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On: 19 August 2011, At: 12:17

Publisher: Routledge

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The Journal of Slavic Military Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fslv20>

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Available online: 19 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Ray Finch (2011): One Face of the Modern Russian Army: General Vladimir Shamanov, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 24:3, 396-427

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2011.598731>

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One Face of the Modern Russian Army: General Vladimir Shamanov

RAY FINCH

Foreign Military Studies Office

This article will examine General Shamanov's background, the probable rationale for his assignment as airborne commander, his role in the ongoing reform of the Russian military, and the possible future implications for the Russian military and state. This biographical sketch suggests that Shamanov represents a portion of the modern Russian officer corps. These officers (from a variety of security agencies) have merged state, business, and private interests, resulting in a distortion of traditional civil-military relations. As a high-level advisor, and now as Airborne Commander, General Shamanov continues to influence the course of military reform. There is speculation that General Shamanov could become the next Minister of Defense. While the Russian military has a long tradition of remaining outside politics, if the domestic situation in Russia were to become dire, General Shamanov could help choose, or even become, the next Russian commander-in-chief.

INTRODUCTION

In late September 2009, one of the few remaining independent national Russian newspapers published a story alleging that the current commander of the Russian airborne forces (VDV), General Vladimir A. Shamanov (see Figure 1), had directed soldiers to seize a building in Moscow in order

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FIGURE 1 General Shamanov.

Source: RIA Novosti.

to settle a personal business dispute.¹ The story included audio recordings of General Shamanov's angry telephone conversations with subordinates as to where the building was located and details of the mission. General Shamanov had apparently been notified that state investigators intended to seize records related to the building which was partially owned by members of his family. The general wanted his *spetnatz* (special forces) soldiers to occupy the building and prevent the removal of any documents. However, after learning that the state investigators had been tipped off, the mission was aborted and the airborne troopers returned to their barracks.

This story spread and made headlines within both the Kremlin-controlled national and relatively small independent press. As President Medvedev had earlier pledged to both reform the military and to fight corruption, some were soon calling for General Shamanov's dismissal. The furor died down, however, and after receiving a verbal reprimand from the Russian Minister of Defense, General Shamanov has gone on to lead Russia's airborne forces. While seemingly insignificant, this episode reflects much about the current state of the Russian military and civil-military relations. The incident also provides an intriguing contemporary snapshot of one of Russia's most powerful generals.

This article will examine General Shamanov's background, the probable rationale for his assignment as airborne commander, his role in the ongoing reform of the Russian military, and the possible future implications for the Russian military and state. This biographical sketch will go on to suggest that Shamanov represents a portion of the modern Russian officer corps. These uniformed officers (from a variety of security agencies) have merged state, business and private interests, possibly leading the Russian military into

¹ Roman Anin, 'General and Gliba,' *Novaya Gazeta*, 21 September 2009 (<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/104/01.html> (accessed 27 April 2010)).

uncharted waters. Should the economic and social conditions within Russia continue to deteriorate, General Shamanov could very well be designated as the Minister of Defense. Indeed, while the Russian military has a long tradition of remaining outside the politics, if the domestic situation in Russia were to become catastrophic, there is a slim chance that General Shamanov could become the next Russian president.²

BACKGROUND

Vladimir Anatolyvich Shamanov was born in 1957 (15 February) into a relatively poor family in the Siberian city of Bernaul, but moved to Uzbekistan where he spent his youth with his two siblings. His father was himself an orphan and abandoned the family when Vladimir was quite young. His mother remarried, and Shamanov was now the eldest in a family of seven. A watershed moment in Shamanov's life occurred, when as a teenager, he went to see the popular film, *Officers* (Офицеры), which idolized the role of the officer in the Soviet Army. Shamanov remarked that after seeing this movie he knew he was going to dedicate his life to 'defending the motherland.'³

Becoming a military officer was a solid career choice for any young man completing high school in the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s. As defenders of the socialist state (and victors of the Great Patriotic War) military officers enjoyed considerable respect and prestige. Within the Soviet military, those serving in the airborne forces were regarded with even greater esteem. Airborne forces were the 'tip of the spear,' designed at a moment's notice to strike deep into the enemy's rear. These were the highly trained and elite special forces, skilled in a wide variety of martial operations, everything from sabotage operations (particularly destroying nuclear delivery systems) to hostage rescue.⁴

Unlike most other 18- to 19-year-old males, rather than waiting to be drafted into the Soviet military, in 1974, Shamanov applied for and was accepted into the Tashkent Military Tank Academy as a cadet/junior officer (see Figure 2).⁵ During a subsequent restructuring of military forces, this unit was transferred to the Ryazan airborne academy and Shamanov graduated with his airborne wings in 1978. This was a dream come true for the

² When running for governor back in 2000, Shamanov commented that 'I think the postulate that we inherited from Soviet times that the army should be outside politics is wrong. As an instrument of politics, the army cannot be outside.' See Svetlana Sukhova, 'A Candidate from the Ministry of Defense Reserve,' *Segodnya*, 21 September 2000.

³ Andrey Vandenko, 'Airborne Career General,' *Itoги*, 3 August 2009. More than once, Shamanov has more than once borrowed the most famous line from this film, 'There is such a profession: to defend your Motherland.'

⁴ Harriet Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR* (Boulder: Westview, 1984) p. 158.

⁵ The father of one of his friends had told him that there was an airborne company at the tank school. Vandenko.



FIGURE 2 Cadet Shamanov.

Source: RIA.

young lieutenant. He had longed to become an airborne officer, and his first command assignment was that of an artillery platoon leader for the 76th Airborne Division located near the city of Pskov. After a year, he returned to the airborne training center in Ryazan, where until 1985, he taught cadets and commanded from the platoon to company levels within the airborne school. He also became a member of the Communist Party, which for the career-minded, was a helpful and important step.⁶

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the USSR had the largest and possibly best equipped airborne forces on the planet, with seven airborne divisions and a host of separate airborne brigades. With the ability to be inserted far behind enemy lines, these forces could hypothetically wreak havoc among their chief conventional, NATO foe. Amidst a less organized opponent (like the mujahidin in Afghanistan) they had proven less effective, though they had carried out a number of successful operations.⁷ Nevertheless, up until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, other than the Strategic Rocket Forces, the airborne forces were considered among the most combat-ready and motivated within the Soviet military.

There has been some conjecture regarding how Shamanov was able to go directly from company-level training command in 1985 to battalion command without going through the normal career pattern of first serving as deputy-battalion commander. This career move was particularly important in that Shamanov was able to avoid having to serve in Afghanistan (at that time, combat service in Afghanistan was considered *de rigueur* for promotion and further schooling). One explanation describes how at a high-level command meeting at the airborne academy in 1985, Shamanov caught the attention of the airborne commander, General D. Sukhorukov. General Sukhorukov

⁶ Yuriy Vasilyev, 'I Worked in the Role of Garbage Collector at a Trash Heap: Vladimir Shamanov Summarizes the Results of his Chechen War,' *Moskovskiy Novosti*, 7 November 2000.

⁷ At a tactical level, Soviet airborne operations were quite effective; the overall Soviet strategy in Afghanistan, however, proved to be untenable.

was so impressed with the energetic Shamanov that he announced to the assembly, 'who wants this young captain as a battalion commander?' General Gregoriy Shpak, then the commander of the 76th Airborne Division (and later to become the Russian Airborne Commander), said that he would give the hard-charging company commander a battalion command.⁸ While such ambition is a hallmark of the ideal airborne officer, this unqualified career jump would have alienated other senior airborne captains who had already served as deputy-battalion commanders in the cauldron of Afghanistan and were awaiting their turn for battalion command.⁹

One other factor sheds light on Shamanov's early career jump. Some six months prior to his selection for battalion command, there was a change of leadership at the Ryazan airborne academy. The new academy commander was the legendary Soviet General, Albert Slusar, Hero of the USSR and an Afghanistan veteran. Some have suggested that this new academy commander didn't want the senior captain (Shamanov had been at the academy since 1979) to advance to battalion command until he had gained actual combat experience in the Afghan conflict.¹⁰ In Shamanov's defense, by 1985, the Soviet Union was encountering ever greater resistance among the mujahidin. Regardless of motive, Shamanov quickly departed the airborne school.

Even without performing his fraternal/socialist duty in Afghanistan, Shamanov secured command of a battalion in the 104th Airborne Division in Pskov. Once his year-long assignment was completed, he entered the Frunze Combined Arms Military Academy in Moscow (another required ticket-punch for promotion). This career episode is also curious and somewhat out of the ordinary. Unable to secure his division commander's approval to attend this academy, Shamanov simply reported to the school without it.¹¹ How Shamanov was able to secure the school billet without this recommendation is unclear, but he may have used the help of high-level political/party friends.¹² His party connections and avoiding duty in Afghanistan likely caused resentment among his military academy comrades.

⁸ Vladimir Voronin, 'Udivitel'naya Kareerya Generala Shamanova,' [The Amazing Career of General Shamanov], *Soversbennoye Sekretno*, July 2009 <http://www.sovsekretno.ru/magazines/article/2248> (accessed 21 May 2010).

⁹ Similar to the American army, battalion command is a necessary ticket to higher-level schooling and promotion. While there is no question that Shamanov was a motivated young officer, there were questions as to how far he was willing to jump to further his career. Presumably, there would have been many other Soviet captains (who had already served as deputy battalion commander or served a tour in Afghanistan) ahead of Shamanov on the list for battalion command. These officers were equally anxious to lead a battalion and perhaps had a better case for being selected for battalion command.

¹⁰ Voronin.

¹¹ Mikhail Lukanin, 'Generalu Shamanovu Otdali Ves Desant,' [They've given the complete airborne to General Shamanov], *Trud*, 26 May 2009 http://www.trud.ru/article/26-05-2009/141249_generalu_shamanovu_otdali_ves_desant.html (accessed 21 May 2010).

¹² Like most officers from this period, Shamanov joined the Communist Party and he may have used his party connections to secure this billet. In a later interview, he claims to have made 'decent progress up the party's ladder.' See Vasilyev *Moskovskkiye Novosti*, 7 November 2000.

Shamanov's propitious career pattern may have been driven as much by ambition as by the confusion of the late Soviet period. The communist foundation was cracking, as the gap between party rhetoric and the grim reality widened to dangerous proportions. Consider what military service was like in the mid- to late 1980s for the thousands of mid-level officers in the Soviet military. Though their political leaders had tried to place a good face on the failure to defeat the insurgency and subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan, there was a growing sense of humiliation and resentment within the Soviet officer ranks (some senior military officials had been against Soviet involvement from the beginning).

Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness) had revealed some uncomfortable truths about service in the Soviet military. Besides the daily reminders regarding the trauma of combat in Afghanistan, readers learned of serious social problems among those who defended the Soviet state. Newspapers began to discuss such topics such as 'dedovshchina' (hazing), corruption, and ethnic tensions between conscripts and officers. Simply put, the brotherly, enthusiastic, self-sacrificing rhetoric of the Soviet military propaganda did not quite match the often dismal reality.¹³

Underlying and exacerbating these uncomfortable revelations were serious economic problems. While the Soviet soldier had never been well paid, up until the system began to collapse, there were adequate funds (and a system of control) to ensure that their basic needs were met. Until the late 1980s, the Soviet officer enjoyed a higher level of status and quality of life than the average worker. Though duty conditions were demanding, as defenders of the socialist cause, military officers had access to a number of benefits and perks. This preferential treatment began to decline with Gorbachev's endless tinkering to retool and invigorate the Soviet economy. The subsequent economic meltdown was sorely felt by those in uniform. Besides openly complaining of the reforms, some officers began to use their rank and authority for less than patriotic endeavors. Corruption exploded within the military.¹⁴

Shamanov graduated from the Frunze Combined Arms Military Academy in 1989, just as the Soviet geo-political framework was beginning

¹³ For a good synopsis of many of the problems in the Soviet military of the late 1980s, see Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁴ Gorbachev's economic, social, and political reforms exacerbated the humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan for those in the military. The Soviet leader's 'new thinking' and perestroika were built on the economic necessity of spending less on defense. Gorbachev understood that the USSR needed to transform itself into a country with a military rather than an armed camp with a country. With the onslaught of information from the West (particularly with regard to material comparisons), the Party leadership understood that to retain its political primacy, it had to provide more in the way of consumer goods. Coercion had proven non-cost effective, and perhaps granting limited freedoms could jump-start the Soviet economy. As a first step, Gorbachev began to place limits on how much of the state's budget would be allocated to defense. Alongside corruption, grumbling was soon heard within the military's higher ranks.

to crumble. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the repudiation and disavowal of the communist party principles in Eastern Europe led to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. There was no longer a need to garrison tens of thousands of Soviet forces to protect the Marxist-Leninist cause within these former socialist states. Although these Soviet military units need not have felt humiliation at the tectonic shifts in the political structure of Eastern Europe, many officers and soldiers were certainly angered and mortified with the sorry planning and provisioning for their relocation back to the USSR. These 'defenders of the socialist cause' rarely received any sort of welcome home, and many units found themselves without adequate housing and facilities.

Armed now with his diploma from the Combined Arms academy, Shamanov served as the Deputy Regimental Commander for the 300th Regiment of the 98th Airborne Division in Moldova (Chisinau/Kishenov). As an ethnic Russian, he would have felt first-hand the humiliation, confusion, and sense of betrayal as Soviet units were planning to redeploy out of Eastern Europe. Had not Soviet forces liberated these countries from the fascist plague? Where was the gratitude? The mortification only grew worse as the former republics of the USSR began to move toward greater sovereignty. Stationed in the Moldovan capital, Russian speakers like Shamanov grew anxious, when in 1989, Moldovan was recognized as the official state language. Soon there were rumors that Moldova might possibly unify with Romania or even seek independence.¹⁵

Although little has been published about Shamanov's actual military experience with the 98th Airborne Division in Moldova (Kishinev), it is possible to extrapolate the general picture. He was in the midst of a collapsing empire, and as a native Russian and Soviet officer, he likely shared the sympathies of those who were trying to maintain some semblance of Soviet control. One of his more famous fellow airborne comrades, General Alexander Lebed, described what life was like for a senior airborne officer during this traumatic period. (General Lebed's brother, Alexei, actually commanded the division in Kishinev to which Shamanov was assigned.) The Russian title of Lebed's book (*Za Derzhavy Obidno; I am Ashamed of My Country*) captures the overall sentiment of both this memoir and the general situation.¹⁶ Lebed graphically describes the Soviet officer's confusion, humiliation, and the growing anger toward their political leaders. These officers had taken an oath to defend a country and political system that was

¹⁵ There was nothing preordained about how the Warsaw Pact and the USSR collapsed, and there were many in Soviet uniforms who advocated using force, if necessary, to hold the Kremlin/Russian-dominated camp together.

¹⁶ General Alexander Lebed, *My Life and My Country* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery 1997). The original Russian version of this memoir was written in 1995: Alexander Lebed, *Za Derzhavy Obidno . . .* (Moscow: Moskovskaya Pravda 1995).

dissolving before their eyes, and these same communist-political leaders were often the guilty party in hastening the collapse.

By mid-1991, while the political, ideological, and economic threads further unraveled, the situation in the Soviet Union became increasingly more fragile. As the tenets of the communist party were discredited, nationalism soon filled much of the ideological void. For instance, as Moldova moved toward greater independence from Moscow, those ethnic Russians living (many with connections to the Soviet-Russian military) on the right side of the Dneister River (sometimes referred to as Transdneister) began to clamor for a closer alignment with Russia or for their own sovereignty. Shamanov, however, departed Moldova in 1991 and thus avoided the inter-ethnic conflict which broke out in this region in early 1992.¹⁷ There is some conjecture that he left Moldova early because he had fallen out with the division commander (General Alexei Lebed), who did not take well to those who had avoided service in Afghanistan.¹⁸

The many details behind the failed coup of August 1991 lie beyond the scope of this article. One observation, however, is pertinent and merits attention. The tipping point of the episode involved an airborne division commander who decided *not* to use force to dispel President Yeltsin and his supporters from the Russian White House (Supreme Soviet building) in downtown Moscow. Indeed, some have suggested that the initial first, faltering steps in the fate of post-Soviet Russia were taken by a courageous airborne officer.¹⁹ They may yet be repeated.

From Moldova, in 1991, Shamanov was reassigned to Azerbaijan (Kirovabad/ Ganca) just as the USSR was coming apart at the seams. He now commanded the 328th Airborne Regiment (104th Guards Airborne Division) and, according to his official biography, his unit helped to quell the ethnic violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan when fighting broke out over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh. The truth of Soviet/Russian military involvement in this conflict is infinitely more complex. As the central Soviet political, military, and economic systems of control were falling apart, there would have been strong temptations for a cash-strapped airborne commander to 'sell' his services to the highest bidder. Recall that, after December 1991, the centralized Soviet control over these forces had grown more tenuous, and administration and logistics were a muddle. In

¹⁷ Another famous Russian airborne commander, General Alexander Lebed played a somewhat ambiguous role in helping to resolve this crisis.

¹⁸ Vladimir Voronov, 'General V Stroi,' [General in Ranks], *New Times*, 17 December 2007 http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/6203?phrase_id=378847 (accessed 21 May 2010). His fellow airborne officers likely felt some resentment toward their comrade who had avoided service in Afghanistan.

¹⁹ The full truth behind the events of 19–21 August 1991 may never be known. General Lebed provides a detailed accounting of the role he played during this fateful period, aptly describing the confusion and deceit among the key players. Lebed, *My Life and My Country*, 1997. Alexander Lebed, *Za Derzhavy Obidno . . .*, 1995.

early 1992, former Soviet military leaders planned to create a unified military to defend the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but effective command and control over the Russian military units stationed abroad had yet to be fully established. There have been allegations that members of the 104th Airborne Division fought/provided services to opposite sides of the conflict.²⁰ To this day, Shamanov wears an award bestowed by the Azeri leadership.

The fight over Nagorno Karabakh was just one in a series of conflicts that erupted as the USSR began to crumble. Glasnost and increasing poverty exacerbated an already tense ethnic situation in a number of republics and provided a spark for long-standing feuds. The Soviet political leadership had earlier ordered the military to intervene in places like Tbilisi, Baku, and Vilnius to quell the ethnic and political violence. When blood was subsequently spilt to restore order, however, this same political leadership disavowed or waffled in their responsibility, leaving military leaders with the blame. For someone like Shamanov, faith in the political leadership had to have been damaged. His circle of trust had narrowed to include few other than his fellow airborne officers.

Alongside the economic, ethnic, and political shocks, the new Russian military leadership played a diminished role within the global security system. The early 1990s were certainly difficult for most Russians, and for a mid-ranking officer like Shamanov, the economic and social decline would have been aggravated by a profound sense of humiliation. Their primary Cold War rival had declared victory and had flexed its unilateral might in defeating the Iraqi military (and one-time Soviet ally) during the First Gulf War. Shamanov would likely echo his onetime commander-in-chief (and later, primary patron) in professing that the 'collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.'²¹ Stationed in Azerbaijan, Shamanov may have begun to feel like a second-class citizen in one of the empire's former colonies. Aggravating these humiliations were the economic hardships, as the ruble collapsed in value as Russia and the other former republics of the USSR were shocked into a new market economy. Compared to Soviet times, there was little status in being commander of an airborne regiment.

The overall political, economic, and social conditions continued to deteriorate in Russia and the former Soviet Union, and by the time Shamanov's unit relocated to the Ulyanovsk region in mid-1993, Russia was on the verge of civil war. The military played a decidedly ambiguous role during the

²⁰ See Michael Taarnby, 'The Mujahedin in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Case Study in the Evolution of Global Jihad,' Real Instituto (Working Paper) 9 May 2008 <http://www.scribd.com/doc/21698244/The-Mujahedin-in-Nagorno-Karabakh-A-Case-Study-in-the-Evolution-of-Global-Jihad> (accessed 17 June 2010).

²¹ 'Putin deploras collapse of USSR,' BBC News, 25 April 2005 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm> (accessed 29 April 2010).

events of October 1993, when the showdown between pro-Yeltsin and (for want of a better term) opposition forces exploded on the streets of Moscow. Polls from that time reveal the military divided as to which side had the more legitimate claim to power. When renegade 'President' Rutskoi appealed to the military for support, only a fraction responded. It is unclear whether Shamanov's brigade was alerted during this time period or not, and if it had been, which side he would have supported. More than likely, even if he had wanted to storm the Kremlin, his unit lacked the personnel and equipment to reach Moscow. In 1994, from Ulyanvosk, Shamanov was promoted to general and reassigned as the division Chief of Staff for the 7th Airborne Division in Novorossisk. His first real test as a Russian military commander was not long in coming.

CHECHNYA 1994–96

When the USSR came apart at the Soviet seams in late 1991, there were some within the Chechen Autonomous Republic who believed that, like the other constituent republics, the Chechens had an equal claim to greater independence from the Kremlin. Up until late 1994, Chechen leaders had taken President Yeltsin's admonition to 'take as much independence as they could handle' to heart, seizing control of federal agencies (army, police, secret service, tax revenues, etc.), creating independent Chechen forces, and forcibly evicting much of the non-Chechen population.²² Former Soviet Air Force General, Dzhokar Dudayev was elected as Chechen president in 1992, and one of his key platforms was greater Chechen independence.²³

The reasons behind the first Russian-Chechen war of 1994–96 are manifold, complex, and obscure. Using both legitimate and not-so legal methods, by mid-1994, the Russian leadership had attempted to regain political control of the region and install a more Kremlin-friendly leader in the Chechen capital of Grozny. Half-hearted negotiations to work out a new power sharing agreement continued until mid-1994, but broke off when Kremlin officials decided to use force to remove Dudayev and reinstate the Kremlin's mandate over Chechnya. The last straw before the botched December 1994 military invasion occurred in November 1994, when a group of Russian soldiers/security personnel (who had been captured after a failed

²² Eduard Ponarin, 'Changing Federalism and the Islamic Challenge in Tatarstan,' *Demokratizatsiya*, Summer 2008.

²³ Contrary to much western analysis, however, there was an equal, if not greater number of Chechens, who did not support the Dudayev clan's call for independence and wanted to remain a part of Russia.

Russian-sponsored armed revolt against President Dudayev) were paraded by their Chechen captors on Russian national TV.

There were other cogent reasons as to why some Russians were reluctant to see an independent Chechnya, including concerns that Chechen independence might be the first domino in a series of sovereignty claims in the Northern Caucasus and elsewhere. Besides the political precedent that Chechen independence would establish, there were considerable economic interests at stake. Chechnya served as a key transit point for oil out of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, and losing control of this pipeline network and refining capability would have had serious economic consequences for Russian business interests. The immediate cause, however, for the poorly planned and executed invasion into Chechnya in late December 1994 most likely stemmed from internal Russian politics. Opposition to the Yeltsin economic reforms was becoming ever more pronounced among the majority of Russians, and the ruling circle may have seen the logic with starting a 'splendid little war' to deflect domestic criticism.²⁴

Defense Minister Pavel Grachev (another airborne officer) had earlier boasted that he could take the Chechen capital of Grozny in a couple hours with a single airborne regiment.²⁵ By the time Shamanov's unit received combat orders in March 1995, the Russian military had already taken a beating, both literally and figuratively. Russian and international observers were appalled at the sorry state of Russian military operations, equipment, and soldier morale, the seeming casual disregard for innocent human life, and the tenacity of the Chechen fighters. The Russian military had been forced to literally raze Grozny into rubble to gain control of the capital. Even then, their power over the region remained tenuous.

Some have recently tried to transform Shamanov's experience during the first Chechen war (1994–96) into a heroic legend. The story is portrayed as the dedicated airborne commander, ordered to crush a vicious separatist movement in Chechnya, ruthlessly set out to accomplish the mission while taking care of his men. Yermolov-like, he systematically destroyed the enemy (with considerable collateral damage, which played well among nationalists), imposing strict military order within the conquered territories. Just when he had the last of the enemy cornered and the war almost won, the politicians stole victory from his grip by reassigning him to Moscow.²⁶

The reality, however, was much more complicated. For anyone studying the recent Chechen campaigns, the lines between truth and falsehood, good and evil, civilian and combatant, war and terror, were not so easily

²⁴ For an excellent analysis on the causes of the First Chechen War, see the recent interview with Alexander Cherkassov <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/netak/683055-echo/> (accessed 16 June 2010).

²⁵ 'Botched Operation,' *The Nation*, January, 1995.

²⁶ To get a feel for modern Russian hagiography, see Konstantin Rashchepkin, Andrey Lunev, and Viktor Pyatkov, 'A Soldier Does not Choose the War,' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 29 May 2009 http://www.redstar.ru/2009/05/29_05/2_01.html (accessed 24 May 2010).

drawn. Shamanov arrived in Chechnya in March 1995 as the Chief of Staff of the 7th (Novorossisk) Airborne Division. Having largely destroyed the capital Grozny in the two previous months of vicious fighting, the Russian security forces had forced many of the Chechen fighters to seek refuge in the mountainous region to the south of the capital.²⁷ Russian military units like the 7th Airborne Division began to isolate and eliminate these pockets of resistance. While the destruction of Grozny displayed the raw (and some say, poorly trained) power of the Russian military, later engagements (particularly those where airborne and special forces were involved) demonstrated a high degree of precision, flexibility, and intelligence (as well as ruthlessness, cruelty, and corruption).

Still, even among the more elite Russian forces, the distinction between Chechen combatant and civilian was not easily drawn. In an effort to secure the territory and destroy the enemy, Shamanov demonstrated little concern for 'collateral damage' among innocent Chechens. He soon gained the reputation of favoring massive firepower to protect his soldiers, intimidate the enemy, and accomplish the mission. According to Shamanov's logic, if Chechen fighters hid among civilians, it was incumbent for these same civilians to help identify and turn these fighters over to Russian forces. His reasoning was simple: if Chechen civilians did not betray their sons, fathers, and neighbors who were fighting for Chechen independence, then these same civilians were complicit and could be treated as the enemy.²⁸

Unlike some of his peers, Shamanov believed in leading from the front and adopting (and sometimes modifying) the tactics and strategy of his enemy. In the near chaos of the Chechen battlefield, where corruption and poverty helped to expose both loyalties and flanks, and where trust and intelligence often went to the highest bidder, Shamanov placed his confidence within a very small circle of airborne comrades. By late spring 1995, airborne forces had succeeded in seizing a number of Chechen strongholds. Shamanov's courage and impetuosity, however, soon resulted in personal injury. Frustrated at the rate of advance in one particular operation, he personally commandeered an armored vehicle (BTR), which quickly proceeded to hit a mine. Shamanov suffered a concussion and was evacuated to a field

²⁷ There were a wide variety of Russian uniformed personnel involved in this 'anti-terrorist' operation. Effective command, control, and coordination of these forces presented considerable challenges.

²⁸ Anna Politkovskaya, 'Ya Shamanov' [I am Shamanov], *Novaya Gazeta*, 19 June 2000. <http://politkovskaya.novayagazeta.ru/pub/2000/2000-038.shtml> (accessed 17 June 2010). This ruthless strategy may have appealed to Shamanov's soldiers, and those Russians hungry for vengeance for the earlier crimes of the Dudayev regime, but it certainly did not help to win the hearts and minds of the moderate Chechens. In what was to become a familiar refrain over the next decade, Russian combat savagery was met with, resisted and sometimes exceeded by Chechen brutality. Given the impossible mission of trying to determine the political loyalty of the Chechen population, Russian military and police units often resorted to the indiscriminate use of force, intimidation, and torture. For a brief synopsis of Shamanov's attitude toward the role of Chechen civilians, see the above interview he gave to Anna Politkovskaya. Also reviewed in: Vladimir Voronin, 'Udivitel'naya Kareerya Generala Shamanova.'

hospital. Again, separating fact from fiction is difficult, but the 'official' story tells how Shamanov, before being fully healed, demanded to be released from the hospital (going so far as to threaten a doctor) to return to his unit.²⁹ By early summer 1995, Russian forces were in control of much of Chechnya and separatist forces were faltering.

At about the same time Shamanov was recovering from his injuries, the Chechens counter-attacked in a novel and ruthless insurgent fashion. Loading up a couple trucks with armed fighters, Chechen rebel leader, Shamil Basayev, proceeded north across the Chechen border to take the fight into the Russian heartland. Having bribed his way through a number of Russian checkpoints, Basayev and about 100 Chechen fighters reached the city of Budennovsk, 75 miles north of Chechnya. After attacking the police headquarters, the Chechen rebels seized and took hostage the local hospital with some 1,500 patients and staff. Basayev claimed that he would kill all the hostages unless peace negotiations were started, and he and his men given safe passage back to Chechnya. After two unsuccessful attempts to dislodge and destroy Basayev and his fellow terrorists, the Russians agreed to the Chechen demands. This 'victory' breathed new life into the Chechen cause, and the pause in fighting allowed the Chechen fighter's time to regroup and re-arm. While half-hearted peace negotiations were restarted, the war was to continue to grind on for another year.

An incident from October 1995 involving Colonel Shamanov represents a snapshot and the nature of the fight at this time. His unit received intelligence that an airport in neighboring Ingushetia was to be attacked by Chechen separatists. Shamanov led a portion of his airborne forces to repel this suspected attack. In their attempt to secure the airport on arrival, his troops opened fire, killing one and injuring three local Ingush. Unfortunately for the Russian soldiers, there were no Chechens in the vicinity. A subsequent investigation found Shamanov guilty of poor planning and one of his soldiers of theft from the airport restaurant. The soldier was found guilty, but no charges were filed against Shamanov. Typically, they were both later amnestied and the charges subsequently dropped.³⁰

As the seemingly senseless fighting continued, and the economic conditions in the country continued to deteriorate, more Russians lost faith in the war and in their commander-in-chief, Boris Yeltsin. As the Russian press was still largely uncensored at this time, the horrors of modern combat were delivered raw to the people, most often on the nightly TV news. Though Yeltsin's approval ratings were below 10% in mid-1995, and plagued with serious health problems, he decided to run again for the post of Russian President. Kremlin insiders believed that some sort of peace agreement

²⁹ Vladimir Voronov, 'Shamanov Day,' *Profil*, 8 June 2009.

³⁰ Vladimir Voronin *Sovershennoye Secretno*, July 2009.

with the Chechens (either through military victory or negotiations) would improve their candidate's chances. While one Russian hand was gesturing toward peace talks, the other was pointing toward smashing the Chechens with military power.

This dual (some might say contradictory) approach to resolving the conflict in Chechnya was personified in the Russian commanders who were leading operations. By April 1996, now Major General Shamanov was the top commander for Russian Army forces in Chechnya, subordinate to the overall Russian military commander for Chechnya, Lieutenant General Vyachislav Tikhomirov. As part of his presidential campaign, Yeltsin had promised that he would work toward a peace agreement in Chechnya and that 'every round fired would be investigated.' The war, however, raged on. Playing on the names of these two officers (Shamanov-related to a shaman, or someone who deludes; Tikhomirov-related to the word for quieting/pacifying), a popular saying said that 'Tikhomirov will continue to Shamanit (delude), while Shamanov will go on pacifying.'³¹

Trying to decipher the events that occurred in and around Chechnya and the Kremlin, from May until late August 1996, is like un-stacking a deformed matroshka doll. Yeltsin was able to cobble together a second presidential electoral victory, thanks largely to funds from Russia's richest oligarchs who used their media holdings to discredit the communist opponent. The cost, however, was high. Besides selling off some of the Kremlin's 'crown jewels' (i.e., the once nationalized oil and gas assets) to his wealthy campaign supporters, Yeltsin was also forced to form an alliance of sorts with another airborne general, Alexander Lebed. In exchange for an appointment to the position of Secretary of Security Council of the Russian Federation, Lebed agreed to back Yeltsin in the second round of presidential election, helping him to obtain more than 51% of the vote.

Bringing peace to Chechnya had been one of Yeltsin's campaign promises, and once the election was over, Yeltsin dispatched his new security advisor, General Lebed to hammer out a peace deal with the Chechens. The Khasavyurt accords that were signed in August 1996 were a Trotsky-like creation, bringing neither peace nor war. The agreement was more of a ceasefire, where Russia agreed to pull its military forces out of Chechnya. Presumably, during the five-year period of the accords (1996–2001), Russian and Chechen leaders would work out their political differences. Unfortunately, Chechen society and the general infrastructure had been badly damaged during the war, and since most of the funding for reconstruction of Chechnya was misappropriated or stolen, the region became ever more unstable. By mid-1998, kidnapping and extortion had

³¹ Vyachislav Izmailov, 'Who Is General Shamanov?' [Кто такой генерал Шаманов] *Novaya Gazeta*, 29 December 1999 http://www.compromat.ru/page_9289.htm (accessed 20 June 2010).

become the key industries. The frail, haphazard nature of this peace agreement was no match for those who wanted revenge or who saw this war as profitable.

One month prior to this ceasefire being signed, Shamanov had departed Chechnya to attend the General Staff Academy in Moscow. While the Khasavyurt negotiations were taking place, many Russians believed that ending the war was more important than 'winning,' as victory was so ill-defined. That assessment, however, particularly from the military's perspective, has evolved over time.³² With his fortuitous reassignment back to Moscow, Shamanov could later maintain (along with many other senior Russian officers), that the Russian army had been on the cusp of victory in August 1996 when they were stabbed in the back by corrupt politicians.³³ The history could be spun even further, to include assertions that Chechen bandits waited until Shamanov had been reassigned before making their final assault on Grozny.³⁴

An incident from June 1996 is emblematic both of the vicious nature of the fight and Shamanov's method of operation. Recall that President Yeltsin had just been re-elected and that the Russian press was still largely uncensored. When a Russian officer and a couple of reporters went to investigate alleged war crimes against Chechen civilians perpetrated by forces under Shamanov's control, they were summoned by the General. According to later testimony, General Shamanov threatened to kill the military officer if he didn't stop snooping around. Perhaps Shamanov believed that he had done his part to get Yeltsin elected and did not appreciate those who dared to examine the costs. Only after Shamanov was transferred to Moscow did this officer-journalist dare to continue his investigation.³⁵ The results went unheeded; another Russian crime without punishment.

CHECHEN WAR 2

Even with the end of open hostilities in Chechnya, the mid- to late 1990s was a time of trial for most Russians, particularly those in military uniform. Beset with political uncertainty, growing corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiency, the economy continued to shrink in the painful and often fraudulent transition to a market economy. The privatization scheme to divide up the

³² Seely, p. 302.

³³ A decade later, Shamanov would admit that the 'stab-in-the-back' peace process had brought him to the edge of suicide. See Andrey Vandenko, 'Airborne Career General,' *Itoji*, 3 August 2009. He strongly criticized Lebed for his actions in helping to draw up this ceasefire. See Sukhova. He would also claim that his reassignment had been a complete surprise to him. See, Aleksey Pobortsev, 'On the Other Side of the War,' *NTV* documentary, 2 September 2005.

³⁴ Konstantin Rashchepkin.

³⁵ Izmailov, *Novaya Gazeta*, 29 December 1999. at: http://www.compromat.ru/page_9289.htm.

Soviet legacy among the Russian populace resulted in massive theft and fraud, where only a small percentage (the so-called 'oligarchs') ended up with the lion's share of the wealth. Increasing numbers of average Russians criticized the pro-western political orientation the Yeltsin government had adopted. For many in the Russian security realm, the West seemed intent on taking advantage of country's economic and political weakness. Russian airborne-turned 'peacekeeping' forces had been given a subordinate (and closely monitored role) in the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. NATO continued to expand, to include former Warsaw Pact allies, and by the end of the decade, the western alliance was making overtures to include the Baltic countries (former republics of the USSR).

The Russian political/economic situation continued to deteriorate throughout the summer of 1998. Just about the time Shamanov graduated from the General Staff Academy, the Russian banking system collapsed, sending the ruble into freefall. Even with loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government defaulted on their foreign debt which further devalued the Russian currency. This devaluation wiped out the savings of most Russians for the second time within a decade. The distressed economy made it very difficult for those in military service to survive just on their salary. In a later interview, Shamanov recounted how he and his fellow officers would pool their spare change just to buy a pack of cigarettes.³⁶ Many military officers were forced to moonlight (loading trucks or driving a taxi) to make ends barely meet. Even when these officers did get paid (often after months of waiting), their salary provided just enough for the basics. Some officers began to look for other sources of income.

The Russian General Staff College is similar to its counterpart in the United States, where upper-level officers study the theoretical foundations of war and associated subjects. Most officers regard this schooling as a break from the demands of normal military duty. During the period when Shamanov attended, the country was being rocked to its very foundations with political and economic instability. Instead of focusing on one of the traditional military disciplines, Shamanov concentrated on an area known as 'informatics.' While winning the hearts and minds of the people has always been an important military consideration, with advanced technology, controlling the flow of information has become the *sine qua non* for victory. Shamanov would later put this knowledge to good use.

Upon graduation, Shamanov took command of the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army stationed in Voronezh. Despite the esteem associated with this legendary formation, this assignment must have been a trying experience, as funding for the military was barely adequate to keep the lights on and the soldiers fed. The 20th Guards Army has been withdrawn from East

³⁶ Politkovskaya, *Novaya Gazeta*, No. 42, 19 June 2000.

Germany in the early 1990s and had never been fully reconstituted. Besides the general funding shortfalls, by early 1999, there were serious questions as to the size and composition of the Russian military. The first Chechen war had exposed catastrophic problems with manning, training, and equipment. While on paper this Combined Arms Army command appeared impressive, the reality was considerably more humble.

With regard to national security and prestige, 1999 could serve as the nadir for post-Soviet Russia. Political confusion reigned within the Kremlin as the increasingly out-of-touch President Yeltsin changed governments about every 90 days. Serious economic problems combined with growing corruption and a deteriorating infrastructure made daily life a challenge for many Russians. There was considerable mud-slinging and muckraking in the privatized, partisan, and oligarch-controlled press over who would become the next Russian president. Aggravating this domestic confusion was the continued seeming insolence of their former superpower rival. Ignoring Russian demands for a U.N. resolution (which would have never been granted with Russia in the Security Council), a U.S.-led NATO operation began in March 1999 to force Serbian forces out of Kosovo. Despite evidence of continued Serbian violence against the Albanian Kosovars, for many Russians this war against the Serbs was a blatant demonstration of the unilateral and aggressive pretensions of the United States, NATO, and the West.

There was a curious incident from this conflict that illustrated the ambiguity (some might say, breakdown) in Russian military command and control. Perhaps serving as a precursor of Russia's future strategic direction, in June 1999, Russian airborne forces relocated from their peacekeeping positions in Bosnia to seize the main airport in Kosovo. To this day, it is still not altogether clear who within the Russian government structure was responsible for this decision. Given the complex and confused domestic politics at the time, there is conjecture that someone within the Russian security establishment apparently decided to act on their own. While this demonstration of force had little strategic value for the Serbs or the Russians, it did remind the Kremlin leadership (and to a lesser degree, the United States and NATO) that there were some within Russia who were willing to use force to protect the country's interests. The incident also raised troubling questions as to overall command and control of the Russian armed forces.³⁷

The transfer of political power in Russia has almost always been fraught with considerable tension and scheming. This was certainly the case in the late summer, early fall of 1999 as President Yeltsin prepared to step down after two terms. Much would depend on who would become Russia's future

³⁷ For an extremely in-depth examination of this incident and its possible connection to the renewed fighting in Chechnya, see the extremely well-researched analysis: Lajos F. Szászd, *Russian Civil-Military Relations and the Origins Of The Second Chechen War* (Lanham, MD: University Press, 2008).

president. As the political fight began to heat up in Moscow, (coincidentally) the situation in the North Caucasus began to boil with reports of Chechen fighters moving into Dagestan.³⁸

Within weeks of the appointment of former Federal Security Service, FSB (formerly known as the KGB) Director, Vladimir Putin being named as the new Prime Minister, there were a series of mysterious explosions in apartment buildings in Moscow and other cities. The new steely-eyed prime minister quickly blamed the Chechens for these terrorist attacks and promised to 'wipe the terrorists out in the shit-house.'³⁹ Additional Russian security forces were dispatched into Dagestan to dislodge Chechen 'terrorists' who had crossed into the neighboring region. Putin's tough talk combined with a desire for revenge and *porядok* (order) resulted in increased political support for the new prime minister. Practically overnight, the formerly unknown Putin became a presidential favorite.

Whether coincidence or part of a larger strategic plan, Shamanov was transferred from Voronezh to take command of the 58th Combined Arms Army with headquarters in Vladikavkaz, just as the Russians were preparing to re-engage militarily with Chechnya (see Figure 3). Russian military and security planning for the second fight against the Chechens was much more thorough and deliberate. When in late summer 1999, the military discovered that it lacked the requisite trained manpower to immediately augment the units in the North Caucasus, plans were delayed until the forces could be repositioned.⁴⁰ What the Russians may have lacked in trained manpower, they made up for with ordinance and better intelligence.



FIGURE 3 Shamanov, Cdr 58 th Army, 1999.

Source: Kompromat.ru.

³⁸ A smart Russian analyst recently remarked, 'War in the Caucasus is always a war for the Kremlin.' See Andrey Piontkovskiy, 'The Smell of Corpses Is Getting Stronger and Stronger,' *Grani.ru*, 30 June 2009. Some conspiracy theorists claim that Chechen fighters were paid by Russian oligarchs to initiate hostilities.

³⁹ This quote by the then new prime minister has now become immortalized and can be found in hundreds of citations. A copy of the original fragment from September 1999 can be found at: <http://dmitri-medvedev.com/news/2007/12/27/putin-mochit-v-sortire/> (accessed 20 July 2011)

⁴⁰ 'During the second military operation in the North Caucasus in 1999, the General Staff needed to beef up the grouping to 65,000 servicemen, but it was discovered that there were 55,000 in combat-ready

Initially, Russian military units (to include General Shamanov as the commander of the 58th Army) were directed to merely turn back the Chechen foray into Dagestan, but as the autumn approached, the mission soon widened to include re-establishing constitutional (Kremlin) control over all of Chechnya.

Why the military mission expanded is a matter of some debate. (Then) Prime Minister Putin derived considerable public relations value in satisfying the average Russian's desire for revenge against the alleged dastardly Chechen terrorists. Pushing Chechen forces out of Dagestan would have likely been enough to guarantee a Putin presidential victory, yet the Russian military wanted more. A decisive victory would allow the military to redeem itself after the humiliation of the 1996 ceasefire.⁴¹ Economics may have also played a role. Given the floundering economy, some in uniform may hoped to profit from renewed hostilities.⁴² Patriotism was also a factor. With much blood shed during the 1994–96 war, Russian commanders were reluctant to talk of limited objectives, where Chechen fighters could hide to attack another day. Having promised to clean up the 'terrorist shithouse,' Putin's presidential aspirations became linked with the heavy hand of the Russian military regaining the Kremlin's political mandate over all of Chechnya.⁴³

General Shamanov understood this political-military equation (i.e., use the war to get Putin elected), and was unwilling to allow the politicians to treat the military merely as a public relations tool. When, in November 1999, after three months of renewed fighting, suggestions were made for Russian forces to halt their advance into Chechnya (returning to the status quo of a semi-independent Chechnya), General Shamanov (and other key generals) threatened to resign.⁴⁴ The Russian military was going to destroy the Chechen separatist movement once and for all, even if this entailed killing, injuring, and alienating a significant portion of the Chechen civilian population. Prime Minister Putin shared the sympathies of his generals and the war expanded.⁴⁵

If the first Chechen war of 1994–96 was characterized by sloppiness and ruthlessness, then the second (1999–2009) was marked by an even greater

subunits, and those were scattered around the country. There was no one to fight and no one was capable of fighting in Armed Forces of almost 1.5 million men.' Viktor Kutishchev and Georgiy Ryabokon, 'Russia Needs Strong Armed Forces,' *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, 10 August 2008.

⁴¹ Musa Muradov, 'Assault Will Begin in Late-October. Grozny Commandant Reveals Military Plan,' *Kommersant*, 20 October 1999.

⁴² A. Cherkassov makes a convincing argument that this war had more to with making money than with restoring territorial integrity. See recent interview with Alexander Cherkassov <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/netak/683055-echo/> (accessed 16 June 2010).

⁴³ Vladimir Terekhov, 'We Can't Stand Another Khasavyurt,' *VEK* No. 42, 29 October 1999.

⁴⁴ Ilya Bulavinov, 'Defense Minister Takes Offensive. Generals Study Pakistani Experience,' *Kommersant*, 9 November 1999.

⁴⁵ There was a wide variety of Russian security forces involved in the Chechen campaigns (police, internal forces, intelligence operatives etc.). The Russian catch-all term for these forces is 'siloviki.'

(though perhaps more accurate) viciousness and information control. The Russian military leadership learned to expend ammunition instead of soldiers, though Russian military losses still numbered in the hundreds. The other lesson learned was in the realm of information operations, and as the war progressed, the security authorities increasingly controlled the flow of information in and around the battlefield. Access to the region became restricted for journalists and foreigners (particularly human rights groups), and Russian military blunders/crimes would no longer highlight the evening news. Just the opposite, as Russian viewers were told each night of new successes in destroying terrorist groups, and in winning over Chechen hearts and minds. With his degree in 'informatics,' Shamanov was putting this knowledge to good use. Even so, the often indiscriminate application of violence continued.

An incident from late October 1999 reflects the lack of effective military-security coordination that often resulted in an even heavier-handed Russian approach. As Russian forces were about to seal off an area to trap the 'bandit terrorists,' the local Chechen civilian population had been directed to evacuate into neighboring Ingushetia via a designated checkpoint. A long line of traffic formed adjacent to the checkpoint, but the Russian soldiers manning the checkpoint would not allow the Chechens to pass. There were not only questions as to which Russian security agency actually had the authority to allow these refugees to leave, but also who was permitted to depart and under what circumstances. It is not clear who gave the order, but while waiting for permission to pass through the checkpoint, the waiting civilian convoy was attacked by Russian combat aircraft and a number of Chechen civilians were killed. Although not directly implicated, since Shamanov was the overall commander of this region, he was subsequently charged with war crimes by human rights organizations.⁴⁶

As the Chechen separatists/terrorists would often take refuge among noncombatants, defining friend from foe was both time-consuming and dangerous. Russian forces set up a system of filtration camps throughout the region where the mission was to identify, incarcerate, and punish those with separatist or terrorist tendencies. Not surprisingly, these camps soon gained fame for their indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force. Many innocent Chechens were detained, tortured, or 'disappeared.' The operation of these camps fell outside of the Russian military's mandate, but like the air attack incident above, Shamanov has been charged with condoning or at

⁴⁶ This incident at the Chechen-Ingush checkpoint illustrated a host of problems connected with this operation, particularly with regard to command and control. For details see Yevgeniy Krutikov, 'Yes Sir, General!', *Izvestiya*, 4 November 1999. For more thorough background on some of the political machinations that aggravated the fighting in Chechnya, see Vladimir Gutnov, "Commander of West Grouping in Chechnya Vladimir Shamanov: 'We Have Chosen the Only Correct Tactic,'" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 4 November 1999.

least turning a blind eye to this state-sponsored violence in areas under his control.

The problem with identifying friend from foe was further complicated by international borders. As the fighting raged on, Russian politicians and generals began to accuse the Georgian authorities of giving Chechen terrorists safe haven along the border between Georgia and Russia/Chechnya. During a later interview, Shamanov openly expressed his desire to teach the 'treacherous' Georgians a lesson. It would take nearly a decade but he was able to wreak his vengeance in August 2008.⁴⁷

As New Year 2000 approached, the war's brutality and destruction grew fiercer, with daily reports of atrocities (on both sides) and human rights violations. While the military tried to limit press exposure in the region, the horrors of the war were still being covered in the major papers and TV news. Shamanov grew ever more adept with his own public relation skills, playing on the nationalist and xenophobic fears of the average Russian. He was a frank and unfiltered spokesperson for the Russian military, recounting the vicious duplicity of the Chechen fighters (who allegedly were being supported by different foreign forces).⁴⁸

Threats by Shamanov to 'tear off his stars' if the Russian military advance was halted was not his only act of insubordination. Having fought and suffered in the first Chechen campaign, Shamanov was perturbed that the overall military commander in Chechnya (General Viktor Kazantsev) lacked similar combat experience. On more than one occasion, Shamanov was to have remarked (in front of other officers) that he was not about to follow orders of such an inexperienced leader.⁴⁹

Kazantsev was not the only general officer Shamanov quarreled with. While Shamanov attacked Chechnya from the west, his counterpart, General Gennady Troshev served as the Russian commander in the east. Having grown up in Chechnya, Troshev had adopted more reasonable methods to flushing out the Chechen terrorists. This more humane approach made Shamanov's tactics appear doubly violent. Not surprisingly, when, after Putin's successful presidential election, Troshev was promoted to take overall command of forces in Chechnya in March 2000, Shamanov began to look for another job.⁵⁰

Having received the presidential mandate, Putin was no longer willing to tolerate insubordination among his generals. Shamanov had been

⁴⁷ Rashchepkin, Lunev, and Pyatkov, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 29 May 2009.

⁴⁸ Terekhov *VEK*, 29 October 1999. Also see Tatyana Gantimurova, 'Interview with Russian General Vladimir Shamanov,' *Nalchik Severnyy Kavkaz*, 28 December 1999. Here Shamanov claims that Ukrainian nationalists were responsible for murdering Chechen civilians.

⁴⁹ Voronin, 'Amazing Career.' Also, Vladimir Voronov, *Profil*, 8 June 2009.

⁵⁰ For a not-so-flattering analysis of Shamanov's relations with other senior army generals during the war in Chechnya, see Vladimir Voronov, *Profil*, 14 June 2009.

awarded the Hero of Russia award in December 1999. However, shortly after Putin's presidential victory in March 2000, it became clear that Shamanov's battlefield 'skills' were no longer needed.⁵¹ The tipping point that led to his dismissal likely dealt with war crime allegations, either against him personally or those against one of his subordinates, Colonel Yuri Budanov. In what would have normally been covered up, in early March 2000, Colonel Budanov was charged with the kidnapping and murder (and possible rape) of a young Chechen girl. The case received wide publicity. Most of the senior Russian military leadership condemned this war crime, yet Shamanov continued to support Budanov.⁵² Budanov claimed that the young Chechen girl had been a sniper and that her death resulted from trying to escape during questioning. Beneath Shamanov's display of loyalty to Colonel Budanov were strains of vengeance and nationalism that resonated among many Russians.⁵³

With the Russian media still largely unfettered and with ongoing investigations by human rights organizations into quasi-criminal actions by Russian forces within Chechnya, Shamanov's outspoken nature turned into a liability. February and March 2000 were fraught with political tension and intrigue, as the country elected a new president. There may be much truth to the observation that the 'road to the Kremlin passes through the North Caucasus.'⁵⁴ The war had served its primary purpose of getting Putin elected. However, allegations of Russian war crimes and massive human rights violations in Chechnya reflected poorly on the new management. Putin understood that generals like Shamanov had helped him secure a presidential victory and that he could not just 'cast him aside.' Therefore, Kremlin officials began to devise a scheme to remove him while still thanking him for his efforts.⁵⁵

First there were rumors that Shamanov would be transferred to the Internal Forces (MVD). The speculations, however, proved groundless, and it is probable that Shamanov had few allies among these generals. He bided his time in late spring, early summer 2000 until a more promising offer was made. Despite the lack of any political experience, in August 2000, he

⁵¹ The specific factors that led to Shamanov's dismissal will likely never be known. It was a mixture of dissatisfaction among his political and military superiors and the bad PR surrounding some of his actions and statements. See Vladimir Gutnov, 'Russia Will not Tolerate Any Bandit Formations on Its Territory,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 December 1999.

⁵² Yuriy Gladkevich (Military News Agency), Inessa Slavutinskaya, and Yuliya Salnikova, 'The Main Hero. Ulyanovsk's Own Vladimir,' *Profil*, 18 September 2000.

⁵³ The Budanov incident is a complex tale, somewhat similar to the My Lai incident from the Vietnam War, and involving American troops, in that it could serve as barometer for how the Russian people felt toward the war in Chechnya. For a brief background, see Sophia Kishkovsky, 'Governor Backs Pardoning Russian Who Killed Chechen Woman,' *New York Times*, 21 September 2004.

⁵⁴ Piontkovskiy, *Grani.ru*, 30 June 2009.

⁵⁵ There are many versions as to why Shamanov was released. For his own take, see Konstantin Rashchepkin and Andrey Lunev, 'The Training and Look of the Armed Forces Will Change,' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 24 June 2008.

began to campaign under the Kremlin colors for the position of governor for the Ulyanovsk province. How Shamanov was able to secure the Kremlin's backing for this billet is unclear. Some have suggested that Shamanov's entry into politics was a reward for the services rendered in helping Putin get elected as president. Others point out that the communist incumbent in Ulyanovsk had been in the job for the past 15 years, and that it was time for a change.⁵⁶ Some even suggested that since Islam was becoming more popular among some youth in the region, Shamanov would serve as a potent counter-force.⁵⁷ Having been stationed in the region in the 1990s, Shamanov was likely aware of the local situation and the best avenue of political attack. Moreover, as an ex-military man, Shamanov could ride on Putin's coattails of promising to restore order after the traumatic 1990s. In December 2000, Shamanov won the gubernatorial election with 56% of the vote, running under the slogan: '*order, change, reliability.*'

SHAMANOV AS GOVERNOR

Shamanov had promised to bring a military-like order to this economically depressed region, but his tough rhetoric did not match his actions. Some of this failure can be attributed to both the problems he inherited upon taking office and his political inexperience. A much greater portion of the blame stemmed from the nature of modern Russian politics, where elected officials view their office less as a service to the Russian people and more as an opportunity to enrich themselves.⁵⁸ Shamanov was no exception, and his reign as Ulyanovsk governor was largely characterized by inefficiency and corruption. By the time he left office in 2004, Shamanov enjoyed single-digit approval ratings.⁵⁹ Although he enjoyed a few gubernatorial successes (though the record is slim), a couple incidents exemplify Shamanov's reign. He had made a campaign promise to finish construction on a new bridge over the Volga. Work had begun in the late 1980s on a second bridge over the Volga, to link city of Ulyanovsk with the large urban areas on the eastern side of the river. The turbulent years of the 1990s had halted construction, and residents of the region were forced to use the increasingly congested older bridge. Though federal authorities had allocated billions of rubles to

⁵⁶ For a good background piece on the pre-election situation in this region, see Yuriy Gladkevich (Military News Agency), Inessa Slavutinskaya, and Yuliya Salnikova, 'The Main Hero. Ulyanovsk's Own Vladimir,' *Profil*, 18 September 2000.

⁵⁷ Bakhtiyar Akhmedkhanov, 'His Orders Are: To the Volga Region! Shamanov Said: 'Yessir' Because Chechnya's Fate Is Predicted for This Region,' *Obshchaya Gazeta*, 24–30 August 2000.

⁵⁸ Theoretically, this problem of 'abuse of office' has been cured by Putin's decisions to do away with gubernatorial elections. Alas, the situation has grown much worse.

⁵⁹ Voronin. It is not altogether clear whether Shamanov continued to draw a military salary while serving as governor. He did not officially leave the Army until 2004, coming back on active duty on a 'contract basis' in 2007.

complete this project, the bridge remained unfinished when Shamanov left office.

Given the lack of transparency in the Russian economic and budgetary systems, it is impossible to prove that Shamanov personally profited from the misappropriation of funds for this project. Still, the unfinished bridge hinted at more than just mismanagement. Similarly, plans to build a large indoor ice palace, complete with hockey and ice skating facilities, reflected another misappropriation of funds. Drug and alcohol use among young people in the Ulyanovsk region was a growing problem, and Shamanov promised to build this skating facility to offer a healthy alternative. Initially, the project served as a great public relations tool for the inexperienced governor. Alas, while billions of rubles were allocated toward this project, the completed rink barely resembled the proposed plan.⁶⁰ Substance abuse remains a serious problem among the young in Ulyanovsk.

From his combat experience in Chechnya, Shamanov understood the importance of controlling the press. Like his patron in the Kremlin, Shamanov attempted to mimic Putin's 'power vertical' and establish command over the local media (see Figure 4). Those journalists in Ulyanovsk who continued to report on the abuse of the gubernatorial office (for instance, Shamanov's purchase of a \$500,000 armored sedan) were often threatened or worse.⁶¹ Indeed, the situation became so bad that when a local resident complained to a Ulyanovsk paper about governor's poor performance, Shamanov sued the paper in which this opinion was expressed.

In generating revenue, Shamanov would not hesitate from charging his former airborne comrades for using airfields within his district. In 2003, plans were drawn up for the local airborne unit to conduct a training jump on a Ulyanovsk airfield. Even though there was considerable doubt over the actual ownership of the airfield, Governor Shamanov insisted that the



FIGURE 4 Governor Shamanov and President Putin examining bridge construction. 2003.

⁶⁰ The rink may soon be demolished.

⁶¹ Nika Mitina, 'Zachem Ulyanovskomy Gubernatory 'Audi' for \$500,000,' [Why does the Ulyanovsk Governor need an Audi for \$500 thousand] *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 May 2003. <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23039/3955/> (accessed 21 May 2010).

Ministry of Defense pay more than 600,000 rubles (\$20,000) for the right to train on state property.⁶²

When Shamanov's term of office was nearly completed, it was clear that he had lost the support of both the electorate and his political sponsors. However, rather than joining the ranks of retired generals, Shamanov was offered a position as special assistant on military affairs to then Prime Minister Fradkov.⁶³ This new job was almost certainly due to the influence of his chief Kremlin patron, Putin. He remained in this position for almost three years and his record of accomplishments was modest at best. Ostensibly, his job was to advise the Prime Minister on social issues related to the Russian military. For instance, when the Kremlin administration announced it was going to monetize various social benefits, Shamanov voiced concerns on the part of the military. He did not, however, threaten to leave his position in protest if the law was not changed.

Even in this ill-defined sinecure, Shamanov gained a certain amount of notoriety, when in March 2007, he met with then President Bush with whom he, served as co-chairmen of the joint US-Russian commission on POW/MIA affairs (see Figure 5). Shamanov had been appointed to this position in January 2005, but did not actually meet with his US counterpart for over a year. This commission had been set up in the early 1990s to share information on soldiers and airmen who became POWs or MIAs during the Cold War. The commission had earlier helped to clarify a number of issues regarding missing, captured, and killed service personnel from both countries. The degree of genuine collaboration began to dwindle as relations grew cooler between Russia and the United States. That Shamanov would be appointed



FIGURE 5 General Fogelsong, President Bush, and General Shamanov.

Source: *Washington Post*.

⁶² Nail Gafutulin, 'Completely Privatized,' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 19 July 2003.

⁶³ More than likely, this assignment stemmed from President Putin's patronage. See Darya Guseva and Nikolai Gorelov, 'Ulyanovsk Governor Vladimir Shamanov Is Named an Adviser to the Prime Minister,' *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 56(46), pp. 9–10 (15 December 2004).

to such a position spoke volumes on the degree of cooperation and sincerity of the Russian side. Human rights groups who were aware of Shamanov's record in Chechnya were incensed when President Bush agreed to meet with the ex-general.

Remaining mostly off the political-military radar screen, in November 2007, Shamanov was unexpectedly called out of his semi-retirement and brought back on active duty as the chief of the Main Directorate for Troops' Combat Training and Service. The timing for such a career move is curious, and there has been considerable speculation as to possible motives. Some pointed to the problems with military reform and that the Kremlin needed to find a senior general who was willing to lobby for the painful cuts to reduce Russia's still top-heavy, Soviet mobilization model. Others suggested that with presidential elections in the not too distant future, Kremlin leaders needed to staff important military billets with personnel who they could fully rely upon.⁶⁴ Once it became clear that Putin was going to fill the Prime Minister role at the end of his term (2008), he may have felt the need to ensure that all the combat-ready security structures were beholden to him personally.

One other possible explanation deserves mention. About the time that Shamanov re-donned the Russian military uniform as the nation's chief trainer, the situation between the Russian president Putin and his Georgian counterpart had become intolerable. Georgian President Saakashvili had adopted a strong pro-West/U.S. position and continued to insist that rebellious regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) would be re-incorporated into Georgia and that his unified country would join NATO. Earlier, Saakashvili had contributed Georgian troops to help the coalition fighting in Iraq and even sponsored a visit by the American president to Georgia in May 2005. Russia responded with additional covert operations, by issuing not so veiled threats, increasing the tension in the Georgian 'statelets' of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (by granting Russian passports to many of the inhabitants), and by pulling out of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. This final action allowed Russia to legally move greater armored forces into regions adjacent to the South Caucasus. If Kremlin leaders were seriously considering using military power to halt Georgia's intent to join NATO, then Shamanov was a strong candidate for the top military training position.

Shamanov gave a number of interviews upon returning to military service. As now the military's chief trainer he had to demonstrate that the Kremlin plans for reforms and painful reductions would actually create a

⁶⁴ Andrei Smirnov, 'The Kremlin Calls on Shamanov Again,' *North Caucasus Analysis* 8(44) (15 November 2007). [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nca/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4553&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=189&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nca/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4553&tx_ttnews[backPid]=189&no_cache=1) (accessed 20 July 2011).

more combat-ready military.⁶⁵ He was appointed to the position when the Kremlin coffers were still over-flowing with fossil fuel revenues and prior to the global economic recession. As such, there were initially plenty of funds to stage large-scale exercises. The military also announced ambitious plans to purchase new equipment, while reducing the former Soviet, top-heavy model (where senior officer billets outnumbered actual soldiers). The reform plans called for streamlining the system of command and control (i.e., doing away with the division-level administration), moving from a conscript to a professional military (creating the requisite non-commissioned officer corps), and creating 85 combat-ready, highly agile, combined armed brigades.

Not surprisingly, these reform plans generated considerable resistance among those nurtured on the Soviet mobilization, WW II model of fighting. While the division-level of command was removed from the larger military structure, Shamanov was able to convince the Minister of Defense that the airborne forces should retain their divisions.⁶⁶ This preferential treatment likely increased resentment among the other armed forces. Opposition has been particularly fierce among those senior officers whose positions and livelihood have been slated for elimination. Shamanov replied by pointing out that the nature of modern warfare has changed, and the former Soviet, mobilization model was no longer effective. He was also unstinting in criticizing general officers who were more interested in finding a sinecure than in building a strong military.

As the chief of training in May 2008, Shamanov was partially responsible for staging the ceremonies on Red Square to commemorate Victory Day. It was the first time in the history of post-Soviet Russia that armored vehicles and other heavy equipment took part in this parade. Even though the funding to stage such a grand display of armed might could have been better spent on training, new equipment, or veterans' social programs, Shamanov and others understood well the importance of imagery and military power. Just three months later, the Russian military high command would find the opportunity to demonstrate their 'patriotism' against an 'invader.'

What exactly occurred in August 2008 between Russian and Georgian forces will likely keep historians and military analysts occupied for years.⁶⁷ Georgian forces may indeed have thrown the first punch on 8 August (although there were a number of Russian jabs prior to this). When the dust

⁶⁵ Konstantin Rashchepkin and Andrey Lunev, 'The Wall of Unfamiliar Mountains Pulsates in the Sight,' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 29 March 2008.

⁶⁶ Some believe that Shamanov appealed directly to PM Putin to preserve the airborne division model. See Shurygin, *Zavtra*, 30 September 2009

⁶⁷ There are a number of good works on this topic, but the question as to who started the war largely depends on where one was sitting. For a solid western analysis, see, Svante Cornell and Frederick Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008* (London: Sharpe 2009). For a brief analysis, see Gary Brecher, 'Georgia Tries out the Bush War Doctrine,' RINF.COM, 12 Aug 2008.

had settled, however, Russian military forces helped to defend/detach/annex South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia and have gone on to recognize and provide for their independence. While the Georgian leadership may have been tempted to use force to regain territorial integrity, there is no question that they had been sorely provoked by the Russians. Simply put, the Kremlin leadership had expressed their disapproval for Georgian plans to join NATO, and when these concerns were ignored, it is quite probable that Russian officials began to search for a pretext to use military force. Given his experience in the region and as the military's chief trainer, Shamanov played a key role in the planning and conduct of this operation.

To prepare for the likelihood of armed conflict with Georgian forces, in spring 2008, Shamanov helped to plan and implement a more aggressive approach toward Georgian actions in and around Abkhazia. In April 2008, a Russian fighter downed a Georgian drone, making it more difficult for Georgia to monitor the airspace over Abkhazia. At the same time, the Russians unilaterally moved an additional 400 airborne paratroopers into the area for 'enhanced peacekeeping' purposes. Even though the Georgians stated explicitly that they did not intend to use force to retake the region (and were relying upon the influence of the West), the Russians claimed that the forces were there to 'prevent a potential Georgian attack on Abkhazia.'⁶⁸

When open hostilities commenced in early August 2008, Russian forces initially concentrated on defeating Georgian units in and around South Ossetia. The operation soon expanded, however, to defeating Georgian forces in Abkhazia and occupying that region. Not surprisingly, given his detailed knowledge of the terrain and fluency in airborne operations, Shamanov was placed in charge of this mission (though at first, the MoD denied that he was involved).⁶⁹ The Russians responded with a show of overwhelming force (to include naval assets) which belied their 'surprise' of Georgian perfidy. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken weeks of preparation for these forces to be ready for deployment.

Because there were few 'enemy' forces in Abkhazia, Georgian resistance was minimal, and there was actually little combat for the forces under Shamanov's command. However, the legend has far outpaced the historical record regarding this 'glorious victory,' and like the previous Chechen campaigns, Shamanov's exploits have already been elevated to that of myth. According to one flattering account, Shamanov was notified of the attack at the last minute (practically still wearing his civilian clothes).⁷⁰ In this version, he played an integral role in the 'risky' planning to seize the region with just

⁶⁸ Vladimir Solovyov and Georgy Dvali, 'Tbilisi Is Asking the West to Avert a War,' *Kommersant*, 7 May 2008,

⁶⁹ 'Russian Military Spokesman Denies Shamanov's Appointment to Abkhazia,' Ekho Moskvyy Radio, 12 August, 2008.

⁷⁰ For a more than flattering account of Shamanov's 'unexpected' exploits, see Konstantin Rashchepkin, 'In the Abkhazian Direction,' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 8 August 2009.

a few airborne units. In truth, however, the Russians vastly outnumbered the Georgian units.

When later describing this operation, Shamanov spoke in almost 'geo-strategic' terms, where he led the airborne and spetsnaz forces into Abkhazia to relieve pressure on the South Ossetian 'axis.' During this interview (which took place on the one-year anniversary of the war), Shamanov relished telling about the war booty Russian forces recovered, to include Georgian maps that 'proved' that the Tbilisi government had been planning offensive operations to seize Abkhazia.⁷¹

While Shamanov praised the work of the airborne forces and the overall conduct of the operation, he was not blind to the Russian military's deficiencies and shortfalls. He bemoaned the poor communications and lack of timely intelligence. Russian soldiers were forced to rely upon cell phones to pass messages.⁷² There were other serious equipment failures, particularly among armored forces. Shamanov understood that against a more formidable opponent, these weaknesses could have mortal consequences. As the military's chief trainer, Shamanov used these shortfalls to spur further reform and obtain greater funding levels. He proposed cutting much of the old Soviet fat and creating lethal, modern, and well-trained/equipped units; instilling the larger Russian military with the airborne ethic.

Shamanov's faithful service to his chief patron in the Kremlin was once again rewarded in May 2009, when he was appointed the commander of the Russian airborne forces. His selection was praised by Russian nationalists, but raised eyebrows both abroad and among most Russian liberals. Though Shamanov had been charged and implicated in war crimes during the fighting in Chechnya, the Russian leadership was making it perfectly clear by this appointment that personal loyalty and combat expertise trumped all other factors.

With his typical airborne frankness, Shamanov has been at the forefront in supporting the unpopular reforms of Defense Minister Serdyukov.

Indeed, some have pointed to his support of the unpopular defense minister and his reforms as the primary reason for his appointment as the new airborne commander. His support of these deep cuts, often acting as hatchet man for the bloated Soviet structure, may also be predicated upon baser motives. Perhaps using his close ties with Prime Minister Putin, he has successfully lobbied to allow the airborne forces to retain their division-level of command (this level was removed from the wider army structure).

In his capacity as the airborne commander, besides taking vengeance on those generals who were responsible for his dismissal in 2000, Shamanov may be able to enlarge his piece of the former Soviet military pie. Just as former Soviet officials were able to enrich themselves by privatizing former

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Olga Mishina, 'The Operation Went Successfully, but Questions Remain,' *Profil*, November 4, 2008.



FIGURE 6 Shamanov and President Medvedev, July 2009.

state property, so high-level military officers have had similar opportunities to make illegal profits from the sale or transfer of military assets. Indeed, the September 2009 scandal, where Shamanov used his forces to protect personal property, and which almost led to his dismissal, is likely just the very tip of the iceberg.

Chastened after this embarrassing incident, General Shamanov has since worked hard to demonstrate his competence as airborne commander (see Figure 6). He has been at the forefront of helping to develop a professional non-commissioned officer corps for the Russian army. His alma mater (Ryazan Airborne Academy) is the test bed for this new concept. Shamanov knows the PR value of a massive airborne operation, and has played a prominent role during recent exercises. He has echoed Russian claims to areas in the Arctic, announcing plans to conduct airborne operations to secure Russia's interests in the region.⁷³ Shamanov has worked to develop close ties with the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, particularly after the embarrassing incident in September 2009 (see Figure 7). He continues to lobby hard for the best equipment for his soldiers, threatening that if the Russian military-industrial complex is unable to produce the optimal weapon systems, he will lobby to purchase foreign systems.

In October, 2010, Shamanov was involved in a near-fatal auto crash as he was on his way from Moscow to visit the 106th Airborne Division in Tula. He spent nearly three months recovering, and it is not clear whether he will ever be able to jump from a plane again. There had been earlier rumors suggesting that Shamanov planned to retire from the military.⁷⁴ He

⁷³ Adrian Blomfield, 'Russia Plans Arctic Military Build-Up,' *UK Telegraph*, 11 June 2008 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/2111507/Russia-plans-Arctic-military-build-up.html> (accessed 20 July 2008).

⁷⁴ Aleksandr Grigoryev, 'General Shamanov Possibly Will Retire as Soon as This Fall,' *Argumenty Nedeli Online*, 23 June 2010.



FIGURE 7 General Shamanov meeting with the Russian Patriarch, Kyrill, Mar 2010
Source: RIA.

has remained, however, to lead the VDV and continues to be a staunch supporter of the current efforts at military reform. As Shamanov's relationship with Vladimir Putin remains strong, one interpretation of the tea leaves has Shamanov becoming the next Russian Minister of Defense when his patron re-assumes the Russian presidency in 2012.

CONCLUSION

When Vladimir Shamanov was commissioned as an officer in 1978, the USSR really was more of a 'military with a state' than the inverse. A central, unifying factor of the 'workers' state' was its ability to defend against the capitalist threat. Unfortunately for Communist Party leaders, the Soviet military's disproportionate consumption of budget resources hastened the empire's demise. As faith in the promised future deteriorated and workers' complaints grew ever louder, party propaganda proved powerless. The peoples of the USSR wanted beans over bullets, and when given the opportunity to freely voice their complaints, they elected representatives who reflected their more mundane concerns.

When the USSR broke apart and the formerly nationalized property was re-divided, the borders as to what belonged to the state and to the individual were not always well-defined. This was especially true in Russia, where the dividing lines among government, private business, and criminal activity were often opaque. In the socialist model (in theory, at least) everything belonged to the state; in the new Russian model, almost anything could be privatized, including military force.

Russia today is a hybrid creature, saddled with traditions and dependencies from its Tsarist and Soviet past, yet coupled with a growing desire for more accountable government and greater freedom. The overall picture is mixed. For every positive characteristic and trend, there are an equal (if not greater) number of qualities pointing in the opposite direction. Russians

are free to travel, and choose their schooling/vocation and where they want to live. A growing number have access to the Internet and other high-tech means of communication. All these new freedoms, however, are predicated upon wealth. As income disparity widens and the sense of injustice deepens, the traditional question 'Kto vinovat?' (Who is guilty?) is often answered with a nationalistic response. Rather than looking in the mirror of their own corruption, many Russians (particularly those guilty of abusing their authority) find it much easier to blame an outside source. The current Kremlin leadership derives considerable political legitimacy from their perceived ability to defend against this foreign threat. And as a 'military expert,' General Shamanov has done his part to reinforce these fears.

Some analysts claim that the Russian military is currently undergoing the most serious reforms in the past 200 years. Modernization plans call for paring down the top-heavy, mobilization structure into a leaner, more combat-ready force. In a sense, Russian military leaders are trying to apply the airborne model of preparedness to the rest of the military. General Shamanov has been one of the key architects of this transformation.

As of mid-2010, however, reform efforts in the military remain muddled. The recent economic recession has forced Kremlin leaders to scale back some of their more ambitious plans regarding personnel (moving to a professional military) and the purchase of new equipment. Some progress has been made, but the airborne forces constitute the bulk of the conventional combat-ready forces.

With its relatively weak democratic tradition, the transfer of political power in Russia has often been fraught with tension and insecurity. The presidential elections scheduled for 2012 will likely be no exception. Given Shamanov's close ties with the current Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, there's a fair possibility that the Russian airborne forces will again be called into action.

Shamanov shares many qualities of his chief patron, Vladimir Putin (pragmatic and forceful). As an airborne officer, Shamanov is resourceful and understands the importance of hitting the target hard on the first attempt. Like Putin, Shamanov is an expert at manipulation and shaping the message that his audience wants to hear. Adept at the application of violence and propaganda, he represents a formidable opponent (both within the halls of the Kremlin and abroad).