

'Afgantsi'—Moscow's Praetorian Guard

Elite troops trained in Afghanistan will carry out the coming crackdown in the Soviet Union. Luba George reports.

"[In the near future] the *Afgantsi* will take up leading positions in the economy, party, and ideological apparatus. . . . These forces will consolidate themselves based on the ideas of suffering, combat experience, and on the ideas of stoicism. The government should take advantage of these forces and put them to use in a positive way. . . . For God forbid should a new crisis break out! The leadership will then be in dire need of people who are experienced and ready to sacrifice themselves. I don't think that the pacifist-leaning youth—the rockers, breakers, punkers [Russian=*Panki*—will be those to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the salvation of the Fatherland. These are not the forces who would be prepared for it. It's the *Afgantsi* who would be prepared to make sacrifices should the time come requiring bloody sweat to be spilled. And that's why they should be given the right place in society."—Aleksandr Prokhanov, *Leningradskaya Rossiya*, May 6, 1988.

Since these words, uttered right after the first wave of national and inter-ethnic unrest had broken out, blood has indeed been spilled on the territory of the Soviet empire. All talk of *glasnost* and "democratization" aside, Soviet dictator Mikhail Gorbachov's April ordering of the massacre of Georgian civilian demonstrators was a massacre carried out by the *Afgantsi* who comprise the Interior Troops' special units. This, together with the repeated brutal handling of Ukrainian demonstrators since last summer by these same units, shows the fascist, Russian nationalist, "blood and soil" policy shift, echoing the brutality the world witnessed in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

The coming policy shift was underscored on Aug. 4—in the wake of the empire's first mass strike wave—in Gorbachov's speech concluding the Supreme Soviet session, where he dropped his mask, to call for a vast internal crackdown. Gorbachov announced a "drastic upgrading of legislation" to combat national unrest and "organized crime," and the forthcoming expansion of the Interior Ministry's (MVD) dreaded *special units* of Interior Troops, to deal with cases of "violent unrest."

This had already been demanded by the MVD at a June 27 Moscow press conference by MVD Deputy Minister Yuri Zhurkin. Zhurkin called for beefing up the MVD's *Interior*

Troops, and for "special programs of action" to handle inter-ethnic conflicts and "organized crime."

Gorbachov's ugly shift was already noticeable in 1988. It has not made the impact on the Western public that China did, because of the Soviet media coverup of the scope of massacres and brutalities committed, and the Western media having simply retailed Moscow's vastly understated version of events.

The first massacre, committed by the *Afgantsi* of the MVD special units, on the orders of the Soviet leadership, including Gorbachov, occurred during July 1988 at Svartnots Airport outside of the Armenian capital Yerevan. The death toll there, as the Afghan veterans of the MVD and the Army paratroop unit sent in fired into the crowd of Armenian demonstrators, was much higher than the official toll of two persons killed. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1988, MVD special units broke up many demonstrations in Ukrainian cities, brutally beating many hundreds of people, with many of the victims requiring hospitalization. The same pattern of violently breaking up protest demonstrations has been often observed in Moscow itself, from October of last year through the spring.

The mood of revolt and protest in the Captive Nations throughout the empire is not stoppable. It is a function of the horrors experienced by the population, forced to live in countries whose economies are near the point of physical breakdown. To counter this, Moscow will employ its "Praetorian Guard" to save the collapsing empire.

Perestroika in the MVD

According to an article in the Estonian Komsomol newspaper *Noorte Haal* on Jan. 14, 1989, written by Toomas Sildam, a correspondent in Kabul since 1979, *more than 1 million* Soviet soldiers passed through the Afghan experience, leaving 50,000 dead and 150,000 injured. Sildam's statistical data refuted the official figures given by General of the Army A.D. Lizichev, chief of the Main Political Administration, who said that over-one-half million Soviet soldiers were involved; 13,310 were killed in action; 35,478 wounded, and 311 missing in action.

This phenomenon, the "Club" of over 1 million young,

angry combat-hardened *Afgantsi*, has transformed the Soviet Union, first and foremost in the institutions which, in the present times of systemic crisis, become the empire's most important institutions—the military and the organs of internal security. It is outside the scope of this article to treat in detail the “revolution” this has engendered in the Soviet Military High Command. Suffice it to say that the *Afgantsi* now comprise the driving group in the Army's leadership, and fill nearly all command positions for forces, from district and groups of forces level down to unit commanders. This has occurred with a vengeance during 1987-89—one crucial component of the real, alarming, *perestroika*, or restructuring, that has occurred in the Army.

We shall focus, however, on a *perestroika*, namely in the ranks of the MVD's Interior Troops (*vnytrenniy voisk*), which has gone unnoticed, or has been deliberately ignored, by the Western media.

During 1987-89, a quiet revolution has occurred in the Soviet Union's 340,000 Interior Troops. They have been placed under the Ministry of Defense, and, since 1987, commanded by Army Gen. Col. Yuri Shatalin, making them a de facto extension of the Army. Personnel-wise, the Interior Troops are superior to the average Army unit. The Interior Troops now consist of hundreds of thousands of carefully selected *Afgantsi*, tough, combat-hardened veterans. As part of the 1987-89 reorganization, starting last year, the MVD “special units” were created, drawn from the cream of the Afghan War veteran crop: former members of elite airborne, air assault, and *spetsnaz* commando units. The racial composition of the Interior Troops has become almost 100% Slavic, mostly *Russian*. These are the forces who have been, and will be ever more often, in Prokhanov's words, “put to positive use.” They are, to the 500-year-old vision of Moscow as capital of the Third and Final Roman Empire which dominates leading circles in the Soviet Union today, what the Praetorian Guard was to the first Roman Empire—the select bodyguard of the emperor.

Gorbachov's concluding speech to the Supreme Soviet not only heralded a huge expansion of the Praetorian Guard, but was an admission after the fact that such an expansion is already under way.

Since spring, more and more efforts have been made to recruit men with Afghanistan combat experience into MVD's special units. *Afgantsi* now form the core of anti-riot special assault teams of the Moscow, Leningrad, Novosibirsk, Kiev, Minsk, and Riga police departments, to name only some. The call for more *Afgantsi* volunteers was made by U.S.S.R. Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin himself, when he appealed to Afghan veterans to join or work more closely with the Soviet law enforcement agencies: “It is vitally important that your enormous authority and untapped potential be used . . . against the insolence of bandits, racketeers, and other scoundrels” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 29, 1989).

These special assault teams for each major urban center

The *Moscow News* (No. 31) reported that a group of *Afgantsi*—Soviet veterans of the Afghan war—have presented a proposal to the Central Committee to form a “volunteer division” to resume the fight. The veterans said that “this division will compensate qualitatively for the reduction of our troops and, not in violation of the Geneva accords, it will help stabilize the situation in Afghanistan as well as the entire region of Central Asia.” Furthermore, they stressed the belief that “the situation of Islam and its propagation carried out by the Afghan opposition, and the situation developing in Uzbekistan . . . is creating a chain reaction, which in the near future threatens to spill over into the U.S.S.R.”

The report added, however, that an unofficial reply from the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Defense had dismissed the idea and mentioned among other things that Kabul had not asked for resumed Soviet intervention.

The core of this *Afgantsi* offer is not Afghanistan as such, but having placed on the policy agenda the idea of a Russian military volunteer force, acting in any one of a number of potential combat theaters, against an Islamic, or Turkic “threat” to the U.S.S.R. This would be a cover for pursuing expansion, much the same way it was done under the Pan-Slavic Doctrine, with Czarist Russian military “volunteers” who served in the Balkans during the 19th century.

are directly modeled on the dreaded Soviet-trained Polish ZOMO elite anti-riot units, which brutally enforced the Jaruzelski martial law regime there, after December 1981.

On July 5 the Soviet news agency TASS issued a report on the training and duties of a “riot squad” of the Moscow police, called the *Otryad moskovsky osobogo naznacheniya* (OMON), created in October 1988. According to the report, OMON has been in action more than 600 times since its creation and has detained some 2,000 people. Each member of the special unit, continued TASS, receives about 1,000 hours of training. Preference in the selection of personnel for the unit was given to former Soviet Army airborne paratroopers (i.e. *Afgantsi*) and the average age of members of the unit is 33. It was used in October 1988 for the first time to break up a demonstration of the Democratic Union in Moscow.

In addition, many of the “anti-riot” courses at the MVD Academy and in other educational institutions under the Ministry are being taught by Afghan war veterans, usually former members of airborne or commando units.

The growing need for these special forces to be used in controlling crowds and demonstrators more effectively was elaborated by the MVD head of Latvia S.S.R., Bruno Steinbriks, who said: “Such a special force, had it been created in Riga earlier, might have been available for deployment during the disturbances in Sumgait.” To the people of Latvia,

these units—dubbed the “Black Berets” or “Black Hundreds”—are a dreaded riot squad, intimidating and beating anti-regime demonstrators.

More information on the pattern of recruiting former Afghantsi airborne troops into the MVD’s special units was provided by Gen. Maj. Ivan Gladush, head of the Ukraine MVD, who said that the militia units in that republic are recruited mainly from among young manual workers and former airborne troops (*Takova militseiskaya zhizn Pravda Ukrainy*, April 2, 1989). In May the *Opvisnyk* (Reporter), an information bulletin published by the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, informed its readers that “A special assignment [spetsnaz] militia unit was organized in Kiev, numbering over 300, assigned to disperse unsanctioned meetings, demonstrations and rallies. The unit’s commander is Lt. Col Anatoly M. Kulyk. . . . It is a highly mobile unit and can be transported anywhere.”

The beefing up of these special units continues. At his confirmation hearing before the Supreme Soviet, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vadim Bakatin, revealed new figures on the size of the MVD forces (TASS, July 10), saying that his ministry had responsibility for 700,000 “policemen” and 36,000 troops (averaging one policeman for every 588 people). Two days later, Bakatin in a *Pravda* interview said that the ministry had been having “difficulties” in dealing with a rising crime rate and an increase in ethnic disturbances. The MVD, he said, was in need of more troops for rapid deployment to areas of ethnic tension and that some 18,000 troops available were “poorly equipped.”

Bakatin was vastly understating the size of the MVD’s Interior Troops. According the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates, the MVD has a staff of 340,000, including 30 divisions of internal security troops equipped with tanks and other armored vehicles (IISS, the *Military Balance* 1988-89, London, 1988, p. 44).

Pamyat, neo-Nazis, and Prokhanov

What the Soviet military says about Afghanistan and the fate of the *Afghantsi* returning from Afghanistan can be read in the articles and works of the *ex-derevneshchik* (“village writer”) Aleksandr Prokhanov (see above quotes). When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Prokhanov became a war correspondent, working closely with the General Staff. His articles always sought to instill super-militaristic, almost cult-like feelings of self-sacrifice for the Motherland.

In early 1988 in line with the coming Soviet overt withdrawal from Afghanistan, Prokhanov’s tune changed. He started blaming the Afghan misadventure on Soviet “diplomats,” “pacifists,” and “liberals” as well as “specialists on Islam.” With the Soviet troop pullout, Prokhanov has now taken up the campaign to secure popular support for the *Afghantsi*, insisting that the “soldier-internationalists” who have returned from Afghanistan should be socially and economically reintegrated into society, because, as he stresses,

their “ideological strength” and feelings of “self-sacrifice” for the Motherland will have to be called on in times of crises.

For his services to the military, Prokhanov was decorated last year by Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov in person. Together with Pamyat-sympathizer Yuri Bondarev of the Russian Writers’ Union, he sits on the editorial board of the military’s “literary” journal *Sovetsky Voin*.

What is Pamyat’s relationship to the *Afghantsi*? Pamyat and like-minded extreme Russian chauvinist organizations have been on a recruiting rampage, enlisting the best and the brightest of Russia’s “Rambos.” Pamyat’s leader, Dimitri Vasiliyev, often boasts of his super musclemen *Afghantsi* bodyguards.

The relationship between Soviet neo-Nazis and veterans of the war in Afghanistan deserves special attention. Artyom Borovik relative of KGB boss Vladimir Kryuchkov in his popular and controversial TV program “Vzglyad” (often focusing on Russia’s Pamyat and neo-Nazi groups) was one of the first to point out the “Afghantsi factor” among the young *fashiki* (Russian word for neo-fascists, neo-Nazis). According to *Leningradskaya Pravda* of March 18, 1989, of the more than 6,000 Afghan veterans living in Leningrad, several dozens—if not hundreds—are said to have been attracted to the Nazi ideology even before going to Afghanistan. When the Leningrad police shut down a neo-Nazi training center (*kachalka*), the youths, it was discovered later, found refuge in a nearby Afghan veterans’ club. “The Afghan veterans have a lot in common with us,” said one young Russian Nazi to a correspondent of *Nedelya*, the weekly supplement of *Izvestia*.

As in the case of aggressive acts committed by the anti-Semitic Pamyat organization, the KGB and police forces consistently look the other way when these “youngsters” beat up old Jewish men and women, commit rape, deface public property, and desecrate Jewish cemeteries.

Samizdat (unofficial) sources say these neo-Nazi youths, as they grow older, move on to join the more acceptable “informal” groups, e.g. the *Pamyat* (Memory) society or its associates, *Otechestvo* (Fatherland), and *Spaseniye* (Salvation).

The case of Aleksandr Rutskoi

The growing symbiosis between military and extreme Russian chauvinist “informal” groups was strikingly evident when the *Otechestvo*, previously Sverdlovsk-based, was officially registered with the authorities in Moscow in April of this year. (On Pamyat’s military connections see *EIR’s Global Showdown Update*, September 1988.)

Reporting on *Otechestvo*’s founding conference in Moscow *Literaturnaya Rossiya* of June 23, 1989, wrote: “The newly-founded society decidedly condemns the scornful attitude of the mass media towards the question of military patriotic education of the young generation.” It “considers inadmissible the discrediting of the Soviet Army and the disregard for the services of the veterans of the Great Patriotic War and

the present situation of Soviet soldiers and officers and the soldier-internationalists [*Afgantsi*] bravely and unselfishly fulfilling their military and civilian duty." Speakers one by one denounced "Western colonization of Russia," saying, "True patriotism is when men would rather starve for three years than have Russia [(*Rossiya*)] handed over to foreigners. They called for "an ecological and demographic renaissance of the Russian people." Participants at the founding conference included Gen. B.P. Ivanov, a Hero of the Soviet Union and spokesman for the veterans of the Soviet Armed Forces.

Otechestvo's assistant chairman is Aleksandr Ruskoi, an Afghan war veteran and Hero of the Soviet Union. A little more than six months ago, on Jan. 8, 1989, Ruskoi's picture appeared on the front page of the Soviet Defense Ministry's daily, *Krasnaya Zvezda*. The caption to Ruskoi's picture, accompanying the article, lavishly praised Ruskoi, a pilot, for his "400 combat missions" and bravery in the Afghan war. He was twice wounded in combat, captured by the Afghan resistance forces, and eventually handed over to the Soviet representatives in Islamabad, Pakistan. A party member, Ruskoi is currently studying at the Voroshilov Military Academy of the U.S.S.R. Armed Forces' General Staff.

This past spring Ruskoi ran for the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow's Kontsevsky electoral district. Although he didn't win, Ruskoi's notorious campaign—attacking "russophobes," the Democratic Union, and the cooperatives as "legalized speculation"—attracted much attention in the U.S.S.R. and abroad. Ruskoi's candidacy, reported the unofficial newsletter *Ezhedennaya glasnost*, was supported by the Soviet army, by Pamyat, and by the Russian

Orthodox Church. Dissident Orthodox priest Gleb Yakunin, in *Ruskaya Mysl* May 19, 1989, denounced Ruskoi's candidacy saying that his victory would mean "the path towards a military dictatorship."

Furthermore, the *Afgantsi* are not confined to the leading figures of such groups. They are well represented in the new parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies. One of these deputies is Gen. Col. Igor Rodionov, who as commander of the Transcaucasus Military District was co-responsible for the April 9 massacre of women and children in Georgia.

Rodionov delivered one impassioned speech during the May session of the People's Deputies. The speech, which was televised across the U.S.S.R., marked the state's granting of a mass audience for undiluted Russian chauvinism. Rodionov denounced the April Georgian demonstrations as "anti-Russian." His speech received a standing ovation from the assembled, mostly Russian, deputies. Similar, televised, standing ovations were to occur in later sessions as Afghan veterans stood up to denounce Andrei Sakharov for having "insulted" and "slandered" the Soviet Army's conduct in Afghanistan.

The *Afgantsi* have moved to center stage in the Soviet arena. The *Afgantsi* combination of the MVD elite troops, their Army counterparts, and the increasing *Afgantsi* acquisition of top military command posts, has created not only a Praetorian Guard, but the institutional framework for a coup option, should the systemic crisis get out of control. Whether or not matters go that far, what is certain is that the Praetorian Guard will be decisive in shaping the brutal Soviet policy shifts to come.

The Soviet view of 'defensive' doctrine

In an Aug. 2 interview with the Communist Party daily *Pravda*, Gen. Lt. Vladislav Alekseyevich Achalov, 43, Commander of Airborne Troops since January of this year, was asked how airborne troops which "probably preach a defensive doctrine least of all" and, which "are mobile and are always primed for the order, 'Advance!' " reflect the "new defensive military doctrine" of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. General Achalov replied, "Yes, the airborne troops are mobile and, as you said, are always primed for the order, 'advance.' But why should defense be passive? No, it should be active."

General Achalov continued, "As long as there are no guarantees of the irreversibility of the present positive processes in the world, Soviet people demand that we consolidate the country's defenses. Proceeding from this assumption, we are upgrading airborne troops." He allowed that the so-called "new thinking" was making headway in the world, but added, "However, by all appearances, it will be a long time before we can run our bayonets into the ground. Our partners in disarmament talks continue to modernize their weapons. . . . Representatives of U.S. ruling circles again make statements about the possibility of winning a nuclear war. Along with actively pursuing a peaceful foreign policy . . . we servicemen should think about the country's defenses and the combat preparedness of those who protect it. This is our principal mission."

The Soviet news agency TASS put out a dispatch summarizing Achalov's remarks, but three hours later instructed its subscribers to kill the item.