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Adventures of the "Nuclear Briefcase": A Russian Document Analysis

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Introduction

The attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev on August 18-21, 1991, provides an intriguing case study of interaction between politics, government communications, and command and control of nuclear weapons. During these days, the legitimate leader of the Soviet superpower, President Mikhail Gorbachev, was held incommunicado under house arrest; he was replaced by his most unprepossessing and visibly shaky Vice-president Gennady Yanaev, who was only a figurehead for a junta named the Emergency Committee; and the military custodians of the Soviet nuclear might seemed to be split between those supporting the coup and those trying to sit it out on a fence. Who was in charge of the Soviet strategic nuclear weapons? Have the Russian leaders learned any lessons for the future from this episode?

At the pinnacle of the command and control of the Soviet (and today's Russian) Strategic Nuclear Forces (SNF) is the "nuclear briefcase" code-named *Cheget*: It is portable equipment, installed in a briefcase, that can be used by the civilian commander in chief "to prepare and issue authorization for the use of nuclear weapons."^[1] Wherever the civilian commander in chief is, the *Cheget* follows him. It is connected to the special communications system of the national leadership code-named *Kavkaz*, which "supports communication between senior government officials while they are making the decision whether to use nuclear weapons, and in its own turn is plugged into the special communication system *Kazbek*, which embraces all the individuals and agencies involved in command and control of the SNF."^[2] It is usually assumed that the nuclear briefcases are also issued to the Minister of Defense and Chief of General Staff.^[3]

A book written by Valentin Stepankov and Yevgeniy Lisov, the prosecutors of the August coup plotters, devoted a whole chapter to the adventures of the "nuclear briefcase;" it contains some unique information both about the arrangements for operation of the *Cheget*, and of the fate of Soviet nuclear command and control system during these fateful days.^[4] Below, I will excerpt my translation of the relevant passages of the chapter. The excerpts are found on pp. 137-143. My comments are in brackets. Stepankov's and Lisov's text is in quotation marks. The direct evidence transcripts are in quotation marks.

Background of a Vacation Coup

"On vacation Gorbachev was accompanied by nine officers of the General Staff: three signals officers from the special operational-technical directorate-majors V. Manuilov and S. Solomatin, Captain V.

Mironov, and six officers of the 9th division (*napravlenie*) of the General Staff, which enables the President of the USSR to command and control strategic nuclear forces in an extreme situation of a surprise massive enemy strike— colonels V. Vasil'ev, L. Aleshin, V. Ryndin, Lt. colonels V. Kirillov and I. Antipov.

The group commander was Vasil'ev. Every watch consisted of three officers—two operators and one signals officer. The watch lasted twenty-four hours, starting at 9 a.m. The officers not on duty lived in Alupka [nearby resort town] at a military vacation facility. They had neither radio, nor TV, nor telephone there. If necessary, they had to go to the woman manager [of the military resort facility], who had a regular telephone connected to the city exchange.

The nuclear watch detail at *Zarya* [code name for the presidential residence at Foros] was located in the so-called guesthouse about one hundred meters from the president's house. The operators occupied one room, while the signals officer was in another. Access to the premises was limited, the doors were always closed, duty officers would leave to have meals in turns. The nuclear watch had the following types of communications equipment at their disposal: special communications equipment code-named PM, previously called VCh [high-frequency], equipment providing direct communication to the president and his bodyguards on duty, as well as the regular internal telephone using three digit numbers.

The president's nuclear aides were supposed to carry out only his orders. They were not operationally subordinated to KGB officers, but had to coordinate [with the KGB] their activities on the territory of the *dacha* [out-of-town retreat]. And, naturally, the guards [from the KGB] controlled their entry and exit.

Technical Break-down

On August 18, 1991, the duty officers were the operators V. Kirillov and I. Antipov, and the signals specialist V. Mironov. The commander of the watch was LTC Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kirillov. At 16:32 the officers-operators learned from special breakdown signals of their equipment that all types of communications equipment at their premises have been disconnected. The TV screen also went blank. The only working communications equipment was a radio telephone connecting the nuclear watch at the presidential retreat to the special exchange of government communications at Mukhalatka. Kirillov called there and asked to be connected to their command in Moscow, but was told that they had no communications with anybody. At 16:35 the duty signals officer Mironov reported to Kirillov that he requested the exchange at Mukhalatka to explain the lack of communications and received a response without any comments: "a breakdown."

Here is the evidence provided by Kirillov regarding the subsequent events:

Communication Down for 24 Hours; President's Orders

At about 16:40 Generalov [Maj. Gen. Vyacheslav Generalov, chief of special operation and maintenance division of the KGB, responsible for the upkeep of the leadership vacation facilities; specialist in communications] knocked on our door; we opened, and he said that Gen. Varennikov [Army General Valentin Varennikov, commander in charge of the Ground Forces, one of the most active participants in the coup] wanted to see the senior officer of the watch. Since I was the senior officer, I followed Generalov to Varennikov ...

Varennikov asked me about the condition of our communications center. I answered that communications had been cut off; he responded that that's the way it should be and that our communications center should be switched off. I asked Varennikov how long this situation would continue, and he said: 24 hours. He added that the president [Gorbachev] was aware of it all.

After this conversation they got up and left for the president's house, while we continued our attempts to restore communications, tried to get in touch with Moscow, but failed. After 17:00 the exchange in Mukhalatka stopped answering at all. I approached the guards and asked several times if they had

communications and what was going on, but they told me that communications had been cut off and that they did not know what was going on.

"None of Your Business"

At about 17:15 I approached Plekhanov [Gen. Plekhanov—chief of the 9th KGB directorate, in charge of physical security of top government leaders], and asked him the same questions, but he replied: "It's none of your business, keep on working." It was then that I checked the direct line of communication to the president, but it was also down. At 17:20-17:25 all the persons who had come earlier to the *dacha* [that is, the plotters who pressured Gorbachev to resign], left, and only Generalov had stayed. Around 19:00 he came up to me and said that all security issues have to be resolved with him. I asked him to allow me to meet with the senior officer of our group Vasil'ev, but Generalov replied that it was impossible, and that if Vasil'ev enters the territory of the dacha, he won't be allowed to leave ... [End of Kirillov's testimony.]

In Moscow

[At the same time in Moscow—the evidence provided by Col. Viktor Ivanovich Boldyrev, commander of the General Staff division that enabled the president to command SNF.]

"... On August 18, 1991, after 17:00 (I can't be more precise), the main Exchange Center of the System reported to me that as of 16:32 the communication with the duty watch with the President of the USSR went down. I was told that the cause of the breakdown was not known, and was being looked into.

Next day, that is August 19, at 7:45 duty officer Potapov, or perhaps Peregudov (I can't remember precisely) reported that the communication breakdown was caused by a rock slide in 1.5 km from Foros. Before coming to work that day, I heard on the radio about the establishment of the Emergency Committee [the plotters' organ for ruling the USSR without Gorbachev]; before that, I had known nothing about its preparation. Then I understood what kind of a rock-slide damaged the communications cable...

... The C3 system of the strategic nuclear forces assigns user terminals to the President of the USSR, the Minister of Defense of the USSR, and the Chief of General Staff of the USSR; these terminals are connected through the [central] command post.

... If the terminal of the USSR President is disconnected from the [central] command post, the whole system of SNF command and control is disabled, since without the president's terminal it is impossible to implement command and control."

The Truth Emerges

[By 8:00 19 August 1991, Col. Boldyrev finally attempts to figure out what precisely is going on.]

" Having understood what had happened, I attempted to get in touch with the duty crew at Foros, but could get by phone only as far as the department of government communications in Yalta. They refused to put me through to my duty officers, saying that the line was out of order. Therefore I failed to learn what was going on around the President of the USSR. And at 8:30 I was summoned by the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff V. G. Denisov, who ordered me to evacuate back to Moscow the president's terminal and the group of officers who worked with it. I replied to Denisov that I had no communication with the group..."

[In the morning of August 19, 1991, Col. Vasil'ev, the senior officer of the "nuclear crew," showed up at Gorbachev's dacha absolutely unaware of the events of the last 24 hours; remember, at the military vacation center at Alupka there were no phones, no TVs, and no radios. He was stopped from entering Gorbachev's compound by an officer in the uniform of the KGB Border Guard, who informed Vasil'ev that his and his people's passes were no longer valid, and that all issues were to be resolved by Generalov. Vasil'ev's evidence continues:]

"[The Border Guard colonel] realized that we were completely unaware of the political situation, and gave

us a transistor radio, and we heard the appeal of the Emergency Committee to the Soviet people, and realized that something difficult to understand had happened: on the radio they were saying that Gorbachev was ill and couldn't continue as president. We, however, knew that Gorbachev was in good health, since he was supposed to leave for Moscow that day, and the flight had not been canceled.

We waited for an answer, or, to be more precise, for Generalov's decision, for more than an hour, and learnt it from the same [Border Guard] colonel. He told us that there was going to be no changing of the duty crew, that none of us would be allowed in, and that we should go back to Alupka. So we returned to the vacation facility."

At that moment in Moscow

"Upon learning from the Chief of Division 9 Boldyrev that he had no communication with the president's nuclear crew, the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff Denisov made a phone call, after which he gave Boldyrev a telephone number through which "he would be allowed to connect with his crew." The permission was given by Kryuchkov's [KGB Chairman] deputy [Gheniy] Ageev. On his order, the KGB's "magic" telephones started working, Vasil'ev was found at the vacation center and ordered to Yalta to the department of government communications, from where he called Boldyrev.

Boldyrev transmitted to Vasil'ev Denisov's order: "Gather all your officers at Yalta and be ready to leave for the Belbek [military] airfield, where a plane would be waiting for you." Vasil'ev replied that he could not evacuate the duty crew from the president's dacha. Boldyrev called Denisov again. Denisov reassured him that everything would be OK, and ordered him to provide the chief of staff of PVO [Air Defense] with the list of officers who are supposed to leave Foros for Moscow." [Indeed, by 14:00 the duty crew left Gorbachev's dacha together with their equipment; they picked up their signals specialists working at the Mukhalatka exchange, and went to the Bel'bek military airfield.]

"At 19:40 all members of the nuclear crew left for Moscow in the president's plane, taking with them his terminal, rendered useless by erasing its magnetic memory. At Vnukovo-2 airport they were met by representatives of the General Staff, to whom they turned over their equipment and personal weapons..."

Analysis

The coup against the president of the USSR resulted in a loss of civilian control over the Soviet nuclear arsenal symbolized by the disappearance of the "nuclear briefcase". Soviet succession rules, according to Bruce Blair's abundantly documented study, stipulated that in case of Gorbachev's death or removal from office, a backup *Cheget* assigned to the president's legal successor, Vice President Gennady Yanaev, would have been activated.[5]

This, however, most probably never happened. Only the military could perform this activation. And they faced an unprecedented situation: President Gorbachev was removed from power not through routine workings of the Party apparatus (as it had happened with Khrushchev in 1964), but as a result of a coup which introduced a new body—the Emergency Committee—into a country which was enjoying its honeymoon with the ideas of democracy, elections, legality, as well as anti-communism. Vice President Yanaev's legitimacy as Gorbachev's successor depended on the unpredictable Congress of People's Deputies and Supreme Soviet. Indeed, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet (the speaker of the parliament) Anatoly Lukyanov, although he took part in the plotters deliberations, firmly refused to join the Emergency Committee, under the pretext that he represented the legislative branch of power.[6] At the same time, a new center of power—Boris Yeltsin's government and elected parliament of the Russian Federation—was vigorously resisting the coup and gaining international legitimacy at the expense of the Emergency Committee. Yanaev was certainly not an inspiring figure. During his press conference on August 19, Yanaev's hands started to shake visibly when a young journalist asked him a blunt question, and we know in fact that he was drunk throughout the coup. The Emergency Committee's power appearing uncertain, several top military officers in charge of strategic nuclear weapons were in no rush to transfer the ultimate symbol of state power to a drunken clown, and then face the possibility of

Gorbachev's revenge or Yeltsin's wrath, or both. Indeed, there is no evidence that Yanaev was issued a "nuclear briefcase."^[7]



Gennady Yanaev (right) during the August 19 press conference.

Both the Minister of Defense Marshal Dmitri Yazov and the Chief of General Staff Army Gen. Mikhail Moiseev had their own "nuclear briefcases," and both were supporters of the coup. But according to Bruce Blair, the Soviet system of nuclear command and control had built-in robust obstacles preventing any one element in the political-military leadership from launching a missile.^[8] And the c-in-c's of the Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF), Navy and Air Force—the three services that had strategic nuclear weapons—were skeptical about the prospects of the coup.^[9]

Well-informed sources suggest that this trio agreed to prevent the conspirators from issuing commands to the strategic nuclear forces, and switching the strategic C3 system to a manual mode.^[10] Moreover, once Gorbachev's "nuclear briefcase" vanished, operators in Moscow deactivated the two remaining *Chegets*, issued to the Minister of Defense Yazov and Chief of General Staff Moiseev. Yanaev was denied access to the aforementioned special communication system *Kazbek*, which excluded him from any involvement in decision-making on nuclear weapons use.^[11] The Soviet nuclear arsenal was not disabled: according to no lesser authority than Yuri Maslyukov, the head of the Soviet Military-Industrial Commission (the body which supervised the Soviet defense industry), the General Staff could launch a retaliatory nuclear strike without a presidential authorization.^[12]

The technical barriers made it practically impossible for one faction in the political-military leadership to seize command and control of the superpower's strategic nuclear weapons. The weakness, however, was political, not technical. The KGB easily cut President Gorbachev's communications (which they controlled), while the keepers of the "nuclear briefcase" and their supervisors in the General Staff accepted the secret police's arrogant violation of the chain of command with habitual humility born out of the decades of nearly superstitious fear of the KGB and its even more sinister predecessors.

Adventures of the Nuclear Briefcase

Gorbachev's successors, presidents of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, apparently took note of the adventures of the "nuclear briefcase." The control of the "nuclear briefcase"

has become a symbol of political authority. When a meteorological rocket launched from Norway on January 25, 1995 was regarded for very few minutes as a potential threat, he immediately revealed to the mass media that he had used the "nuclear briefcase."^[13] When Yeltsin underwent heart surgery in 1996, his entourage again made a big public fuss over the fact that he regained control over the "nuclear briefcase" from Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin as soon as he woke up from anesthesia. President Putin on several occasions personally supervised exercises of SNF and chose to discuss "for background" with journalists his experience in training how to use the *Cheget*.^[14]

The structure of the command and control system inherited from the Soviet Union with its built-in safeguards, apparently has left both Yeltsin and Putin quite satisfied: to the best of our knowledge, no changes have been made in it. Serious changes were made, in contrast, in the organization of presidential security and communications. Yeltsin broke up the KGB into several agencies; one of the fragments, the Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information (its Russian acronym is FAPSI) contained a division that ran government communications; another fragment, the Federal Protection Service (FSO), protected high-ranking government officials. Yet another fragment, the Main Directorate of Special Projects (GUSP) was put in charge of the vast network of emergency underground structures for the Russian leadership.

Vladimir Putin, a KGB alumnus and former director of its main successor—the Federal Security Service (FSB), returned to FSB several services that Yeltsin split off: Federal Border Service with its troops, and the FAPSI with its electronic eavesdropping. But the FSB did not gain control over the bodyguards of the political leaders, their communications, and their secret bunkers. The Federal Protection Service remains outside of the FSB, subordinate only to the president. The division of FAPSI in charge of government communications was split off and into the Service of Special Communications and Information, which is part of the Federal Protection Service.^[15] Putin, like his predecessor, continues to control directly the Main Directorate of Special Projects, with its wartime bunkers and presumably communications. Cutting off Mr. Putin's phone lines would not be easy.

Adept as Mr. Putin is in dealing with the bureaucracy, it is possible that he is building a political system where control over nuclear weapons would be no more secure than the president himself from plots and conspiracies. He rules more and more by relying on the bureaucracy (especially the security services), and control over TV, while the judicial and legislative branches of power are not developing, or are even regressing. Great Russian historian Vassily Kliuchevsky characterized in the early twentieth century such a mode of government in Russia as "reliance on bayonets covered with newspapers." The result was a sudden collapse of the political system supported only by the bureaucracy. If Russia indeed follows this path again today, the world one day may again face the fateful question: who controls the Russian nuclear arsenal?

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