

# CONSCRIPTION AND REFORM IN THE RUSSIAN ARMY

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## **Executive Summary**

Conscription in the contemporary Russian Army faces many serious problems, the roots of which lie the legacy of the Soviet Union. The violent experience of conscript life was a pervasive feature of the late Soviet military and continues to be a pressing factor in making fear of conscription and draft evasion a reality of the Russian Army and a central issue in Russian society. Additionally, the economic crises of the transition have pressed the armed forces to greater extremes in the challenge of supporting their troops with basic needs, thereby lowering morale and exacerbating the problems of extortion and violence in the ranks. The current crisis also involves parents who are desperately trying to help their sons avoid service and authorities who readily accept bribes for granting exemptions. Consequently, the conscription problem adds to the general issue of corruption in public service, while barracks violence nurtures disparaging and hostile attitudes among Russia's young men. Meanwhile, Soldiers' Mothers movements are making nominal attempts to utilize new civil liberties and the rule of law to protest and work against the draft, and the government is struggling to turn the dilapidated and demoralized military into a modern professional-volunteer force.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines conscription and reform in the Russian Army. Bringing together academic studies, government reports, and anecdotal and media accounts, we provide a comprehensive overview of the problems facing Russian military conscription policy. Beginning with the issue of the draft's origin and development, the Soviet legacy and its contribution will be examined with regard to the current situation. Violence in the enlisted ranks of the army and its influence on the fear of conscription and the increasing difficulty of implementing the draft, including the problems of evasion and desertion, are then discussed. We also explore the contribution of economic challenges and the dilapidated state of the Army to the conscription issue, particularly regarding corruption and extortion. Finally, we outline attempts and plans to reform the Army, both by the government and by civilian organizations such as soldier's mothers groups.

## **Soviet Origins of the Draft and the Dynamics of Conscript Life**

Under the Soviet Union's original 1938 service law, one conscription 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. The result was that approximately one-quarter of enlisted soldiers were discharged and replaced by fresh conscripts every six months (Odom, 1998).

The change was likely due in part to the Ministry of Defense's newly emerging military doctrine in the 1960s. Believing that nuclear war would require vast reserves of trained military

personnel to compensate for 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 (conscript 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” that is 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 (Odom, 1998).

The shortened service length came along with changes in the army’s leadership structure. Although the Soviet Army had no professional Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps, platoon and squad level sergeants were selected from among conscripts and given special regimental training on active duty. They were expected to serve as reasonably fair and competent leaders by their third year. Further, a small number of soldiers who volunteered for extended enlistment were given *starshina* (company level sergeant) rank.

Nonetheless, the shortage of enlisted manpower was obvious, 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 Lieven (1998, p. 292), “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 NCO’s.”

After the 1967 law, the additional training for platoon and squad level NCO’s was abandoned in favor of increased civil defense training in secondary schools. Furthermore, the *starshina* began to decline as they were promoted to the new *praporshchik* rank, a warrant officer class that 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 rule] system (Odom, 1998, p.288).

Dedovshchina originated from the gulag culture, which was brought to the army as convicts were drafted in the Great Patriotic War (Jenkins, 2001). As the system evolved during the 1970s and 1980s, second year conscripts, *stariki*, assumed de facto command of the barracks, each serving as the *ded* (grandfather) to one or several first-year soldiers. The juniors washed their deds' clothes, polished their boots, serviced their rifles, scrubbed toilets, suffered the harshest and dirtiest work details, and were forced to surrender their families' care packages of food and/or money.

Deds often confiscated juniors' army pay and regular food rations, as well. 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, that contributed to the severe injuries, disability discharges, murders and suicides that became such a notorious public issue by the late 1980s (Bogoslovskaya, Polyakova, & Vilenskaya, 2001, Finch, 1998; Herspring, 2000; Lambeth, 1995). As for the new sergeants, "they found themselves formally in charge of *stariki* privates. But 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*" (Odom, 1998, p. 288).

The emergence of *dedovshchina* appears to have been facilitated by the shorter service term, as well as the worsening lack of a professional NCO corps. None of the former Soviet soldiers interviewed by Odom (1998) who served before 1967 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 (Jenkins, 2001). In exchange for unquestioned autonomy, the senior cohort ensured that the officers' assignments would be completed promptly and efficiently by the junior conscripts, "forging a perverse mutual dependency between the officer and enlisted ranks" (Odom, 1998, p. 48).

The new conscript social structure slowly became formalized. A characteristically poetic Russian slang described conscripts' assent through the "ranks" of *dedovshchina*: from "dukh" to "slon" to "cherpakh," and in the final six months, "ded." Progression from one level to the next "often is marked by a bizarre series of rituals," (Jenkins, 2001, p. 34) which were inevitably violent. Finch (1998) recounts a set of rules provided by a regiment's senior conscripts for their juniors, 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."

The *dedovshchina* system was further complicated by ethnic and national divisions (Lieven, 1998). Lower fertility rates of Slavs 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" (Odom, 1998, p. 289) was especially cruel. A Chechen conscript in the 1980s complained that "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" (Lieven, 1998, p.292).

In the late 1980s, Baltic (Latvian, Estonian) and Caucasian (Armenian, Georgian) minorities also complained of special abusive attention. Various ethnic and national groups began to form *zemlyachestvo*, 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” (Odom, 1998, p. 48).

### **Economic Crises and the General Decline of the Russian Military**

The Russian military budget was especially hard hit during the transition, which brought staggering financial challenges that affected conscripts and officers alike. Along with an immediate ten percent reduction of the 5.2 million personnel force, the 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. The logistical difficulty of the massive resettlement was daunting, straining the already diminished budget and leaving 155,000 officers and their families without housing (McGrath, 2001; Lambeth, 1995).

In 1992, the new Russian Ministry of Defense developed a plan to reduce the total troop strength from 2.7 million to 2.1 million (Baev, 1996), and a new Law on Military Service passed by the Russian Parliament in February 1993, shortened the conscription term from 24 to 18 months and introduced a new series of generous exemptions that would allow 84% of eligible conscripts to avoid induction (Baev, 1996).

Despite the immediate cutbacks, the military began to experience a severe financial crises. Total military expenditure had declined so much that the army was left with defaults in payment of wages and other bills, shortage of housing, and little useful training or modernization



(Mcgrath, 2001). Lack of air force funding forced 2,000 pilots to be reassigned to infantry, artillery, and other troops. Those pilots who remained usually got less than 25 flight 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” (Herspring, 2000, p.135).

For many conscripts, previously Spartan conditions became truly frightening. Food was notoriously poor. Most regiments cultivated their own vegetable garden plots to supplement their diet (Odom, 1998), and some troops were even told to pick berries and mushrooms in local forests (Herspring, 2000). A Russian newspaper article in 1995 pointed out that Russia, with only sixty percent of the United States population and sixteen percent of its GDP, was attempting to support an army as large America’s on only seven to eight percent of the U.S. defense budget (Arbatanov and Batanov, 1995). The government began to form the view that the military, like other formerly state-funded organizations, should at least partially sustain themselves by selling superfluous assets and utilizing inexpensive conscript labor (Finch, 1998).

The military obliged, turning Russia’s conscript army into “one of the largest (practically unpaid) labor pools” (Finch, 1998, p.4). Recruits performed labor building dachas, guarding personal residences, harvesting farmers crops and working at other private enterprises to generate income for the regiment and/or its officers (Finch, 1998). The producer of a film documentary on the Russian Army in 2001 described that “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” (Jenkins, 2001, p.34).

Generating revenue to maintain living expenses had become the central preoccupation of many regiments. Herspring (2000) recalls interviewing a Russian admiral in Vladivostok who declared that feeding his sailors was his most pressing military issue, and he had been making arrangements with local agricultural producers to hire out the sailors as laborers in exchange for a share of the food. Many commanders followed suit, hiring out their conscripts to work on private construction projects to make extra money for the unit or for themselves (Lieven, 1998). Jenkins (2001, p. 34) described that “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.”

Officers began selling all the military property they could for personal gain, as well. 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 (Lambeth, 1995). Russian prosecutors stated that seventeen generals and admirals were convicted of corruption in 1998 (Herspring, 2000, p.138).

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” (Lambeth, 1995, p. 91). By 1994, the first Chechan war had diverted four billion dollars 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 on the Chechen war was further compounded by many commanders’ practice of overstating the official number of soldiers in their units in order to collect the extra pay allocated. Many units assigned to combat in

Chechnya were woefully understaffed, but the officers were unable to complain since they had been lying about their troop strength (Lieven, 1998).

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 that "no army in the world is in as wretched a state as Russia's," and that if 1995's proposed budget were cut in half as was 1994's, "the army will simply collapse" (Lambeth, 1995, p.88). The budget assignment was nonetheless disappointing, and a furious Ministry of Defense, rather than reforming the bloated military structure and streamlining the army to gain a smaller but at least competent and equipped force, actually 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 (Baev, 1996).

While conditions for conscripted soldiers worsened, Russian leaders strove to maintain a vision of the country as a superpower (Finch, 1998). President Putin referred to Russia as "a great, powerful, and mighty state" (McGrath, 2001, p.12) in his 2000 inaugural address. This nostalgia for the greatness of the past was especially perpetuated by the Defense Ministry, which served as the country's only remaining claim to superpower status, and the claim was due solely to the size and scope of its nuclear arsenal. Conventional combat forces were in no condition to inspire the image of a superpower. The Russian army, for example, has not held any ground force field-exercises above battalion level since 1991 (Lieven, 1998; Herspring, 2000). 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 (Lambeth, 1995).

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 (1995) poignantly describes the change in 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 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 (p.91).

However, with conventional capabilities dilapidating, the Ministry of Defense maintained a vested interest in hanging on to its perceived days of Soviet glory, when the military could remain arrogantly unaccountable. Assigning first priority to a costly infrastructure of strategic air, sea, and land missile capability, and often demanding the continual enhancement of current systems with no regard to budget constraints, defense leaders consequently resisted investment on conscription reform and the development of a competent professional force (McGrath, 2001).

A similar myopia may have existed with regard to the leadership's view on draft evasion and the despair of Russian conscripts. When Lieven (1998) interviewed General Vorobyev in 1994, the general told him that "As for morale, I am convinced that it is very high among our conscripts, because 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” (p.293). Fortunately, not all Russian military leaders were so naïve, 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 from universities with military studies departments (who would normally be entitled commissions) as enlisted privates. Defense Minister Pavel Grachev was enthusiastically supportive of the new measures (Baev, 1996). The Duma initially rejected the bill, but finally accepted it on April 7, with extensive lobbying by the Ministry of Defense.

After repeated protests by some Duma members, however, the law was amended: those conscripts already inducted would serve only their agreed eighteen months, and graduates of universities with military departments would be offered commissions. Also, eligible draftees with only one parent who was over 50 could receive a deferment (Arbatov & Batanov, 1995). Despite the amendments, however, the measure was so publicly unpopular that it was repealed a year later, and Yeltsin’s suddenly sympathetic reversal may have been a device to win votes in the 1996 election (Lieven, 1998).

There was no doubt that the draft was despised by much of the country. Lieven (1998, p.201) interviewed youths in Moscow, finding them to be almost universally in favor of avoiding the draft, and noted that they had “a positively encyclopedic knowledge of the various medical

and legal ploys involved.” The most obvious reason that serving as a conscript in the Russian Army was so feared is that it is a truly dangerous endeavor. *Dedovshchina* is as prevalent and violent as during the late Soviet era, and the current funding crisis means that soldiers endure a grueling and emaciating eighteen months.

An April 1996 *Izvestia* article told the story of private Misha Kubarsky, a young conscript from Yaroslavl. He died from starvation within three months of induction into the Russian army. A medical exam conducted on private Kubarsky after he had complained of fatigue, revealed that he was twelve kilograms below the army’s clinical minimum for his height and body type. He died on the way to the military hospital in Volochayevka. 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 Kubarsky’s death found fifty percent of the regiment’s soldiers to be body-mass deficient (Resnik, 1996, p.1) The *Izvestia* reporter described to readers that “I saw those pale lads with skinny necks and shaking hands in the Anastasyevskaya Military Hospital, where they say the life is like in a resort hotel...they think with horror about returning to their regiment” (p.1-2).

In 1996, 31,000 assigned conscripts fled induction. Of these, 18,000 were eventually apprehended, but only 500 criminally charged (Lieven, 1998). Usually, the worse thing to happen to an absconder is to be eventually inducted, and the odds are not too discouraging. During 1997, 50,000 eligible young conscripts fled, and 12,000 inductees deserted during their first year in service (Herspring, 2000). While 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 eighty percent of personnel requirements (Finch, 1998).

The Russian Army draft “makes mothers dream, twice a year, of their children getting some disability” (Bogatyreva, 1998, p.33). Of the pool of conscripts actually inducted in Fall 1997, 15% were clinically underweight, another 15% had criminal records, 10% 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 deferment (a quarter million of these for medical premises), and 71,000 were disqualified for having serious criminal records (Finch, 1998).

Another problem with the draft is that every aspect of the conscription system is being extorted for bribery. Eligible draftees purchase medical exemptions, draft board members can be paid for favorable decisions, higher education administrators accept gifts for recommending deferment, and local police can be likewise compensated to overlook a warrant on an evading conscript (Finch, 1998). One mother seeking exemption for her son observed that “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” (Bogatyreva, 1998, p34).

Article 59 point 3 of the Russian constitution of December 1993 states that “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” (Bogatyreva, 1998, p.34). However, the April 1995 conscription law offered no such provision; those

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 (Lieven, 1998). 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 (Jenkins, 2001). Although the Ministry of Defense estimated a seventeen million dollar budget to conduct the Fall 1997 draft call-up, it only received about six million. The remaining costs were provided by local leaders, presumably in exchange for some political compensation, such as greater autonomy or free labor. Finch (1998, p.4) warns that this relationship may be a “step towards regional warlordism.”

The corruption of the induction process continues during service. Survival in the modern Russian Army often necessitates protection from internal threats, and young soldiers must be prepared to provide either cheap (or free) labor, or else obtain money for bribes (Finch, 1998). The violent atmosphere of *dedovshchina* has only become worse in the transition’s new period of extreme destitution. Before the breakup, Herspring (2000, p.136) recalled having personally witnessed Soviet soldiers and sailors subject to “most brutal discipline” and reacting like “mechanical puppets,” while other observers “could talk of ‘Prussian-style’ discipline in the Russian/Soviet military.”

During the transition, however, discipline evaporated further, and military prosecutors struggled to keep track of murder and other violent crimes (Herspring, 2000). Lambeth (1995) claims that 169 Russian conscripts died in violent barracks incidents, while Lieven (1998) reports that the Ministry of Defense admitted there were 543 suicides and 1,071 murders in 1996. Herspring (2000) refers to the chief military prosecutor, stating that fifty soldiers had fatally shot fellow servicemen while on guard duty during 1999, and shooting is one of the least common



forms of murder in the army (Herspring, 2000). A letter from private Serguei Flocha, before he was killed while serving in Mozdok, informed his mother in St. Petersburg that

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 (Bogoslovskaya, et al., 2001, p. 181).

Soldiers' mother organizations (discussed below) began to give notice to 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" (Herspring, 2000, p.137), yet no measures seem to have been forthcoming. In 2002, a foreign newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported the shooting deaths of 8 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 54 conscripts reportedly fled from their regiment and walked 55km to Volgograd to protest the violent beatings (Murder and Mayhem Cull Ranks of Russian Army, 2002).

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 will be future husbands and fathers, and possibly more at risk to be domestic abusers. Furthermore, Herspring (2000) notes that former soldiers, particularly from elite units such as paratroopers, play an unusually large role in Russian organized crime.

## **The Impact of the Soldiers' Mothers Movement**

The roots of public activism against conscription began during the perestroika period. 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 issues such as inadequate food and housing, 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 from Soviet authorities was disappointing: by December, active duty servicemen were prohibited from joining unions (Odom, 1998).

While the top military leadership could “hurl insults with impunity at radical junior officers in Shield” (Odom, 1998, p.197), the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers would not be so lightly dispelled. Founded by Maria Kirbasova in 1989, the new organization monitored and kept records of abuse deaths, attempted to demand accountability for commanders, and demanded soldiers’ rights laws. They conducted demonstrations in January 1990, and by June had organized a meeting of the All-Union Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers in Gorky Park (Odom, 1998). The veracity of the Soldiers’ Mothers organization gave the generals pause (Odom, 1998), even those who tended to viciously attack any critic of the army.

Several senior officers tried to assume the 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. 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 fifteen to twenty thousand soldiers had died from non-combat violence since 1986. The union called for a decree

from Gorbachev to protect conscripts' rights before the fall call-up, although he had already issued such a law in response to Kirbasova's group (Odom, 1998).

Conscription revolts broke out in 1989 and 1990, the result of the confluence of several factors: the campaign to repeal the suspension of student deferments, the open publicity of 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 the year before of the Nazi-Soviet Pact's ceding of the Baltics to Stalin, were alarmed by the recent Tbilisi massacre 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" (Odom, 1998, 294). In January 1990, women in Krasnodar protested the assignment of local reserves to suppress the nationalist uprising in Azerbaijan (Lieven, 1998).

In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Defense had organized soldiers' mothers groups in various towns and cities in an attempt to control the situation. Even when Shield was operating 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" (Bogoslovakaya et al., 2001, 184).

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 serve their political ambitions. Kirbasova claimed that many of these officers were assigned by the KBG to dissolve the movement and reduce its effectiveness (Odom, 1998).

If the government was trying to suppress the Mothers' organizations, they were unsuccessful. Mothers' groups would continue to be the most active and well-known voice in the issue of conscript abuse during the transition.

The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, formed in 1992, began disseminating information on deferments and how to seek help for their sons either in hiding or trying to escape from the barracks. Since the late 1990s, over 100,000 people have sought help from the group, including deserters, young men fearing the draft, parents whose sons had been beaten and tortured in the barracks, and parents whose sons had been killed and sought real investigations (Bogoslovskaya et al., 2001).

Leaders of the group explained that their methods are modeled on those of dissident Vladimir Bukovski, who exploited Soviet bureaucratic rules to ensure that his complaints would be recognized. They utilized the 1993 Russian Constitution to inform parents and conscript age men about their rights, and encourage them to make official complaints, for which they provided samples and lists of all of the political offices to where complaints could be sent, from the Procurator general to the local authorities.

Of the three primary grounds upon which conscription can be exempted, educational deferment, certain social hardships, and medical disqualification, the latter is the most commonly exploited. The medical commission uses a simple list of illnesses to assess exemption, which was undisclosed during the Soviet era. The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg obtained a copy of the list and posted it 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" (Bogoslovskaya, et al., 2001, p. 185). The organization also posted sample forms for official complaints and inquiries, along with names and addresses for offices to send them, and beginning in February 1999, they

began conducting twice-weekly “School for Human Rights” consultation sessions for conscripts and families that average about 150 people in attendance (Bogaslovskaya, et al., 2001).

For four years the Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg worked out of their one-room office with no funding. Finally, donations came in from Tacis and the Soros Foundation, and the organization began to publish brochures and reports. One 1997 booklet, *Protecting the Rights of Servicemen on Active Service*, was approved by the Ministry of Defense. The mothers also published a report in cooperation with Amnesty International which was received by the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva (Bogoslovskaya, et al., 2001).

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. Their instructions demonstrate a profound effort on the part of the members 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. (Bogatyreva, 1998, p.34).

Other instructions that the Committee gives to mothers concern detailed descriptions of the educational deferment laws and how to file such cases, how to check the credentials of persons on the draft commissions in order to file exemption cases on the basis of a commission not being legitimate, and how to exploit other loopholes in the conscription laws (Bogatyreva, 1998).

## **Towards a Professional Volunteer Force**

In Boris Yeltsin's 1992 decree creating the Russian Army, the new president stated that the armed forces should move towards a volunteer professional force. Due to the unpopularity of the draft, the announcement was politically expedient. His first defense minister, General Pavel Grachev, developed a plan that was to have half the armed forces converted to volunteers by 2000; there were already 90,000 (of 780,000) contract soldiers in the army by 1994 and 170,000 (of 670,000) by 1995. Military reform had already been part of Gorbachev's perestroika initiative, and the Premier had told the United Nations in December 1988 his desire to restructure and scale-down the Soviet Union's armed forces. Yeltsin's new initiative for a professional military seemed like a promising step (McGrath, 2001).

Enlisted pay for Soviet soldiers had been staggeringly low, about seven or eight dollars per month. Like the gulag inmates of the Stalinist era, conscripted soldiers provided a pool of essentially unpaid labor (Odom, 1998). The pay structure for conscripts in the new Russian Army was worse, only about one dollar and five cents per month. The new professional soldiers, or *Kontraktniki*, would earn about \$167 per month in order to attract volunteers. *Kontraktniki* would be enlisted from among conscripts with at least six months of active duty, or anytime after they are 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 that is essential to developing the technical expertise a modern army requires (McGrath, 2001).

While they were certainly offered better compensation than conscripts, only 180,000 of the planned 280,000 *Kontraktniki* were recruited by 1996. While campaigning for president in May of that year, Boris Yeltsin promised to abolish the draft and develop an entirely professional

volunteer force by 2000, though no explanation was given of how the plan was to be funded (Lieven, 1998) . 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" (as cited in McGrath, 2001, p. 4).

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" (as cited in McGrath, 2001, p.4). By July, 1997, Rodionov was replaced by Marshal Sergeyev (Finch, 1998), who immediately edited 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." (as cited in McGrath, 2001, p. 4).

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

Despite the uncertain political landscape and economic challenges, the movement to a professional military was somewhat successful. About 170,000 Kontraktniki (of 420,000) soldiers were serving in the Russian army in 1997, though the number has not significantly increased since then (Finch, 1998). Before leaving office, President Yeltsin had authorized a plan for another 150,000 army volunteers, but no new funding was appropriated (Baev, 1996). Also, besides being exempt from the draft, women made up the majority of the contract soldiery, 82,000 in 1994 and 100,00 by 1997, and most of these soldiers are actually officer's wives who fill support position vacancies in order to boost their meager household incomes. Known as "family operations," adult children sometimes join the regimental support staff, as well (Jenkins, 2001; Lieven, 1998; McGrath, 2001).

Many volunteers do serve in combat-oriented positions, however, presenting a new social challenge within the ranks. Volunteers who are integrated into conscript units are usually several years older than their peers (as well as being better equipped and paid). The director of the Institute for Military-Political Problems in Russia, Aleksandr Sharavin, points out that "the contract soldier of twenty-five or twenty-six is never going to submit to an eighteen year-old sergeant" (as cited in McGrath, 2001, p. 15). The army quickly developed all-volunteer units, which have performed above average and are usually better equipped and deployed to the highest profile missions. Such units have become distinctly stratified from the rank-and-file units that consist mostly of conscripts, and Kontraktniks often do not want to associate with conscripts (Jenkins, 2001).

New difficulties have also arisen due to the contracts' wide range of service lengths and terms. Commanders of both composite (conscript and Kontraktniki) and all-professional units have had to struggle to balance unit effectiveness with upholding contractual provisions. Some



Kontratniki 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 (2001) likens the challenge of managing military units with differently contracted soldiers (and composite units) to the supervision of job-sites with workers from assorted labor unions and varying contractual constraints.

Sometimes the military failed to fulfill even the minimum requirements of its contractual obligations. Failure to pay salaries, like in other areas of Russian public service employment, has been a problem among volunteer soldiers. In 2000, Kontratniki demonstrated at the North Caucasus Military District headquarters over not receiving salaries 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 with the volunteer soldiers, Yeltsin replied that "the existing contracts were more like an oath of allegiance" (as cited in McGrath, 2001, p. 13).

The government's uncertain performance in paying the contract soldiers may be a factor in the disappointing quality of many volunteers. General V. Zhrebtsov, former Chief of the Main Organization-Mobilization Directorate, complained that recruitment in the early and mid-1990s was inconsistent and that many of the Kontratniki were unprofessional, incompetent, and even criminal. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Guards Motorized Rifle Division in Chechnya reportedly rejected 230 of the 300 new contract soldiers sent to them by the Urals Military District as unsuitable, and in 1998, 24% percent of contract soldiers were terminated for criminal activity (McGrath, 2001).

## **Conclusions**

In his report to the U.S. Army War College on the state of the Russian military, McGrath (2001) states that “The combination of a reliable and reasonable paycheck, acceptable treatment, meaningful work, and a promising career path characterize a professional organization” (p. 7). If Russia had an army with such qualities, or even reasonably close to such qualities, conscription would of course 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 that has affected all aspects of public service and worsened the kinds of corruption and unofficial revenue-generating that had become ingrained during the Soviet era. Many goals for improving social and economic problems in the former Soviet Union involve the need to acquire adequate funding, of course, and conscription is no different. Until a reasonable defense budget can be appropriated and efficiently channeled to the necessary vital services (rather than diverted toward maintenance of large-scale strategic technologies), low and unreliable salaries and poor living-conditions (including lack of food) will prevent the army from any significant movement towards modernizing.

The second challenge, reforming the violent social structure of the conscripts and implementing official discipline, can hopefully be curbed by moving to a professional force (volunteers cannot be attracted and retained if they must look forward to the violent conditions of physical abuse and extortion), but this will also require the financial stability to reliably pay

salaries and provide the equipment necessary for an effective fighting force. The government officials who attempt to bring about necessary reforms, and the families involved in the soldiers' mothers movement who have so visibly protested conscription and brought awareness to the problem, almost certainly have years of difficult work ahead of them.



Table 1

**SUMMARY OF SOVIET AND RUSSIAN MILITARY COMPOSITION, 1989-2002**

	USSR 1989	USSR 1990	USSR 1991	CIS 1992	RF 1993	RF 1994	RF 1995	RF 1996	RF 1997	RF 1998	RF 1999	RF 2000	RF 2001	RF 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 (VPVO)	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	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	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 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance publications 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. London, UK. This table designed and constructed by the author.

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