

# The Security of Russia's Nuclear Arsenal: The Human Factor

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# The Security of Russia's Nuclear Arsenal: The Human Factor

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Assertions by the Russian military that all of their nuclear weapons are secure against theft and that nuclear units within the military are somehow insulated from the problems plaguing the Russian military should not be accepted uncritically. Accordingly, we should not give unwarranted credence to the pronouncements of military figures like Col.-Gen. Igor Valynkin, Chief of the Defense Ministry's 12<sup>th</sup> Main Directorate, which oversees the country's nuclear arsenal. He contends that "Russian nuclear weapons are under reliable supervision" and that "talk about the unreliability of our control over nuclear weapons...has only one pragmatic goal—to convince international society that the country is incapable of maintaining nuclear safety and to introduce international oversight over those weapons, as it is done, for example, in Iraq."<sup>1</sup> While the comparison to Iraq is preposterous, many analysts might agree with Valynkin's sanguine appraisal of the security of Russia's nuclear weapons. In contrast, I argue that the numerous difficulties confronting the military as a whole should cause concern in the West over the security of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

## Background

Nuclear weapons are of course the backbone of Russian military power. Russia's economic crisis and the government's general neglect of the military has crippled Russia's conventional forces. The lamentable condition of Russia's conventional forces coupled with NATO's expansion and newly found out-of-area proclivity have led Russia to abandon its longstanding declaratory policy of no-first-use. Russia's military doctrine now states that Russia will use nuclear weapons not only in response to weapons of mass destruction attacks, but in response to large-scale conventional assaults. In short, if Russia finds that its conventional forces cannot thwart an attack, it might well resort to nuclear weapons.

The importance of nuclear weapons to Russia's security should render units that handle nuclear weapons and those that have custody of the weapons a high priority in budgeting and military planning. Russia's nuclear weapons generally are not located in the actual units that would use them in wartime, but are placed in local storage sites not far from the units. Weapons are allocated to the battalion, battery or regiment that would use them in wartime, but these units do not control the weapons in peacetime.<sup>2</sup> The units practice as if they possess the weapons, but it is believed that they are kept in the storage sites under the watchful eye of the 12<sup>th</sup> Main Directorate. The question is whether this added layer of security does in fact make the weapons more secure.

A major difficulty in analyzing the question of the security of Russian nuclear weapons is the paucity of reliable and specific information. Thus, rather than speculate, I will extrapolate by analyzing the state of the Russian military as a whole.

## The State of the Russian Military

Russia has approximately one million men in its armed forces. "Military reform" has consisted primarily of restructuring the armed forces and reducing their size rather than addressing the more difficult questions of mission, threat, and how to counter the threat. Training levels are low, and the quality of the conventional equipment is dismal. In 1998, the Ground Forces did not receive a single new item of major military equipment: other services received very little.

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<sup>1</sup> "We Will Do Everything so that the Novaia Zemlia Accident Is Not Repeated," *Iadernii kontrol*, vol. 42 (November-December 1998): 42. Interviewed by Viktor Litovkin, trans. in FBIS, 2 April 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Jacob Kipp, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 5 October 1999.

Ultimately, however, the security of Russia's nuclear weapons is far more dependent on the reliability of its people than its equipment. Are the people who control, protect and use nuclear weapons capable of carrying out their jobs? Physical protection of nuclear weapons is important as well, but if the people are ill, incompetent, or prone to engage in criminal activity, then even the best physical protection mechanisms can be overcome.

To assess the human factor in controlling the Russian nuclear arsenal, it must be recognized that the Russian military is a reflection of the larger society it serves—and therefore is subject to the same social and economic ills that afflict the rest of Russian society, including inadequate health care, drug abuse, hazing, dire economic conditions, and crime. At the same time, as with NATO forces, military personnel selected to oversee the arsenal are most likely of a higher caliber than the remaining personnel.

### **Health Issues**

Recent statistics reveal that almost half of those drafted are unfit for military service for health reasons.<sup>3</sup> The military recognizes that healthy personnel are a key component of combat readiness, but it is drafting conscripts from a society that lacks the basic requirements for good health: quality water is not available in all regions of the country, food is frequently contaminated, and heat and electricity are often turned off because of insufficient funds. The military has also experienced a dramatic increase in the number of personnel requiring treatment for cardiovascular disease, malignant tumors, tuberculosis, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and psychiatric disorders.

### **Drug Abuse**

Drug abuse in the military is rampant. Statistics about criminal activities reveal that more than half of the soldiers apprehended with drugs in their possession began using them for the first time during their military service.<sup>4</sup> The military claims that despite the tightening of measures to keep drug users out of the draft, their penetration into the army ranks continues.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, the problem of drug abuse in the military is of great concern: entrusting any type of weapon to possible addicts places the safety of society at risk. Of even greater concern is whether drug addicts have penetrated the ranks of the strategic missile troops, the 12<sup>th</sup> Main Directorate, or the ground force units that would handle tactical nuclear weapons. Valynkin states that the US Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (run out of the Department of Defense) is helping provide equipment to assess personnel reliability, such as polygraph machines, and alcohol and drug detection instruments. The extent and prevalence of the substance abuse problem in the Russian military, however, remains unknown.

### **Hazing**

The brutal practice of *dedovshchina* (or bullying) is so routine and well known in the Russian military that draft avoidance is rampant. In an environment where boys are beaten with fists and shovels, often leading to hospitalization, it is hardly surprising that young men go to extraordinary lengths to avoid military service. Moreover, given the absence of an enforced system of punishment for military avoidance, the ease of obtaining fraudulently concocted medical waivers, and the prevalence of bribes, those who do end up in the military can hardly be characterized as the cream of the crop, let alone average. Valynkin has stated that nuclear weapons are only handled by officers, implying that the officers are more responsible and knowledgeable than mere conscripts. However, the behavior of officers is often less than commendable. In one instance, lieutenants—their judgement impaired by

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<sup>3</sup> Deborah Yarsike Ball, "The Social Crisis of the Russian Military," in *Russia's Torn Safety Nets: Health and Social Welfare During the Transition*, ed. Mark G. Field and Judyth L. Twigg (forthcoming, St. Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Irina Zhirnova, "U opasnoi cherty," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 8 July 1999, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Petr Altunin and Ivan Ivaniuk, "Voennaia meditsina obsluzhivaet bolee 6 millionov patsientov, no ee glavnyi prioritet—meditsina voiskovaia," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 4 June 1999, 1.

alcohol--believed that the only option for solving their problems was to beat up their subordinates, and as a result severely beat six men. In another instance, an officer serving in the Caucasus slammed a private's neck so hard that he fractured the young man's laryngeal cartilage.<sup>6</sup>

### **Economic Hardship**

The economic situation for military personnel is also dire, fueling speculation that some might steal nuclear weapons or fissile material for personal gain. A social contract from the Soviet days that guaranteed officers housing, wages, medical care and a pension exists primarily on paper for many Russian officers. Officers go for months without receiving their wages, and the money they do receive is often inadequate to support their families. The result is an enormous shortage of young officers in the military. Many of the best young officers--tired of bad housing conditions and moving from post to post--have been lured away by better prospects and payment in the civilian economy.<sup>7</sup> This again raises the question of the quality of officers remaining in the military.

Those officers who do remain tend to engage in practices that undermine the professionalism of the military, the very trait so necessary to ensure the proficient command of the units. Officers either are compelled to seek secondary jobs outside the military or engage in illegal activities. Aside from the fact that combat effectiveness is diminished when officers have to spend much of their time thinking about how to raise money to feed their families rather than focusing on military matters, loyalty to the military as an institution is undermined as well. Conflicting lines of authority raise questions about where the officers loyalty lies: to the military or the organization that is providing him with a living wage.

### **Crime**

Crime in the military is on the rise and further fuels concern over the security of nuclear weapons in Russia. From the top generals to the conscripts, crime is rampant. Embezzlement is common and includes the sale of weapons, munitions and any other property. Military personnel sell Stinger-type weapons, air-to-ground missiles, tanks and planes--basically anything that can be moved. Even honest officers condone the behavior because they often have no other means to pay their staff. Organized crime has penetrated the armed forces, and former army officers are apparently prominent in various mafia organizations as well.<sup>8</sup> The Minister of Defense, Igor Sergeev, admitted that in 1997 roughly 18,000 officers were charged with criminal activity. The activities and behavior of senior officers have been particularly bad. They not only inappropriately use conscripts to build dachas for themselves, but have developed businesses where they profit by using conscripts to build dachas for others. In the early half of the 1990s, 300 generals built dachas in the suburbs of Moscow using military conscripts and stolen material.<sup>9</sup> Prior to becoming the Defense Minister, General Lev Rokhlin publicized corruption among his fellow flag officers. Among the many cases he discussed was the disappearance of \$23 million received by the Defense Ministry's budget chief, Vasili Vorobev, from the sale of ammunition to Bulgaria.<sup>10</sup> Russia's military prosecutor, Yury Demin, recently confirmed that crime is rising in all military branches of the Russian Federation and that he is considering launching another round of lawsuits against a large number of generals and admirals.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is unclear whether those in charge of nuclear weapons have been insulated from the many problems confronting the Russian military as a whole. To be sure, the nuclear forces are an elite, and as such

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<sup>6</sup> "Boys Beaten Up By Seniors and Fathers Too. By Their Commanders," *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 5 March 1998, translated in *FBIS*, 6 March 1998.

<sup>7</sup> V.M. Zakharov, "Military Education in Russia: How to Reform It?" *Military Thought* 6 (April 1997): 48.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Donnelly, "Prospects for Reform of the Russian Armed Forces," unpublished ms., 30 July 1999.

<sup>9</sup> John M. Kramer, "The Politics of Corruption," *Current History* 97 (October 1998): 331.

<sup>10</sup> Richard F. Staar, "Russia's Military: Corruption in the Higher Ranks," *Perspective* 9 (November-December 1998).

<sup>11</sup> *RFE/RL Newslite*, vol 3 no. 197 (8 October 1999); Reported in *Izvestiya*, 8 October 1999.

their economic and manpower needs should be of the highest priority. Presumably, Russia, like its Soviet predecessor, can focus its resources on a specific area and perform at world-class standards despite developments in the rest of the economy. Indeed, Russians frequently tell me that those in charge of nuclear weapons “are different.” However, when electricity to units of the strategic missile forces is turned off because they have yet again failed to pay their bills, it strains credulity to assert that the nuclear units can be completely isolated from the societal crisis that surrounds them. The crucial questions remain: a) to what extent have the nuclear units been affected? and b) what concrete effect has this had on their ability to safeguard Russia’s still vast nuclear arsenal?

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