

Yeltsin's Debt to the Old KGB

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

MOSCOW—Most commentators on the recent political turmoil in Russia maintain that President Boris Yeltsin owes a great debt to the military, which helped subdue the armed hardliners during the fateful events of Oct. 3-4. A closer look, however, indicates that the Russian leader's greatest debt is not to the highly visible military but to the little seen forces of the former KGB.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly two years ago, Mr. Yeltsin has mortgaged his political and economic reforms by preserving the KGB's institutions. Rather than dismantling the organization as he had once advocated, he has maintained it in four separate bureaucracies: the ministry of security, which contains the KGB's internal security organs; the main guard administration, a 25,000-strong personal army of the president; the federal agency for government communications and information, responsible for electronic intelligence and secure communications; and the external intelligence service, formerly called the KGB First Chief Directorate. Little has changed in any of these.

In the weeks before his action against the Supreme Soviet and renegade Vice President Alexander Rutskoi, the Russian leader made a series of unsavory moves on behalf of the security organs. After firing Minister of Security Viktor Barannikov, a longtime crony from the uniformed police who was widely disliked by KGB professionals and who had been leaning toward the hardliners, Mr. Yeltsin was expected to name a reformer to impose a thorough housecleaning and reorganization.

Vestiges From the Past

Instead, he replaced Gen. Barannikov with a hideous relic of the Soviet era: Nikolai Golushko, a KGB general who spent most of his 30-year career in the Fifth Chief Directorate, the dissident-hunting unit that repressed opponents of the Communist Party. The particular department that Gen. Golushko once headed was responsible for suppressing ethnic and nationalist sentiment—including Russian nationalism which native Ukrainians did with gusto. Once Gen. Golushko was formally installed as minister in August, he secured from the president a decree to expand his armed bureaucracy's

broad and arbitrary powers, as well as a pay raise for all military and security personnel.

Thus the foundation was laid for the president to suspend the Supreme Soviet on Sept. 21. The ministry of security, which controls the counterintelligence and informant networks within the military and the national police, known as the MVD, was able to gauge the political reliability of those institutions and neutralize any major multiples. MVD personnel had to be brought into

Previously a component of the KGB first chief directorate, Vypmel is part of the external intelligence service. Alfa, formerly of the KGB Seventh Directorate, is an anti-terrorist and offensive shock force now with the president's personal security contingent. Although Alfa is acclaimed for not having attacked the Supreme Soviet building during the coup of 1991, its most infamous operation was a slaughter; the storming of the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan, on the eve of the 1979

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It was not the army but the former KGB that saved the day for Boris Yeltsin. The Dzerzhinsky division, a motorized unit named for the founder of the Soviet secret police, was the first defense, repulsing the Rutskoi-sanctioned assault on the Ostankino television station the night of Oct. 3. Formally under MVD command, the division is subject to operational control of Gen. Golushko's ministry of security.

Nor did the army lead the attempt to retake the Supreme Soviet building the next morning. Initial infiltration was done by a joint team of highly-trained KGB commandos. According to Victor Yasmann of Radio Liberty, with whom I witnessed the fighting and have carefully investigated events since, 80 team members were from the Vypmel spetsnaz unit, and the remaining ones from the Alfa group. They infiltrated the compound mainly through a system of secret subterranean tunnels and nuclear bunkers.

This is extremely significant, because it begins to show exactly to whom Mr. Yeltsin owes his political life. The Vypmel is a sabotage and terrorist force trained to infiltrate enemy territory and wreak mayhem behind the lines in time of war.

who really controlled the streets, Mr. Yeltsin imposed a curfew in the capital which applied even to military officers. The curfew was enforced by the MVD and former KGB. Communication lines in the ministry of defense, general staff and GRU military intelligence were reportedly cut until Oct. 5—lines controlled by the former KGB Sixteenth Directorate.

Protecting Their Own Interests

The West should resist the temptation to view the units who stayed "loyal" to Mr. Yeltsin as defenders of democracy. The security organs did what they have done time and again since 1917: fired on fellow Russians to protect their man in the Kremlin and, more importantly, their own interests. The president after all was protecting them—essentially by not trying to control or reform them—and was helping them by attracting the hard currency and technology they need from the West. There is little reason to believe that they have changed.

In the most ugly irony yet of the post-Soviet reform process, Russian democracy now finds itself dependent on the institutions and individuals who ran the ever-growing informant networks that set neighbor spying on neighbor. These are the organs that provided international terrorists with training, weapons and money; they were the machinery that persecuted and even murdered their own citizens whose ideas ultimately helped sweep Mr. Yeltsin to power.

Mr. Yeltsin did what he had to do Oct. 4, but he has made a pact with the devil. Rather than looking the other way, the West must help the Russian leadership to break that pact and survive. This means fundamentally that the West must no longer be silent about the continued existence of a huge totalitarian-style security apparatus and the human rights abuses that go with it. The West must support the irreversibility of democracy in Russia by encouraging strict civil controls over the security and military forces, and the complete dismantlement of the instruments of repression that make the specifier of dictatorship a continued threat to Russia and the rest of the world.

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