Two giants of modern Russia, Boris Yeltsin and Mstislav Rostropovich, died within days of one another at the end of April. One represented the political heart of post-Communist Russia, and the other personified its musical soul, one that could not be repressed by the Soviet regime. We asked Jeremy Kinsman, Canada’s ambassador to Russia during the early Yeltsin years and a personal acquaintance of the great maestro, to reflect on the meaning of their lives and consider their unique legacies to their country and to the world.

On the morning of April 23, I learned that Boris Yeltsin had died. Memories surged of the four intense and dramatic years my wife and I had spent in Moscow during Boris Nikolayevich’s first term as president of the newly created Russian Federation, when we lived out a narrative of good guys and bad guys, with enormous and historic stakes in play. It was a time when the human spirit lifted and fell and lifted again, a chaotic, cruel time for many as the totalitarian world was turned upside down.

Boris Nikolayevich had done very great things. He believed in three simple and powerful rights: to a democratic vote, to free speech and to own property, all illegal and judged seditious under Communism. He ended the Communist Party, the Soviet Union and the Cold War. In the long view of history, these will be seen as huge achievements.

It is commonplace now to blame him for the inequities and damage to the social fabric caused by privatization, but less often remembered is that “shock therapy” was the prescription foisted on Russia’s young and inexperienced economists by the West, in the persons of the well-paid bureaucrats of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and especially by self-interested and conflicted experts of the Harvard Institute for International Development.

True, Boris Nikolayevich behaved and governed in ways which stood on their head the sober Canadian governance themes of “peace, order, and good government.” His appalling-ly ill-managed military campaign to suppress Chechen separation was disgraceful. But he changed Russia fundamentally, and in doing so, he changed the world for us all.

Trying to put my thoughts, memories and emotions in order to write about Yeltsin, I sought the companionship and inspiration of music. Our profound feelings of affection for Russia, especially its “soulful” side, draw again and again from its deep well of music and literature whose beauty, compassion and intelligence make reading and knowing of the appalling cruelties of Russian history in the 20th century somehow endurable.

My mental scan for the Russian who could speak to me best about Boris Yeltsin focused immediately on Mstislav Rostropovich. It was Rostropovich’s connection to Yeltsin, in the decisive moment for him and for Russia, which I felt most that morning.

I instinctively reached for the cellist’s recordings of Shostakovitch, but broke instead to the Dvorak Cello Concerto.

Why the Dvorak? Because Rostropovich had told my wife, Hana, that this 1952 Prague recording, performed under the direction of her own grandfather, the legendary maestro Vaclav Talich, for decades the conductor and musical director of the Czech Philharmonic, was the first he ever made. That tenuous family connection also explains how I came to meet Rostropovich, whose fondness for Talich — an artist who also suffered greatly under a Communist regime
F o u r days later, Mstislav Rostropovich himself died in Moscow. Like Yeltsin’s, his body lay in state, in his case in the Moscow Conservatory whose ethos and history are as sacred to music as the reconstructed Church of Christ the Saviour in state, in his case in the Moscow Conservatory whose ethos and history are as sacred to music as the reconstructed Church of Christ the Saviour.

Yeltsin was a rough, sports-loving construction engineer who became a local party boss by virtue of his energy and aptitude for getting things done. Though a member of the Communist party until he very publicly quit in 1990, he was a contrarian, a rebel. His autobiography, written in 1999, is aptly called Against the Grain. Under Stalin, he would have suffered much more than his father, who was sent to a gulag for four years in 1934 for anti-Soviet behaviour; Boris Nikolayevich would have been eliminated.

A vast circle around Russia’s disastrous 20th century has, we hope, been closed by Yeltsin and Rostropovich — two giants of Russia whose backgrounds seemed polar opposites.

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City mayor, Michael Bloomberg, rode a streetcar to work) and challenged the leadership to reform ever faster. Eventually, his compulsion to question higher authority, and specifically the interference of Raisa Gorbachev in policy decisions, led to his dismissal and a campaign of vilification from the Kremlin.

But after a few years of relative oblivion, his decisive moment would come, to be shared with Mstislav Rostropovich.

Only three years older than Boris Nikolayevich, born in 1927, Rostropovich had a much more rarified childhood and family. He was from Baku, in oil-rich Azerbaijan, the gifted son of musical parents whose origins were as cosmopolitan as their Caucasian community, though the Bolshevik revolution had by then chased away the millionaires.

He entered the Moscow Conservatory at 16 in 1943, and studied under Prokofiev, who had returned from America, and the great and politically ambiguous Shostakovich.

Rostropovich’s gigantic talent was immediately clear to all, and overrode the risks he took because of his strength of character, shown when he quit the Conservatory in 1948 on learning that Shostakovich had been dismissed for arousing Stalin’s displeasure and suspicion.

In 1955 he married Bolshoi Opera soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, whom he accompanied on the piano frequently in recitals, and together they launched an international career.

...
the triumph of his own life’s theme of promoting freedom for Russians.

His citizenship was returned by Gorbachev the following year.

But in August 1991, glasnost and the process of change were challenged in Moscow by the coup against Gorbachev by bitter hard-liners who threatened to turn back all clocks.

Yeltsin, who had recovered politically and been elected the first president of the Russian Republic only two months before, defied the coup and tried to rally Russians from atop a tank.

It was touch and go, and “Slava” Rostropovich, who had rushed to Moscow on hearing the news, made the historic difference.

As Yeltsin later wrote in *The Struggle for Russia*:

*I learned that outside, down below the White House tout le Moscou had gathered; that is, the most vigorous, prominent people in the capital, including actors, artists, writers, and musicians. Rostropovich was a special person with a special kind of magic. I understood that ancient Russia, Russia the Great, was blessing me with the highest possible art... A seething undirected crowd is a double-edged sword. We tried to govern it but, obviously, not everyone was under our authority. Suddenly Rostropovich walked in and everything fell into place. Of course Rostropovich was a great man who performed a magnanimous, bold deed: he asked for an assault rifle and was loaned one for a time. Later, in 1993, Rostropovich gave a concert in Red Square... Playing for all of us. Just as during the coup in August Rostropovich had blessed democracy in Russia with his heartfelt gesture, so during the*
parliamentary rebellion in 1993, it was as if he were telling us with his beautiful music to be prepared for great ordeals. And may God help you. For his part, the cellist recalled the day he joined Yeltsin against the coup as “the most important, dangerous, and emotional day of my life. I was ready to die and happy to die.” From one who had musically plumbed the most profound human emotions, this may sound like hyperbole, but Yeltsin later said, “It was because you were there that they did not storm Parliament.”

So, together, these two men, seemingly unlike, saved the beginnings of Russian democracy.

Today, there is worry that even these beginnings are being rolled back by Yeltsin’s chosen successor, Vladimir Putin. The jury is out on Putin’s performance, though he is widely approved by Russians themselves. But we should not forget how much Yeltsin did change. Rostropovich, the returned exile, knew well the enormous distance travelled from the system they had grown up in.

Both men were big, smiling, generous and open. Yeltsin wrote about Rostropovich, “I become infected with his enthusiasm, his energy, his bright, pure openness. He is easygoing and straightforward and it doesn’t matter to him whether he is dealing with a boss, a worker, or a member of the nobility. He finds everyone interesting and, in the same way, people find him interesting.” So one could have written about Boris Nikolayevich.

Both men had the gift of strong marriages to gallant and supportive women. Again, in Boris Nikolayevich’s words, “I was fascinated to see how he [Rostropovich] and his wife got along ... When she told her husband something in her well-modulated voice, he gazed at her with un concealed admiration.”

And, as I have written elsewhere, “Anyone who knew Yeltsin and his wife Naina witnessed a profound love story in his great dependency on her to keep him on the rails. He was a man demonstrably in the thrall of a strong woman without whom he would have succumbed to excess drink and sporadic yanks of depression decades ago.”

Four days after burying her own husband, Naina Yeltsina wept beside a new widow in the same church at the funeral of Mstislav Rostropovich.

Each man had been so different and yet each in his way was a creator, of vast imaginative power.

When the Russian film industry collapsed in the early 1990s, it was said it was because fiction couldn’t keep pace with the drama of real life.

Yeltsin and Rostropovich were larger than life. Their dreams led them at critical times in the fate of their country to be live action heroes, and the extraordinary Russian narrative made them indispensable to each other.

Jeremy Kinsman, a career foreign service officer for 40 years, was Canadian ambassador to Russia from 1992 to 1996. He is equally a lifelong music lover.