

Report on Lieutenant General Vladimir Cheremnikh's visit to PRIO June 1994

Based on notes by the Swedish Military Intelligence Service

Vladimir P. Cheremnikh was born in 1924. He was a soldier in the Russian Army from 1942 and took part in the Soviet invasion of Prague in May 1945. He was an officer in the Leningrad Military District up until 1966. He was on duty at the time of the U-2 plane being shot down in 1961 [*sic*]. He attended the General Staff Academy in Moscow from 1966 to 1967. He wrote his degree thesis on the Central Front (military planning). During his time at the Academy, he shared a room with three others who were later to become more famous: Dimitri Yazov, Valentin Varennikov and Sergei Akhromeyev. He was consequently well placed within the 'old boys' network' that developed in the 1980s. Between 1968 and 1972, Cheremnikh was stationed in the Far East Military District. After that, he was appointed to a senior post on the Central Front and stationed in East Germany from 1972 to 1976. At that time, he was one of the few Russian generals who spoke German. After this, he was appointed First Deputy Chief of the General Staff in the Leningrad Military District from 1976 to 1980 and later appointed 'military adviser' to the Afghan Army in early 1980. Later, when the Soviet chain of command collapsed in the summer of 1980, General Cheremnikh was given supreme command of all the forces in Afghanistan. His conflict with Defence Minister Ustinov forced him, however, to resign in 1982. At the same time, General Varennikov was appointed commander in Afghanistan. Cheremnikh then returned to his previous post as First Deputy Chief of the General Staff in the Leningrad Military Area, a position he retained until his retirement in 1986. Currently, several of his subordinates from the war in Afghanistan hold key posts in the Ministry of Defence, and these include Defence Minister Pavel Grachev and General Cheremnikh's two immediate subordinates, the present Deputy Defence Ministers,

General Boris Gromov and General Valery Mironov. He has a great deal of confidence in the latter. And, accordingly, it appears that Cheremnikh also has good contacts within the ‘old boys’ network’ of the 1990s. He did not want to emphasise the involvement of Yazov and Varennikov (as well as Akhromeyev’s suicide) in the ‘tragic’ attempted coup in 1991. According to Cheremnikh, the person behind the attempted coup was the head of the KGB, Kriuchkov, and I have also had this confirmed by another source. The military support for Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (about 70–85% within the strategic missile forces and separate special forces) was, which he emphasised, a statement from the military to President Yeltsin that Gaidar was unacceptable. According to General Cheremnikh, Zhirinovskiy will not take over power. He was more worried about people like Alexander Barkashov, the military leader of the fascist ‘Russian National Unity’ party.

At PRIO, General Cheremnikh held two seminars, one about Afghanistan and one about military planning in respect of Northwestern Europe.

Afghanistan

General Cheremnikh claims that he himself tried to warn Defence Minister Ustinov at an early stage, which is not unlikely as this critical opinion seems to have broadly applied within the General Staff. The General Staff was not informed in advance of the decision and, according to the archives, the decision seems to have been widely seen as idiocy (the Foreign Ministry and the General Staff), particularly taking into account the historical experiences of the British. As advisor to the Afghan Army, General Cheremnikh learned *Farsi* and studied the Koran and, from what I understand, he was relatively close to the Afghani military command, which was, in turn, in bitter conflict with the political leadership in Kabul. The most time-consuming activity was not, according to Cheremnikh himself, the war with the guerrilla forces (which took up 15% of his time) but the ‘war’ within the Afghan Communist Party – between Khalq and Parcham – which, in practice, entailed a conflict between the military and political leaders. This was, in turn,

reflected in a third ‘front’ between, on the one side, the Soviet Army (which had a close relationship with the Afghan Army) and, on the other side, the KGB/The Party (which had its ties with the Parcham faction within the Afghan Communist Party). In order to deal with these problems, he developed a private intelligence service alongside the KGB and the GRU so as to guarantee reliable information. The conflict with Ustinov ultimately led to him being replaced and reinstated in his previous position.

Military planning for Scandinavia

The position as First Deputy Chief of the General Staff involved, as I understand it, responsibility for war planning. His position in the Leningrad Military District provided him with special knowledge of the Nordic region. He is very familiar with Scandinavian geography and was fascinated to see some of these areas in real life. He had never been outside the Eastern Bloc before, except in Afghanistan, in Japan (once?) and in Boris Kleb [*sic*] near Kirkenes. I assume that, prior to his journey to Oslo, he made enquiries about what he was allowed to say and what would be of a more sensitive nature.

For Cheremnikh, it was obvious that Leningrad Military District would play a part in any advance into the Nordic region. He said, ‘we had a special agreement’ with Finland, which, if necessary, would allow for the introduction of military forces. He also took it for granted that this would not necessarily be met with great enthusiasm in Finland. Finland was to be taken in its entirety. The Norwegian armed forces were not seen as a threat, but American forces designated to be deployed in Norway concerned Russian planners. Their aspirations were to occupy Norway as far as and including Bodø. According to this version, there were no war plans for neutral Sweden, but, according to an earlier, similar discussion, Sweden was also included in this planning, as were Northern Norway and Finland. The only difference between both versions is actually Sweden. Let us return to this.

According to General Cheremnikh, there were four gateways to the Northwest. The forces in Leningrad would first take Helsinki, before taking Vasa. The forces in Petrozavodsk had the task of taking Oulu. The forces in Kandalaksa

would take Boden in Sweden, while the forces in the Murmansk area would take Northern Norway. It was necessary to take Northern Norway for two reasons: it would be an extended defence zone against advancing NATO forces (actually first against the US navy and air forces and, later, possibly against army forces) and also an extended base area for the Soviet Northern Fleet, as the base area on the Kola Peninsula was not sufficient, i.e., far too vulnerable. All these details correspond very well with previous discussions on this subject.

(Previously Sweden held the same key position as Finland and Northern Norway.) When asked why Sweden was to be taken and not Southern Norway the reply was that ‘this was not necessary’. The argument in favour of taking Sweden was primarily that Sweden had a special role for the American air force. As I understand it, Swedish air bases were to be used by American attack and fighter aircraft as preparation and support for the US strategic bombers. It was planned that the strategic bombers would pass over Sweden (perhaps partly over Finland) towards the Soviet Union’s ‘soft underbelly’ in the Baltic States. That is to say, first air-to-surface missiles would destroy radar systems and other air defence systems, primarily in the Baltic States. Then attack aircraft would go in and neutralise the remaining air defence systems (reserve systems, etc.). Knowing the range of attack aircraft flying low and the use of afterburning, it would appear that using Swedish air bases would be a prerequisite (my observation). Finally, bombers, supported, as I understand it, by fighter aircraft, would go in over the Baltic States towards Leningrad and Moscow. The same applies to fighter aircraft as for attack aircraft, i.e., attack, fighter and bomber aircraft must be regarded as one system (my observation). As I understand it, these were the key arguments for Moscow’s war plans and interest in Sweden.

In addition, General Cheremnikh mentioned the 3rd American Airborne Division stationed in Great Britain, which was to fly in over Sweden and land in the Leningrad area. At the presentation at PRIO, he denied, however, that these arguments were sufficient grounds for any occupation of Sweden and, instead, he talked – in the event of American attack aircraft coming from Sweden – of the possibility of bombing Swedish air bases, something that, as I understand it, is

easier said than done. It is possible to imagine the Soviet military command assuming the widespread use of nuclear weapons.