

'Time of Troubles' haunts Russia again

by Rachel Douglas

"Leningrad and Moscow are not Russia," sneered more than one Communist Party hack in recent months, meaning that the reform governments of the old and the current capitals would find little resonance in the countryside or provincial towns. The weekly *Ogonyok* recently profiled the electoral districts where Communist Party career officials had to run in order to get elected to the national or Russian *sovets*; they were all rural backwaters inhabited by pathetic old peasant women, what the Russians call *glukhiye mesta*—remote, God-forsaken (literally, "deaf") places. Here there would be little interest in democracy, never mind "market reforms."

But the Soviet crisis extends into all those provinces and towns. Far from being strictly a battlefield of urban-based political parties, contending for the chance to solve severe economic and strategic problems, the Soviet scene is a modern version of Russia's *smutnoye vremya*, the Time of Troubles, 1598-1613. Then, after the death of Tsar Ivan Grozny (the Terrible) and before the election of the Romanov dynasty, political and military battles for the control of state power by princes, foreign-backed pretenders, or the powerful Russian *boyar* families, took place in a setting of profound economic breakdown, which led to surges of violence and desperate actions by masses of hungry peasants.

The symptoms of a Time of Troubles, which recurred in Russia under Catherine the Great (the 1773 Pugachov Rebellion), and during the Civil War (1918-1921), can easily be discerned in the Soviet Union now. Academician V. Ginzburg, writing in *Izvestia* May 17, reflected as much:

"Alarming for the soul. Alarm is the leitmotiv in conversations among acquaintances as well as strangers. . . . The past year was a year rare in its saturation with events: three Congresses of People's Deputies and sessions of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet, the historic events in Eastern Europe, strikes, the growth of crime, inter-ethnic conflicts in the country, the crisis in the CPSU [Soviet Communist Party], the birth of new parties and organizations, the transition to the presidential form of rule, Lithuania. And perhaps the most important—no breakthrough in the economy and dark clouds visible on the horizon. . . . Under conditions of the evident weakening of central power and only the bare estab-

lishment of local *sovets*, on the backdrop of empty shelves and hooligan elements going completely unpunished, the country could easily be diverted into the abyss. I don't even want to be more precise, I think that everyone nonetheless will understand what I am talking about; they know how Soviet people lived and died during the Civil War, and in the periods of collectivization and the Patriotic War [World War II]."

Among the most volatile sections of the Soviet and Russian population are industrial workers, persons displaced by ethnic unrest, and demobilized military men.

The miners

It was telling, that practically the first speaker at the 28th Congress of the CPSU when it opened July 2 was one Vladimir Bludov, from the bleak gold-mining area of Magadan on the Sea of Okhotsk in the Soviet Far East, who demanded the resignation of the entire party leadership, for failure "to fulfill the food program." Eight days later, when Mikhail Gorbachov got reelected as the General Secretary of the moribund CPSU, the last rival candidate was former coal strike leader Teimuraz Avaliani, from the Kuznetsk Basin mines in Siberia.

In the interim, the congress took a break from bickering about who was to blame for the erosion of party power, to pass a resolution, pleading with Soviet coal miners to forgo their pre-announced July 11 strike, which was to protest that government promises after last summer's mine strikes were not being kept. The miners ignored the plea. On July 11 they walked out for one day, in the Kuzbass, in the Donbass mines in eastern Ukraine, and elsewhere, with a demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov's government. The strike was more comprehensive, and more political, than the strikes that broke out in the summer of 1989.

New trouble has been brewing among the hundreds of thousands of miners, almost since the end of the last of the 1989 coal strikes, in Vorkuta in the far north.

In *Pravda* of June 4, the Communist Party boss of Kemerovo Oblast, Kuzbass, A.G. Melnikov, termed the situation there "complex and explosive," above all because of shortages. "Outside shipments are proceeding poorly," he complained, admitting failure in every area of policy. "Further meat supplies are possible only as and when it arrives. Krasnodar, Voronezh, Lipetsk, Stavropol, and Tambov, which are better supplied than we are, are disrupting deliveries." In the realm of economic relations, "the reasons for the conflict have not been eliminated, enterprises have not received genuine independence. . . . The omnipotence of the [central government] ministries remains."

Melnikov lied that "the overwhelming majority of working people are against strikes," but he betrayed his fears, by warning that "the most dangerous thing is if young people are drawn into strikes or meetings."

The Communist official attacked the local branch of the

Union of Working People (of Russia)—whose national leader, Venyamin Yarin, was brought by Gorbachov onto his new Presidential Council—as an unregistered organization that “does not enjoy popularity among the workers,” a claim Melnikov himself quickly belied as he worried aloud about its influence. “Deproletarianized elements and people trying to gain political capital most frequently join it. That is why the union’s leaders often operate by incorrect methods with regard to the party and official organs. For the time being they are winning popularity by this means, but I do not think they will be successful.”

In late May and early June, CPSU Central Committee Secretary Oleg Baklanov, a defense industry expert, toured the Kuzbass, after which he made a show of concern about the “serious delay in implementing the government’s decisions on Kuzbass, adopted almost a year ago,” on pension and other benefits, and housing. Baklanov alluded to a political struggle for hegemony among the miners. “Those who plan to drive a wedge between the CPSU and the working class,” *Pravda* quoted him June 11, “are hoping to exploit our mistakes, blunders, and procrastination.”

Behind Melnikov’s talk about “deproletarianization” and Baklanov’s diplomacy of the “too little, too late” variety, lies the fact of a mass exit of Kuzbass Communist Party members. In a June 18 feature, “A hot summer in the Kuzbass,” *Izvestia* described the politicization of the Kuzbass miners as congruent with the demise of the party’s authority. In many Kemerovo towns, the strike activists of 1989 head the newly elected *sovets*. At the first meeting of the *oblast* council, a group of deputies “on the platform of the workers’ committees” walked out, after Communists preemptively tried to ban groups and factions. At the same time, there was formed a Union of Toilers of the Kuzbass. Certain party secretaries immediately proclaimed that anybody who joined it, had to quit the party. But, explained *Izvestia*, everybody was quitting the party anyway. The Kemerovo party organization lost 10,000 people last year, 4,000 more in the first quarter of 1990, and 2,500 in April alone.

The miners’ disgust with the Communist Party came out in a June 2 story by two *Pravda* writers who visited Kuzbass: “How many times we then heard . . . that the country is in bankruptcy, the Baltic is about to secede, things are very bad in the Transcaucasus, the food supply is worse in Kuzbass than it was before—everything came down to this: Who is responsible?” A young miner asked them, “Explain this to me. Last year there were some government representatives here, they promised some kind of concern, which would just about directly sell coal to Japan. In general, total independence. Do you know, how everyone went wild over that? And where is that concern, where is that Japan? The government says nothing. And over [the government], is the party.”

Pravda’s report also exposed a little-discussed ingredient of past and future explosions in Kemerovo Oblast, namely criminal gangs. The area Internal Affairs Directorate chief,

Col. V. V. Shkurat, drew an ominous picture:

“For the uninitiated, the Kuzbass is above all a giant of industry, a working region. But few know that this is also a huge zone of corrective labor institutions. In 1988 alone, 34,000 prisoners were freed from [penal units], 90% of whom settled in the Kuzbass. Partly they have nowhere else to live, and it is hard to find work under conditions of [the economic reform].”

By the time of *Izvestia*’s warning about a hot summer, the Kuzbass Council of Workers’ Committees had appealed to the miners to “renew the activity of the workers’ [strike] committees at the enterprises and in the cities, and to set up new ones where there were none. It is necessary to work out preparatory measures for an all-Kuzbass strike, in order to prevent it from arising spontaneously.” Interviewed in *Rabochaya Tribuna* on May 29, Workers’ Committees leader A. Kutlakhmetov said that in view of poor food supplies, “a spark could flare up at any moment and, just like last year, a chain reaction across the coal regions of the country could take place.”

In mid-June, miners’ delegates from Kuzbass, Vorkuta, and elsewhere convened in Donetsk, Ukraine for a national conference. Each day of the meeting, reported *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, had to begin with a moment of silence, because the first day the delegates honored all the mining dead, then the second day there came news of a gas explosion that killed five young miners in Donetsk. “It is well known,” said the report, “that in the Donbass alone, every million tons of coal takes the lives of two or three miners.”

On June 13, the miners appealed to the Supreme Soviet to make the government resign, for failing to lead the country out of an economic crisis. On June 16, they voted to form a new independent miners’ union. Their resolution said, “We are workers, but we do not consider the CPSU our party. We call for a mass exit from the party.”

The July 11 political strike was supported by solidarity strikes at industrial and construction sites scattered throughout the Soviet Union. The Communist Party’s fear of worker unrest came out in the July 4 letter from the 28th Congress to the miners, begging them not to strike. After all, it said, “the workers in any branch of the national economy have no less ground to express their demands and claims in this way.”

The displaced military

Thousands of Soviet servicemen, demobilized due to force reorganization and the pullback of Soviet troops from countries where they were stationed in Eastern Europe, lack proper housing in the Western regions of the U.S.S.R. The lucky ones are living in converted barracks, others in sprawling tent cities that have mushroomed around Soviet military bases in the Western U.S.S.R. Defense Minister Marshal Dmitri Yazov estimates that no fewer than 440,000 apartments would be needed during the next five years, for ser-

vicemen and officers' families redeployed to the western regions of the country, according to *Izvestia* of July 4. In June, former Chief of Staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev said that there was a lack of 200,000 apartments for the military already.

The plight of the displaced officers' families has become a point of agitation for the military leadership, blending with the issue of "disrespect" for the Armed Forces. Reporting from the Belorussian Military District, in a June 23 feature called "Where are the officers to live?" the military daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* observed that "the prospect of living with their families in prefabricated panelboard houses does not overjoy officers and warrant officers, who have each served 10-15 years or more, but have not managed to earn decent housing." Consumer goods, medical and other services are in short supply for the "significantly increased" population of these areas. "How are the abovementioned prefabricated houses to be supplied with heat and water, when the city's capacities are already working at the limit?"

Akhromeyev in his speech, delivered June 14 to the Supreme Soviet, located the housing shortages and attendant problems as part of "an emergency situation . . . a crisis within the Armed Forces," and, more broadly, "a crisis of state power." For maximum political mileage, Akhromeyev painted a picture of "officers and members of their families [in the Baltic states] humiliated and put in conditions that are intolerable for life." He read out loud a letter from the wife of a 21-year Navy veteran, retired from the Northern Fleet as part of staff reductions and assigned housing in the military city of Liepaja, Latvia. When the local officials refused to issue a residency permit for the republic, the officer could not draw his pension, the family could not draw food rations and had to subsist on charity from other military families. "Thousands of officers are in an analogous position," Akhromeyev maintained.

The refugees

In the Time of Troubles, and in the Civil War, thousands roamed the Russian countryside, displaced by war and hunger. In the 1920s, wandering *bezprizornyye* (unsupervised) youth were adopted by the Soviet secret police, whose orphanages became schools of brutality for the NKVD executors of the following two decades.

Again today, masses of people are on the move inside the Soviet Union. Jeri Laber of Helsinki Watch reported June 24 in *New York Times*, that the number of homeless in the U.S.S.R. is over 1 million, according to Yelena Bonner, the widow of Academician Andrei Sakharov. Their ranks have swelled in recent months, as Armenians fled Azerbaijan for Armenia or Russia, Azeris fled Armenia, or Meshkhetian Turks fled Central Asia, in the wake of ethnic combat. Others are refugees from villages in parts of Russia or Ukraine, where economic activity has shut down as the old people die, the youth having left long before.

The homeless who come into Soviet cities are in desperate straits, since essential services, including food where rationing is in effect and housing, are dispensed according to the system of residency passes. Bonner's associates explain that even the Popov administration in Moscow dares not issue passes to the miserable refugees living in Moscow train stations or camped in the suburbs, because once the door were opened, an unstoppable flood of humanity from the countryside would swamp the capital.

At the U.S.S.R. State Committee on Labor, Pyotr Rudev has the title, "Chief of the Directorate for Migration and Resettlement of the Population." On May 2, *Izvestia* interviewed him about a government resolution on help for refugees from the Transcaucasus fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan—or "people who have abandoned under compulsion their regular places of residence," as the government calls them.

According to Rudev, there are 600,000 such people in the Soviet Union, of which 500,000 are from the Transcaucasus, which suffered the 1988 Armenian earthquake as well as ethnic strife. Some 230,000 of the refugees are in Armenia, 200,000 in Azerbaijan, and tens of thousands have left those two republics for Russia, especially Moscow.

In southern Russia, in the agriculturally rich regions just north of the Caucasus Mountains, there are "tens of thousands of refugees from Central Asia and the Transcaucasus," according to Rudev. This makes for "an explosive situation," because "the local infrastructure cannot stand it. Prices have skyrocketed, everything has gotten fabulously expensive—housing, land." Local officials there have banned the influx of more refugees.

In Moscow, there are 41,000 "registered" refugees, not counting the families of demobilized servicemen. About 8,500 of them, according to Rudev, are accounted for as living in hotels, and the rest are "as a rule" staying with relatives or friends.

In Ukraine and Belorussia, another vast category of refugees is that of victims of the Chernobyl atomic power station explosion of April 1986. Only in 1989, was it officially admitted that the initial evacuation zone, a 20-mile radius around the stricken plant, was far too small. More people were moved last year, still others are living in conditions of high radiation contamination, but with nowhere to be transferred to. Talking about the impossibility of housing demobilized troops, reported *Krasnaya Zvezda*, First Deputy Prime Minister V. Yevtukh of Belorussia cited "thousands of families who suffered after the tragedy at Chernobyl," and "are waiting to be moved out of the disaster area." The weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* reported June 23, that more than 110,000 inhabitants of the Russian Republic are living in zones contaminated by Chernobyl, that would be ruled out as uninhabitable by international standards. Yelena Bonner's collaborator, Alla Yaroshinskaya, says that 4 million more people should move, if there were anywhere to go.