

# Ensuring the Political Loyalty of the Russian Soldier

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*A good Cause puts life and courage into mens Hearts.*

—*The Souldiers Catchisme*, 1644

Ever since returning to the Russian presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has placed patriotic renewal at the top of the Kremlin's agenda. Nationalist rhetoric escalated after the country's armed annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military involvement in both southeast Ukraine and Syria. During his annual press conference in December 2019, Putin suggested that

“patriotism is the only possible ideology in the modern democratic society.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Kremlin practices a peculiar brand of democracy, there is no question that patriotism has become its new ideological centerpiece. The ideological void that developed after the collapse of communism, and the subsequent failure of liberal democracy to take hold during the economically painful 1990s, has been partially filled with a renewed sense of patriotism.

Reflecting on or wary of its communist past, the Russian constitution prohibits a state ideology. However, there is an emerging

formula that captures Russia's developing dogma: Russia was, is, and will remain a great power, reflected in the country's history, culture, size (resources), people, and military prowess.<sup>2</sup> The Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War during World War II has become the focal point and defining characteristic of this new ideology. While the country celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of this victory in June 2020, the memory of this horrific war remains the prism through which Russians understand their world today. As Deputy Defence Minister Col.-Gen. Andrei Kartapolov recently suggested, “the victory of the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] over fascist Germany should become the basis of the national identity of the Russians.”<sup>3</sup>

Religion makes up another potent ingredient in the Kremlin's patriotic recipe. For instance, the traditional close association between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin leadership has correlated a divine sanction to its understanding of patriotism: God is on Russia's side. The construction of a huge military-themed cathedral at Patriot Park, located outside of Moscow, is an apt metaphor for this heavenly support. This state-sponsored, religiously sanctioned patriotism has helped to compensate for the Kremlin's greater authoritarian tendencies, slower economic growth, and domestic political repression. It has also helped to drive a more aggressive foreign policy.

Over the past decade, alongside the patriotic rhetoric, the Kremlin leadership has worked to ensure the loyalty and devotion of those charged with defending the Russian state. Despite pressing domestic needs (e.g., mediocre schools, housing, roads, medical care, etc.), funding for military and internal security forces remains high. The Kremlin-sponsored media continues to blanket the information space with praiseworthy coverage of every military and security achievement. The formation of the Russian National Guard in 2016 and the continued

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Newly appointed unit-level Russian political officers attending a special military-political meeting in the Southern Military District of Russia examine a copy of a military publication 21 November 2019 that has been prepared for dissemination to members of the Russian military. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Ministry of Defence)

development of a nationwide patriotic youth group (Юнармия, or Young Army) have strengthened domestic security while enlisting the loyalty of younger Russians to the Kremlin's patriotic cause.

Against this backdrop of rising (managed) patriotism, in early 2018, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced the reintroduction of the Main Military-Political Directorate (MPD) into the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. This Soviet-era organization was originally designed to guarantee that the military remain devoted to the Communist Party and to help with morale, discipline, and education. The organization fell into disrepair after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, when a newly independent Russia ostensibly depoliticized the military.

According to the head of the new MPD, Kartapolov, the main goal of this organization today "is to form a warrior-statesman, a reliable and loyal defender of the Fatherland, a bearer of the traditional spiritual and moral values of Russian society: spirituality and patriotism."<sup>4</sup>

## Background

Russians celebrate "Defender of the Fatherland Day" (День защитника Отечества, or *Den' zashchitnika Otechestva*) on 23 February, where the nation honors those who have defended the country or anyone who wears a uniform today.<sup>5</sup> The holiday was first observed during the Russian Civil War (1917–22) by Bolshevik leaders who were celebrating the first mass conscription of Russian men into the recently created Red Army, which was fighting (among others) former tsarist soldiers of the White Army. This red "workers' army" would ultimately prevail in crushing its domestic opponents in the civil war and would later serve as the nucleus of the Soviet military that defeated the Nazi threat some twenty years later.

Since many former tsarist officers had been dragooned into fighting for the Red Army cause, there were doubts surrounding their political loyalty. There were strong grounds for concern, since many former tsarist officers had pledged "to defend the [tsarist] dynasty to his

last drop of blood” and where many had taken up arms against the new Bolshevik leadership.<sup>6</sup> The institution of political commissars was created to ensure tsarist officer allegiance, to maintain discipline, and to boost morale. These commissars were responsible for making sure the party’s orders were carried out as well as handling propaganda and education (less than half of the Russian population was literate in 1920).<sup>7</sup>

The role of these political commissars fluctuated over time. Once the Bolshevik leadership prevailed in the civil war, the commissars’ role was reduced, and they focused more on propaganda and education. Commissars were no longer required to cosign a commander’s orders. During the latter portion of the Great Terror in the 1930s when the Kremlin leadership purged the upper ranks of the military and every officer’s loyalty was in question, the commissar’s role again became more controlling. After the initial fiasco in the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–40, the party leadership temporarily reduced the authority of the commissar. The commissar’s authority was reinstated after the devastating losses in 1941–42 when Nazi forces reached the Moscow city limits. Once the Red Army

turned the tide after the Battle of Stalingrad, however, commanders were able to issue orders without the commissar’s approval once again.

The Soviet victory in World War II had “proven” the rectitude of the communist cause. After the war, the role of the commissar was formalized within the MPD of the Soviet army and navy (GlavPUR). It has been described as “the channel through which the Party influences all aspects of the Armed Forces’ life and activity, enhances their combat readiness, strengthens military discipline, raises the personnel’s political level and boosts their morale.”<sup>8</sup> A major part of their work dealt with “ensuring the ideological purity of the Soviet Armed Forces. Political officers prepare and teach Marxist-Leninist studies to all personnel and also supervise the educational system throughout the military structure.”<sup>9</sup>

The Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, under construction 28 April 2020 in Patriot Park outside of Moscow. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Ministry of Defence)



Like the Communist Party structure in the wider Soviet society, GlavPUR grew into an enormous organization within the armed forces with its own “Military-Political Academy named after Lenin and 14 higher military-political schools.”<sup>10</sup> GlavPUR was also represented in “the Department of Social Sciences at twenty military academies and more than 150 higher military schools.”<sup>11</sup> Besides producing trained political officers and

by type of service and branch. They could theoretically fill in “to carry out training and combat missions for the purpose of their unit,” whether driving a tank or performing “combat duty in the Strategic Rocket Forces.”<sup>13</sup> In actual practice, political workers focused more on propaganda and morale.

While an integral part of the Soviet military, GlavPUR had its own personnel department with its



Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu (*foreground*) checks on the construction progress of the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation 22 April 2020 at Patriot Park outside of Moscow. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Ministry of Defence)

huge quantities of military-political literature, GlavPUR managed a variety of cultural detachments that dealt with music, theater, art, and film, as well as museums and cultural centers. According to Lt.-Gen. (reserve) Victor Buslovsky, who served as lead author of a recently completed book describing the history and achievements of GlavPUR, “If the General Staff is the brain of the army, then the Main Political Directorate was the face, soul and parental home of the Soviet Armed Forces.”<sup>12</sup>

In the Soviet military, trained political officers were assigned down to the company level to inculcate Marxist-Leninist dogma, and they were also trained

own measure of officer effectiveness. These political deputies played a key role within the regular officer promotion system. Without their strong recommendation, an officer would not likely advance in rank.<sup>14</sup> Given their separate management system and influence over officer advancement, political officers were often not highly respected by their regular officer comrades. The anecdotal evidence corroborates this poor reputation.

In the Soviet army, which many of us found in all its glory and all its grim grandeur, the political officers were a special and most despised caste among officers. With rare exceptions, they



did not enjoy any respect in the troops—and this sharply contrasted with their official position and conceit. The political instructor was, of course, not a commander—but someone who was standing very close to him, and yet without experience in leading troops, without real military training, without a real understanding of the personnel. Their privileges were almost the highest, and the benefits of them to the troops were truly the smallest.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, as faith in the communist system began to wane, the role of the political officers in the military became even more problematic. They had the unenviable task of defending and promoting an ideology that simply was not working. Attempting to revive the floundering communist economy, the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced reforms that inadvertently both weakened party control and the Soviet military. *Glasnost*, or openness, revealed several serious problems within the hitherto secretive military (e.g., personnel losses in Afghanistan, hazing, corruption, etc.). Gorbachev's decision to radically downsize the military and convert a portion of the Soviet industrial complex toward civilian production caused considerable grumbling within the ranks, further exacerbating the mission of GlavPUR.

Were they themselves role models? Not at all. Political leaders were spokesmen, as they would say today, of double standards. For this,



The widely promoted iconic picture of a Soviet commissar/political officer (usually identified as Aleksei Gordeyevich Yeryomenko of the 220th Rifle Regiment, 4th Rifle Division) leading fellow soldiers in an infantry assault against Nazi forces in Ukraine minutes before he was reputedly killed 12 July 1942. (Photo by Max Alpert via RIA Novosti via Wikimedia Commons)

they were hated. Amidst these political leaders there were plenty of alcoholics, womanizers, and swindlers, but they, unlike many others of that ilk, were always covered by the party. It is not surprising that such two-faced creatures instantly changed rhetoric after the country's collapse, or that they began to sing the praises of democracy using the same pathos once reserved for communism.<sup>16</sup>

The Soviet military played an ambiguous role during the dramatic political events of August 1991, when a handful of Soviet hardliners (to include the minister of defense) attempted to seize power and use force to reestablish party control over the splintering country. Military units were sent into the streets of Moscow as a show of force and to isolate the country's popular president, Boris

Yeltsin. However, when the order finally came to seize the building where Yeltsin and his followers were defying the coup, these military personnel lacked the zeal or determination to carry out their mission.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the military's hesitation to use force likely stemmed from a sense of betrayal resulting from the country's political authorities that had developed earlier under Gorbachev. As the nationalist seams of the USSR were beginning to fray, the party leadership had ordered the military to intervene to neutralize or crush ethnic tensions. In the process of restoring order throughout the crumbling Soviet Union, many civilians had been killed or injured. When confronted by the country's more independent media or Western leaders to explain why force was employed, the Kremlin leadership disavowed its political involvement, blaming instead the military.<sup>18</sup>

After the unsuccessful coup attempt of August 1991, Gorbachev signed a decree to eliminate all the

**Previous page:** A Russian political commissar stands behind German and Soviet officers in conversation 22 September 1939 at the German-Russian victory parade in Brest-Litovsk, Poland. (Photo courtesy of Bundesarchiv via Wikimedia Commons)

military-political organs in the USSR armed forces. In December 1991, when the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin, there were no protests either in the streets or within the military ranks. Despite the massive investment in propaganda, most Russians welcomed the dissolution of the USSR, along with the denunciation of the Communist Party and its leadership.<sup>19</sup> The lack of any protest may have partially stemmed from near economic collapse, as the new independent countries of the former Soviet Union wrestled with challenges of moving from a centralized economy toward something resembling a market-driven model. Former Soviet republics were also challenged with developing their own governments, bureaucracies, and militaries.<sup>20</sup>

Former political workers in the Soviet military were rebranded as education officers in the newly formed Russian military, and they were assigned to assist with education, morale, and psychological training. Over the next twenty years, as the military tried to figure out how to use these assets, its exact mission remained ill-defined and was not helped by numerous organizational changes. In 2010, as part of reforms to streamline the military education system, many of the former political officers' billets were finally eliminated and the educational structure received a new name—the Main Directorate for Work with Personnel of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.<sup>21</sup> This organization would serve as the precursor to the MPD, which was officially reconstituted in July 2018.

## Why Reactivate the Main Political Directorate?

There has been considerable conjecture as to what prompted the MOD to reestablish the MPD. Recall that in early 2018, Putin was reelected to another (and presumably final) six-year presidential term.<sup>22</sup> Prior to this “election,” there had been relatively large protests in Moscow and other major cities, where Russians (many from the younger generation) protested government corruption and the country's *faux* democracy. The Kremlin leadership likely determined that the West was either responsible for sparking or exploiting these protests.<sup>23</sup> As the first line of defense against any foreign threat, in reconstituting the MPD, the military leadership moved to ensure that its personnel would not fall prey to such attacks.

Although presidential elections are not slated until 2024, the military (and those who control it) may have also felt the need to begin preparing for the possible

transfer of power. Throughout history, the transition of Kremlin authority has often been fraught with tension, and the return of a political branch within the military could help ensure the loyalty of the rank and file. This may have also been a contributing motive behind the creation of the Russian National Guard. Similarly, it should be noted that the MOD is just one of many power ministries under Kremlin control. In the struggle for budget resources, creating a department designed to strengthen political loyalty could translate into greater appropriations.

A couple months after his appointment to head the MPD, Kartapolov confirmed that the primary reason for reconstituting political training within the ranks was predicated on a need to defend against external information attacks “to counteract the many lies and slander” that were trying to corrupt Russian youth with “extremist ideologies.”<sup>24</sup> The MOD has written extensively on the dangers of defending against what it terms as “color revolutions.” Kartapolov warned that this information onslaught can “change the political consciousness of society, which in modern conditions can lead to very serious consequences. With some of our neighboring states, this is clearly visible.”<sup>25</sup>

In the same interview, Kartapolov explained that “the main goal of the newly created military-political bodies is to form a warrior-statesman, a reliable and loyal defender of the Fatherland, a bearer of the traditional spiritual and moral values of Russian society: spirituality and patriotism.”<sup>26</sup> The objective is not only to raise the “patriotic consciousness of military personnel and civilian personnel of the RF [Russian Federation] Armed Forces” but also includes “military-patriotic work with all citizens of Russia, especially youth.”<sup>27</sup> In a later interview, Kartapolov insisted that “depoliticization was a mistake” and that “it has become obvious that without an effective system of forming the political consciousness of military personnel it is impossible to solve the tasks of ensuring military security.”<sup>28</sup>

Kartapolov's rationale was echoed by Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu in September 2019, when Shoigu stated that re-creating the Main Political Directorate “became apparent when we saw how actively the West is meddling in the affairs of the army—they are interfering completely—ceremoniously and shamelessly.”<sup>29</sup> Shoigu went on to assert that the West is making up fake stories about the Russian military and trying to hack



into the Russian military's communication networks. He pointed to the new NATO strategic communications center operating in Riga, which he claimed is applying a "psychological pressure on the military."<sup>30</sup>

Less ominously, some have pointed to the education tasks assigned to the MPD. The chairman of the State Duma Committee on Defence and former commander of the airborne forces, retired Col.-Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, suggested that given the higher ratio of contract soldiers in the Russian military, these new political deputies would serve as something like "non-commissioned officers between the soldiers and the officer corps who [would help] to solve educational problems and deal with domestic problems."<sup>31</sup>

One source claimed that "discussions about the revival of political officers have been going on for a long time, since it became apparent that the greatly curtailed function of the educational system in the military has ceased to cope with new tasks in the face of constantly growing threats and deepening military confrontation."<sup>32</sup> The source goes on to suggest that the ongoing Russian military involvement in Syria demonstrated the "need to intensify the political, educational, moral and psychological training of all categories of military personnel."<sup>33</sup>

Tanks on Moscow's Red Square 19 August 1991 during a failed coup attempt by disgruntled Soviet leaders who had ordered troops to enter Moscow to overthrow the government of President Mikhail Gorbachev. (Photo by SPUTNIK via Alamy Stock Photo)

Analysts and pundits have proposed other reasons as to what prompted the return of the MPD. There is a widespread belief among older Russians that the younger generation is not well versed in the country's history and traditions, particularly within the military realm. Besides giving young soldiers the basics of military training, the MPD will allow the Kremlin to inculcate its patriotic message within the annual conscript pool.<sup>34</sup>

Other observers suggest that as Russia moves toward creating a professional military, mere material benefits alone will not motivate soldiers to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend their country. They echo what Kartapolov has stated regarding the mistake in depoliticizing the military in the early 1990s, and that it is incumbent upon the military leadership to explain to soldiers today why they are defending their country.<sup>35</sup>

A recent article from the liberal news source, *Obschaya Gazeta*, describes two other possible reasons



Then commander of the Russian Western Military District, Col.-Gen. Andrei Kartapolov (left) attends an oath ceremony 1 September 2016 for first-year cadets of the Saint Petersburg Suvorov Military School in Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo by Peter Kovalev, TASS via Alamy Live News)

behind reactivating this directorate. It suggests that “the project is needed to provide generals with career growth,” since staffing the new MPD will entail an increase in senior officer billets.<sup>36</sup> The article also posits that the new MPD could provide employment to the thousands of “staff officers [among them, former education officers] who were dismissed from military service” under the previous defense minister.<sup>37</sup>

Soviet nostalgia may have also played a role. Over the past twenty years, the Kremlin-supported media has worked hard to discredit the democratic changes that the country experienced during the 1990s, praising instead the stability, security, and great power reputation the country enjoyed during the Soviet Union. In reestablishing the MPD, the Kremlin may be hoping that it can replicate the sense of solidarity and purpose depicted in communist party literature.

As mentioned previously, this initiative also aligns with a wider focus on patriotism throughout all

Russian society. Over the past decade, the Russian authorities have expended considerable effort and resources in improving patriotic awareness among the younger generation. The Юнармия (Young Army) movement now boasts over six hundred thousand members (ages eight to seventeen) throughout all of Russia and in other countries, where it provides both patriotic training and the fundamentals of military service as well as other educational, sporting, and cultural opportunities. A similar organization, DOSAAF (Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation and Navy) that dates from the Soviet period, provides additional training and vocational opportunities (many related to the military) for young Russians.

Now that the MPD has been reactivated, young Russians who missed out on earlier opportunities for patriotic indoctrination will learn the basics while serving as conscripts in the military. Besides studying the basics of soldiering, the annual military-draft

# Curriculum: Military-Political Training (MPT) (for conscripts)

## Section I

### State and military structure (26 hours total)

- Russia in the modern world and the main priorities of its military policy. Tasks of soldiers (sailors) of a military unit (4 hours)
- Government structure and system of state power in the Russian Federation (4 hours)
- President of the Russian Federation - Head of State, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (2 hours)
- Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (2 hours)

## Section II

### Patriotic education, military history of Russia, traditions of the army and navy, days of Russian military glory (66 hours total)

- Wars and battles of the 19th century (2 hours)
- Hero cities and cities of military glory are symbols of courage and steadfastness of the people and army in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 (4 hours)
- XVIII century—the century of Russian military glory (4 hours)
- The most important battles of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. World historical significance of the Victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 (8 hours)
- Russia in the era of wars and revolutions (1914–1922) (6 hours)
- Traditional religious associations of the Russian Federation. The interaction of the Russian army and navy with traditional religious associations: history and modernity (2 hours)
- The army of Russia and the Russian state in the struggle for independence and territorial integrity of the Fatherland in the IX–XVII centuries (4 hours)
- History of state and military symbols of Russia (2 hours)
- Military reforms of Peter I, strengthening Russian statehood (2 hours)
- Glorious victory of Russian weapons in the Russian-Turkish war of 1877–1878 (2 hours)

## Section III

### Legal basis for military service (12 hours total)

- Responsibility of the military (4 hours)
- Russian legislation on freedom of conscience and religious freedom. Features of the implementation of religious needs of military personnel (2 hours)
- The basics of conscript military service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Social guarantees and compensations provided to conscripts (4 hours)

## Section IV

### The moral, political, and psychological foundations of military service (16 hours total)

- The military collective and the rules of conduct of servicemen (4 hours)
- Modern combat and its impact on the psyche of military personnel (4 hours)
- Psychological training of military personnel during active hostilities (4 hours)

## Section V

### Training and education (18 hours total)

- Defense of the Fatherland is the duty of a citizen of the Russian Federation. Worldview, moral and spiritual foundations of dedicated service to the Fatherland (2 hours)
- Military etiquette and the culture of communication of military personnel (4 hours)
- Know and strictly comply with security measures during combat training and daily activities of the unit (4 hours)
- Discipline is the most important quality of a warrior's personality (4 hours)
- Social and medical consequences of the use of narcotic and psychotropic substances. Criminal and administrative liability for drug-related offenses (2 hours)

## Section VI

### International humanitarian law, human rights (6 hours total)

- Key provisions of international humanitarian law (6 hours)

### Review and testing (16 hours total)

*“Учебные планы военно-политической подготовки в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации на 2019 год” [Lesson plans for military-political training in the armed forces of the Russian Federation in 2019], Armeiskiy Sbornik [Army digest], no. 11 (November 2018): 92–102.*





contingent (approximately 250,000 men) will be exposed to the Kremlin's view of history, Russia's place in the world, the role the military plays, and similar subjects designed to create stronger patriots. While the training is not quite as extensive, officers and contract soldiers will receive similar MPD training.

## Establishing the Main Political Directorate

Kartapolov described a three-phase approach toward building the new MPD.<sup>38</sup> The first two phases have already been completed; that is, to create the central apparatus and to identify MPD slots down to the regiment and separate unit levels. The third, and likely most challenging phase, is training the requisite number of personnel to staff these billets.

Since the new MPD will not have its own separate personnel system, questions have arisen regarding what type of officers will man these billets. Once trained, former education officers will likely fill some of the positions, but it is not clear where the remainder will come from. In a recent interview, Kartapolov proposed that filling an MPD billet would be, if not mandatory, then a "desirable step in the formation of the future great military leader."<sup>39</sup>

In commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, a World War II veteran walks with his great-grandchildren 9 May 2015 in Moscow's Victory Day Parade through the Red Square. (Photo courtesy of the Office of the President of Russia)

## The Actual Duties of the New Military-Political Deputies

While it will likely be contingent upon the actual billet, open sources suggest that the average political officer will be responsible for "military-political training; propaganda and informational work; moral and psychological preparation; spiritual and patriotic work; military-legal work to strengthen military discipline and the rule of law; military-social work with all categories of personnel and members of their families; individual educational work with all categories of military personnel; cultural and educational work in places of constant deployment and in the field."<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the tasks above, the political officer "is expected to maintain ties with parents and relatives of military personnel, interact with religious representatives of traditional faiths, participate in military-patriotic education of civilian youth, [and] study and disseminate the best practices of the top military specialists who have

distinguished themselves in military training and during exercises or training sessions.<sup>41</sup>

A journalist from *Obschaya Gazeta* posited that “the political officers will replace the current deputies for educational work, who are engaged exclusively in discipline in the armed forces. The return of political officers to the army has a much wider range of responsibilities—they will deal with ‘military-political information’ of the personnel, will monitor the ‘moral-political and psychological state’ of the fighters, report to the leadership (writing petty complaints and denunciations) about the situation in the military unit, keep track of crews ‘taking into account their psychological compatibility, religiosity and attitude to service,’ fight drug addiction and extremism, and even organize leisure activities for military personnel.”<sup>42</sup>

According to published guidance in *Armeiskiy Sbornik* for 2019, military-political training comprises “one of the main subjects of training for the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the most important form of military-political, state-patriotic, spiritual, moral, military and legal education of military personnel.”<sup>43</sup> The training is designed to strengthen “spiritual and moral readiness and psychological ability of military personnel to selflessly and courageously fulfill military duty.”<sup>44</sup>

The training is broken down into separate curricula designed for officers, contract soldiers, and conscripts. Officers receive upward of 60 hours of training and discussion; contract soldiers receive about 80 hours, and conscripts receive about 160 hours.<sup>45</sup> The accompanying sidebar (on page 61) breaks down the major categories for the conscript soldier. It is not clear whether these categories are merely guidelines or whether commanders and the political deputy are required to schedule the full 160-hour course load during the conscript’s single year of service.

## Positive Implications

After the sharp decline of patriotic sentiments in the traumatic 1990s, over the past two decades, patriotic sentiments among Russians have gradually increased. Today, the overwhelming majority of Russians regard themselves as patriots.<sup>46</sup> This positive attitude toward the country is also reflected among those who serve in the military. While the Kremlin’s patriotic rhetoric has played a role, so too have higher military wages, improved living conditions, a shorter period of conscription, and greater funding for training and equipment.

The Russian military role in regaining Crimea and successful intervention in Syria have also helped to improve the image of the Russian armed forces. In 2018, the approval rating for the Russian military reached its highest level within post-Soviet Russia, and today, trust in the military is higher than that of the president.<sup>47</sup>

The MPD, capitalizing on these widespread patriotic sentiments, will likely have an easier time with instilling positive military morale within the ranks. This morale-building process among soldiers will likely be aided by the country’s Kremlin-supported media juggernaut and greater restrictions on military personnel in accessing alternate sources of information. Besides providing the soldier with practical lessons in financial literacy, the MPD instruction will inculcate information that highlights the military’s rich history and prowess as well as the belief that the Russian cause is just.

The strength in the Kremlin’s ability to shape the narrative has been on full display ever since Russian-supported separatists inadvertently shot down a civilian airliner over southeast Ukraine in July 2014. Instead of accepting blame for this tragic accident (the crew thought they were shooting at a Ukrainian military transport aircraft), the Kremlin has spared no time and expense to clutter the information space with alternative theories as to who was responsible. Their efforts have paid off—at least among the Russian domestic audience—where today, the majority of Russians believe that either Ukraine or the United States was responsible for this tragedy.<sup>48</sup> This power to shape the narrative will be used as a force-multiplier for those wearing a Russian military uniform.

## Negative Implications

While it is too early to determine the effectiveness of the new MPD, there are some negative factors that could mitigate its overall usefulness. First and foremost, should the gap continue to widen between the Kremlin’s patriotic rhetoric and the mediocre reality of the average Russian soldier and his or her family? Military personnel may think twice before fully adopting and supporting the Kremlin’s narrative. As the Soviet experience illustrated, there is a relatively short shelf life in blaming the West for all the country’s social and economic ills. While the Kremlin has proven to be extremely adept in media manipulation, sources of alternative information are increasingly available to the Russian soldier. Today’s Russian soldier may become at least as skeptical of the Kremlin’s

patriotic message as were his or her Soviet ancestors, particularly if the income divide continues to grow.

This gap between rhetoric and reality is particularly wide regarding the low number of children of the Russian elite serving today within the military. Those who enjoy high-level connections or wealth avoid conscript service or finagle a way to complete their military obligation without ever serving in the ranks. Online commentaries suggest that this lack of elite representation within the ranks has weakened the Kremlin's patriotic message and has led to the sentiment that the common soldier is now being asked to sacrifice "to increase the wealth of oligarchs."<sup>49</sup>

There also remains a bitter residue from the Soviet period. Many senior officers in today's Russian military have firsthand experience of working with political officers when they served in the Soviet armed forces. While some Soviet MPD officers certainly helped with

training, discipline, and soldier welfare, their attempt to defend a failing political and economic system left a bad impression among a wide swath of the Soviet military. Given the number of negative anecdotes regarding MPD officers, it appears their poor reputation was well deserved. Senior military officers likely still hold an adverse attitude toward those responsible for propagating state-approved patriotic training.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, given the challenges of training one-year conscripts in basic soldier skills, commanders today may not place a high priority upon formal political training. According to the 2019 guidance, conscripts are to receive up to 160 hours of military-political training annually. As during the Soviet period, units might adopt a pro-forma, checklist mentality, treating this political training as a mere extra duty.

Despite optimistic claims by those running this department, questions and problems remain over both



the actual content of MPD training and trained cadre to carry out this mission. The huge MPD infrastructure that developed under the USSR has long been abolished, and while the new MPD now claims to have more than eleven thousand personnel, it is not clear how many are actually trained to carry out the mission.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

A century ago, the Bolshevik leaders instituted the system of political commissars to ensure the loyalty of those charged with defending the new workers' state. Having achieved victory in the civil war, the commissar's mission evolved to include training, education, and improving the morale of the Soviet soldier. While these political officers did their share in helping to defend the USSR from external aggression, their primary mission was to make sure that the military remained devoted to the communist cause. As this

ideology fell into disrepute, the role of the political officer became discredited.

Reinstating the MPD within the Russian armed forces was predicated upon many factors, but the primary reason stems from concerns that "dangerous ideas" will influence today's Russian soldier. While radical Islamic teachings remain a concern, the most threatening appear to be those that question the political legitimacy of the ruling class. Fears that Russian society (to include those in uniform) will demand genuine political representation and a more equal distribution of the country's wealth, via protests (color

Cadets from the Ryazan Guards High Military Airborne Command School march in celebration 8 April 2019 during the first rehearsal of the 2019 Moscow Victory Day Parade at Alabino training ground, which is an exact model of Russia's Red Square. (Photo courtesy of Vitaly Kuzmin, [www.vitalykuzmin.net](http://www.vitalykuzmin.net))



revolution), have caused the Kremlin to rely upon other tools of legitimacy. Chief among these tools are the glorification of the country's history, claims of divine sanction, and assertions of foreign aggression. Somewhat like his or her communist predecessor, today's political officer is responsible for helping to ensure that Russian military personnel are protected from "revolutionary" thoughts and subscribe instead to the patriotic dogma of the current Kremlin leadership.

Outside of political indoctrination, there are many tasks within today's Russian military where the new political officers can make a positive difference. Whether working to solve individual personnel issues, helping to maintain discipline, or instructing young

soldiers the basics of financial literacy, today's political officer can do much to strengthen unit morale.

Learning about the exploits of great Russian military leaders like Mikhail Kutuzov, Alexander Suvorov, or Georgy Zhukhov can certainly boost morale, though such patriotic instruction presents a danger if today's leaders pale in comparison. While there is much within the MPD curriculum that appears to support a healthy love of country, there are concerns that the new MPD could adopt the form of its Soviet predecessor. By aligning itself so closely with the current Kremlin leadership, the MPD may find itself focused more on defending a corrupt political system than with a genuine concern for the country. This will be bad for both Russia and its military. ■

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## Notes

**Epigraph.** J. Wright, *The Souldiers Catechisme: Composed for the Parliaments Army: Consisting of Two Parts: Wherein Are Chiefly Taught: 1 the Justification 2 the Qualification of Our Souldiers. Written for the Incouragement and Instruction of All That Have Taken Up Armes in the Cause of God and His People; Especially the Common Souldiers* (London: The Cresset Press, 1644), 10, quoted in Norman Copeland, preface to *Psychology and the Soldier* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing, 1942), accessed 27 March 2020, <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/.nlm.nlmuid-14320680R-bk>.

1. "Putin Considers Patriotism the Only Possible Ideology in Modern Society," TASS, 19 December 2019, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1101043>.

2. Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Constitution of the Russian Federation], art. 13 (English), accessed 4 March 2020, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>. The drafters of the country's first post-Soviet constitution deliberately stated that "ideological diversity shall be recognized" and that "no ideology may be established as state or obligatory." As of March 2020, the Kremlin is in the process of amending the current constitution, where it will not only allow Putin to extend his presidential term indefinitely but will also include a reference to "God."

3. "Минобороны предложило сделать победу в ВОВ основой национального самосознания" [Defence ministry proposes to make the victory in World War II the basis of national identity], Interfax, 28 January 2020, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/693027>.

4. Oleg Falichev and Andrei Kartapolov, "Право первым подняться в атаку" [The right to attack first], *Voyenno-Promyshlennyi Kuryer* [Military-industrial courier] (website), 11 September 2018, accessed 6 February 2020, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/44913>.

5. The holiday has evolved over the past two decades and has now become something of a Russian version of "Father's Day," where all Russian males are recognized and celebrated.

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8. A. Y. Khmel, ed., *Education of the Soviet Soldier: Party-Political Work in the Soviet Armed Forces* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 23.

9. Harriet Fast Scott and William Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 288.

10. Mikhail Sukhorukov, "Замполиты-политруки, но уж точно не комиссары. Часть 1-3" [Deputy political officers, but certainly not commissars. Part 1-3], *Voennoye Obezreniye* (website), 29 December 2018, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://topwar.ru/151956-zampolity-politruki-no-uzh-tochno-ne-komissary-chast-1.html>.

11. Boris Pavlovich Utkin, "ГлавПУР: взгляд сквозь годы" [GlavPUR: A look through the years], *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red star] (website), 15 May 2014, accessed 13 February 2020, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/siriya/item/16083-glavpur-vzglyad-skvoz-gody>.

12. Viktor Byslovskiy, "ГЛАВПУР – ВЗГЛЯД СКВОЗЬ ГОДЫ" [GlavPUR-A look through the years], *Rossiyskoye Voennoye Obezreniye* [Russian military review] (April 2019): 24–29.

13. Sukhorukov, "Замполиты-политруки, но уж точно не комиссары. Часть 1-3."

14. Alexander Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 240.

15. "В советской армии их презирали! Зачем восстанавливать институт политруков" ["They were despised in the Soviet army." Why restore the institution of political officers], *Noviy Izvestiya*, 6 March 2019, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://newizv.ru/news/politics/06-03-2019/v-sovetskoy-armii-ih-prezirali-zachem-vosstanavlivat-institut-politrukov>.

16. Ibid.

17. To get a sense of the confusion and tension for senior Soviet military personnel during the dramatic events of August 1991, see Alexander Lebed, *My Life and My Country* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1997), 297–391.

18. Dale Herspring, *The Kremlin and the High Command: Presidential Impact on the Russian Military from Gorbachev to Putin*

(Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 49–51. See Tbilisi, 1989; Baku, 1990; and Vilnius, 1991.

19. Much has been written on these events from nearly thirty years ago. For a good English source, see David Remnick, *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 37–83. Not all of those in uniform welcomed the changes going on in Russia. The loyalty of those in the military would again be sorely tested in the autumn of 1993, when the executive and legislative branches struggled for supremacy on the streets of Moscow. The conflict was ultimately resolved when President Boris Yeltsin personally ordered tanks to fire upon the Russian White House to subdue those Russian legislators who had dared to question his authority.

20. Much has been written on this topic over the past thirty years. For a work that captures some of the initial trauma of trying to build fifteen new national militaries during near economic collapse, see William A. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

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22. The Kremlin is currently in the process of amending the country's constitution that would permit Vladimir Putin to remain as president through 2036. However, there is considerable speculation today whether Putin will actually choose to remain as Russia's top leader.

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26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. Kartapolov, "Наша цель – формирование воина-государственника."

29. Mikhail Rostovskiy, "Сергей Шойгу рассказал, как спасали российскую армию" [Sergei Shoigu told how they saved the Russian army], *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* (website), 22 September 2019, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/09/22/sergey-shoigu-rasskazal-kak-spasali-rossiyskuyu-armiyu.html>.

30. *Ibid.*

31. "Шаманов: в российской армии появятся замполиты в новом качестве" [Shamanov: New politicians will appear in the Russian army], *TASS*, 31 July 2018, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/5415903>; see also "Main Military-Political Administration (GVPU)," *GlobalSecurity.org*, accessed 5 February 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/mo-gvpu.htm>.

32. *Ibid.*; Sukhorukov, "Замполиты-политруки, но уж точно не комиссары. Часть 1-3"

33. Sukhorukov, "Замполиты-политруки, но уж точно не комиссары. Часть 1-3."

34. Vladimir Vorsobin, "Товарищ политрук: нужна ли эта должность в современной армии?" [Comrade political instructor: Does the modern army need this position?], *Radio Komsomolskaya*

*Pravda*, 4 September 2018, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/radio/26876/3920155/>. Listen to the remarks of retired Capt. G. F. Sivkov, who is a popular conservative military expert, for a common Russian view on why the Main Military-Political Directorate should be reestablished and some of the challenges that the military is now facing with regard to soldier education.

35. Svetlana Gomzikova, "ГлавПУР, как выяснилось, бессмертен" [GlavPUR, as it turned out, is immortal], *Svobodnaya Pressa* (website), 31 July 2018, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/206749/#mc-container>.

36. Yuri Dmitriev, "Слушай то, что говорит наш товарищ замполит" [Listen to what our comrade political officer says], *Obschaya Gazeta* (website), 14 September 2018, accessed 27 March 2020, <https://og.ru/society/2018/09/14/99048>.

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49. For a recent example of this sentiment, listen to this podcast: Vladimir Vorsobin, "Николай Стариков: Мы проиграли войну Японии потому, что наша армия долго не воевала. Поэтому тренировки нашей армии в Сирии так важна" [Nikolai Starikov: We lost the war of Japan because our army did not fight for a long time. Therefore, the training of our army in Syria is so important], *Komsomolskaya Pravda Radio*, 24 February 2020, accessed 13 February 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/radio/27095/4168565/>.

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