



Policy Update

S e p t e m b e r 2 0 0 3

A REVIEW OF THE SUITCASE NUCLEAR BOMB CONTROVERSY

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States and Russia have developed a deep cooperation designed to assure the security of Russia's nuclear arsenal. While a number of steps have been taken to consolidate and improve the security of Russia's strategic nuclear arms, particularly under the U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR or Nunn-Lugar), concern remains over the security of the Russian tactical nuclear weapons arsenal. In particular, a serious debate has arisen over the status of what are known as "suitcase nuclear weapons," very small Soviet-era nuclear devices. This debate is all the more relevant when one considers the potential destruction that could occur should such a device fall into the hands of an organization like al-Qaeda.

The term suitcase nuke is generally used to describe any type of small, man-portable nuclear device although there is serious debate as to the validity of the term itself. (See *Box 1: Will a Suitcase Nuke Fit in a*

Suitcase? for more on the history and mechanics of these devices). In a worst case analysis, a suitcase nuke would be small enough to be hand-carried into a major population or leadership center (downtown Manhattan or Capitol Hill, for example) undetected and then detonated. Although, by most accounts, the yield of such a device is likely far less than ten kilotons, its combined effects may have the potential to kill tens of thousands, if not more.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of confusion over just how many of these suitcase devices exist or if they even exist at all. By some accounts, the Soviet Union built hundreds of these devices, of which several dozen are missing. Based on other reports, suitcase nukes were never built in large numbers or were never deployed. There is no definitive open source information on the number, location, security, or status of these suitcase nuclear bombs. Barring full disclosure from official government sources, one can only look back on the statements made up to this

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point and attempt to understand the range of possible truths about suitcase nukes. In any event, the uncertainty of the situation should remain a source of concern, particularly in light of the interest of terrorist networks in weapons of mass destruction.

When considering open source information, it must be noted that unofficial Russian

reporting is often inaccurate or misleading. Additionally, there is a large amount of confusion regarding the terminology of nuclear weapons. Terms such as “atomic demolition mine” and “atomic mine,” for instance, are frequently used to describe miniature nuclear devices but it is likely that these terms are interchangeable descriptions of the same types of weapon.

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MISSING RUSSIAN SUITCASE NUKES: THE START OF THE CONTROVERSY

In mid-1995, several Russian media reports claimed Chechen rebels had obtained “a number” of man-portable nuclear devices.¹ Questions regarding the credibility of the reports undermined the validity of the claim and the issue seemed to disappear for the time being.

In January 1996, the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies received information from a “senior advisor to Boris Yeltsin” that “in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the KGB (the Committee for State

Security, responsible for both internal and external security operations²) acquired an unspecified number of small nuclear weapons (under 75 pounds) that were never included in any inventory.”³

That September, Yeltsin’s National Security Advisor, General Alexander Lebed, former commander of Russian forces in Moldova and a candidate in the previous June’s Russian presidential elections, ordered the formation of a commission to review the security of Russia’s nuclear arsenal. On October 17, reportedly due to Lebed’s inability to work with other members of the government, Yeltsin fired him in a nationally televised address. Lebed’s dismissal occurred before the completion of the nuclear commission’s report, although he is thought to have had access to its preliminary findings.⁴

¹ The most thorough account was a series of articles published in the extremist newspaper *Zavtra*. Although the initial October 1995 article claimed that two suitcase bombs had been obtained, *Zavtra* later recanted its story, claiming it had been fed to them in an attempt to increase the political leverage of Chechen leaders. For more on this, see: Scott Parrish, “Are Suitcase Nukes on the Loose?” *CNS Reports*, November 1997, <www.cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/lebedlg.htm>.

² After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the KGB’s duties were divided among four primary agencies: the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service), the FSB (Federal Security Service), the FAPSI (Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information), and the FSO (Federal Protective Service).

³ William Potter, “The Peacemaker’ Is A Warning To All,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1997.

⁴ Carey Sublette, “Osama, Suitcase Bombs, and Ex-Soviet Loose Nukes,” October 2001, <www.fas.org/nuke/hew/News/Lebedbomb.html>.

BOX 1: Will a Suitcase Nuke Fit in a Suitcase?

The term “suitcase nuke” is both ambiguous and controversial. Nuclear weapons are traditionally thought of as large, heavy devices that are by no means man-portable. However, popular images of these suitcase devices often characterize them as briefcase-sized weapons that can be easily transported and operated by one person. There are questions as to the validity of this image.

The United States (and by all accounts the Soviets as well) developed nuclear artillery shells down to 152mm. In a 1997 interview, Lebed cited 155 and 152mm artillery shells as examples of nuclear warheads that could be smuggled in a suitcase. In fact, a mock-up of a briefcase-sized nuke has often been displayed. It places the physics package, neutron generators, batteries, arming mechanism and other essentials of an atomic weapon in an attaché case. However, one must consider that such shells weigh anywhere between 120 and 130 pounds. Even though the physics package and other components would weigh less than the complete shell, weight could still be prohibitive for placement in a briefcase or even suitcase. It has also been hypothesized that the “suitcase” may be the coding device necessary to detonate the larger, separate ADM or that it may contain the conventional explosives or plutonium charges of a larger mine. Some Russian officials have mentioned that the plutonium charges are stored separately from the larger devices, which may account for the “suitcase” moniker.

The more likely source of smaller nuclear devices is those charges used in Atomic Demolition Munitions (ADMs). Throughout the 1960’s the United States developed and tested a series of small, portable nuclear devices (also referred to as atomic mines or atomic landmines) to be used for “engineering purposes” such as closing a mountain pass to prevent Soviet tanks from getting through to western Europe. The lightest of these devices was the Mk-54 (designed to be fired from the Davy Crockett recoilless rifle). The Mk-54 used a spherical implosion plutonium warhead and had a yield ranging from a mere 10 tons up to 1 kiloton. The physics package of the warhead weighed around 50 pounds. The U.S. did deploy a somewhat man-portable variant of this warhead, known as the Mk-54 SADM (Small Atomic Demolition Muniton). The Mk-54 SADM was 16” in diameter by 24” long and weighed nearly 150 pounds (the warhead weighed around 50 pounds. The extra weight came from the addition of safety and arming devices). A Department of Defense film, declassified in 1997, showed a SADM equipped Navy diver deploying from a helicopter. The production run for these weapons was between 1964 and 1966 with around 300 SADM’s and 400 Mk-54’s produced. In addition, from 1963 to 1986 the U.S. deployed a Medium Atomic Demolition Muniton (MADM) that had a yield of 1 to 15 kilotons and weighed 400 pounds. Both the SADM and MADM were withdrawn from U.S. service in the mid-1980s.

From an engineering standpoint, there is serious debate as to whether or not a nuclear device could be made to fit into a 24”x16”x8” space as described by Lebed. By some accounts the Mk-54 is the near minimum size possible for a spherical implosion device. Although the Mk-54 measures close to that, its weight is a prohibiting factor. It has been theorized that an artillery shell stripped of all but its warhead would fit in a larger trunk although weight may, once again, be a prohibiting factor. It is more realistic to describe these devices as more akin to a footlocker than a suitcase or a briefcase.

Sources

Scott Parrish, “Are Suitcase Nukes on the Loose?” *CNS Reports*, November 1997, <www.cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/lebedlg.htm>

Statement of the Honorable Curt Weldon, Chairman, Subcommittee on Research and Development, October 26, 1999.

Steven I. Schwartz, ed. *Atomic Audit*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998.

Federation of American Scientists, “Complete List Of All U.S. Nuclear Weapons”, available at <<http://www.nuketesting.enviroweb.org/hew/Usa/Weapons/Allbombs.htm>>

Pavel Felgenhauer, “Lebed Backpedals on Allegedly Missing ‘Suitcase’ Nuclear Devices,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 6–12, 1997.

In May 1997, Pennsylvania Congressman Curt Weldon led a delegation to Moscow that met with Lebed, who was then a private citizen. During the course of the discussions, Lebed brought up his concerns regarding the condition of Russia's nuclear arsenal, chief among them the fact that a number of "suitcase-sized" nuclear devices were unaccounted for. Weldon later described the exchange on the PBS program *Frontline*, which aired on February 23, 1999:

"He [Lebed] said one of his assignments was to account for 132 suitcase size nuclear weapons that the Soviet Union had manufactured during the sixties, the seventies and the eighties...He said he could only find 48. We were startled. We said 'General, what do you mean you can only find 48?' He said, 'That's all we could locate, We don't know what the status of the other devices were, we just could not locate them.'"⁵

According to the Weldon account, the total number of suitcase sized devices in the Russian inventory was 132; however, a State Department cable recounting the same meeting cited 100 as the total. The same cable supports Weldon's account of 84 as the number of missing devices.⁶

On September 7, 1997, *60 Minutes* aired an interview with Lebed in which he claimed: "...more than a hundred (of these suitcase nuclear devices) out of the supposed number of 250 are not under the control of the armed forces of Russia. I don't know their location. I don't know whether they have been destroyed or whether they are stored or whether they've been sold or stolen. I don't know." Lebed speculated that these devices had been built for the GRU (Soviet military intelligence) for use behind enemy lines in the event of war and that several may have been left in former Soviet

⁵ "Comments on Russia's Atomic Suitcase Bombs," *Frontline*, February 23, 1999, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/russia/suitcase/comments.html>>.

⁶ R. Jeffrey Smith and David Hoffman, "No Support Found for Report of Lost Russian Suitcase-Sized Nuclear Weapons," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 1997.



republics as the GRU left their bases following the Soviet collapse.⁷

Reaction to Lebed's comments, from both U.S. and Russian officials, was quick. On September 5, based on a pre-release of the interview transcript, a State Department spokesman expressed a lack of confidence in Lebed's claims: "The government of Russia has assured us that it retains adequate command and control of its nuclear arsenal and that appropriate physical security measures exist for these weapons and facilities. We have been assured by the Russian authorities that there is no cause for concern. We believe the assurances we have received."⁸ The official Russian response was even stronger. On September 5, also in response to the pre-release transcript, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin called Lebed's allegations "absurd." The official government newspaper, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, called Lebed's allegations "superfantasies," describing them as the product of a "diseased imagination." Yeltsin's Press Secretary, Sergey Yastrzhembskiy, attributed the comments to Lebed's political aspirations, stating, "Lebed is looking for pretexts to remind people of his existence."⁹

Russian officials had not, up to this point, commented on whether or not such devices had ever been built. However, on September 10, 1997 a Ministry of Atomic Energy (MINATOM) spokesman stated "We don't know what General Lebed is talking about. No such weapons exist." That same day, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, quoting a high-ranking but anonymous GRU official, reaffirmed the Ministry of Atomic Energy's claim. This official stated that the Soviets never produced "any 60x40x20cm briefcases containing nuclear charges" and even went so far as to assert that, although GRU forces are trained at sabotage, they "never use nuclear munitions."¹⁰

On September 13, Vladimir Denisov, one of Lebed's former deputies on the security council and head of the investigative commission set up by Lebed in September 1996 to investigate missing nuclear weapons, made several statements which both supported

and contradicted prior government statements. Denisov's commission, which included the various Russian security services and the Ministry of Atomic Energy, had reached the conclusion that no Russian military units had any ADMs in their arsenals. Denisov went on to say that any such devices were housed in "appropriate" storage facilities (a statement

Examining past claims and allegations may be the only way to understand the possible truths about the status of Russia's suitcase nuclear weapons.

that implies the existence of such devices, contrary to statements made by the GRU and MINATOM).¹¹

To further complicate matters, on September 22, 1997 the Moscow paper *Novaya Gazeta* published a letter written by Aleksei Yablokov, Yeltsin's former environmental and health advisor and former head of the environmental security subcommittee on the Russian Security Council. In it, Yablokov made the striking claim that he had personally met with the scientists who designed the suitcase devices and that the intended user was not the GRU or even the Ministry of Defense but the KGB.¹²

On September 25, 1997 Lieutenant General Igor Valynkin, head of the Defense Ministry's Twelfth Main Directorate, the organization responsible for the security of Russian nuclear weapons, briefed journalists on the state of the Russian nuclear arsenal. During this briefing, Valynkin stated that in the early 1990s, all tactical nuclear weapons were removed from the stockpiles of individual military units and placed under the control of the Twelfth Main Directorate. Additionally, Valynkin

⁷ Parrish, p. 1.

⁸ "U.S. Department of State Daily Press Briefing, September 5, 1997," available from the Federation of American Scientists web page at <www.fas.org/news/Russia/1997/970905db.html>.

⁹ Parrish, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David Hoffman, "Suitcase Nuclear Weapons Safely Kept, Russian Says," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 1997.

¹² Parrish, p. 4.

TABLE 1: The Suitcase Nukes Controversy Timeline

April 1995	Russian media reports claim Chechen rebels have “a number” of small nuclear devices (Atomic Demolition Munitions or ADMs)
January 1996	Monterey Institute of International Studies reports that the KGB had a number of small nuclear devices in the 1970s and 1980s.
Sept. 1996	Lebed forms commission to review security if Russia’s nuclear arsenal.
Oct. 17, 1996	Yeltsin fires Lebed.
May 1997	Lebed tells U.S. congressional delegation that 84 of 132 “suitcase sized” bombs are missing.
Sept. 7, 1997	<i>60 Minutes</i> airs Lebed interview in which he claims that more than 100 suitcase nukes are missing out of a total of 250. Russian PM calls allegations “absurd.” Yeltsin’s press secretary attributes comments to Lebed’s political aspirations.
Sept. 10, 1997	MINATOM: “No such weapons exist.” GRU: suitcase nukes were never produced.
Sept. 13, 1997	Head of Investigative Commission: No Russian units have ADMs; any such devices are appropriately stored.
Sept. 22, 1997	Alexei Yablokov, Yeltsin’s former environmental and health advisor, claims, in letter to <i>Novaya Gazeta</i> , to have met the designers of the suitcase nukes and that they were built for the KGB.
Sept. 25, 1997	Lt. Gen. Igor Valynkin, in charge of protecting Russia’s nuclear weapons, claims ADMs are too expensive to build and maintain; impossible for KGB to have its own nuclear devices. Former Head of the KGB: “KGB had no use for nuclear weapons.” Russian National Security Advisor: “No record of such devices.”
Sept. 27, 1997	MINATOM: suitcase nukes “never existed, and do not exist.” Federal Security Service: no information on KGB possessing such devices.
Dec. 1997	Russian Defense Minister tells Rep. Weldon: “Yes we did build them...they will be destroyed by 2000.”
Aug. 4, 1998	Former GRU Col. Lunev claims that man-portable nuclear devices were built for Soviet special operations forces and that they may have been hidden in the U.S.
Oct. 3, 1998	Yablokov, in U.S. Congressional testimony, claims KGB was primary user for “terroristic” purposes but may no longer be in existence. Lebed, on NBC, claims there may be as many as 500 devices or as few as 100.
August 1999	Terrorism analyst Yossef Bodansky claims bin Laden has “several” suitcase nuclear devices.
Nov. 5, 2001	Lunev claims that bin Laden has obtained several suitcase devices.
Jan. 17, 2002	Russian Atomic Energy Minister: “all of these [miniature nuclear devices] are registered...it is technically impossible for them to find their way into the hands of terrorists.”

claimed that, while technologically feasible, the cost of a suitcase-sized nuclear device would make it impractical (due to the fact that its fissionable material would need to be replaced every three months in order for it to remain functional). Valynkin admitted that Russia had built a series of smaller nuclear artillery shells and land mines but that they were in the process of being destroyed. According to Valynkin, these mines and shells were of such a substantial size and weight that it was unlikely they could easily be stolen. When asked about the possibility of special devices being made solely for the KGB, Valynkin countered that all nuclear weapons produced in the USSR and Russia were delivered to the Twelfth Main Directorate directly from the production lines and it would have been impossible for the KGB to have their own manufacturing facilities.¹³

Following the September 25 press conference, a number of current and former government officials came forward with their own statements refuting Lebed’s claims. Vladimir Kryuchkov, former head of the KGB, stated that the KGB never had any need for nuclear weapons. Lieutenant-General Vyacheslav Romanov, head of the Russian General Staff’s National Center for the Reduction of Nuclear Danger, called the existence of such small nuclear weapons a “myth...the minimum weight of a device would be about 200 kg (441 lbs),” and called the claim that one person could carry such a device “absurd.” Lebed’s successor, Ivan Rybkin, stated that there were no documents related to atomic demolition mines in the Security Council’s records and that the staff had no knowledge of such devices having been deployed by Soviet Special Forces.¹⁴

On September 27, 1997, the Minister of Atomic Energy, Viktor Mikhailov, told Russian Public Television that such weapons “never existed, and do not exist.” One of the KGB’s successor agencies, the Federal Security Service (FSB), added that they had “no information about the USSR KGB possessing nuclear ammunition of this kind — that is, super-small charges in the form of nuclear cases.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.¹⁴ Ibid.¹⁵ Ibid.

On October 2, Yablokov was called to testify before the Research and Development Subcommittee of the House of Representatives National Security Committee, chaired by Representative Weldon. In his testimony, Yablokov reasserted his claim that the KGB was the primary “user” of suitcase nuclear devices for what he termed “terroristic” purposes. Since the KGB was the responsible party, Yablokov argued, none of these weapons ever appeared on official Soviet lists of nuclear weapons or stockpiles.

Yablokov never claimed to know how many of these weapons were developed (only stating that some number had been built) or what their status was. His statements, instead, seemed designed to counter MINATOM and Defense Ministry claims that such weapons never existed. However, during his testimony, Yablokov theorized that the suitcase devices built for the KGB may no longer be in existence due to the fact that their fissile material would had to have been replaced several times in order for them to remain functional; replacements which Yablokov doubted had occurred.¹⁶

That same week, Lebed again appeared on American television. This time, his statements were far less specific. In regards to the total number of suitcase devices built, Lebed stated: “As for their number, I can’t say. When I was asked about the number I said I didn’t know—maybe 100, maybe 500. Then speculations started. And they began saying ‘Lebed said there used to be 100.’” Lebed countered Russian claims that such devices were technologically impossible by citing the existence of small 155 and 152mm nuclear artillery shells as proof that small nuclear bombs are possible.¹⁷

On October 7, Russian military analyst Pavel Felgengauer told *Segodnya* that even the smallest nuclear artillery shell was too heavy for an individual to carry. Felgengauer cited the American W-48 artillery shell as proof that a man-portable nuclear weapon was impossible. A report published by the Monterey Institute in November 1997 disputed Felgengauer’s claim, stating “(his) arguments are based on inaccurate information... the W-48 warhead

weighs 128 pounds (as opposed to Felgengauer’s claim of 220 lbs), still heavy for a suitcase, but not as impossible for one person to carry.”¹⁸

On August 4, 1998 Col. Stanislav Lunev, a former officer in the GRU, testified before Weldon’s Research and Development Subcommittee. During his testimony, Lunev, who defected to the United States in 1992, described what he called “portable tactical nuclear devices specifically designed for Soviet special operation forces.” Lunev described these devices as looking more like a cooler than a briefcase and claimed that his job was to find pre-positioning points within the United States for placement of these weapons. The purpose, he said, was to allow Soviet special forces to “cut the head from the American military chain of command” should hostilities break out. When asked about the location of these devices Lunev responded, “It is possible that these devices are here, because they are not inside Russia.” Lunev went on to address the issue of warhead security, stating that the GRU forces who knew how to use such devices “are isolated... They are supplied very well. They do not have shortage in salaries... I hope...they would not need to sell something, let’s say for terrorists or for criminals from this very special devices.”¹⁹

In the 1999 book *The Sword and the Shield*, former KGB officer Vasili Mitrokhin describes the placing of caches of conventional arms and other equipment for use by Soviet special forces units: “...still scattered around north America, most of western and central Europe, Israel, Turkey, Japan and some other parts of the world, are the caches of KGB arms and radio equipment intended for use by the DRGs (sabotage and intelligence groups).”²⁰ Clearly there is precedence for the pre-positioning of weapons however Lunev’s claim that these caches included nuclear weapons has never been substantiated.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pavel Felgengauer, “Lebed Backpedals on Allegedly Missing ‘Suitcase’ Nuclear Devices,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 6–12, 1997.

¹⁸ Ibid; see also Parrish, pp. 10–11.

¹⁹ Transcript of the House of Representatives, Committee on National Security, Military Research and Development Subcommittee meeting, August 4, 1998, available at <commdocs.house.gov/committees/security/has216010.000/has216010_of.htm>.

²⁰ Andrew, Christopher and Mitrokhin, Vasili. *The Sword and the Shield*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. pp. 359, 365.



THE *FRONTLINE* BROADCAST



On February 23, 1999, the PBS investigative program *Frontline* aired a special on Russian nuclear security which included a series of interviews with several of the individuals who spoke publicly during the 1997 debate on suitcase nukes.²¹ Alexei Yablokov appeared and reasserted his position that some number of small atomic charges had been built, even going so far as to speak of their weight (“thirty kilos, forty kilos”). Yablokov accused the Russian government of misleading the public on the situation, pointing to the inconsistencies in denials by the FSB, MINATOM, and the information that was publicly available on the Internet (“...if I’m looking at a [picture] of an American weapon, I must be sure that we have an analogy...”).

On the same program, Representative Weldon, in a further twist, recounted a meeting he held in December 1997 with Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev. During this meeting, Weldon asked Sergeyev specifically about the small ADM devices. According to Weldon, Sergeyev’s response was: “Yes, we did build them, we are in the process of destroying them, and by the year 2000 we will have destroyed all of our small atomic demolition devices.” Weldon went on to express confidence in Sergeyev’s statement but also raised concern as to whether or not the Russian government had accounted for all of its nuclear devices.

Frontline also featured several American and Russian experts and officials who presented differing views on the subject. General Vladimir Dvorkin, a former officer in the Strategic Rocket Forces and subsequently Director of the Fourth Central Research Institute in Moscow, admitted that “some small devices existed in the United States and Russia” but that something that small would have a very limited shelf life and would have little deterrent value. Dvorkin discounted the validity of Lebed’s statements, saying “...Lebed is probably the least informed person as far as this topic is concerned...an expert in military folklore.”

The former commander of U.S. nuclear forces, retired General Eugene Habiger, also appeared on *Frontline* and expressed doubt about the size of such devices, calling the term suitcase “a little optimistic.” Additionally, Habiger spoke of the systems set up by the Russians to track their nuclear weapons, saying “If the Russians were as deadly serious about the accountability of the nuclear weapons that I saw and have been involved with, I can only surmise that they have the same concerns with the smaller weapons.”

It is entirely possible that a majority of Russia’s miniature nuclear devices have simply aged beyond the point of functionality.

SUITCASE NUKES AND BIN LADEN

By late 1999, the concern had expanded from nuclear armed Chechen rebels to include concerns about Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. Although unsubstantiated, some reports suggested that Bin Laden had already managed to acquire weapons from the Russian nuclear arsenal.

In August 1999, Voice of America broadcast a story about the threat posed by Bin Laden. In it, Yossef Bodansky, an American terrorism analyst, author, and head of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Non-Conventional Warfare claimed that he had learned, through sources in Russia and the Middle East, that Bin Laden had "a few of the ex-Soviet 'suitcase' bombs acquired through the Chechens."²²

Two months later, on October 5, the Moscow daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published an interview in which Bodansky, citing "various intelligence sources," claimed that Bin Laden had acquired, through Kazakhstan, "from

several to twenty tactical nuclear warheads." Bodansky also claimed that Bin Laden had attempted to buy "nuclear suitcases" in Kazakhstan. In the same article, the director of the Atomic Energy Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan declared that all nuclear weapons had been removed "long ago" from Kazakhstan and that suitcase nuclear devices were never built in Kazakh territory. The head of counterintelligence for the Kazakhstani Committee on National Security told *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that all nuclear weapons were removed from Kazakhstan in 1995 in accordance with the START I treaty and denied reports that Bin Laden had attempted to purchase nuclear weapons there.²³

Bodansky's claims surfaced again on October 25, 1999 when the magazine *The Jerusalem Report* published an article on Bin Laden and suitcase nuclear devices. In this report, Bodansky's claim of "a few to twenty" weapons was repeated. In addition, Bodansky claimed that Bin Laden had purchased the weapons using "\$30 million in cash and two tons of Afghan heroin."²⁴ Very little information is available to back Bodansky's claims and they remain in doubt.

²¹ *Frontline*, February 23, 1999. Interviews available at <www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/russia/>.

²² Nick Simeone, "Bin Laden Bombing Anniversary," Voice of America, August 6, 1999.

²³ "Youssef Bodansky: Terrorist No. 1 Has an Atomic Bomb," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, October 5, 1999.

²⁴ "Bin Laden Has Several Nuclear Suitcases," *The Jerusalem Report*, October 25, 1999

SUITCASE NUKE CONCERNS POST 9/11

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, fresh attention was focused on al-Qaeda's desire for weapons of mass destruction but with more urgency than in the past. A serious concern was that al-Qaeda terrorists might attempt to obtain Russian warheads or weapon-usable nuclear materials.

Former GRU Colonel Stanislav Lunev's 1998 statements were resurrected following the attacks. During an appearance on CBS,



Lunev reasserted his claim that suitcase bombs existed, even going so far as to claim that Bin Laden had obtained several of the devices from the former Soviet Union. In the same segment, Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution discounted Lunev’s claims: “Our view is that this is not a major worry. If those devices ever existed, they were under the control of the Soviet state, and not available to terrorists.”²⁵

On December 20, 2001 UPI reported that the FBI had stepped up its investigation into terrorist access to Russian nuclear stockpiles. Representative Weldon, once again at the forefront of the debate, stated “Do I think he (Bin Laden) has a small atomic demolition munitions, which were built by the Soviets in the Cold War? Probably doubtful.”²⁶

On January 17, 2002, Russia’s Atomic Energy Minister, Aleksandr Rumyantsev, told Interfax it would be impossible for terrorists to construct a portable nuclear weapon, citing a lack of “necessary potential and materials.” The Interfax report went on to state “major nuclear powers have an effective system of control over miniature nuclear charges, which weigh a total of several dozen kilograms.” According to Rumyantsev “all of these [miniature nuclear devices] are registered... it is technically impossible for such charges to find their way into the hands of terrorists.”²⁷

²⁵ “Nuclear Terror?” CBSNews.com, November 5, 2001

²⁶ Nicholas Horrock, “FBI Focusing On Portable Nuke Threat,” UPI, December 20, 2001

²⁷ “Russian Minister Says Miniature Nuclear Charges Out Of Reach Of Terrorists,” *Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey*, January 17, 2002.

There is no definitive open source information on the number, location, security, or status of these suitcase nuclear bombs.



CONCLUSIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

It is difficult to draw any solid conclusions from the statements made over the last seven years. The man who started the suitcase nuke controversy, Alexander Lebed, was elected governor of the Krasnoyarsk Region of Siberia in May 1998 and died in a helicopter crash in April 2002. Clearly there are Russians (and non-Russians, for that matter) on both sides of the debate as to whether or not these weapons exist and have all been accounted for. The problem is the tremendous variation in statements from both camps. The Russian government (through both official and unofficial channels) initially denied the very existence of suitcase nuclear devices but later officials admitted that such devices had been built and were in the process of being destroyed. The alleged number of suitcase nuclear devices in existence has varied greatly. Some scientists and generals have claimed that suitcase nukes are impossible to build or field while others have claimed they do indeed exist or have at least confirmed it indirectly.

Russian claims that such devices were never built or are technically infeasible are, in all likelihood, false. The Soviets are known to have copied American military technology, including nuclear weapons technology, and it is a reasonable assumption that American ADMs were copied as well. Further, the Soviet nuclear weapons program was extremely advanced and small nuclear devices were almost certainly within the range of Russia's technical capabilities. In Rensselaer Lee's 1998 book *Smuggling Armageddon*, the head of the Russian Academy of Sciences Working Group on Dual-Use Technology, Veleriy N. Spektor, discounts Lebed's claims and goes on to suggest that such weapons were indeed developed and tested but never assembled or deployed.²⁸

Which organizations within the Soviet Union controlled the ADMs has also been a source of debate. While it is likely that both the GRU and the KGB were designated as users

of these devices (due to their roles in sabotage operations) it seems unlikely that, given the high level of control exerted by the 12th Main Directorate, either the KGB or the GRU had physical or custodial control of Soviet miniature nuclear devices. Based on this, it seems highly unlikely that any ADMs were pre-positioned in the United States.

The most logical reason for the discrepancies in the total number of suitcase nukes is a simple accounting error. While the Russians are known for exercising tight control of their existing nuclear arsenal, mix-ups can occur. In addition, the "shelf-life" of small nuclear weapons may play a role in determining how many of these devices are still in existence. Both the fissile material and the weapon's other components must be replaced periodically. As Valynkin stated, it is entirely possible that a majority of Russia's miniature nuclear devices have simply aged beyond the point of functionality.²⁹

If these weapons still exist, they may be classified as part of Russia's unverified tactical nuclear arsenal. This arsenal does not fall under any existing arms control treaty and the Russian government has never divulged the number of its tactical nuclear weapons and devices. Until further transparency on the state of the Russian tactical nuclear arsenal is achieved, examining past claims and allegations may be the only way to understand the possible truths about the status of Russia's suitcase nuclear weapons.



²⁸ Rensselaer W. Lee III, *Smuggling Armageddon: The Nuclear Black Market in the Former Soviet Union and Europe*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, p. 126

²⁹ It is believed that Russian plutonium deteriorates at a rate that requires replacement approximately every ten years. If this is the case, any suitcase device whose plutonium pit has not been replaced would likely be unusable, at least as a fission weapon.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN AMERICAN NUCLEAR SECURITY ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Russian American Nuclear Security Advisory Council (RANSAC) is an independent, non-governmental research organization dedicated to increasing the security of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and reducing proliferation risks. RANSAC's priority is supporting the cooperative threat reduction agenda between the U.S., Russia, and the other former Soviet states and promoting its expansion to address global proliferation dangers. Founded in 1997, RANSAC's key issues are: ensuring the security of WMD materials, warheads, and technologies; downsizing the Russian WMD complex and transitioning excess scientists and workers to peaceful careers; limiting the production and use of fissile material; and disposing of excess weapons and materials.

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Observations on the President's Fiscal Year 2004 Budget Request for Nonproliferation Programs in Russia and the Former Soviet Union, February 2003.

Reshaping U.S.-Russian Threat Reduction: New Approaches for the Second Decade. November 2002 (Published with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

Policy Update: U.S.-Russian Reduced Enrichment for Research and Test Reactors (RERTR) Cooperation. Summer 2002.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS:

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| <p>p.4 American M-388 Davy Crockett recoilless rifle with Mk. 54 warhead attached. Credit: National Archives.</p> | <p>p.8 Jeep-mounted Davy Crockett with Mk 54 warhead. Credit: U.S. Army.</p> | <p>p.10 Mock-up of a nuclear device in an attaché case. Credit: Charles Werner</p> |
| <p>p.7 Carrying case for the American Mk 54 Small Atomic Demolition Munition (SADM). Credit: Department of Defense courtesy Natural Resources Defense Council</p> | <p>p.9 Disassembled Medium Atomic Demolition Munition. The warhead is the second object from the left. Credit: Department of Defense courtesy Natural Resources Defense Council.</p> | <p>p.11 Medium Atomic Demolition Munition. Credit: Department of Defense courtesy Natural Resources Defense Council.</p> |

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