

## In Memory of Vitali Churkin, Russia's Charismatic Ambassador to the UN

Vitali Churkin succeeded in creating and sustaining a balance in the UN Security Council, a balance between East and West, a multipolar world crucial to global peace and economic justice.

By [Carla Stea](#)

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*On February 20, 2017 the shattering news reverberated throughout the United Nations, and the world: the charismatic and world renowned Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, Vitali Churkin, was suddenly stricken in his office at the Russian Mission and pronounced dead upon arrival at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.*

*The New York City Medical Examiner failed to discover the cause of Ambassador Churkin's sudden death, stating that the autopsy is inconclusive and 'determining the cause and manner of his death requires further study, which could require weeks of further screenings.' For ten years Churkin had illuminated the corridors of the United Nations, and a surrealistic atmosphere of disbelief and incredulity now permeates the United Nations, as unanswered questions regarding Ambassador Churkin's death increase.*

Vitali Churkin's colossal intellectual power prevailed over the crass propaganda and hypocrisy of his detractors at the UN Security Council. In so doing, he restored the credibility of the UN Security Council, and restored the dignity and independence of the United Nations. His moral force and courage, even in isolation, towered above his detractors at the Security Council, and within the General Assembly.

His prodigious knowledge of the historic context and realities being distorted by his opponents was a formidable obstacle to their chronic attempts to hijack and deform both the Security Council, and the UN itself, into becoming a tool for geopolitical engineering antithetical to the very purposes for which the UN was established.

Following the first Persian Gulf War, authorized by Security Council Resolution 678, the United Nations had become regarded as an annex of the US State Department and the Pentagon. Security Council Resolution 1973 reinforced that impression, and, indeed, when Lakhdar Brahimi, formerly Foreign Minister of Algeria and top United Nations envoy, was asked why UN offices were so often bombed, he replied that the UN was becoming perceived as a "party to disputes."

Churkin's arrival at the UN, and the re-emergence of Russia as a world power, with the Presidency of Vladimir Putin, re-established the United Nations as a multipolar organization, and with the six vetoes cast by Vitali Churkin, the United Nations was prevented from further debasement, as those vetoes prohibited the UN endorsement of the barbaric slaughter of yet another country in the Middle East. Vitali Churkin commanded the respect of even those attempting to discredit him, and he was admired by even those who hated

him for his capacity to expose their duplicity.

More than 25 years ago I first met Vitali Churkin at his office in the Soviet Foreign Ministry in Moscow. I had been invited to Russia by Vladimir Petrovsky, First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, and I had been referred to Churkin by the International Editor of a major Soviet newspaper, who advised me that Mr. Churkin could solve an urgent problem I was confronting.

On the morning of December 21, 1991, Vitali Churkin immediately welcomed me to his office, assured me that he would take care of my problem – which he did with alacrity, and we then spoke for hours about subjects ranging from capitalism versus communism, my previous work in Santiago, Chile during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the consequences of the imminent dismembering of the Soviet Union, his close friendship with Boris D. Pyadyshev, the distinguished editor of the prestigious journal, “*Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*,” and we discussed other subjects too numerous to mention. Churkin’s presence was electrifying, his intellect dazzling, his warmth disarming and engaging, and he impressed me as a man who did not suffer fools gladly. We shared contempt for hypocrisy and double standards. His personality could be described with two words: formidable and unique. But he was completely unpretentious, and retained that magnetic human warmth which charmed even the most dour opponents.

Two days after I first met Churkin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet President and General - Secretary of the Communist Party resigned, the Soviet Union collapsed, and an abyss opened, the catastrophic consequences of which would unfold throughout the ensuing decades. But that freezing Moscow winter, with his world – (and ours, ultimately) disintegrating around him, Churkin’s steely discipline and good will guided the foreign press through the devastated terrain of the dying Soviet empire, as we instinctively shuddered at what was to come.

On January 31, 1992 we returned to the United Nations for the summit meeting of US President George H.W. Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, held at Conference room 4 of the UN. Prior to the meeting, he and I discussed my plans to return to Moscow, and following the boilerplate speeches of both the American and Russian Presidents, as they exited the chamber, with Churkin a member of that solemn entourage, he winked at me as they departed, a gesture revealing both his great sense of fun, and his utter disdain for stultifying bureaucratic restraint.

In the early weeks of February, 1992, I awaited the visa for my return to Moscow, which Alex, a Russian foreign ministry official had promised to arrange. After weeks sped by, without my Russian visa arriving at the Russian Consulate in Washington, I phoned Mr. Churkin in Moscow. He immediately took my call, and I explained that Alex had not arranged for my return visa, as he had promised to do. Mr. Churkin replied: “I’m sure he will do as he promised, but I’ll look into it.” The following morning I received a telephone call from the Russian Consulate informing me that they had just received two visas for me! That was typical of Churkin’s style: he was extraordinarily effective, and totally sincere.

Following my return to Moscow in late February, 1992, Churkin informed me that he had been appointed Ambassador to Chile, which he regarded as a form of exile. Andrei Kozyrev was now Foreign Minister. Life in Moscow was becoming chaotic, and denial no longer shielded me from the reality of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The deterioration of

conditions of life following that collapse was inevitable and demoralizing, and, of course, only the beginning of what would become catastrophic. Russia had been my sanctuary, following my exposure to fascism, in Chile, and, to certain elements of it in the USA, but that sanctuary in Moscow no longer existed.

On April 7, 1992, I wrote a long letter to Churkin to say good bye, and apologizing for having cut short my visit. On April 8 we met again, at length, and Churkin tried to convince me to remain in Moscow. That afternoon he spoke with sorrow of the collapse of the socialist government of President Najibullah in Afghanistan, and I shared his grief, and perhaps we both, subliminally, at least, expected the disastrous consequences which ensued from the destruction of that last civilized and Soviet supported government in Afghanistan. Churkin told me that he had just returned from Tbilisi, Georgia, where he had been meeting with Edouard Shevardnadze. The conversation continued, and he offered to help me with my work. Churkin ultimately succeeded in persuading me to stay in Moscow.

But, eventually, flashbacks and horrific memories of my experiences in Pinochet's Chile, and elsewhere, and fear of the dire long-term consequences of the Soviet collapse continued troubling me, and in June I finally left Russia, which, bitterly ruptured my friendship with Churkin.

Fifteen years later, unexpectedly, I met Vitali Churkin again at the United Nations. Miraculously, our friendship survived the preceding years of turmoil. At times, we had argued ferociously, at times, incessantly. But what we shared was indestructible.

Russia was being resuscitated as a world power, and Churkin was beginning his mastery of the United Nations environment. On July 13, 2009, Churkin graciously invited me to participate in a roundtable celebration of the 100 year anniversary of the birth of Andrei Gromyko, one of the founding fathers of the United Nations. The meeting was held in Conference Room 8.

Participants included Henry Kissinger, Anatoly Gromyko, Ambassador William VandenHeuvel, Veronika Krasheninnikova and Alfred Ross. When the translator failed to appear, Churkin blithely announced we would move to plan B, and speak in English, a language he commanded impeccably. Gromyko's son, Anatoly, summarized the history of Soviet diplomacy, and comments were requested of Ms. Krasheninnikova, one of Russia's expert advisers who helped author the law requiring disclosure of the identity of funders of the many foreign organizations in Russia, a law she had observed in the USA, and which helped to protect Russia from pernicious and destabilizing "color revolutions." Ms. Krashenninikova then courteously invited Ambassador VandenHeuvel to contribute to the discussion. Throughout that unforgettable morning, Vitaly Churkin glowed with pride at the splendid legacy of great Soviet diplomats who had helped to champion the cause of peace, economic justice, and a world based on humanitarian principles, above all. That Gromyko roundtable seemed to be one of Churkin's most joyous presentations.

Later, at a Vietnamese reception, to which I realized I was the only journalist invited, Ambassador Churkin came over to me and said: "Carla, you were right all along." I was so astounded by his words I was unable to reply and ask him to specify about what, precisely, I had been "right all along," and I'll always regret that lost opportunity.

But Vitali Churkin attained his greatness of stature, that for which he will be remembered by the United Nations, and honored by history, following the UN Security Council's ill advised

and reckless adoption of Resolution 1973, in 2011, authorizing, by “all necessary measures,” the barbarous NATO slaughter of Libya, one of the Arab world’s most progressive nations, an attack which pulverized that previously functioning state, and transformed it into an incubator of terrorism. Thereafter, Churkin, indefatigably represented Russia’s categorical opposition to a UN sponsored attack on Syria, which would, otherwise, have been the third progressive Arab country destroyed with collusion by the UN, and could, very likely, precipitate a World War. Churkin was a great diplomat, but in his latter years at the UN, he emerged as a great statesman, transcending the technical limits of his position, at the zenith of his power.

Vitaly Churkin spearheaded the three famous “double vetoes” of Chapter VII draft resolutions which the dogs of war were attempting to force upon the UN. And in this he was immeasurably strengthened by his friend and comrade, Li Baodong, China’s brilliant and noble Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, and formerly Ambassador to the UN. Both Vitaly Churkin and Li Baodong were intellectual aristocrats of the highest order. When, together, they raised their arms to veto the draft war resolutions at the Security Council, spectators at the UN and worldwide gasped in awe at the enormity of their power to command peace and to halt in their lethal tracks the insane march of the merchants of death toward Armageddon. Again and again and again Churkin and Li Baodong cast double vetoes, repelling and defeating ravenous attempts to inflict on Syria the barbaric slaughter that had already been inflicted on Iraq and Libya. Those moments were spellbinding. Their triumphant double-vetoes were a legendary victory for peace and justice and a turning point in UN history, which laid the foundation for a progressive transformation of the global order.

Following Li Baodong’s transfer to Beijing, Churkin alone at the United Nations shouldered the huge burden of staving off savage attacks on Syria, continuing to veto those draft resolutions that would have led, ominously and treacherously to “regime change.” As TASS so accurately described him, posthumously, “Churkin was like a rock against which were broken the attempts by our enemies to undermine what constitutes the glory of Russia.” But he represented much more than that: he was like a rock against which were broken the aggressive actions of neo-colonialists who attempted to mask their ruthless greed with sanctimonious and arrogant contrivances. He exposed this prevarication. But his was a Russian heroism – an unbreakable moral force reminiscent of Kutuzov at Borodino.

The deadly resurgence of Russophobia, a form of neo-McCarthyist fascism in America, a cancer infecting the Security Council and even the General Assembly reached ominous proportions recently, and an atmosphere targeting Russia as “fair game,” an atmosphere resembling the blood lust that precedes a lynching, and described by Chinese Ambassador Liu as “poisonous,” preceded the sixth and last veto cast by Ambassador Churkin. China also cast a veto against this recent draft resolution, with the Security Council again experiencing the titanic force of another double veto. The date was December 5, 2016. The Syrian Government had just recovered Aleppo. Soon thereafter, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey was assassinated, followed by the death of the Russian Ambassador to India.

On February 21, a Security Council meeting opened, commemorating the life and work of Ambassador Churkin. One of the most moving and beautiful – and revealing – speeches was delivered by Japanese Ambassador Koro Bessho who stated: “I was deeply shocked and saddened by the news of the passing of Ambassador Vitaly Churkin. I happened to meet him on Sunday (yesterday) at lunchtime, coincidentally, we were seated next to each other at a restaurant. He was with his wife, I was with my wife, and we were all very happy at the time. In fact, he had arrived a bit after I did, so I did not realize that he was there. I

suddenly heard a voice saying, 'Koro, what do you recommend?' I looked back and there was Vitaly, looking happy, looking very well and with his usual big smile." According to Ambassador Bessho, he was ebullient, and evidently took a walk with his wife in the park afterward. Within less than 24 hours Churkin was dead in his own office. Three Russian Ambassadors have died in the line of duty within the past three months.

Like a great impresario, Vitali Churkin succeeded in creating and sustaining a balance in the UN Security Council, a balance between East and West, a multipolar world crucial to global peace and economic justice. Churkin's death destroys this balance, and leaves the Security Council, and the United Nations vulnerable to the manipulation and control by those member states and interests he succeeded in commanding and so skillfully held at bay. Seldom is one person so indispensable. But Vitali Churkin was such a person. His star blazed brilliantly, but too briefly.

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#### About the author:

Author and Geopolitical analyst Carla Stea is Global Research's Correspondent at United Nations headquarters, New York, NY.

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