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# Russian Weapons a World Concern

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## **“Russian Weapons a World Concern”**

**Assistant Professor Erika Simpson**

Fears of instability in Russia were heightened again this week when Russian President Boris Yeltsin fired his government for the fourth time in 17 months. Such fears are not aided by Yeltsin’s ailing health, the falling ruble, the possibility of widespread food shortages and the threat of political extremism.

While this week’s focus is on important Russian elections next year and the poor economy, the possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands has also never been greater. As Russian General Aleksandr Lebed recently told U.S. President Clinton during the latter’s visit to Moscow, Russia today faces a greater threat than in 1917 on the eve of the Russian Revolution. Lebed warned, “Now we have huge stockpiles of poorly guarded nuclear weapons.”

Desperate conditions exist in nuclear cities and biological institutes across Russia. Weapons scientists and engineers are not being paid. The sale of nuclear weapons, materials, technology and the flight of nuclear scientists to other countries may increase. A sharp drop in weapons research spending has left thousands of scientists, engineers, and technicians in near poverty.

European governments should work with other like-minded members of the United Nations through the International Scientific and Technical Center (ISTC) in the former Soviet Union to provide Russian scientists with more long-term research grants and programs that promote alternative civilian employment. Perhaps an international registrar of scientists should be set-up through the UN to track the research activities of all scientists in the world. Similar to the UN arms registrar, co-operation would have to be voluntary in order to preserve academic freedom. Over time such a registrar could contribute to increased transparency, openness, and scientific security.

What more can be done to further enhance Russia’s nuclear stability? Much of the problem stems from Russia’s weakness, not its strength. The Russian Duma’s deputy chairperson of the committee on defense, Alexei G. Arbatov, asserted recently, “Not

since 1941 has the Russian military stood as perilously close to ruin as it does now... If Russia's mammoth military-industrial establishment were to collapse—a distinct possibility in the new few years—the consequences would be not less devastating than were the events of June 1941 [the German invasion], and not only for Russia but for the entire world.”

High-level American officials who recently visited some Russian nuclear sites have also expressed strong concerns about the safety of Russia's nuclear arsenal. Adding to fears is the prospect that Russia has little time and comparatively few resources to deal with potential Y2K computer problems that might affect missile operations.

One option might be for North America and Europe to contribute thousands more computer experts, along with substantial travel and research funds, to a large-scale initiative that would deploy knowledgeable computer personnel to Russia to work on the military's computer equipment. North American and European leaders could also press Russia to continue to centralize control of its nuclear arsenal and consolidate nuclear weapons on Russian soil. More technological and monetary assistance for Russia is also necessary. The U.S. has already spent \$1.6 billion to improve the safe storage of Russia's nuclear materials, provide assistance in transporting and dismantling nuclear weapons and create new research opportunities for Russia's nuclear weapons specialists. But much more money and expertise are needed in order to avoid a nuclear tragedy from occurring.

The rich nations on the UN Security Council, such as Canada, the Netherlands, and Britain, should contribute more money to programs that will plug leaks at Russian nuclear facilities. The non-nuclear players, like Canada, Germany and Norway, could also serve as neutral third parties who are genuinely interested in reducing information leaks and the disappearance of nuclear materials from Russian nuclear storage and launching sites.

To save itself, the world must not judge Russia. The countries of the world must restore relations with Russia to ensure the lives of their own citizens.

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