

The Soviet James Bond

By [Alexei Pankin](#)

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Last week, the army ceremoniously laid to rest retired Colonel Vitaly Shlykov with a three-volley salute and an honor guard marching under the Russian flag. At the memorial service, Valentina Melnikova, secretary of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, recalled how Shlykov had helped make that organization truly professional and effective back in the early 1990s.

Such a wide range of recognition is the key to understanding this incredibly versatile figure. National security was Shlykov's primary concern in life, and he believed that an important component of that was civilian control over the military.

In recent years, the media has focused a great deal of attention on Shlykov's activities as a Soviet-era spy. In particular, the TV Center channel aired a documentary in November on Shlykov made by Leonid Mlechin. It portrayed Shlykov as a Soviet James Bond who enjoyed beautiful women and high risk while working to protect his homeland.

However, his exploits at home deserve to become just as legendary as his feats behind the

front lines of the Cold War.

At the request of the leadership of the foreign military intelligence, or GRU, Shlykov created a think tank to assess the military and economic might of NATO following his return in the mid-1980s from Switzerland, where he had served a two-year prison term on charges of illegally crossing the border. That agency found that the Russian General Staff vastly overestimated the threat of war. And they did so with selfish intent: the more tanks and other weapons the top brass produced in response to the “threat from the West,” the more stars and perks the colonels and generals could earn. Shlykov opposed the military chiefs and looked for a way to inform political leaders of the truth. He later recalled: “Fortunately, intelligence officers were not banished or ground into dust by that time, so the worst they did to me was to fire me on practically the same day I reached retirement age in 1988.”

From 1990 to 1992, Shlykov served in the government of President Boris Yeltsin as deputy head of a committee for public security — the forerunner of the current Defense Ministry. While at that post, he developed a concept for radical economic reform based on the post-World War II experience of the United States. He argued that the United States had managed to make the transition to a booming peacetime economy without inflation or unemployment within just two years of having devoted 45 percent of gross domestic product to wartime defense.

He considered Yeltsin’s neoliberal reforms — the exact opposite of his own proposals — to be a national catastrophe. However, he never had a bad word to say regarding former acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. “He was an astute and intelligent person,” Shlykov said in an interview published posthumously by Russian Reporter. “But how could he have known anything about the military economy if everything connected with it was highly classified during the Soviet era?”

Shlykov began working on army reforms after leaving the government and taking a post with the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. His ideas provided the groundwork for many of the reforms implemented by Anatoly Serdyukov, the first civilian defense minister. And it is largely to Shlykov’s credit that the media has responded positively to those reforms: He was able to explain complex matters in simple language. Even journalists covering defense questions who are extremely skeptical of the military establishment held an unequivocally high regard for Shlykov.

His death is a terrible loss for Russia.

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