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ARE THE PRAETORIANS TAKING OVER?

(See end for summary)

Now, when Western Kremlinologists have belatedly accepted the likelihood that they will have to report for at least some months yet on all the members of the Soviet Politbureau, who have returned to their usual posts from their annual vacation, a wave of cloudy speculation has begun about the role of the Armed Forces. Is Bonapartism on the march, has the Praetorian Guard taken over in the Kremlin, are Grechko and Yakubovsky really more important than Kosygin and Suslov? These are the questions being eagerly discussed wherever participants in the greatest (and most prolonged) guessing game in history gather together. Briefly, the answer to all three questions is probably "no." The reasons are not far to seek.

The questions arise mainly because of Marshal Grechko's brief but successful visit to Prague, which ended with the demotion of Dubcek and the promotion of Husak. The misinterpretations unfold largely because those who regard the Red Army as now being at the peak of its political power tend to overlook a significant fact -- that Grechko was accompanied to Prague by a deputy Foreign Minister, V.S. Semenov.

After the invasion of August 1968, Moscow's Gauleiter in Prague for several months was V.V. Kuznetsov, Gromyko's First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, who has been a member of the Central Committee, CPSU, for nine years longer than Grechko. (1) In view of Kuznetsov's seniority and his familiarity with the problems of trying to instill some "normalization" in Prague, it seems virtually certain that he would have been sent on the April mission as well, had it not been for the unpredictable factor of the death

(1) Kuznetsov elected 1952; Grechko elected 1961.

of ex-President Eisenhower. In the last years of General Eisenhower's Presidency, Kuznetsov was repeatedly in the USA on missions to the UN, in 1957 and in 1959.

He was therefore one of the obvious choices for the representational task of attending the funeral, and since the military threats which precipitated the fall of Dubcek were probably decided on by the Politbureau after Kuznetsov's departure, Semenov had to go to Prague instead. But it does not necessarily follow that Grechko was the sole or even the major spokesman for the Politbureau on the April mission, and still less can one conclude that the Marshal was playing an independent role.

The truth of the matter is that not since the rout of the anti-party group in July 1957, when Zhukov's aircraft saved the day for Khrushchev, Suslov and Mikoyan by flying in C.C. members to Moscow from all over the USSR, has there been a single occasion on which the Marshals played a decisive political role. And that experience was such a shock to the Presidium that within four months Marshal Zhukov himself was purged and replaced by the much more compliant Malinovsky.

While on the subject of the latter it is worth recalling that Khrushchev, at the Paris summit meeting in 1960, used him in exactly the same way that Brezhnev used Grechko in April 1969, as a symbol of military power and of the possible use of force (i.e. a means of blackmail). But on both occasions it seems far more probable that the Defense Minister was employed as the executive of the Presidium/Politbureau's wishes than in any independent policy-making role.

Those who argue that the Marshals are now in the political saddle (the men on Brezhnev's horseback?) tend to argue that the rise in the Soviet military budget, allegedly by a quarter since 1967, is evidence for their claim. The overt Soviet defense budget in fact was 14.5 billion rubles for 1967 (13% of total budget expenditure) and for 1969 it is 17.7 billion rubles (13.2% of total expenditure). An increase of 0.2% in the share of the national cake allotted to the armed forces scarcely supports the theory of bounding Bonapartism. In the Khrushchev years 1958-64 the defense budget grew by 6.3% p.a., according to the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, while for 1969 the rise is smaller, at 6%. (2)

If total Soviet military spending is examined, the best Western estimate for 1964 was 35 billion dollars, (3) while the same source in 1968 puts the total at 50 billion

(2) Reuter, 10 December 1968.

(3) The Military Balance 1964-65, ISS, London, 1965, p. 3.

dollars. This is nearly a 50% increase, but it cannot all be attributed to the malign Marshals. In the same period the U.S. defense budget rose from 51.2 billion dollars to 79.6 billion dollars (largely due to the war in Vietnam), which represents a rise of almost 60%. Even if the Politbureau were not a conservative-minded body, it could scarcely have failed to respond to such increases on the part of the leading Western nation, without necessarily being driven to such action by the military clique.

This is not to suggest that Grechko would not have liked still more, but merely to point out that he did not do as well as Mr. McNamara in the perennial battle of the soldiers against the two Treasuries.

The grooms of the "men on horseback" theory argue that it was the armed forces' influence which persuaded Khrushchev to announce his support for "wars of liberation" in 1960. But in fact Stalin had advocated it clearly enough 35 years earlier, in 1925 when he addressed the students of the "University of Peoples of the East." He then noted that:

It is impossible to achieve the liberation of colonies and dependent countries from imperialism without a victorious revolution.

The obvious implication was that once the revolution had been carried out, the USSR would support colonial "liberation" whether by war or any other means. Certainly the USSR gave N. Korea full support in its "war of liberation" begun during the Stalin era in 1950, and one could cite numerous other similar examples.

Most observers will probably hold that the Soviet marshals helped to trigger off the Cuban missile gamble of 1962. But they could scarcely have done so without the consent at least of the Presidium, and of Khrushchev in particular, and it seems most improbable that they would have so meekly agreed to the subsequent humiliating withdrawal of their hardware from the island, had it not been forced upon them by the direct orders of the Presidium.

The downfall of Khrushchev in 1964 is quite another matter. Careful examination of the record shows that the Armed Forces were, at the most, neutral and that at least two of the Marshals were so ignorant of the impending coup that they wrote articles in praise of Khrushchev on the very eve of his removal.

Marshal Krylov, the Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Rocket Forces, was away in Kazakhstan at the time, Marshals Bagramyan and Yeremenko were in Riga, (4) and on October 15th Krasnaya Zvezda, the Armed Forces newspaper, was still mentioning Khrushchev as First-Secretary! whoever else may have been in the plotters' circle, it was not Krasnaya Zvezda.

Some of the arguments for Bonapartism on the rampage rest on the theory that Brezhnev did not support Khrushchev's campaign to reduce the armed forces and has not attempted to curb the "metal eaters" in the Moscow establishment. But the statistics show that the armed forces were cut from 5.7 million men in 1955 to 3.3 million in 1964, a sizeable reduction indeed. Moreover in 1964 Brezhnev was already clearly designated as Khrushchev's most likely successor, and it is improbable that the Presidium (or Khrushchev) would have appointed someone as crown prince who had opposed its decade of succeeding major demobilizations of the conventional forces.

As for "metal-eaters," it needs to be recalled that Brezhnev and Kosygin have for two years running followed a policy of planning to expand consumer goods production faster than the output of the heavy industry sector, something which Khrushchev tried but failed to achieve because of his removal. It seems evident that his successors have in fact continued his policy in this respect to its logical conclusion.

The Grechko/Ustinov Contest

It is sometimes argued that the emergence of Marshal Grechko as Minister of Defense in 1967 instead of D.F. Ustinov was a triumph for the military. This would certainly be true had a majority of the Politbureau ever supported Ustinov's candidacy, but there is no evidence that it did. It was widely rumoured at the time that Ustinov was under consideration, but it never seemed probable that either Brezhnev or Kosygin would wish to antagonize the Armed Forces by giving the Defense Ministry to a civilian -- even to one who had spent most of his working life in the arms industry. Rumours in Moscow, however intriguing, are not necessarily always correct.

Czechoslovakia

It is universally agreed in the West that the influence of the Armed Forces on Soviet policies as a whole has been

(4) Sovetskaya Latvia, 13 and 14 October 1964.

considerable and at a high level since 1964. But so it was in 1962 (Cuba), in 1960 (after the U-2 incident), in 1958 (the squeeze on Berlin) and in 1956 (the invasion of Hungary).

The invasion of Czechoslovakia, however, differed greatly from the assault on Hungary in that the Red Army's freedom of manoeuvre was limited by much more stringent political controls in the later case (it took eight months to get a Czechoslovak government which even begins to look acceptable to Moscow).

It is true that there were valid military arguments for the 1968 invasion, but it is also true that the ideological/political fear of "infection" was the primary motive, with the military rationalizations as an added, but not necessarily decisive, factor.

The speeches of the Marshals published last year (and until now in 1969) have not ventured beyond the usual routine limits, and there is little sign that either Grechko or Yakubovsky are seeking any major degree of political independence. They surely recall the fate of Zhukov, who has certainly been rehabilitated (in retirement) as a war hero and a great soldier, but who has not been offered any new post under Brezhnev.

Conclusion

In most of the specific areas which can be examined in detail, the parallels with a Bonapartist situation are largely misleading. The histories of Trotsky, Tukhachevsky and Zhukov, different as each of them is individually, all demonstrate the point that the Party is well aware of the dangers and ready to act ruthlessly whenever it believes that action against the military elite is advisable.

The most likely explanation of the Grechko visit to Prague in April is that he was carrying out, faultlessly, the orders of the Politbureau with Semenov and without taking any initiative of his own. This by no means excludes the possibility that the influence of the Armed Forces is growing; it only suggests that any concrete evidence of such a shift is still lacking. Grechko is three years older than Brezhnev, and both are well aware of the fact that the Defense Minister is now beyond normal retirement age.

One item conspicuously lacking in the arguments of the Praetorian theorists is the Supreme Soviet decree of

October 1967, which reduced the length of active military service for the majority of conscripts. It is even seriously argued by some (e.g. Le Monde, 20 April 1969) that the accompanying military training in the schools from the ninth class onwards (there are ten classes in most Soviet schools now) is evidence of the militarization of society. Well, it's a point of view, but the Englishman, for example, who remembers beginning his military training at thirteen may be unlikely to be much impressed and be inclined to take more note of the shorter period of full-time active service.

Undoubtedly the successful Red Army performance in invading Czechoslovakia (unopposed) and the nation-wide clamour concerning the Ussuri River border clashes has strengthened the hand of the USSR's Praetorian Guard. But it may be found in the fullness of time that increased influence for the military in the USSR is not tantamount to an independent voice in policy decisions which, to judge by the experience of the past fifty-two years, are probably still made by the Politbureau. As for the eminent Yugoslav communist who believes that Grechko and Yakubovsky are now more important than Kosygin and Kirilenko, one may take leave to hope that he knows more about the Yugoslav system than he appears to about the Kremlin.

One last question: if Bonapartism is resurgent in Moscow, why was the military side of the May Day Parade apparently cancelled, and by whom? Could it have been the "impotent" pair, Kosygin and Kirilenko? It was almost certainly a civilian, not a military, decision.

Summary: This paper discusses the problem of whether the influence of the Soviet Marshals has grown in recent months to the point of making them a decisive political force. It examines some of the arguments which have been used to bolster Bonapartism, and concludes that while Red Army influence since the August invasion and the Ussuri River clashes has clearly increased, there are good reasons for believing that the civilian Politbureau is still firmly in the saddle. Grechko attracts the limelight, but it is quite probable that Semenov is doing the political hatchet work for Moscow.

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