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ARMS AND SOCIETY: RUSSIA'S REVOLUTIONARY ARBITER?

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Russia's military has been both victim and agent of the revolutionary changes that have swept the lands of Muscovy since 1988. Though wrecked by dynamics that defied control, it has emerged as perhaps the most important arbiter of (still uncertain) societal cohesion, and purpose. To appreciate the complex interplay of often contradictory nationalist, ethnic-separatist, socio-economic and other dynamics that shaped the years from withdrawal from Empire to Boris Yeltsin's (second) coup in September 1993 and beyond, the topic must per force be sub-divided into period and thematic sub-sections. The analysis looks first at the forces and events that led to the failed coup of August 1991, and Yeltsin's successful usurpation of power shortly thereafter. This is followed by a thematic overview of the economic dynamics (budgetary collapse, conversion and arms trade imperatives) that span these and later events. Finally, the analysis turns to the milestones that shaped the 1993 emergence of a new, far smaller, but again ambitious Great Russian Army--once again accepted as Russia's revolutionary arbiter, but now free of the social compact that had bound it through previous eras of Russian history.

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Military transformation as weather-vane for the turmoil that swept through and changed the lands of Rus from 1988 to 1993 is uniquely appropriate. Since Peter the Great, under Tsars and Commissars, the Army was integrated into a larger, composite leadership. Its officers served on the highest councils of State, and Party. It participated in policy formulation, and frequently also implementation, in economic, social and other realms. Its stewardship of the Orthodox Church under Peter, its "school of the nation" role and purpose, and the fact that it was called on to provide leadership for Michail Gorbachev's attempt to generate civilian high tech industries, are symptomatic. Conversely, civilian state and Party leaders served on military councils, affecting, and in turn being affected by military decision-making, concerns and ethos.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the Army was always part of and never apart from the nation's leadership; the concept of military coup or regime was alien to its culture and tradition. Russian history resounds to the memory of peasant rebellions against the established order, to names like Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev. Yet the Army, as an institution, always remained loyal.

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