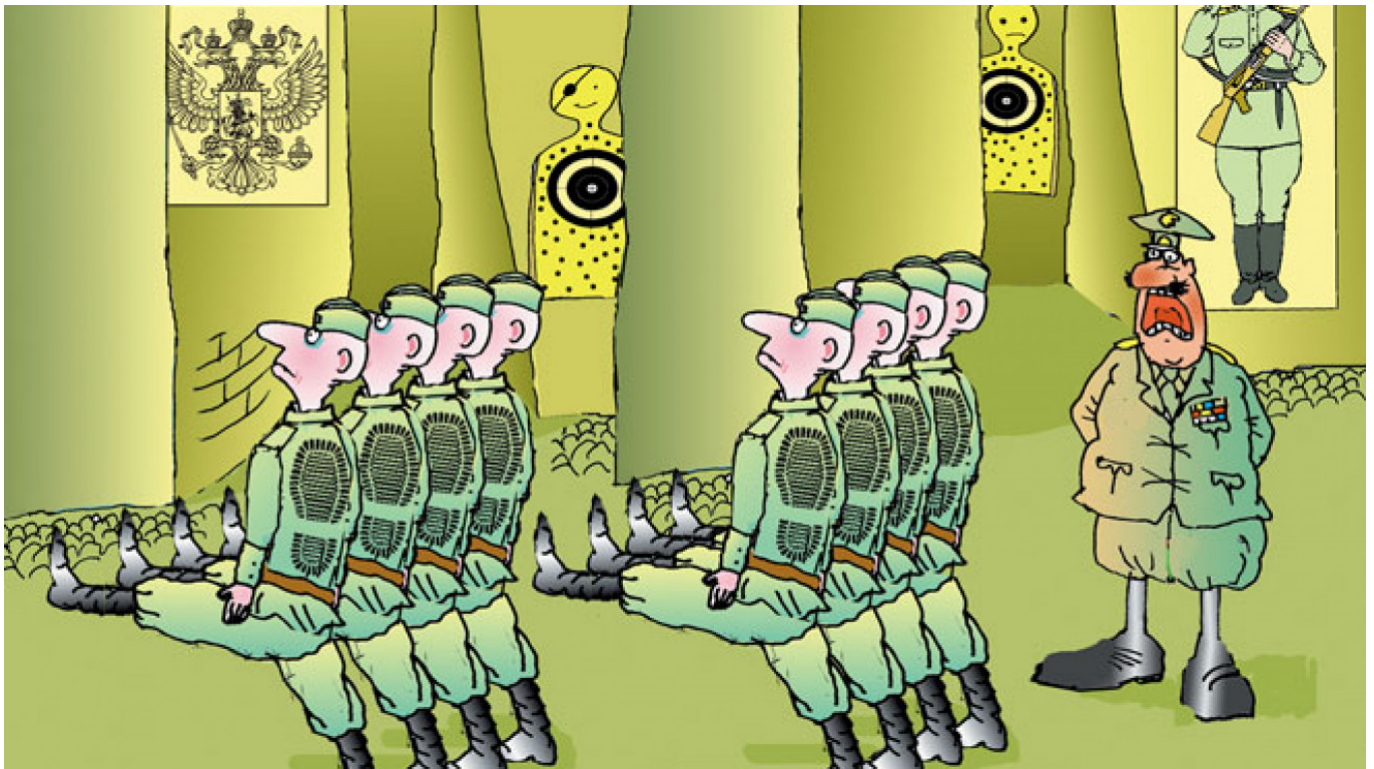


War in Ukraine Ruined Russian Military Reform (Op-Ed)

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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I have stated several times before in this column that Moscow's secret war in eastern and southern Ukraine is having a devastating impact on Russia's armed forces. It not only throws into question the results of the successful military reforms that former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov carried out in 2008–2011, but it is doing so much more quickly than I would have imagined possible. The site Gazeta.ru published a sensational investigation reporting that dozens of soldiers from the 33rd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade stationed in Maikop left their military unit last fall and now stand accused of desertion. The contract soldiers claim they had to leave the Kadamovsky training area due to inhuman living conditions and pressure from superiors to go serve as volunteers in the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics in Ukraine. As expected, the Russian military command vehemently denied everything. However, even official data indicates that the Maikop Garrison Court convicted 62 soldiers in the first half of 2015 on charges of "leaving their units without permission," but convicted only about half that number, 35, on the same charges in the four years between 2010 to 2014. What could have caused such

a surge in desertions? It is also worth noting that the 33rd Brigade was formed in 2005 by presidential decree and was intended to become an elite mountain unit.

All of the soldiers under investigation were contract personnel, not conscripts. They had made a conscious decision to pursue that line of work. One of those named in the Gazeta.ru report had fairly recently completed his mandatory term of service as a conscript before signing his contract, while another had served as a seaman for seven years aboard the nuclear-powered cruiser "Peter the Great." In other words, they had a good idea of what to expect from the Russian army. And then suddenly, they were faced with something quite unexpected.

The soldiers of the 33rd Brigade were sent to the training area in fall of last year, at the time when leaders signed the first Minsk agreement. Meanwhile, troops that had taken part in summer battles near Ilovaisk and Mariupol in Ukraine were given time to recover from their tour of duty and it became apparent that there was nobody to replace them. Serdyukov's military reforms created only a limited number of elite units. They were trained to achieve rapid victory on the battlefield, but were never intended to stand for an entire year at the Russian-Ukrainian border.

At that time, Russian commanders faced a critical shortage of fresh troops to continue the hybrid war in the Donbass. (Later, in the winter, they brought in a tank battalion stationed in Buryatia to achieve victory near Debaltseve.) However, the soldiers of the 33rd Brigade were clearly not eager to fight in Ukraine. At that point, commanders reverted to the tactics they had used a decade earlier when they received orders to persuade conscripts to sign up as professional contract soldiers, whether by hook or by crook. They achieved that by creating unbearable conditions for the men and presenting contract service as a means of deliverance. In the same way, according to the soldiers of the 33rd Brigade, commanders made life difficult for the soldiers at the Kadamovsky training area by forcing them to sleep on boards and depriving them of adequate food and water, with the result that they suffered from frequent colds. At the same time, various officers showed up offering them the moon in the Donbass: the impossible sum of 8,000 rubles (\$142) per day in pay and the status of war veterans upon their return to Russia.

However, other men already serving as contract soldiers dissuaded them, explaining that if anything were to happen to them while fighting in Ukraine, army brass would write them off retroactively or declare them deserters who had been killed by land mines while running away, according to Gazeta.ru.

If this story is true, it spells the end of Russia's progressive military reforms. The problem is not just that after leaders promised to make military service more humane they once again relegated soldiers to the status of slaves, but that they are now denigrating adult military professionals in addition to 18-year-old conscripts — that is, the very people who represent the only hope of modernizing and improving this country's armed forces. And those men found no other way to address their concerns than to flee because they did not believe they could achieve justice in Russia. After such an experience, is it realistic to expect them to give their lives for a country that has treated them so shamelessly?

The strength of any army lies in the faith the men have in their commander. But in this case, the soldiers firmly believed that their commanders were lying to them about unheard-of

salaries in the Donbass and treating them as cannon fodder. These lies started one year ago when leaders began almost officially alleging that Russian soldiers would first request a formal leave of absence before going to fight in Ukraine. That blatant lie was designed to relieve commanders of all responsibility for the lives of their subordinates. However, only the willingness to assume such responsibility forms the basis of military discipline and soldiers' readiness to carry out orders.

The worst part is that similar outrages probably plague all of Russia's armed forces. That will only reduce the number of people wanting to sign on as professional soldiers. And that means the president will eventually decide to go back to the concept of a mass mobilization army. In the end, what difference would that make, if professional soldiers and conscripts alike are treated as little more than slaves?

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