



# F.Y.I.

FYI 65

September 26, 1995

## GENERAL ALEXANDER LEBED: RUSSIA'S RISING POLITICAL STAR

By Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

Salvatori Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies

General Alexander Ivanovich Lebed has emerged at the front of Russia's tumultuous political stage. According to the polls, he is poised to beat any other politician in the presidential elections scheduled for the summer of 1996. He is the most popular leader in Russia, ahead of President Boris Yeltsin. Yet few in the West know who he is or what he represents.

Lieutenant General Lebed retired from command of the Special 14th Army in June 1995. This Russian army still occupies the Trans-Dniester region in Moldova. Lebed today is Vice Chairman of the Congress of Russian Communities, a nationalist party headed by Soviet-era military-industrial stalwart Yurii Skokov and guided by the famous writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. If Skokov and Lebed succeed in the Russian parliamentary elections of December 1995, their likely goals will be to restore the Russian Empire and dismantle democratic and market reforms.<sup>1</sup> A Lebed presidency might well plunge Russia into wars with her neighbors and confrontation with the United States.

Lebed has said that enlarging NATO to include some countries of Central Europe would be enough to start World War III. He is deeply suspicious of the West, particularly the United States. Lacking economic education or knowledge, he would tend to push not only for ever-increasing military budgets, but also for speedy and forced integration of the Newly Independent States of the "near abroad" into a Greater Russia. As the quintessential Soviet military man, he would see only military strength and territorial aggrandizement as the true measures of Russia's status as a great power.

### WHO ARE YOU, GENERAL LEBED?

Lebed retired this year as a 44-year-old general of the paratroop and special assault forces. Russia's current Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, was Lebed's long-time boss and mentor. In 1981-1982 they fought together in Afghanistan, where Grachev earned the highest Soviet military decoration, Hero of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> As commander of the elite Tula paratroop division, Lebed participated in suppressing ethnic unrest during the closing days of the So-

FYI #65/95

- 1 Possible scenarios include the nomination of Skokov as Prime Minister and Lebed as Defense Minister by President Yeltsin, or the victory of one of them in the summer 1996 presidential elections.
- 2 Sergei Karkhanin, "Zigzag ataki," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, March 14, 1995, p. 1.

viet empire in the late 1980s. In Azerbaijan in 1988, he cracked down on riots in the capital, Baku, and commanded the *spetsnaz* (special operations) troops sent in to quell anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait. He then was dispatched to put down demonstrations in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi in the spring of 1989. Over twenty people were killed and dozens wounded when his *spetsnaz* troops used sapper shovels and chemical weapons to quash the unrest.

In the winter of 1990, Lebed was ordered to impose martial law in Baku as communist rule in Azerbaijan was collapsing. Again, he proved himself a ruthless commander. Using armored personnel carriers, his troops shot, stabbed to death, and crushed hundreds of Azerbaijanis.<sup>3</sup>

In 1989-1991, younger officers of the rank of colonel and general, many of them Afghan war veterans like Lebed and Grachev, threw in with Boris Yeltsin when he made his bid for power against Mikhail Gorbachev. Most senior marshals in the General Staff supported the hard-line communist forces who staged the 1991 coup aimed at deposing Gorbachev. Today there is a public debate in Russia between Lebed and Grachev about the role each played in the momentous events of August 1991. Lebed says that as commander of the Tula Guard division, he was ordered by Grachev, then commander of the paratroop forces, to take up a position near the Russian White House. According to Lebed, he informed Yeltsin that his troops had arrived to prevent bloodshed and then reported to Grachev that he intended to protect the seat of the Russian president. While Grachev insists he supported Yeltsin all along, Lebed claims that Grachev waffled between the *putschists* and the president until the last minute.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Lebed reportedly got into a personal fight with then-Vice President Rutskoi.

Lebed assumed command of the 14th Army in June 1992, when ethnic Moldovans and Russians from the Trans-Dniester were at each other's throats. Three thousand people had been killed and tens of thousands wounded. Lebed stopped the war by decimating the nascent Moldovan armed forces. His nomination as commanding officer of the 14th Army put him in charge of one of the largest former Soviet arsenals, which could be used in the event of an attempt to revive the Soviet Union. Some Russian generals have explored the idea of selling arms from this depot to groups in the Balkans and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

At Kolbasna, a town near the Ukrainian border, Russian troops are still guarding the central military depot of the southwestern flank of the former Warsaw Pact. Without this protection, hundreds of tanks and cannon, millions of rounds of ammunition, and 400,000 tons of explosives could fall prey to Russian mercenaries, Serbs, Chechens, or anybody with enough cash to pay for them. Before retiring his command, Lebed suggested on several occasions that his removal from Moldova would allow "corrupt" Russian generals to sell off the gigantic 14th Army arsenal.

In 1994 Grachev began pushing for reduction of the Russian forces in the Trans-Dniester region. He called for bringing the 14th Army and its arsenal back to Russia proper and demanded both the removal of the Army commander and a dramatic reduction in the 14th Army's manpower. In July 1994, Grachev ordered Lebed to report to Moscow, where Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin offered him the post of Defense Minister of Tajikistan, a Central Asian state in the throes of civil war. Lebed declined, asking: "Why should a Russian general help one group of Tajiks kill another group of Tajiks?" Yeltsin finally intervened,<sup>6</sup> and Grachev reversed his decision,<sup>7</sup> but Lebed had to fight repeated attempts by Grachev to remove him from command of the 14th Army during the following

---

3 *Ibid.*

4 Alexander Nikolayev, "Pavel Grachev-Alexander Lebed: Du'el na vylet," manuscript, Moscow, 1995, p. 1.

5 Personal interviews with Russian military sources, May-August 1995.

6 Viktor Litovkin, "President Rossii zashchishchayet generala Lebedya," *Izvestiya*, August 16, 1994, p. 1.

7 Alexander Minkin, "Alexander Lebed pobyval v Moskve s kratkosrochnym visitom," *Segodnya*, August 25, 1994, p. 1.

months. Lebed refused to withdraw the 14th Army and continued to sit on the largest arsenal of weapons in southeastern Europe until his resignation in June 1995.

## GENERAL LEBED'S VIEWS

**On the end of the Russian Empire.** Lebed has been known to bemoan the collapse of the Soviet Union, to brag about his aggressive use of military force, and to defend Russian control of the Trans-Dniestrian enclave. As commander of the 14th Army, he threatened to take the Rumanian capital of Bucharest in seven hours. He has alleged that "The West is attempting to turn Russia into a cheap supplier of raw materials, a reservoir of free labor, and a huge hazardous waste dump for the industrial world."<sup>8</sup> Because "Everybody is wiping their feet on Russia...Russia has to show her teeth."<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, looking back at the collapse of the USSR, the general appears now to have reconsidered the use of force: "I know for sure that constitutional order cannot be restored by using air force, tanks and artillery. We used military power in Tbilisi, Baku, Vilnius. Where are they today—Georgia, Azerbaijan, Lithuania? Everything we tried to keep by force was lost. Now everything is being done in order to lose Chechnya."<sup>10</sup> Whether this really signals a kinder, gentler approach, however, is unknown.

**On Moldova.** Lebed claimed there were three reasons why the 14th Army should stay in Moldova: (1) if the Army was moved, the ethnic conflict would start again; (2) both the Trans-Dniester Russians and Moldovans wanted the Russian Army to stay; and (3) moving the army with its weaponry would be dangerous. In the event of withdrawal, he warned, the arms would be seized by the Trans-Dniestrian Russians, who would sell them or use them to fight Moldovans.

But Lebed did not enunciate the fourth—and possibly the most weighty—reason: According to a leading Russian military commentator, for Russia to keep the huge arsenal in Moldova makes sense only if the former Soviet Union is put back together again. To do this would require a large army close to the Balkans and in Ukraine's rear, hundreds of miles away from the Russian border.<sup>11</sup> Looking at the USSR's pre-1992 borders, it would make perfect sense for Lebed, a Russian "great power patriot," to keep the huge arsenal in Moldova indefinitely, until such time as the Soviet Union could be resurrected.

**On Democracy.** Lebed's democratic credentials are shaky at best. He once confessed that "To conduct diplomatic negotiations with some parliament to receive power and to maneuver is not my style."<sup>12</sup> After he was forced to resign, he lost the aura of the persecuted general speaking for the disgruntled Russian army. Moreover, he is seen by some in the career military as having pushed the army toward a confrontation with the defense minister and the president that eroded the military's neutrality and its position "outside of politics." Lebed is a general who used his military command to boost his political career.<sup>13</sup> By appealing to the media and civilian paramilitary forces, such as the Cossacks, Lebed played by a new set of rules that has been rejected by many officers.

---

8 Lyudmila Felixova, "Dolzhna pritupit'sia bol'," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, September 6, 1994, p. 1.

9 Alexander Mukomolov, "Alexander Lebed: '14 Armiya v Pridnestrovye-chistaya politika,'" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 27, 1994, p. 1.

10 Rodion Morozov and Vladimir Snegirev, "Lebedinyi ryk sotriasyet kremlevskie steny," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 2, 1995, p. 1.

11 Pavel Felgengauer, "Rossiyskaya armiya uynet iz Moldavii ne spesha," *Segodnya*, August 12, 1994, p. 2.

12 Mukomolov, "Alexander Lebed: '14 Armiya v Pridnestrovye-chistaya politika,'" *op. cit.*

13 Personal interviews, Moscow, May 1995.

**On Lenin.** Lebed is trying to define himself as a Russian patriot who appeals to both communists and nationalists. In media interviews published in 1993-1995, he attacked Russia's current leadership, charging that "Yeltsin is nothing but the first (communist party) secretary of Sverdlovsk, infamous for the destruction of the building where the last Russian tsar and his family were incarcerated before their execution."<sup>14</sup> He also once publicly said he was reading the memoirs of White Russian generals Anton Denikin and Peter Krasnov from the Civil War era (1918-1921), a clear nod in the direction of the nationalist right wing. However, in the same interview Lebed defended keeping a large bust of Lenin in his headquarters and declared himself an atheist. "They threw the old fetishes to the junkyard, but did not give us new ones," he complained; "therefore Lenin stays."<sup>15</sup>

The founder of the Soviet state indeed appears to have a special place in Lebed's heart: "Lenin was the only man in our history who combined theory and practice in Russian politics."<sup>16</sup> This despite numerous revelations in the Russian media about Lenin's personal involvement in hostage executions and the mass murder of Russian peasants, military officers, clergy, and intellectuals during and after the Civil War.

Leaders whom Lebed perceives as tough include Stalin, Charles De Gaulle, and Augusto Pinochet.<sup>17</sup> Lebed himself is often called a possible "Russian Pinochet" by the Moscow media, even though he adheres neither to the Chilean general's free-market policy nor to his anti-communism.

**On Crime.** After crushing the Moldovan attempt to take over the Trans-Dniester Republic, Lebed, who had become extremely popular locally, was elected to the Trans-Dniester Supreme Soviet (legislature). Soon he learned of the massive corruption and embezzlement for which the Trans-Dniester leadership is famous. He resigned from the local parliament, stating loudly that he would "not travel along with thieves," and called upon the state to "make everybody feel its gentle embrace."<sup>18</sup> The army and Russian society at large took notice. Many interpreted this statement as aimed at the Yeltsin administration and Grachev's Defense Ministry, both widely regarded as corrupt.

Playing the anti-crime card in today's Russia was a winning move, especially when one military inspection after another failed to find anything wrong with the 14th Army. On the contrary, Lebed boosted morale, beefed up military drilling, created a special "Russian Soldier of the Future" program based on the Green Beret training routine, and almost eliminated the hazing and suicides which plague the rest of the Russian military.

In a country where alcoholism is the leading cause of death and falling life expectancy, Lebed says he stopped drinking so that he "would be the only sober man in this drunken country." For this he was widely applauded.

---

14 Morozov and Snegirev, "Lebedinyi ryk sotriasyayet kremlevskie steny," p. 7.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Svetlana Gamova, "Alexander Lebed: sama zhizn zastavliayet generalov zanimat'sia politikoy," *Izvestiya*, July 20, 1994, p. 1.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Morozov and Snegirev, "Lebedinyi ryk sotriasyayet kremlevskie steny," p. 7.

## CONCLUSION

Lebed has a tough fight ahead of him, perhaps the most difficult battle of his career. The prize is the Russian government. The nationalist field in Russian politics is getting crowded. "Liberal-Democratic" Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Gennady Ziuganov of the Communist Party, former Vice President Rutskoi, former Soviet Prime Minister Nikolay Ryzhkov, and others are vying for the mantle of "most patriotic" leader. Whoever emerges will have to face President Boris Yeltsin, Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, or Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky in the presidential elections of 1996.

If he throws his hat into the presidential ring, Lebed will have one thing working for him: his skill in tapping two major themes in today's Russian politics—wounded national pride and the law-and-order crusade. The Russian voters seem to be buying Lebed's simple message. It remains to be seen whether they will buy him as their next leader.

