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Stanislav Shushkevich

Physicist who hosted the historic meeting that officially broke up the Soviet Union and became the first leader of an independent Belarus

It was a somewhat chaotic meeting in December 1991 in an obscure place — a forest not far from the Belarusian border with Poland. Yet its outcome was hugely significant in the emergence of a new Europe from Soviet domination.

The Berlin Wall had been gone for more than two years, but the Soviet Union was clinging on. Its leader Mikhail Gorbachev, having survived a coup attempt by communist hardliners, was desperately trying to stay in power. The Soviet Union's constituent parts were beginning to break away, led by the Baltic states. The republic of Belarus was not one of the most politically dynamic parts. However, its constitutional head, a physics professor by the name of Stanislav Shushkevich, feared political and economic chaos.

He summoned two key figures, the Russian president Boris Yeltsin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Leonid Kravchuk (obituary, May 12, 2022), to a meeting at Viskuli in the Belavezha forest. It was a luxurious hunting lodge built for the Soviet elite. "As was usual for such meetings, a steam bath visit was scheduled," Shushkevich recalled. "The meeting was organised in the best Soviet traditions, with plenty of food, plenty of drink, plenty of facilities to relax, and an opportunity to go hunting."

They had not told Gorbachev what they were doing. There were rumours that Soviet security forces under his command might be lurking near by,

Gorbachev accused him of having 'turned the world upside down'

ready to arrest the participants. However, the leader of the Belarus KGB had reassured Shushkevich that there would be no arrests, a decision he later publicly regretted.

After the hunting and bathing the leaders discussed what they could agree. Shushkevich, aware of how closely Belarus was tied into the Russian economy, said his priority was energy supplies. "Our economy was in crisis, we could not pay for the supplies, and had no one to lend us the money, so we wanted to ask Russia to help us out, so that we didn't freeze that winter," he said. Yeltsin and Kravchuk were more focused on thwarting Gorbachev's attempts to revive the Soviet Union in looser form.

They agreed a statement but realised they had no photocopiers and no means of printing it, other than sending it to the state-run Belarus printing company notorious for its inability to do anything quickly. In the end, one of the delegates came up with the idea of sending texts between the fax machines located in different parts of the lodge so they could make copies. The accord they announced on December 8, 1991, created a Commonwealth of Independent States out of former Soviet Union entities: it still exists, though with little significance. Far more important was the simple declaration that "the USSR ceases to exist as a subject of international law and as a geopolitical reality". "I will remember this sentence to the end of my life," said Shushkevich.

Now they had to inform Gorbachev



Shushkevich with Boris Yeltsin after signing a declaration to dissolve the Soviet Union in December 1991; right, meeting President Clinton in Minsk, 1994

— a task the other leaders nervously assigned to their Belarusian colleague. When he got through to Moscow, Gorbachev angrily accused him of having "turned the world upside down" and patronisingly asked how the international community would react. Shushkevich informed him coolly that they were simultaneously speaking to the US president George Bush, who was broadly favourable, while expressing concern about the nuclear weapons stationed on the breakaway states' territory.

Gorbachev wrote resentfully in his memoirs that at this Belavezha meeting "the striving for power and personal interests had prevailed". Yet Shushkevich claimed the agreement was a "diplomatic masterpiece... A great empire, a nuclear superpower, split into independent countries that could co-operate with each other as closely as they wanted, and not a single drop of blood was shed." Gorbachev soon conceded defeat and resigned a few weeks later, his job as Soviet leader no longer existing.

For a while, Shushkevich enjoyed international approval, widely seen as a responsible, altruistic figure. On the highly sensitive question of nuclear weapons based in Belarus, he admitted they were still under Moscow's control. That, he feared, made his country a target, so he pressed for their removal as quickly as possible. Honoured with a visit to Washington in 1993 and a meeting with President Clinton, he was praised by the US as a "shining example to states around the region". However,

the fact that he had obtained no formal security guarantees in return for giving up the weapons would be criticised as Belarus was drawn back into the Russian orbit.

Shushkevich had hoped to link his country more to the West. Shifting from dependence on Russia was, however, a daunting challenge. Belarus, famous for its tractor factories, had sent 80 per cent of its exports to Russia in Soviet times and imported all its fuel from there. A new populist leader emerged, Alexander Lukashenko, a former collective farm manager who exploited economic insecurity by opposing privatisation, favouring con-

After Chernobyl he measured radioactivity levels around the area

tinuing links with Russia and expressing nostalgia for much of Soviet life.

Lukashenko also presented himself as a campaigner against corruption, with Shushkevich among his targets. At one point allegations focused ludicrously on his alleged embezzlement of two boxes of nails for his holiday home. He eventually resigned after losing a vote of confidence.

Shushkevich the academic had always seen himself as somewhat above the political fray, and never built up a supporters' base. His statements were often vague, once suggesting that "what we need to do is not so much to

RIA NOVOSTI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; LUKE FRAZZA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



develop but to resurrect our nation".

In the 1994 presidential elections, while Shushkevich secured only 10 per cent of votes in the first round, Lukashenko eventually won by a landslide, and began relentlessly to consolidate his power into a dictatorship.

Shushkevich remained notionally involved in politics but was persecuted for his opposition to Lukashenko. At one point the president decreed new rules which meant that Shushkevich's pension became virtually worthless due to hyperinflation. To earn a living he now returned to lecturing, including at foreign universities, resuming the academic career he had developed in Soviet times.

Shushkevich had been born in 1934 in Minsk. His father was a writer and poet who was sent to work camps under Stalin's rule. His mother, who was ethnically Polish, worked as a teacher and writer. During the Second World War he survived Nazi occupation living with his mother. After graduating from Belarusian State University in the mid-1950s, Shushkevich initially specialised in electronics. In a curious historical footnote, while working as an engineer in the 1960s he briefly taught Russian to an American man living in Minsk, Lee

Harvey Oswald, who went on to assassinate the US president John F Kennedy in 1963.

Shushkevich married Irina in 1976 and they had a son, Stanislav, and a daughter, Elena. His academic career made him a leading nuclear physicist. After the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant near the Belarus-Ukraine border in 1986, Shushkevich and colleagues travelled around the area to try to measure radioactivity levels "but were not allowed to share the information publicly, instead having to report in to their Soviet departments", he recalled.

Concern about the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster was one of the reasons he sought election to the Belarus parliament in the late 1980s. When, in 1991, the chairman of the local Supreme Soviet was ousted after supporting the attempted coup against Gorbachev, Shushkevich was, somewhat to his surprise, chosen as the new head of state.

He may not have seemed the most forceful of leaders during the next few years, but he certainly showed impressive courage after losing power in continuing to oppose Lukashenko as he ruthlessly tightened his grip.

"We have stability, yes, but it is stability based on fear, based on the killing of people who are inconvenient to the state," he told *The Times* in 2004. "It reminds me of the stability of a cemetery." When he tried to contest parliamentary elections he was refused registration.

He criticised officially encouraged nostalgia for Soviet life. "People don't remember now about the murdered innocent people," he said. "They remember that it was a big country and we all sang happy songs." And he pointed out how Lukashenko depended on the backing of Vladimir Putin's Russia to stay in power, warning after the annexation of Crimea in 2014

that "the Kremlin has started really missing the empire". When Russia invaded Ukraine this year, Shushkevich was particularly critical of Lukashenko for allowing Moscow to use Belarus as a "staging ground for Putin's mad games". Russian troops, he warned, would remain in Belarus for a long time.

Putin's aggression, his attempt to create a new kind of Russian empire, was what Shushkevich had hoped to prevent with his 1991 agreement on the ending of Soviet rule. The Lukashenko regime did its best to eradicate memories of that period and its optimistic ambitions, ordering the removal of references to Shushkevich in school history books.

Yet he was not forgotten by the Belarusian democratic opposition, which did its best to survive despite violent suppression. "When the occupation of Belarus ends, when peace, the law and sovereignty return to Belarus," said the exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsihankouskaya, "streets and monuments to Stanislav Shushkevich will certainly appear in Belarusian cities."

Stanislav Shushkevich, physicist and leader of Belarus, was born on December 15, 1934. He died of complications from Covid-19 on May 3, 2022, aged 87