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# Not in fighting trim

It was, a source in the U.S. naval intelligence told me, "el bango grande." On May 13, a series of enormous explosions began to rip through the central missile storage centre at Severomorsk. Located 900 miles northwest of Moscow on the Barents Sea, Severomorsk is the principal base for Russia's mighty Red Banner Northern Fleet.

For five days, explosions, fires and secondary detonations swept across the Russian naval base. The conflagration was so great that at first NATO observers, through the medium of spy satellites, believed the explosions to be nuclear. When the smoke began to clear after the fifth day, the extent of the damage became evident.

Three key areas of Severomorsk had been demolished: The storage and assembly facility for the Northern Fleet's anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles; the explosive and warhead storage area; and the main naval ammunition storage depot. At least 200 Russians died and another 200 were wounded.

Fortunately for the Russians, their storage depots holding sea-launched nuclear ballistic missiles and mines did not explode. But almost 70% of the Northern Fleet's tactical missiles were destroyed. To replace the approximately 1,000 missiles lost will cost the Russians at least \$400 million. Some of the production lines for older missiles, such as the SA-N-3, have been closed. This will mean replacing entire systems on board ship.

NATO experts now say that the Northern Fleet will be unable to sustain combat operations for at least six months unless the Soviets strip their Baltic and Black Sea Fleets of missiles and transfer them northward. Whatever the case, no one should envy Admiral Mikhaylovski, commander of the Northern Fleet, who may soon be chopping logs in Siberia.

How did this catastrophe occur? The probable answer is sheer sloppiness. Russia has always been noted for its cheerful disorganization, messiness and lack of attention to details. Anyone who has been to the USSR knows that its genial people are not noted for orderliness or even hygiene.

One possible cause of the explosion could have been the well-known habit of Soviet sailors to use gasoline to clean equipment. They are issued alcohol-based cleaners, but most prefer to drink them, considering gasoline perfectly adequate for mundane equipment. Gasoline has the unfortunate tendency to explode. Put too many missile storage depots too close together, clean with gas, using tipsy, sullen sailors and you are on the way to a very big bang.

Before we laugh too hard at the unfortunate Muscovites, we should recall a report put out two weeks ago by the U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee. It made very disturbing reading and may help improve the mood of the crestfallen commissars in Moscow.

The U.S. armed forces, according to the report, were in no shape to fight a war: They could not sustain combat for more than two weeks against

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the Soviets and might even be humiliated by some lesser powers like North Korea or Cuba.

The Committee is dominated by Democrats; the report was clearly designed to embarrass President Reagan in an election year. The Democrats were saying that it was the Republicans' fault that the nation was unprepared.

The facts in the study were not disputed. The U.S. lacks adequate stocks of ammunition, missiles, spare parts, fuel and lubricants to fight for more than 14 days — particularly if war erupts in two separate areas of the world.

Field hospital facilities are so lacking that only 20% of casualties in a war could be treated. Secure communications systems are in perilously short supply: It is estimated that 35% of all tactical communications in wartime would be immediately jammed and another 30% quickly destroyed.

U.S. war stocks should amount to 180 days: The time it would take American industry to gear up to full-scale military production. To reach 180 days in ammunition and missiles will cost \$90 billion.

In reality, U.S. war stocks are dangerously low because Congress has never allocated enough money to build them; the military has also neglected logistics in favor of higher salaries and flashy weapons systems. New planes, for example, look impressive and buy votes if they are made in your district. Boxes of ammunition lack glamor.

The Democrats are blaming it all on Reagan. They are evidently suffering from a convenient attack of election year amnesia. The massive shortages in U.S. war stocks are the direct result of severe spending cuts made by the Democratic-controlled Congress after the Vietnam War. The present administration has made some progress in correcting this situation; but a decade of neglect cannot be rectified in four years.

U.S. military forces are today overextended. They are being asked to perform too many different roles across the globe. As demands for new assignments increase, military budgets are not growing sufficiently to finance expanding operations.

The Soviets are supposed to have 60 days of war stocks. With only 14 days' worth, the U.S. is going to be in big trouble if a conventional war ever occurs. The American military are tidier than the Russians; they do not allow missile depots to blow up. But, no matter what you think of the untidy Soviets, at least they had enough missiles in stock to make the big bang last May.

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