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COMMUNIST AREA

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IRATE CITIZENS CHASTISE SOVIET MILITIA

Summary: The recent death of a World War Two hero in Alma Ata has provoked a storm of criticism against the Soviet militiamen. Letters branding them as uncouth, coarse, and rude, as well as questioning their bravery, have been received by a member of the recently created Ministry of the Interior (MVD). The solution proposed by the board member, however, merely accentuates a return to the rules -- a solution hardly likely to soothe the deep-seated prejudices against the militia which this latest incident has revealed.

On November 29, a TASS report announced that steps were being taken to improve the efficiency of the Soviet militia in conjunction with renaming the Ministry for the Protection of Public Order the Ministry of the Interior. Undoubtedly an important aspect of this change was to upgrade the negative image which has plagued these guardians of the people. "The best representatives of the working people are to be sent to work in the militia," TASS concluded, "in order to strengthen its cadres and expand its contacts with the people." A recent two-party report on militia activities, however, indicates that the "villainous" image of the average militiamen has survived these administrative changes.

The case in point concerns a certain N. Klimov (an acknowledge pseudonym), a thrice decorated World War Two pilot, who recently died under strange circumstances in the railroad station of Alma Ata. According to the irate letter written by Klimov's sister, and published in Izvestia, the war hero became ill upon arriving at the station, and the concerned yardkeeper immediately summoned the militiamen for assistance. "She [the yardkeeper] called the militiamen," the letter continues, "who thought he was drunk and, as they later stated, 'dragged him to the duty office. He spoke hoarsely, so we decided to send him to a sobering station (vytrezvitel'), but he died before the

wagon arrived'." By the time the nurse was called, it was too late to do anything. "...could they not see," the letter continues, "that he [Klimov] had no arms?"

This, however, put no end to the brash treatment of the militiamen. The family was not notified of Klimov's death until four days later, and by then it was no longer allowed to take the lid off the coffin. "We will never forgive them for this," the letter concludes.

According to a lengthy commentary following the published letter, Izvestia acknowledged that the facts, as stated, were correct except for one error -- Klimov was indeed drunk, as confirmed by the medical report. Yet the most interesting aspect of this case, aside from the complexity of an armless man drinking himself to death, concerns the virtual flood of angry letters which the report produced. In this barbaric treatment, numerous citizens apparently saw their prejudices, formed in their own past dealings with the militia, once again confirmed.

"Why don't you punish the workers of the militia for such savagery, such caddishness?" demanded one irate reader. "Where is the guarantee," wrote another, "that having drunk an extra glass of wine, you don't fall into the hands of the militia? That having dropped into a shop during a change in shifts, having drunk a glass of wine or two [you aren't] sent off to the soboring station?" Some letters however included criticisms of the bravery of the average militia employee. "It is not right," wrote comrade P., "that in the provinces the militia-men, having heard a fight, attempt to avoid interfering."

"I have received letters," wrote a member of the board of the newly created Ministry of the Interior (MVD), S. Krylov, "...in which the militiamen are reproached in unison for their cruel, mechanical, bureaucratic actions at the train station. These letters contain criticism of the methods of work of the militia, examples of their coarseness, uncouthness, and disrespectful relations with the people. If I said that all the authors were guilty of slander, it would be incorrect." (1)

The solution to the problem of the untrusted and inefficient militiamen proposed by Krylov consists basically of a return to more rigid training -- of going by the book. "Our humanism is in the statutes, in the statutes of the constitution of the USSR, in the legal codices, and in the codices of communist morality. For each servant connected with the defense of the citizens ... a concrete embodiment of these principles is required. More than this, we believe that the appearance of a high moral behavior in the activities of such organizations as the militia is possible only on the basis of the regulations.

(1) S. Kylov, "The Militia and You," Izvestia, 21 February 1969.

Thus, teaching love toward the people, we will every time combine it with fully practiced circumstances and responsibilities."

One can legitimately question whether this combination of firmness and naivete will in fact soothe popular prejudices against the militia which apparently reflect extensive and unpleasant past experiences. More than a return to statutes and a changed departmental name may well be required.

Michael Boll

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(*) E. Kiylov, "The Militia and You," Izvestia, 21 February 1969.