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By KEITH ARMES

Gen. Kirshin was interviewed by the editor of Perspective in Washington, D.C., on October 5, 1991.

Maj. Gen. Yuri Ya. Kirshin formerly headed the Strategic Department of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces. After leaving the General Staff, Gen. Kirshin became head of the Theoretical Department of the Institute of Military History. Subsequently he served as deputy director of the Institute, in charge of the production of the ten-volume History of the Great Fatherland War and the Soviet Military Encyclopedia. He then had a conflict with Gen. Mikhail A. Moiseev, Chief of the General Staff, and was forced to resign from the army. Earlier Gen. Kirshin had created the Association for Military-Political and Military-Historical Studies, of which he serves as President.

**Perspective.** General, what was the cause of your conflict with Moiseev?

**Kirshin.** The conflict arose in the first place over the writing of the first volume of the ten-volume History of the Great Fatherland War. At a meeting of the editorial commission, Gen. Yazov, Gen. Varennikov, Gen. Lizichev, and CPSU Central Committee Secretary Falin strongly criticized this volume, for which I was responsible. They defended Stalinist and Brezhnevite positions with regard to the evaluation of our military history. I also had a very serious conflict with Moiseev over the non-governmental journal Tochka Zreniya (Point of View) which I founded without his permission. Finally, he did not like my creating the research association.
Perspective. The opinion is being expressed that after the failure of the putsch of 19th August the way is now open for radical military reform. What are your views on the security needs of the Soviet Union and the future structure of the armed forces?

Kirshin. In Europe, a security system was created—the Helsinki agreements, CSCE process, as well as other political and economic structures—to ensure stability. These structures made a big contribution to preventing nuclear world war and local wars in Europe. But as events in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have demonstrated, these structures which included the Soviet Union were not successful in ensuring peace in Europe. Security broke down. Now, in view of recent events, particularly events in the Soviet Union, a completely new security system on different principles is required in Europe. The vital thing is that on the territory of the Soviet Union 15 independent states are being formed, each of which will have its own national interests. Consequently, we need to resolve questions of security in the European-Asian space formerly occupied by the Soviet Union. The external threat now is reduced to a minimum. At the present time the greatest threat for our people, for this entire space—also for neighboring states, indeed in my personal view a global threat to humanity—is internal instability on the territory of our former Soviet state.

All the new independent states that are being formed—the Ukraine, Russia, Georgia—are multinational states with many different nationalities living on the same territory. And as events have shown, national questions between them remain unresolved and national conflicts are possible, even civil wars on the territory of these independent republics are not excluded.

Secondly, there are many unresolved territorial questions between these new independent states. We consider that even armed conflicts and wars between these new states are possible, for example between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A third danger will arise if the nuclear problem is wrongly resolved. If independent states are formed with their own independent strategic nuclear weapons, or their own tactical
nuclear weapons—for instance, Ukraine, Belorussia, Kazakhstan—we will have the problem of the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the territory of the former Soviet Union. For example, if the Ukraine has a powerful army and its own nuclear weapons, it will be stronger than Germany. This would represent a great danger and create major complications.

Consequently, we need a new system of security, beginning with the territory of the former Soviet Union. Each state should conclude military agreements with the others—for instance, the Ukraine with Belorussia, Russia, Moldavia. In addition, the Ukraine should make agreements with all the bordering states—Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The goal should be to achieve reasonable defensive sufficiency.

The internal security system on the territory of the Soviet Union should be organically combined with security agreements with NATO and the European countries in order to create a completely new overall security system on new principles, ensuring that wars are impossible, instead of the system of confrontation with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact on one side and NATO on the other.

With regard to nuclear security I envisage two options. The first option would be that the four nuclear states—Russia, the Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakhstan—conclude an agreement under which there would be a single nuclear button and collective decision-making on whether to use or not to use nuclear weapons. That would be a very good arrangement. The second option would be for the Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakhstan to declare themselves nuclear-free zones and for all nuclear weapons to be concentrated on Russian territory. Russia would reach agreements with the other states on the non-use of nuclear weapons against them.

_Perspective._ What are your views on conventional forces?

_Kirshin._ The center should have its own unified (_yedinye_) armed forces at its disposal in accordance with agreements with all the states for dealing with external threats.
Given the possibility of internal conflicts and wars between the states that join with the center in creating combined forces, it seems to me that the center also needs a small force like the Blue Helmets [UN peacekeeping forces] that could play a peacemaking function if needed.

_Perspective_. A firefighting force?

_Kirshin_. Exactly. But its use must be based on a democratic decision in accordance with law. These forces must not be used in the interests of the center, the way Yazov used military forces in Vilnius and Tbilisi, or in Karabakh when Armenia started to break away. They must be fundamentally new formations intended to forestall conflicts and separate opposed sides—not support one of the sides—so that the people have a good attitude toward them and don't consider them aggressive forces.

Further, the putsch showed that independent states need to have their own small national formations to ensure their sovereignty. Why is it that armed formations were created in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Karabakh, and Lithuania? Because the center and Gorbachev did not ensure the sovereignty of these republics. If Yeltsin had had such formations available to him, Kryuchkov, Moiseev, Yazov, and Pugo probably would have been afraid to carry out the putsch. I believe that Russia will have such national formations of several divisions to fulfill this role.

_Perspective_. Yeltsin was fiercely attacked when he originally proposed the creation of a Russian national army.

_Kirshin_. Yes, I believe Yeltsin backtracked and stopped talking about it. I think he now regrets he made concessions on this.

_Perspective_. What size do you believe the central forces should be?
kirshin. i think it is premature to discuss this before the questions i have been talking about have been resolved. for example, you can't discuss how many hundred thousand troops should be cut before you have solved the question of military security between the republics. then it will become clear what size armed forces you want. you can't structure armed forces before you've decided the main question—what external and internal threats to your state exist at the present time or are likely in the future. then the question arises how to recruit these armed forces—should it be a professional volunteer army, or based on universal conscription. military reform also means reform of the society, although certainly reorganization of the armed forces is the nucleus of the reform. it is the state that carries out military reform, and it cannot be implemented without reference to the economy, the political system, foreign policy, the educational level of the people, etc.

conversion of military industry has to be a constituent part of military reform. the military-industrial complex must correspond to the appraisal of the situation and possible threats. right now our military-industrial complex far exceeds what is required for defensive sufficiency. consequently no military reform will be effective unless the military-industrial complex is brought into correspondence with present realities.

it's all a single process and for this reason a special military reform committee chaired by gen. konstantin kobets, attached to the state committee under the president, is being created for determining policy and strategy and for carrying out military reform.

**perspective.** at this time you are not ready to make proposals for the structure of the future soviet army?

**kirshin.** i can only envisage the form a future soviet army should take after i know the answer to the question what internal and external wars are possible. we may come to the conclusion that nato isn't going to fight a war against the soviet union, either now or in ten years.
**Perspective.** What’s your own opinion about that?

**Kirshin.** Right now it’s excluded and I don't see any real, any serious threat from the Western powers.

**Perspective.** That leaves China.

**Kirshin.** Yes, what worries me is that the socialist system is still not completely destroyed. There are still hot points, remnants of socialism, for instance Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, China. On the territory of the former Soviet state communists may remain in power in some independent states, for instance in Tadzhikistan, and communist preserves will be established. Thus there may be reactionary states that will maintain close contacts with China, North Korea, and so on. This is a very dangerous prospect that needs to be borne in mind. There are areas like this within Russia itself, which is why Yel'tsin wants to hold elections in November for new regional leaders so that democrats can take over from the communists. Yel'tsin is looking ahead. We see dangerous tendencies in Georgia also—it’s impossible to say how the situation will turn out.

**Perspective.** What nuclear policy would you recommend with regard to China?

**Kirshin.** Let's assume China represents a danger. We have several Central Asian republics with a common border with China. We need to leave tactical nuclear weapons there against China. The center can conclude contracts with these independent states for the stationing of Soviet forces and tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of these republics. The agreements will include conditions for the use of these nuclear weapons, making independent use impossible.

**Perspective.** But what will happen if it proves impossible for the center to reach an agreement with a republic on nuclear weapons?
Kirshin. If a republic on the Chinese border won't make such an agreement we're not going to give them nuclear weapons, we'll simply remove them.

Perspective. What if a nationalistic government insists on keeping nuclear weapons?

Kirshin. We'll remove them, as we did in conflict situations in Armenia and Azerbaijan. They can deal with China themselves. China can make war on them, conquer them if it wants.

Perspective. This may seem strange to you, but some people in this country are asking whether the center will remain strong enough to guarantee its continued control of nuclear weapons in the republics. In your view, would it be completely impossible for any armed nationalistic or terrorist groups, let's say in the Transcaucasus, to seize control of nuclear weapons and use them for blackmail?

Kirshin. I consider that if there were such attempts the center should make harmless and remove nuclear weapons by any means available, the most radical measures, of course with the support of the United States and the United Nations. And I am sure that this is what will happen.

Perspective. A report to the USSR Supreme Soviet from the KGB that was leaked in October supposedly concluded that the majority of the officer corps did not have democratic attitudes. You seem to take an optimistic view of the process of democratization?

Kirshin. Definitely. I can say one thing with confidence—our officer corps is becoming more democratic. The officers are moving to the left under the influence of society, which is becoming democratic. The young lads who finished high school and entered military school are living in a society in which the democratic space is expanding. Our Russian television in Moscow and St. Petersburg is democratic—all this has an influence on officers and soldiers, also on the officer cadets, future officers. But for the
democratization of the army, and society as a whole, democratization of the economy is needed.

**Perspective.** What was the role of the military high command in the putsch of the 19th of August?

**Kirshin.** You can't consider the putsch in isolation from developments during the preceding years in our country. Many top commanders and political officers supported the actions of the Soviet armed forces in Vilnius, Tbilisi, in Central Asia, and elsewhere. A military man is obliged to carry out an order. But an order can be carried out passively, or with enthusiasm. These officers were glad to carry out the orders. Not a single commander of a military district—for example, Gen. Kuz'min, commander of the Baltic Military District—refused or sent in a report, "I protest against such a military policy." They completely supported the course of Gorbachev, Yazov, Pugo, Kryuchkov. I know many marshals, generals, and colonel generals, but apart from Volkogonov, I don't know any supporters of Yel'tsin at all.

**Perspective.** Which top-ranking officers participated personally in the planning of the putsch?

**Kirshin.** I don't believe that Yazov informed everybody about the putsch. It can't have been that way. The putsch was prepared at the top. The putsch was prepared by Yazov, Pugo, and Kryuchkov. They openly talked about it and said openly that it was necessary to restore order, and so on. But Yazov couldn't announce this at some big meeting. It was a narrow group of people who prepared it. But they hoped that when the order was given, everything would be carried out—when Yazov said the word where the troops were to be deployed, where they were to shoot. But this was where Yazov made a mistake. He made a mistake because the army had become a different army. Our soldiers and officers had fired in Karabakh, but when the Taman' Division was deployed in Moscow the soldiers let children and little girls climb onto the tanks. There was fraternization—the people were Russians, fellow Muscovites.
**Perspective.** Couldn't they have used units that would have been willing to fire on the crowds?

**Kirshin.** Where could they have found any? There aren't any such units in the army. For instance, the airborne troops under Gen. Grachev refused to take part.

**Perspective.** What about the OMON units? They would have obeyed orders, surely?

**Kirshin.** Yes, of course. They are a bad lot. But they are MVD troops, not army troops. Or they could have found KGB units.

**Perspective.** But it would really have been impossible to find such units in the army?

**Kirshin.** Unquestionably there are some individual units, for instance the Spetsnaz units of the Ministry of Defense—these are quite different units and they would have taken part.

**Perspective.** So why didn't they use these troops?

**Kirshin.** Yazov and the rest did not know what was happening in the army. He thought that any units he called upon would carry out the assignment. He did not realize the way the army had changed.

**Perspective.** What if troops had been used who obeyed orders to fire on the crowds and seize control of the White House and the Russian Parliament?

**Kirshin.** Then there would have been civil war.

**Perspective.** It's very striking that the putschists made such a gross mistake—believed they could rely on the troops, that they had such a wrong idea of the attitude of the army.
Kirshin. Yes, their professional level was so low that they couldn't even succeed in carrying out a *coup d'état*. And our Minister of the Interior was such a poor professional, so inadequately trained that he couldn't even manage to shoot himself properly.

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