A Coup Backfires

Trace how a failed takeover accelerated the Soviet Union's breakup.

TOT.C.9.10 "Examine the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the August Coup (e.g., the rise of Boris Yeltsin and the pluralist movement, uprisings in Lithuania and Latvia, Gorbachev's resignation…"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two actions that weakened central Soviet authority, circle two actions taken by republics toward independence, and number your four marks in chronological order. Use your marks to trace how power shifted.

From Union to Independence

1 In the late 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev loosened censorship and allowed more political debate, hoping to repair the Soviet system. Instead, people in several republics demanded the power to govern themselves. Lithuania declared the restoration of its independence in March 1990; Latvia issued a similar declaration that May. In January 1991, Soviet forces killed civilians during confrontations in Vilnius, Lithuania, and Riga, Latvia. These clashes showed that demands for independence were not just speeches in government buildings. Citizens faced real danger as Moscow tried to keep the republics in the union.

2 In June 1991, Russian voters elected Boris Yeltsin president of the Russian republic. He backed a pluralist movement that favored competing parties and less control by the Communist Party. On August 19, hard-line Soviet officials announced an emergency committee and confined Gorbachev at his vacation home in Crimea. They hoped to stop his reforms and a planned agreement giving republics more power. Yeltsin called the takeover illegal, and crowds gathered outside the Russian parliament in Moscow. Some troops refused to support the plotters. By August 21, the coup had collapsed, leaving Gorbachev in office but politically weaker.

3 The failed coup sped up the breakup it had tried to prevent. On August 24, Gorbachev resigned as general secretary of the Communist Party and called on its Central Committee to dissolve itself. Soviet authorities soon suspended the party's activities, further weakening its central leadership. More republics declared independence, and the Soviet government recognized the independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in September. In December, leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus agreed that the Soviet Union would end; several other republics joined a new association. Gorbachev resigned as Soviet president on December 25, 1991. The union formally ceased to exist the next day.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the Baltic declarations and the January 1991 clashes show a growing conflict over who would govern the republics?

2. Why did the hard-line officials attempt the August coup, and how did their goal conflict with the planned agreement?

3. How did Yeltsin's position and response to the coup challenge Communist Party control?

4. How did events after the coup show that both the Communist Party and the Soviet Union were losing authority?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a six-sentence museum label titled “A Coup That Backfired.” Explain how the coup changed the struggle between central leaders and republics, using one Baltic example, Yeltsin's response, and two events after August 21; connect the events rather than just listing them.

ANSWER KEY

A Coup Backfires

HIGH SCHOOL · TOT.C.9.10

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two actions that weakened central Soviet authority, circle two actions taken by republics toward independence, and number your four marks in chronological order. Use your marks to trace how power shifted. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the Baltic declarations and the January 1991 clashes show a growing conflict over who would govern the republics?	**Lithuania and Latvia declared independence, challenging Moscow's authority. Soviet forces then killed civilians during confrontations in their capitals as Moscow tried to keep the republics in the union.**
2	Why did the hard-line officials attempt the August coup, and how did their goal conflict with the planned agreement?	**They wanted to stop Gorbachev's reforms and preserve central control, while the planned agreement would give republics more power.**
3	How did Yeltsin's position and response to the coup challenge Communist Party control?	**As the elected Russian president, Yeltsin backed competing parties and less Communist Party control. He called the coup illegal, and crowds gathered to resist it.**
4	How did events after the coup show that both the Communist Party and the Soviet Union were losing authority?	**Gorbachev left the party leadership and urged its Central Committee to dissolve itself; Soviet authorities suspended party activities. More republics declared independence, republic leaders agreed to end the union, and Gorbachev resigned as Soviet president.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A Coup That Backfired

In 1990, Lithuania declared that it was restoring independence, showing that a republic could challenge Moscow openly. When hard-line officials tried to seize power in August 1991, they hoped to preserve central control. Yeltsin rejected the coup, and crowds gathered to resist it. After the plot failed, Gorbachev urged the Communist Party's Central Committee to dissolve itself. More republics declared independence, leaving the Soviet government with less territory to govern. In December, republic leaders agreed to end the union, and Gorbachev resigned as Soviet president.

Accept other accurate connections between the coup's failure, weakened central authority, and republican independence. The museum label should contain six sentences beneath its title and include the requested examples and events.