and Asia.

Depressed Economy

Change had come at a time of recession. Economies worldwide were depressed, particularly in developing countries where the burden of debt, imposed low commodity prices together with too much central control by governments were causing widespread misery. The Uruguay Round of GATT on trade liberalisation talks, which should help developing countries, remained blocked by controversy between the rich — the US and the European Community — over farm subsidies. People were increasingly

tionary Democratic Front took over Addis Ababa and a transitional government was formed under Meles Zenawi.

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front set up a provisional government in Eritrea and cooperated with Zenawi. The US mediated in peace talks in London. Some fighting continued but, with Soviet involvement in Ethiopia now gone, peace was quickly restored and at conference in Addis Ababa in July a charter was agreed that would remain in force till elections in 1993.

In neighbouring Somalia the 21-year-old regime of Ilohammed Siyad Barre had come to an end on January 26 after long civil strife, but there the outcome was not so peaceful. Barre fled to the south and Ali Mahdi Mohammed became President. Three factions continued the war and in May the north-east of the country — the former British Somaliland — declared secession as the Somaliland Republic.

Wind of Change in Africa

Multipartyism was catching on in Africa. On January 13 Cape Verde held its first multiparty elections and the ruling party was defeated. A week later a similar thing happened in Sao Tome and Principe. On March 24 Benin became the first country on the African mainland to throw out its pres-

and Belgian troops to rescue their nationals and the appointment by Mobutu of a series of prime ministers — at one point two at the same time.

Nigeria prepared for a return to civilian rule and two-party politics, but Tanzania put the brake on and President Daniel Arap Moi did everything possible to stop it in Kenya.

It was in Kenya that the real showdown took place between those in the West tying aid to human rights and democracy. For so long the West's favoured African son, Kenya was told at a meeting of donors in Paris in November to go away and change if it wanted any more help.

Developments in South Africa

In South Africa, a year after the release of Nelson Mandela, events had moved at speed, though not without much violence. President F.W. de Klerk seemed as good as his word when he pushed through the white parliament the repeal of all the main bills entrenching apartheid.

But violence between followers of the Inkatha Movement of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi and the African National Congress reached alarming proportions. Charges that the police and security forces were supporting Inkatha and even stirring the trouble were rejected by de Klerk until leaked documents revealed that government money and overseas funds had been going to Inkatha.

The revelations harmed the trust that had built up between Mandela and de Klerk, but they also seriously harmed Inkatha's international image and the violence lessened.

On November 29 months of intensive behind-the-scenes negotiation across most of the political spectrum led to a historic meeting between the government and 20 parties (minus the right-wing white Conservatives) for a preparatory conference in advance of constitutional talks that were to be known as the Convention for a Democratic South Africa.

Internationally, South Africa was rapidly losing its pariah status. Sporting links were suddenly invited to India and the way was cleared for South Africa to take part in the 1992 Olympics.

India's Democratic Tests

In Asia, democracy was put to its greatest test in India since independence in 1947. The minority government of Chandra Shekhar tottered on until March when, almost by constitutional accident, Rajiv Gandhi, leader of the opposition Congress Party, precipitated another election. It was fixed for May 20-26. One day into polling, on May 21, the former prime minister was assassinated as he was about to address a meeting near Madras.

Elections in the shocked country were suspended as world leaders gathered in New Delhi for Gandhi's funeral. In the political turmoil some members of Congress turned to his Italian-born wife Sonia to lead them, but this idea was quickly squashed — she refused anyway — and Congress turned to the elderly, respected figure of Narasimha Rao who was not even standing in the election because of poor health.

Polling resumed in June and for the second time in two years no party had a majority. This time, however, Congress took power after days of negotiations with other parties. Rao was elected its leader and sworn in as India's ninth Prime Minister on June 21.

Although with other parties he had only the slenderest support, the government looked more stable this time, and in a series of by-elections later in the year Congress did well and Rao got a seat with a massive majority.

He had inherited a weak economy and a more than usually divided country, but he set about drastic reforms, moving India further away from its traditional socialism and coming to terms with the loss of Soviet Union support that had been a mainstay of Indian foreign policy for 40 years. After several years of political turmoil

India seemed to be sailing into calmer water.

Bangladesh: Fall of Ershad and After

Bangladesh, too, showed signs of settling down to more democratic rule in the wake of the forced resignation of President Ershad. A peaceful general election on February 27 observed by a Commonwealth team produced no overall majority. The party led by Begum Khakda Zia, widow of the respected President Ziaur Rahman, who was assassinated in 1981, eventually took office.

Later, after a referendum, a parliamentary form of government was restored to the country, as in India, and the Begum became the country's first woman Prime Minister.

Only weeks after taking over the Begum faced another of the country's cyclones. This time the low-lying areas around Chittagong were the worst hit and 140,000 people were believed drowned. In a year in which the world was relatively free of sudden natural disasters millions became homeless again in a catastrophe that is all too familiar in the Bay of Bengal.

Death came in 1992 to an array of great artists. Among the authors were Graham Greene (Brighton Rock and The Third Man), and Sir Angus Wilson (Hemlock and After), Sean O'Faolain and Max Frisch; among ballet dancers Margot Fonteyn and Martha Graham; musician Claudio Arrau, and film director Sir David Lean (Great Expectations and Passage to India).

King Olav V of Norway, 87, was succeeded by his son, Jaig Qing, the notorious wife of Mao, leader of the Gang of Four, killed herself at 77 after long detention in a Beijing villa, and Sir Roy Welensky, prime minister of the short-lived Federation of Nyasaaland and Rhodesia (1953-63) died in obscurity and poverty in Dorset, England, at 83.

Sudden natural disasters were relatively few in the world in 1992. One exception was the eruption after 600 years of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines. At least 100,000 people became homeless and the US Clark Air Base had to be evacuated. Another exception was in China, where two months of torrential rain brought the worst flood since 1954. Eighteen provinces and some of China's most fertile land were affected.

With only six years left before Britain handed back Hong Kong to China, a row had broken out over the building of a massive airport on Lantau Island, Hong Kong. Since the airport would not be ready till 1997 China was worried that it would swallow up so much money that Hong Kong coffers would be empty by the time of the handover.

Agreement was reached. China won more say in the project and in a pact signed for Britain by Prime Minister John Major China promised a “positive” attitude to necessary loans beyond 1997.

A bloodless military coup in Thailand overthrew the elected government of Major-General Chatchai Choonhavan on February 23. Army commander General Suchinda Kraprayoon took over without causing much stir and set up a committee to investigate politicians who were “wealthier than anyone with an honest profession could be.”

Situation in Cambodia

Much more complicated, as always, was the situation in neighbouring Cambodia, although 1991 ended there optimistically. Complicated diplomacy led to a revival of the deadlocked UN peace plan. Before talks in Jakarta the parties to the civil war implemented a ceasefire for the first time in 12 years.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk then won agreement on a permanent ceasefire and the return of all the warring factions to the capital. Premier Hun Sen accepted a UN broker. After complex negotiations involving Indonesia, Thailand, China, Australia, and France among others a pact was signed in Paris by the four warring factions on October 23 paving the way for a UN administration and an election in 1993.

The settlement was another product of the end of the Cold War, but the increasing influence of the UN was an important factor.

The UN had never had a more successful year than the last one under its rarely smiling, careful Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar. Partly the tide was helping him and he was often criticised — in 1991 for seeming to

So that was 1991

January Operation Desert Storm launched against Iraq Soviet aid to Israel	February Kuwait occupied Up to 200,000 die fighting in Gulf Aristide sworn in	March Yeltsin intensifies ties with West Fall of Indian government	April Antarctica mining ban pact Help flown in to starving Kurds	May Gandhi assassinated Mengistu flees Peace in Angola	June Pillar laws of apartheid repealed US-Canada-Mexico free trade talks Mt. Pinatubo erupts
July Warsaw Pact dissolved Bosnia begins in Cambodia	August Coup against Gorbachev Yugoslavia civil war	September Noriaga on trial Hospice celebrates begins	October Kaunda ousted in poll Aung San Suu Kyi wins Nobel Peace Prize	November Eighth South African becomes UN chief Maxwell drops Israel and Arabs talk in Madrid	December Dubrovnik Old City bombed Maastricht Treaty signed

Notes: Another year of... Aids Violence in N Ireland Civil war in Sri Lanka GATT stalemate Recession Little action on the environment

On June 19 the last Soviet troops left Hungary and on June 30 they were all out of Czechoslovakia. Poland wanted theirs all out by the end of the year, but the Soviets wanted until 1993 for full withdrawal. Then, on July 1, in a ceremony in Prague the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. It had lasted 36 years.

In half a decade the face of Europe from Berlin to the Urals and beyond had been transformed — and all with little bloodshed.

That, however, was to follow. Centuries-old ethnic rivalries began to surface in many parts of the old Soviet Union and, worst of all, in Yugoslavia, which had begun to shed communism years earlier. Now it began to fall apart.