



## Boy on the Bridge: The Story of John Shalikashvili's American Success

By Andrew Marble

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Reviewed by Bryon Greenwald

Biographies are frequently hit or miss and often tell linear, one-dimensional stories. The value of a biography as a contribution to a larger history depends on how broad an intellectual swath the author cuts and how extensive and probing the research. The wider the cut, the greater the chance the reader will learn not only about the subject but also about the greater social, cultural, political, and technological aspects of the subject's lifetime. The deeper the research, the more one learns both about the subject and the key events during his or her career. *Boy on the Bridge: The Story of John Shalikashvili's American Success*, Andrew Marble's thoroughly researched and exquisitely crafted biography of former Army general and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili, is an excellent example of a biography

that tells a compelling story and offers the reader a window into the surprising life of an American success story.

As Marble highlights, General Shali, as he preferred to be called, was a reserved, self-effacing consensus-builder who liked to avoid conflict and enjoyed giving others credit for actions he clearly set in motion. He shied away from publicity, albeit while making history. He twice told Secretary of Defense Les Aspin and President Bill Clinton that he did not want to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Shali was not the sort of man nor had the type of military career that normally produces great biography. After Colin Powell, few Chairman have risen to any level of historical prominence. Still, from the opening pages of *Boy on the Bridge*, the reader will be surprised by Shali's life and all he achieved. Indeed, his life reflects the intermingling of society, culture, and war that was so prevalent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

His maternal grandfather served in the high command of Russia's Tsar Nicholas II. His father, Dimitri, fought in World War I on the Russian side but returned to Georgia after the Bolshevik Revolution. After the war, Dimitri moved to Poland, where he married Shali's mother, Maria "Missy" Rudiger. When Germany attacked Poland in September 1939, Dimitri fought with the Poles, and in a twist of geopolitics, served at the end of the war as a member of the Georgian Legion supporting the Germans in Normandy and Italy before ending the war supporting Italian partisans against the communists in northern Italy. As a child, Shali witnessed the starvation and privation of Polish Jews in Warsaw before fleeing with his mother, brother, and sister to Germany to escape the oncoming Soviet Army. There, on April 24, 1945, in Pappenheim, Germany, 8-year-old John Shalikashvili met his first Americans, members of the 86<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division that had chased German SS troops out of the small town. In 1952, Shali immigrated to America and went to high school in Peoria, Illinois. He attended college and entered the Army through Officer Candidate School, served in the Artillery and Air Defense when it was a single branch, and then in the Artillery

for the rest of his career, including a tour in Vietnam.

As formative as those early years were, it was his service as a general officer that commends Shali to history. As the deputy commander of U.S. Army Europe in 1990, Shalikashvili was responsible for moving VII U.S. Corps from Germany to Saudi Arabia to provide General H. Norman Schwarzkopf with enough combat power to eject the Iraqi army from Kuwait, an immense multinational logistical undertaking. Immediately after the Persian Gulf War, Shali's greatest achievement came as the commander of Operation *Provide Comfort*, the 30,000-strong multinational relief effort to save 500,000 Kurds who had fled Iraqi forces into the high desert mountains and were dying by the thousands from harsh conditions, malnutrition, and disease. Shali organized forces from 13 countries and over 50 international and nongovernmental organizations to establish supply routes and basic infrastructure across an area of 83,000 square miles. Later, as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, he traveled throughout Eastern Europe encouraging newly independent nations and calming Russian fears. Finally, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1993 to 1997, General Shali oversaw the deployment of forces to Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia and provided a steady hand during the reduction in forces following the end of the Cold War. He died in 2011 from complications following a stroke.

Marble's fine biography offers much to the military reader. Beyond his significant accomplishments, General Shali is best known and remembered for his patience, empathy, and calm demeanor. In a world of Type A officers and leaders, he was a competent and capable Type B who treated everyone with dignity and respect, who set high standards and looked after those with whom he served, and who rose from extremely desperate beginnings to become the most senior man in the American military. JFQ

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Dr. Bryon Greenwald is a Professor of History in the Joint Advanced Warfighting School, Joint Forces Staff College, at the National Defense University.