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Military Suffering Casualties in War Games

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The number of non-combat losses of the armed forces, a figure six to nine times greater than that claimed by Moscow, reflects the problems many commanders have in interacting with their counterparts from other countries during international military maneuvers.

Last year, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said his forces had suffered 471 non-combat deaths, Ruslan Gorevoi reports in the current issue of "Versiya," but Veronika Marchenko, the head of the Mother's Right Foundation, said the actual figure is much higher, closer to 2,500 to 3,000.

The difference between official and unofficial figures, Gorevoi says, is not simply about

intentional underreporting but rather because the Defense Ministry does not count those who die from injuries after they have been demobilized or those who die "in the course of joint military exercises with the armies of other countries."

Both those figures are classified, just as they were in Soviet times. Gorevoi's article focuses on the second of these categories, and he reports that military experts say Russian forces are losing "approximately 150 to 200" men every year.

That figure, he continues, is approximately the same as the one Soviet forces suffered 20 years ago, a lack of progress Gorevoi suggests is the result of Russian armed forces now taking part in up to eight international exercises each year, whereas in Soviet times, such exercises occurred "much more rarely &mdash one or two times annually."

According to Gorevoi, the deaths Russian forces are suffering during joint exercises with the armies of other countries are the result of a variety of factors. Some are simply the product of sloppy work, the failure of Russian technicians to ensure that equipment is packed carefully so that it will work as intended.

Others are the product of secretiveness, either by the Russian forces or by those with whom they are cooperating. On the one hand, Gorevoi says, sometimes Russian commanders do not install the latest technology, such as flotation devices for tanks, and soldiers die when they are ordered to drive them across rivers.

And on the other, both Russian and foreign armies often are working with maps that are either outdated or distorted to prevent foreigners from knowing where things are located. During joint maneuvers last year with Mongolia, Gorevoi says, map errors caused approximately 100 soldiers from both armies to be fired upon in error.

The journalist notes that similar "cartographic" errors were responsible for deaths and injuries during Russian exercises with the Kazakh and Armenian militaries. Most recently, during this summer's Peace Mission 2009 maneuvers with China, inaccurate maps led to approximately 15 Russian deaths and 60 Chinese ones.

But technical issues such as equipment and maps are not the only problems in these exercises that lead to uncounted non-combat deaths, Gorevoi continues. Others involve failures to communicate accurately what each side is supposed to do or even to understand what the games are intended to look like.

One such disaster took place recently when Kyrgyz commanders suddenly decided to change the nature of the game and revert to what they had done in an earlier exercise with Russian forces. Because they did not make clear their intention, 120 Russian soldiers came under fire and approximately 15 were killed.

Retired Col. Gen. Leonid Ivashov, the president of the Moscow Academy of Geopolitical Problems and a frequent critic of the Russian defense minister, offered the following explanation for why Russian officers now find it so difficult to participate in joint exercises without suffering significant losses.

In Soviet times, he pointed out, such problems mostly did not arise: There were a number of countries in the Warsaw Pact, but they had "common standards of armament and common approaches to command and to strategic and tactical planning."

Something like that, Ivashov said, "is being reestablished in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but the time needed for the restoration will take more than year." And until then, Russian commanders will have to cope with many more differences than they were used to — and Russian soldiers are likely to be the victims.

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