

In Alexander Lebed, Russia Has Lost a Potential National Leader

by Jonathan Tennenbaum

General Alexander Lebed, 52, Governor of Krasnoyarsk Territory in Siberia and famous as a former military leader, Presidential candidate, and national political figure, was killed in a helicopter crash on the morning of April 28. Thereby, Russia lost one of the few prominent personalities who, amidst widespread disillusionment and cynicism in politics, had maintained a reputation of integrity, courage, and independence, and might conceivably have played a role in the political future of the country.

Whatever his limitations, the portrayal of Lebed in the Western press as merely “tough-talking,” or even “extremist,” is not accurate. Lebed was consciously inspired by the life of France’s Charles de Gaulle—a military man who, under special circumstances, was called upon to provide political leadership to his nation in a time of crisis. Above all, Lebed hated the destruction of war—which he had witnessed in the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan, and strongly opposed in Chechnya—and often spoke of his longing for real economic reconstruction and improvement in the Russian people’s lives.

Opponent of Chechen War

After early military training, Lebed served from 1981-82 as battalion commander in Afghanistan. In 1982 he entered the elite Frunze Military Academy, graduating with honors in 1985 and going on to command the Kostroma, Pskov, and Tula Airborne Divisions in succession. He was elevated to the rank of major general in 1990, and in the same year was elected to the Central Committee of the newly constituted Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Lebed was credited with preventing bloodshed during the August 1991 coup attempt, when he was overall deputy commander of the Russian Airborne troops. After becoming commander of the Russian 14th Army, he was deeply involved in the events connected with the Transdniester Republic (in Moldova).

In December 1994, Lebed publicly denounced the sending of Russian military forces into Chechnya, calling this an act of “nonsense and stupidity” and declaring that “under no circumstances” would he agree to having the 14th Army fight in Chechnya. Later, he played an important role in organizing the end of the first Chechen war, culminating with his personal

signing of the Khasyavurt Peace Agreement in July 1996.

Meanwhile Lebed, who had early separated himself from the Communist Party, entered national politics directly. After resigning from the 14th Army in June 1995, Lebed joined the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO), headed by former chairman of the Russian National Security Council Yuri Skokov. He was elected to the State Duma (lower house of parliament) in December of that year (representing Tula), and then was chosen to become the KRO’s Presidential candidate for the January 1996 elections.

The KRO electoral troika of Lebed, Skokov, and the brilliant young economist Sergei Glazyev, promised to end the wholesale looting of Russia, which was being carried out by the notorious “family” around President Yeltsin, and to rebuild the country. Unfortunately, in the highly manipulated Presidential election, Lebed won only the third place, with 14.7% of the vote.

Starting June 1996, Lebed served for a short time as Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, during which time he negotiated the Chechnya peace—only to be fired by Yeltsin in October of that year, in favor of a team led by the notorious Boris Berezovsky.

Lebed and his entourage were heavily courted by people in International Republican Institute circles in the United States, as a prospective strongman who would impose liberal monetarism and harsh austerity on Russia. The general should forget de Gaulle and imitate Chile’s Gen. Augusto Pinochet, these propagandists crowed. Lebed, however, moved on to a job in the Russian interior. In May 1998, he was elected Governor of Krasnoyarsk, a huge territory in central Siberia, which is home to major hydroelectric facilities, most of Russia’s aluminum industry, and the metals complex at Norilsk above the Arctic Circle.

Lebed’s time as Governor of Krasnoyarsk, now ended by his sudden death, was not easy, and marked by constant fights with the criminal organizations that are deeply involved in the region’s economic structures. Although the helicopter accident occurred under poor weather and has preliminarily been declared an accident, some circumstances—and also some Russian intelligence experts—have pointed to the possible role of foul play. An official commission is investigating.



Former head of Russia's National Security Council and Presidential candidate, Krasnoyarsk Gov. Alexander Lebed, was killed in a helicopter accident on April 28. Here Lebed meets with President Vladimir Putin on March 22.

Implications for Russia Today

Commenting on Lebed's death in an April 29 interview with the popular Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy, Duma member Glazyev called Lebed's death "a great loss for Russia," praising the general as a person who had the courage to take responsibility for his actions. "I understand that not everybody likes the Khasyavurt agreements [on Chechnya], but if Lebed had not been removed from the post of Secretary of the Security Council, most likely it would have been possible to avoid the second Chechen war."

Glazyev worked closely with Lebed in 1995-96, on the KRO slate and then at the Security Council when Lebed headed it. He reflected on the lost opportunities of the 1990s, and on Russia's need for higher-quality leaders now. Glazyev's remarks contained a significant, implicit critique of the recent performance of Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose annual State of the Nation speech on April 12, with its empty appeals for "increasing market competition," disappointed many people in the country after the disastrous "free-market years" of the 1990s.

Referring to his work with Lebed at the Security Council in 1996, Glazyev stressed that they developed "criteria for national economic security," which are still applicable today. These measures centered on "the ability of the country to develop independently, in the interest of its citizens, regardless of foreign economic fluctuations or conjunctural trade considerations."

"We worked out a list of economic security criteria and officially adopted them," Glazyev recalled, "and the minute it became clear that not a single one of the policies being implemented corresponded to the national interest, far-reach-

ing conclusions began to arise. This aspect of our work really upset the Kremlin, and Lebed, in effect, pushed it through, circumventing the Kremlin staff and the government of that time, because—then, as now—the people shaping the country's economic policy reacted very nervously against any attempt to introduce objective criteria for assessing their work. . . . Beyond that, a whole program of stabilization measures was drafted, for a transition to an economic growth policy, and a new National Security Doctrine was adopted. All of this was done in the short period, when Lebed was the Secretary, literally in half a year."

'Oligarchs' Feared Lebed

Why was Lebed kicked out? Glazyev was asked. Because, "what he was doing personally threatened the people who were actually running national economic

and financial policy. [Prime Minister and "oligarch" Viktor] Chernomyrdin, first of all, and the group that was actually controlling the government—I mean Chubais, et al. These people feared Lebed, because he, using his authority in the eyes of the public, the support of millions of people—and Yeltsin had to take this into account—was not afraid to pose controversial questions and demand accountability."

As to whether Lebed would have been able to run for President again, Glazyev believes "that Lebed was, to the very last moment, what could be called a certain historical chance for the country. In the sense that we need today, and I think we shall need in the foreseeable future, a head of state who acts and assumes responsibility, who takes decisions, and is not afraid of getting into a conflict with those who hold power in this world, and to stand up for the people. . . . I believe that the sympathies of the population would have been on his side, especially during crises. . . . If nothing were to change, and we continued to lose \$30-40 billion per year in illegal capital flight, and the budget remained in crisis, . . . and we bore the other burdens of an unsatisfactory economic policy, which are imposed on the population's shoulders, then this would evoke expectations in the country for the appearance of a popular hero, who would be able to restore justice and provide a policy in the interests of society. I think that sympathies would have been on the side of Alexander Lebed."

In response to a caller's question about whether the crash were suspicious, Glazyev said that he would not like to preempt the official investigation, but he agreed that Lebed had many enemies, not only among Krasnoyarsk criminal circles, mentioned by the caller, but also "in the upper echelons of power."