

Russian military's decision exposes NATO miscalculations

by Rachel Douglas

The type of mixture of ingredients from which world wars explode should be recognized in the events in Kosovo and Russia in mid-June. The opinion that the swift deployment of 200 Russian troops from Bosnia to the Pristina, Kosovo airport on the night of June 11 was a "publicity stunt," which was attributed, in several wire service dispatches, to analysts within the NATO command, is exposed as a typically dangerous miscalculation.

Vice President Al Gore and others who participated in maneuvers to bring about the ouster of Yevgeni Primakov as Russian Prime Minister, which happened on May 12, and to elevate the dean of "crony capitalism," Viktor Chernomyrdin, have heightened the political instability of Russia. This occurs alongside a renewed potential for Russia's foreign debt defaults again to detonate worldwide financial shock waves (see *Economics*), and at the height of anger, felt within diverse Russian political factions, over NATO's high-handed conduct of its operations in the Balkans. The Russian Federation, heir to the nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union as well as its financial debts, has been subjected to eight years of looting and destruction under "free market" policies imported from the West. The country is a tightly wound spring.

With the nighttime advance to the Pristina airport, one Russian institution emerged as capable of taking and willing to take decisive actions, amid clan warfare to control a President whose state of health is uncertain at best, and the political turmoil of the fourth government in little over a year. Not only Moscow rumors, but targeted leaks to journalists from NATO countries, identified the General Staff of the Armed Forces, under Gen. Anatoli Kvashnin, as author of the fast action plan, implemented in Kosovo on June 11.

He is the same General Kvashnin who, after State Duma

(parliamentary) hearings on March 31, stated that, "if the choice is between life or death for Russia, then whatever the Armed Forces have, in particular nuclear weapons, should be used." Pursuant to those Duma hearings on "primary measures to upgrade the combat potential of the Russian Armed Forces" (see *EIR*, April 23, 1999, p. 63), the Security Council met in late April to adopt a program for the rapid development of so-called "battlefield" tactical nuclear weapons.

Ten thousand 'miniaturized nuclear warheads'

On April 29, Russian President Boris Yeltsin chaired a closed-door meeting on the status of the country's nuclear arsenal. Security Council Secretary Vladimir Putin, according to RIA Novosti, announced that Yeltsin had signed two decrees and one other document, covering "the development of the nuclear weapons complex and a concept for developing and using non-strategic nuclear weapons"—i.e., tactical nuclear weapons. Putin was reported by Interfax to have refused to give even the title of one of the documents, because it was top secret.

Izvestia of April 27 said that the Security Council would receive proposals at this meeting, for "upgrading and extending the lifespans of strategic weapon systems of the last Soviet series." The article, on which the Defense Ministry declined to comment, said that ten Kalmar missile-carrying submarines, built in the Soviet period and code-named Delta III by NATO, would likely stay in service until 2005 instead of being retired next year. The RS-20 ICBM would stay in service. *Izvestia* suggested that Russia would reacquire some strategic bombers from Ukraine, and keep others in service past their scheduled retirement.

In a press conference, as well as an article in *Parlament-*

skaya Gazeta, both on April 27, Defense Minister Marshal Igor Sergeyev stated that the new NATO doctrine, including out-of-area deployments, “forces Russia to reconsider many provisions for ensuring its own military security,” respecting both “conventional forces and strategic nuclear deterrence forces.” Sergeyev warned that further expansion of NATO, such as by recruitment of the Baltic countries, “would be a great threat to Russia; we will take all necessary measures to minimize the military threat that would follow from such a development.”

On June 8, China’s *People’s Daily* provided more details on the Russian plan to produce 10,000 “miniaturized nuclear warheads” as part of a new strategy that would “make limited nuclear attack possible.” In an article noteworthy both for its content and for the fact of its publication in China’s official government organ, the paper looked at overall Russian strategy, in light of NATO’s expansion and the Balkan war. After Yeltsin’s signing the order for “non-strategic nuclear weapons,” it reported, Prime Minister Stepashin told the State Duma that the Russian defense budget will be raised from 2.8% to 3.5% of GDP, in order to guarantee the financing of the “non-strategic nuclear weapons.”

People’s Daily wrote that Yeltsin’s order to develop “non-strategic nuclear weapons” was the “program for developing a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons,” set forth by the former Deputy Minister of Atomic Energy, Viktor Mikhailov. According to this policy, Russia must carry out a comprehensive modernization of its whole inventory of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, in order to be able to carry out a limited nuclear war.

Citing Minister of Atomic Energy Adamov’s declarations on testing of non-strategic nuclear weapons, the Chinese report pointed to planned tests of “non-nuclear explosion” grade, which would increase the quality of nuclear devices and verify their performance. The tests being prepared at present involve miniaturized and super-miniaturized nuclear bombs, having an explosive power equivalent to one one-thousandth of the bomb dropped by the United States on Hiroshima. According to reports, in order to match NATO, Russia is planning to produce 10,000 of these nuclear weapons, and to revise “the concept that nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction.” Since people are extremely fearful of using nuclear weapons, wrote *People’s Daily*, at present hardly anyone would dare to use nuclear weapons. Therefore the nuclear threat has lost its effectiveness. The logic of the Atomic Energy Ministry is: If we can greatly increase the real possibility of nuclear attack, we can renew the effect of nuclear deterrence; maintaining the pressure of nuclear arms can thereby become an effective policy. For this reason, Russia should be able “to use miniature and super-miniature nuclear warheads” to attack military targets at any point on the globe, while at the same time such a “precision attack” would not trigger a large-scale nuclear war. The Russian Atomic Energy Ministry emphasizes, that in the unlikely event of a large-scale nuclear

war, Russia should remain able quickly to exchange the “tactical nuclear warheads” again for “strategic warheads.”

On June 12, the *Washington Post* paid attention to the April 29 Russian Security Council deliberation on the option to develop more battlefield nuclear warheads, as its decaying military capabilities were dramatically shown up during the Balkans conflict. David Hoffman’s account, citing an unidentified “well-informed source,” had Yeltsin demanding at the meeting, why Russian military power had not deterred NATO from bombing Yugoslavia.

At Pristina airport

On June 11, the Russian military weekly *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* quoted Premier Stepashin on Russia’s readiness to send a force of 5,000 to 10,000 peacekeeping forces to Kosovo. It is the equivalent of an entire motorized division, but the report suggested that the structure of the Russian force would comprise two or three brigades, including one airborne brigade. Gen. Georgi Shpak, commander of Airborne Forces, stated that 2,500 paratroopers were ready to depart from their base in Ryazan.

“There are no concrete NATO plans,” it was noted in another *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* article, “for Russian participation in the operation.”

Arriving at the Pristina airport, the Russian troops, relocated from SFOR duties in Bosnia, made sure that there would be concrete plans. It was not a matter of “publicity” or prestige, but rather what one senior analyst at a Moscow think-tank called an effort “to block Kosovo from becoming a staging area for NATO’s march to the East.”

Despite initial statements by Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, that the unit would be ordered to leave Kosovo, President Yeltsin promoted Gen. Viktor Zavarzin, the Russian officer on the scene in Kosovo, to a rank matching that of NATO commander Lt.-Gen. Sir Michael Jackson of Britain. Yeltsin’s foreign affairs aide, Sergei Prikhodko, affirmed on June 12 that, “as far as the presence of the Russian contingent in Kosovo is concerned, these are instructions from the President. The responsibility for their fulfillment and timing depends on the military. . . . The need for the presence of a Russian military contingent was on the agenda from the very beginning of the discussion of prospects for a peaceful settlement in Kosovo.”

Russian Defense Ministry official Gen. Leonid Ivashov said, “We don’t intend to beg the American side to provide Russia with a relevant sector in Kosovo.” Lacking an agreement, “We will declare our sector and agree on this question with the Yugoslav side. Russia is planning to deploy its troops in the northern districts of Kosovo, which are densely populated by the Serbs, who have warm feelings for the Russians.”

Entering Pristina, the small Russian unit experienced a psychologically important moment: Russian soldiers were welcomed with enthusiasm by a local population, in this case the Serbs of Pristina, for the first time since 1945.

Politicization of command

The Airborne Forces have been directly under the command of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff in recent years, being relatively unentangled with the Ground Forces and Defense Ministry bureaucracies. (In 1997, the Airborne Forces were the subject of intense disputes over Russian military policy and spending, in the midst of which President Yeltsin was prevailed upon to rescind, in part, orders for their downsizing.) It appeared possible, in the days following the drive to Pristina, that Defense Minister Sergeyev, like Foreign Minister Ivanov, had been in the dark about the command decision by the General Staff.

The Italian daily *La Stampa* published an inside account of the decision, on June 13. Moscow correspondent Giulio Chiesa, once described as “one of the few Western journalists or experts who really understands the nuances of Russian culture, politics, and life” (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1993), summarized his interview, held in a Moscow park with an unnamed “high-ranking officer in the Russian Armed Forces.” As translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Chiesa’s interlocutor offered this explanation of the sudden military move: “After 48 hours of those smiles [of U.S. emissary Strobe Talbott, during negotiations], we would have seen Kosovo occupied by NATO and we would have had no other choice than to accept their decisions. So, we decided. . . .”

Chiesa wrote, “Who decided? At this juncture my interlocutor said that he preferred to speak off the record. . . . As early as Friday afternoon [June 11], Chief of Staff Anatoli Kvashnin reportedly held a meeting with his closest aides and, after a brief overview of the situation and a quick look at CNN, he is said to have called Gen. Lt. Viktor Zavarzin, the [former] Russian representative with NATO, giving the green light for the operation. Does ‘the green light’ mean that the operation had already been planned in the days prior to the call? ‘Of course. Zavarzin was already in Bosnia, and that was no mere coincidence.’ ”

Said the anonymous officer, “Kvashnin and Leonid Ivashov truly embody the predominant opinion in the upper echelons of the Russian Armed Forces. We all realized that either we had to go in by surprise or we would not get in at all. Or else we would have gotten in like poor pilgrims, cap in hand, asking for a place in the shade.”

What does this mean for the political power of the Russian Armed Forces? Ravaged though they may be from eight years of economic collapse in Russia, the Armed Forces will no longer stand aside from the political power struggle.

Potential for military rebellion

In the *Moscow Times* of June 9, Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer painted a dramatic picture of potential military rebellion against Yeltsin, along the lines he last did around the launch of the late Gen. Lev Rokhlin’s military movement in 1997. Felgenhauer, who often purveys views from within Russian military intelligence, put this article in

an English-language Moscow paper.

In his “Defense Dossier” column, titled “Serbs Sold Down the River,” Felgenhauer wrote that only a “small but highly influential pro-Western clique of corrupt oligarchs that controls the Kremlin,” has supported “the occupation of Kosovo.” Other people in Russia, “including its professional military and diplomats,” “support the Serbs” and “disapprove of NATO actions in Yugoslavia.” The bombing of Yugoslavia outraged “every Russian, including those few with pro-Western sympathies,” but that at the offer of “a price that seemed good, . . . the pro-Western Kremlin clique promptly sold the Serbs down the river.”

Continued Felgenhauer, “The NATO-imposed peace will probably be another public relations disaster. Russian officials say that a 5,000- to 10,000-strong Russian military force will be sent to Kosovo, and that it will be ‘independent of NATO command.’ This is totally impossible. The defense budget in 1999 is planned to be \$7 billion. In reality, the military will be lucky to get the equivalent of \$4 billion by the end of the year. To equip and maintain 10,000 men for one year with heavy armaments in war-torn Kosovo will cost up to a billion dollars. Only if NATO pays Russian bills and provides logistical support can a sizable Russian contingent be posted in Kosovo. But if NATO pays and supports it, it will also be fully in control. Russian troops will be Western-paid proxies like their political masters in the Kremlin.”

He concluded, “Almost all Russians, especially the Russian military, increasingly believe that Yeltsin’s continued presence in the Kremlin is a terrible liability, a handicap for Russia. The country and its military may simply not wait for elections to get Yeltsin out.”

In discussion with *EIR* on June 17, Felgenhauer elaborated this analysis. “We’re heading into a revolution in Russia,” he said, and that is the real significance of the dispatch of Russian troops to the Pristina airport.

According to Felgenhauer, “If the military now ousts Yeltsin, they will be honored with flowers. There is no single leader, it will not happen in an organized way, but in a revolutionary style. It could be spontaneous. The present situation cannot last long. The current round of ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo, if it continues, will be a total disaster for the pro-Western forces in Russia. Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin, and their allies, will be seen as traitors. The rallying cry will be to oust the pro-Kremlin traitors. That is why Yeltsin is now talking so belligerently, trying to save his own skin.”

Felgenhauer asserted that “the final orders” for the deployment into Pristina “came from the General Staff, not even from the Defense Minister. This has happened very rarely in Russia, and it establishes a precedent, for something to happen next in Russia itself. The military sees the national interest being at stake. Either all this is not understood in the West, or the main people making policy in the West want a final confrontation, with the aim of ruining Russia.”