

Designer of Iconic Soviet Sukhoi Fighter Jet Dead

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Simonov

Aircraft designer Mikhail Simonov, whose supremely maneuverable, heavily armed and far-flying Sukhoi fighter jet became an icon of the Soviet defense industry and a cash cow for post-communist Russia, died in Moscow on Friday after a long illness.

He was 81, the Sukhoi company said. Simonov is to be buried on Sunday at Moscow's most prestigious Novodevichy Cemetery.

Developed to counter the U.S. F-15 fighter, Simonov's sleek twin-engined, twin-finned Su-27 joined the Soviet Air Force in the early 1980s and won respect in the West for its range of more than 3,500 kilometers, its impressive agility and its ability to fly at 2.35 times the speed of sound.

It was a star of international air shows, performing aerobatics that few other fighter planes could accomplish, and is matched only by the MiG jet and Kalashnikov assault rifle as a symbol of Russia's considerable prowess in weapons-making.

The Su-27's excellent thrust-to-weight ratio and sophisticated control system allowed it to perform exceptional maneuvers at very low speeds, such as raising its nose and literally standing on its tail for a few seconds — a stunt called the Cobra.

When state defense orders ground to a near halt after the 1991 Soviet collapse, Simonov played a key role in winning lucrative export deals. The cash-strapped government sold hundreds of fighters to China, India and other foreign customers under contracts worth billions of dollars.

Simonov started working as an aviation engineer in the 1950s, and joined the Sukhoi design bureau as a deputy chief designer in 1970. During the following nine years he led the development of the Su-24 bomber, the Su-25 ground attack plane and the Su-27.

After serving as deputy minister of aircraft industries in 1979-1983, he was named the top Sukhoi designer and continued work on the Su-27.

While Simonov polished the original Su-27 design, adding upgraded engines and modern avionics, the work on a prospective fifth-generation fighter to compete with the U.S. F-22 Raptor has dragged amid the post-Soviet industrial decline.

The prospective Sukhoi T-50 made its maiden flight last year nearly two decades after the Raptor's first prototype took to the air, and Russian officials said it will take at least another five years for the new jet to enter service.

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