

Yet Russia's generals are thirsty to avenge their earlier humiliation. One senior commander, Lt-General Gennady Troshin, said it would be a 'betrayal' if troops were ordered to stop outside the capital. 'We cannot stop halfway,' he said.

The prospect of a political compromise is unlikely. The Kremlin has said it will negotiate with Chechen authorities only if they accept Russian authority, disarm their militants and release numerous Russian hostages.

Despite his popularity, Putin's prospects were beginning to look doubtful yesterday. Horrified by the death toll from the explosion in Grozny, EU delegates in Helsinki were not convinced by the prime minister's explanation that the Chechens had blown up the market themselves.

And the Kremlin hinted that Yeltsin's support for his prime minister may be waning, when the presidential spokesman refused to confirm that Putin was still regarded as Yeltsin's heir.

Everything rests on the next step of the campaign. Nervously waiting for the next onslaught, Raisa Vakhidova, who was wounded in Thursday's attack, said: 'I wonder when this nightmare will end. I don't know what they are punishing us for.'

Celestine Bohlen writes for the New York Times

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Wary of Abuses, U.S. Sharply Cuts Visas for Russians

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

MOSCOW -- The United States Embassy in Moscow has sharply curtailed the number of visas issued to Russians, particularly students and scholars, despite Washington's avowed desire to spread Western values in Russia. About 40 percent of Russian students who sought to study in the United States using private funds were refused visas this year, about twice the rejection rate of previous years. Embassy officials suggested that students from impoverished Russia -- potentially part of the country's opinion-making elite -- will be tempted to try to settle permanently in the United States.

In some cases, the reason given for refusing a visa -- that the applicant appeared to have insufficient ties, like children, to Russia -- echoed the Soviet practice of allowing citizens to travel abroad only if their loved ones stayed behind to insure the relative's return.

The tightened visa policy followed the August 1998 economic collapse in Russia and is part of a broader and increasingly rancorous debate over the procedures for inviting foreign students to the United States. Applicants from South Korea and Thailand, which have also undergone economic crises, have reported increasing problems too in obtaining visas.

But the visa policy has special implications for Russia, where America wants to encourage democracy and influence public opinion. The Clinton Administration has defended its policy of engaging Russia, and recently announced a vigorous campaign against what it calls the "new isolationists" in Congress.

In Moscow, American Embassy officials deny that they have been overly strict. Laura Clerici, the consul general, asserted that consular officials needed to be particularly vigilant after the 1998 collapse.

"Many Russians think that bureaucracy is something to be gotten around," she said in an interview. "They give us all sorts of paper that is false."

But American educators and former diplomats say that the embassy has

overreacted and that many worthy candidates have been cast aside.

They note that the embassy's statistics do not show Russians hurrying to flee abroad after the ruble collapsed. Overall, visa applications have not increased since August 1998 -- although the number of rejections has -- and student applications have actually declined.

"The visa policy is at cross-purposes with U.S. foreign policy," said Greg Guroff, the former director of an American Government office that encourages educational and cultural exchanges. "The American policy had been to expand contacts. Now the consular policy appears to be to turn down young people, particularly on private education exchanges."

The visa policy has been a shock to many young Russians. Despite a general surge in anti-American sentiment -- most evident in the street protests outside the American Embassy during the Kosovo conflict -- young educated Russians are still drawn to the United States.

For Russian students, there are American Government-financed exchange programs that can last for a few weeks, or for years. In 1998, 6,000 visas were granted to Russians under such programs.

But Russians also attend American universities and colleges using "F" type visas, where the education is paid for by the student or other private sources or is supported by a scholarship.

In 1998, 83 percent of all "F" type visas were granted during the prime student application months of June through August. This year, the acceptance rate slipped to 62 percent.

Ruslan Shevdov, 27, had appeared to catch a lucky break when the small Moscow-based trading and agricultural company he joined after leaving the food service division of the Russian Army offered to send him to America at its expense to earn a degree in business administration and to perfect his English.

Accepted by Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y., Shevdov had hoped to begin his studies this fall. But his request for an "F" visa was rejected three times.

"They said I didn't fit the student profile," Shevdov said. "Maybe they think I am too old. I tried to assure them that I plan to return. My parents live here. This is the country where I grew up. I can call my friend here at any time and he will come. How would I live there?"

Embassy officials said they would not discuss individual cases. The six-member team that handles nonimmigrant visas at the Moscow consulate makes hundreds of similar decisions, often on the basis of a 5- or 10-minute interview.

They try to divine if a student or scholar has an unbreakable tie to the homeland that will spur return. Interviews often amount to hurried discussions of an applicant's marriage status, family life and assets.

The burden of proof that a Russian has no plans to emigrate, even legally, falls on the applicants. They may find it hard to argue that what appear to an American to be meager rewards are sufficient for a decent living in Russia. Shevdov, for instance, earns about \$900 a month, a respectable sum for a Muscovite.

Scholars have also had problems. Taras Ivchenko, a 34-year-old assistant professor at Moscow University, is a specialist in Chinese linguistics who graduated from Beijing University and wrote his doctorate in Chinese. Encouraged by several American professors, he was to visit the United States to help translate a Ming dynasty manuscript.

But in a 10-minute interview in May, Ivchenko was unable to secure a tourist visa. He earns \$150 a month and has no substantial property. His wife, father and sister live here -- but Ivchenko said the consular officer who

interviewed him suggested that his chances for a visa would be better if he had children to leave behind.

"It reminded me of Soviet times," the soft-spoken Ivchenko said. "I would like to work on a project or two in the United States, but I am not interested in emigrating there. I belong here."

American academics report increasing problems in obtaining visas for Russian students or faculty members. Some have campaigned successfully to secure visas; others have lost. The University of Maryland was recently left without a Russian instructor when the candidate it picked was denied a visa.

Maria Lekic, director of the university's graduate program in Russian language, said the faculty had gone through a careful selection process and had never had a Russian refuse to return home when a visa expired.

But the American Embassy concluded that the university salary for the Russian was too appealing compared to his modest pay at home.

"For years, the Soviets would not let people leave," she said. "Now when Russia is opening up, we are behaving like Soviets."

American Embassy officials insist that they need to be wary, and note that the black market price of forged visas has risen, giving credence to street talk of many Russians "jumping ship."

But they also concede that there has never been a comprehensive study on whether Russian students eventually return, or emigrate.

Almost half a million tuition-paying foreign students were enrolled in American institutions in the 1997-98 academic year. The tough American visa policies are driving Russian students to other countries, like Britain, which has loosened visa regulations to admit more foreign students.

Certainly, Britain won in the case of Maria Ushakova, 17, daughter of a leading Russian businessman who wants to become a psychoanalyst and take over her mother's practice. Her request for a visa to attend college in Pennsylvania was repeatedly rejected.

Her family says she was told there was no point in studying in the United States since Russia had no tradition of psychoanalysis and a foreign-trained specialist would never find work at home.

Her father then obtained a letter from a Russian clinic saying it would gladly hire his daughter once she finished her training.

Ms. Ushakova received a visa on her fourth try. By then, however, she had missed the start of the school year in the United States. Offended, her father said, by all the refusals and worried that she might not be able to renew an American visa to finish her education, she is now studying in London.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS / By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN
Playing Russian Roulette

The most important story out of Russia last week was buried in the business pages: Russia's top stock-market watchdog quit after declaring that Boris Yeltsin's government was simply not interested in enforcing laws to protect shareholders in Russia.

Imagine if you picked up the paper and found that Arthur Levitt, the chairman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, had quit, saying that the New York stock exchange and our commercial courts were so corrupt that you were