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LANDING OF LIGHT AIRCRAFT IN RED SQUARE

SUMMARY

1. THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP HAS TAKEN RAPID, DRASTIC AND PUBLIC ACTION FOLLOWING THE LANDING IN RED SQUARE ON 29 MAY OF A LIGHT AIRCRAFT PILOTED BY A YOUNG WEST GERMAN. THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE SOVIET AIR DEFENCE FORCE HAS BEEN DISMISSED, AND THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE ABRUPTLY RETIRED. OTHER HEADS MAY ROLL. THE LEADERSHIP WAS NO DOUBT SHOCKED AND ANGRY AT THIS EMBARRASSING INCIDENT BUT GORBACHEV MAY NOT HAVE BEEN ENTIRELY ADVERSE TO THE OPPORTUNITY TO PUT THE MILITARY FIRMLY IN THEIR PLACE.

DETAIL

2. THE SOVIET MEDIA DID NOT REPORT THE INCIDENT FOR 24 HOURS, WHEN A BRIEF TASS STATEMENT (CARRIED BY THE CENTRAL PRESS ON 30 MAY) DESCRIBED WHAT HAD OCCURRED IN TWO SENTENCES AND STATED THAT THE MATTER WAS UNDER INVESTIGATION. THE FACT THAT THE PLANE HAD LANDED IN RED SQUARE WAS NOT MENTIONED, BUT THERE WAS IMPLIED CRITISM IN THE WORDING THAT THE AIRCRAFT'S FLIGHT HAD 'NOT BEEN CUT SHORT'. THE POLITBURO MET IN SPECIAL SESSION, PROBABLY AS SOON AS GORBACHEV, WITH THREE OTHER POLITBURO MEMBERS AND THE NOW EX-DEFENCE MINISTER SOKOLOV, RETURNED FROM THE WARSAW PACT SUMMIT IN BERLIN ON SATURDAY 30 MAY. THE COMMUNIQUE OF THE POLITBURO SESSION PUBLISHED IN THE CENTRAL PRESS ON 31 MAY STATED THAT THE AIRCRAFT HAD BEEN DETECTED BY SOVIET RADAR AND TWICE BUZZED BY SOVIET FIGHTERS; BUT THE AIR DEFENCE COMMAND HAD SHOWN 'INTOLERABLE NEGLIGENCE AND INDECISIVENESS' IN FAILING TO STOP THE FLIGHT 'WITHOUT RESORTING TO MILITARY MEANS'. THE INCIDENT HAD SHOWN UP SERIOUS DEFICIENCIES IN THE ORGANISATION OF AIR DEFENCE, LACK OF VIGILANCE AND DISCIPLINE AND MAJOR SHORTCOMINGS IN LEADERSHIP ON THE PART OF THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE. THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE AIR DEFENCE FORCES, MARSHALL KOLDUNOV, HAD BEEN DISMISSED FOR NEGLIGENCE, DISORGANISATION IN DEALING WITH THE INCURSION AND ABSENCE OF PROPER CONTROL OVER THE AIR DEFENCE FORCES. IT HAD BEEN DECIDED TO STRENGTHEN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE. THERE WAS NO MENTION IN THE COMMUNIQUE OF THE DEFENCE MINISTER BUT THE SIMULTANEOUS ANNOUNCEMENT IN THE CENTRAL PRESS OF THE RETIREMENT OF MARSHAL SOKOLOV AND HIS REPLACEMENT BY ARMY GENERAL

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D T YAZOV MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE HAD BEEN HELD PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE. THE ABSENCE OF ANY REFERENCE TO HEALTH REASONS FOR SOKOLOV'S RETIREMENT AND FAILURE TO TRANSFER HIM TO THE INSPECTORATE OF THE ARMED FORCES UNDERLINES THAT HE HAS BEEN REMOVED WITHOUT HONOUR. THE REFERENCE IN THE COMMUNIQUE TO THE CONTINUING INVESTIGATION BY THE PROCURACY INTO THE ACTIONS OF OFFICIALS IN CONNECTION WITH THE INCIDENT SUGGESTS THAT OTHER HEADS MAY ROLL.

COMMENT

3. SEVERAL FACTORS MAY HAVE INFLUENCED THE DECISION TO REACT SO QUICKLY AND SHARPLY. THE LEADERSHIP WAS GENUINELY SHOCKED AND ANGRY AT THIS EMBARRASSING INCURSION AND THE LANDING ON RED SQUARE ITSELF (AND BY A GERMAN TO BOOT) MUST HAVE ADDED INSULT TO INJURY. IN VIEW OF THE TRADITIONAL EXTREME SENSITIVITY TO VIOLATIONS OF SOVIET FRONTIERS REACTIONS AMONG THE PUBLIC AS WELL AS PARTY AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS MAY HAVE BEEN THOUGHT TO REQUIRE A DRASTIC AND DEMONSTRATIVE REACTION. AT THE SAME TIME, GORBACHEV MAY NOT HAVE BEEN ENTIRELY UNHAPPY WITH THIS OPPORTUNITY TO RUB THE NOSES OF THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN ITS OWN FAILURE AND TO REPLACE SOKOLOV. DESPITE HIS EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO 'PERESTROIKA' FOR THE FORCES IN HIS REPORT TO THE JANUARY PLENUM, THEY HAVE ESCAPED LARGELY UNSCATHED SO FAR APART FROM OCCASIONAL CRITICISM IN THE PRESS OF SENIOR OFFICERS AND INCREASING CRITICISM IN RED STAR OF STANDARDS OF DISCIPLINE AND EFFICIENCY. THIS PUBLIC SLAP IN THE FACE HAS PUT THE MILITARY FIRMLY IN THEIR PLACE AND MAY POSSIBLY PAVE THE WAY FOR THE KIND OF SHAKE UP WHICH THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS HAVE UNDERGONE.

4. THE EPISODE PROVIDES AN INTERESTING CONTRAST WITH THE HANDLING OF THE INCIDENT INVOLVING THE SHOOTING DOWN OF THE KOREAN AIRLINER IN 1983 WHEN THERE WAS NO PUBLIC CRITICISM WHATEVER OF THE AIR DEFENCE FORCES OR THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT KOLDUNOV MAY BE PAYING A BELATED PRICE FOR HIS HANDLING OF THAT INCIDENT TOO. THE POLITBURO COMMUNIQUE INDICATED THAT SOVIET FORCES HAD BEEN EXPECTED TO INTERCEPT THE CESSNA FLIGHT 'WITHOUT RESORTING TO MILITARY MEANS'

5. BY TAKING ACTION SO PUBLICLY, THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP HAS TO SOME EXTENT INCREASED ITS OWN PUBLIC EMBARRASSMENT. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE TO PRETEND THAT THE AIRCRAFT HAD BEEN MONITORED AND PERMITTED TO LAND OUT OF HUMANITARIAN CONSIDERATIONS, WHILE MEASURES WERE TAKEN DISCREETLY TO PUNISH THOSE RESPONSIBLE. TO THAT EXTENT GLASNOST' HAS PREVAILED, BUT NOT IN THE REPORTING OF THE INCIDENT ITSELF. SO FAR THE SOVIET PRESS HAS CARRIED NOTHING ABOUT THE AFFAIR EXCEPT THE BRIEF TASS ANNOUNCEMENT AND THE POLITBURO COMMUNIQUE.

6. GORBACHEV HAS BEEN SEEN TO ACT DECISIVELY AND RAPIDLY, EVIDENTLY WITH POLITBURO SUPPORT, TO DEMONSTRATE POLITICAL AUTHORITY OVER THE ARMED FORCES. THE APPOINTMENT OF GENERAL YAZOV, A RELATIVELY JUNIOR OFFICER, AGED 63 WHO WAS ONLY APPOINTED DEPUTY MINISTER IN JANUARY THIS YEAR AND IS ONLY A CANDIDATE MEMBER OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE ALSO HELP TO ENSURE THAT THE

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MILITARY LEADERSHIP MAINTAINS A LOW PROFILE. HOWEVER, THIS PUBLIC HUMILIATION OF THE MILITARY IS BOUND TO HAVE ANTAGONISED OTHER SENIOR ARMED FORCES LEADERS AND COULD LEAD TO FRICTION BETWEEN POLITICAL AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP. IT IS INTERESTING THAT THE MAIN TELEVISION EVENING NEWS PROGRAMME 'VREMYA', ON 31 MAY, QUOTED BRZEZINSKY TO THE EFFECT THAT AMERICA SHOULD LEARN A LESSON FROM THE RUSSIANS ABOUT ALLOCATING RESPONSIBILITY AND PUNISHING THE MILITARY WHEN MISTAKES WERE MADE, UNLIKE FOR EXAMPLE, THE INCIDENT INVOLVING THE USS STARK, IN WHICH NEARLY 40 AMERICAN SAILORS HAD BEEN KILLED BUT NO ONE DISMISSED.

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