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Dmitri Ustinov: The Kremlin's Surprise Choice for Minister of Defense

The recent appointment of the new Soviet Minister of Defense, Dmitri F. Ustinov, to succeed one of the foremost Soviet military figures of the postwar period, the late Marshal Andrej A. Grechko,¹ came as almost a total surprise to those of us who watch important Soviet events. Although Ustinov held a titular military rank of colonel-general of the Artillery-Engineering Service,² he was a possible, but highly unlikely, choice to fill a slot traditionally held by career military officers. Rather, Kulikov, Chief of the Soviet General Staff and a General of the Army, or Yakubovskij, Commander-in-Chief of Warsaw Pact forces a Marshal of the Soviet Union, or other top military officers were believed to be more likely candidates to succeed Grechko.

But who is Ustinov? And why was he selected over military officers who were obviously more qualified? And what impact is his appointment as Minister of Defense expected to have on the Soviet political and military process?

A Background Sketch

Ustinov, who was 68 in November 1976, received a degree in mechanical engineering from the Leningrad Military-Mechanical Institute in 1934. From there, he held various positions in industry until 1937, when he became design engineer and later chief engineer in an armaments factory.

¹ Grechko, at age 72, died suddenly on 26 April 1976 of an apparent heart attack. Ustinov succeeded him as Minister of Defense on 29 April.

² Ustinov held military rank, although never being assigned to a military unit. This is not uncommon in the Soviet system. During World War II, while the USSR Peoples Commissar for Armaments, he was given the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and was promoted to colonel-general in 1944.

During World War II, Ustinov supervised tank production as Stalin's Commissar of Armaments. Since that time he has been totally involved in the defense sector, holding the posts of Minister of Defense Industry and Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers. In these capacities, he became deeply involved in missile research, and assumed administrative control of the entire missile-development program during the postwar years. He has received many awards—including a Hammer and Sickle gold medal in 1961—for his pioneer work in missile and space programs.

Elected to full Politburo membership at the 25th Party Congress in February 1976, he had been a candidate-member since 1965, and the Party secretary responsible for the entire defense-industry sector since 1957. And most significantly, he was, and is, one of the few members of the top military-political policy group, the Defense Council, along with Brezhnev, Podgornyj, and Kosygin (Grechko had also been a member). These responsibilities placed Ustinov in one of the most significant and influential positions within the entire Soviet military policy and decision-making process.

Although a politician, he limits his involvement in this area primarily to the defense industry, and has shown no inclination to build a larger political base. He is known as a tough technocrat rather than a politician.

Why Ustinov was Chosen

The Russian mind, being virtually impenetrable, permits one to only guess why the civilian Ustinov was selected in lieu of a career military officer. Some clues, however, are available.

One of the serious problems which the death of Grechko thrust upon the Kremlin leaders stemmed from the appointment of Grechko, along with Gromyko (Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Andropov (Chairman, KGB), to full Politburo membership during a Party

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plenum in 1973. This, apparently, was done to ensure that the key institutions of the Soviet foreign policy apparatus were fully represented in the top decision-making body of the Party. Grechko also had been considered to be a close and loyal confidant of Brezhnev, and it was speculated that his Politburo appointment was due, at least in part, to this faithful service to his political mentor. But Grechko's sudden death posed a dilemma: If a military officer, say Kulikov or Yakubovskij, were selected, what would happen to the Politburo seat held by Grechko? On the one hand, if the new Minister of Defense were not given Politburo status, the military would appear to be downgraded with respect to the Foreign Ministry and the KGB. On the other hand, if a Politburo seat were granted to a military officer of unproven loyalty, an unwise and perhaps dangerous precedent could be set.

The situation was further complicated by the military choices available. Kulikov, Chief of the General Staff, is a dynamic and aggressive military officer who tightly controls the Soviet military, and at age 54, he has a long and promising career ahead (the average age of full Politburo members is 65).³ Kulikov, then, could present a possible future threat to the other leaders if he could combine political with military power at such an early age. Yakubovskij, Commander-in-Chief of the Warsaw Pact forces, at age 64, would seem to be a far safer choice (and, indeed, a logical one, since in rank he was the senior military man, holding the top rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union). But he was tainted. Unconfirmed sources tell the story that in the 1968 Czech crisis he joined Politburo member Pyotr Shelest in taking a hard line in arguing against Brezhnev and Grechko, who both wished to solve the conflict, if possible, without military intervention. Shelest was subsequently removed from the Politburo, and although Yakubovskij remained in his military Warsaw Pact role, his opposition to Brezhnev, particularly in his alliance with a Politburo member, marked him as a potentially dangerous man, and one who could not be forgotten.⁴

In resolving this problem, the conservative-minded Kremlin apparently took the easiest path by selecting a current Politburo member—one who had been previously considered for the top Military slot⁵ and one who was

³ The top Politburo members are much older: Brezhnev: 69; Podgornyj (President, USSR): 73; Kosygin (Premier, USSR): 72; Suslov (Party Ideologist: 73; and Kirilenko (Unofficial Deputy to Brezhnev): 69.

⁴ Another possible reason offered for not appointing Yakubovskij is that he was, at this time, urgently needed at the Warsaw Pact, since his Chief of Staff, General of the Army Shtemenko, had died only a few days before.

⁵ In 1967, when Grechko became Minister of Defense, it was rumored that Ustinov had been an alternate choice.

politically acceptable to the consensus of the Politburo membership. Furthermore, there might have been some fringe benefits in joining the military and defense industry sectors under one hat. (Should Ustinov later be removed from his position as Minister of Defense Industry, his background would place him in the unique position of being able to work with both sectors of defense.) Also, at age 67 Ustinov, even by Kremlin standards, probably would not have too many more years on the job, but by that time the aging Kremlin leadership most likely would not be around to worry about it. Thus, Ustinov emerged as the most convenient choice of a conservative leadership in its waning years.

The Impact of the Ustinov Selection

The selection of Ustinov as Minister of Defense is expected to have no significant impact on Soviet political or military policy-making. It should, rather, result in a continuation of the present Kremlin policy, and in particular that of its principal architect, Brezhnev.

With respect to the military structure, there undoubtedly will be changes in the personal role played by Ustinov, and in the activities of his subordinates. Grechko was an extraordinarily active participant in military operations, constantly involved in exercises, in frequent visits to the forward areas, and in personally supervising and overseeing combat scenarios. Ustinov's background, and his likely continued involvement with the defense-industry sector, would appear to preclude this kind of participation. He will probably concentrate on economic and management matters, and leave much of the direct participation in military activities to his senior commanders, such as Kulikov, Yakubovskij, General of the Army Sokolov (one of the First Deputy Ministers of Defense, along with Kulikov and Yakubovskij), and the five commanders-in-chief of the armed forces. In this, Kulikov should emerge with a stronger role, in that Ustinov will have to rely on his Chief of the General Staff more heavily than did Grechko for direction of the armed forces.

Finally, the role of Brezhnev vis-a-vis the military may also be strengthened. With Grechko gone, and only a General of the Army⁶ in charge of the military establishment, Brezhnev may be expected to at least tacitly assert himself as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Indeed, Brezhnev's recent promotion to Marshal of the Soviet Union, with a front-page display of

⁶ Ustinov was promoted to General of the Army concurrent with his appointment as Minister of Defense.

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the bemedalled and uniformed General-Secretary, suggests such a role. (In war-time, his position as Supreme High Commander is unquestioned, but no mention is known to have been made of Brezhnev's peacetime military role, apart from the recent revelation of his being Chairman of the Defense Council.) Brezhnev, however, is expected to continue his rather low-key posture in regard to military matters.

As an officer in the Naval Security Group from 1960-1967, Mr. Brenner served in analytic and staff positions, with a tour as operations officer of the NSG unit at Guam. As a civilian, he has served on the D Staff and in A Group, and is at present on a tour at the State Department.

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