

Profile: Marshal Sergei Sokolov

Who is Moscow's new defense chief?

by Konstantin George

On Thursday, Dec. 20, the Soviet Union announced that Marshal Dmitrii Ustinov, 76, defense minister since early 1976 and one of the chief architects of the Soviet Union's wartime and postwar military buildup, died after a long illness. His successor is Marshal Sergei Sokolov, who had been first deputy defense minister, the number-two man in the ministry, since April 1967.

Sokolov's appointment comes in the context of a broad ultimatum-offensive by Soviet Politburo members, from the youngest at 53, Mikhail Gorbachov, to the oldest, Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov. The target is the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

There have been a lot of silly and downright lying "analyses" suddenly appearing in newspapers in West Germany and elsewhere, that with the "hawk" Ustinov's passing, a "milder" Chernenko-Gorbachov grouping has come to the fore, and Sokolov's naming as new defense minister is part of this "thawing." The barest facts contradict such wishful nonsense in a cold and brutal manner.

Marshal Sokolov is a professional military officer—a "gung ho" advocate of the offensive with a career as a commander of tank units with eight years' combat experience. He was number-two at the defense ministry for an unprecedented 17 years, spanning the tenures of Andrei Grechko and Ustinov, the period of the strategic shift from U.S. world dominance to Soviet military superiority backing up an outright imperialist policy. Sokolov duties made him chief of the reserve of the armed forces, a job that involved him closely in the militarization of Soviet society and the economy.

Although not a member of the ruling Politburo, Sokolov is the third-most senior member (after Foreign Minister Gromyko and Navy chief Adm. Gorshkov) of the elite Defense Council of the U.S.S.R.

Marshal Sokolov is also the reputed commander in time of war of the Soviet "Eastern Theater of War"—the entire Asian-Pacific plus the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. This would rank him with Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, chief of staff until Sept. 7, architect of the Soviet strategic missile defense program, and now wartime commander of the "Western Theater of War"—in charge of waging war against the United States and NATO.

Sokolov oversaw the restructuring of the Soviet Far East Command throughout the summer of 1984, which featured

the promotion of the Far East commander, Gen. Vladimir Govorov, to deputy defense minister in Moscow working directly under Sokolov. Gen. Ivan Tretyak, commander of the Soviet Far East Military District in Vladivostok, was named new head of Far East Command. Govorov and Tretyak were the immediate culprits in the KAL-007 massacre.

Sokolov's "diplomacy" of late is a clear signal of new expansionist moves in the making. On Nov. 21, he met with Libyan Deputy Defense Minister Boubakr Jabr, which preceded the Crete summit of Libya's Qaddafi, Greece's Papan-dreou, and France's Mitterrand, and the December move of Malta headlong into the Soviet-Libyan camp. In early December, Sokolov arrived in Afghanistan, dumped the Afghan defense minister, and worked out a brutal war escalation which portends Soviet expansion in the region.

The Sokolov appointment occurs in the context of the most ferocious campaign of threats ever waged by the Soviets against the United States, targeted on the beam-weapon defense program or Strategic Defense Initiative. The first wave of Soviet ultimatums began with a Chernenko speech on Dec. 5 which declared that the SDI would render all previous arms-control agreements "null and void." This formulation was repeated in a Sunday, Dec. 12 *Pravda* editorial.

Then came a signal escalation during the Dec. 15-21 stay in Great Britain of the youngest Soviet Politburo member and reputed "Crown Prince," Mikhail Gorbachov. Gorbachov headed a 30-man delegation which included Yevgenii Velikhov, Vice-President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and top expert on space-based weapons.

Gorbachov ordered British Prime Minister Thatcher to convey an message to President Reagan during their talks at Camp David on Dec. 22. As the London *Daily Express* of Dec. 18 put it: "The high-powered Russian delegation visiting London yesterday issued a dramatic ultimatum to President Reagan, giving him three months to stop a Star Wars arms race. . . . Mikhail Gorbachov warned of the dangers ahead if the United States failed to halt Star Wars weapons testing. Then Soviet space expert Yevgenii Velikhov laid it on the line." Velikhov is then quoted: "If these tests are started, it will be too late."

The language of these ultimatums has, if anything, escalated. Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov on a three-day stay in Ankara, Turkey, a visit which resulted in wide-ranging and long-term Soviet-Turkish trade and economic agreements, used the bluntest language possible in a dinner speech before his hosts, quoted on Radio Moscow: "Our top priority is how to prevent space from being militarized. . . . [This is] of the utmost urgency. . . . The militarization of space would dramatically increase the danger of war." Tikhonov concluded with a warning to his Turkish hosts: "The threat of war is heightened by the new American missiles in Western Europe. . . . On the [European] continent, the situation is becoming increasingly explosive."

Given Soviet policy, that statement is a "made in Russia" self-fulfilling prophecy.