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MILITARY MODERNIZATION AND THE RUSSIAN GROUND FORCES

Rod Thornton



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Rod Thornton

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FOREWORD

Military organizations have to change with the times. But organizations, of course, resist change; military organizations resist change more than most; and, it can be argued, Russian military organizations resist change more than most military organizations. This is clear from the pace of the post-Cold War attempts to reform the Russian ground forces.

Historically, this was an army that, in many ways, sacrificed the need for military efficiency in order to perform a role as the inculcator of Soviet values into young conscripts. Social engineering then mattered almost more than military skill. But today, in the era of high-tech weaponry and expeditionary warfare, armies all across the world can no longer remain simply as 2-year repositories for unmotivated conscript soldiers. Thus it has long been recognized in Moscow's political circles that the "citizen-army" must be replaced by modern, flexible, and well-trained ground forces. The Russian leadership believes that such forces would better protect the country and serve the government as an adjunct to its foreign and security policy.

Indeed, it is the likes of President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev who have been the main instigators of reform—wanting their armed forces to be more capable operationally. The politicians have been facing the resistance of conservative generals, and for several years there has been stalemate in the reform process. However, the war with Georgia in 2008 showed the overall weaknesses of the Russian military, and thus undermined the opposition of the generals. Significant change could now come. The Russian ground forces are therefore now undergoing

quite significant reform in terms of structure, deployability, and overall philosophy. U.S. military planners must be mindful that, if all that is anticipated comes to pass, these Russian ground forces are now set to shake off many of their old Soviet failings and deficiencies.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.

Director

Strategic Studies Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROD THORNTON lectures at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom (UK). He previously spent 9 years in a British Army infantry regiment, including 3 years in Northern Ireland and 1 year as a Serbo-Croat interpreter in Bosnia (1992-93). He has lived and worked in both Moscow and Sarajevo. Dr. Thornton taught for 5 years at the UK's Joint Services Command and Staff College (working for King's College London), which included guest lecturing at the NATO Defense College in Rome, Italy. Dr. Thornton is the author of *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century* (2007) and is currently working on a book (with Dr. Bettina Renz) on Russian military modernization. Dr. Thornton holds a Ph.D. in comparative peacekeeping operations.

SUMMARY

This monograph examines the recent process of organizational change in the Russian ground forces. It begins by charting the whole post-Soviet military reform debate. This debate was dominated, on the one hand, by those seeking to make the armed forces more professional, flexible, and adroit—and thus better suited to the security demands of a major 21st-century power—and, on the other hand, by senior military figures wedded to the concepts of mass and a conscript-based military. It was actually only after the war with Georgia in 2008, and when military opposition was weakened, that change within the ground forces could begin in earnest. New command tiers were established, divisions became brigades, and the idea of absorbing professional soldiers into the ground forces was refined. The problems of generating a suitable corps of non-commissioned officers, of training suitable officers, and of marrying equipment to strategic need are all issues covered here. This work concludes with the thought that even though the changes being introduced in the ground forces look dramatic, they cannot be implemented overnight. The road towards fundamental change where Russia's ground forces are concerned will be quite a long one.

MILITARY MODERNIZATION AND THE RUSSIAN GROUND FORCES

INTRODUCTION

Change is not a common commodity in Russia. The country, whether as Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, or as today's democratic manifestation, is not one characterized by entrepreneurship, drive, and innovation. Rather, as any historian of this land would aver, it is one beset by torpor, indolence, and conservatism. So the current ambition of the political leadership in Russia to push through a state-wide process of *modernizatsiya* (modernization) is bound to be one that, to a large degree, must fall on deaf ears. And while the main target of this process is obviously the economy, the Russian military has also been asked to undertake considerable reform.

For the political leaders involved in trying to push through such reform, the task has naturally not been easy. The military hierarchy in Russia, itself imbued with considerable institutional power, has been doing its best to stand against change; against those reforms that threaten not just the comfort of familiar strategies, structures, and standard operating procedures, but also the individual stakes of senior officers within the various military organizations. Ultimately, the proposed reforms threaten the very jobs of such officers. The Russian military, as a whole, does not want to modernize; or rather it does not want to be "*modernized*" in the way that its political masters want.

The aim here is to analyze this current process of Russian military modernization. More specifically, this work is concerned with examining modernization in the Russian army; and particularly in the ground

forces. While making occasional comments about the airborne forces, this is an arm of service separate from the ground forces. In this monograph, the term “army” will be used to include both airborne and ground forces. As a point of detail, the Russian word *armiya* is often mistranslated as “army,” when it actually means *all* of the country’s armed forces, i.e., the range of armed services controlled by the Ministry of Defense (MoD)—including the navy and the air force. This causes some confusion for Western analysts, particularly in trying to establish the actual manpower figures that relate to the *armiya*. Such an issue is compounded by the tendency of Russian observers and analysts to be somewhat inaccurate with their use of figures.

Such caveats having been established, the following analysis will focus on the process of military modernization in terms of its manifestation in structural and personnel terms in regard to the Russian ground forces. While some mention will be made of equipment issues and technical advances, these are not so important; mostly because there have been very few such advances made.

Mention will first be made of the background to the current wave of Russian military modernization. This will be followed by a look at the role of the 2008 war with Georgia in terms of giving impetus to a reform process that had been stalling. The new structure of the ground forces will then be examined, followed by a look at the changes made in terms of personnel issues. By way of conclusion, some broad comments will be made in regard to the current efficacy of Russia’s ground forces.

HISTORY OF POST-SOVIET MILITARY REFORM

The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, first set in motion the process of military reform that the ending of the Cold War so demanded. He looked upon his military machine as a gargantuan, inflexible dinosaur that absorbed immense state resources, while seemingly providing for very little in the way of operational utility in the defense and security realm—at least compared to the U.S. armed forces. Despite his wishes, all that Gorbachev could push through in terms of change was to bring down the overall personnel strength of the armed forces from five to four million.

Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the newly constituted Russia, kept up the pressure on the military to reform. Yeltsin wanted cutbacks. In particular, he wanted to see the end of Russia's conscript military to be replaced by a much smaller, professional one—akin to those in the United States and the United Kingdom (UK). The principal political goals in terms of ending conscription, however, were not so much to develop a more efficient military—although that would have been a welcome side-effect—rather, Yeltsin wanted to both save money and to court electoral popularity.

In terms of cost savings, Yeltsin and his government of economic technocrats wanted to see an end to the conscription system that was a drain on the economy in that it took young men out of the work force for the 2 years of their service. Conscription was also tied to another generator of vast expense: the mobilization system. Reducing the former would also reduce the need for the latter. The mobilization system was one wherein, in times of crisis or outright conflict, a huge number of former conscripts—up to 20 million—could

be called up. This, though, meant maintaining a large number of bases manned only by a cadre staff—including many officers—whose sole task it was to keep the base and its associated equipment (tanks, armored personnel carriers [APCs], etc.) prepared for any possible influx of mobilized former conscripts—an influx, of course, that might never happen. Moreover, to add to the cost of the mobilization system much of Russian industry had to maintain the capacity to reengineer both plant and human skills to turn out supporting materiel for this 20 million-man military. This was naturally an inefficient use of resources. The new idea was to replace the conscript military with a professional one. Recruits would sign 3-year contracts. This, naturally, would mean a smaller military. It would thus require fewer bases, less infrastructure, and fewer officers to run it. It would also not generate a mass of conscripts, and thus the mobilization system would have to be either drastically reduced or actually eliminated. The ending, therefore, of both conscription and the associated mobilization system offered the chance to make huge financial savings. This was very tempting to a Russian government that was, in the early 1990s, looking to cut costs wherever it could.

The cost effectiveness of a smaller military would also be enhanced by the fact that it would be more efficient, more flexible, and, crucially in this immediate post-Cold War era, more deployable and thus of more use as an adjunct to Russia's striving to play a significant role in world affairs. The argument was also being made that professional service personnel—the contractees (*kontraktniki* in Russian) would have a greater chance of developing the skills necessary to handle the increasingly complicated military technologies that were by now coming into service.

A further reason for Yeltsin wanting to see an end to conscription was that it would prove popular at the ballot box. Most Russians looked upon conscription as an iniquitous and hateful institution. Few young men wanted to join a military in which hazing was rife, housing poor, and treatment bad. The electorate would support any politician who called for conscription's termination.

Naturally enough, though, there was opposition from within the military to Yeltsin's proposed reforms. An end to both the conscription and mobilization systems, and the moves towards a smaller professional military, would patently mean that thousands of officers' jobs would be lost; mostly in the cadre formations. And, of course, among those losing their jobs in all this shake-up would be a good many generals. And these generals, often within the bloated General Staff (where some 21,000 officers worked), could generate a fair degree of political clout since they constituted one of the principal *siloviki* (power) structures in Russia. The generals could stand in opposition to the proposed reforms; and, of course, they did.

The first point made by many a senior Russian military officer, both serving and retired, was that the country needed conscription because it served a useful role in shaping Russian society. The military, indeed, saw itself as a force for social good. There was a sense that all young Russian men should experience conscript service as a means of creating a sense of national pride. Previously, in Soviet times, the military had been the only state institution that could develop in young men, from Lithuania to Kyrgyzstan, and from Novaya Zemlya to Sakhalin, a sense of "sovietness," of nationhood. This same principal still applied, said many a post-Soviet general, in the new Russia. Who

was to instill the sense of Russian national spirit if not the military? It was, after all, the only institution to which virtually all young Russian men would at one time belong.¹

The point was also made that conscript service was a “right of passage”: that the young Russian male owed an immense debt of gratitude to the state that had nurtured him. He then should pay that debt off by serving in the military. As the current Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and himself an arch conservative, Colonel-General Vasiliy Smirnov,² put it, conscription was necessary because “every citizen should be ready to defend the state.”³ Everyone, he went on, had to be “taught to respect their constitutional duty to defend the country.”⁴

Of course, all such sentiments really belonged in the bygone Soviet era. But the mindsets of those in the Russian military who had by then (early-to-mid-1990s) reached one-star rank and above were forged in this former Soviet era – and their thinking died hard.

On a more prosaic level, the argument could also be made that the Russian military was different from Western militaries in that they did not have to face the possibility of conflict with China. Russia sees China, short as it is of the raw materials necessary to maintain its economic growth, as being covetous of Siberia’s wealth of natural resources. In any possible future military enagement between the two countries, the Chinese would doubtless field a mass army of conscripts. So, of course, say many a Russian general, Russia has to do likewise. The ability, then, to mobilize a huge number of former conscripts would clearly be needed as part of Russia’s defense against this perceived Chinese threat.

Most of all, though, the generals' opposition to the ending of the conscript system was a matter of supreme self-interest. Conscripts, when hired out by officers as cheap labor to local enterprises or farms, provide a means for many an officer to supplement what are fairly meager salaries. Such schemes produce profits for officers all the way up the chain of command. The corrupt practices engaged in by a good proportion of the military's senior ranks do not stop there: a decent number were and are involved in siphoning off funds meant for weapons procurement and construction projects into their private businesses or bank accounts. Being a Russian general is, in many cases, a ticket to some riches.

However, senior officers also pointed out the human cost of markedly reducing the size of the military and thus the number of officers within it. Severe hardships could result. For if officers lost their jobs, then they and their families would also lose their homes — and this in a country already critically short of housing. Of course, the jobs that the generals most feared losing were their own. A conscript army meant a large army, and thus many generals would be needed to run it. A reformed, professional army would be smaller and need fewer officers and thus fewer generals. Any senior officer who backed the reforms demanded by Yeltsin and his government would be akin to a turkey voting for Christmas.

Undaunted, however, by such military conservatism, Yeltsin issued an edict in 1996 instructing the entire military to begin a process of "professionalization." By the end of 2000, it was stated, all Russian military personnel would be on contracts. Conscription would then have ended.⁵

In choosing which formations would be the first to be professionalized, the main criterion was to select those that would most likely be engaged on operations. The idea was that it would only be the formations manned by professionals who would conduct any fighting that needed to be done by Russian forces—notably in Chechnya. Yeltsin wanted to avoid having conscripts involved—and dying—in combat. Again, it lost votes. The first formation chosen to become fully manned by *kontraktniki* was the 76th Airborne Division (as it was then called) in Pskov.⁶ The scheme was later to take in other formations in the airborne forces and those engaged on operations—i.e., the 42nd Motor Rifle Division (MRD), then involved in combat in Chechnya.

Having been given targets to introduce *kontraktniki* into such formations, some skullduggery was entered into by senior officers to massage the recruitment figures to their advantage. The more it *seemed* as if the professionalization process was going well, then the less pressure would be put on the military by its political masters. Since, for instance, not many of the new *kontraktniki* wanted to sign up to serve in the 42nd MRD, and thus to commit to 3 years spent solely in Chechnya, certain “transfers” went ahead. When elements of the 76th were about to leave Chechnya after a short deployment there, 1,000 of its *kontraktniki* were, apparently, simply transferred over to the 42nd. They were thus counted twice: once as part of the 76th and then again as troops of the 42nd. On paper, it seemed as if both formations had achieved their targets for *kontraktniki* recruitment.⁷ Another scam was to force conscripts to sign on as *kontraktniki*. They would then be paid as professionals but actually leave when their 2-year conscript term was up, and not when their

3-year contract term finished. Such servicemen were not committed to a military career and thus had no intention of signing on for further periods of contract service. Again, it seemed as if there were more truly *kontraktniki* than was actually the case.⁸ With all such hoodwinking, the generals could tell their political masters that the scheme to professionalize the military was progressing well, therefore those masters would not press them to recruit more *kontraktniki*—which they wanted to avoid. The military had to remain conscript.

Other schemes to undermine the professionalization process were also entered into. Projects to build new barracks and housing for single and married *kontraktniki* went either painfully slowly or were simply not completed due to foot-dragging by the General Staff. The bills presented by the military for such projects were too high, making it seem as if professionalization could not be afforded. Moreover, the *kontraktniki* who had been promised decent living conditions, only to find out that they did not yet exist, would not be signing on for a further 3 years once their initial term was up. Pay was another issue. The *kontraktniki* could not be paid more than quite senior officers. And since the latter's pay was so low, the *kontraktniki* themselves had to accept low salaries. Promises to raise pay scales were not kept. There was thus little financial incentive to become a professional soldier. *Kontraktniki* recruitment, quite strong to begin with in the late 1990s, began to trail off as the situation became clearer in regard to both accommodation and pay.⁹

While the mission to create a professional military seemed destined to remain a work in progress, Yeltsin did have some concrete successes where his efforts to reform the armed services were concerned. He had

inherited a military some four million strong; but by 1992 this figure had dropped to 2.8 million, and it continued to fall further throughout the later 1990s.¹⁰ This was not so much to do with any active attempts to reduce the size of the military, but rather came about both because of the increase in the number of post-Soviet deferments available to potential conscripts and because the pool of manpower that Russia now had access to was much smaller than that in the Soviet Union. What curiously did not change, though, and this was to the conservative generals' advantage, was the number of actual formations within the army's ground forces. This stayed the same – at 203 divisions.

In the later Soviet period, these 203 divisions were never all fully manned. Only 50 Category A divisions were described as being at "permanent readiness." The rest, the B, C, and D category formations, were cadre units; understrength and waiting to be filled out only on mobilization. The division's category depended on its manning strength and equipment schedules. A Category C division would, for instance, have a personnel strength of approximately 1,000 – mainly officers and warrant officers.¹¹ In the post-Cold War era, the situation in terms of these divisions' manning levels became considerably "worse." Only some 13 percent of the ground forces' overall assets were now deemed ready to take part in immediate operations (i.e., without mobilization).

But while all these divisions were lacking in conscripts, what they did not lack was officers. These were still there acting in their role as the divisions' cadre strength. Thus there were divisions with only 1,000 or so personnel; half of whom would be officers or warrant officers. This was the obvious result of putting the fox in charge of the chicken coop. For here

was a ruse by the military hierarchy to preserve officer posts: units needed officers – including generals – and so the units were kept.¹²

PUTIN ADVANCES REFORMS

Vladimir Putin, when he officially succeeded Yeltsin as president in 2000, picked up the baton of military reform. But whereas Yeltsin was concerned mostly with cost savings, Putin had a much more nationalist agenda and specifically wanted armed forces, and especially units of the airborne and ground forces, that could contribute to Russia's great power ambitions. The military Putin inherited, though, while it appeared to be large on paper, was actually a largely ineffectual fighting force and certainly not capable of deploying, with any appreciable size, on any expeditionary operation. Putin lamented that, "The army [i.e., the *armiya*] has 1.4 million men, but there is no one to wage war."¹³

Putin in particular directed his ire at the mobilization concept and at the hollow shell of a military that it had created. The thinking behind the mobilization concept had always been that the Soviet military would only ever be engaged in full-blown superpower conflict, and never in any small-scale, low-intensity engagements. The Soviet Union never conducted the likes of the operations that the U.S. military had done in such countries as Lebanon, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama; or as the British had done in the Falklands/Malvinas.

For the Soviet military, with its "big war" emphasis, the thinking was that any lead-up to such a war would involve a prior buildup of tension that would allow time for the mobilization of reservists. Hence

there was no need for the Soviet military, apart obviously from formations based in East Germany, to be in any real state of readiness. The results of this approach were obvious during the Soviet army's war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The battalions sent there (infantry, airborne, artillery, air defence, and logistics) were all composite and made up from manpower of the three undermanned battalions in any Soviet regiment. There was no sense that an entire regiment, let alone a division, would be available to be sent en bloc to Afghanistan.¹⁴ This neglect of the concept of "rapid deployment" was still apparent when the Soviet military became (for the most part) that of Russia in 1991. Indeed, the battalions sent to fight in Chechnya were also composite in nature.¹⁵

But Putin wanted a military that did not have to wait for recalled conscripts to turn up or for composite units to be formed before it was ready either to defend the country or to deploy anywhere. In essence, what Putin wanted was the professional military that had still, by 2000 and in spite of Yeltsin's earlier edict, not yet materialized.

The problem remained the institutional power of the military. If the conservative generals wanted to thwart Putin's plans for military reform they could, just as they had done with Yeltsin. And Putin knew he had to treat them warily. As Aleksandr Golts puts it, Putin "didn't dare initiate radical military reform." Putin's power base lay with the domestic security service (the FSB)¹⁶ and not with the FSB's rivals for institutional power, the military. But Putin did, though, think he could push through something like the Israeli system in which a professional force was always on hand that could, in slow times, be reinforced by recalled conscripts.

A good deal of military procrastination ensued. Several defensive measures were enacted to hinder this latest, Putin inspired, drive towards professionalization. The first card played by the conservative generals, led again by Colonel-General Smirnov, was that of cost. It was said that Russia could not afford the number of *kontraktniki* being proposed. The figures to back up the claims presented by the conservative elements within the powerful General Staff varied. In December 2001, the cost of professionalizing one division was stated as being 500 million roubles. By March 2002 the cost had risen to 1 billion roubles per division, and by May of that year it was 2.5 billion! So Putin then advanced the concept of just professionalizing several units and formations—such as those in the airborne forces and marines. These units would then be capable of deploying immediately without waiting for any recalled conscripts.¹⁷ Thus, in 2003, Putin pushed through the Federal Targeted Program for the Conversion of the Military to Contract Service. Under this program, the number of *kontraktniki* was supposed to increase from 22,000 in 2003 to 148,000 by 2008.¹⁸ In step with this move and echoing Yeltsin's desire to court public popularity by ending conscription, the principal 2-year conscript term of service was to be reduced; first to 18 months and then, in 2007, to just 1 year. The next step planned was that of the total abolition of conscription.¹⁹

But even this move was not to the liking of Smirnov and his allies. They continually revised downwards the target figure for the number of *kontraktniki*. The original figure of 148,000 *kontraktniki* posts to be created by 2008 was first dropped by the General Staff to 133,000, and then to 125,000. Finally, in January 2008, Smirnov announced that the overall program had

been successfully completed, but with just 100,000 *kontraktniki*!²⁰

With such sabotaging of his wishes, Putin realized he needed help in pushing through his ideas on military reform. Thus in February 2007, he drafted in a new defense minister, Anatoliy Serdyukov. Here was the first truly civilian Russian minister of defense. As the former head of the Tax Ministry, Serdyukov was supposed to have a wealth of experience of dealing with bureaucracies and a nose for the corrupt practices in which many senior officers were engaging. This was a weakness that could be targeted. The more generals that could be caught and sacked for abusing their position, then the more of them that could be replaced by officers compliant to their political masters. Serdyukov thus conducted “a thorough purge” of the MoD.²¹ To aid him in his mission, Serdyukov brought in a phalanx of advisers and bureaucrats from St. Petersburg — outsiders with no links to the Moscow military gravy train.²²

While Serdyukov, like his predecessors, was capable of reducing the overall numbers in the military, the actual number of officers — particularly generals — was staying remarkably static. Serdyukov was also to point out an old issue. Even though the personnel strength of the military had dropped to just 1.3 million, the actual number of units and formations in the ground forces remained remarkably the same. Moreover, as Serdyukov noted, the officers serving in this skeleton army were all the time losing their leadership and administrative capabilities because they had no actual soldiers to lead or to administer. Certainly, it was fairly pointless for them to do any training or exercises. This system, said Serdyukov, meant that while the ground forces had its 203 divisions, it could only

muster 90,000 combat-effective troops.²³ At least this was better than the figure quoted earlier by Putin in 2006 of only 55,000 combat-effective troops.²⁴ While representing something of an improvement, it was still clear that something was very wrong with the Russian army.

Thus it became Serdyukov's principal aim to reduce the entire military's officer strength by 200,000. He wanted to see officers constituting only some 15 percent of the total military strength, and not the 30 or so percent that they did constitute.²⁵ Basically, Serdyukov's plan ran like this: the 355,300 officers and 140,000 warrant officers reportedly on strength as of January 1, 2008 would be reduced, by January 1, 2012, to just 150,000 officers. All of the 140,000 warrant officers would lose their jobs (the rank would disappear). However, the number of other ranks was to be boosted from 623,500 to 850,000; 180,000 of whom were slated to be *kontraktniki* (both figures relate to the armed forces as a whole).²⁶ What Serdyukov was doing, and very much what he had in mind, was to eliminate the inverted rank pyramid that had formed. Thus while the jobs of many officers would be lost, the actual number of lieutenants in the armed forces was to rise by 10,000. The ultimate aim was to have, across the services, 10,000 officers of colonel rank and above; 40,000 lieutenant-colonels and majors and, at the base of the new pyramid, 100,000 junior officers (40,000 captains and 60,000 lieutenants).²⁷

Serdyukov naturally clashed with the conservative Chief of the General Staff (CGS), General Yuriy Baluyevsky, whose attempts to thwart Serdyukov eventually led to his replacement as CGS in June 2008 by General Nikolai Makarov. Makarov would doubtless prove to be more receptive to politically-driven

reform than his predecessor. Unlike Baluyevsky, Makarov had no power base in Moscow among the General Staff—he had been brought in from his previous post as the head of the Siberian Military District. As such, he owed his position to the political masters who had appointed him, and not to his standing among the generals of Moscow's General Staff. He would thus more likely be a proponent of what those political masters wanted, i.e., reform. Of course, the more Makarov supported the politicians' reform processes, the more enemies he would make in the General Staff and the more he would then have to rely on political patronage to keep him in his post as CGS. For Putin and Serdyukov, it was a virtuous circle. Makarov was just a puppet to be manipulated by them.

Despite now having a defense minister and a CGS who were minded to push through reform—which came to be called the process of *modernizatsiya*—the conservative elements in the military were still capable of at least delaying, if not exactly thwarting, the process. This all changed, however, after the war with Georgia broke out in August 2008.

THE WAR WITH GEORGIA

While perceived in some quarters as a war that Russia was well prepared for and one that was perhaps even instigated by Moscow, this was actually not the case. The Russian armed forces were just not ready to fight: the initiation of the conflict took both politicians and military by surprise. The response to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia—and on the Russian peacekeeping troops there—was slow. This was partly due to the fact that neither civilian nor military decisionmakers were available in the August holiday

period. As the newspaper, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, reported, "They could not find the defense minister via telephone for more than 10 hours" and "could not make any important decisions without him."²⁸ Confusion was also apparent over whether the despatch of troops should be authorized by Prime Minister Putin or by President Medvedev. Technically, such power lay with the president, but Putin was still looked upon as the major locus of power within the government. More critically for detailed military activity, Colonel-General Aleksandr Rukshin, the head of the Defense Ministry's Main Operations Directorate (the department responsible for planning operations beyond Russia's borders and the "brain of the General Staff"²⁹), had not been replaced since his removal by Serdyukov back in July. Indeed, most of the officers in the Directorate were away on leave, and the Directorate's building was itself being redecorated. No one was there. Rukshin apparently even refused an appeal from the Defense Ministry to return to duty to cover the crisis. It was only a call from Putin that actually brought him back to his desk.

The problems at the Directorate may have slowed down response times, but there was little excuse for the slow reaction of elements of the ground forces' 58th Army. The 135th and 693rd Motor Rifle Regiments of the 19th Division were based just over the border from South Ossetia and yet were so slow to come to action that troops from the airborne forces, flying in from hundreds of kilometers away and acting as basic infantry, still managed to be the first Russian combat forces to cross the border into South Ossetia itself.³⁰

Apart from the organizational *faux pas*, the war also exposed other Russian military inadequacies. Firstly, space-based and electronic warfare (EW) as-

sets failed to pick up the concentration of Georgian forces prior to the conflict. And neither could Russian EW suppress the Georgians' air defense capabilities (leading to the shooting down of several Russian aircraft). Reconnaissance assets were also rudimentary and provided little in the way of information to turn into actionable intelligence.³¹

Poor communications in theatre added to other command and control problems. Interservice cooperation was minimal, particularly air-to-ground. The commander of the North Caucasus Military District seemingly had no control of what the air force was doing in his theater of operations. Air assets were controlled by the Air Force commander, Colonel-General Aleksandr Zelin, who remained remote from the battlefield. The retired general and author, Makhmut Gareyev, noted that the "absence of a unified command" was the root cause of Russian aircraft losses and of the failure of the air force to provide effective close air support to ground units.³² Basic tactical communications were also woeful. Apparently, even the commander of the 58th Army, Lieutenant-General Anatoliy Khrulev, at one point could only communicate with some of his troops via a satellite phone he had borrowed from a journalist.³³

The Russian equivalent of the Global Positioning System (*Global'naya Navigatsionayya Sputnikovaya Sistema* [GLONASS]) did not work properly. In 1996 there were 21 satellites in the GLONASS array, but by the beginning of 1998 only 16 were still transmitting. This first generation of Russian satellites was poor, and no enhanced replacements were initially deployed due to budgetary cutbacks. Six more satellites were launched between 1998 and 2000, these could not compensate for the fall-out rate of the older satellites,

and by 2001 there were only seven still operating. This situation had not improved much by 2008 when the war with Georgia began.³⁴

The failings of GLONASS not only affected basic navigational tasks and fire control missions, but also made it impossible to fashion a network-centric capability (NCC). Thus, overall command and control was inept at best. Luckily, individual units did what they had to do and initiative was displayed, especially by the airborne units involved.³⁵ The war was saved for Russia by what Medvedev called the “professional, independent operations of battalions.”³⁶

The lack of basic modern equipment was evident elsewhere. Russian tanks, besides lacking access to GLONASS, were also without identification friend-or-foe (IFF) systems and thermal imagers. The tanks themselves were principally (60-75 percent) older T-62s or T-72s, which had no answer to the Georgians’ use of shaped-charge warheads. Artillery units did not have counterbattery radar and so could not locate Georgian fire bases. All troops, bar some special forces units, lacked night-vision aids, and their armored vests were heavy and cumbersome. All in all, not much was in the Russians’ favor, and yet they proved victorious. As one Russian journalist put it, “It’s just that we had a bit less chaos than the Georgians.”³⁷

In terms of Russian personnel involved in this war, those units that had a fair number of *kontraktniki* within their ranks were perceived to have performed better than those that did not. A lack of leadership skills was also apparent; especially at the noncommissioned officer (NCO) level. For instance, basic issues such as the filling of tanks’ reactive-armor canisters prior to operations – an NCO task in any Western army – could not be performed because it required the presence of an

officer of at least captain rank. But these were all too busy on other tasks. Thus ground forces tanks went into battle with empty reactive-armor canisters.³⁸

Naturally, once the conflict was over, a good deal of reflection occurred in Russian military circles. The media, too, were very critical of the overall performance. As Makarov put it, "We had serious drawbacks in the conflict and learned a number of lessons. We will deal with them as soon as possible."³⁹ Now, though, Serdyukov and Makarov had their chance to push through the reforms that had, heretofore, been stymied by the conservative generals. The conflict with Georgia changed the dynamic where military reform was concerned. Once the war was over and it became clear just how badly the Russian military had performed, then the need for quite drastic reform became starkly evident – even to the conservative generals. Their opposition largely crumbled. Sensing their chance, Serdyukov and Makarov redoubled their efforts to push through the reforms they wished to see.

The first target, again, was the number of superfluous personnel in the military. After the war, the pace of the personnel cuts accelerated. Originally, the armed forces were supposed to reduce in size from 1.3 million down to one million by 2016, 150,000 of whom would be officers. In September 2008, it was announced that such a reduction was now to be achieved by 2012.⁴⁰ The second principal target of Serdyukov and Makarov was the basic structural arrangement of the army.

NEW COMMAND STRUCTURES

Perhaps the most obvious reform affecting the army itself related to the introduction of a range of new command structures. These were designed to in-

crease the army's flexibility and to create better command and control arrangements. In October 2008 it was announced that all of the ground forces' divisions were to be converted into brigades, that new command tiers were to come into operation, and that the Military District system was to change to become one of Strategic Commands.⁴¹

Divisions to Brigades.

The war with Georgia made clear that the overall structure of the ground forces was ill-suited to the conduct of modern warfare. To start with, the traditional Russian division of about 10,000 personnel⁴² was seen to be a poor basic building block. It did not have the adroitness or flexibility to cope with the demands of fast-moving modern conflict. This was principally because the divisions were top-heavy. They normally consisted of three regiments that could be armored, armored infantry, or basic infantry, depending on the type of division. But the division was a structure suited to all-out conventional warfare as envisaged by all the major potential protagonists during the Cold War. It had the requisite heavy weaponry and a degree of independence supplied by its organic combat support (e.g., artillery) and combat service support (e.g., logistics) assets. Most of these assets would be held at the division level and then released down to the regiments as required. This is what made them top-heavy. Once the Cold War was over, though, Western armies—such as those of the United States and the UK—realized that the division was too large and unwieldy a formation for the expeditionary operations that were in vogue post-1989. The United States and UK both adopted the brigade as the new basic army

building-block during the 1990s.⁴³ Roughly a third of the size of a division and with generally lighter equipment, it could have access to those support assets that were previously held at division level. A brigade was also a more manageable structure in terms of command and control and provided increased flexibility. It could be fairly easily deployed by sea or air within a short period of time and would be immediately able to fight once in theatre and without requiring external aid—barring some air power assets, which the brigade would probably have trained with before any overseas deployment. In the U.S. and British armies, the brigade had become the new formation of choice. It was the future.

Only now were the Russian ground forces catching up. As Serdyukov put it, compared to the division, “the brigade structure is more flexible, mobile and modern.”⁴⁴ The new brigades, two or two-and-a-half times larger than the old divisional regiments in terms of numbers, were to mirror Western practice in being modular and having their own combat support and combat service support assets. They could operate independently. Of course, the officers selected to command these new brigades had to get used to the idea of operating independently and in controlling new assets. This was something of a problem in the centralized Russian military system, but many officers did have experience commanding such units as the reinforced battalions that had been sent to Chechnya.⁴⁵

The role of armor in the Soviet/Russian military mindset was also changing. While tank battalions obviously still figure in the Motor Rifle Brigades, only two of the 83 brigades are purely tank brigades. Markarov explains this by saying that “in both future wars and even ones that are occurring now, the role of tanks will be secondary.”⁴⁶

The change from divisions to brigades did not take place throughout the army. The airborne forces managed to fend off such a change. The 203 divisions of the ground forces, however, were duly converted into 83 brigades. The only ground force division to be preserved was a machine gun division based in the Kurile Islands.⁴⁷ This whole structural rearrangement was put together over a year or so (the conversion was stated to be complete by December 2009). The new brigades were then all deemed to be at “permanent readiness.”⁴⁸

This permanent readiness idea resulted from the tardiness of the ground forces units in making their initial moves in the conflict with Georgia. To correct this, in October 2008 Medvedev had called for all formations in the army to be in a state of “permanent combat readiness” by 2012. This was also seen as another signal from the politicians that the practice of conscription should end. Basically, permanent combat readiness could only be achieved by having fully constituted units that could engage in operations without having to wait until they had received their quota of recalled conscripts. Of course, without the need to recall conscripts, there was no need for the mobilization system. It would have to end; or at least be cut back markedly. As military analyst Mikhail Barabanov put it, “Thus, the Russian army basically will cease to be a mobilization army.”⁴⁹

What exactly the term “permanent readiness” actually meant was open to debate. Both Makarov and Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov stated that each of the 83 brigades (with personnel strength of 4,500-5,000) “will be ready for combat within an hour” of getting any order to deploy. This seemed remarkable. Colonel-General Aleksandr Postnikov, the cur-

rent commander of the ground forces and another of those brought in from Siberia,⁵⁰ has said that the term means that the brigades can leave their barracks gate within an hour but would not be capable of combat operations until 24 hours had passed.⁵¹ The head of the (then) Volga-Urals Military District, Lieutenant-General Arkadiy Bakhin, said that the term meant that the brigade had 100 percent manning, 100 percent availability of stores and equipment, and that deployment would be "in that normative time which the General Staff has determined for us to go out . . . within an hour." He confirmed thus the move within an hour.⁵² Other military officials have said that it means "capable of going into battle within 1 or 2 hours."⁵³ Yet other, perhaps more thoughtful, voices have stated that what "permanent readiness" actually means is that the brigades are really no more than fully manned and thus not reliant on conscript recalls.⁵⁴

Some of the brigades are destined to be split into light and heavy variants. One of the brigades in each of the Military Districts (soon to be the four Strategic Commands) is designated as an air assault brigade. As such, it will act as the regional rapid reaction force.⁵⁵ It will, however, only ever be delivered by helicopter, and such brigades are not part of the airborne forces; although their personnel are to be trained by the Airborne personnel.⁵⁶ The ownership of the helicopter fleet is currently an issue within the Russian military. In 2003 all of the ground forces helicopters were handed over to the control of the Air Force. But the Air Force, dominated as it is by a fast-jet culture, is perceived to have not looked after the helicopter fleet; treating it as an unwelcome step-child. This has meant that the ground forces have not had access to the number of helicopters that they would like, and it is thus proving difficult to train the new air assault brigades.⁵⁷

New Command Tiers.

The demise of the division in Russian army thinking also allowed Serdyukov to announce once more, in October 2008, a move designed to help overall command and control procedures. The previous command tiers were arranged as such: Military District-Army-Division-Regiment. This was to be replaced by the new order: Military District-Operational Command-Brigade. This reordering was again designed to increase flexibility. The removal of the Army level meant one less stratum of command and thus a more streamlined system. All of the Military Districts were converted to the tier system on December 1, 2009.⁵⁸

Strategic Commands.

The structural reforms went further. It was officially announced in July 2010 that Russia's six Military Districts, dating from the Soviet era, would also be downsized into just four Strategic Commands. These four new Commands—West, East, South, and Central—are replacing the Moscow, Leningrad, Siberia, Far East, Volga-Urals, and North Caucasus Military Districts.⁵⁹ The Commands will also provide for better command and control over what have become, since the Soviet period, very much smaller Russian armed forces. They will also be broader in scope. One control center in each Command will now direct not just the ground forces formations, but also navy and air force assets held within the command area. Additionally, and unusually, the commands will also have operational control over the troops of the Interior Ministry, the Emergency Situations Ministry, and the Border

Guards stationed within the command.⁶⁰ The only units not to be controlled by the Strategic Command headquarters will be those of the Strategic Missile Troops and the Space Troops. Both are still directed centrally from Moscow.

This move from Military Districts to Strategic Commands has also allowed the political masters to make personnel changes that suit their purposes. This is obvious from the choice of the men appointed to head these new Commands. All four are considered to be supporters of reform, and all once served under or with Makarov in the Siberian Military District: Colonel-General Arkady Bakhin in the West; Lieutenant-General Aleksandr Galkin in the South; Admiral Konstantin Sidenko in the East (he was formerly commander of the Pacific Fleet), and Lieutenant-General Vladimir Chirkin assumed control in the Central Strategic Command. Again, these men, like Makarov, are not from the Moscow inner circle of influential General Staff officers. They are also, crucially, men that Makarov trusts.⁶¹

The East Strategic Command.

While the South Strategic Command looks as if it will be the most operationally busy in terms of dealing with terrorist/insurgent issues in the North Caucasus, it is probably the East Strategic Command that will, in a strategic sense, become the most important. This is because it faces China.

For the Russians, there is certainly some concern about China as a possible future threat; certainly more so than any threat emanating from the United States or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In recent years Russia has experienced a significant

influx of Chinese migrants into its underpopulated Far East region. This has raised nationalist issues of a “takeover by stealth” by Beijing of an area of Russia that is rich in the resources that the Chinese economy needs. Moreover, the Chinese military has recently conducted large-scale exercises involving the movement of significant force elements overland for long distances (hundreds of kilometers). This is seen in Moscow as preparation for operations inside Russian territory. Among other responses to this perceived threat, in March 2010, the head of the Siberian Military District moved two ground forces brigades closer to the Chinese border near Chita.⁶²

It is, however, very rare for any military figure or government official to actually mention China as a threat by name. Doctrinal statements and national security strategies will, for instance, openly talk of NATO being a “threat” or a “danger” (even though most Russian officials believe this not to be the case), while China is never mentioned or even alluded to.⁶³ As Jacob Kipp puts it, “The silence about the rise of China and its implications for Moscow has been deafening.”⁶⁴ Moscow, while believing that the United States, NATO, and Japan can absorb a threatening tone from Moscow with a fair degree of equanimity, does not want to antagonize China: it is, after all, a major trading partner of Russia and occasionally an important diplomatic ally.

Historically, the Far East region has never really figured as a major Russian strategic concern. It was always a military backwater. All of the Soviet Union’s best troops and equipment faced west and not east or south. And despite the threat felt now from China, even in 2010 the Far East Military District still contained military formations that were a cause of concern. In

January 2010 an inspection had rated the whole Far East Military District as “unsatisfactory,” and none of its brigades were judged to be combat ready.⁶⁵

The concentration, though, is now changing. The largest Russian military exercise held since the end of the Cold War, *Vostok-2010*, took place in the late summer of 2010 in the Far East. It involved land, sea, and air elements.⁶⁶ And while the point of the exercise was rather bizarrely stated as being to practice dealing with a “terrorist incursion,” it clearly concerned the conduct of large-scale conflict.⁶⁷ It seems also to have been intended as a warning to China that Russia was ready for any conflict in the region.⁶⁸ It was also, of course, a test exercise for the new Far East Strategic Command itself, for the new brigade structures, and for the fledgling NCC currently being developed for the Russian military.⁶⁹

However, even though this exercise was clearly aimed at countering a notional Chinese invasion, the rhetoric of Russian officials said otherwise. Ground troops were taking part, it was made known, to practice dealing with any mass influx of refugees from North Korea. Anti-aircraft systems (S-300s) were involved in order, it was said, to practice engaging pieces of supposedly malfunctioning North Korean rockets, which could fall on Russian territory. Warships were stated to be involved in order to practice countering U.S. naval assets. An amphibious landing was also conducted in the Kurile Islands: this naturally drew Japanese ire and not that of China, the probable real target. None of the elements of *Vostok-2010* were confirmed as being directed at what was clearly the real adversary – the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA).⁷⁰

There is, however, a problem with converting from divisions to brigades when facing such a potential en-

enemy as the PLA. The real requirement, if the PLA is to be a future opponent, is for bulky and hard-hitting divisions. "The border with Finland and Norway," as one analyst of the Russian military puts it, "is one thing and that with China is quite another."⁷¹ Brigades, for all their flexibility and speed of response in a complex and compact theater of operations, could, as another observer noted, "simply be lost" in the vast tracts of land in the Far East. Divisions would appear to be the formation of choice for operations that would doubtless be conducted over lengthy periods and require that the engaged formations have access to substantial amounts of organic combat support and combat service support.⁷²

It has been stated that the army will deal with any enemy incursion into the Far East first with immediate-use airborne forces, then with the East Strategic Command's own ground forces air assault brigade, and finally with other ground forces brigades that will then be capable of being brought into action. The army leadership understands that the forces currently available in the Far East will not stop any serious PLA invasion. Thus the plan seems to be that if such an invasion cannot be stopped or slowed down sufficiently using brigade elements, then, if there is no alternative, tactical nuclear weapons will be used. Indeed, during *Vostok-2010*, several nuclear land mines were notionally exploded and two Tochka-U (SS-21) missiles, which can carry tactical nuclear warheads, were launched.⁷³

Interestingly, reinforcing from the west was also tested during *Vostok-2010*. As part of the exercise, the 28th Motor Rifle Brigade was moved from European Russia to the Far East to test the actual deployability of a brigade. However, instead of deploying with its

own heavy equipment, the brigade used tanks and APCs that were waiting in the Far East. This equipment originally belonged to one of the cadre formations that had been disbanded in the recent reforms.⁷⁴ This approach appears to have been used because long brigade moves had gone wrong in the previous year's major exercise, *Zapad-2009*, held in the west of Russia.⁷⁵ Su-24M and Su-34 aircraft were also sent from European Russia to the Far East exercise zone accompanied by air-to-air refueling tankers, a critically short Russian military capability.⁷⁶ Such lengthy moves by either ground or air assets have never been attempted before in Russian military exercises. Such procedures, along with others practiced in *Vostok-2010*, are helping the Russians write new field manuals.⁷⁷

An important issue in regard to the new emphasis on the Far East region is that it is so different—in terms of topography, climate, and infrastructure development—from other Military Districts or Strategic Command areas. A quite different kind of operational thinking and equipment schedules are needed in the Far East compared to those of military formations operating in the west or the south. It may be, and it is currently being discussed, that Russia may have to develop two different armies—one for the Far East and the other to operate elsewhere.

THE FAILURE OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

One of the main drivers of professionalization in the past was the perceived need to create a body of men who could conduct military operations, while leaving the conscripts to sit quietly in a barracks somewhere out of harm's way. This worked to a large degree in that the vast majority of soldiers going to Chechnya

by the 2000s were *kontraktniki*. But today the army has fewer *kontraktniki* than it did in the early to mid-2000s. For example, there are no longer enough *kontraktniki* to man units in such current hotspots as Dagestan and Ingushetia, and operations in Chechnya are now conducted only by local troops of the pro-Moscow government in Grozny.⁷⁸ Thus conscripts are still being sent on active service, even though promises were made that they would not.⁷⁹ Indeed, in the war with Georgia, 30 percent of the troops involved were conscripts, some of whom were killed during the conflict. These had either been in the original peacekeeping force in South Ossetia, were in the 58th Army, or were part of the airborne forces, all of which should technically have been made up exclusively of *kontraktniki*.⁸⁰ Clearly, such deaths indicated that professionalization was not progressing as well as it might.

A further sign that all was not as it should be with the process came in August 2009 when it was announced that the 76th Air Assault Division was never going to be able to be fully professional. Back in 1996, as part of Yeltsin's edict, the 76th had been chosen as the formation that would be the very first to be fully contractualized. Now it was admitted that even this formation had not attracted enough professionals.⁸¹

The target set for 2008 of having 148,000 *kontraktniki* was thus missed by a wide margin. As Smirnov said, only 100,000 had signed up by January 2008. This figure was for the military overall; i.e., such elements as the ground forces, airborne forces, navy (which is now manned entirely by professionals⁸²), air force, space troops, and strategic rocket forces. The situation has now worsened. In January 2009, Smirnov announced that there were only 79,000 *kontraktniki* in the military,⁸³ although the most recent figure quoted puts the number at 90,000.⁸⁴

There are many reasons why the professionalization program ran into problems. Obviously, the generals were throwing their spanners into the works, but there was more to it than that. The initial promises on pay and housing had not been kept. Thus those who had signed on as *kontraktniki* were not inclined to continue their service beyond 3 years, and those who were tempted to join up were put off and changed their minds. There were also budgetary constraints. While the state was not paying the *kontraktniki* much, it could only afford to pay for a finite number.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, it is difficult to say what the exact reasons are for the failure to achieve the target number of *kontraktniki*.

In February 2010 Makarov, citing the cost factor, officially deemed the whole professionalization process to be a failure. Although it was his opinion that the “best option is to have a totally contract army,”⁸⁶ he now had to accept the inevitable. “Very many mistakes were made,” he said, “and the task set of building professional armed forces has not been accomplished. Therefore the decision has been made that conscript service must remain in the armed forces. . . . We are not going to go over to a contract basis. Moreover, we are increasing the draft and reducing the contract part.”⁸⁷ In April 2010, Makarov stated that Russia would never totally get rid of conscription. Thus, the country will continue with the system for the foreseeable future, ending the political hopes that it could be abandoned. It appears now that, in both the ground forces and the airborne forces, the concept of mixed-manning has emerged. That is, there will be no completely professional units: all will have a mixture of the two types (except for some special forces units and detachments, which will be totally professional). All of the newly formed brigades will have some com-

plement of *kontraktniki*, although this is likely to vary among brigades with some more permanently ready if they contain more *kontraktniki*.

In the current army, some 20 percent of personnel are said to be professionals.⁸⁸ Most of these are more likely to occupy the more technical branches, such as air defense, artillery, and signals. In infantry units, such positions as commanders, gunners, and drivers of APCs would normally be *kontraktniki*, while the rest of the squad/section would be conscripts.⁸⁹

In essence, the failure of professionalization is a victory for the conservative generals who all along had done their best to thwart the move towards professionalization. As Golts sums up, "The sad story of the [move to contract Manning] is a classic example of how . . . officials can upset any reform that is not to their advantage."⁹⁰ Golts, indeed, lays the blame squarely on Colonel-General Smirnov, the Deputy CGS.⁹¹

However, while the whole professionalization process has not been an unalloyed success, and although this might be seen as a victory of sorts by many in the military hierarchy, it is something of a Pyrrhic one, for the army, as well as the rest of the military, must now accept the concept of conscripts who serve for only 1 year.⁹²

The first problem with such conscripts is obviously the lack of time they spend with their ascribed units. After his 3-month training stint (or 6 months if the individual is destined for a technical branch of the military), the conscript will only ever spend some 9 months in his unit. As such, he is more a liability than an asset. Moreover, such men are not in their units long enough to take part in any annual field exercises. It is quite common now for conscripts to have their

terms extended so they can take part in such exercises. Remarkably, some 50 percent of the 20,000 servicemen who took part in the Vostok-2010 major exercise in September 2010 had only just been called up in that spring's conscription draft. Thus half of the troops involved in the Russian military's biggest exercise since the end of the Cold War had served for less than 6 months. Some of them, technically, were still in training.⁹³ The implications for the military's combat potential are clear.

The second problem with the 1-year term is that since the length of conscript service has been halved (from 2 years to 1), then double the number of conscripts must now be brought into the military to maintain the troop strength demanded by the generals. Thus the call-ups now held in the spring and fall of every year that were previously bringing in just 260,000 or so young men per annum now must at least double such figures. So to bring in the 500,000-600,000 conscripts now needed every year by the military obviously means that the conscription net has had to be spread much wider. Men previously exempt, such as those with very young children, college graduates, or doctors, are now being asked to present themselves for service.⁹⁴ The scale of medical deferments has also been markedly reduced, while those with a criminal record can now also serve as conscripts.⁹⁵ All this widening of the net has had to take place against a background of new constrictions on the availability of potential conscripts caused by both falling health standards and a falling birth-rate in Russia. Of the 400,000 young men currently leaving high school every year, a third are deemed to be unfit for military service.⁹⁶ In all of 2002, for instance, 335,000 men were conscripted out of a total population of 145.2 million. In 2008, it

was 334,000 out of a population of 142 million. In 2009, it was 625,000 out of an as yet unknown population — but certainly one smaller than in 2008. The mathematics are problematic: if only 400,000 young men leave school every year, how long can the military continue to conscript 600,000 and more per annum? And of course, all of these new problems with the 1-year term can be added to the traditional draft avoidance issues surrounding the Russian conscription system. (Estimates are that 130,000 men are currently dodging the draft.⁹⁷)

It must be assumed that if the conscription net is being spread wider and wider, then two contrasting features should be apparent. The first is that if more educated men can now be called up, then the average intelligence of the Russian conscript must be increasing — helpful when complicated military technologies have to be handled. On the other hand, more men must be called up who really do object to being part of a military organization. Such men can become troublemakers and upset unit morale.⁹⁸

Moreover, with such huge numbers of conscripts now being brought into the military every year, a similarly huge number of troops then become tied down in either training this number or in simply transporting them from location to location. Experienced personnel are thus removed from the operational order of battle.⁹⁹

A fourth problem is “churn,” or turnover, within units. Every spring and fall when the conscript call-ups take place, units lose some 50 percent of their personnel and have to accept a massive new intake. Unit cohesion must inevitably suffer.¹⁰⁰

The shortage of conscripts is certainly not due to a lack of effort on the part of the recruiting offices, or

commissariats. These commissariats, which fall under the control of Colonel-General Smirnov, have been given quotas for bringing in conscripts.¹⁰¹ Monetary rewards are handed out when an office meets or exceeds its quota. The doctors performing the entry medicals are likewise rewarded. It is thus no surprise if some sharp practice is entered into in order to meet these quotas. Some of this activity amounts to press-ganging. As one analyst points out, "Cases are known in which a young man has gone off to his place of work or education in the morning and has found himself in a military unit by that evening. Everything is done in a day, so the youth is unable to contest his illegal induction." It seems that even if the conscript is medically unfit for service, it is not the commissariat's problem. If he is found to be unfit once he gets to his training unit, then he will still have been registered and thus will have helped to fulfil the commissariat's target.¹⁰²

The army is desperate to have more conscripts. If any of the brigades are not fully manned using conscripts, then they will lose their permanent readiness status and thus receive a poor inspection rating.¹⁰³ Smirnov is currently trying to increase the military's share of the conscript intake by reducing the number going to other agencies. He does not want to see any conscripts being sent to organizations such as the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR),¹⁰⁴ and he wants a reduction in the numbers going to the Interior Ministry (MVD) and the Emergency Services Ministry (EMERCOM).¹⁰⁵

It may now be the case that the conscript term will have to go back up to 2 years. This will be pushed by the military but resisted by the politicians. It is sure to generate public protest. So the army, at least for the time being (and at least until after the presidential

elections of 2012), will have to deal with a series of problems being created by the fact that the conscription term is only 1 year.

With the massive cutback in officer numbers and the closing of the cadre formation bases across Russia, it is obvious now that the mobilization system can no longer function as it once did. It has been estimated that the whole Russian military will now, in a time of crisis, only have the capacity to call up some 700,000 reservists. This would take the military up to a personnel strength of 1.7 million. What the size of the ground forces itself would be on mobilization is, like many aspects related to the study of the Russian military, not clear. But it is clear that virtually all of the recalled conscripts will be those who have only served for 1 year.¹⁰⁶

The relatively small size of this mobilized military is raising some disquiet; particularly in relation to the fact that Russia may not be able to defend itself with conventional means and will therefore have to employ tactical nuclear weapons. As Konstantin Sivkov, retired from the General Staff's Centre for Military-Strategic Studies, argues:

The elimination of cadre units will strike a terrible blow against the country's defence capabilities. The result is that when a threat escalates from armed conflict to local war, we will have to go over to the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷

Such a warning – and others made by like-minded individuals – may, however, merely represent a scare tactic by those who wish to ensure that the overall size of the military does not drop too far.¹⁰⁸

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

There is a natural tension within a Russian military manned largely by short-service conscripts that is also being called upon to modernize and become an effective fighting force. A number of reforms have had to take place in order to deal with this issue.

Military Training in Schools.

One way chosen to alleviate the problems caused by the 1-year term of conscription, and announced in a February 2010 decree, has been to resurrect the Soviet concept of the Voluntary Association for Assistance to the Army, Air Force, and Navy (DOSAAF). Under this system, retired officers used to prepare high school children for conscript service. The training/indoctrination sometimes involved work in classrooms and sometimes in the field on camping trips. The subjects taught were mostly benign military skills, such as fieldcraft, map reading, and using radios.¹⁰⁹ The plan was that by the time the pupils had reached conscription age, they would already have had a basic introduction to military skills.¹¹⁰

The new version of DOSAAF, and very similar to it, is known as the Russian Defence Sports-Technical Organization (ROSTO).¹¹¹ Planned to be allied to ROSTO, and sometimes running concurrently with it, is another new system whereby pre-draft-age young men spend time at pre-conscription training centers. These are to be established in all Russian regions beginning in 2011. Up to 15,000 retired officers (many just having been made redundant) are earmarked to do the training—which will doubtless involve more technical military skills.¹¹² Moreover, high schools will

soon teach military subjects as part of their overall curricula.¹¹³

The advent of ROSTO and pre-conscription training is evidence that Russia still harbors a desire to hold on to the citizen army concept—implying that mass still has a place in Russian military thinking. How this concept squares with the accepted military logic of having highly trained professional soldiers operating modern high-tech military equipment is difficult to fathom. It can only make sense if China, with its PLA relying on mass, is seen as the most likely future enemy.

Non-Commissioned Officers.

Any army needs a decent corps of NCOs: personnel with military skills, with leadership ability, and, most of all, with *experience*. The former 2-year conscript term of service, while it still meant that soldiers could never serve long enough to develop true NCO capabilities, could at least justify the promotion of a number of conscripts to become NCOs (*serzhanti*¹¹⁴) for the last 6 months of their term. While this produced some junior leadership, it could not deal with the issue of troops having to man modern, sophisticated military equipment. The traditional Soviet approach—a legacy necessarily passed on to the Russian military—was to supply its conscript troops with very basic equipment that even a Central Asian peasant who did not speak Russian could work with. The aim was to keep everything simple, but the whole current military modernization project naturally has to involve a move away from simplicity. The lack of proper NCOs has thus been highlighted and become a particular concern as military technology has improved.

Another traditional Soviet approach was to let the officers take on many of the tasks that would normally fall to junior NCOs in Western armies. The Russian army also inherited this characteristic. If nothing else, it provided an argument to political masters against cutting officer posts. Moreover, given that the conscript term is now only 1 year, today's Russian officers are being called on to undertake even more of the basic tasks that should really be within the purview of NCOs. Officers are thus not doing what they should be doing—improving their own officer skills.

Initially, when *kontraktniki* first started to come into the army in the mid-1990s, the General Staff objected to them being trained to become NCOs. Such professional NCOs would have undermined the generals' argument that officers were needed, in part, to do the jobs of NCOs. They had made sure that there was no program to train the NCOs that would make the system work.¹¹⁵

Again, though, the conflict with Georgia undermined this argument by opening the inadequacies of the army to public scrutiny, and one of the obvious inadequacies was the fact that junior leadership was lacking. And this problem was not helped by the announced cutback in officer numbers and the elimination of the rank of warrant officer. There is thus now a shortage of both to do the NCO tasks. Some units are currently reported to be unmanageable due to a dearth of proper leadership.¹¹⁶ In an effort to get around this obvious lacuna, the General Staff has decided to take 5,000 young officers fresh from military academies and to put them into NCO positions. Thus the previously unofficial and unacknowledged system whereby officers were doing NCOs jobs has now become official. These men—paid as officers—have been promised

that they will assume real officer appointments at the first opportunity.¹¹⁷

The fall-out from the war with Georgia also meant that the establishment of a proper system of NCO development could no longer be resisted. Serdyukov was thus able to establish a new training school specifically for NCOs – the first in Russia since the Tsarist era.¹¹⁸ This was to be based at the main training base of the airborne forces in Ryazan. The airborne forces had come out of the Georgian conflict with their reputation actually enhanced, and not diminished as with the ground forces, and so they were chosen to train all of the army's NCOs. It is hoped by Serdyukov that some of the airborne's *esprit de corps* and fighting spirit will rub off on the new NCOs.

A 3-year NCO training program is now running at Ryazan. The personnel chosen to go to there are recruited from those aged 19-35 who have already completed at least a year of service (either as a conscript or professional), who have completed secondary education, and who have agreed to sign on for 5 years' service once they have graduated from the school. Recruits for NCO training are also being sought in the reserves. The first graduates will appear in 2012, and will naturally assume the posts of quite senior NCOs, equivalent to sergeants and staff sergeants in the West. Their arrival will definitely increase the combat capability of all Russian army units – both airborne and ground forces.¹¹⁹

There are some teething problems with this new means of creating NCOs. One is the sheer expense, in Russian military terms, of running this new course. Another is the scale of the problem. The Russian army needs tens of thousands of NCOs and not just the 250 or so per year the current scheme will produce for the

35,000-strong airborne forces and the approximately 400,000 in the ground forces.¹²⁰ Ryazan therefore merely represents a drop in the ocean. As one analyst notes, “the creation of such an NCO corps even under the most favourable conditions will not require 3 to 4 years, but no fewer than 10-15. This delay potentially creates a threat to the announced reforms.”¹²¹ The realization that an effective NCO system cannot be created overnight has reportedly led to a halt in the removal of the rank of warrant officer, and those of that rank slated to be made redundant are now being kept in the military.¹²²

Officer Training.

Serdyukov’s plan is to close a good proportion of the 72 officer academies. These used to turn out some 18,000 officers a year (including 7,500 conscript officers). The plan now is to train only 1,500-2000 officers annually (with no conscript officers¹²³) in a greatly reduced number of academies.¹²⁴

EQUIPMENT

As noted, it is not the purpose here to produce a detailed account of technical improvements under the current Russian Army modernization process. This is partly a reflection of the fact that there have simply not been many such improvements. Recent statements on Russian military spending indicate that strategic nuclear, air force, and air defense forces have a higher priority than the ground forces.¹²⁵ The Russian army’s equipment is still basically that of the Soviet army, with a few updates to old frames. Tanks, for instance, have not been a major target of investment.

There is deemed to be no real need to build newer models. Tanks were lost in the war with Georgia mostly because they had not been properly prepared for battle, and not because they were unfit for battle. It is the same with APCs, although foreign (wheeled) APCs are being purchased. As with Western armies, the Russian army is moving more towards employing wheeled APCs because of their increased deployability and flexibility compared to tracked variants.¹²⁶ In Russia, however, wheeled APCs have been recognized as unsuitable for use in the Far East where the road system is underdeveloped. Again, there is the issue of the two armies: one with equipment for the west and south of Russia and one with equipment for the Far East. The army is also procuring from abroad several tactical-level systems such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance, sniper rifles, armored vests, and night-vision goggles to fill obvious gaps exposed by the war with Georgia.¹²⁷

It has been pointed out in Russia that the lack of a modern command and control system is “the principal problem with the Russian Army.”¹²⁸ This is also slowly being dealt with. More tactical radios are being issued at squad level and better interservice means of communication are being developed. A rudimentary NCC is also being introduced and has been tested in a few exercises, but it is nowhere near the capability of Western analogues. The current reduction in both horizontal and vertical command levels with the introduction of the new command tiers and the Strategic Command concept should ease the proposed introduction of the NCC into the armed forces.¹²⁹ As would be expected, however, such systems are proving difficult for Russian officers to master, from both cultural and technical aspects.¹³⁰

The politicians have promised to provide the military with the most modern weapons, apparently as a sop to the generals to sweeten the bitter pill of the overall cutbacks. But many such modern weapons can only be procured from abroad because the Russian defense industry is more in need of modernizing than the military itself. As noted, the Russian military-industrial complex can really only produce updated systems from Soviet times. High-tech systems and assets that are commonplace in Western militaries simply cannot be produced in Russia.¹³¹

THE MODERNIZATION PROCESS

It is quite difficult, given the conflicting data available, to establish just how far the process of Russian military modernization has come and where exactly this leaves the ground forces. However, a few main points can be made:

- The Russian military will probably never be totally professional.
- As things currently stand, the personnel strength of the military is in the region of 1.1 million. The ground forces strength is probably between 350,000 and 400,000.
- The military's command and control structures have been simplified, and there will undoubtedly be better future coordination between the services and among the services.
- Better communications systems are being introduced into the ground forces at all levels. This will alleviate the command and control issues that emerged in the war with Georgia.
- The military education structures are also being streamlined, and the new NCO school will

inevitably help create—no matter how small—a corps of well-trained and effective NCOs.

- The ground forces may now actually be *short* of officers if it is accepted that they perform a variety of NCO functions. Since there are no “real” NCOs yet to take over from the now absent officers, units are bound to miss such officers.
- The elimination of the rank of warrant officer appears to have been halted. The posts of some warrant officers have, however, already been contracted out to civilians.
- Despite all the changes made in the Russian ground forces, its units are not suddenly going to become highly effective. There will still be far too many short-service conscripts in their ranks and not enough NCOs. The officers will still have their skill sets limited by all the mundane tasks that they have to perform. If the need is for rapid-reaction capabilities, or if an expeditionary operation needs to be conducted, then it is the airborne forces that will be called upon, not the ground forces.
- So long as it does not prove too expensive, the probability is that two Russian armies will form: one to conduct operations in the south and west of the country and another to conduct operations in the Far East. The equipment and the education/training of both officers and other ranks will be different for each army.
- The only likely change in ground forces heavy equipment for the foreseeable future is that more wheeled vehicles will be procured from abroad. Very few upgraded main battle tanks are likely to be delivered in the coming years.

- Ground forces are being created that will be more suitable for use against small-scale opponents than against NATO or China.
- The claim that ground force units can be on the move within an hour of a call-out is very debatable.
- Ground force units will be very much weakened by the fact that twice a year they lose almost 50 percent of their personnel.
- It remains to be seen just how the ground forces will adjust to the new brigade structure. Exercises are reported to have gone well when they have involved the brigades. But to what degree such claims can be believed remains moot.
- Their use of tactical nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out in any future engagement between Russian and Chinese forces.

CONCLUSION

Russia's political leaders are currently pushing a state- and society-wide process of modernization. But such a process takes time. There can be no overnight solutions. So it is with the modernization of the Russian military. It all seems to be rushed. The radical changes that have been both proposed and introduced need to be given time to embed. For while new structures can be created and new equipment and technologies procured, the crucial element in such changes is the degree to which they are accepted by the human element. This is often the most difficult aspect in any process of organizational change. The Russian military is a deeply conservative institution, and it is being asked to accept fundamental changes. Changes, indeed, that threaten the very livelihoods of

those being asked to implement them. It is no wonder that the military modernization process is progressing slowly in Russia. The Russian ground forces will not be very different in the next few years than they are now. Time and future investment will eventually produce the more refined army that a host of Russian politicians have wished to see. But it will take time and investment.

ENDNOTES

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