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LIVING WITH RUSSIA IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA

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*James Sherr*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the rising of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in 1648, Russian expansion into Europe has been a prominent theme of our history and an inescapable reference point in European strategic thinking. Today's strategic thinking must begin by recognizing that this entire 350 year process has been reversed in less than three. For most Europeans, this is not regarded as a security problem, but as the lifting of a huge security burden — and for the states of the ex-Soviet empire and Warsaw Pact of a good many more pernicious burdens as well. But if we want to understand the *Russian* perception of these developments, we had best recall T. S. Elliot's dictum: «humankind cannot bear much reality». By any standard, Russia's elites have had too much reality to bear — externally to be sure, and, more importantly, within both Russia and the former Soviet Union itself. We in the West rightly approach their struggle with sympathy. We must also approach it with clear-headedness.

### II. FIRST PRINCIPLES

Clear-headed analysis and prognosis must proceed from two sobering facts:

2.1 First, the events of August 1991 were not a revolution, but a collapse. This is not because the revolution was «faked», but because it simply is not possible to have a revolution of the classical kind against a system as entrenched, as pervasive and as corrosive as that which Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev built. To talk about dislodging this system in a month, a year or even ten years is about as realistic as talking about removing a man's vertebrae from

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his body. In August 1991, the Communist system was decapitated, long before that the heart stopped pumping, but to this day, the vertebrae — the structures, institutions, and elites of the old USSR — remain very largely in place.

2.2 Second, however impressed we might be by the figure of Boris Yeltsin, the issue today is not Yeltsin or any other personality, but the 750 000 people who really run Russia. Half of these people are unreconstructed and probably unreformable. The other half — for reasons of self-interest as well as national interest — want to change, but for the most part do not know how. So long as these people think and work in traditional ways, even the most radical Russian President will be nothing more than the titular head of this country. So long as we focus upon personalities rather than upon elites and institutions, we will fail to see who really holds power and will find our expectations continually disappointed.

In the old Soviet Union, it was clear who held power: the KGB, the Armed Forces, the military-industrial complex, the state bureaucracy and, penetrating and linking them all, the Communist Party apparatus. As the dust settles, we are likely to find that, with the exception of the Communist Party apparatus, power is held by the successors to the KGB, the Armed Forces the military-industrial complex and the state bureaucracy. With the demise of the Communist Party as a mechanism of command and supervision, we might also find that these institutions have become *more* autonomous than they were before and in some cases more opaque to outsiders, including the country's political leadership.

To be sure, the power which these institutions now enjoy is almost entirely negative. Their guardians have lost, and will not easily regain, the ability to achieve most of their own positive objectives. What they do possess is the ability to maintain themselves in being and dilute, sabotage and derail the projects of others. Yeltsin's concessions to the defence industrial lobby in April (and consequent dilution of Gaydar's government with fresh ministerial appointments in May), his appointment of Army General Pavel Grachev as Defence Minister on 18 May, and the publication of the new military doctrine in June suggest that he has a shrewd sense of where power actually lies.

### III. OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

In four areas, the legacies of old elites, old institutions and old habits of mind will prove very difficult to root out.

3.1. The first of these, obviously, is the multi-national structure of old Soviet Union itself. The Soviet Union was deliberately set up — geographically, demographically and economically — to be as interdependent as a straight-jacket. Until very recently (if not still), Russian leaders, Boris Yeltsin included, believed that these interdependencies would force mistrustful and even antagonistic republics to coordinate their policies and preserve the essence of a Soviet Union in all but name. (On the day after the CIS was formed Yeltsin himself stated: «if Ukraine refuses to join the new union (sic), they will be on one side of a barricade and we on another».)

This was always a very questionable analysis. For one thing, the economic dependencies of the old Soviet Union were to a large extent wasteful, exploitative and misaligned: an obstacle, not an asset, to creating normal, productive economies and balanced trading relationships. Moreover, antipathy to the Soviet empire is so great in the European parts of old Union (and the Caucasus), that a large proportion of its non-Russian inhabitants would divorce themselves from «integrated structures» even if it were economically irrational to do so. In the short term the costs of divorce will certainly prove painful, and many in the Russian Armed Forces and security services plainly seek to make them unendurable for the peoples concerned.

3.2. A second area of concern is the Russian economy itself. Markets will not be established by the very people who oppose them. Yet, the Russian government, partly out of confusion and partly out of necessity, is relying upon the old Soviet bureaucracy to dismantle the old command structures. When local bureaucrats obstruct rather than assist, the centre responds in a characteristically Bolshevik way: by strengthening the power of the centre. Whereas Prime Ministers Ryzhkov and Pavlov reduced the number of central officials from 70 000 to 36 000, the numbers since August have climbed (from 800 to 2000 in the Ministry of Agriculture alone). Yeltsin chairs over 20 commissions and maintains four separate advisory staffs. The result in post-Soviet conditions is not a return to Soviet-style centralisation, but administrative anarchy. Today, export licenses must be renewed quarterly,

and export quotas, registration and authorisation documents are issued by a host of separate authorities, each doing its best to undermine the other. In these conditions, «accountability spreads like watery porridge» and the decrees of Yeltsin and Gaydar are little more than conversation pieces.

3.3. A distinct, but no less vital issue is the defence complex, a complex with no analogue in the West or, for that matter, in any ex-Warsaw Pact country. (The entire armaments industry of Slovakia employed 80 000 people at its peak, fewer than the number employed by the Pleshakov science-production association alone.)

Yet the most intractable problem with the defence economy is not its scale but its nature: by design, a separate and autarkic economy, with its own system of supply, support and pricing, operating entirely at variance with market principles. Although this complex has historically been responsible for most of the country's quality civilian production, very few of its facilities could survive under market conditions. These enterprises were never efficient, only effective: an effectiveness achieved by production and quality control methods so wasteful of labour and materials that they would have bankrupted Detroit in the 1930's. If the complex itself remained «solvent», this is largely because it was permitted to purchase its inputs and raw materials at one-third to one-seventh the price paid by enterprises in the Soviet civilian sector. The real price was paid by the country, whose assets were systematically stripped and plundered.

For this reason, a market economy which excludes the defence complex is not a market economy. To say «we will free all prices except those in the defence sector» is like saying, «we will tax all incomes except those derived from work». Either the complex is propped up by exemptions and subsidies (in which case, the plunder continues); or the props are removed and the complex collapses, at a social and political cost which probably no Russian government could withstand. Yeltsin is bound to put political survival ahead of economic consistency. His concessions to the defence industrial lobby will neither save the complex, nor help the country, but they are dictated by the unfavourable balance of political power which he confronts.

3.4 The final area of difficulty is the Armed Forces. It remains a very opaque institution. After the coup, most assumed that the outsiders, the pro-Yeltsin military reformers in the USSR Supreme Soviet, would become

the new insiders. They did not. After the formal demise of the USSR in December, they still did not. Early this year, their tribune, Major Vladimir Lopatin, claimed «the Yazov group of officers still dominate the General Staff»; there is no transparency, no discussion, no reform. The force of this assessment has been confirmed by three recent developments in Russian defence policy.

- a. The first of these is the establishment of a military-dominated Russian Ministry of Defence with a military Defence Minister after nine months of assurances that a civilian minister would be appointed to head an all-civilian Defence Ministry. The new minister, Pavel Grachev is not apologetic about these developments: civilian defence ministers are «not part of our tradition», civilians «lack competence», the army is «not psychologically ready». What is more, there will be a «strict demarcation line» between the MoD and the General Staff. The functions of the former will be «political and administrative», whereas the General Staff — which survived the coup almost intact — will retain its traditional prerogatives in the critical areas of «operational and strategic planning».
- b. The second is a subtle, but unmistakeable, shift of policy with regard to the 600 000 Russian servicemen serving outside Russian territory. From 1 July, these forces — frequently the victims of «provocation» in non-Russian republics and just as frequently the instigators of it — operate under new rules of engagement with local antagonists. If «threatened» (not merely attacked), local commanders need no longer seek the centre's authorisation to respond; they may now order «retaliation» (not merely defence), without clearance from higher authority. To underscore the point, Grachev has announced that in current conditions, it will be necessary for MoD forces to exceed their customary remit and take on functions hitherto reserved for Interior Ministry troops.

The conventional wisdom — that formations in «hot spots» operate outside the control of central authority — is, like much conventional wisdom, correct only if critical amendments are made to it. The first is that control becomes an issue in those areas (Moldova, the Baltic states) where local forces wish to remain in defiance of the centre's

wishes, rather than in those (e. g. Osetia) which local Russian forces would gladly depart. Secondly, «central authority» is not useful term, because «the authorities» are themselves divided, not only between military and civilian, but between civilian and civilian. Third, whilst there is probably no centralised, orchestrated strategy in Moldova and the Baltic states at present, there is nonetheless a conspiracy of common instinct and purpose between local commanders and those whom Foreign Minister Kozyrev has recently termed the «war party» in Moscow.

The common purpose, clearly, is to defeat separatists in a world where NATO, the EC and the IMF make it impossible to crush them: and to do so by intimidating, disrupting and exhausting to the point where *the separatist populations themselves* come to Moscow seeking accommodation. (In the words of a Russian trade minister last February, «in six months time, the Baltic states will be begging to be allowed to join the CIS»). In Moldova and the Baltics, scarcely a day goes by without confrontation between the Russian Army/KGB and civil authority: an all but Hobbesian situation, which makes economic stabilisation, let alone coherent policy making for the long-term, fanciful and which strengthens the «Moscow party» within each separatist movement: i. e., those calling for «gradualism», «interdependence», «equidistance» between East and West and «the historical approach». For these reasons, Landsbergis and other advocates of a fully independent, pro-Western course in the Baltics are now weaker than they were six months ago.

- c. The final development is the publication in June of a draft military doctrine for the Russian Armed Forces. Labelled, with due obeisance to Gorbachev era «new thinking», as a «defensive doctrine» of «flexible response» for «repulsing aggression», it is testimony to the grip of old thinking on the Soviet military mind.

- 1) Like all pre-Gorbachevian military doctrines, it is based upon a worst case analysis of potential enemies and their capabilities. The United States is portrayed as Russia's most formidable potential rival. NATO — which the General Staff had credited with the intention of expanding to the Soviet border after the

- Warsaw Pact collapsed — is also credited with the wherewithal to assemble 71 divisions on M day.
- 2) As before 1987, the purpose of military doctrine is stated to be the preparation of the armed forces, economy and society for «world war». The threats identified by Army General Grachev differ little from those identified by Marshal Grechko: states having «a system of bases close to Russia's borders», «the massing of troops and naval groupings adjacent to its borders», the «introduction of foreign troops onto the territory of adjoining states», the possession of powerful armed forces «by certain states», and the maintenance of rapid mobilisation capabilities. With respect to the threats which actually confront the Russian state — the spillover of national conflicts within the old Union, the loss of control over subordinate formations (and armament), and civil conflict within Russia itself — the new doctrine offers no guidance. Nor does it demand that which today is plainly urgent: capability (and expertise) in crisis management and de-escalation. Now as before, the business of military doctrine is war-fighting and victory.
  - 3) The capabilities demanded also have a discordant ring: out of tune with NATO's defence reductions as well as the Gaydar team's assessment of Russia's economic possibilities and national interests. According to Grachev, the mixed, but largely professional army of 1.5 million men, scheduled to replace today's 2.8 million man conscript force by the year 2000, will dispose of «highly accurate» armament and «will have its fighting level enhanced». Not only will an operational-strategic level rapid-deployment force will be established — a measure roughly complementing NATO's own efforts — but, in addition, half the forces in each military district will be maintained in «constant combat readiness». Russia's neighbours are bound to ask why such readiness is required. NATO is reducing combat readiness, the condition of ex-Warsaw Pact military establishments is parlous (and likely to remain so) and Ukraine, according to the Russian General Staff's own public assessment, lacks a viable armaments industry as well as the means to conduct war at an operational-strategic scale.



- 4) Russia's neighbours will be equally unsettled by Grachev's views on war-fighting. Now as much as in Gorbachevian times, the General Staff is seeking to reconcile a politically motivated «defensive doctrine» with a multi-variant strategy and offensive concepts of operations. As Grachev has stated:

«it by no means follows that we should always defend ourselves always and everywhere. In the event of aggression, we have the right to choose the means of combat which we deem most effective in the existing situation.»

What kind of operations does Grachev's formula permit, and what does it rule out? Does it mean that, if attacked, Russian forces will undertake offensive action at a tactical or operational-tactical scale to restore the *status quo ante*? Or does it mean that, if attacked (or «threatened»), Russian forces will launch an operational-strategic offensive to «crush the aggressor» and create a *new status quo*? There is nothing in today's definition of «defensiveness» which rules out the latter (characteristically Soviet) view of war-fighting and victory.

- d. These are the General Staff's ideas and not those of Grachev alone. Each of them — professionalisation and mixed manning, rapid deployment forces, hi-tech armament at lower force levels, the need for offensive and pre-emptive capabilities, the «absurdity» of defensive defence — were spelled out in spring 1991 by Army General Lobov (OGS from 29 August to 7 December 1991), who, in turn, was both reflecting and refining military orthodoxies developed by the General Staff in the early 1980's.

#### IV. PROGNOSIS

4.1. The collapse of the Soviet Union brings to mind the ancient Chinese curse: «may all your dreams come true». Without doubt, the ideological *cum* military threat to Europe which became synonymous with «the Soviet Union» has disappeared. Russia's new leaders not only seek, but have a compelling

interest in, cooperation with their former adversaries. The West is engaged, and it has influence. Yet, despite these blessings, this is the kind of dream that keeps people up at night. Without a substantial displacement of elites, authority structures and habits of mind, Yeltsin's policies stand little chance of producing significant and enduring change. Instead, it is likely that mass support will erode, whilst old elites remain disaffected. Under these conditions, a future putsch by the «forces of order» is surely possible.

But it is far from certain. The «amateur coup» of August 1991 is a monument to the folly of ill-prepared and ill-considered action. As such, it is both a warning and a challenge to future plotters. For three reasons, those who consider action may well conclude that it is ill-advised as well as unnecessary.

- a. *Lack of confidence and cohesion.* To be able to organise and act, putschists must have a mission in common, they must be convinced of their own fitness to rule and must be confident of wider support. «Restoring Russia's dignity» is a powerful sentiment, but it is not a political programme. Whilst this will not disturb every potential intriguer, we must distinguish between those who can threaten governments and those who can topple them. Do the majority of key players (i.e. those whose support is essential) know what to do once a government is toppled? Are they willing to suffer the international cost? Do they believe that «order» can be restored at an acceptable internal cost, if at all?

To be sure, Bolsheviks were not troubled by cost, but Bolsheviks were fanatics, motivated by a radiant future. Fanaticism cannot exist without ideals. Not only is there no radiant future on offer, but Russia, unlike post-Wilhelmine Germany, has no «golden age» to restore. The Soviet Union's defeat was not military, but moral. Leaders as well as followers are ideologically exhausted. For these reasons, analogies with Bolshevik Russia and Weimar Germany are misconceived. In post-Soviet conditions, energy and passions are more likely to be directed towards shabby and modest pursuits than grand designs.

- b. *Lack of authority.* To risk action, putschists must be reasonably confident that their subordinates will obey them. Yet, the institutions that matter are fragmented and factionalised, rather than centralised and cohesive. The question today is not «what is your legal authority?», but «who answers to you in practice?». Months before August 1991, the defence industrial complex, Armed Forces and KGB were divided. The marvel is not that the putschists were defied, but that they acted. These institutions may be unreformable (and in that sense «strong»), but this does not mean they are easy to mobilise or move.
- c. *Lack of necessity.* The Armed Forces, KGB and defence complex might overcome these inhibitions if their existence were truly threatened. Yet, despite Yeltsin's policies, these institutions have been remarkably successful at defending turf and clawing back losses. One year after the coup, it is clear that the changes have changed little. Their more resourceful leaders know that it is wiser to transform a legitimate government from within than to overthrow it.

4.2. Therefore, we must not trick ourselves into believing that the choices before Russia are *either* success of the reforms and «stability» *or* failure and chaos. If those who hold legal power continue to make concessions to those who hold real power, we might end up with failure and stability.

4.3. We must also take with a pinch of salt warnings about the reactionary threat. Gaydar's team is threatened by «moderates»: by managers who make up Arkadiy Volskiy's Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, by bureaucrats and power brokers, associated with the Civic Union, who run parliaments and local authorities, and by the professionals in charge of Russia's army, KGB and Ministry of Internal Affairs. They are not an angry mob, but a coalition of seasoned level-headed practitioners who, increasingly, are undermining Gaydar from *within* the Russian government. We should have no illusions about the balance of forces: Gaydar, in the words of Volskiy's deputy, Vladislavlev, is «a soloist without an orchestra»; true democrats (those with a non-Communist past) are minute in number and effectively sidelined; «principled» Communists do not hold power and are unlikely to hold it again.

4.4. When the dust settles, we may find a Russia more regionalised and fragmented, but otherwise little changed: largely unreformed and no longer reforming, inhospitable to its own minorities, menacing to newly independent states. Whilst having no wish to revive the cold war, it will be determined to rebuild its army and remain a power on its own vast periphery: Eastern Europe, Central Asia and possibly the Gulf and Far East. It will not threaten members of NATO and, vis a vis ex-Soviet republics, will prefer «active measures» to war. But it will not become a «security partner» either, let alone a good neighbour.

4.5. Thus, the odds of «a thousand Yugoslavias» may be lower than the odds of a new stagnation. To be sure, there will be hot spots as well as bright spots ahead, but Russia is likely to remain, for the most part, a drab and inert place, where the gulf between those who lack power and those who hold it — between *obshchestvo* (society) and *gosudarstvo* (state) — is wide and, to all appearances, unbridgeable. Russians are more resigned to this situation than outsiders suppose, and their deep reserves of cynicism, wit and tenderness enable them to endure what others would not tolerate.

4.6. But like Brezhnevian stagnation, post-Soviet stagnation will not last forever. Contradictions will mount. No amount of Western aid will enable the state to underwrite a largely unreformed economy or indefinitely buy off those who can shut the country down: e. g., the workers in the fuel and energy complex, as well as those in the defence complex, who Volsky boasts could be «brought out» in hours. In time, new pressures from below will appear and new revolutionary leaders will emerge. But we should accept that, for the time being at least, the revolutionary wave has crested and revolutionary energy is spent.

## V. WESTERN INFLUENCE AND WESTERN ASSISTANCE

5.1. It is a truism to say that Russia's evolution will be determined by internal forces outside our control. We do, however, remain important in the margins. NATO, EC, G-7 and IMF have a decided influence in encouraging adherence to troop withdrawal schedules and in stimulating potential putschists

to achieve their ends by less dramatic means. As a form of danegeld, aid can be used to advance limited Western aims.

5.2. But if our purpose is not danegeld, but transformation, we should have no illusions. Massive state-to-state aid is more likely to retard positive change than encourage it. Civil society is the precondition for an effective aid programme, not its consequence. Placed in the hands of those who now run Russia, credits will help the military industrial complex delay the inevitable and convince the Armed Forces that they have a «hi-tech» future. It will do nothing to cure the vices of Russian administrative and factory culture, which in themselves are the greatest obstacle to free markets and normal business practices. Finally, credits will only deepen the divide between «haves» and «have nots» and convince ordinary Russians that we are it bed with their oppressors. The greatest danger is not — as is so often portrayed — that we deny Russia aid and disillusion her, but that we assist her and disillusion her, convincing her people, not for the first time in Russian history, that Western models and values are irrelevant, if not downright harmful, to their peculiarly Russian circumstances and predicaments.

5.3 He will not solve this problem by arguing amongst ourselves. The issue is not how we decide to use aid, but how the end user decides to use it. Today, the end user is not «Yeltsin», but the tens of thousands who work in ministries, manage state enterprises (and cosmetically privatised «concerns»), sit on local soviets and chair *oblast* committees. Their first concern is survival: an objective which will be largely accomplished if they can convert Soviet style bureaucratic power into financial power. For this reason, most of them will have very different notions from our own as to what aid is «for». If Yeltsin cannot alter their thinking and behaviour, we will not be able to do so either.

5.4. Assistance (or commercial investment) can produce results where the Russian end user has a personal stake in satisfying the Western donor and where that donor (or customer) has a «hands on» relationship with his Russian client. Such assistance will, for the most part, be labour intensive, time consuming and small in scale: tens of millions *per annum* rather than tens of billions which Yeltsin seeks.

## VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR WESTERN SECURITY POLICY

6.1. Contrary to current orthodoxy, Russia has a foreign policy. Its most obvious and urgent aim is to transform the world into Russia's life support system. Its more serious aim is to provide the antidote to internal disintegration: the integration and «merging» of economic groupings and security structures. This latter aim is the straightforward continuation, under Kozyrev's auspices, of Shevardnadzian «new thinking»: a policy which sought in its initial phase the «elimination of enemy images» and in its more parasitical post-1988 phase, the creation of a genuinely «inter-related, inter-dependent and integral world».

6.2. Thus, «integrating the East into our security structures» is not merely a western project, but a major plank of Russian foreign policy. In reality, this formula is the expression of a problem rather than the solution to one. Questions and choices need to be faced.

- a. Who is to be integrated into what? Poles and Czechs are neither flattered nor reassured when we propose to associate Russia — their past and most likely future adversary — with the very security bodies that they look to for protection.
- b. Who will guarantee that an integrated Russia will be a sociable Russia? What can we look forward to if the «war party» turns out to be the beneficiary of Kozyrev's foreign policy and the demilitarised Europe he seeks? (a question which Kozyrev has recently raised himself).
- c. Who is to be defended against whom? «Collective security» is a recipe for impotence when the threat to security come from within the collective itself.
- d. How will deterrence be maintained? To date, deterrence has rested on the perception that an attack on one NATO member will be treated as an attack on all. Hence the preoccupation of NATO professionals: that commitments be accompanied by capabilities and by clear demonstrations of political will. In a post-cold war world, this preoccupation is bound to become an anxiety. If this can be said for existing commitments, how realistic is it to contemplate new ones,

not to speak of new members? Is there the remotest prospect that British or American electorates will countenance war over the independence of Ukraine or the inviolability of Poland's eastern frontier? If the price of NATO's enlargement is a dilution of its cohesion and effectiveness, will enlargement prove a blessing or a curse? If, to the contrary, we shut the door on Poland, the Czech lands and Hungary, will this mollify the Russian «war party» or embolden it?

## VII. CONCLUSION

7.1. The collapse of the Soviet Union should focus our thinking rather than dull it. It compels us to think about defence as much as security, about Western interests as much as common interests. Above all, it obliges us to preserve NATO's integrity and freedom of action. In future, NATO may be constrained to deter Russian misconduct not through the threat of force, but through the threat of rearmament. Russia's leaders — deeply impressed by the adaptability of Western democracies — will find this threat more convincing than may Westerners, but only if NATO remains an autonomous and militarily serious alliance. The Reagan-Rogers military buildup left a strong mark on Russian military commanders. They would not wish to provoke a sequel to it.

7.2. The Soviet collapse is more likely to produce a time of troubles than a time of upheaval: troubles with little chance of engulfing Europe, but every chance of impinging upon it. Russia's future directly affects the destinies of ex-Soviet republics, the prospects of the East European states and through them, the well-being and tranquillity of Europe as a whole. If the worst can be avoided, there will be no comfort for those who believe that history has ended. To the contrary, it is being made. If we conduct ourselves as spectators rather than as hard-headed protagonists, we may find, in more respects than one, that it is made at our expense.

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