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Ogarkov's return casts doubt on theories of disgrace

By Martin Sieff
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The reappearance of Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov on the Communist Party Central Committee has confirmed the suspicion of many Soviet watchers that he was never in disgrace during his 2½-year absence. It was just another ploy by the man who once headed the Chief Directorate of Strategic Deception.

Marshal Ogarkov, 68, was chief of the Soviet General Staff and first deputy defense minister from 1977 to 1984. In that time, he became notorious as the Kremlin's arch-hawk — a military planner of boldness and imagination.

He published articles urging an increase in military spending and a new emphasis on high technology weapons. This appeared to clash with Leonid Brezhnev's stated policy of keeping such spending pegged at existing levels.

Western analysts speculated that Marshal Ogarkov was able to keep his position only because of the support of such hawkish figures on the ruling Politburo as Leningrad party leader Gregory Romanov and Ukrainian party boss Viktor Scherbitsky.

The marshal appeared to be a potential successor to veteran Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov. Then, in September 1984, he was removed from his post in circumstances that still puzzle Sovietologists.

When senior Soviet military figures fall from grace, they vanish to their dachas and are seldom seen in public again. But Marshal Ogarkov remained a figure in good standing in the Soviet military hierarchy. He continued to publish highly influential books and articles and his name appeared in a prominent position on the obituary list after Marshal Ustinov's death.

Some western analysts feel Marshal Ogarkov moved sideways to devote himself to refining a Soviet plan for the military conquest of western Europe. In October 1984, a month after his dismissal (if such it was), he met with East German leader Erich Honecker in Berlin. Such a meeting would be inconceivable, these analysts argue, if Marshal Ogarkov had been disgraced.

Disgrace, they point out, would have meant transfer to deputy chief of staff of the Siberian Military District, or some comparable backwa-

ter. Instead, Marshal Ogarkov kept popping up in the Western Theater, the prime Soviet strategic area of concern.

He also was seen in Warsaw, a likely headquarters for such operations. A September 1985 Defense Intelligence Agency report noted that as of Dec. 22, 1984, he was commander-in-chief Western Theater, a position he apparently still holds. This would put him over the Warsaw Pact command, a slot that, curiously, has remained unfilled for several months.

The position fits Marshal Ogarkov's background as the Soviet army's prime specialist on initiative strike and strategic warning problems. Some analysts believe he has been the champion of a blitzkrieg strategy in the western theater of operations.

This "can win" concept emphasizes high-speed offensives through battlefields contaminated with nuclear, biological, and chemical agents. This would give the Third Shock Army in East Germany the option of launching a sudden strike against the West without a giveaway major mobilization.

Some U.S. intelligence sources claim that Marshal Ogarkov has reorganized TVD, the Western Oriented Fronts, and that he has built up a new STAVKA, the Soviet World War II military headquarters, west of Moscow, from which the western theaters would take their commands in the event of war with the West.

One senior intelligence analyst said, "There's no doubt in my mind that Ogarkov is the power [in the Soviet military leadership]."

He pointed out that Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, who succeeded Marshal Ogarkov as chief of staff, had previously been his protege.

"It would be a master-student relationship," the analyst said. "If anything, Ogarkov was his mentor."

Current Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov, 74, is widely regarded as a colorless figure. According to this view, he would be seen as a front man for the military planners rather than a stopgap until another figure emerges.

Many colorful stories circulated about Marshal Ogarkov's ouster.

It was said that the dying Defense Minister Ustinov said, "Promise me one thing. After I'm dead, get rid of that man Ogarkov." As he had risen to the top of the Soviet military un-

der Marshal Ustinov, the tale appears unlikely.

However, it fits a pattern of disinformation, a field in which Marshal Ogarkov has immense experience. He commanded the Chief Directorate for Strategic Deception, the most powerful directorate on the Soviet General Staff. He attended most international disarmament negotiations through the 1970s, including the SALT talks, and served as foreign policy spokesman for the military lobby under Marshal Ustinov.

In his book "Inside the Soviet Army," former Soviet officer Viktor Suvarov wrote that Marshal Ogarkov "made a brilliant success of the operation to fool the American delegation [at the SALT I arms talks]. For this he was made Chief of the General Staff." His role as public "point man" at the 1983 press conference after Soviet aircraft shot down a Korean airliner with 269 people on board showed his skill at handling the press. The supposedly dour Ogarkov's performance was described by one western reporter as "spellbinding."

Marshal Ogarkov, some intelligence sources claim, is also a close friend of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and sees him often.

Mr. Gorbachev emphasizes high technology, as does Marshal Ogarkov. He has appointed senior figures with a background in the military-industrial complex over the civilian economy. Deputy Premier Ivan Silaev, in charge of the bureau of machine building, was a mastermind in the aerospace field. First Deputy Premier Nikolai Talyzin, chairman of the State Planning Commission, had a background in communications satellites.

The controversial removal of the marshal was announced in September 1984, the same month Western analysts believe Mr. Gorbachev took over effective control from the ailing Konstantin Chernenko, who died the following March.

His reappointment to the Central Committee at the 27th Party Congress confirmed the suspicion of some Soviet watchers that he had always been a Gorbachev favorite, involved in top-level work and not languishing in obscurity. If that is the case, the world may not have heard the last of Nikolai Ogarkov, born within a month of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the most eminent Soviet soldier of his generation.