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Pavel Grachyov, a True Soldier

By Alexander Golts

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Pavel Grachyov, who headed the Defense Ministry from 1992-96 under President Boris Yeltsin, was laid to rest last week. Grachyov was one of the most prominent figures of what Kremlin spin doctors consistently refer to as the wild 1990s.

Grachyov is inextricably linked with corruption in the military, Russia's disgraceful defeat in the bloody first Chechen war and the murder of Moskovsky Komsomolets investigative journalist Dmitry Kholodov. But as a person who knew Grachyov during his tenure as defense minister, I can say with confidence that he was not the miscreant so many have made him out to be. On the contrary, he was a very professional and competent military leader.

But fate played a cruel trick on Grachyov by elevating him to the highest military post in the country too rapidly. The same thing happened to lieutenants whom Soviet leader Josef Stalin appointed to top positions just before World War II and whom he blamed for all of the army's initial defeats. Had circumstances been different, Grachyov would now be no less respected than, say, General Boris Gromov, an Afghanistan war veteran who retired with honor from the army and became an influential politician.

Raised in a village in the Tula region, Grachyov had no connections in the Soviet army and rose to the rank of commander on his own merits. Grachyov served two rounds of duty in the Afghan War, once as a regiment commander in 1982-83, and then as a division commander in 1985-88. He was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union gold star for carrying out his military objectives with minimal casualties.

After the Afghan War, Grachyov developed a good relationship with Yeltsin, who in 1990 was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Republic and had firmly positioned himself in opposition to the Kremlin. Grachyov began visiting Yeltsin at his dacha and discussing problems in the army, earning Yeltsin's strong trust.

The moment of truth came on the first day of the putsch — Aug. 19, 1991 — when Grachyov was ordered by the hard-line putschists to arrest Yeltsin and his inner circle. Grachyov refused to carry out the order, understanding perfectly well that this refusal would land them in jail or worse if the putschists remained in power. Grachyov also called Viktor Karpukhin, commander of the elite Alpha KGB special forces, and secured an agreement from him not to carry out the order.

To be fair, Grachyov also opposed Yeltsin's decision to use tanks to fire on the parliamentary building in 1993 but conceded after Yeltsin visited the Defense Ministry to "clarify" the military task before the vacillating Grachyov.

In addition, Grachyov did everything in his power to delay the invasion of Chechnya in 1994. At the end of the day, however, he obeyed Yeltsin's orders, famously saying in haste that the Chechen rebels would be defeated "in a couple of hours with a single regiment of paratroopers." At the same time, Grachyov did his best not to shed the blood of his fellow citizens, even when he was ordered directly to do so.

Above all, Grachyov's critics hold him accountable for the failures of the first Chechen war. Admittedly, it was a bloody and bungled military campaign, but it was not managed any worse than the country's other wars. The problem was that at that critical juncture in Russia's history, Moscow's leaders had lost the trump card they had held for the previous 300 years: the ability to mobilize millions of reservists who could overwhelm any foe through sheer numbers. Certainly, Grachyov cannot be blamed for that.

It is difficult to refute the fact that Grachyov rebuilt the Russian army from ruins. After all, the Soviet army had collapsed along with the Soviet Union in 1991. In addition, Grachyov reached agreements for the withdrawal of 1.5 million Russian troops stationed in Eastern European and Baltic states and concluded the Lisbon Protocol in 1993 stipulating that Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus return all nuclear weapons located on their territories to Russia. These were the largest movements of troops and weapons of mass destruction since World War II.

Moreover, Grachyov formulated the principles for reforming the military that Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov is only now implementing 18 years later. These include the need to reduce the number of large units, the necessity of eliminating skeleton units completely and the importance of making the transition from a divisional structure in the army to one based on brigades.

In all of my interactions with Grachyov, he always struck me as the quintessential Russian paratrooper. When Grachyov was fired several months after Yeltsin was re-elected in 1996, Grachyov calmly turned and walked away. For many years, he did not give a single interview in his own defense. It seemed as if all of the dirty accusations against him had little impact, but, then again, he died unexpectedly at the age of only 64. No doubt he internalized all of these negative emotions, which clearly played a role in his death at such a young age.

Grachyov was a pre-eminent military leader who prevented Russia from lapsing into civil war several times. He died in relative obscurity, living for 15 years after his retirement without once hearing a word of gratitude. But as old military adage goes, "The motherland always punishes its heroes."

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