

# Danger of armed conflict looms between Russia and Ukraine

by Konstantin George

As of late August, the nightmare threat of armed clashes leading to outright war between Russia and Ukraine, the two largest states of the former Soviet Union, has become a very real possibility. Such a war, involving two nations with a total population of more than 200 million, would dwarf anything seen to date in either the Balkans or in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It would create the gravest international strategic crisis since World War II. Even were escalation up to a world war averted, a war between Russia and Ukraine would ruin or devastatingly weaken both states. Whatever certain short-sighted and stupid imperial Russians in Moscow might think, a Russian-Ukrainian conflict is an insanity that would only serve British-centered interests, whose geopolitical doctrines demand a protracted, devastating destabilization and weakening of the leading Eurasian states.

The danger has been highlighted through a significant, ugly shift in coverage of Ukraine by the Russian Defense Ministry daily *Krasnaya Zvezda*, notably in articles on Aug. 24 and 25 ostensibly on the winding down of the war in the Georgian region of Abkhazia. The articles cited the involvement of some 1,000 Ukrainian "volunteers," drawn exclusively from West Ukraine (Galicia), who fought on the side of Georgia against "Russian imperialism." *Krasnaya Zvezda* describes these Ukrainians as planning, now that the war in Abkhazia is over, to send about 600 of their number to the Crimea to wage the next fight against "Russian imperialism" in Sevastopol, the main base and headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet, adding that such a fight could occur as early as late September.

The scenario given by *Krasnaya Zvezda* as to how the conflict could start is of cardinal importance. The war would not result from a general "inter-ethnic" conflict between Ukrainians and Ukraine's 10 million-plus Russian minority: To date, there has not been even one single incident of "inter-ethnic" violence in Ukraine. Rather, *Krasnaya Zvezda* is talking about a conflict being initiated by two gangs of provocateurs, one "Ukrainian," with the smell of a hidden British hand behind it, and the other Muscovite. As *Krasnaya Zvezda* writes, the "Ukrainian" component is all drawn from West Ukraine, and the Russian component is the fleet, thus admitting that not one inhabitant of Crimea will be involved in the

initial fighting.

We have here a threatened repeat of the type of covert operations employed by Britain in Bosnia to ignite a war between Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats, as documented by the Croatian weekly *Danas* (see *EIR*, Aug. 27, 1993, p. 32).

## 'At the very edge of the abyss'

Ukraine itself is in the throes of internal economic-political collapse, which has brought this strategically crucial nation of 54 million to the brink of catastrophe. Addressing the Ukrainian Parliament on Aug. 31, Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma warned that Ukraine is "at the very edge of the abyss," and its fate would be decided probably within days. Ukraine's crisis of national existence has been caused in large part and aggravated by Russian slowdowns and shutoffs of vital oil and gas supplies, combined with an ironclad western credit and aid embargo. The extremely vulnerable position of Ukraine is tempting Moscow forces devoted to imperial restoration to add military options to their repertoire of intimidation and blackmail measures against the Ukrainian nation, employing Russian forces to seize parts of Ukraine, such as Crimea.

Prime Minister Kuchma, who has been demanding since May emergency powers to stabilize the collapsing economy, told the Parliament that this is Ukraine's last chance. He presented to Parliament an "anti-crisis program for economic stabilization," calling for declaring a "state of emergency for the economy . . . without delay," in which the prime minister would rule by decree. The Parliament, dominated by "former" communists representing the old *Nomenklatura*, and which has repeatedly sabotaged all attempts by Kuchma to give Ukraine a strong government, was told, "This is a tough measure, but if we postpone it until tomorrow, we will lose everything."

The elements of the Kuchma package dovetail with certain key demands of the national independence movement Rukh, such as holding early elections, and thus form the basis for a concerted cross-party effort to save the nation. The package specifies: 1) the prime minister rules by decree until early elections are held; 2) all structures of the executive

and presidential administration should come under the power of the prime minister; 3) the central bank is to be transferred from the control of Parliament to the prime minister's control; and 4) the prime minister retains the right to fire any minister except the foreign minister, defense minister, or security minister.

Finally, Kuchma insisted on receiving a mandate from Parliament to conclude the final drafting and signing of an Economic Union with Russia. Kuchma had signed, on July 17 in Moscow, the agreement for a Slavic Economic Union among Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, and that agreement stipulated that the final treaty would be signed in September. Joining this Russian-led Economic Union is a bitter blow to Ukrainian sovereignty, but it may be the only immediate way to avert an armed conflict and/or the disintegration of the Ukrainian economy, so thoroughly dependent on Russia.

The first point, danger of armed conflict, is known all too well, but remains unspoken, at least in public. The second point, the economic aspect, was stressed by Kuchma. He said that neither a stabilization of the economy nor of the interim currency, the karbovanets, was possible unless reduced prices for Russian energy supplies could be negotiated. This was a direct attack on the currency stabilization measure decreed a few days earlier by President Leonid Kravchuk, which pegged the karbovanets at 5,970 to the dollar. Its actual trading rate was 19,000 to the dollar, and it has remained there since the "stabilization." Kuchma has also begun a purge of the free marketeers in the cabinet, causing Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Reforms Viktor Pynsenik to resign on Aug. 27, and firing Economics Minister Yuri Bannikov on Aug. 30. These measures will prove meaningless, however, should the Parliament continue to sabotage the government.

### Imperial Russia debates

The next nodal point is the summit of the Community of Independent States (CIS) set for Sept. 7 in Moscow. The faction in Moscow favoring military action is not yet hegemonic. Its plan — which dovetails neatly with that of the British geopolitical interests, as mentioned above — is to provoke initiating points of conflict, using small organized bands of provocateurs on both sides, to create a series of *faits accomplis*, leading to a general conflict. The still dominant view in Moscow is that Ukraine can be "brought back into the fold" through means short of war, and this brutal application of economic blackmail will be employed in full force.

Entering September, Russia had completed the international isolation of Ukraine. The late-August visit of President Boris Yeltsin to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia exemplified this, above all the agreements reached in Warsaw. In an act of apparent magnanimity, Yeltsin dropped all Russian objections to having Poland and the Czech Republic join NATO. This shift, however, signalled a new East-West line of division worked out with the western powers, putting

Poland and the Czech Republic in the western sphere, thus giving NATO an eastern glacis. In exchange, Slovakia was excluded from the West and thrown to Russia. Above all, everything east of Poland's eastern frontier, historically known as the Curzon Line, namely the entirety of the former Soviet Union, was recognized as being in the Russian sphere of interest, and the *quid pro quo* for Poland was to abandon its support for independent Ukraine. Thus Ukraine, already abandoned by the western powers, lost its last remaining pillar of support from a larger European state.

During the autumn, Moscow will further increase the pressure on Ukraine from another direction, by having the other Slavic non-Russian republic, the Republic of Belarus, declare an end to its independence and seek a "confederation" with Russia. Belarus, in contrast to Ukraine, has been independent since August 1991 in name only. With the exception of President Shushkevich, who is a mere figurehead, the entire leadership, the government of Prime Minister Kebich and the overwhelming majority of Parliament, have always been totally in the hands of the former Soviet *Nomenklatura*. This was illustrated on Aug. 25, Belarus's Independence Day, where there was no celebration or commemoration. In September, not only will Belarus join the Economic Union, but Shushkevich will be forced to sign the CIS Defense Pact.

All groups in the Russian elite support the policy of reconquest of the "lost" territories. Mitigating against war is a predominant, cocky view that Moscow can dictate terms to Ukraine without war. This "enlightened" imperialist view was presented in late August in the weekly *New Times*, No. 34: "Ukraine seems to have already entered a period of prolonged instability, and many deem it logical to make use of this situation in order to, firstly, get the Crimea back, and secondly, start shattering Ukraine with the Crimea. But isn't it more likely that aggressive actions and instigation on the part of Moscow will bring extreme nationalists to power in Ukraine? . . .

"And what is more important for Russia's foreign policy than a close union with Ukraine? Nothing, from any point of view: geopolitical, economic, strategic, psychological or moral. . . . While most other conflicts are marginal to Russia and Eurasia, this one may turn out to be fatal."

The Russian elite knows that armed intervention by Moscow on the territory of Ukraine could escalate into an armed conflict dwarfing anything seen to date in the Balkans or in any of the conflicts of the former U.S.S.R. This would be true even should no nuclear weapons come into use — a danger not to be excluded. A poignant warning should be addressed to those in Moscow toying with this lunacy: Any attempt to conquer Ukraine by armed force or to dismember it will backfire, and be met with bitter armed resistance. Moscow got a taste of what such a phenomenon can mean for Russia in the 1945-50 Ukrainian armed resistance against Soviet occupation, when the war was largely confined to West Ukraine, which would not be the case now.