

A day with the Russian Army

Our correspondent Konstantin George visits the Western Group of Forces based in eastern Germany, as they prepare for the long journey home to Russia.

On March 24, this *EIR* correspondent attended by invitation of the Russian Army's "Western Group of Forces," as the Russian forces based in Germany are called, the ceremonies for the withdrawal of a tank regiment of the 79th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, based in the East German city of Jena in the state of Thuringia. Along with German journalists present, I was given a morning tour of the base, complete with closeup inspection of the BMP-2 armored personnel carriers of the unit, waiting to be loaded at the siding.

This was followed by formal farewell ceremonies at the Jena rail freight station, where the last 33 T-80 tanks and other armored vehicles of the unit were sitting atop railway flatcars ready for their departure that day.

On many counts, the invitation was a sign of the changes that have taken place. This was the first time in history that an *EIR* correspondent was allowed on a Russian Army base and could freely chat with officers and enlisted men of a combat unit.

The ability to see firsthand the 79th Guards Division was important to this writer, who coauthored the *EIR* "Global Showdown" series of special reports, and having contributed numerous pieces dealing with the mid-1980s Soviet military moves and buildup on German territory by the then-Soviet "Group of Forces in Germany," which in 1989 was renamed the "Western Group of Forces."

The 79th Guards Division had always been the elite unit of the Soviet 8th Guards Army, forward-based in Thuringia, right next to the West German state of Hessen and the U.S. Army, with a crucial spearhead role in any invasion. This was therefore an opportunity to see the current status of personnel in one of the best units in the entire roster of the Russian ground forces.

One remark is merited here, showing in retrospect how on the mark the documentation in "Global Showdown" on the 1980s Soviet military buildup had been. I can remember how many in western Europe had scoffed at our assertions then, that Soviet forces in East Germany were equipped with very large numbers of T-80 tanks, the most modern in the Soviet inventory, and how this tank had first been introduced into East Germany at the beginning of the 1980s. The visit to 79th Guards Division confirmed this. The T-80 was first

introduced into the Russian armies in East Germany back in 1981.

Morale was good

What I saw and heard during this day with the Russian Army was most interesting. This visit provided proof, that at one level, sweeping changes are indeed under way in the Armed Forces. The troops, especially the enlisted men, contrary to the stereotype image of the Russian soldier, were relaxed, friendly, and talkative, and posed with the author for pictures beside their BMP-2 armored personnel carriers. This held true not only for the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian troops, but also for the young recruits from the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

While these troops were relaxed and friendly, there was no sign whatsoever of any laxness or sloppiness concerning discipline, let alone any sign of "demoralization." On the contrary, whatever may be happening elsewhere in the Russian Army, the 79th Guards Division was living up to its traditional high standards and high morale.

In his speech at the farewell ceremonies, the division commander recounted the division's history. Created in December 1941 at the height of the critical battle for Moscow, the division played a prominent role in stopping the advance of the German Wehrmacht at the gates of the Soviet capital. Then, from the successful Red Army counteroffensive from December 1941 to February 1942, they went on to fight with honor at the Battle of Stalingrad, the turning point of the war. As the commander stressed, this particular unit went the entire route "from Stalingrad to Berlin" as one of the most decorated units in Russian military history.

What struck me most about the troops, however, was the combination of professionalism, alertness, and pride, and at the same time being relaxed and friendly. Certainly, and I heard this directly from the young conscripts who would be demobilized upon return home, there was the normal joy and happiness about being reunited with one's family after completing two years of hard spartan duty. I can give an example of what these two years looked like.

From some of the young men I spoke to among the BMP-2 drivers, the two years had begun, after standard basic train-

ing, with deployment to the armored vehicle training school in the Kharkov region of Ukraine's Kiev Military District. From there came the assignment to the 79th Guards Division. For these conscripts, the last 18 months of service had been with the 79th Guards Division in Germany, with no break, far from home. These troops were, given the uncertain future all would face once home, committed to performing their military duties until the day of demobilization.

'Very complicated' situation back home

This worry about the uncertain future was much more visible among the officers who, generally speaking, had a much more tense and nervous appearance. To them, home had always been the Army. This was not uniformly the case, but it was true as a rule for the Russian officers. A young Belorussian, for example, was happily recounting that leaving the Community of Independent States forces would mean a future with the new army of the Republic of Belarus now being formed.

The speeches and statements made to the press by the division and regimental commanders and other high-ranking officers, were also revealing concerning the uncertain future. The division commander stressed that the withdrawal, which would see "all of our troops leaving Thuringia this year," i.e., the entire 8th Guards Army, was taking place amidst a "very complicated situation" back home. The translation into German omitted the crucial word "very."

Other statements by these commanders were equally revealing in terms of their obviously high level of dissatisfaction over the "very complicated" situation back home. What struck me as I listened to officer after officer describe the destination of the withdrawal, was their use of interchangeable phrases "our homeland" and "our country."

After asking a few times, "Which of the independent republics do you have in mind?" an interesting mix of answer and non-answer emerged. The division commander stressed that each of the demobilized troops would return to "his republic." An obvious enough answer. But what of the career personnel? Silence.

I don't believe the silence was meant in any bad way. This was a question that these Russian officers, who had no other republic to go to except for the Russian republic, where large-scale cuts in the officer corps will be occurring, and where the prospect for decent living conditions for those lucky enough to escape unemployment was nightmarish, could not answer.

The Russian words used to define home were *rodina* or "homeland," and *stran* or "country," which were liberally mistranslated into German as "Russland" or Russia, with one significant exception: The word "Rossiya" for Russia was never used. This exception came when the division commander, in his final remarks, said, "We are returning to our country, to Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan."

Here was an interesting political statement, saying in a

concise, deliberate way that somehow a Slavic core plus Kazakhstan, of four sovereign republics but economically and militarily one "country," so to speak, must be preserved. I would be willing to bet that far more than a few former Soviet generals would avidly agree with the feelings of this particular general major.

Another question was: What will happen to the T-80 tanks and all the first-class arms and equipment of this division? In the case of all the arms and equipment of the Western Group of Forces, it is all going to the Russian Republic. The T-80 tanks, the armored vehicles, and all other equipment of the 79th Guards Division will find its new home somewhere in the Russian Republic's Volga-Urals Military District.

On the squabbles between republics on dividing up arms and equipment, the flow of arms from the Russian forces in Germany, which on the average is the most modern in the Ground Forces' inventory, solely to Russia, sheds important light on the real issue at hand. Not how many tanks, or whatever, does a republic get, but how many of what type, how modern, or as the case may be, how obsolete.

The restless army

The two expressions that would best characterize the social crisis within the Armed Forces of the former Soviet Union are, "something has to give" and "anything can happen."

The military is furious at the mass demobilization of officers and soldiers by the International Monetary Fund-dictated budget cuts being shoved through by Vice Premier Yegor Gaidar, which are throwing officers into a civilian life devoid of jobs and housing. The lifting of price controls has wrecked the living standards of officers still on active duty, impoverishing their families, and added to the grave housing crisis within the military.

According to February statistics released by the Armed Forces, 200,000 soldiers and their families, are living in makeshift, temporary facilities. In other words, they do not have, even by spartan Russian military standards, decent housing.

The boiling situation within the officer corps was at the top of Russian President Boris Yeltsin's agenda during his two-week working vacation in March at Sochi on the Black Sea coast. It was no coincidence that his first act upon returning to Moscow on March 16 was to issue a decree forming a Russian Defense Ministry and appointing himself as Russia's first defense minister, as the prelude to formally creating a Russian national armed forces.

Naming himself was designed, as Yeltsin stated, to reassure the military that they would enjoy the full support and financial-material backing of the Russian nation, with himself as the guarantor. This move may succeed in buying time, but whether it will do more than that depends on what Yeltsin does to solve the social crisis within the military and society generally.