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Former Defense Minister Sokolov Dies at 102

By The Moscow Times

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Sergei Sokolov, an esteemed military commander and "hero of the Soviet Union" who was dismissed as defense minister after a West German amateur pilot penetrated Soviet airspace and landed on Red Square, died on Friday. He was 102.

His passing came a week after the death of his wife Maria.

Sokolov, a tank commander who rose to the prestigious rank of "marshal of the Soviet Union," was awarded the title of national hero for his actions and command strategies in the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

But his Soviet military career came to an anticlimactic end in 1987, when President Mikhail Gorbachev fired him after 18-year-old Mathias Rust managed to fly a Cessna from Helsinki to the center of Moscow in a stunt aimed at breaking down Cold War tensions between the East and West.

Rust was arrested and sentenced to four years for "hooliganism," but a year later was handed over to the West. Soviet Air Force fighters had intercepted his plane but did not receive permission to shoot it down.

Several senior officers were fired over the incident.

Defense analyst Igor Korotchenko, who praised Sokolov for his role in strengthening the Soviet armed forces, told RIA-Novosti that Gorbachev took advantage of the Rust affair to place loyalists in top military posts.

But Marshal Dmitry Yazov, who replaced Sokolov as defense minister, ended up opposing Gorbachev in the August 1991 coup attempt.

President Vladimir Putin awarded Sokolov the Order for Service to the Motherland in 2001.

The current defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, called Sokolov a "true patriot and brave soldier" in a letter of condolences to his family. Sokolov had served as his adviser.

Sokolov was also praised by the governor of his native Kirov region. "He was a wonderful man, I held great respect for him," Governor Nikita Belykh said Friday on LiveJournal.

Sokolov will be buried at the Novodevichy Cemetery on Monday. He is survived by two sons, both retired army officers.

Friday also marked the death of another Soviet marshal, Alexander Yefimov, a pilot who was twice decorated as a national hero and served as deputy defense minister from 1984 to 1990. He died in Moscow at the age of 90.

Only 41 people achieved the rank of marshal of the Soviet Union. Neither Sokolov's nor Yefimov's cause of death was given.

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