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Facing the Soviet
Military**

By Baker Spring



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Five Questions Facing the Soviet Military

By Baker Spring

The ongoing crisis in the Soviet Union is forcing the Soviet military to make important decisions not only about what sort of society it wants but also about what role it sees for itself in the future. The manifestations of this process have been reported resistance in the military to general political and economic reforms, while at the same time proceeding with an institutional reform proposal for itself. Out of this confusing and contradictory situation, the Soviet military leadership has at least recognized that the military cannot insulate itself from the ongoing crisis. It will have to take a stand as to what it will support, or at least tolerate. As Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov has stated: "The processes which have unfolded in [the Soviet Union] also have been reflected in and have demanded the transformation of society's entire military organization. Military reform has become an objective necessity, without which society's further movement along the path of democratization has become impossible."

In the context of this crisis, the Soviet military faces five questions that one way or another it will have to answer. Answering these questions correctly will mean a better future for the Soviet people and a healthy military better able to serve its people and perform its mission. The wrong answers will only deepen the existing crisis and ultimately threaten the standing of the military itself. These questions are: 1) will the Soviet military renounce its allegiance to communist ideology? 2) will the Soviet military support free market economic reform? 3) will the Soviet military define a new, more limited political role for itself within the society? 4) will the Soviet military find a constructive way to solve cultural and ethnic conflicts that exist within it? 5) will the Soviet military abandon its imperialist vision?

Sympathetic Advice. I suppose some may be asking why one who has been warning America about the threat posed to it by the Soviet Union, and particularly its military threat, would seek to give sympathetic advice to the Soviet military. I do so for three reasons. First, I do not think the Soviet military consists entirely of communist ideologues committed to opposing reform at all costs. In short, I think the Soviet military, or at least portions of it, can still be won to the reform cause. There is no guarantee of success in this, but I think the effort to convince them is worth the attempt because the alternative carries such severe consequences. Second, I think it is unrealistic to believe that the ongoing crisis will consume the Soviet military as an institution and we can just sit back and watch it collapse. In fact, it may be unhealthy to adopt this approach. As much as conservatives should support pro-democracy forces in the Soviet Union, including the leader of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin, we should not confuse it with a policy of destroying all institutions in the Soviet Union. Russian and Soviet history has an unpleasant record of nihilism, which the conservative tradition of Burke should compel us to abhor. Third, as a student of military affairs, I believe that it is possible to distinguish between good and bad

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military institutions. Iraq's military has provided us with a textbook example of what constitutes a bad military. As sentimental as it may sound, I still believe that under the right circumstances the Soviet military can be transformed into a responsible and healthy institution.

Communism

Now to the questions at hand. Will the Soviet military abandon its commitment to communist ideology? If the Cold War truly is over, it is because communism as an ideology has failed. Anybody, including members of the Soviet military, who still thinks communism works is truly on the wrong side of history. As it has done with the Soviet society at large, communism's central tenets have served to weaken, and will ultimately destroy, the Soviet military. The requirement of public ownership of the means of production has prevented the growth of a robust industrial base. Communism's prohibition on the free exchange of ideas has destroyed the creativity required to advance scientific and technological horizons. Its commitment to a global ideological, political and military struggle against capitalism has imposed the burden of global hostility. Communism's prohibition of religion has stunted the spiritual growth of the citizenry.

These and the other tenets of communism pose a threat to, not a foundation for, the military. A strong industrial base is an absolute requirement for a strong military, but communism has left the Soviet industrial base in a state of decline. Technological advances ensure that a military can stay ahead of potential competitors in sophisticated weapons and equipment. But communism demands the punishment of those favoring the free exchange of ideas. The result is a country that has to steal military technologies from the West. Communism's call for a global struggle has resulted in a Soviet Union that has no real international friends, only those who fear it or serve it as lackeys. The Soviet military needs to ask, for example, what it got out of its so-called friendship with the government of Afghanistan. Official atheism has given the Soviet Union a citizenry that is spiritually bankrupt. The Soviet military, as a result, has a manpower pool that likely lacks the motivation to defend the society.

Unfortunately for the Soviet military, it has been wedded to communism and its myriad shortcomings. While it has been able to insulate itself from these shortcomings in the past because of its privileged position in Soviet society, it can no longer do so. Some prominent individuals, including former Politburo member Yegor Ligachev, Russian presidential candidate General Albert Makashov, and Russian Communist Party leader Yegor Polozkov, have been saying that the current crisis is the result of the reform process. The military should ignore this suggestion. Communism is the cause of the current crisis, and the only shortcoming of the reform process is that it has not jettisoned communism quickly enough. If the military chooses to ignore this reality and pursue immediate gains through repression justified on the basis of orthodox communism, it will really be doing nothing less than feeding off the corpse of Soviet society. The long-term interest of the military clearly rests with its going to the political leadership and saying: "Communism is killing us, it must go."

Economic Reform

The next question facing the military goes to the most pressing element of the ongoing crisis, the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Will the Soviet military support free market economic reforms? This question can best be answered with another question: Does it have a choice? In reality, the military does not have a choice. The economic collapse

of the Soviet Union will bring about the weakening of the military as surely as night follows day. A market economy is the only way out. The Soviet Union now spends some five times the percentage of its gross national product on the military compared to the United States. This stems not only from huge investments the Soviet Union has made in the military, but also because its economy is so small. Absent a larger economy brought about by the economic growth fostered by a free market economic policy, the military will find the Soviet economic base too small to sustain it.

Now Soviet military leaders will complain that a free market economic policy will hurt them because the privatization required by such a policy will force a reduction in the size of the military. They are right. Military conversion will be required. But, in any event, the shrinking Soviet economy is forcing them to cut back now. At least with a free market economy the military can hold out the possibility of future growth.

It is important, however, for the Soviet military to realize that the free market can offer it some immediate benefits. Chief among them is competition among suppliers. Traditionally, the Soviet military has depended entirely on the Military-Industrial Commission to direct the production of weapons and equipment. While the military has demanded, and often got, the best of what the Commission could produce, if that was shoddy or inferior the military has had no choice but to accept it. As stated by First Deputy Chief of the General Staff V. Lobov, the military should "...refuse the services of suppliers that produce junk or obsolete equipment and seek other suppliers so as to provide the Ministry [of Defense] with the possibility to demonopolize a number of producers...." In reality, the monopolistic supply structure referred to by Lobov is causing great damage to the Soviet military. Thus, the first step the military can take to help both itself and the cause of free market reform is to go to war against its entrenched supply structure, break it up, and force it to compete. Such a competitive environment ultimately will give the military higher technology and more reliable weapons and equipment. The constant criticism of the U.S. military development and procurement system by anti-defense politicians here may have led Soviet military leaders to believe they were better off under the command economy in the Soviet Union. They would not be alone in this belief. The constant criticism led many in the American public to believe the U.S. military procurement system did not work. The performance of U.S. weapons and equipment in the war against Iraq, however, should make it clear to the Soviet military that America's competitive model can and does work.

The consequences of a decision by the Soviet military to spurn a free market approach could only be described as disastrous for both the society at large and the military itself. It would mean accepting a smaller economy and ever-increasing defense burden. Obviously, this cannot be sustained. The Soviet military already consumes 60 percent of machine production. There is little room left for a higher consumption level, particularly with an economy that this year is likely to be 10 percent smaller than last year's.

The Political Role

To say that the military is an important institution politically in the Soviet Union is stating the obvious. This is not because the Soviet military has a record of defying civilian authority or imposing military regimes (it has not) but because of its privileged place in the Soviet political order. The ongoing crisis, by its nature, is forcing a reordering of the Soviet political structure. The question facing the military is: Will it resist the reordering of the political structure to protect its own privileged position?

Communism, because of its belief in the use of violence to force political and social change, has viewed military power as essential to its cause. Since Leon Trotsky created the Red Army in the midst of revolution, it has had a privileged political position within Soviet society. In a society as highly politicized as the Soviet Union this has meant quite a lot. The military has been given access to a vast amount of resources, both human and material. It has had representation in the highest political institutions, including the Politburo. Finally, it has meant serving as the chief, in fact almost exclusive, tool of Soviet foreign policy in the post-war era. The result of this is a huge institution wielding commensurate powers.

Protecting Privileges. Typical of institutions caught in the midst of a societal crisis, the military is likely seeking to protect its privileges. But as painful as it may be to the military leadership, the military must accept a less prestigious position for itself. A staunch defense of its position and privileges will force the military to choose between two dead-end paths. The first is a retreat to orthodox communism. The shortcomings of this approach I have already outlined. But suffice it to say that it would represent a return to the politics of Josef Stalin and Lavrenty Beria. The only other way the military could hope to retain its relatively prestigious position is to resort to direct military rule. But this approach has its own shortcomings. First, it can only exacerbate the already dire economic crisis. While there are references in Moscow to the "Pinochet model," conditions in Chile in the late 1980s were far different from current conditions in the Soviet Union. Pinochet engineered a transition to a democratic system when the economy was relatively healthy. The Soviet economy is anything but healthy. The best analogy to the direct military rule in the Soviet Union is Wojciech Jaruzelski's Poland. Martial law in Poland only further weakened the Polish economy, and military rule was ultimately reversed. Also, is the reputation of the Polish military among the people of the society at large improved today by the imposition of martial law in the 1980s? I think not. This is something the Soviet military should pay attention to before it does something precipitous.

Second, direct military rule means that the military will assume responsibility for a whole host of problems now outside its mandate. The most important of these responsibilities is enforcing domestic order. This responsibility alone will likely force the Soviet military to become something akin to a heavily-armed constabulary. Militaries have never really been very good at police work and it generally has had a bad impact on those that have tried it. Armies are designed to conduct operations against other armies. The ability to perform this proper mission will inevitably deteriorate if the Soviet military attempts to perform police functions. Many Third World militaries are caught in this trap.

Clear Principles. Third, direct military rule in the Soviet Union, outside the mantle of communism, will lack ideological underpinnings and legitimacy. As any first-year student of politics knows, power absent legitimacy is a deadly combination. Direct military rule, absent strong ideological underpinnings, can only be maintained by the threatened use or actual use of force. The Soviet military is deluding itself if it thinks it can impose order and stability over the long term by the threatened use of force alone. Anybody who achieves order out of the current chaos will have to put forth a clear set of principles and explain why his platform will improve the lot of the average citizen.

Finally, direct military rule would be a decision to evade, not proceed with, needed reforms. Not even through direct rule could the military insulate itself from the effects of social and economic decline in Soviet society. The best it could hope is to be a big fish in a little pond, similar to a number of Third World military dictatorships. Are Soviet military leaders going to be satisfied with roles similar to their counterparts in the former regimes of Idi Amin or Mengistu Haile Mariam? If nobody else, the Soviet people should hope not.

Ethnic Strife

The cultural diversity in the Soviet Union is something the Red Army has had to contend with since its founding. With *glasnost* it has become apparent that Slavs in the military suppressed those with non-Slavic backgrounds. This ugly situation was the result of the system used to provide the military with huge quantities of manpower. The military relied on the draft to build a military consisting of 5 million persons in the active forces and 9 million in the reserves at its height in the 1980s. What has become obvious is that the Soviet Union's large, conscripted, and culturally diverse military is racked with internal conflict and dissension. It is a force of low quality and morale. There have been widespread reports of physical abuse, desertion, and suicides resulting from the ethnic conflicts within the ranks. The question facing the Soviet military leadership is: How does it solve these internal ethnic conflicts in a positive manner?

The obvious answer to this question is rooted in how the Soviet military will meet its manpower needs. The military must realize that its commitment to a large, conscripted army is not compatible with its desire for highly capable and motivated personnel. Drafting thousands of young men from a society as culturally diverse as the Soviet Union will inevitably result in internal problems for the military. Last year, the Chief of the Air Defense Forces Political Directorate complained: "Much has been done in our units to smooth out interethnic relations, but it is also necessary to look truth in the eyes: New recruits include more and more people who have participated in gatherings of all sorts of fronts and groupings. They frequently have a very vague understanding of duty and are incompatible with the demands of discipline." What he did not say, however, is how unhappy he would be if the number of troops under his command were cut significantly. The military leadership cannot have it both ways in this area. It must choose between a large conscripted army or a smaller all-volunteer force.

At this point, the Soviet military mistakenly believes that it can "split the difference" on this issue. Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov has announced the military will institute a "mixed" manpower acquisition system, which will combine conscription with contractual voluntary service arrangements. But as long as the Soviet military forces men into the service, internal conflict and morale problems will persist. Forcing men into service who do not want to be there will inevitably reduce morale. The same arrangement will ensure the continuing abuse of conscriptees. In fact, the mixed system may actually exacerbate this problem because volunteers will wish to exercise control over those conscripted. Also, the conscripted portion of the force will present the same problem of cultural and linguistic barriers present in the force now.

Higher Quality Force. The only practical alternative for the military leadership is to go to an all-volunteer force. This will ensure that everybody in the military wants to be there. Abuse of troops within the ranks, for ethnic or other reasons, will inevitably decline because such abuse will present a real threat to recruitment and retention rates. As such, it will not be tolerated. A volunteer force will also allow the military to adopt more ambitious training goals, ones that could include a language proficiency requirement and technical expertise. The result will be a more highly motivated, technically proficient, and culturally tolerant military; in short, a higher quality force. Some in the military will protest the fact that it will result in a smaller force. They will be right, but that is a price the military leadership should be willing to pay to obtain higher quality.

The Nationalities Question

The final question facing the Soviet military, under the current circumstances, is the most important one. It is whether it will want to continue to support, indeed protect, the internal empire that is the Soviet Union today. This broader question goes directly to the heart of the narrower question every individual Soviet soldier and sailor must be asking himself: "Am I willing die to defend the Soviet Union, or are my loyalties to my home republic?"

In the past, the individual soldier or sailor satisfied himself with his answer to defend the Soviet Union because of the common commitment to communist ideology. It was the ideology that served as the glue that held the Soviet Union's disparate nations together, along with the threat of force. With communism dead, is there any other common thread that binds all the people of the Soviet Union together? The experience in Eastern Europe since the revolutions of 1989 suggests not. The German Democratic Republic no longer exists. Absent communism, the ties of language, culture, and history inevitably drew East Germany's people back into union with their West German counterparts. In Yugoslavia, we are likely to see that the demise of communism will result in popular allegiances to Serbia and Croatia. Czechoslovakians are currently grappling with their identity as the government tries to manage frictions between the Czech and Slovakian populations.

It is quite obvious that the average Armenian, Estonian, Georgian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Moldavian feels loyalty to his home nation. The military can see this in the high rate of draft evasion by conscriptees from these republics. Many Ukrainians are likewise drawn toward nationalism. It is harder for me to determine what the feelings are in the Moslem republics. This leaves us with the question of what the average Russian, and perhaps Byelorussian, feels. My intuition tells me that the average Russian will also be drawn back to his Russian heritage and away from empire, now that communism has collapsed. I predict there will be a period in Russia that is marked by a glorification of all that is Russian. For the most part this will be a healthy thing. Still, some of it will be a cover for sense of power and glory, and indeed, empire lost.

Defending the Indefensible. At an emotional level, however, some will feel revulsion at the prospect of disunion, which is an outgrowth of the depressing reality of decay and decline. It is this sort of attitude that is likely spurring some to urge the military to "stop the chaos." They urge the formation of a Committee of National Salvation (really a form of direct military rule) to save the union. But before the military supports such a proposition it should think long and hard. The problem with those that propose a Committee of National Salvation, with military backing, is that they have no higher justification for maintaining the union. Nations do not appear out of nowhere. They represent a higher common interest shared by their people, either linguistic and cultural, religious, ideological, or historical. While a nation can be held together by force temporarily, which some may be urging the military to do in the Soviet Union today, that by itself is insufficient over the long term. If the military is persuaded to use force in the defense of the union, it will be assuming a commitment to defend the indefensible. It will be trapped into a commitment to wage war on its own population. Such a commitment will result in the long-term degradation of the military and ultimately will lead to its destruction. This is because the population, whose hostility the military will have invited with repression, will ultimately prevail. Once the population does prevail, there can be little doubt they will vent their hostility on the military, and at that point the military will have nowhere to turn. The most serious mistake the military could make is to stand between the people and their aspirations for national self-determination.

Conclusion

No doubt there are some in the Soviet Union who are whispering in the ear of the military about the need to stop the reform process, which they now consider out of control, by the use of force. In essence, these same people are pointing at the reformers and telling the military: "They are the cause of all our problems, shoot them before they destroy us all." If the military heeds that advice, it will have effectively answered the wrong way all the five questions I have posed here. Such an action not only will be an atrocity committed against the population, it will mark the point of no return on the road to disaster for the Soviet military.

