

Shebarshin, Who Headed KGB for 2 Days, Takes Own Life

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Leonid Shebarshin, a Soviet spymaster who briefly headed the KGB after the 1991 coup attempt and oversaw the rise of Islamic radicalism in Iran, committed suicide amid failing health Friday, investigators said.

Shebarshin, who turned 77 on March 24, shot himself in the head with a ceremonial pistol in his central Moscow apartment and left a suicide note in the same room, they said.

The contents of the note were not disclosed, but Shebarshin wrote in the last entry in his diary, dated March 29, the day before he died, that he was nearly blind, Moskovsky Komsomolets reported, citing a friend.

Another longtime friend, Lev Korolkov, said Shebarshin had been depressed about his poor health, Russian News Service radio reported.

His body was found by his daughter-in-law, who came to visit him in the apartment on 2nd Tverskaya-Yamskaya Ulitsa.

In August 1991, Shebarshin, a deputy of the KGB's foreign intelligence directorate, was briefly appointed by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to head the KGB after the failed hard-line coup attempt masterminded by KGB chief Vladimir Kruchkov. Shebarshin chaired the post of one of the world's most powerful agencies for only two days, before Gorbachev replaced him with Vadim Bakatin, whose job became to effectively dismantle the KGB.

Shebarshin made a name for himself abroad, overseeing the Soviet Union's intelligence policy in India and the Middle East as station chief in Tehran before and during the days of the turbulent Islamic revolution. Former intelligence officers working in the country have credited Shebarshin with preventing a possible takeover of the Soviet Embassy in Tehran after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

But just in case, "We destroyed all the secret documents in advance," Shebarshin said in one interview.

He rued the fact that the relationship between the two countries sank to a low after the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s because the Soviet Union supported Iraq in the conflict.

Iran also proved a low point in Shebarshin's career after one of his KGB subordinates, Vladimir Kuzichkin, fled to Britain.

After leaving intelligence, Shebarshin founded a security company, the Russian National Economic Security Service, that provided consulting to Russian and foreign business.

Known for a sarcastic attitude toward current politics, he became known as the author of a number of sententious sayings that he included in his 1998 memoirs. A typical saying read: "What Russian doesn't like a fast ride? Only the one who is being driven on."

An intellectual speaker, Shebarshin earned respect from political experts and journalists from all sides of the political spectrum, including liberal New Times journalist Yevgenia Albats, who described him on Ekho Moskvyy radio Friday as "an honest and sincere person" and "a man made of steel."

Shebarshin's wife died several years ago, and he is survived by one son, Alexei Shebarshin, a diplomat.

Information is pending on funeral arrangements, but judging by Shebarshin's rank, he is likely to be given a state funeral.

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