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Who is the Russian 'Merchant of Death' the U.S. Exchanged for Brittney Griner?

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Victor Bout being extradited to the United States in 2010. **Drug Enforcement Administration**

Russia and the U.S. on Thursday conducted a one-for-one prisoner swap that secured the release of American basketball star Brittney Griner in exchange for Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout.

Bout, 55, was meant to serve a 25-year sentence in a prison in Illinois after being convicted of a handful of offenses by the U.S. courts, including conspiracy to kill Americans, acquisition and export of anti-aircraft missiles, and provision of material support to a terrorist organization.

Throughout his two-decade criminal career Bout is believed to have aided both rebels and legitimate governments in an array of conflict zones, including Afghanistan, Yemen, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But under the deal to secure the Thursday exchange, the sentence of one of the world's most notorious arms dealers was commuted to the 10 years already served.

Bout, who earned nicknames such as “the merchant of death” and “the sanctions buster,” was born in Dushanbe, the capital of modern Tajikistan that was then part of the Soviet Union. He was educated and built a career in the Soviet military system and is believed to be fluent in six languages, including Arabic, Persian, and Esperanto.

Bout took advantage of the collapsing Soviet aviation industry to buy three Antonov cargo planes that he then leased for long-haul flights from Moscow, he told The New York Times in a 2003 interview.

"I never had investors," Bout famously said in the same interview, while also refusing to reveal how he was able to find the $120,000 to buy the planes aged just 25 years old.

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The self-proclaimed, self-made entrepreneur first used his newly acquired fleet to import flowers from South Africa to the Middle East, before turning his focus to weapons as his business grew.

Famously known to have sold arms to parties on both sides of the same conflict, Bout was on the radar of the U.S. intelligence services and was for years under a range of sanctions, though for the most part managed to hide in plain sight.

Bout’s luck finally turned when he was arrested in Thailand in 2008 as part of a sting operation carried out by the Thai police, the U.S. and Interpol. He was extradited to the U.S. two years later.

Bout has always maintained his innocence and has denied the claims that he used his air cargo business for arms smuggling, while also denying his alleged links to Russia’s intelligence services.

Bout’s return to Russia on Thursday was hailed by a number of high-profile government officials, including State Duma deputy Leonid Slutsky, who called Bout’s arrest “absolutely illegal” and vowed to celebrate the arms dealer’s return to “the homeland” by inviting him to attend a special session of Russia's State Duma.

“Victor courageously and steadfastly endured all the trials and unprecedented tribulations he faced in those American dungeons. We look forward to his return ... We don’t abandon our own,” Slutsky wrote on his Telegram Thursday.

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