



Russian Armed Forces *Enlisted Professionals*

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Soldiers in the Separate Operational Purpose Division march during the 2013 Victory Day Parade. Russia's Victory Day commemorates the Nazi surrender during World War II. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)



Two Ratnik infantry machine gunners pose for a photo at Patriot Park, a military theme park in Kubinka, Russia, in 2017. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

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History and Roles of Enlisted Professionals in the Russian Armed Forces¹

The Russian Federation has pursued the development of a professional enlisted component in the Russian Armed Forces since the early 1990s. The impetus for this stemmed from the conscription system inherited from the Soviets. After the Second World War, the Soviets believed that the future of modern warfare would closely resemble the battles they had fought in the last years of the war, albeit with nuclear weapons. These battles would require vast numbers of troops organized in divisions, army groups, and fronts to execute high speed maneuver warfare to penetrate enemy defenses and then exploit these successes. At that time the Soviets believed that the enlisted force that would be required to fight in future battles would resemble the enlisted force that fought in the WWII. In order to amass a large army without bankrupting the economy, the Soviets retained their universal conscription system. The intent was that all males would receive a basic level of military training during their two-year stint and then be able to return to civilian life. These former conscripts would infrequently

be called for musters, and would be called en masse in the event of a mobilization. This system had an unintended consequence for the strong NCO corps that the Soviets had inherited from the Tsarist Army (the Imperial Russian Army, 1721 - 1917). The two-year conscription model for the enlisted personnel had no real career path for those who desired to serve past their initial conscription length. The strong NCO corps that emerged after the WWII soon disappeared as these NCOs either left the service or became commissioned officers. In the Soviet Armed Forces, officers, not NCOs, became the primary small unit leaders and trainers.²

This system began experiencing problems as the Soviet Armed Forces began to modernize rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. Technically advanced equipment requires skilled manpower to operate and maintain. Since two-year conscription terms were considered insufficient time to train individuals to perform complex technical tasks, Soviet officers performed duties that would normally be performed by NCOs in Western armies. The Soviets believed this was an inefficient way of managing manpower, and decided to create “warrant officer” positions primarily to maintain and operate advanced equip-

ment. These warrant officers, recruited from conscripts who had completed their initial tours, were generally not viewed favorably by the officer corps, since the best conscripts who wanted to continue their military service were enrolled in military academies to become officers. Warrant officers relieved some of the technical and small unit leadership burdens that were placed on officers, but were never well-regarded as an institution and had little in common with Western NCOs and warrant officers.³

In addition to technical positions, warrant officers filled positions similar to U.S. first sergeants (albeit with far less authority) and served as platoon leaders for maintenance and supply units. The Russian Federation abolished all warrant officer positions during the 2008 “New Look” reforms and converted all warrant officers into contract NCOs. Warrant officer billets have since been brought back. There has been little reporting about how warrant officer and contract NCO positions differ, but there is little practical difference, and for the purposes of this article, the term *enlisted professionals* is inclusive of Russian warrant officers.⁴

Russia has maintained a hybrid system of conscription and contract service to the present day.⁵ In this system, officers, not NCOs, are the primary trainers of the platoon. In order to prepare these lieutenants, cadets usually attend four- or five-year military academies that more closely resemble a combination of the U.S. Military Academy and the Basic Officer Leaders Course.⁶ As soon as a new lieutenant graduates from an academy and takes command of their platoon, they are expected to immediately begin training and maintaining discipline.⁷ Soviet lieutenants fill the leadership, planning, training, and disciplinary roles of both a U.S. platoon leader and platoon sergeant.

A problem that arose with this system is that when the lieutenant would leave at night to be with their family, a system of hazing, known as *dedovschina*, developed among the conscripts. This unofficial, but deeply institutionalized practice consisted of senior (second year)

conscripts hazing the junior (first year) conscripts. These practices often involved theft, beatings, and humiliation, which became somewhat infamous and embarrassing to the government. The problem was so severe, that essentially, a small unit discipline problem began to harm national security as young men, and their parents, feared conscripted service. Although this practice has become less common in today’s Russian military, it still occasionally surfaces in the media.

Conscription became unpopular due to the problems associated with *dedovschina*. The popularity dropped even further because of the turbulent financial situation, which was devastating the Russian Armed Forces.

And due to the failing economic situation, little progress was made towards full enlisted professionalization, but Russia did start its first “contract NCO” program, which allowed enlisted soldiers to serve with better pay and privileges, like not living in a barracks. Russia has maintained a hybrid system of conscription and contract service to present day.

Russia’s military leadership has had mixed feelings about the replacement of conscripts with contract NCOs. Some generals have lamented the idea of abolishing the conscription system, because they believe such a reform would deprive Russia of a large strategic reserve with at least some military training. Other criticisms have involved the description of contract NCOs as “mercenaries,” a

term that is sometimes used to describe the U.S. system of enlistment, the implication being contract NCOs are more interested in pay than service to the country (this argument likely carries little weight in the Russian military, as both officers and contract enlisted soldiers sign service contracts).

Probably the strongest motivator for Russia’s military leadership to support the formation of a contract NCO system is Russia’s lessons learned from Chechnya and other modern conflicts. Local and regional conflicts, rather than large-scale high-speed maneuver are seen as the most



Russian soldiers participate in a Crimson Beret Qualification Exam on August 19, 2013 at Vityaz Training Center. The crimson beret is the symbol of Russia's special forces (spetsnaz). (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

likely manifestation of future warfare. In addition, warfare will also now involve “indirect and asymmetric methods” and a general blurring of the lines between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of military operations. The implication for Russia’s enlisted personnel is that conscripts will be unable to be effective warfighters on the modern battlefield because the conscription period in the Russian Federation has been reduced to one year.

Russia has vacillated back and forth between desiring a completely professional enlisted force, and continuing with the current hybrid system, albeit with a greater percentage of contract NCOs.⁸ Due to greater costs involved with contract NCOs and the aforementioned desire to maintain a mass mobilization capacity, it is likely that Russia will utilize a hybrid system for enlisted manning in the foreseeable future.

There is often a Western assumption that Russian contract sergeants are distributed throughout the ranks and are placed in positions of leadership over conscripts. A more accurate term for Russian contract sergeants (NCOs) would probably be “enlisted professionals” because in the Russian system members are designated as either “conscript” or “contract serviceman,” and there is apparently little interaction between these enlisted personnel types. In general, contract servicemen fill “trigger puller” positions and require advanced skills and training. Conscripts usually fill positions that require little training, such as drivers, cooks, laborers, or lower-level maintenance personnel.

Although one-year conscription terms give little time for training, conscripts do not necessarily join the



Russian soldiers from 4th Guards Kantemirovskaya Tank Division stand behind their BMP-2 Infantry Fighting Vehicle during the annual inspection by the commission of the Western Military District in October of 2011. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

military without militarily useful skills. The Russian Federation, like the Soviet Union, has “patriotic education,” and certain rudimentary military skills (first aid, etc.) are included in the primary and secondary education curriculum for male and female students.

The Current Status of Enlisted Professionals

The Russian Armed Forces currently have 850,000 servicemen. Of those, 405,000 are supposed to be contract servicemen (by the end of 2017).⁹ But Russia has fallen well short of this goal. According to Gen. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, as of December 2018, Russia only has 384,000 enlisted professionals.¹⁰ Further clouding the issue is that Russia offers some conscripts the option of serving on a two-year contract instead of completing a one-year conscription period. The number of these “2-and-done” contract servicemen is not available for analysis, so a significant portion of these 384,000 contract servicemen may serve on very short contracts, as many young men are favoring being a two-year contract serviceman over being a one-year conscript.)

Although there are still rough edges, it does appear that the Russian Federation has made significant strides in improving contract servicemen’s quality of life and raising the prestige of military service. The increased number of contract servicemen has allowed Russia to reduce draft quotas for conscripts. These reduced draft quotas has allowed Russia to make legislative changes to allow young men that have reported to draft boards, but not been conscripted, to



A BMP-2 (*amphibious infantry vehicle) driver looks out of the driver's hatch during the annual inspection by the commission of the Western Military District in October of 2011. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

be allowed to work in the government. The previous legislation prevented not only draft dodgers from working in government positions, but also young men who reported to draft boards but were not drafted due to the needs of the government. (In certain areas, particularly the North Caucasus, military service is very prestigious, with regional draft quotas often being well exceeded. The young men turned away in such situations often had difficulty finding employment in the security services, which is considered very prestigious employment in these areas.) There also appears to be qualitative changes, according to Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev, Chief of the Russian Federation National Center for Defense Management:

Over seven or eight years, especially during the last three to four years, the quality of draftees has undoubtedly improved. This is due to the established state policy. Draftee numbers have diminished. But the reduction of their recruitment is actually making it possible to select a smaller number from a larger number for the Armed Forces' needs. While at the same time raising their quality.¹¹

The Russian enlisted education system is unlike the U.S. system. It is not designed to develop well rounded leaders, it is instead designed to develop technically proficient professionals. The Russians have no concept of "key developmental positions" or "out of branch assignments." All assignments involve one of three things: Learning their profession, practicing their profession, or teaching their profession to the next generation. In this sense the Russian enlisted education system is identical to their officer education system. Although Russians do not view their enlisted professionals as "leaders," they still greatly value the contributions these personnel provide, and invest in them accordingly.

The Russians are very satisfied with their officer education system, and so are modeling some of their enlisted professional career paths in a similar manner. There is even a new three year, ten month course for enlisted professionals (specifically warrant officers) at the Aerospace Forces (Air Force) 183rd Training Center at Rostov-on-the-Don that grants graduates a bachelor degree. Vladislav Shurygin (military expert) states:

The warrant officers' main problem was their lack of opportunity of career advancement... They received identical monetary compensation in practically all positions. And they were only able to count on the rank of 'senior warrant officer' after several years of service. In order to become officers, warrant officers also needed, just like ordinary citizens, to study for



Lance Cpl. Svetlana Lebedkova from 106th Airborne Division participates in the Common Wealth Warrior Competition, an international competition of military skills among friendly armies, at the Cultural Center on the Alabino training ground, September, 2011. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

4-5 years at a military school. This is precisely why there were always never enough warrant officers in the Armed Forces, especially in the positions, which are associated with complex technical work... Now the candidate will obtain a higher, not a vocational education. The incentive will also appear for him to have outstanding service results and to increase his educational level.¹²

Although this is currently the only institution granting Russian enlisted professionals bachelor degrees, there are many other similar three to four year training programs. A stark contrast from the way their counterparts in the U.S. are trained.

Another major difference between the Russian and U.S. military is the concept of pay. In the U.S., monetary entitlements (including housing allowances) are almost always a percentage of the base salary with grade and

years of service being of primary importance. In Russia, the base salary is merely the starting point for calculating entitlements. A few entitlements are allotted by a fixed ruble amount, but the majority are calculated by indexing the base salary by a given percentage. The total sum of these additional entitlements is always many times greater than the soldier's base salary. The two most important criteria for pay are the serviceman's rank and position held (servicemen receive both salaries). Rank-based salaries are based on equivalent responsibility/skill levels of federal government employees, while the position salary is based upon the soldier's current duty assignment, which must be on a valid table of organization and equipment (TO&E). Positional salaries are typically higher than rank-based salaries, and are set by the Ministry of Defense.

In this system, a sergeant first class (E7) in a leadership position is paid more than a sergeant first class in a staff assignment. This pay system is important for enlisted professionals because it allows for greater flexibility. A soldier that is highly trained with an advanced education can be paid much more than another soldier that has served the same amount of years, is of the same rank, but simply drives a truck. Furthermore, this system allows well-educated enlisted soldiers to be compensated similarly as officers, thereby negating some of the financial incentives of simply just wanting to become an officer for better pay.

Another benefit of contract service is the ability to stay in assignments longer and not require a change of duty station. Also in the Russian system, there is no "up-or-out" policy and enlistment contracts specify duty station, so a serviceman may serve in the same duty assignment as long as he or she chooses, even though this would limit their advancement and pay opportunities. In practice, enlisted professionals typically remain at their same duty station, but take different duty assignments as opportunities become available.¹³

Enlisted Professional Accessions

In terms of contract serviceman accession, Russia is implementing a three-stage process for selecting candidates involving an: initial, preliminary, and in-depth (final) selection.

Initial selection will be a two-step process first involving a computer-based assessment on the Russian Ministry of Defense website designed by the General Staff Academy of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and then an interview with an Armed Forces representative at an initial recruiting station, unit of intended service, or local military commissariat (draft board).

Preliminary selection includes: military orientation; filing a formal application for service, verification of personal data and background (citizenship information,

Military Pay Structure for Privates and Sergeants Serving on Contract

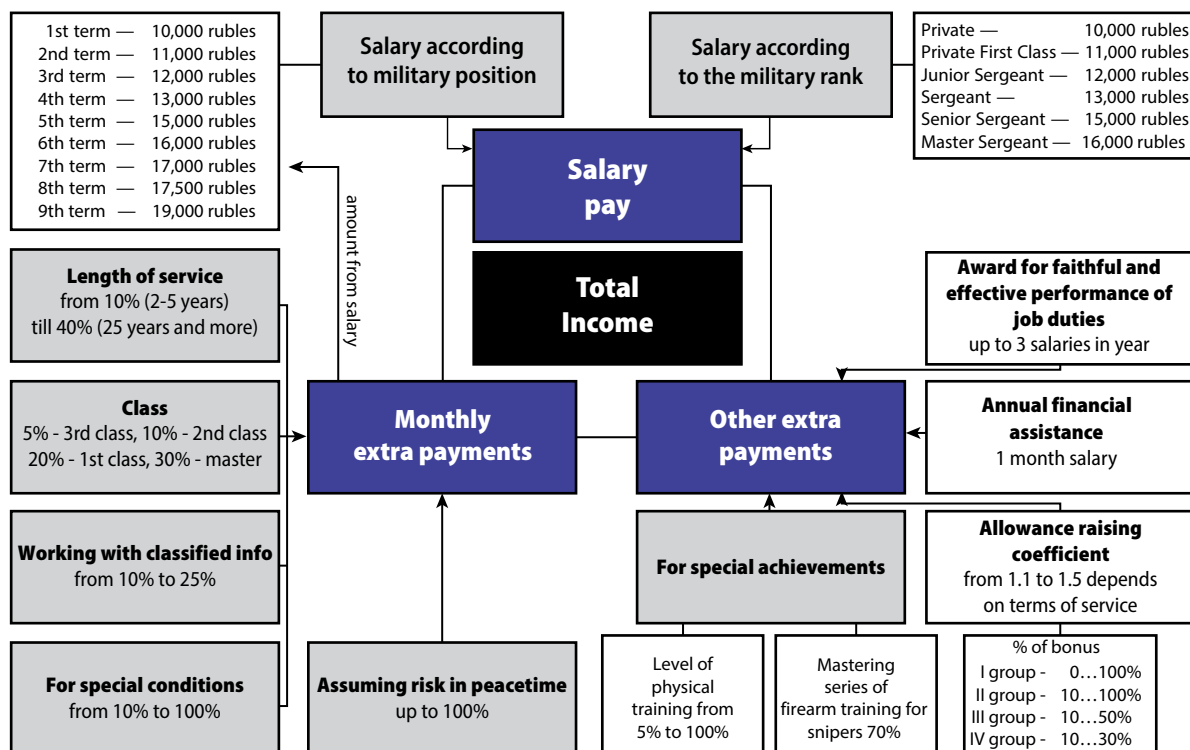


Figure A¹⁴. Graphic translated from "Military Financial Literacy," *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* Online, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/27161>.



Soldiers from 2nd Guards Tamanskaya Motor Rifle Division stand in formation during the Common Wealth Warrior Competition, an international competition of military skills among friendly armies, at the Cultural Center on the Alabino training ground, September, 2011. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

academic and employment history, law enforcement background check, and medical documentation); preliminary medical examination; and preliminary psychological examination. If no disqualifying conditions are found, the findings are sent to the recruiting station for further review. Both the initial and preliminary stages may be conducted at the unit of intended service.

In-depth selection is carried out at certain recruiting stations with all candidates who passed the preliminary selection. Sometimes preliminary and in-depth selection occurs at these recruiting stations, in cases near where the candidates live. In-depth selection includes: Further verification of personal data and background, in-depth medical examinations, in-depth psychological examinations, physical fitness exam, building the candidates personnel file, and registration for access to state secrets (if necessary). The selection process is completed when the candidate's eligibility for military service is determined. The selection process typically takes from two weeks to six months, depending on the: Needs of the Armed Forces, previous civil education and military training, place of residence, and unit training cycle.

After the candidate is assessed into service, the new serviceman is in a probationary status for three months. The commander of the military training unit may discharge the new serviceman at this time, if deemed in the best interest of the Armed Forces. This probationary status applies both to contract serviceman that are assessing into

the military from civilian status and former conscripts that are changing their status to contract serviceman.¹⁵

Enlisted Professional Education

In the Russian system, there is no centralized system for the professional training and development of conscript soldiers, such as US style basic training. Conscripts simply report to induction stations, and then are transferred to their units where they receive initial training and then on-the-job training for their particular assignment. Even skills such as airborne training are conducted by the conscript's unit. In order to develop a professional education system for contract serviceman,

Russia has laid out guidelines for standardizing the training of personnel (enlisted soldiers and warrant officers). This includes all contract serviceman in major branches (Ground Forces, Navy, Aerospace Forces) and specialty branches (Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN) and Airborne Troops (VDV)) found in the Ministry of Defense.

This standardization will involve establishing specific requirements and qualifications for contract service as they progress through their careers. Russia envisions a five-tier system for contract serviceman career development. The first-tier is for the training of serviceman to fill rank-and-file entry level positions. These positions will be (or currently are) filled by conscripts. This level of training is accomplished in two phases. The first phase involves a six-week basic training that is conducted at 29



A Russian soldier participates in the 137th Guards Parachute Order of the Red Star Regiment of the 106th Guards Red Banner Order of the Kutuzov Class II Airborne Division tactical exercises. (Image courtesy: Vitaly Kuzmin*)

training units and 4 higher military educational institutions. The second phase involves attendance at a Military Occupational School (MOS), this training lasts from three to 10 months, but some programs can be as long as four years. This second phase may be omitted if the serviceman assesses into the Armed Forces with a valid MOS, such as one provided through a Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy program, vocational school, or other means.

The second-tier is for squad leaders, tank commanders, crew leaders, etc. Candidates for second-tier positions are picked from the first tier based upon leadership qualities and technical proficiency, having served at least two years in a first-tier position. In addition, there are more administrative requirements relating to age, health, education level, physical fitness, and military discipline. They receive an additional three months of training that may be conducted at various locations, depending on branch of service and specialty.

The third-tier is for platoon leaders and deputy platoon leaders. In the Russian system, contract servicemen often fill platoon leader positions for the combat support platoons that are found in most battalions. Candidates for these positions are selected based upon recommendations from their immediate supervisor and require service at a tier-two position for 3-5 years. They receive an additional three months of training that may be conducted at various locations, depending on branch of service and specialty.

The fourth-tier is for contract serviceman serving in regiments, brigades, and divisions. Candidates for these positions are selected from third-tier contract serviceman, who have served at least 10 years. They receive 3-5 months of staff training at the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School (RVVDKU).

The fifth-tier is for contract serviceman serving at the Army Group-level and higher echelons. Candidates for these positions are selected from fourth tier contract serviceman, who have served at least 15 years. They receive 3-5 months of staff training at the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School (RVVDKU).¹⁶

Conclusion

The Russians have struggled with enlisted professionalization since Soviet times, and have experimented with several different models. Russia is quite aware of the US/Western model of enlisted professionalization, but this model has been evaluated and rejected for use in Russia. Although the Russian military understands the institution in the US/West, they do not think it would be a good fit for the Russian military due to different military decision-making processes, histories, and social conventions. Russia does not want well-rounded enlisted leaders, they want narrowly-focused, technically competent, professional, enlisted soldiers. Due to this very different system, Russian contract servicemen are probably more accurately described as "enlisted professionals" than "noncommissioned officers."

Russia is still overcoming growing pains in regards to its path for enlisted professional, and have had a few false starts, but appear to be generally satisfied with the path they are on. This could be useful to the U.S. and other militaries who train, advise, assist, and enable coalition operations. Given that the Soviets/Russians have trained many armies in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America, it is likely that these partner nations could better adapt the Russian system of enlisted professionalism rather than attempting to graft the US/Western NCO model to their armies. ■

Notes

1. The following section is excerpted from Dr. Lester Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, pp. 3-5.

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