The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

One General Too Many

By Alexander Golts

December 16, 2012



Only a month has passed since Sergei Shoigu was appointed defense minister and, as many feared, he seems to be in a hurry to dismantle the reforms put in place by his predecessor, Anatoly Serdyukov. Shoigu has given orders to create new military training schools and academies: the Mikhailovsky Artillery Academy, the Air Defense Academy, the Chelyabinsk Navigator Training School, the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School and the Krasnodar Higher Military School.

The problem is the plan effectively reinstates a three-tiered structure of military education in which officers must attend a training school for four years, a general military academy for three years and a General Staff academy for two more years.

Reformers had considered it irrational for high-ranking officers to spend more than half of their service away from the troops. Accordingly, they closed down several dozen military training schools and academies and proposed replacing them with 10 training centers. In their opinion, an officer should get his basic education just once — before receiving his lieutenant's stripes. Thereafter, he would have to attend short-term courses before moving up to new positions and promotions in rank.

Shoigu also ordered the reinstatement of the Defense Ministry's main combat training directorate, which had been eliminated by Serdyukov's former head of the General Staff, Nikolai Makarov. They had planned for the armed forces high commands to be responsible for military training. Now, regional commanders will have operational control of all army, Air Force and Navy troops. With the reestablishment of the main combat training directorate, the main command will have nothing to do. It is safe to assume that the top commanders of the various branches of the armed forces will therefore start interfering with the control of troops.

These counter-reforms are the inevitable consequence of President Vladimir Putin's decision to make Shoigu an army general. That puts the situation back to where it was prior to 2007, under Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, who had also been proud of his general's stars and who failed to improve the condition of the armed forces.

Pro-Kremlin commentators justify Putin's decision as necessary to give Shoigu sufficient authority over the military. They contend that the now discredited Serdyukov, whom military brass called "Marshal Stoolikin" in reference to his former job managing a furniture factory, lacked even a modicum of such authority. The problem with this argument is that Serdyukov managed to accomplish more without any rank than all of his "star-studded" predecessors combined. He even managed to do what Putin himself was afraid to take on back in 2001. Ultimately, Serdyukov did exactly what Putin asked of him: He reformed the ineffective military machine.

I am certain that Serdyukov would not have accomplished anything if he had been made a general. Russian generals are masters of the art of currying favor and using subtle psychological manipulation. Whenever a defense minister is appointed, the generals cunningly make him feel like a member of the army clan. But experience shows that this is especially true of greedy "non-army" generals who head dozens of government agencies nominally requiring military rank and who know deep down that they did not earn their stars. A "legitimate" general has years of military education and experience. In contrast to Serdyukov, defense ministers who are simply given their stars do not pose simple questions to military chiefs for fear of appearing incompetent. As defense minister, Sergei Ivanov surrounded himself with generals who helped him maintain the illusion of competence. As one senior military official informed me, "The problem was that as a professional, he knew when someone would start oversimplifying a complex issue and this immediately made him angry."

All of this is the consequence of the false position in which any defense minister finds himself if he imagines that is really a part of the military establishment. A civilian defense minister is in a better position to implement political control over the military, and ideally, to make it accountable to the public. This illustrates the sharp division between the functions of military and political leaders. In principle, a situation should never arise in which generals independently reach a decision about a threat to the state. Their job is to advise political leaders and then carry out decisions without reservation.

Of course, one civilian defense minister is not enough to implement full-fledged civilian control over the armed forces. Western defense ministries are mostly composed of civilian officials who formulate decisions that, following approval from the political leadership,

the military is obligated to implement. Serdyukov and Makarov attempted to create such a ministry in Russia by dividing the defense establishment into two sections: the civilian branch responsible for financial, economic and supply questions, and the military branch. Serdyukov appointed his co-workers from his former post as head of the Federal Tax Service to head the civilian section, and it was this "battalion in skirts" that so greatly irritated military officials in uniform. Now generals will return to their former jobs to replace those "skirts," and Shoigu will be doomed to make not political decisions, but purely technical ones — for which he will be held accountable. Now the military brass will be making serious decisions and Shoigu will become hostage to the very system he is helping to reinstate.

Alexander Golts is deputy editor of the online newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/12/16/one-general-too-many-a20234