

# The Russian Military Outside Politics: a Historical Perspective

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Pavel Grachev, the disgraced and widely despised former Russian defense minister, was fond of asserting that the Russian army is "outside politics." Many Russian and Western observers dismissed Grachev's claim as hyperbole at best, palpable nonsense at worst. Surely the military implicated in the failed August 1991 coup attempt and which shelled the parliament in October 1993 cannot be described as "outside politics?"

Yet in a real and important sense Grachev was right: the Russian military is "outside politics." Most Russian officers believe that it is not their job to decide who rules the state, beyond their right as Russian citizens to participate in elections. (Thus when I say outside politics I do not mean to suggest that the Russian military plays no role in the formation of national foreign and security policy. Obviously, the armed forces in all country have this political role.) These normative beliefs are deeply ingrained in the organizational culture of the Russian armed forces. These norms have served as an important barrier to significant military intervention in the last ten years, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, severe challenges to the army's organizational interests (budget and force cuts, housing and pay problems, etc.), and the continuing weakness of the new Russian state.

The rest of this policy memo explores this basic argument in more detail. First, I look at the military traditions of the Russian and Soviet officer corps in historical perspective. Second, I explain how officers' norms influenced military behavior in the key political crises of the last ten years. Third, I examine some continuities and discontinuities in military organizational culture in the last few years. Although the breakdown of discipline in the officer corps is troublesome, it is not a harbinger of a more praetorian Russian army.

## **The Military Traditions Of The Russian And Soviet Army**

In the eighteenth century Russian officers intervened in sovereign power issues (deciding who rules the state) at least eight times. However, the last successful military coup in Russia took place in 1801, when a group of aristocratic officers murdered Emperor Paul I and placed Paul's son, Alexander I, on the throne. Since that date there has not been a single successful instance of independent military involvement in sovereign power issues in Russia. The turn toward a more apolitical military took place in the mid-nineteenth century. The failed Decembrist uprising of

1825, which was spearheaded by a group of politically ambitious junior and mid-level officers, was a key institutional lesson for Russian officers--military intervention is a risky and fruitless endeavor. Imperial Russia's greatest defense minister, Dmitriy Milyutin, successfully reoriented the Russian army towards external threats and sharply diminished the involvement of officers in domestic politics and administration. The phrase "the army is outside politics" was not invented by Grachev; most late-Imperial Russian officers espoused this view and adhered to an apolitical military organizational culture. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was made possible in part by a military leadership that was fixated solely on the war effort and had no desire to get dragged into the political revolution at home. It took defeat in a major war and the dismemberment of the country to bring about concerted military intervention during the Civil War, and large numbers of imperial army officers served with the Bolsheviks, despite the blatant hostility displayed by Lenin and his followers towards army officers in 1917.

Soviet officers, like their Tsarist counterparts, were inculcated with the notion that they had no role to play in deciding who ruled the state and that they should remain subordinate to civilian authority. The supremacy of the Communist Party over the army was a persistent feature of Soviet politics. Even during Stalin's murderous purges of the officer corps in 1937-1938 the military did nothing to protect itself from this onslaught. In the post-war period the army leadership was on several occasions involved in high politics, such as during the arrest of security chief Lavrenti Beria in 1953, but the military never acted independently in sovereign power issues and showed no interest in a political leadership role. The army played no role in the ouster of Khrushchev in 1964 or subsequent leadership transitions.

Thus, by the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 the armed forces had a tradition of non-intervention in high politics that stretched back over 150 years. The one exception was the Russian Revolution and Civil War, and even in the face of military defeat and state collapse much of the military leadership remained extremely reluctant to seek a larger political role.

### **Military Organizational Culture Under Gorbachev And Yeltsin**

Soviet military organizational culture was subjected to contradictory pressures under Gorbachev. On the one hand, the decline of the Communist Party and the advent of more pluralistic politics undermined the traditional line of subordination from the party leadership to the military. The ability of officers to participate in parliamentary politics also weakened the notion that the army had no role to play in high politics. On the other hand, the disastrous use of the military for internal missions in Tbilisi and Vilnius reinforced officers' views that playing an active role in domestic politics was not the army's job and would only damage the military's reputation. This allergy toward domestic involvement became known as the "Tbilisi syndrome."

The failed August 1991 coup was spear-headed by the KGB, not the military, and collapsed when key military leaders refused to storm the White House. Top officers such as Grachev, Boris Gromov, Aleksandr Lebed, and Yevgeniy Shaposhnikov believed involvement in high politics was not the military's job, and their foot-dragging doomed the coup effort. Defense Minister Yazov was a half-hearted participant in the affair, and he took no steps to remove officers that refused to involve themselves in the coup. Instead, he backed their unwillingness to storm the

White House and pulled out of the coup attempt, remarking a few days later that he was "an old fool to participate in this adventure."

Four months later the armed forces let the state they were sworn to defend, the Soviet Union, collapse without military intervention. The officer corps limited itself to calling a national assembly in January 1992, at which they complained about the collapse of the state and adopted resolutions. This is a rather restrained response to state disintegration. The armed forces commander, Shaposhnikov, told the officers' assembly, "we will never sink so low as to dethrone someone or to enthrone someone with the aid of our bayonets. This is not our task."

The first commander of the new Russian armed forces, Grachev, took a similar stance in his years as defense minister. He stressed repeatedly in 1992-1993 that the army was "outside politics" and would not become involved in the political struggle between President Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet opposition. When Yeltsin disbanded the parliament in September 1993 the Military Collegium initially opted for a position of neutrality. Grachev told the press that "the army will not meddle in political activity" and advised politicians to "leave the army alone." It was only after wide-scale violence broke out in Moscow after the Supreme Soviet forces attacked the Mayor's office and the television center that the army became involved in the crisis, and Yeltsin had to go to the Ministry of Defense personally and provide Grachev with a written order before the military agreed to attack the White House. The army newspaper *Krasnaya zvezda* remarked after the crisis:

"The army outside politics" is the formula which, if you like, has entered into the souls of the military, sincerely accepted by them. Taught by the bitter experience of August 1991, the military, frankly speaking, came to believe that never again do they need to send their tanks and BTRs [Armored Personnel Carriers] along the streets of Moscow. And if a dramatic spiral of events leads to that, then an extremely responsible and detailed explanation is necessary.

In none of the political crises that Russia has faced in the last ten years has the military shown strong praetorian urges. On the contrary, the armed forces leadership has in most instances sought to avoid being dragged into political battles.

### **Continuities And Discontinuities In Military Organizational Culture**

Polling data from recent years reinforces the view that the Russian officer corps remains largely committed to an apolitical organizational culture (See the list of relevant polls below). In a number of polls conducted between 1992 and 1997 large majorities (from 75 to 90 percent) of officers have stated their view that the army should not become involved in politics and their opposition to military rule. In a poll conducted in 1994 officers rated full Russian membership in NATO within the next two years more likely than a military coup. This polling data demonstrates how fallacious comparisons of the Russian military to Third World and Latin American militaries are. Data on the Ecuadorian military from the 1950s and 1960s, for example, showed that less than twenty percent of officers believed that military involvement in politics was illegitimate, in sharp contrast to the opinions of Russian officers today. Another important

continuity in Russian military organizational culture is the widely held belief that the army's primary task is defense of the state against external attack. Polls in recent years have found a majority of officers against using the military for domestic social and economic tasks and a variety of domestic policing missions. The only internal missions that consistently gain support are in cases of natural disasters or nuclear power accidents.

The one important, and troublesome, discontinuity from the Soviet to the Russian officer corps has been the degree to which officers now state their reluctance to carry out dubious orders. The number of officers in this category ranges from 20-40 percent. These results are a clear reflection of the "Tbilisi syndrome" and the institutional lessons learned by the military in events such as Tbilisi, Vilnius, the failed August 1991 coup, the October 1993 events, and the war in Chechnya. Over 500 officers refused to go to Chechnya in the first few months of the war. This apparent erosion of traditionally firm discipline is disturbing, but it does not reflect praetorian urges on the part of the officer corps. This very hesitancy to follow questionable orders would likely doom any attempt at military intervention.

## Conclusions

Observers of the Russian armed forces usually point to political divisions within the officer corps or the "counter-balancing" effects of other ministries, such as the Interior Ministry, as obstacles to a military coup. These factors certainly may play a role, although it is worth noting that in the major political crises of recent years, such as the August 1991 coup and the October 1993 events, all of the power ministries were on the same side and the military was still highly reluctant to get involved.

The evidence discussed here suggests that deeply-held officers' norms serve as a crucial barrier to military intervention, despite repeated attacks on the military's organizational interests and the weakness of the Russian state. Comparisons of the Russian armed forces to Latin American or Third World militaries are misleading, because they have very different traditions and norms. When thinking about the possibility of military intervention in high politics in Russia, it is useful to consider some basic points:

- The last successful military coup in Russia took place almost 200 years ago;
- All cases of autonomous military intervention in politics in the last 150 years have been during periods of state collapse (the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the August 1991 coup attempt);
- All other instances of military involvement in sovereign power issues have come at the impetus of civilian political leaders (the arrest of Beria in 1953, Khrushchev's showdown with the anti-party group in 1957, the October 1993 events); and
- Organizational lessons learned from military involvement in political crises in the last ten years have made the army more, not less, reluctant to play a role in sovereign power issues.

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