

Politburo overrules Gorbachov on Afghanistan; Transcaucasus boils

by Konstantin George

On March 17, the Soviet Foreign Ministry announced that Soviet forces would be withdrawn from Afghanistan, with or without a Geneva agreement. The statement is the third signal in as many weeks that Mikhail Gorbachov has effectively been removed from power.

The dethroning of Gorbachov was already evident when his Feb. 26 appeal for "calm" in the Transcaucasus blew up in his face 24 hours later, as the KGB staged a massacre of Armenians in the Azerbaijan city of Sumgait.

The Foreign Ministry's March 17 statement could only have been issued with explicit Politburo authorization, which came while Gorbachov was out of Moscow, in the midst of a March 14-18 visit to Yugoslavia. The policy change threw overboard Gorbachov's proclamation, issued in February, that any withdrawal was contingent on a Geneva agreement that met Soviet conditions by March 15.

The 180-degree turn, in the general secretary's absence, was driven home by a companion announcement that the Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan, Pavel Mozhayev, a candidate member of the Central Committee, was being replaced with one Nikolai Yegorichev. It was a clear downgrading of the posting to Kabul. Yegorichev was the powerful boss of the Moscow city party, until his disgrace in June 1967. That ended his career on the Central Committee. He was lucky to get, from 1970-84, a "comfortable" exile as ambassador to Denmark, and the last three years as a nondescript Foreign Ministry bureaucrat.

Where was Yakovlev?

Gorbachov was not the only Politburo member conveniently absent during those critical days that produced the turnaround on Afghanistan. His close associate, Aleksander Yakovlev, was also absent, having been granted the "honor" of presiding over a March 16-17 meeting of Central Committee ideological secretaries from socialist countries—in Mongolia.

Yakovlev is perhaps the Politburo member most closely identified with the Moscow side of the East-West alliance known since the days of Lenin, Dzerzhinsky, and Bukharin, as the "Trust."

Yakovlev was given a "slow boat" return ticket, depart-

ing Mongolia March 18 and spending the night in Irkutsk in the Siberian boondocks, only reaching Moscow on Saturday, March 19.

Yakovlev's absence is the more significant: On March 9, the Politburo entrusted the Central Committee Secretariat, led by Yegor Ligachov, the succession fight's "king-maker," with working out a solution to the crisis in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Yakovlev is one of the six Politburo members who are also on the Central Committee Secretariat. He is nominally the Secretariat's expert on nationality questions. One would have expected him to be playing a prominent role in the Secretariat's work on the Transcaucasus crisis. Instead, the opposite has been the case; Yakovlev has been frozen out of the process.

While Yakovlev was sampling the delights of the Mongolian capital of Ulan Bator and night life in Irkutsk, a select core of the Central Committee Secretariat, led by Ligachov and Politburo member Lev Zaikov, the Secretariat member responsible for the U.S.S.R.'s military industry, began meeting in Moscow with delegations from Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The military's rise

Zaikov's promotion, to de facto number-two behind Ligachov in dealing with the Armenia-Azerbaijan crisis, is the latest demonstration of the military's growth in power during the succession fight. In early February, Yuri Maslyukov, one of the leading military production experts in the U.S.S.R., who spent 12 years (1962-74) at the plant which later manufactured the SS-20 missiles, was named head of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan). At the Feb. 17-18 plenum, he was appointed candidate member of the Politburo. Also in early February, Oleg Baklanov, another expert on missile and high-tech military production, was appointed to the Central Committee Secretariat.

The hapless Gorbachov returned to Moscow on March 18, just in time to receive another jolt from Ligachov and his Politburo sidekick Zaikov. They had just finished their first round of meetings with a delegation from Azerbaijan, and a statement was issued that any discussion of Armenian de-

mands for incorporating the region of Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia were out of the question. The statement as such was no surprise. It merely reiterated the CC resolution of February. But its timing was. As part of his Feb. 26 appeal, Gorbachov had promised he would make a final decision on Nagorno-Karabakh by March 26, in return for a promise of no Armenian demonstrations until that date. The March 18 statement by Ligachov et al., threw Gorbachov's one-month deal out the window, and ensured a new Armenian crisis.

That is exactly what happened. On March 19, Armenian protest organizers held a mass meeting. On Sunday, March 20, demonstrations again erupted in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, and continued on March 21, 22, and 23, involving tens of thousands each day.

This wasn't the only chain reaction launched by Moscow leadership deliberations held during Gorbachov's absence. During March 21-23, resolutions were passed by all 13 Soviet Republics, outside of Armenia and Azerbaijan—the lead was taken by the three Slavic Republics of Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia—condemning any attempt to change territorial boundaries, and calling on the authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan to “restore order.”

The line taken by the Soviet press, led by *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, beginning March 22, reveals that the leadership's intent in precipitating the latest Armenian explosion is to prepare to violently crush of the Armenian nationalist ferment, and thus provide a “lesson” for all other nationalities in the Muscovite Empire. A point generally missed in most Western articles, which stressed the Armenian side of things, was that the Supreme Soviet (Parliament) resolutions and the tough press coverage also were conveying a message to Turkic Azerbaijan.

Rule from Moscow

After weeks of near silence on Armenia, the March 22 *Pravda* delivered a broadside against Armenian “national egoism,” and charged the Armenian Central Committee with having “lost contact with the masses.” There were two interesting fine points in that article. The leadership of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, who deserved “severe criticism,” were accused of having ignored repeated reminders from Moscow to “educate the people” of the Republics in “Soviet patriotism and socialist internationalism.” The Armenian protest leaders were accused of having “sowed a national conflict,” under the “cover of democratization and glasnost.” More than the Armenian protest leaders were being attacked in that latter phrase.

The same day, *Izvestia* declared that Saturday, March 26, in Armenia would be “the most explosive day.” The Soviet government paper reported on the March 19 meeting of Armenian protest organizers, informing the entire Soviet Union that they planned to take the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to the World Court in The Hague, Netherlands, and had proposed a “mass hunger strike,” declaring Armenia a “non-party So-

viet Republic.” Such language in the past has appeared on the eve of military interventions, such as Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, or the near intervention into Poland, 1980-81.

The gravity of the situation and the severity of coming measures was underscored in a resolution of the Supreme Soviet, issued on March 23, at a session attended by the Politburo. The resolution was issued “in connection with developments in Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, where tension persists, as a result” of demonstrations which demanded Nagorno-Karabakh's incorporation into Armenia. The “current situation” was described as “ruinous to the peoples of both republics,” and the Supreme Soviet declared: “It is considered inadmissible . . . for all sorts of self-proclaimed groups to call for the redrawing of state and administrative borders secured under the Soviet Constitution.” The resolution denounced “attempts to exert pressure on government bodies to change territorial boundaries,” as acts which “may lead to unpredictable consequences.”

The Supreme Soviet called on the authorities in Azerbaijan and Armenia to “restore order,” and “impose stringent punishment on those who, with their actions, destabilize the situation.”

It is clear, however, from points four and five of the resolution, that Moscow itself will take central actions to accomplish these goals. Point Four calls on the Council of Ministers (i.e., the Soviet government) to “work out all measures deciding the immediate economic, social, and cultural development of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region.” Point Five calls upon the chief state prosecutor to issue a directive for “necessary steps and measures” to be taken “to restore order.”

These parts of the resolution, given that Soviet Army units are already patrolling of Nagorno-Karabakh, give the guts of Moscow's decision. Nominally, Nagorno-Karabakh remains part of Azerbaijan, but will be ruled not from Baku, but Moscow. This implies at least the possibility that as the dynamics of the succession fight unfold, changes in territorial boundaries are not to be ruled out, at the expense of the Turkic republics of the Soviet Union.

Observers found it striking that the Supreme Soviet resolution, which certainly was harsh and virulent against Armenian protest leaders, limited its attacks to “self-proclaimed groups,” ignoring, apparently consciously, the fact that duly constituted governing bodies, the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh on Feb. 20, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Party Committee on March 17, had passed resolutions for the incorporation of the region into Armenia.

The next critical juncture occurs on March 26, when, if original plans are adhered to, hundreds of thousands will again demonstrate in the streets of Yerevan. Will Moscow move preemptively, with a massive military show of force? Or will Moscow wait and let the next explosion occur in the Transcaucasus?