

THE RUSSIAN SOLDIER TODAY

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The first decade of the post-Cold War era left the Russian military neglected, impoverished and, to a large extent, structurally and technologically obsolete. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, however, the Russian leadership became determined to regain the country's military prowess. In 2003, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov declared the end of the era when the military had to struggle to survive. Concurrently, the Russian Armed Forces began reforms aimed at creating a smaller, highly mobile, modern professional army that would be equipped to deal with regional wars and insurgencies, while larger threats would be deterred by the nuclear arsenal.¹ The security budget rose from RUB 214 billion in 2000 to RUB 1017 billion in 2008, 400 new types of armament and hardware were introduced, reorganization of command and control was initiated, and the professionalization of the once all-conscript army commenced.²

The success of rebuilding a capable military force, however, does not depend only on new doctrines, weapons, and command structures. It is also contingent on the quality of personnel. Due to socioeconomic and demographic challenges, improving the human element of the Russian military has proven to be a daunting task. This article takes a closer look at this exact issue—the human terrain of today's Russian Armed Forces. It examines who is serving, looks at the experience of enlisted soldiers, and analyzes the efforts of authorities to improve the state of Russia's conscript force. The following observations rely heavily on dozens of interviews conducted with NGO activists, Russian conscripts and their families, and with officers serving primarily in the northwest corner of Russia. The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2009, while the author worked with Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg (SMSP), a Russian NGO dedicated to protecting the rights of men of serving age.

GETTING DRAFTED—OR NOT

During the Soviet era, military service was considered an important patriotic duty: a time for boys to become men. Some of the fathers interviewed during this project recalled their days of serving in the Soviet army with visible nostalgia. Today, polls indicate that 35 percent of young men do not wish to be in the military at all.³ According to a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), a Russian polling organization, 70 percent of men say that *dedovshchina*—a violent hazing tradition prevalent in the Russian military—is the reason they are put off by the prospect of serving.⁴ Even the official data, which has

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a reputation of grossly underestimating the problem, shows that *dedovshchina* claims hundreds of lives and is the cause of thousands of serious injuries among soldiers each year.⁵ The prevalent sentiment among the youth is therefore not surprising.

To assess the current levels of brutality, all one needs to do is visit YouTube, where home-made videos openly portray the beating of young recruits, filmed by their proud assailants. Perhaps due to the availability of this information, Russian families are increasingly aware of the dangers military duty entails and they expend great efforts to save their sons from it. Every week, dozens, sometimes hun-

dreds, of parents and young men cram into the dingy offices of SMSP to attend the human rights school and learn how to protect themselves from violations common to the military draft and service.

While the official figures show that draft dodging has significantly decreased since the mid-1990s—when as many as 44,133 men evaded the draft annually—four times the number of draft dodgers today. It is difficult to discern if numbers have dropped because the public's attitude to military service has improved, or due to new forms of corruption that offer another way out, or perhaps because the authorities are more determined to round up draft dodgers.⁶

CORRUPTION AND HEALTH

According to SMSP activists, a sophisticated system of corruption for the purpose of draft evasion exists, making it easy for those with money to avoid conscription. Healthy and able young men can, and increasingly do, obtain exemptions from the military for the price of approximately \$10,000, using the services of established lawyers. Acting as middlemen, the lawyers secure medical exemptions from military doctors for a fixed price and without any proof of an actual

medical condition. This, of course, is the most elegant way. Many draft evaders engage in direct bribery.

In 2008, some 340,000 men—30 percent of those called up—were declared unfit to serve.⁷ Judging by the testimonials of activists and soldiers, we can assume that a significant portion of these were in fact healthy men from more affluent and probably better educated families.

The difficult socioeconomic conditions Russia has endured since the fall of the Soviet Union are reflected in the health of today's conscripts. Men entering the military ranks today are those born and raised during the 1990s, a time when much of the Russian population was mired in poverty.⁸ According to the World Health Organization, the percentage of poor reached as high as 70.2 percent in 1998.⁹ Not surprisingly, many conscripts are malnourished, suffer from a variety of health conditions, or have a history of alcoholism and disciplinary issues.¹⁰ In 2009, after undergoing the medical examination, 10,000 men were told to gain weight.

Since draft quotas still need to be met and ranks filled, however, draftees with legitimate health issues are often declared capable to serve. SMSP activists jokingly say that unless a man enters the enlistment offices carrying his own head under his arm he will certainly be categorized as able. The superficiality of medical screenings at enlistment offices is one of the most frequent problems described by the soldiers interviewed by this author.

There are built-in incentives for authorities to engage in this type of oversight. According to Resolution No. 436, the government awards regions that achieve or exceed the target draft numbers and the Defense Ministry issues annual bonuses to doctors from military medical commissions for favorable outcomes.¹¹ It is easy to see how such a resolution was once intended as a measure to stop the corruption engendered by illegal draft evasion. This well-intentioned measure, however, has been perverted into an opportunity for corruption that provides doctors with the incentive to send as many men, regardless of their health, into the army.

One of SMSP's clients, Anton, claimed to have an illness that was ignored by the military medical commission. Once related health problems arose during his service, his superior officer quoted a price of \$1,500 and provided a bank account number where money could be deposited, in exchange for the opportunity to be reexamined.

These corrupt practices lead to the following: in 2008, over half of all conscripts had some sort of health-related issue.¹² The dismal state of the conscript force is probably the only thing that NGOs such as SMSP and the officers in charge of conscripts agree on. Practically all of the officers interviewed complained about the physical and mental incompetence of the draftees they are sent to work

with. “Who am I supposed to serve with?,” one of them asked after describing a conscript who broke his leg immediately after arriving at the base, after jumping out of the bus on which he arrived.

GET WHAT YOU CAN

As its potential ranks are being chipped away by corruption, draft dodging and the poor health of the youth, the military appears to have resorted to a campaign of youth seizure without much discrimination.

The methods often used to recruit speak to the shortage of potential conscripts. It is not unheard of for young men to be picked up on the street, in the metro, in front of their university dorms, or from their apartments and taken, often by force, to military enlistment offices for a quick review and deportation to the designated base. During the spring 2009 draft, SMSP alone was approached by seventy individuals who endured psychological pressure and threats, disinformation, confiscation of documentation, and physical abuse while being drafted.¹³

Maxim, another young draftee, went before the commission with medical records demonstrating serious back problems. The records were declared illegitimate and he was kept captive on the premises for four days, under threat of being sent to Chechnya unless he agreed to serve immediately.¹⁴

In addition to questionable methods, perhaps even more troubling is a broadening of the types of individual the military is now taking into its ranks. In 2009, it drafted young men like Artem, a man convicted of murdering his brother:¹⁵

Exclusive polls done by the Armed Forces Sociology Center... indicate a decline in the quality of conscripts. According to the polls done among conscripts in 2008, over 80 percent of them come from a blue-collar worker or peasant (farmer) families. Almost 40 percent are the children of single parents or were raised in orphanages...Over 10 percent have a police record or a history of alcohol abuse. Gen. Sergei Shevchenko, deputy commander for education in the Russian Air Force, says that only a quarter of Air Force conscripts are fit to be entrusted with weapons.¹⁶

A TROUBLING NEW TREND

In 2009, the need for conscripts soared and the conscript target number more than doubled from that of 2008. Indeed, 305,000 men were drafted during the spring cycle alone.¹⁷ The most important reasons for this dramatic increase are the drastic cuts in the officer corps and the shortening of the draft term.

As a result of ongoing military reforms and restructuring, of the 355,000 officers and 140,000 warrant officers serving in the Russian Armed Forces as of 1

January 2009, only 150,000 officers were supposed to remain in the force by the end of the same year.¹⁸ More conscripts are needed to perform duties that were previously the responsibility of the officer corps.

Furthermore, until recently, Russian conscripts served two year terms. In 2008, the length of service was brought down to one and a half years and, in 2009, to only one year. Once the term of service was shortened, the number of able men required for service increased.

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia experienced a stunning drop in the birth rate. While 1.8 million boys were born annually prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, that number amounted to only 800,000 after the collapse. The effects of this demographic slump are already becoming evident in the decreasing number of healthy men new generations can supply. This problem is expected to peak between 2010 and 2012.¹⁹

Military authorities were hoping that this demographic hurdle would be avoided through timely implementation of military reforms—namely cuts in the size of the armed forces and a new focus on professionalization. Thus, the smaller Russian force, heavily infused with professional soldiers, known as contractors (*kontraktniki*), would not need as many eighteen years olds. The reforms, however, are behind schedule. The size of the military has been hovering around 1.2 million troops for about a decade while the poor employment conditions currently offered to the contractors have not attracted the best and the brightest among Russian men.²⁰ Moreover, many interviewees provided anecdotal reports of what some Russian defense experts have argued is the case: a significant number of contract soldiers are conscripts that have been forced to sign contracts by their unit commanders using *dedovshchina*.²¹ It is then no surprise that in the 76th Airborne Division, one of the new all-volunteer units, the officers complain of the “endemic disciplinary offences and failure to meet minimum standards” that result in the dismissal of up to 40 percent of contractors within the first four or five months of service.²² Conscripts will, therefore, continue to be needed in significant numbers until a reliable and robust professional force is in place.

To cope with the lack of personnel and to boost the numbers of eligible conscripts, the authorities have also bent the rules and canceled nine of twenty-five service exemptions. Until 2008, men caring for retired or disabled relatives, men with wives who have been pregnant for less than twenty-six weeks, and those raising children under the age of three, among others, were excused from serving. That is no longer the case.²³

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TO DISCIPLINE A SOLDIER

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Disciplining eighteen year-old “boys” is challenging enough. Interviewed officers claimed that a method of recruitment that prefers a more unhealthy and unruly pool of conscripts, not to mention those forced into service, makes it even harder. Some conscripts are physically unable to perform basic tasks while others are drunk and unmanageable. Extreme efforts are considered necessary to keep the troops in order, and increasingly this entails use of violence.²⁴ This is probably where the practice of *dedovshchina* comes into play.

Human Rights Watch, in its report “The Wrongs of Passage,” and Joris Van Bladel, in his writings on Russian military institutions, both provide extensive descriptions of this decade-long hazing tradition in Russia.²⁵ In its essence,

[Dedovshchina] establishes an informal hierarchy of conscripts, based on the length of their service, and a corresponding set of rights and duties for each group... Newcomers have essentially no rights... they must earn them over time. [They] are ‘not eligible’ to eat, wash, relax, sleep, be sick, or even keep track of time. Dedovshchina is distinguished by predation, violence, and impunity. During their first year of service, conscripts live under the constant threat of violence for failing to comply with limitless orders and demands of *dedy* [senior conscripts].²⁶

According to the soldiers interviewed for this project, and as attested by Human Rights Watch and Joris Von Bladel, the majority of hazing is carried out by senior conscripts and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The officer corps occasionally participants directly, but for the most part they quietly approve or simply ignore the violence. Research done by Von Bladel indicates that, although it has been a part of Russian military life for decades, *dedovshchina* has become more brutal in post-Soviet times.²⁷

Every day, at least a few victims of hazing pass through the offices of SMSP. Almost all of them have endured some level of abuse. When asked about their daily life on the base, they describe it as normal but after being pushed further, the author found that in most cases “normal” entailed some combination of the following: illegal expropriation of passports and military IDs, extortion, degrading treatment, systematic and violent beatings, denial of medical care, and detrimental living conditions.²⁸

A typical story heard in the offices of SMSP is that of Vladimir. Vladimir

was repeatedly beaten because he did not provide the requested sum of money to senior conscripts. When he complained to the sergeant about the pain he was experiencing as a result of the beatings and sought medical assistance, he was told to do push ups.²⁹

In addition to the “normal” *dedovshchina* practices, conscripts also run the risk of becoming victims of more gruesome types of violations, such as forced labor, rape, prostitution, murder, and, more recently, the forced signing of military contracts.³⁰

During the summer of 2009, SMSP was informed of a forced labor case in a city north of St. Petersburg. An employee in the military hospital explained that conscripts who were admitted to the hospital with various types of health problems were forced to work for free in a wood processing plant attached to the hospital premises. With the help of SMSP, the author managed to film soldier-patients at work.³¹

Another related and deeply concerning trend is the rate of non-combat casualties. The Russian Armed Forces lost more than 470 soldiers and officers in 2008. Of those, 231 killed themselves.³² Some suicides were attributed to *dedovshchina* practices, but SMSP staff claim that many other occurrences show signs of foul play. During the summer of 2009, SMSP dealt with a number of such cases. In one instance a young conscript was hospitalized after he tried to hang himself. What raised suspicions in his case, however, is the fact that the back of his skull was smashed to a pulp causing his later death due to brain injuries.³³

According to the Public Chamber’s Committee for Veteran Affairs, the number of non-combat casualties in the Russian Armed Forces experienced an upsurge in recent years, and among the causes of this increase is the use of violence by officers toward their subordinates.³⁴

OFFICIAL RESPONSE

With ample evidence and public knowledge of the violence that takes place inside military bases, the authorities cannot but acknowledge its existence; and increasingly they do so. Then President Putin stated that hazing was a “great problem” and reintroduced the idea of bringing in the military police to tackle it.³⁵ In 2007, in a closed meeting with the Russian Duma, Defense Minister Serdyukov highlighted the problem as one of the more serious ones plaguing the military, acknowledging that in 2006 alone over 6,500 soldiers became victims of hazing, and promising transparency and public control over intra-military relations.³⁶ Although the idea of military police never came to fruition, a public council has been established in the Defense Ministry and the work of some of the registration and enlistment offices is now overseen by parents’ committees.³⁷ Officers

are compelled to look more closely into crimes committed by their subordinates and appointments of those convicted are banned. Surveillance cameras are being installed in some bases.³⁸

In spite of the decisive statements made by the political elite, it appears that the military authorities remain more concerned with the lack of men on the bases and ways to improve the army's appeal than in confronting the issue at hand. The above mentioned measures have been implemented half-heartedly and for the most part have proven to be ineffective.


Nevertheless, the Defense Ministry attempts to appease the public with claims that the reduced term of service will lessen *dedovshchina*, and is now putting forth statistics to support this assertion—in one place claiming a reduction of bullying as high as 93 percent.³⁹ Other sources, however, suggest a much different trend. Military prosecutor General Sergei Fridinsky describes an increase of 2 percent in the incidence of bullying in 2009,⁴⁰ while the Chairman of the Russian Public Chamber Commission for the Affairs of Veterans quotes a 15 percent increase.

NGOs focusing on the problem continue to be treated by authorities with disdain and are accused of being foreign agents working to undermine the Russian military. In the months following the author's departure from St. Petersburg, the staff was physically attacked and verbally assaulted by military officers for doing their work.

When presented with the issue, most officers interviewed admitted that the problem exists—just not in their units. This is probably true as there are, after all, good and bad officers. The fact that SMSP consistently receives a large volume of cases from some bases and not as many from others indicates that the terrain is uneven.⁴¹ On the other hand, considering that since 2004 the organization has processed at least 2,200 cases from as many as 600 different military units it is clear that the problem is real and widespread.⁴² Positive results require hard work and innovative approaches from officers who are already grossly overworked and underpaid, in charge of an increasingly hard to manage crop of conscripts. With new and drastic cuts in the officer corps, the ratio of officers to conscripts is likely to widen, making it even more difficult for officers with good intentions to exercise control. Nevertheless, positive examples do exist and should be studied and promoted. In the Siberian District, for instance, the military authorities decided to keep new arrivals away from older conscripts and troops for a period of six months, decreasing the level of hazing by 90 percent. The command also forbade the signing of contracts by conscripts currently serving, further minimizing foul play.⁴³

Russian military authorities doubtlessly face a serious challenge in the problem of military recruitment. As qualified but fearful youth avoid service en

masse, either through draft dodging or corruption, the military is left with unmotivated, unhealthy, uneducated, and an increasingly criminalized conscript force. Negative demographic trends threaten to turn this problem into an acute crisis and considering the poor quality of the contract force and the speed with which it is being put in place, it looks like conscripts will constitute the bulk of Russian forces for some time to come.

Russia has historically relied on attrition warfare in which quantity trumps quality. However, addressing security challenges in the new century requires a more sophisticated counterforce. If it is truly committed to changing its military doctrine and entrusting its security to a professional, highly mobile, and modern force, the Russian leadership will also have to change how it sees the role of the foot soldier and more seriously invest in the safety, livelihood, and quality of its men. This is why, as Prime Minister Putin himself once stated, addressing the issue of *dedovshchina* is key “for both developing of the Armed Forces and for increasing their battle alertness and social prestige.”⁴⁴ In other words, however commendable recent reforms might be, the Russian military will increasingly fail to provide security to its nation until the state of its soldiers dramatically improves. 

The Russian leadership will have to seriously invest in the safety, livelihood, and quality of its men.

NOTES

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