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GRECHKO RAISES ISSUE OF SUPREME MILITARY COMMAND

For the first time, to the knowledge of this writer, since a widely noted article by Major General Zemskov early this year, the Soviet military press has broached the delicate subject of the USSR's supreme command in time of war. On this occasion the spokesman, no less authoritative than Minister of Defense Marshal Grechko, lends weight to the impression conveyed by Zemskov's article that the matter has been subject to discussion at the highest level, and remains unresolved.¹ The institutional question pertains to the formation of a single supreme political-military organ for directing the nation and the armed forces during wartime. The political issue at stake seems clearly to be who shall assume the mantle of Supreme Commander, worn by Stalin and claimed in his last years of rule by Khrushchev.

Zemskov touched upon the subject in the context of a long article on leadership during wartime, in which he asserted the pre-eminence of political over military leadership but, at the same time, unity of them both. He seemed to be arguing that the political leadership should maintain overall command, but that the military should be intimately involved. He left the impression, moreover, that the institutional arrangements for ensuring this relationship are not currently in existence. The key passage warrants quoting at length for comparison with Grechko's formulation. Zemskov stated:

The Communist Party implements its line through a single military-political organ which directs the country and the armed forces. During the Civil War years such an organ was the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants Defense, changed later into the Soviet of Labor and Defense. This high military-political organ worked under the chairmanship of V.I. Lenin. To the Soviet of Defense was

1. Kommunist Vooruzhennikh Sil, No. 20, 1967, p. 37

subordinated the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic [Revvoyensovet]. It accomplished the direct leadership of the army and navy and contained the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Republic with the Field Staff of the Revvoyensovet.

The experience of the Civil War was used also in the Great Patriotic War. From the beginning, the State Committee for Defense, under the chairmanship of I.V. Stalin, created by decision of the Central Committee of the Party and the Soviet Government, became the high military-political directing organ. The direct leadership of the Armed Forces, of the combat operations of the army and navy was actually realized by the Stavka of the Supreme Command, basing its activity on the General Staff.

Thus developed and was proven by life itself the necessity of a single military-political leadership in war. Now the tendency of development in this area is such that the role of political leadership markedly increases.²

Zemskov went on to describe such organs existing in the West, for example, the National Security Council in the United States. Marshal Grechko's allusion to this subject is much briefer, but very similar to that of Zemskov. He writes:

The experience of the military defense of the Soviet Homeland evidences that the political leadership of the Armed Forces is blended with the strategic, forming a single system of direction acting in the name of victory over the aggressor. The Communist Party has implemented its line through a single military-political organ, which leads the country and the Armed Forces. During the Civil War years such an organ was the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Defense, changed later into the Soviet of Labor and Defense. Already in the first days of the Great Patriotic War the State Committee of Defense, created by decision of the Central Committee of the Party and the Soviet government, became the high military-political directing organ. [Emphasis added.]

Grechko's language indicates that either he was writing with Zemskov's article in mind or both Grechko and Zemskov wrote against the background of a document with which they are both familiar, perhaps the protocol of a debate or a secret resolution. The most striking difference is Grechko's use of the past tense (provodila).

2. Krasnaia Zvezda, 5 January 1967. [Emphasis supplied.]

Zemskov's present tense (provodit), followed by a description of past organizational arrangements, left open the possibility that a corresponding organ exists today but is not being revealed, although one could conclude the contrary from Zemskov, that such an organ does not exist. Grechko's formulation renders it much more plausible that the supreme commanding organ does not exist and that its creation is being debated.

Beyond this, analysis of this clearly very important issue of Soviet politics must be largely conjectural. Zemskov's original broaching of the issue occurred at a time when a variety of other indicators pointed to an effort on the part of Brezhnev to strengthen his personal authority as primus inter pares in the Politburo. The implied call for a new GKO (State Committee for Defense) could easily be read as part of such an effort, for Brezhnev would certainly stand first in line to become its chairman and hence Glavnokommanduyushchii or Supreme Commander. One must assume, of course, that the USSR always has some sort of acting Supreme Commander, the man who must decide on a moment's notice issues of war or peace should they arise. Brezhnev may fill the post most of the time on a de facto basis, but it must rotate on occasion. The important thing politically is not who pushes the button in a crisis, but who bears and is known within the elite to bear the title Supreme Commander. There has been no public indication that Brezhnev has captured it for himself. Were he to do so, the collectivity of the current ruling group would be signally reduced, for which reason, apparently, no contemporary GKO has been formed.

Grechko's implied support for a new GKO and, by further implication, the nomination of a Supreme Commander suggests strong military support for Brezhnev's cause, perhaps in repayment for Brezhnev's strong support of military budget claims. It is odd, however, that Grechko did not continue in the paragraph quoted to mention the role of Stavka. This was the operating military command organ through which Stalin and his top marshals directed the war effort and in which the military exerted its most significant influence. Perhaps Grechko felt endorsement of a new Stavka would be going too far in projecting himself as the latter-day Zhukov and Brezhnev as the latter-day Stalin. But, in view of the continuing debate over Stalin's image, the conflict over arrangements to be established among the top political leaders must be carried on in these terms. If Brezhnev does indeed have the support of the military high command in his quest for greater personal authority, it is certainly an achievement for him, but not necessarily a guarantee of success, for nothing would seem more likely to consolidate opposition among his colleagues. In any case, this would seem to be one of the many vexatious issues which will be up for decision when Soviet politics returns to normal after the anniversary celebrations.

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