

Conscription and Reform in the Russian Army

Andrew L. Spivak and William Alex Pridemore

Russian families fear that their sons will be starved, beaten, disabled, or killed during their mandatory eighteen months of military service.

THIS article examines conscription and reform in the Russian army. It brings together academic studies, government reports, and anecdotal and media accounts to provide a comprehensive overview of the problems facing Russia's military conscription policy. The article begins by examining the origin and development of the draft, and specifically how the Soviet legacy affects the current situation. It then turns to a major complicating factor, violence in the enlisted ranks, which contributes to draft dodging and desertion. Russia's economic woes and the dilapidated state of the army further complicate the conscription issue by encouraging corruption and extortion. The article concludes with an overview of attempts to reform the army, both by the government and by civilian organizations.

Soviet Origins of the Draft and the Dynamics of Conscript Life

Under the Soviet Union's original 1938 service law, one call-up was instituted each year to induct conscripts for a three-year term of service (four years for the navy). Thus, each year about one-third of the enlisted soldiers were discharged and replaced by new conscripts. In 1967, a new service law shortened the active term to two years and increased the frequency of call-ups to twice per year. As a result, approximately one-quarter of the enlisted soldiers were discharged and replaced by fresh conscripts every six months.¹

The change was probably due in part to the Ministry of Defense's newly emerging military doctrine in the 1960s. Believing that in a nuclear war vast reserves of trained personnel would be needed to compensate for

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Natasha Berezovskaia, an activist of the Soldiers' Mothers, Russia's leading anti-draft group, holds portraits of Russian soldiers Alimerdon Masenidov, left, and Roman Podkopyayev, right, in Moscow, September 16, 2002. According to Berezovskaia, Masenidov and Podkopyayev were killed by their fellow-soldiers. (AP Photo/Mikhail Metzler)

massive initial losses, Soviet military leaders favored increased civil defense preparation for secondary school students. Soviet youths already received civil defense training from elementary to secondary school, so that by age eighteen (conscription age) almost all young people had a preliminary degree of basic military competency. Those not actually drafted were automatically assigned to the reserves. This pre-service training allowed conscripts to begin active duty without the formal "basic training" customary in Western armed forces. The 1967 policy made rapid turnover of active-service recruits more feasible and maximized the proportion of the citizenry that could serve as a trained reserve.²

The shortened service period was accompanied by changes in the army's leadership structure. The Soviet army did not have a professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps, but instead selected platoon- and squad-level sergeants from the ranks of the conscripts and gave them special regimental training on active duty. They were expected to serve as reasonably fair and competent leaders by their third year. A small number of

soldiers who volunteered for extended enlistment were given *starshina* (company-level sergeant) rank.

The shortage of enlistees was obvious, however, and the weakness of the leadership structure was buttressed by a ratio of officers to enlisted personnel about twice that of Western armies. According to journalist Anatol Lieven, "Any sergeant who could read and write and showed a glimmer of leadership tended to be quickly promoted to Lieutenant, creating an immensely high turnover of NCOs."³

After the 1967 law took effect, the additional training for platoon- and squad-level NCOs was abandoned in favor of increased civil defense training in secondary schools. Furthermore, the role of the *starshina* began to decline as eligibles were promoted to the new rank of *praporshchik*—members of this warrant officer class no longer had to live in the enlisted barracks with conscripts. Since platoon- and squad-level sergeants were now identified during their last year of secondary school and received their rank shortly after induction, the formal NCO structure became subordinate to the *dedovshchina* ("grandfather"—abbreviated as *ded*) system.⁴

Dedovshchina originated from the gulag culture, which was brought into the army with the drafting of convicts during World War II.⁵ As the system evolved in the 1970s and 1980s, second-year conscripts, *stariki*, assumed de facto command of the barracks, each serving as the *ded* to one or several first-year soldiers. The juniors washed the clothes of their *ded*, polished his boots, serviced his rifle, scrubbed toilets, suffered the harshest and dirtiest work details, and were forced to surrender any money or food packages sent by their families.

The barracks *ded* often confiscated the juniors' army pay and regular food rations. Obscene and humiliating nicknames for junior soldiers were standard, and sexual assault by *stariki* was not unknown. Resistance was often met with beatings, sometimes with weapons such as belts and shovels, resulting in severe injuries, disability discharges, murders, and suicides. Reports of such hazing methods became a notorious public issue by the late 1980s.⁶ As for the newly inducted sergeants, "They found themselves formally in charge of *stariki* privates. In reality, the *stariki* were in charge. A new sergeant might have a *ded* who was formally his subordinate. Yet he could hardly give orders to his *ded*."⁷

The emergence of *dedovshchina* appears to have been facilitated by the shorter term of service, as well as by the worsening lack of a professional NCO corps. When

Lt. General William E. Odom of the U.S. Army interviewed Soviet veterans who had served before 1967, none remembered it as being a pervasive feature of conscript life. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, junior officers began to relinquish authority over barracks life to the senior conscripts, and official military discipline, *ustavshchina*, was not readily enforced.⁸ In exchange for unchallenged autonomy, the senior cohort ensured that orders given by officers would be carried out promptly and efficiently by the junior conscripts, “forging a perverse mutual dependency between the officer and enlisted ranks.”⁹

The new conscript social structure slowly became formalized. A characteristically poetic Russian slang described conscripts’ ascent through the “ranks” of *dedovshchina*: from *dukh* (first six months) to *slon* (6–12 months), *cherpakh* (12–18 months), and, in the final six months, *ded*. Progression from one level to the next was “often . . . marked by a bizarre series of rituals” that were inevitably violent.¹⁰ U.S. Major Raymond C. Finch recounts a set of rules that a regiment’s senior conscripts laid down for newcomers, including: “The favorite brand [of cigarettes] of the *deds* is L&M. . . . don’t reply that you don’t smoke or don’t have one . . . quickly search around or borrow from a friend; if you go on leave, remember that your sergeants, like little children, expect a present; if your parents come to visit, don’t come back to the barracks empty-handed.”¹¹

The *dedovshchina* system was further complicated by ethnic and national divisions.¹² The lower fertility rates of Slavs as compared to Central Asians and Muslims contributed to the increased conscription of the latter two groups by the 1980s. The suffering of these soldiers at the hands of Slavic *stariki*, who “were highly creative in devising obscene ethnic slurs,” was especially cruel.¹³ A Chechen conscript in the 1980s complained, “The Russians have no principles or rules or traditions. Nothing is sacred for them, not even their own families. Look at the way they swear the whole time, foully insulting each other’s mothers and sisters. If a Chechen did that to another Chechen, he’d be dead.”¹⁴

In the late 1980s, Baltic (Latvian, Estonian) and Caucasian (Armenian, Georgian) minorities also complained about especially abusive treatment. Ethnic and nationality groups began to form *zemliachestvo*, a network of regiment-level gangs designed to protect members from excessive abuse by organizing targeted reprisals. “The abuse of a minority soldier often inspired the wrath and revenge of his fellow nationals. . . . national groups banded together in fights, thievery, and other kinds of disorderly behavior.”¹⁵

Economic Crises and Military Decline

Russia’s military budget was hard hit during the post-communist transition, which brought staggering financial challenges that affected conscripts and officers alike. Along with an immediate 10 percent reduction of the 5.2 million personnel, force restructuring demanded that tens of thousands of officers and their families, as well as massive amounts of equipment, be transferred back to Russia from Eastern Europe and the outer republics.

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The logistical difficulty of the massive redeployment was daunting, straining the already diminished budget and leaving 155,000 officers and their families without housing.¹⁶ (See Table 1.)

In 1992, the new Ministry of Defense developed a plan to reduce the total troop strength from 2.7 million to 2.1 million. A new Law on Military Service, passed by the Russian parliament in February 1993, shortened the conscription term from twenty-four to eighteen months and introduced a series of generous exemptions that would allow 84 percent of eligible conscripts to avoid induction.¹⁷

Despite the immediate cutbacks, the military began to experience a severe financial crisis. Total military expenditure declined so much that the army was left with unpaid wages and other bills, housing shortages, and little useful training or modernization.¹⁸ Lack of funding for the air force led to the reassignment of 2,000 pilots to the infantry, artillery, and other branches. The remaining pilots usually flew less than twenty-five hours per year and spent much of their time on other assignments. “There were no aircraft for them to fly and, in any case, no fuel for the aircraft even if they did exist. In addition, many of the pilots are working part-time as cab drivers.”¹⁹

The previously Spartan conditions worsened and became truly frightening for many conscripts. Army food was notoriously poor. Most regiments cultivated their own vegetable garden plots to supplement their rations, and some troops were even sent to pick berries and mushrooms in local forests.²⁰ A newspaper article in 1995 pointed out that Russia, with only 60 percent of the U.S. population and 16 percent of its GDP, was at-

tempting to support an army as large as America's on only 7–8 percent of the U.S. defense budget.²¹ The government decided that the military, like other formerly state-funded organizations, should at least partially sustain itself by selling superfluous assets and utilizing inexpensive conscript labor.²²

The military obliged, turning Russia's conscript army into "one of the largest (practically unpaid) labor pools."²³ Recruits built dachas, guarded private residences, harvested crops, and worked at other private enterprises to generate income for the regiment and its officers. The producer of a film documentary on the Russian army in 2001 recalled, "When entering army bases the impression is often of a kind of wilderness—where is everyone, you ask yourself. The answer, all too frequently, is that the soldiers are being hired out to local enterprises to generate revenue either for the commanders, to keep the unit functioning, or both."²⁴

Generating revenue to maintain living expenses became the central preoccupation of many regiments. Dale Herspring recalls interviewing a Russian admiral in

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Vladivostok who declared that feeding his sailors was his most pressing professional concern, and he had been making arrangements with local agricultural producers to hire out the sailors as laborers in exchange for a share of the harvest.²⁵ Many commanders followed suit, hiring out their conscripts to work on private construction projects to make extra money for the unit or for themselves.²⁶ Jenkins recalled, "While making our film we came across a logistics commander selling military fuel at night to civilian trucks. . . . in another, mosquito-ridden training unit, the soldiers were carving up equipment for scrap and selling it in the local town."²⁷

Officers also began selling all the military property they could for personal gain. Official asset liquidation between 1993 and 1995 was designated by the Ministry of Defense to help fund the housing shortage, but generals are thought to have pocketed some \$65 million of the proceeds.²⁸ Seventeen generals and admirals were convicted of corruption in 1998.²⁹

Meanwhile, Russian conscripts in the first Chechen war lacked decent uniforms, food rations, and equipment. Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev described them as "hungry, barefoot, and under-financed."³⁰ By

1994, the first Chechen war had diverted \$4 billion from the defense budget, and the extra expense was not met with supplemental appropriations. Housing, food, routine operations, and maintenance all simply declined in quality and availability. The adverse impact of the Chechen war was compounded by the many commanders who overstated the official number of soldiers in their units in order to collect the extra pay. Many units deployed in Chechnya were woefully undermanned, but the officers were unable to complain because they had been lying about their troop strength.³¹

Much of the money in each year's defense appropriation was needed simply to pay off past debts. Grachev announced to the Duma in 1994, "No army in the world is in as wretched a state as Russia's," and if the proposed 1995 budget, like the 1994 budget, were cut in half, he added, "The army will simply collapse."³² The budgetary allocation was nonetheless disappointing, and a furious Ministry of Defense, rather than reform the bloated military structure and streamline the army to gain a smaller but at least competent and equipped force, responded by *increasing* troop strength. In 1995, military leaders were complaining that they could not feed their people, and that regiments in the north were in real danger of starving in the winter.³³

While conditions for conscripted soldiers worsened, Russia's leaders sought to project a vision of the country as a superpower. President Vladimir Putin referred to Russia as "a great, powerful, and mighty state" in his 2000 inaugural address.³⁴ The nostalgia for the greatness of the past was especially perpetuated by the Defense Ministry, the country's only remaining contender for superpower status, thanks solely to the size and scope of its nuclear arsenal. Russia's conventional combat forces were in no condition to inspire the image of a superpower. The army, for example, has not held any ground-force field exercises above battalion level since 1991.³⁵ In 1995, it took Russia's entire airlift capacity to move one airborne division, and the entire military is incapable of staging an effective operation across any of its borders.³⁶

The military's glamorous self-perception was further embarrassed when, in the summer of 1993, Aeroflot suspended military transports due to the Ministry of Defense's unpaid bills. Lambeth poignantly describes the change in the quality of Russian military personnel during the transition.

These are not the sons of the Soviet leviathan that confronted NATO across the Fulda gap. . . . for two generations. NATO's military posture was configured on the reasonable assumptions that if war came, Western

Table 1

Composition of Soviet and Russian Military, 1989–2002

	USSR	USSR	USSR	CIS	RF	RF	RF	RF	RF	RF	RF	RF	RF	RF
	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Estimated GDP (bn\$)	\$2,194	\$2,215.00	\$2,042.70	\$1,112.40	\$476.50	\$1,200.00	\$1,160.00	\$1,110.00	\$1,100.00	\$1,100.00	\$1,100.00	\$1,100.00	\$1,200.00	N/A
Estimated defense exp. (bn\$)	\$119.25	\$117.48	\$128.79	\$128.79	\$47.22	\$79.00	\$63.00	\$82.00	\$71.00	\$64.00	\$55.00	\$56.00	\$60.00	N/A
Population (millions)	287.776	288.561	290.527	N/A	150.385	148.920	148.940	149.120	148.000	146.600	146.300	146.000	146.720	N/A
Total armed forces personnel	4,258,000	3,988,000	3,400,000	2,720,000	2,030,000	1,714,000	1,520,000	1,270,000	1,240,000	1,159,000	1,004,100	1,004,100	977,100	988,100
Estimated conscripts	2,700,000	2,500,000	2,000,000	1,500,000	950,000	950,000	400,000	381,000	381,000	381,000	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000
Estimated women	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	160,000	153,000	153,000	145,000	145,000	100,000	100,000
Total ground forces (army)	1,596,000	1,473,000	1,400,000	1,400,000	1,000,000	780,000	670,000	460,000	420,000	420,000	348,000	348,000	321,000	321,000
Estimated conscripts	1,200,000	1,100,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	450,000	450,000	210,000	144,000	144,000	144,000	185,000	190,000	190,000	190,000
Estimated contract	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	80,000	170,000	170,000	170,000	170,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total air force	448,000	420,000	420,000	300,000	170,000	170,000	130,000	145,000	130,000	210,000	184,000	184,600	184,600	184,600
Estimated conscripts	310,000	290,000	290,000	180,000	85,000	85,000	400,000	44,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total air defense	502,000	500,000	475,000	356,000	230,000	205,000	200,000	175,000	170,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Estimated conscripts	300,000	300,000	280,000	230,000	100,000	100,000	60,000	60,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total navy	437,000	410,000	450,000	320,000	300,000	295,000	200,000	190,000	220,000	180,000	171,500	171,500	171,500	171,500
Estimated conscripts	260,000	245,000	270,000	200,000	180,000	180,000	140,000	133,000	142,000	17,000	16,000	16,000	16,000	16,000
Total strategic nuclear	287,000	376,000	280,000	181,000	194,000	176,000	149,000	149,000	149,000	149,000	149,000	149,000	149,000	149,000
Estimated conscripts	215,000	116,000	116,000	70,000	N/A	53,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000
KGB border troops	230,000	230,000	230,000	220,000	100,000	N/A	N/A							
MVD	340,000	350,000	350,000	180,000	130,000	180,000	158,000	232,000	329,000	237,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Presidential guard	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100,000	100,000	100,000	220,000	200,000	196,000	140,000	140,000	140,000
Interior troops	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	140,000	140,000	151,100	151,000

Source: Data compiled from International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), *The Military Balance*, 1989–1990, 1990–1991, 1992–1993, 1993–1994, 1994–1995, 1995–1996, 1996–1997, 1997–1998, 1998–1999, 1999–2000, 2000–2001, 2001–2002, 2002–2003.

forces would have to fight badly outnumbered and from a defensive and reactive posture against a massive, combined-arms military machine that . . . was prepared, as a matter of doctrinal principle, to trade high casualty rates for victory. The clash in Chechnya revealed a military of a sadly different sort: a ragtag band of hastily assembled conscripts who were not resourceful enough to evade the draft, led by under-equipped, under-trained, and demoralized officers.³⁷

Russia's diminished conventional capabilities reinforced the Defense Ministry's stake in the remembered glory of the Soviet era, when the armed forces were arrogantly unaccountable. Assigning first priority to a costly infrastructure of strategic air, sea, and land missile capability, and demanding the continual enhancement of current systems with no regard to budget constraints, defense leaders resisted investment in conscription reform and the development of a competent professional force.³⁸

A similar myopia may have existed with regard to draft evasion and the despair of Russian conscripts. When Lieven interviewed General Eduard Vorobyev in 1994, the general told him, "As for morale, I am convinced that it is very high among our conscripts, be-

cause they serve out of conviction, not for pay. In the Russian army, material questions always came second. First came the moral one. As in the Second World War, when the Motherland called, they went. There is not a single country in the world with such moral foundations for its defense forces as Russia."³⁹ Fortunately, not all Russian military leaders were so naive, and the issue of conscription reform became prominent in Russian politics during the transition.

Conscription During the Transition

On March 24, 1995, in an attempt to maintain a high level of manpower, the Ministry of Defense introduced a bill to eliminate a number of draft deferments, extend the conscription term from eighteen months to twenty-four months (even for conscripts already inducted on the eighteen-month plan), and draft graduates of universities with military studies departments (who would normally be entitled to commissions) as privates. Defense Minister Pavel Grachev was enthusiastically supportive of the proposed measures.⁴⁰ The Duma initially rejected the bill, but finally accepted it on April 7, largely because of lobbying by the Ministry of Defense.

Thanks to the efforts of several deputies, however, the law was amended. Conscripts already inducted would serve only the agreed eighteen months, and graduates of universities with military departments would be offered commissions. In addition, eligible draftees whose only surviving parent was more than fifty years old could obtain a deferment.⁴¹ Despite the amendments, the measure was so unpopular that it was repealed a year later. Yeltsin's suddenly sympathetic reversal may have been a ploy to win votes in the 1996 presidential election.⁴²

There is no doubt that the draft was despised by much of the country. When Lieven interviewed youths in Moscow, he found them to be almost universally in favor of evading the draft, and he noted that they had "a positively encyclopedic knowledge of the various medical and legal ploys involved."⁴³ The most obvious reason why serving as a conscript in the Russian army was and is so feared is that it is a truly dangerous endeavor. *Dedovshchina* is as prevalent and violent now as during the late Soviet era, and the funding crisis means that soldiers endure a grueling and emaciating eighteen months.

An April 1996 *Izvestia* article told the story of Private Misha Kubarskii, a young conscript from Yaroslav. He died from starvation within three months of being inducted into the army. A medical exam, conducted after Kubarskii complained of fatigue, revealed that he was 12 kilograms [almost 27 pounds] below the army's clinical minimum for his height and body type. He died on the way to the military hospital in Volochaevka. The regimental food-service officer said he had been unable to obtain anything but cabbage for a week. A surprise visit by a medical commission two days after Kubarskii's death found 50 percent of the regiment's soldiers to be body-mass deficient.⁴⁴ The *Izvestia* reporter said, "I saw those pale lads with skinny necks and shaking hands in the Anastasevskaiia Military Hospital, where they say the life is like in a resort hotel. . . . they think with horror about returning to their regiment."⁴⁵

In 1996, 31,000 assigned conscripts fled induction. Of these, 18,000 were eventually apprehended, but only 500 were criminally charged.⁴⁶ Eventual induction is usually the worst thing that happens to an AWOL recruit, and the odds are not too discouraging. In 1997, 50,000 eligible young conscripts fled, and 12,000 inductees deserted during their first year of service.⁴⁷ Whereas the Ministry of Defense was able to meet its 1997 draft goal of 188,400 new conscripts (113,000 for the military, the rest for paramilitary units, railway troops, etc.), the army and navy would only be staffed to 80 percent of personnel requirements.⁴⁸

The Russian army's draft "makes mothers dream,

twice a year, of their children getting some disability."⁴⁹ Of the pool of conscripts actually inducted in the fall of 1997, 15 percent were clinically underweight, another 15 percent had criminal records, 10 percent were chronic drug addicts, and one-third were secondary school drop-outs. Between one-fifth and one-third of conscripts do not meet basic health standards, and some inductees are even sent to "diet camps" in order to gain minimum weight levels before beginning training. Ironically, many new enlistees in the U.S. military are assigned to several weeks in special diet camps as well, except that the American version is designed for overweight recruits to lose enough body fat to get below maximum weight standards before beginning basic training. Of 2.2 million eligible draftees in Russia in 1997, 1.5 million received deferments (a quarter million of these for medical reasons), and 71,000 were disqualified because they had serious criminal records.⁵⁰

Another problem is that every aspect of the conscription system is exploited for bribery. Eligible draftees purchase medical exemptions, draft board members can be paid to make favorable decisions, higher-education administrators accept gifts for recommending deferment, and local police can be compensated to overlook a warrant on a draft-dodging conscript.⁵¹ One mother seeking exemption for her son observed, "In military commissariats they often suggest they will 'enhance' your diagnosis to the required condition for money. . . . jobs in military commissariats are profitable enough. . . . Thank God, I will add. Long live grafters as long as we have an army like this."⁵²

Article 59, point 3 of the Russian constitution of December 1993 states, "A citizen of the Russian Federation is entitled to alternative civilian service, if military service contradicts his convictions of faith, as well as in other cases provided for by the Federal Law." However, the April 1995 conscription law offered no such provision—conscientious objectors who are inducted may receive even worse abuse under *dedovshchina*, and those who avoid conscription by bribery or exemption do not perform alternative service.⁵³ Bribery for draft evasion is so prevalent that some politicians in Russia have suggested it be made a legal and official institution to help fund the army.⁵⁴ Although the Ministry of Defense estimated that it would cost \$17 million to conduct the fall 1997 draft call-up, it only received about \$6 million. The balance was made up by local officials, presumably in exchange for political compensation of some kind, such as greater autonomy or free labor. Finch warns that this relationship may be a "step towards regional warlordism."⁵⁵

The corruption continues during service. Survival in the modern Russian army often necessitates protection from internal threats, and young soldiers must be prepared to provide cheap (or free) labor or else obtain money for bribes.⁵⁶ The violent atmosphere of *dedovshchina* has only been worsened by the extreme destitution of the transition period. Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, Herspring personally witnessed soldiers and sailors being subjected to the “most brutal discipline” and reacting like “mechanical puppets,” while other observers “could talk of ‘Prussian-style’ discipline in the Russian/Soviet military.”⁵⁷

During the transition, however, discipline evaporated further, and military prosecutors struggled to keep track of murder and other violent crimes. Lambeth claims that 169 Russian conscripts died in violent barracks incidents, while according to Lieven, the Ministry of Defense admitted there were 543 suicides and 1,071 murders in 1996. Herspring says that the chief military prosecutor told him that fifty soldiers had fatally shot fellow soldiers while on guard duty in 1999, and that shooting is one of the least common forms of murder in the army.⁵⁸ A letter from Private Sergei Flocha, written before he was killed while serving in Mozdok, informed his mother in St. Petersburg:

We earn money with our blood and then it is taken away, supposedly to go toward wallpaper, paint, equipment for the barracks, but half of it goes into the sergeants’ pockets. . . . there are often beatings here, it’s just accepted. I already have a broken rib cage, some of my teeth have been knocked out, but that’s nothing compared to the others who have . . . concussion due to being hit with a stool, broken arms and legs. . . . I pray to God that they won’t take Alyosha away, too. He won’t survive here—my little brother won’t return home.⁵⁹

Organizations of soldiers’ mothers (discussed below) began to publicize stories like Private Flocha’s and the general issue of violence among conscripts. In October 1999, the Duma announced that violent crime in the military had become alarming enough to warrant “emergency measures,” yet no changes seem to have occurred.⁶⁰ In 2002 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the shooting death of eight conscript sergeants in the Caucasus Mountains. Two privates were caught and confessed to killing the sergeants in revenge for brutal treatment. The same article described how fifty-four conscripts had reportedly fled from their regiment and walked 55 kilometers to Volgograd to protest the violent beatings.⁶¹

For the vast majority of soldiers who survive

dedovshchina, the brutal social education that conscripts learn in the army may have the consequence of nurturing violent behavior after discharge. Tens of thousands of young men are discharged twice each year, and these former conscripts, presumably future husbands and fathers, are possibly more at risk to be domestic abusers. Furthermore, as Herspring notes, former soldiers, particularly from elite units like the paratroopers, play an unusually large role in Russian organized crime.⁶²

The Impact of the Soldiers’ Mothers Movement

The roots of public activism against conscription began during the *perestroika* period of the late 1980s. Noting the success of a West German army “trade union,” Soviet junior officers formed the Union for the Social Protection of Servicemen and their Families (*Shchit*, or Shield) in October 1989. The group addressed such issues as inadequate food and housing, and conscript violence, and conducted a public protest in Moscow in support of increasing soldiers’ pay and reducing Communist Party influence over the military. The reaction of the Soviet authorities was disappointing. By December, active duty personnel were prohibited from joining unions.

While the top military leadership could “hurl insults with impunity at radical junior officers in Shield,”⁶³ the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers could not be so lightly dismissed. Founded by Maria Kirbasova in 1989, the new organization monitored and kept records of abuse deaths, called for accountability by commanders, and demanded laws enumerating soldiers’ rights. They conducted demonstrations in January 1990, and by June had organized a meeting of the All-Union Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers in Gorky Park. The veracity of the Soldiers’ Mothers organization gave the generals pause, even those who tended to viciously attack any critic of the army.

Several senior officers tried to assume leadership of the new organization, eventually splintering the movement into competing factions that vied for influence and tried to exclude one another. In September 1990, for example, Lt. Col. Vitalii Urazhtsev, the former director of Shield, organized the All-Union Congress of Servicemen’s Parents in Moscow, where speakers described the horrific abuse imposed on their conscripted sons and claimed that 15,000–20,000 soldiers had died from non-combat violence since 1986. The union called for a decree from President Mikhail Gorbachev to protect conscripts’ rights before the fall call-up, although

he had already issued such a law in response to Kirbasova's group.⁶⁴

Conscription revolts broke out in 1989 and 1990, precipitated by a combination of factors: the campaign to repeal the suspension of student deferments, the publicity about conscript violence that came with *glasnost* and the subsequent influence of the Soldiers' Mothers movement, and the strengthening nationalism in the Baltics and the Caucasus. Baltic nationalism was particularly advanced. Anti-Soviet organizations in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, already incensed by the public acknowledgement in 1989 of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pacts that ceded the Baltics to Stalin, were alarmed by the April 1989 massacre in Tbilisi and Soviet repression of nationalism in the Caucasus. During the 1989 spring call-up, students in Riga protested outside the Baltic Military District headquarters with signs reading, "The Stalinist Plague Still Lives" and "Forces of the USSR are Occupiers in Latvia: Demand their Removal."⁶⁵ In January 1990, women in Krasnodar protested the assignment of local reserves to suppress the nationalist uprising in Azerbaijan.⁶⁶

In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Defense organized soldiers' mothers groups in various towns and cities in an attempt to control the situation. When Shield was active in the late 1980s, it had been placed under the Supreme Soviet: "Deputies and military men stood behind the backs of the fathers and mothers whose children had died in the army."⁶⁷

After the August 1991 collapse, the new Russian defense minister described a worsening battle for leadership of the mothers' movement, charging that officers were involving themselves only to advance their political ambitions. Kirbasova claimed that many of these officers were assigned by the KGB to dissolve the movement and reduce its effectiveness.⁶⁸ If the government was trying to suppress the mothers' organizations, it was unsuccessful. Mothers' groups would continue to be the most active and best-known voice on the issue of conscript abuse during the transition.

The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, organized in 1992, began disseminating information on deferments and ways to get help for sons who were in hiding or trying to escape from the barracks. Since the late 1990s, more than 100,000 people have sought help from the group, including deserters, young men afraid of the draft, parents whose sons were beaten and tortured in the barracks, and parents who want investigations of the death of their sons while in the army.⁶⁹

The group's leaders say that their methods are modeled on those of the dissident Vladimir Bukovskii, who

exploited Soviet bureaucratic rules to ensure that his complaints would be acknowledged. They utilized the 1993 Russian constitution to inform parents and men of draft age about their rights and encouraged them to make official complaints, for which they provided samples and lists of all of the official agencies where complaints could be sent, from the procurator general to the local authorities.

Of the three primary grounds on which one can be exempted from conscription (educational deferment, certain social hardships, and medical disqualification), the last is the most commonly exploited. The medical commission uses a simple list of illnesses to assess exemption. The list was classified information during the Soviet era, but the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg obtained a copy and posted it in the hallway outside their one-room office. "One could not have imagined how avidly people pored over it. For the majority it was a saving grace."⁷⁰ The organization also posted sample forms for official complaints and inquiries, along with the names and addresses of the relevant agencies. Since February 1999, it has conducted twice-weekly "School for Human Rights" consultation sessions for conscripts and families. About 150 people attend each session.

For four years, the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg worked out of a one-room office with no funding. As donations came in from the European Union's TACIS program and the Soros Foundation, the organization began to publish brochures and reports. One 1997 booklet, *Protecting the Rights of Servicemen on Active Duty*, was approved by the Ministry of Defense. The mothers also published a report in cooperation with Amnesty International that was submitted to the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva.

Another group, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, advises parents and young men to avoid bribes and attempt to exercise their rights to acquire legitimate exemptions. Its instructions demonstrate a profound effort to understand the ominous bureaucracy and to utilize legal options in a country where corruption would often be more convenient:

If you do not agree with the decision of the medical commission . . . that your son is fit for service, file a case. They have no right to draft your son as long as the case is in the court . . . if they refuse to accept any of your documents . . . send them by a registered letter . . . attach copies of articles of laws to which you refer . . . If they refuse to give you abstracts from the medical card in the hospital where your son was placed, complain to health protection departments. . . . if your son has been inspected by only one doctor and one serviceman, this

does not mean that he has passed the call-up commission. File a case.⁷¹

The committee also provides explanations of the educational deferment laws and instructions on how to file such cases, how to check the credentials of the members of the draft commission in order to file an exemption case based on a claim that the commission was illegitimate, and how to exploit other loopholes in the conscription laws.⁷²

Toward a Professional Volunteer Force

In Boris Yeltsin's 1992 decree creating the Russian army, the new president stated that the armed forces would move from conscription toward a volunteer professional force. The announcement was politically expedient, given the unpopularity of the draft. Defense Minister Grachev issued a plan that was to have volunteers comprising half of Russia's military personnel by 2000. Two years later, in 1994, 90,000 of the army's 780,000 troops were "contract soldiers," and by 1995, the figure was 170,000 in a total force of 670,000. Military reform had already been part of Gorbachev's *perestroika* initiative, and he had spoken of his desire to restructure and scale-down the Soviet Union's armed forces when he addressed the United Nations in December 1988. Yeltsin's new initiative for a professional military seemed like a promising step.⁷³

Enlisted pay for Soviet soldiers was staggeringly low, about \$7 or \$8 per month. Like the gulag inmates of the Stalinist era, conscripted soldiers provided a pool of essentially unpaid labor. The pay structure for conscripts in the new Russian army was worse, only about \$1.05 per month. The pay rate for the new professional soldiers, known as *kontraktniki*, would be about \$167 per month in order to attract volunteers. *Kontraktniki* are recruited from conscripts who have been on active duty for at least six months or have been discharged to the reserves. Most of these contract professionals serve three-year terms, allowing for a higher return on training investment than is possible with two-year conscription, an advantage essential to developing the technical expertise a modern army requires.⁷⁴

While they were certainly offered better compensation than conscripts, only 180,000 of the planned 280,000 *kontraktniki* were recruited by 1996. During his presidential campaign in May of that year, Yeltsin promised to abolish the draft and develop an entirely professional volunteer force by 2000, but did not explain how the plan would be funded.⁷⁵ When critics

pointed out that this goal was twice as ambitious as Grachev's plan and hardly seemed feasible, Yeltsin responded, "It's always like that in our country. Until you set a task they will try to argue that it cannot be fulfilled. When you make the decision, things will get moving."⁷⁶

The army's disastrous failure in the first Chechen war, along with credible accusations of corruption, precipitated Grachev's dismissal in 1996. General Igor Rodionov, Grachev's successor, characterized the new anti-draft initiative as "dangerous and irresponsible electioneering rhetoric that at best would never really be implemented and at worst could cause the final downfall of the Russian Army."⁷⁷ In July 1997, Rodionov was replaced by Marshal Igor Sergeev, who immediately revised the president's decree, eliminating the 2000 goal and stating instead that the conversion would take place "gradually, as the necessary [economic] conditions are created."⁷⁸

In 2000, Russia's new president, Vladimir Putin, repeatedly stated that he wanted to refurbish and strengthen the country's military, including a commitment to the investment necessary for a professional army.⁷⁹ In November 2001, Putin's defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, declared that the president was committed to a reform plan that would produce "a completely redesigned, highly trained, and well-paid volunteer Russian Army by 2010." Although Putin endorsed the goal of increasing contract service and reducing conscription in the April 2000 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, he later claimed that such a transition applied mainly to personnel assigned to highly technical or especially dangerous duties.⁸⁰

Despite the uncertain political landscape and the economic challenges, the movement to a professional military was somewhat successful. There were about 170,000 *kontraktniki* (of 420,000) serving in the Russian army in 1997, but the number has not significantly increased since then.⁸¹ Before leaving office, Yeltsin authorized a plan for another 150,000 army volunteers, but no new funding was appropriated.⁸² Although they are exempt from the draft, women made up the majority of the contract troops, 82,000 in 1994 and 100,000 by 1997. Most of these women soldiers are actually officer's wives, who fill support-position vacancies in order to boost their meager household incomes. In what are known as "family operations," adult children sometimes join the regimental support staff as well.⁸³

Many volunteers serve in combat units, however, and this poses a new social challenge in the ranks. Volunteers who are integrated into conscript units are usually

several years older than their peers, not to mention better equipped and better paid. As Aleksandr Sharavin, the director of the Institute for Military-Political Problems in Russia, points out, "The contract soldier of twenty-five or twenty-six is never going to submit to an eighteen-year-old sergeant."⁸⁴ The army quickly developed all-volunteer units, which have performed above average, are usually better equipped, and are deployed for the highest-profile missions. Such units are distinctly stratified from the rank-and-file units that consist mostly of conscripts, and *kontraktniki* often do not want to associate with conscripts.⁸⁵

New difficulties have also arisen because of the wide range of service periods and terms in military contracts. Commanders of both composite (conscript and *kontraktniki*) and all-volunteer units have had to struggle to balance unit effectiveness with upholding contractual provisions. Some *kontraktniki* sign up only to serve near home, others to serve for extra pay in Chechnya. Many contracts are for three years, others for up to five years. McGrath likens the challenge of managing military units with differently contracted soldiers (and composite units) to the supervision of a job site with workers from assorted labor unions with different contractual constraints.⁸⁶

Sometimes the military has failed to fulfill even the minimum requirements of its contractual obligations. Failure to pay salaries is a problem in the army, as in other areas of Russian public service employment. In 2000, *kontraktniki* demonstrated at the North Caucasus Military District headquarters over not being paid for their recent service in Chechnya, and two divisions in Chechnya announced their own early discharge due to suspicions that they would not get paid. In response to inquiries about the army's failure to uphold contractual obligations to the volunteer soldiers, Yeltsin replied, "The existing contracts were more like an oath of allegiance."⁸⁷

The government's uncertain performance in paying the contract soldiers may be a factor in the disappointing quality of many volunteers. General Viacheslav Zherebtsov, former chief of the Main Organization-Mobilization Directorate, complained that recruitment in the early and mid-1990s was inconsistent and that many of the *kontraktniki* were unprofessional, incompetent, and even criminal. The 42nd Guards Motorized Rifle Division in Chechnya reportedly rejected as unsuitable 230 of the 300 new contract soldiers sent to it by the Urals Military District; and in 1998, 24 percent of contract soldiers were terminated for criminal activity.⁸⁸

Wanted: Money and Discipline

In his report to the U.S. Army War College on the state of the Russian military, McGrath states, "The combination of a reliable and reasonable paycheck, acceptable treatment, meaningful work, and a promising career path characterize a professional organization."⁸⁹ If Russia had an army with such qualities, or even approximated such qualities, conscription would not be a significant issue in Russian society. Russian families are rightfully afraid that their sons will be starved, beaten, disabled, or killed during their mandatory eighteen months of service, and this fear will not subside without significant reform in the personnel structure of the military.

Two serious challenges fuel the problem. The first is the generally poor economic climate, which has affected all aspects of public service and worsened the corruption and unofficial revenue generating that became habitual during the Soviet era. Plans for dealing with social and economic problems in today's Russia are usually dependent on obtaining adequate funding, and conscription is no different. Until a reasonable defense budget can be appropriated and efficiently channeled to the necessary vital services (rather than diverted to maintenance of large-scale strategic technologies), low and undependable salaries and poor living conditions (including lack of food) will prevent the army from any significant movement toward modernization.

The second challenge is the need to change the violent social structure of army life and impose official discipline. It may be possible to solve this problem by moving from a conscripted to a professional force, but individuals will not volunteer if serving in the army entails physical abuse and extortion. This sphere of reform also requires financial stability, because an effective fighting force will not come into being unless salaries are paid regularly and the necessary equipment is provided. The government officials who attempt to implement the necessary reforms, and the families involved in the soldiers' mothers movement that have so visibly protested conscription and raised awareness of the problem, have many years of difficult work ahead.

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