

The Paratroopers' Attack

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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You may be surprised to learn that Russia's paratroopers are the most pious of all military personnel. Last week, retired chiefs of the paratrooper corps asked President Dmitry Medvedev and Patriarch Kirill to evaluate what they considered to be the inappropriate behavior of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. The defense minister apparently flew into a rage when he discovered that there was a church on the territory of a paratrooper training center near Ryazan. He chewed out the center's commander and reportedly issued an order to raze the church.

But there were several different versions of the story. For example, paratrooper commander Vladimir Shamanov said in a statement carried by Lenta.ru that Serdyukov had only suggested moving the church from the military compound — where it was apparently poorly attended — to a nearby village to give local residents access to the church. In addition, Deputy Defense Minister Grigory Naginsky said the cause of the conflict was not the church per se but that several buildings had been constructed at the training center without the proper permits.

There is another interesting aspect of this story. The church incident started on Sept. 30, but it

was not publicized on the Internet until Oct. 14. This means that the offended paratroopers endured the insult a full two weeks before raising an outcry. In addition to questioning Serdyukov's religious values and his alleged desecration of the church, the petitioners complained that he appointed the "wrong person" as director of the training center, lowered the status of the center and gave insufficient attention to the museum of the paratroopers.

Behind all the commotion and burst of activity against Serdyukov is a new revolution that is brewing in the armed forces. For the first time, even the highest-ranking officers are being freed from the heavy burden of managing the expenditure of funds. From now on, unit and district commanders will not have to answer for the condition of the boiler plant or the canteen or for getting electricity to the troop compound. Now every manner of supplies, from boots to bullets will be supplied by civilian agencies. Military reformers want to put an end to the system in which troop commanders are more concerned about running their own private "profit centers" than building able, qualified soldiers who are combat-ready.

For decades, commanders have been forced into a corner. They have had to devote most of their time and energy to making repairs and improvements to their military bases without relying on government funding. The only way they could pull this off was by inventing a barter system that relied on their only commodity available — unpaid laborers in the form of conscripted soldiers — in return for building materials or other goods.

During the Soviet era, the Communist Party kept the practice of "slave labor" more or less under control. But in the 1990s, when the government had almost no money to maintain the gigantic military machine, military units were forced to scrape by on their own. As a result, brigade and deputy army commanders have become better con artists than military commanders. That is more their misfortune than their fault. Realizing this, the Defense Ministry is creating a special system for retraining senior officers.

But few commanders are inspired by the prospect of working night and day to improve the preparedness of the armed forces and implementing new methods for bringing troops into battle readiness, particularly when their units are underfunded. Many have come to rely on the money they earn under the table as their primary source of income. They perceive Defense Ministry innovations as a threat to those vested interests.

After the paratroopers created a scandal over the church, they showed that they weren't shy about expressing their grievances. This proves that Serdyukov has his work cut out for him.

The paratroopers — true to their reputation as being avant-garde — delivered the first blow to Serdyukov's reforms. There could be many more where that came from.

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