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# The Russian General Staff

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Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a  
"Besieged Fortress"



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*Cover: Adapted from photo by the Government of the Russian Federation. Vladimir Putin observes military exercises in the Black Sea region. With Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov (left) and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (far right).*

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# About This Report

In this report, we develop a foundational text for policymakers and warfighters alike to improve our collective understanding of the Russian General Staff: its formal authorities and responsibilities and its capacity to condition Russia's national security decisionmaking process. This report was completed as part of an ongoing research project for the Russia Strategic Initiative, United States European Command.

The research reported here was completed in April 2022 and underwent security review with the sponsor before public release.

## RAND National Security Research Division

This publication was sponsored by the Russia Strategic Initiative, United States European Command, and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

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## Acknowledgments

Formal reviews by Bruce McClintock and Andrew Monaghan strengthened this report. That we received help and insights from those acknowledged should not be taken to imply that they concur with the views expressed in this report. We alone are responsible for the content, including any errors or oversights.



# Summary

## Issue

The Russian General Staff, with its broad authorities and responsibilities for ensuring the defense of the Russian state, is unlike any single organization within the U.S. defense establishment or even the broader U.S. government. The absence of an analog in the United States, among other reasons, means that audiences within the U.S. civilian and military communities largely are unfamiliar with the concept of a General Staff. Because of the increasing militarization of Russian foreign policy since 2008, it is important to understand not only the formal authorities and responsibilities of this institution but also its capacity to influence Russia's national security decisionmaking process.

## Approach

In this report, we employed a mixed methods approach to analyze the Russian General Staff along multiple axes with the objective of advancing the collective understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff within the Russian national security decisionmaking process. We draw on a variety of primary and secondary Russian-language sources—e.g., statutes, speeches by political and military elites, and academic military writings—which inform our characterization of the General Staff's statutory mandate. We then apply this baseline of knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff in three contexts to create a more complete (albeit somewhat speculative because of the absence of concrete evidence) picture of the General Staff's role within Russian national security decisionmaking.

First, we apply this information by placing the General Staff in a comparative institutional context, providing a high-level evaluation of the institutional roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the General Staff's U.S. counterpart—the Joint Staff. Second, we consider what the formal roles and responsibilities of the General Staff suggest about the relative balance of power among Russia's political leaders, the General Staff, and the broader Russian military. We focus on the role of the General Staff during peacetime (because its role is to prepare Russia's Armed Forces for potential war). Finally, we apply our understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff in a practical context by analyzing two case studies of this institution's involvement in recent conflicts: Ukraine (2014–2021) and Syria (2015–2019). These cases allow us to draw inferences about how the General Staff behaves in practice and its role within the Russian decisionmaking process.

The research for this report was conducted prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which unfolded shortly after this report was written. Therefore, this report does not examine the role of the General Staff in the ongoing campaign. But we would be remiss in discussing the progress of the Russian Armed Forces as an institution without also acknowledging the initial observations of the press and analytical community regarding the stumbles that Russia's military took in its first weeks of its incursion into Ukraine. Thus far, the Russian military has encountered numerous challenges—stemming from logistical, morale, and command and control (C2), and capability issues—in its operation in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tara Copp and Patrick Tucker, "Five Reasons Why Russian Forces Are Struggling in Ukraine," *Defense One*, March 1, 2022; and Warren P. Strobel, "Russia Facing Military Shortcomings in Ukraine Invasion," *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022.

## Key Findings

**The Russian General Staff is the key organ for exercising command and control of the Russian Armed Forces.** The core responsibility of this body is to analyze the military-political situation, anticipate further developments, plan for contingencies, ensure the combat readiness of the Armed Forces, and perform a centralized C2 function.

**A symbiotic relationship exists between the Minister of Defense and his first deputy, the Chief of the General Staff:** The Minister of Defense cannot build a strong political position if the Armed Forces are weak, and the Chief of the General Staff cannot strengthen the influence of the Armed Forces in the broader national security system if the Minister of Defense does not have a strong position in the government.

**The Russian General Staff is headed by the Chief of the General Staff, who is vested with command authority over the entirety of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces.** This contrasts with the United States Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is explicitly excluded from the chain of command, reflecting a long-standing reluctance in the United States to vest too much military authority in one individual. Looking at the authorities and responsibilities of the Russian General Staff, this does not appear to be a particularly strong concern for Russia.

**The United States and Russia have chosen distinct models of military command authority: largely decentralized in the case of the United States and highly centralized in the case of Russia.** Each model has potential benefits. The relative advantages of each appears to depend on subjective (and imperfectly predictive) considerations about the importance of oversight relative to the speed of decisionmaking or the importance of broad yet shallow expertise versus deep yet narrow specialization.

**The number of factors that had to coincide in 2008 to undermine the Russian military's resistance to reform is striking.** Legacy ideas and vested bureaucratic interests held the peacetime military decisionmaking process hostage. The centuries-long militarization of Russian political and social structures, in addition to the high degree of autonomy granted to the Russian General Staff, allowed these concepts and authority structures to persist.

**Although the nature of the 2022 conflict in Ukraine complicated our ability to comprehensively define the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff, the case study suggests that the emphasis on secrecy and deniability materially constrained the ability of the Russian General Staff to orchestrate the war in a manner that subordinated Russia's use of force entirely under the General Staff's control, as one might have expected to occur.** Relatedly, reliance on proxies and other shadowy figures that fell outside the formal chain of command and military institutions—as was the case in the Donbas—introduced a unique element of unpredictability that sharply contrasts with the General Staff model of centralized C2 and the practice of closely monitoring and overseeing decisions made at lower echelons.

**The Russian intervention in Syria, by contrast, appears to have been prosecuted in a manner largely concordant with the General Staff's mandated roles and responsibilities.** For example, an expeditionary headquarters was established at Khmeimim air base in Syria, and the General Staff formed a "combat control group," led by officers from the Main Operations Directorate, to serve as the campaign's primary oversight entity.<sup>2</sup> This group completed the initial operational planning, and these plans were then provided to the operational group commander for refinement and implementation. Yet this case also featured the use of entities—specifically, private military contractors—that again fell outside the formal Russian military chain of command. The use of these forces indicates that prioritization of plausible deniability and cultivating

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<sup>2</sup> A. V. Dvornikov, "Forms of Combat Employment and Organization of Command and Control of Integrated Force Groupings in the Theater of Military Operations," *Bulletin of the Academy of Military Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 63, 2018, p. 5; and Mark Galeotti, "The Main Operations Directorate: The Head and the Heart of the General Staff," *Mayak Intelligence*, 2021, pp. 12–13.

adversary confusion may be judged by the General Staff—or by senior Russian political leaders—to provide a useful tool, even if it comes at the expense of compromising command and control of the use of force.

**In terms of the networks of actors who our analysis revealed to have had some influence over decision-making in the Ukraine and Syria conflicts, it is notable how the actors in each network tend to be mostly (though not exclusively) individual people rather than organizations (e.g., government agencies or other bureaucracies).** Thus, the Russian General Staff, as an institution, seems to emphasize interpersonal relationships among key players. This fits with the argument that an informal political network perspective can be helpful in describing both Russian domestic and foreign policymaking. In that context, individuals tend to hold more sway when compared with more-formal entities or structures, such as laws or bureaucratic rules.

**Although the network analysis lends support to the contention that informal personal networks dominate national security decisionmaking, consistent with the literature on Russian informal politics, our research suggests that bureaucratic rules and procedures appear to dominate military decisionmaking.** It certainly appears that the use of force by Russia reflects the will of political leaders and not the military. However, the arduous process of reforming the Russian military demonstrates that the ability of the political leadership and other institutions to play an effective oversight role is highly constrained in the Russian context.

**Moreover, it is important to move the conversation beyond the relatively simplistic question of whether the General Staff participates in national security decisionmaking.** Multiple passive and active opportunities exist for the General Staff to influence the Russian decisionmaking process, in addition to participating in the actual decision to use military force. The General Staff has numerous *ex ante* and *ex post* opportunities to influence said decisionmaking. Before any particular national security policy decision is made, the General Staff has the primary role in determining what kind of military is available to decisionmakers. Also, decisions must be implemented, and the General Staff again plays the central role in determining the effectiveness and capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces in this implementation role. Therefore, the *formal* decisionmaking system of the General Staff appears to uniquely condition the *informal* decisionmaking system that dominates national security.

**Finally, it is plausible that the broader, bottom-up issues discussed in this report—from the General Staff's tight grip on information and its treatment of knowledge as currency, to the military's institutional resistance to reforms, to the General Staff's highly hierarchical C2 structure, and the influence of corruption on the armed services—are at least partly responsible for the Russian military's performance in Ukraine thus far.** The improvements that ostensibly allowed the Russian Armed Forces to become a relatively more effective fighting force in its limited operations in Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015) have thus far appeared to be insufficient when attempted at scale. Further research is needed to fully understand the implications of this conflict and the Russian military's ability to effectively wage a large-scale, highly complex operation.





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# Introduction

## The Issue

Over a five-day period in August 2008, Russia's Armed Forces were "victorious," swiftly mobilizing a force with overwhelming numerical superiority to defeat a much smaller foe. Russian forces achieved their military objective—bringing two Georgian breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, under Russian control. Yet while Russian forces demonstrated better planning and operational proficiency relative to the two wars in Chechnya (1994–1996 and 1999–2000), Russia's Armed Forces struggled more than was anticipated by both Russia and the West against the Georgian military. Russia's command and control (C2) chains experienced multiple failures at nearly all echelons. Obsolete Russian equipment suffered numerous breakdowns, thus halting the forward flow of forces. The Russian air component lost more than ten aircraft flying only 200 sorties against an opponent that lacked fighter aircraft or advanced air defenses.<sup>1</sup> The Ground Forces lacked an effective electronic warfare capability; the ability to communicate with air defense and air support units; and access to functional, secure battlefield communications systems, among other shortcomings.<sup>2</sup>

These events spurred the Russian government to invest heavily in a military modernization and professionalization effort. Less than six years later, the performance of Russian forces in the seizure of the Crimean peninsula (2014) and the operation in Syria (2015) indicated that the Russian Armed Forces had improved markedly, at least in limited conflict scenarios. In Syria, Russia demonstrated the ability to project power—via airlift and sealift—thousands of miles beyond its borders. In the seizure of Crimea in particular, Russia demonstrated the ability to match forces with the military objective at hand, deploying special operations soldiers who exercised restraint in the application of violence—so-called little green men or polite people.<sup>3</sup> In these campaigns, Russia used more-modern equipment, including long-range precision-guided missiles, electronic warfare, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Finally, Russia demonstrated an improved C2 capability that included soldiers with individual communication devices and interservice coordination.<sup>4</sup>

This apparent improvement in competence effected on one of the world's largest militaries merits further consideration. Such an analysis is warranted to understand not only how this improvement was accomplished

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<sup>1</sup> Four aircraft were shot down by Georgian air defenses, two aircraft appear to have been friendly-fire casualties, and at least four more aircraft were damaged beyond repair as a result of some combination of these two causes. See Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2009, p. 408.

<sup>2</sup> Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009, p. 408.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Lavrov, "Russia Again, the Military Operation for Crimea," in Colby Howard and Ruslan Pushkov, eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis, Minn.: East View Press, 2015, pp. 163–164; and Christopher Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations: Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF, and Special Operations Forces Command*, Winnipeg: CANSOFCOM Education & Research Centre, 2017, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, pp. 1–3.

but also to advance our understanding of whether these seeming improvements were material or a mirage, given the poor performance of Russian forces one month into its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this report, we aim to examine how the Russian military was able to transition so quickly from comprehensively poor combat performance to a relatively competent fighting force in these limited operations. Specifically, we aim to explore the role played by the Russian General Staff in the orchestration and actualization of these reforms. We examine how the General Staff's responsibilities, internal structure, and staffing, as well as its position within the broader Russian national security system, contributed to—and impeded—the overall effectiveness of the Armed Forces. The overarching objective of this report is to provide a better understanding of the General Staff's current inputs to Russia's national security decisionmaking and project out into the future the ways in which this influence might evolve.

The research for this study was conducted prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which unfolded as this report was being written and prepared for publication. As a result, this report does not examine the role of the General Staff in decisionmaking, planning, or execution related to this ongoing campaign. But we would be remiss in discussing the progress of the Russian Armed Forces as an institution without also acknowledging the initial observations of the press and analytical community regarding the stumbles Russia's military had in its first weeks of its incursion into Ukraine. Thus far, the Russian military has encountered numerous challenges—stemming from logistical, morale, C2, training, and capability issues—in its operation in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Approach

In this report, we employ a mixed method approach to analyze the Russian General Staff along multiple axes with the objective of advancing the collective understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the Russian General Staff in the state's national security decisionmaking process. In the first section of the report, we draw on Russian-language materials, especially *General Staff of the Russian Military: Past and Present*, edited by former Chief of the General Staff, Yuri Baluevskii.<sup>6</sup> This edited volume provides a relatively rare historical overview of the General Staff from the Russian perspective, and it covers the period of the early 1700s to 2004. The volume details the General Staff's functions, the factors that influenced its decisions, and the challenges it faced in implementing those decisions. We also draw on the relevant Russian statutes that codify the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff and the relevant speeches given by the current Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valerii Gerasimov, and other General Staff officials, to construct an authoritative characterization of the General Staff's statutory mandate. Subsequent portions of the report then apply this baseline of knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff in three contexts to construct a more complete, if necessarily speculative, picture of the General Staff's role in Russian national security decisionmaking.

First, we apply this information by placing the Russian General Staff in comparative institutional context. Drawing on U.S. statutes and institutional histories, we provide a high-level evaluation of the institutional roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the General Staff's U.S. counterpart—the Joint Chiefs of Staff and its supporting Joint Staff. We use this high-level comparison to distill insights regarding the potential benefits

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<sup>5</sup> Tara Copp and Patrick Tucker, "Five Reasons Why Russian Forces Are Struggling in Ukraine," *Defense One*, March 1, 2022; and Warren P. Strobel, "Russia Facing Military Shortcomings in Ukraine Invasion," *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Iu. N. Baluevskii, ed., *Generalnii stab Rossiiskoi Armii: Istokiya i sovermennost*, Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2006. This edited volume was newly acquired and translated by the RAND Corporation.

and trade-offs entailed in the Russian model, which—particularly relative to the U.S. model—concentrates a significant amount of power in the hands of one institution.

Second, we consider what the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff suggest about the relative balance of power between Russia’s political leaders, the General Staff, and the broader Russian military. We survey the existing political science literature regarding civil-military relations in Russia. Although the existing literature tends to focus on the role of the so-called power ministries in foreign policy decisionmaking, we instead focus our analytic efforts on examining the role of the General Staff during peacetime in the process of preparing the Russian Armed Forces for war.<sup>7</sup> The military, after all, can be thought of as an instrument, and the fitness of this instrument affects the foreign policy options available to policymakers. However, the concentration of power revealed by the discussion of the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff raises questions about the ability of Russian political leaders to ensure effective accountability and oversight, such that the military institution is responsive to political decisionmakers. To illustrate the seeming limits of political authority, we conduct a case study of Russian military modernization efforts from the late 1990s until Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia. We leverage this analysis to draw informed—albeit speculative—inferences about how the authorities and responsibilities of the General Staff fundamentally condition the ability of political leaders to leverage the military as a foreign policy tool.

Finally, we apply our understanding on the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff in a practical context by examining case studies of this institution’s involvement in two recent conflicts: Ukraine (2014–2021) and Syria (2015–2019). These cases provide additional analytical traction for advancing our understanding of the General Staff by allowing us to draw inferences about how the General Staff behaves in practice and its role within the Russian decisionmaking process. Although our ability to present an exhaustive characterization of the General Staff’s involvement in each conflict is constrained by the opaque nature of this institution and Russian national security decisionmaking in general, we examine a diverse variety of sources to assess how the Russian General Staff appears to have participated in each conflict. We also use the data from the case studies to inform our construction of high-level network analyses that visualize the key General Staff members and their relationships (both direct and indirect) for each conflict. The diagrams produced for this report offer a novel vehicle that provides new insights about who within the General Staff is central, who is peripheral, and who is connected to whom to depict where and how the actors within the General Staff interact with the larger cast of characters.

## Caveats

Before diving into the analysis undertaken as part of this research effort, it is important that we acknowledge the limitations of our analysis. Although we have taken an analytically rigorous approach in seeking multiple independent sources in building our analysis, particularly for the case studies, the reader should be mindful of several caveats. These are as follows.

*As a highly personalized system, Russian decisionmaking, particularly at the highest levels, is a function of decisionmakers’ personal networks. Thus, to understand which actors and institutions possess decisionmaking power, one must understand the specific individuals involved.* While we address these networks to the degree that it helps explain the role of the General Staff as an institution, it is not an aim of this study to produce an

<sup>7</sup> The term *power ministries* is one of several (others being *force ministries* and *power agencies*) used in scholarly and analytical circles to refer to, for example, Russian security services and military bodies. For a discussion of definitions, see Carolina Vendil Pallin, “The Russian Power Ministries: Tool and Insurance of Power,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2007; and Brian D. Taylor, *State Building in Putin’s Russia: Policing and Coercion After Communism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

exhaustive network analysis. A wide collection of actors influence national security policymaking in Russia, including actors within the Ministry of Defense (MoD), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Presidential Administration, Security Council, Federal Security Service (FSB), and key state corporations, among other groups. While we are cognizant that the more senior members of the General Staff and Russian military necessarily have connections within this broader network, this report is not an attempt to comprehensively place the individuals within the General Staff in the so-called power vertikal.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, we acknowledge that an increasingly small circle of individuals have national-level decisionmaking power in Russia, but we contend that individuals outside this small circle have agency, and our report is an effort to advance our collective understanding of these lower-level networks.

*We suspect that no one individual or institution, including the General Staff, is wholly responsible for the improvement—or lack thereof—of the Russian Armed Forces in the post-2014 period. Other factors and actors that fall beyond the scope of this effort likely would have to be considered to provide a comprehensive explanation for the improvement of the Russian Armed Forces.* Factors contributing to the increase in Russian military effectiveness include Russia's economic growth from the rising price of oil at the turn of the century and the decades-spanning longevity of key political and military figures, among other factors.

In terms of the impact of the economy, Russia has experienced a tumultuous boom and bust cycle in the three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union. The 1990s economy was marred by the transition recession and default of the years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency, which saw the Russian defense budget cut from an estimated U.S. \$344 billion in 1988 to U.S. \$52 billion in 1992 and less than U.S. \$20 billion in 1998.<sup>9</sup> This bust was followed by the boom of the 2000s, during which Russia's gross domestic product increased by roughly an average of 7 percent per year until the economic crisis of 2009; the decline resulted from the global economic recession and subsequent collapse in oil prices.<sup>10</sup> During this decade, the global price of oil rose from less than U.S. \$30 per barrel to almost U.S. \$90 per barrel prior to the summer of 2008, peaked again in 2011, and then held relatively steady above U.S. \$110 per barrel until 2015.<sup>11</sup> This is significant for Russia because of its economy's heavy dependence on energy exports. Awash with oil rents, Russian defense spending increased steadily over this period, in terms of purchasing power parity; it grew by 90 percent between 2005 and 2018 to roughly U.S. \$180 billion, even while being constrained to roughly 3 percent of gross domestic product.<sup>12</sup>

Another important explanatory factor is the longevity of key political and military figures, most notably Vladimir Putin's hold on power for over 20 years and the continuity that this engenders. Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Gerasimov have occupied their posts for the better part of a decade and are implementing reforms that bear historical lineage to reform efforts attempted and initiated by nearly all of their post-Soviet

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the power vertikal, see in particular Andrew Monaghan, *Defibrillating the Vertikal? Putin and Russian Grand Strategy*, London, UK: Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2014. Additional works in this Kremlinology vein include, among others, Minchenko Consulting, *The Politburo 2.0 and the Anti-Establishment Wave*, Moscow: Minchenko Consulting, Summer 2019; and Pavel K. Baev, "The Evolution of Putin's Regime: Inner Circles and Outer Walls," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 51, No. 6, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Renz, 2018, p. 55, citing the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Military Expenditure Database.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Hanson, "Managing the Economy," in Richard Sakwa, Henry E. Hale, and Stephen White, eds., *Developments in Russian Politics*, 9th ed., Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford G. Gaddy and Barry W. Ickes, "Russia After the Global Financial Crisis," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2010, p. 284; Hanson, 2019, p. 136; and Nikolay Petrov and Eugenia Nazrullaeva, "Regional Elites and Moscow," in Daniel Treisman, ed., *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Connolly, *Russian Military Expenditure in Comparative Perspective: A Purchasing Power Parity Estimate*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, IOP-2019-U-021955-Final, October 2019.



predecessors.<sup>13</sup> Renowned former Chief of the General Staff and Marshal of the Soviet Union's forces during World War II, Boris M. Shaposhnikov, and former Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Makhmut Gareev, supported longer terms for Chiefs of General Staff, emphasizing the resulting strategic continuity and having enough time to get "solid work" done.<sup>14</sup> This continuity has several potential benefits. The high level of continuity among Putin-era political and military elites allows for a high degree of policy consistency.<sup>15</sup> Putin, for example, has presided over a two decade-long increase in defense spending. In other systems with stricter term limits, bureaucracies can use these limits as instruments—waiting out the elected officials, hoping that a new party or new policy will take hold—as a means by which to resist reform.<sup>16</sup> In the Russian case, however, the stability of the occupant of the highest office voided this option. This continuity of leadership and policy provides an important explanatory variable.

*The Russian decisionmaking apparatus is opaque, and thus this analysis is necessarily speculative to some degree.* As has been described by multiple experts in Russian politics, informal networks dominate the Russian decisionmaking process.<sup>17</sup> Formal institutional roles and responsibilities often fail to reflect *actual* authority.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as one Russian expert notes, "Even officials who served in the administration at the same time sometimes have radically different understandings of how things work."<sup>19</sup> The dearth of public discussion on some defense topics and the secrecy that shrouds the national security decisionmaking process in particular mean that publicly available evidence about decisions is relatively sparse. Yet, leaks (intentional or not) do occur, and instances of poor operational security—such as awarding medals with the dates of the Crimean operation—provide opportunities to gain insights into the decisionmaking process.<sup>20</sup>

*Limitations posed by the availability of data mean that the case study research in Chapters Five and Six, including the network analysis derived for each case, is as comprehensive as unclassified sources will allow but is not exhaustive.* It is important to acknowledge that our analysis is constrained by the inherent limitations imposed by the topics examined in this research. It was not our objective to identify all relevant individuals and their interactions and reconstruct the network of Kremlin-affiliated actors involved in the Syrian and Crimean cases. Instead, we aimed to identify a sampling of key actors with relevant connections to the General Staff and characterize their relationships such that they would help us understand the role of the General Staff in practice. The network analyses incorporated in each case study therefore necessarily represent a sample of the entire universe of interactions between the individuals involved. We applied a simple network analysis framework to the case study research to provide our best understanding of relevant actors, their relationships, and key decisions.

<sup>13</sup> Carolina Vendil Pallin, *Russian Military Reform: A Failed Exercise in Defence Decision Making*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Makhmut A. Gareev, "Rol stabov v sisteme voyennovo upravleniya," *Vestnik Akademii voyennih nauk*, No. 1, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "The Political Elite Under Putin," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Security Insights, No. 53, April 2020.

<sup>16</sup> B. Guy Peters, *The Politics of Bureaucracy: An Introduction to Comparative Public Administration*, 7th ed., New York: Routledge Press, 2018, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Kimberly Marten, "Informal Political Networks and Putin's Foreign Policy: The Examples of Iran and Syria," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2015; and Monaghan, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Marten, 2015, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Maxim Ananyev, "Inside the Kremlin: The Presidency and the Executive Branch," in Treisman, 2018, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Treisman, "Crimea, Anatomy of a Decision," in Treisman, 2018b, p. 288.

## Organization of This Report

In Chapter Two, we focus on the statutorily defined roles, responsibilities, and authorities delegated to the Russian General Staff, which provide the legal basis for its sweeping authorities and contribute to the adaptability and longevity of the institution. This chapter also provides a human resources perspective, discussing the occupant at the helm of each office, including their military experience prior to ascending to the position. While formally the list of the General Staff's roles consists of 16 tasks, we focus on those that were necessary to secure the transition of the Russian Armed Forces from its post-Soviet incarnation to a modern military. Specifically, we consider how the General Staff's authorities, structure, and staffing support its key responsibilities: strategy conceptualization, planning, execution, and C2. The consistency of the General Staff's mandate over centuries provides the first marker indicating that Russia continues to be influenced by legacy ideas. This chapter thus provides an authoritative characterization of the General Staff's statutory mandate, which subsequent chapters then apply to create a more complete if necessarily somewhat speculative picture of the General Staff's role in Russian national security decisionmaking.

Leveraging this detailed account, Chapter Three places the Russian General Staff in a comparative institutional perspective. Specifically, we offer a high-level comparison of the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the General Staff relative to those of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. This chapter is not meant to provide an exhaustive comparative case study. It is intended to broadly illustrate the seemingly key respects in which the mandates of these two institutions diverge and thus their centrality within their respective national security decisionmaking processes. The notable differences between these two institutions, particularly in terms of the centralization and concentration of C2 authorities—or lack thereof, in the case of the Joint Staff—to a large degree arise because Russia and the United States seek divergent outcomes with these two bodies. Yet, the implications of these differences for the peacetime process of preparing for war, let alone the prosecution of a war, are significant. This chapter thus concludes by offering some observations regarding the potential implications of the two organizational approaches.

In Chapter Four, we apply our understanding of the authorities and responsibilities of the General Staff to an examination of some of the external factors that shape the ability of the General Staff to affect the evolution in Russian military effectiveness. Although much analysis has focused on the evolution of Russian Armed Forces post-2008, our research suggests there are greater benefits to be gained from a retrospective look. We therefore assess the role of the General Staff in the post-Soviet environment, when the military found itself mired in institutional crisis.<sup>21</sup> We consider the merits of the various rationales levied by the military to stall, redirect, and curtail reform efforts despite senior political leadership's directives to enact reforms. Some of the most senior leaders within the General Staff—including the then-head of the Main Organization-Mobilization Directorate—called for reform, yet change remained slow and fitful.<sup>22</sup> We discuss what factors enabled the General Staff to resist reform through the late 1990s and early 2000s and in spite of the Russian military's poor performance in the first and second Chechen Wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2000). The chapter assesses the elements that had to align to *begin* to overcome the military's obstructionism. Notably, the poor performance of the Russian Armed Forces displayed during the first month of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 suggests, based on preliminary observations, that its effort to become a professional, high-tech force capable

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<sup>21</sup> Aleksandr M. Golts and Tonya L. Putnam, "State Militarism and Its Legacies: Why Military Reform Has Failed in Russia," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Fall 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Viacheslav Zhrebtsov, "On Some Directions of Russian Armed Forces Organizational Development at the Present Stage," *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, April 1996.

of fighting large-scale, highly complex operations has yet to be realized.<sup>23</sup> We then use this analysis to draw inferences about how the authorities and responsibilities of the General Staff appear to fundamentally condition the ability of political leaders to leverage the military as a foreign policy tool.

The subsequent three chapters apply our understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff to examine how the General Staff's elements operated in practice, i.e., in the context of real-world campaigns: Ukraine (2014–2021) and Syria (2015–2021). These cases allow us to draw inferences about how the General Staff behaves in practice. For each case, we consider the role of the General Staff in the planning and decisionmaking processes from the initial decision to intervene, to planning the operation, and then to overseeing the execution of the operation. These cases provide two types of comparative perspective. First, they offer the opportunity to assess the role of individuals within the General Staff and the General Staff as an institution, relative to the multitude of other actors with national security equities in Russia. Second, the two cases address within-case variation, thus allowing the opportunity to draw insights about how the General Staff has operated in different conflict settings (though both settings do represent limited military engagements). For each case, we visualize the key General Staff members and their relationships for each conflict, providing novel insights into who within the General Staff is central and which institutions are central, peripheral, and interconnected.

We conclude by presenting our findings as to what the organization of the General Staff reveals about the leadership system that it serves and the balance of power within Russia's national security decisionmaking structure. We thus discuss the position of the General Staff within the context of the broader Russian national security system, both formally and informally, including why certain concepts and authority structures persist and how the General Staff affected the transformation of the Russian Armed Forces into an effective tool of foreign policy. Although the network analyses of the individuals involved in Ukraine and Syria lend support to the contention that informal personal networks dominate national security decisionmaking, which is a finding consistent with the literature on Russian informal politics, our research suggests that bureaucratic rules and procedures appear to dominate *military* decisionmaking. Moreover, our research suggests that multiple passive and active opportunities exist for the General Staff to influence the Russian decisionmaking process, other than participating in the actual decision to use military force. Therefore, the formal decisionmaking system of the General Staff appears to uniquely condition the informal decisionmaking system that dominates national security. We thus propose some tentative conclusions about what the organization of the General Staff reveals about the leadership system it serves.

Finally, we also offer our initial observations about the potential implications of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine; these observations were written in the first four weeks of the war. For example, it is plausible that the broader, bottom-up issues discussed in this study—from the General Staff's tight grip on information and its treatment of knowledge as currency, to the military's institutional resistance to reforms, to the General Staff's highly hierarchical C2 structure and the influence of corruption on the armed services—are at least partly responsible for the Russian military's poor performance in Ukraine up to that point in time. The improvements that allowed Russian Armed Forces to become a relatively more effective fighting force in its limited operations in Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015) have appeared to be insufficient when attempted at scale. Further research is needed to fully understand the implications of this current conflict and the Russian military's ability to effectively wage a large-scale, highly complex operation.

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<sup>23</sup> Justin Bronk, "Is the Russian Air Force Actually Incapable of Complex Air Operations?" blog post, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, March 4, 2022.



## Roles and Responsibilities of the Russian General Staff

In conclusion, I want to state that, regardless of how strong the enemy is, regardless of how perfect [*sover-shennya*] its forces and means for the armed struggle, the forms and means of their use, it [the enemy] will always have weak spots; this means that the possibility exists for an adequate defense.

—V. G. Gerasimov<sup>1</sup>

The Russian General Staff has existed, in one form or another, for more than three centuries. It was first established during the reign of Peter the Great (1682–1725), and then recreated in 1762 under Catherine II.<sup>2</sup> Despite its long history, the modern General Staff is much closer to the General Staff of the 20th century in its structure and role.<sup>3</sup> The main functions and elements of the General Staff that are still recognizable in the existing General Staff were only established during World War II (WWII) and refined in its aftermath.<sup>4</sup>

Although there have been significant changes in the strategic environment, fluctuations in the military-political power relations, and transformation of the Armed Forces since WWII, the overall core structure and functions of the General Staff have remained relatively constant over time. Any changes in the structure or functions seem to reflect larger changes to the security and strategic environment and have not significantly affected the fundamental institutional structure or responsibilities of the General Staff. Some more significant changes are related to the reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s and are more related to the civil-military balance of power that is discussed in Chapter Four.

The central role of this institution, throughout its existence, has been to conceptualize and operationalize the military requirements to prepare for the state's "adequate defense."<sup>5</sup> However, efforts to coordinate Russia's defense experienced massive disruptions in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulting from domestic and international political upheaval. The General Staff faced the collapse of the Soviet Union; the requirement to withdraw enormous numbers of personnel and materiel from the former Warsaw Pact countries and

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<sup>1</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii," *Voенно-promyshlenniy kur'er*, Vol. 8, No. 476, February–March 2013, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Russian modern General Staff tradition is based on the country's experience during WWII. Russia's military thinkers and practitioners drew a lesson from the war: The Soviet Union (and later Russia) could bear only a type of general staff that is more than an administrative body and has the power to manage and command the forces. See Baluevskii, 2006; and Christopher N. Donnelly, *Red Banner: The Soviet Military System in Peace and War*, Surrey, UK: Jane's Information Group, 1988, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> The year 2022 is the 260th anniversary of the Russian General Staff.

<sup>4</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Gerasimov, 2013, p. 3.

members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR); and economic, social, and political infighting within Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Amid this turmoil, the General Staff of the newly independent Russian Federation faced the need to reform the Armed Forces that it inherited from the Soviet Union to ensure that these forces were adequate for the defense of Russia given its new security environment. Arguably, the formal responsibilities and authorities of the General Staff were ideally suited to expeditiously conceptualize and implement such a transition. Given that the scope and substance of the General Staff's mandate has been largely consistent since the end of WWII, it stands to reason that the General Staff would be similarly well-suited to modernizing the Russian Armed Forces between the war with Georgia (2008) and the annexation of Crimea (2014).<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to present an authoritative characterization of these formal roles and responsibilities and demonstrate how responsibilities and authorities are perhaps uniquely aligned in the Russian military context. Responsibilities resident in the General Staff encompass the entire range of military activity, including threat assessments, strategy and force planning and development, equipping and training the Armed Force, command and control of forces, and coordination of service arms and other national security bodies in preparation for wartime. In the following sections of this chapter, we explain how the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff are formally but broadly defined, which General Staff bodies fulfill those roles and responsibilities, and what the human resources in these institutions can tell us about the continuity of effort in these areas.

## The Formal Roles and Responsibilities of the General Staff

The tasks and functions of the Russian General Staff are formally defined by Presidential decree in the *Regulations on the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation*. The current version of the decree, most recently updated in 2020, defines the General Staff as

the central body of military command of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation . . . and the main body of operational control of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. . . . In accordance with the decisions of the President of the Russian Federation, the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, the General Staff performs command and control of the Armed Forces, organizes defense planning of the Russian Federation, mobilization training and mobilization in the Russian Federation within the powers of the Ministry of Defense of Russia, and also coordinates activities other troops, military and special formations in the field of defense.<sup>8</sup>

The *Regulation* exhaustively details the 16 main tasks (listed in Text Box 2.1) that are assigned to the General Staff. Rather than expand on this list of tasks, we describe the four overarching responsibilities contained in the *Regulation*, each of which has fallen within the purview of the General Staff: strategic conceptualization and planning, readiness and preparedness, the system to command and control forces, and interservice and interagency coordination.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> The modern General Staff structure was created during WWII and refined in its aftermath.

<sup>8</sup> President of the Russian Federation, "Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 23.07.2013 No. 631 (red. ot 21.12.2020), Voprosy General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii," July 23, 2017b, point 1.

<sup>9</sup> Baluevskii, 2006. Although the General Staff historically has held additional administrative functions, those largely have been moved to the purview of the MoD in the modern era and are therefore excluded from this section.

## TEXT BOX 2.1

**The Main Tasks of the General Staff**

- a) organization of command and control of the Armed Forces;
- b) organization of defense planning of the Russian Federation;
- c) organizing the development of proposals for the formation and implementation of state policy in the field of defense, participation in its implementation;
- d) coordination of actions of the Armed Forces, other troops and military formations in peacetime when carrying out measures of strategic deterrence;
- e) organization of planning and implementation of measures for the development of the Armed Forces, coordination of the development of concepts, plans for the construction and development of other troops and military formations in the interests of defense;
- f) organizing the transfer in accordance with the legislative and other normative legal acts of the Russian Federation of the Armed Forces, other troops, military formations, bodies and special formations to the organization and composition of wartime, as well as ensuring their mobilization deployment;
- g) organizing the maintenance of the Armed Forces in the required readiness and monitoring this activity, as well as monitoring the state of mobilization readiness of other troops, military and special formations;
- h) management of the operational and mobilization training of the Armed Forces, coordination of the operational and mobilization training of other troops, military and special formations;
- i) organization and implementation of measures for the strategic (operational) support of the Armed Forces;
- j) organization of intelligence activities in the interests of defense and, within the limits of its competence, in the interests of the security of the Russian Federation;
- k) development of the control system of the Armed Forces and coordination of the development of control systems of other troops, military and special formations in the interests of defense;
- l) organizing communications and automated control of the Armed Forces, determining the procedure for using and planning the use of the radio frequency spectrum in the interests of defense;
- m) planning and organization of organizational measures in the Armed Forces, organization and implementation of interaction with other troops and military formations on the implementation of these measures in them;
- n) organizing the recruitment of the Armed Forces, other troops, military formations, bodies and special formations with conscripts;
- o) planning the provision of the Armed Forces with the main types of weapons, military, special equipment and materiel, as well as the accumulation and deployment of emergency reserves of these means;
- p) organization of measures to protect state secrets in the Armed Forces and federal executive bodies and organizations subordinate to the Ministry of Defense of Russia and control over their implementation.

SOURCE: Reproduced and translated verbatim from President of the Russian Federation, 2017b.

## Strategy Conceptualization and Defense Planning

A central task for the Russian General Staff is the application of military science (*Voennaya nauka*) to theorize about and forecast the future of warfare.<sup>10</sup> Renowned former Chief of the General Staff and Marshal of the Soviet Union's forces during WWII, Boris M. Shaposhnikov, introduced the concept of the General Staff as the *brain of the Army* (*mozg armii*) in the late 1920s. His contemporary, prominent Soviet military strate-

<sup>10</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "Vliiane Sovremennogo kharaktera vooruzhennoi bor'by na napravlennost' stroitel'stva i razvitiia Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Prioritetnye zadachi voennoi nauki v obespechenii oborony strany," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2018a.

gist and scholar Aleksandr Svechin, wrote that the General Staff "should represent the guard of emerging ideas . . . to grasp, cherish and preach them."<sup>11</sup> A later Russian author suggests that the General Staff also should be a "thinking organism" (*dumayushii organizm*) of the state, thus placing the General Staff in a key position within the broader system of military-political control of the country.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, this means that the General Staff is responsible for understanding the threat environment—the *military-political situation* (*voenno-politicheskaia obstanovka*)—the likelihood of different types of threats and conflicts materializing and the trends in the future nature, methods, and means of warfare.<sup>13</sup> A variety of variables and subvariables are compiled to provide the data for forecasting the likelihood and nature of warfare, including the political, economic, military, scientific-technical, and cultural characteristics of each potential adversary and ally.<sup>14</sup> The General Staff is tasked with identifying and quantifying all of these variables and with modeling these factors to gain insights into the expected outcome of notional wars.<sup>15</sup>

Theorizing about the course and outcome of war in Russian military science also relies on calculations of the correlation of forces and means.<sup>16</sup> In Soviet and Russian military science, the course and outcome of war can be anticipated by calculating, in general: (1) the relative combat power of each combatant; (2) the tactics, operations, objectives, and missions enabled by weapons, equipment, and personnel with different quantitative and qualitative characteristics; and (3) the interaction of tactics, operations, objectives, and missions at different levels of warfare—strategic, operational-strategic, operational, and operational-tactical.<sup>17</sup> More recently, so-called "nonmilitary actions" have been added to the list of factors that need to be considered to accurately estimate the correlation of forces.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this correlation must be continuously reassessed, modeled, and updated.

Using these calculations, which are designed to determine the future nature and likelihood of war and of the correlation of forces and means, the General Staff is then responsible for developing military strategy and

<sup>11</sup> Shaposhnikov borrowed the term from the English writer and military theorist of the 19th and 20th centuries, Spenser Wilkinson, who used the term to talk about the German General Staff; Svechin, quoted in Nikolay Makarov, "Glavnii Organ voyennovo upravleniya, ili gvardiya zarozhdayushihsy idey," *Rossiiskoye voyennoye obozrenie*, No. 2, February 2009; and Spenser Wilkinson, *The Brain of the Army: A Popular Account of the German General Staff*, Westminster, UK: Archibald, 1895.

<sup>12</sup> A significant element of the General Staff as a "brain of the army" lies in one of its structural parts—the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)—to the extent that one Russian analyst suggests that without GRU, the power of the General Staff would significantly lessen (Sergey Zhuravlev, "Glavnii Shtab kak dumayushii organizm," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 31, September 5, 2003; see also Jim Nichol, *Russian Military Reform and the Defense Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R42006, August 24, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Yu. V. Chuev and Yu. B. Mikhailov, *Prognozirovaniye v voennom dele*, trans. DGIS Multilingual Section, Translation Bureau, Secretary of State Department, Ottawa, February 6, 1981, p. 14; and Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Chuev and Mikhailov, 1981.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Russian process and component parts of Russian forecasting process, see Clint Reach, Alyssa Demus, Eugeniu Han, Bilyana Lilly, Krystyna Marcinek, and Yuliya Shokh, *Russian Military Forecasting and Analysis: The Military-Political Situation and Military Security in Strategic Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A198-4, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Russian process of assessing the correlation of forces and means, see Reach et al., 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "Rol' General'nogo Shtaba v organizatsii oborony strany v sootvetstviy s novym polozheniyem o General'nom shtabe, utverzhdennym Prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federatsii," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, No. 1, 2014; and N. V. Ogarkov, ed., *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1983, p. 691.

<sup>18</sup> Gerasimov, 2014. Nonmilitary actions broadly include "political, information (both psychological and technical), diplomatic, economic, legal, spiritual/moral, and humanitarian measures" (see Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev, April 2020, p. 4).



the broad templates that commanders can use to develop their operational plans.<sup>19</sup> The General Staff's analyses characterize novel methods of warfare, including the employment of new weapon systems. These analyses, in turn, are intended to inform operational commanders' decisionmaking regarding the employment of the Russian Armed Forces at various levels of war, for each military theater, and against different opponents.<sup>20</sup> The General Staff also uses these calculations to conduct other defensive planning efforts, including the continuous improvement of the organizational structure of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>21</sup>

The amalgamation of these various threads of analysis combine to answer the central question—"what kind of Armed Forces are necessary so as to guarantee the safeguarding of Russia's military security and protect its national interests?"<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the General Staff is also responsible for drafting strategic planning regarding "the tasks, structure, composition, strength, and deployment of the Armed Forces," and develops the concept and the plan for the construction and development of the Armed Forces that are necessary to safeguard Russia.<sup>23</sup>

## Readiness and Preparedness

In a break from the Soviet model (which was based on mass mobilization to man skeleton units), the modern Russian military model seeks to field combat-ready forces—i.e., suitably trained and equipped forces in peacetime that are ready to be moved into the theater within hours.<sup>24</sup> In another break from the Soviet Cold War model, these units are intended to be composed of contract soldiers rather than conscripts.<sup>25</sup> The system of conscription nonetheless remains, even though the percentage of conscripts relative to the overall force has been reduced in favor of professional forces.<sup>26</sup> The General Staff is responsible for overseeing the conscription process, for ensuring that the Armed Forces remain at the required readiness level, and for monitoring the readiness of the Armed Forces and other militarized formations.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to organizing, implementing, and monitoring measures to maintain combat and mobilization readiness of the Armed Forces, readiness and preparedness entails organizing the development of a

<sup>19</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b; and Roger N. McDermott and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Military Decision-Making Process & Automated Command and Control*, Hamburg: German Institute for Defense and Strategic Studies, 2020, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Gerasimov, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> O. V. Korol and N. L. Romas, "Formy voyennykh deystviy: Znachenie kategorii," *Voennaya mysl'*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Gerasimov, 2018a.

<sup>23</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 9.b, point 11.a. Specifically, these two planning documents are called the *Concept for the Construction and Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation* and the *Plan for the Construction and Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation*.

<sup>24</sup> A. S. Rukshin, "Doktrinal'nye vzgliady po voprosam primeneniia i stroitel'stva Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossii," *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 3, 2007, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Gosudarstvennaia Duma, "Vladimir Shamanov: Priniat zakon po dopolnitel'nym meram sotsial'noi podderzhki voennosluzhashchikh," December 18, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> In 2003, conscripts appear to have accounted for 330,000 personnel and professional soldiers; there were 1,425 in Russia's Armed Forces. In 2012, conscripts appear to have accounted for 317,200 personnel, and professional soldiers amounted to 189,700 personnel in Russia's Armed Forces. Around 2015, the balance appears to have shifted in favor of professional soldiers, with 297,000 conscripts and 352,000 professional soldiers. During this period, estimates regarding the total size of the Russian Armed Forces remained steady, within a band of 1 to 1.2 million personnel. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2003*, Vol. 103, London, UK: Routledge, 2003, p. 85; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2013*, Vol. 113, London, UK: Routledge, 2013, p. 200; and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2017*, Vol. 117, London, UK: Routledge, 2017, p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 13, point 20.

yearly training plan for the Armed Forces.<sup>28</sup> The General Staff thus "[leads] the operational and mobilization training of the Armed Forces, and [coordinates] the operational and mobilization training of other troops, military and special formations."<sup>29</sup> In particular, the General Staff organizes and carries out high-level operational training under the leadership of the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, or the Chief of the General Staff. It also plans, organizes, and coordinates joint training with foreign partners and bodies outside the MoD.<sup>30</sup>

Readiness and preparedness also include equipping the Armed Forces. The General Staff is thus responsible for determining the priorities for equipping the Armed Forces, proposing technical requirements for equipment, and controlling compliance with said requirements. This compliance responsibility also appears to include serving as the body that assesses whether a particular system meets military requirements and providing a recommendation to the Minister of Defense whether to accept or reject the system delivered by the military industrial complex.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the General Staff is responsible for determining what types of weapons, equipment, and materiel resources each service branch and combat arm needs and for provisioning these resources (to include provisioning reserves).<sup>32</sup>

## Command and Control System

Two facets of C2 are subsumed within this category: organizational and technical. While the "On Defense" law codifies the chain of command—specifically, that the General Staff reports to the President through the Minister of Defense—the General Staff retains responsibility for structuring the chain of command for all levels below it.<sup>33</sup> Given the perceived importance of the initial period of war, the General Staff is tasked with ensuring that in peacetime, the C2 structure at the strategic and operational-tactical levels is consistent with the structure that will be used during wartime.<sup>34</sup>

Most recently, this responsibility has meant the reorganization of the Soviet C2 systems, with the system's 16 control points—i.e., military districts—being reduced to five.<sup>35</sup> A simplified three-tiered C2 structure that excluded the services from operational C2 responsibilities was implemented in June 2010. This new structure established five new military districts (which convert into Joint Strategic Commands in wartime) to control forces at the operational-tactical level and report to the General Staff through the National Defense Management Center (*Natsional'nyy tsentr upravleniya oboronoy*—NTsUO).<sup>36</sup>

The creation of the NTsUO exemplifies the second facet of this category.<sup>37</sup> The General Staff is responsible for the development of C2 systems and equipment fielded at the strategic, operational-strategic, operational,

<sup>28</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 13e.

<sup>29</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 6h.

<sup>30</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 14.

<sup>31</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 6, point 21.

<sup>33</sup> President of the Russian Federation, "Ob oborone," Federal Law No. 61-FZ, December 30, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "Opyt otdaleniya v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne i Organizatsiya upravleniya oboronoy strany v sovremennykh usloviyakh," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 2, No. 51, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Charles K. Bartles, "Russian Force Structure for the Conduct of Large-Scale Combat Operations," *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin*, Vol. 45, No. 1, January–March 2019, p. 52. The Soviet system had 16 military districts; as of this writing in 2022, there are only five military districts.

<sup>36</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, pp. 9–10.

<sup>37</sup> For additional information on how NTsUO functions during conflict, see the Syria case study in Chapter Six.

and operational-tactical levels to enable the C2 of Russian forces. Automated C2 of the Armed Forces is a particularly prominent ambition within the Russian military and falls within the purview of the General Staff, as do maintenance and support of digital communication systems, telecommunication networks, and technical means of special fortified command posts.<sup>38</sup>

The General Staff also has a direct planning role in Russian military deployments, a functional legacy that continues from the Soviet era. For example, the General Staff's role during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was significant. The General Staff was involved in the organization of the combat composition of the 40th Army, and the Deputy Chief of Staff led a task force to provide on-site guidance to the Soviet forces in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> As will be seen in the Syria case study later in this report, the General Staff played a similar role, providing on-site guidance to Russian Forces.

## Coordination

Finally, as should be intuitive given the significant concentration and centralization of responsibilities within the General Staff, this body is assigned the crucial coordination role to facilitate a whole-of-government approach to warfighting, which is perceived as critically important in modern warfare.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, one Russian author refers to the General Staff together with the MoD as the “board of directors of a great corporation,” in which the General Staff is the “true corporate headquarters” and the Chief of the General Staff fulfills the role of the chief executive vice president.<sup>41</sup> In 2013, the responsibilities of the General Staff were expanded to include “coordination of activities of all federal organs of the executive in the interests of ensuring defense readiness and the security of the country.”<sup>42</sup> This coordination resulted in the development of the Defense Plan, which created a C2 structure and the technical capabilities to enable interagency coordination when needed.<sup>43</sup> The NTsUO provides the technological backbone enabler for this whole-of-government approach.<sup>44</sup>

Claims have been made that the General Staff was poised to gain significantly more authority in this coordination role, but that instead it ceded responsibility and authority in this space to the other power ministries.<sup>45</sup> Such a reading of events might not be entirely accurate. A 2019 *Izvestia* article is cited as the source of the contention that the General Staff's role was about to be expanded in the 2020 *Regulations*, thus becoming “senior among the security forces . . . a single center coordinating the work of different departments in the field of defense and mobilization.”<sup>46</sup> The supposedly new language cited by the *Izvestia* article that would “expand” the authorities of the General Staff mirrors the language already used in the 2013 version of *Regulations*. Thus, the General Staff does not appear to have actually been poised to receive any additional authorities in 2020.

<sup>38</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 18.

<sup>39</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Gerasimov, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia's Imperial General Staff,” *Perspective*, Vol. 16, No. 1, October–November 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Gerasimov, 2014. The federal organs of the executive include but are not limited to the FSB, the Ministry for Civil Defense and Emergency Situations (MChS), and the Federal National Guard Service of the Russian Federation (see Renz, 2018, pp. 86–120).

<sup>43</sup> Gerasimov, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Greg Whisler, “Strategic Command and Control in the Russian Armed Forces: Untangling the General Staff, Military Districts, and Service Main Commands (Part Three),” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2020b, pp. 248–249.

<sup>45</sup> Oscar Jonsson, *The Military Instrument and the Influence of the General Staff*, forthcoming, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Igor A. Fedorov, Aleksei Ramm, Aleksei Kozachenko, and Roman Kretsul, “V tsentre oborony: Genshtab naznachayut starshim sredi silovikov,” *Izvestia*, November 26, 2019.

However, the 2020 version added a subclause (11b), which directed the General Staff to undertake this effort "together with federal executive authorities."<sup>47</sup> The addition of subclause 11b certainly appears to moderate the coordination authority of the General Staff. However, its authorities are circumscribed in seemingly the most minor of ways—i.e., 11a still assigns the General Staff the lead role in developing a plan for and coordination of all forces, but with the caveat in subclause 11b that the General Staff coordinate its plans with these other federal bodies. If subclause 11a had been removed and replaced with subclause 11b, that might have indicated a more significant contraction of the General Staff's responsibilities and authorities. It is possible that subclause 11b was added to mollify the other federal executive bodies that compete for authority while doing little to substantively alter the central coordination role of the General Staff.

## Supporting Internal Structure and Staffing

Although not explicitly defined in the *Regulations on the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation*, it appears that each of the 16 tasks assigned to the General Staff roughly correlate with the sub-components of the General Staff (Main Directorates and Directorates). Consequently, it is possible that the document reflects the preexisting structure of the General Staff, rather than creates it.

Moreover, the information on the internal organization of the General Staff is scarce and an organizational chart is not publicly available. Attempts to cleanly define the internal structure and the General Staff's roles and responsibilities are blurred additionally by the fact that the General Staff is part of the structure of the MoD, and the Chief of the General Staff is also a First Deputy Minister of Defense.<sup>48</sup> Thus, this individual oversees the General Staff as the central organ of the military command of the Armed Forces Administration, several bodies of the MoD, as well as the Service Branches and Arms Commands and Military District Commands.<sup>49</sup> Figure 2.1 provides an organization chart that depicts the structure of the General Staff: We have been able to piece it together using our compilation of the information published and publicly available on the MoD website.

In the sections that follow, we discuss the responsibilities of the General Staff bodies, which include four Main Directorates, four Directorates, the Archive Service, and the National Defense Management Center. Each body includes a brief biography of the head of that organization, which we use as an indicator of the relative importance of a given body. Unless stated otherwise, the responsibilities of the General Staff bodies and biographies of their heads use information provided by the MoD.<sup>50</sup>

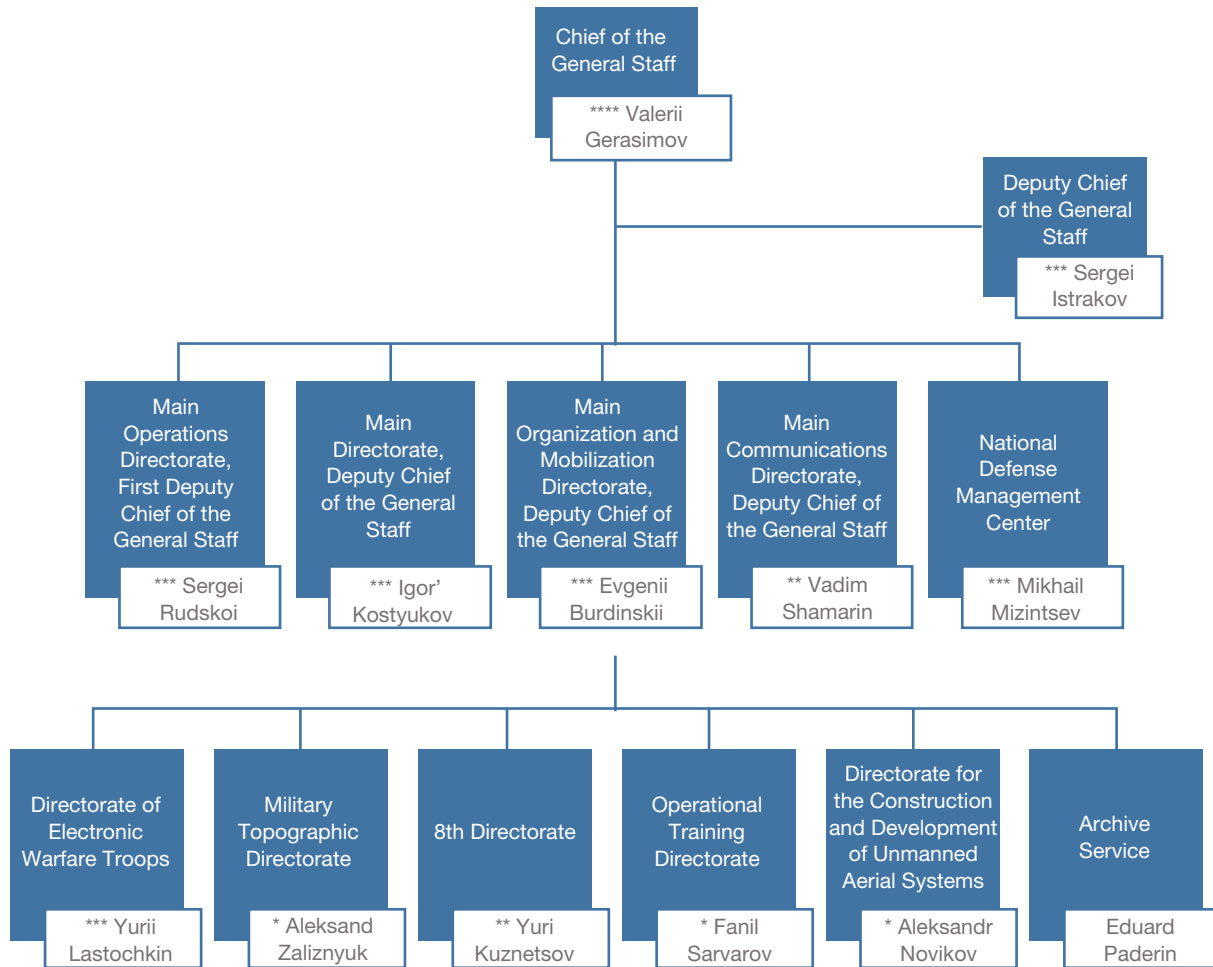
<sup>47</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 11b.

<sup>48</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b.

<sup>49</sup> MoD, [title unavailable], webpage, undated-n; and MoD, [title unavailable], webpage, undated-o. For example, "The command of the Airborne Forces is the central body of military command and is subordinate to the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"; see MoD, [title unavailable], webpage, undated-p; and President of the Russian Federation, Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 19.04.2017 N 177, April 19, 2017a. Please note that the FSB issued an decree that prohibits the sharing of information in the field of Russian military and military-technical activities, even though the information is not classified as a state secret, which is why many of the resources cited in this report are unavailable. See Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, "Order of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation of September 28, 2021, No. 379, 'On Approval of the List of Information in the Field of Military, Military-Technical Activities of the Russian Federation, Which, upon Receipt by a Foreign State, Its State Bodies, an International or Foreign Organization, Foreign Citizens or Stateless Persons Can Be Used Against the Security of the Russian Federation,'" Order No. 379, September 28, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> In general, there is little open-source information about military service history of the officers serving in the General Staff. Even where additional information is available, it is usually found in single, nonverifiable sources (for example, blog posts or local news outlets) and thus is excluded from this analysis.

**FIGURE 2.1**  
**Organizational Chart of the Russian General Staff**



SOURCE: Compilation of information from the MoD website.  
\* Denotes the military rank of the particular individual.

## The Chief of the General Staff

The Russian military tradition places a significant amount of personal responsibility on commanders.<sup>51</sup> The importance of commanding roles in the Russian military cannot be overstated. The Chief of the Russian General Staff holds *personal* responsibility for the success of the tasks assigned to the General Staff.<sup>52</sup> According to the *Regulations on the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation*, the Chief of the General Staff,

bears personal responsibility for the fulfillment of the tasks assigned to the General Staff and the military command and control bodies directly subordinate to him.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Donnelly, 1988, p. 152; V. V. Gerasimov, S. F. Rudskoi, V. V. Trushin, and S. P. Belokon, *Osnovy pobedy v Boiu*, Moscow: General'nyi shtab Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Gareev, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, point 26.

Appointments to the post are determined by the President of the Russian Federation. Although the Minister of Defense appears to have some influence over the selection of the individual serving in this role, the Duma has little to no authority in the appointment or oversight of this officer. Moreover, there is no term limit: The Chief of the General Staff serves at the pleasure of the President.<sup>54</sup> This appointment process provides an initial data point regarding the highly personalized system that dominates the Russian context. Additionally, the authority to select individuals for this position can serve as one of several institutional mechanisms by which the Russian president can exercise influence in high-level decisionmaking.

This individual's tasks largely mirror the tasks of the General Staff. However, as the First Deputy Minister of Defense, the Chief of the General Staff also oversees some MoD directorates and the High Commands of Service Branches, Commands of Combat Arms, and Commands of Military Districts. Hence, the Chief of the General Staff is responsible for drafting regulations on the General Staff and subordinate military C2 bodies and approving the structure and staffing of military C2 bodies, formations, military units, and organizations.<sup>55</sup> This broad scope of responsibilities provides another example of how the Russian president's sole authority to select the position of the Chief of the General Staff allows the president to exert control over the Armed Forces.

The Chief of the General Staff is also responsible for the development and implementation of a unified military-technical policy regarding weapons and military equipment, organizes scientific research in the interests of defense, manages the military-scientific complex of the Armed Forces, and supervises military-scientific cooperation with foreign states.<sup>56</sup>

Given the responsibility and authority invested in this role, the individual selected to serve as the Chief of the General Staff tends to have several qualities:

- **The Chief of the General Staff tends to be an officer from the Ground Forces.** All chiefs have come from the Ground Forces, even if they might have had experience in other services (such as the Naval Infantry or the Strategic Missile Forces). This illustrates the gravitational pull of the Ground Forces in Soviet and Russian military thinking and tradition. After all, the Main Command of the Ground Forces retained operational C2 authorities for the longest period, even after these authorities had already been removed from the main commands of other services, and the Ground Forces form the core of the Russian general-purpose forces.
- **The chief tends to have experience from key military engagements.** Since the 1950s, most chiefs gained military combat experience or staff experience from other key engagements of the time, for example, during World War II, the war in Afghanistan, or the Chechen Wars. This would suggest that combat experience is perceived as providing practical skills in command and control.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Bruce Menning and Shane E. Mahoney, *Final Report to National Council for Soviet and East European Research*, Washington, D.C.: Council for Soviet and East European Research, May 10, 1982; Aleksandr Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2019; and Zoltan Barany, *Democratic Breakdown and the Decline of the Russian Military*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> The *Regulations on the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation* exclude in this point the central military C2 bodies and other subdivisions that are part of the structure of the central apparatus of the Russian MoD. It seems that the central apparatus might refer to High Commands of Service Branches and Commands of Combat Arms; see President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, points 30g, 30, and 30c.

<sup>56</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2017b, points 30i–l.

<sup>57</sup> Makhmut A. Gareev, "Vidayushiicya voyennii reformator," *Krasnyi voyn*, No. 78, October 27, 2007, p. 13.

- **The chief usually has prior military district command experience.** In general, chiefs have also held command positions in at least one strategically important military district.<sup>58</sup>

As of this writing, the General Staff is headed by Army General Valerii Gerasimov (born in 1955). Gerasimov is the longest-serving chief since the communist revolution in the early 20th century and the third-longest-serving chief in the past 200 years.<sup>59</sup> In 1977, he graduated from the Kazan Higher Tank Command Red Banner School and subsequently served as a commander of ground forces in the Northern Group of Forces and the Far Eastern Military District. In 1993, Gerasimov became the commander of a motorized rifle division in the North-Western Group of Forces. After graduating from the Military Academy of the General Staff in 1997, he served in the positions of first deputy commander of an army in the Moscow Military District and deputy commander, chief of staff, and commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army in the North Caucasus Military District during the Second Chechen War. In 2003, he was appointed the Chief of Staff of the Far Eastern Military District. From 2005 to 2006, Gerasimov was the head of the Main Directorate of Combat Training and Service of the Troops at the MoD, but in December 2006, he returned to the North Caucasus Military District to serve as the Chief of Staff of that military district. In late 2007, he was appointed the Commander of the Leningrad Military District and, in early 2009, the Commander of the Moscow Military District. In December 2010, he became the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, left the General Staff for a few months in 2012 to serve as the Commander of the Central Military District, and later that year was appointed the Chief of the General Staff, First Deputy Minister of Defense. He replaced Army General Nikolai Makarov, after Makarov was dismissed.<sup>60</sup> This career path reflects a typical one that would be expected for an individual who eventually rose to the height of being Chief of the Russian General Staff.

It seems that the choice to appoint Gerasimov as the Chief of the General Staff stemmed from his military experience and the respect he commanded among troops.<sup>61</sup> For example, reporting on other potential appointments by then–newly appointed Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stressed personal relationships, but reporting on consideration of Gerasimov for the post lacked reference to any former history between Shoigu and Gerasimov. This absence might be evidence that Gerasimov was selected for his competence and military record and in the tradition of selecting Chiefs of General Staff from the Army.<sup>62</sup> Over the years, Gerasimov's influence in the national security establishment has increased. This appears to stem from the fact that under his command, the Russian Armed Forces have demonstrated their value as a foreign policy tool.

## Main Operations Directorate

The Main Operations Directorate (*Glavnoe operativnoe upravlenie*—GOU) dates back to the beginning of the 1700s and traditionally has been the center of strategic and operational planning and command and con-

<sup>58</sup> One exception exists: Baluyevski lacked combat experience and had not commanded a military district before he became Chief of the General Staff in 2004. Baluyevski was likely appointed Chief because of his significant experience working on the General Staff and as someone who would be able to ensure smoother relations between the General Staff and the political leadership than his predecessor Anatoly Kvashnin. His lack of experience as a commander of a military district raised some questions in the media, but it was countered by high-ranking officers who spoke out in defense in his appointment, specifically noting his experience in strategic planning, and characterized him as the right person to lead the General Staff and develop it into a proper “thinking, planning organ.” See Felgenhauer, 2005; Steven J. Main, *Couch for the MoD or the CGS? The Russian Ministry of Defense and The General Staff 2001–2004*, Camberley, UK: Conflict Studies Research Centre, May 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>60</sup> MoD, “Gerasimov Valerii Vasil’evich,” webpage, undated-c.

<sup>61</sup> “Genshtab vozglavil Valerii Gerasimov,” *Interfax*, November 9, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Vladimir Mukhin, “Rossiiskaya armiya u Shoigu stanet prezhde vsego armiei,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 9, 2012.

trol of the Armed Forces. As such, the body has always been the most important, and most prestigious, body of the General Staff.<sup>63</sup> Akhromeev and Kornienko describe the special relationship between the Main Operations Directorate and the Chief of the General Staff:

The Main Operations Directorate is a kind of headquarters within the General Staff, which to a greater or lesser extent depends on the style and methods of work of the Chief of the General Staff personally.<sup>64</sup>

The head of GOU is traditionally the First Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

According to the MoD website, the GOU is responsible for "operational command and control of troops in peacetime and wartime" and for "[organizing] cooperation between the Armed Forces and federal executive bodies, including other troops, military formations and bodies." Furthermore, the GOU oversees "strategic and operational planning of the use of the Armed Forces," "[organizes] the development of the Defense Plan of the Russian Federation," and participates in drafting proposals for the State Armament Program. The GOU analyzes the sources of military threats and drafts proposals for the Armed Forces' development to address these threats. It also coordinates planning for the development of other militarized forces. Finally, the GOU controls operational training of the Armed Forces and "[supports] military cooperation events in the format of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization."<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, the GOU translates and transfers the decisions and instructions of the Supreme Commander in Chief, the Minister of Defense, or the Chief of the General Staff into directives and combat orders, coordinates the activities of the central bodies of military command, and supports and monitors the implementation of orders.<sup>66</sup> To that end, the officers of the GOU are embedded with fielded units. According to the head of this Main Directorate, Colonel General Sergei Rudskoi,

This makes it possible to know the real situation on the ground, to determine in a timely manner the problems that the Army and Navy encounter while performing their missions, to promptly propose concrete measures to resolve them, and to provide assistance to headquarters and troops.<sup>67</sup>

The officers of the GOU also participate in day-to-day combat operations planning, as is the case with the intervention in Syria. According to General Rudskoi,

Officers [of the GOU] form the core of the Combat Management Group of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, which is tasked with analyzing the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and preparing proposals for the leadership. All issues of the organization, preparation and conduct of hostilities are constantly under the operational management and control of the GOU.

In addition, the generals and officers of the GOU take an active part in the negotiation processes to resolve conflicts in Syria [and] make a significant contribution to the implementation of the peacekeeping initiatives of the Russian Federation.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sergei Rudskoi, "Pul's oborony strany," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, No. 17, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> S. F. Akhromeev and G. M. Kornienko, "Glazami Marshala i diplomata," *Mezhdunarodnuyeye otnosheniya*, Moscow, 1992.

<sup>65</sup> MoD, "Glavnoe operativnoye upravlenie General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii," webpage, undated-d.

<sup>66</sup> Rudskoi, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Rudskoi, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Sergei Rudskoi, "Generator idei i zamyslov," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, No. 18, 2018, p. 1.



Consequently, the aptitude of the officers serving in the GOU is required to be among the highest within the General Staff. According to Rudskoi, personnel in these billets need to be competent not only in military art but also in “political, diplomatic, informational, technical, economic, scientific and many others [fields]”; they need to understand the big picture, think ahead, and be creative, innovative, reliable, and responsible.<sup>69</sup> Officers are often selected to serve in the GOU at early stages of their military career. Almost half of the officers serving in the GOU have combat experience, and one-third graduated from the Military Academy of the General Staff.<sup>70</sup>

The special position of the GOU is indicated by the career paths of its heads, which contrast with the service history of the heads of other General Staff bodies. The majority of Directorates of the General Staff are headed by officers with lifelong military careers in specific lines of work—e.g., topography or electronic warfare. That is not the case in the GOU, which traditionally is headed by an officer with extensive command experience. Furthermore, former heads of the GOU often are promoted to positions as commanders of military districts or commanders of service branches or combat arms divisions—i.e., appointed to positions with a significant amount of responsibility and a high degree of prestige in the Russian Armed Forces. This career path is not open to heads of other General Staff bodies.

It should be noted, however, that part of the responsibilities traditionally carried out by the GOU are performed by the NTsUO. In particular, tasks related to combat, real-time control of training activities, and interagency coordination appear to reside with the NTsUO. Consequently, the weight of day-to-day situational awareness and decisionmaking has shifted away from the Main Operations Directorate. It is too early to say whether the establishment of the NTsUO will weaken the influence of the GOU, but the choice of the current head of the GOU could serve as evidence that this could be the case.

Traditionally, heads of the GOU have gained experience on military district staffs. For example, Colonel General Andrei Kartapolov (head of the GOU, 2014–2015) was the Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (2010–2012), a Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (2012–2013) and the Chief of Staff of the Western Military District (2013–2014).<sup>71</sup> In contrast, the current head of the GOU, Colonel General Sergei Rudskoi, seemingly spent most of his military career in the GOU. His biography is unavailable on the MoD website, but other online sources indicate that his last commanding experience occurred in 1996, when he served as the Commander of the 255th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment. Reportedly, he also participated in the First and Second Chechen Wars.<sup>72</sup> In contrast, the military career of the director of the NTsUO more closely aligns with the service pattern of previous heads of the Directorate.

The head of the GOU remains the First Deputy Chief of the General Staff, which indicates that individual’s continued seniority. However, if that changes, it would be a clear indicator of a shift of the prestige and power away from the GOU, likely to the benefit of the NTsUO. The career paths of officers in each body could serve as another indicator of such a shift. In the past, the GOU-trained officers later served as commanders of military districts. That was the case for both Colonel General Vladimir Zarudnitsky, who was appointed the Commander of the Central Military District in 2014, and Colonel General Andrei Kartapolov, who was appointed the Commander of the Western Military District in 2015.<sup>73</sup> If commanders of military districts

<sup>69</sup> Sergei Rudskoi, “Ugrozy pariruem vdumchivo,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, No. 19, 2019, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Rudskoi, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Mikhail Mishustin, “O persone. Pravitel’stvo Mikhaila Mishustina. Kartapolov Andrei Valerievich,” *Kommersant*, January 20, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Geroi Strany, “Rudskoi Sergei Fedorovich,” webpage, undated.

<sup>73</sup> Mishustin, 2020.

start to be recruited from the staff of the NTsUO instead, it will be another indicator of the potential shift in relative importance.

It is possible, however, that the GOU will maintain its position as the intellectual powerhouse of the General Staff, even as the visibility and centrality of other portions of the General Staff (specifically, the NTsUO, discussed in the following section) start to increase. To forestall this challenge to its position of primacy within the General Staff, for example, the GOU might choose to second some of its officers to the NTsUO so that the GOU retains influence within this new center. Furthermore, it is safe to assume that the GOU will maintain its planning function and its responsibility for analyzing lessons learned during combat deployments and training.<sup>74</sup> In other words, it is likely that this body will remain the leading actor in the long-term outlook of the Russian Armed Forces.

## Main Directorate

The Main Directorate (*Glavnoe upravlenie*—GU), formerly the GRU, is perhaps the best-known Directorate of the General Staff, even though it is often seen as somewhat of an independent agency. Despite its formal name change, few within the analytical community or media have adopted its new moniker and instead continue to call it the GRU. Thus, we refer to this body as the GRU throughout the study. Formally, the GU is the military intelligence body of the MoD and the Armed Forces and is tasked with providing senior political and military leadership with intelligence information necessary to make decisions regarding political, economic, defense, scientific, technical, and environmental matters. The responsibility to supply information to federal legislative and executive bodies outside the MoD guarantees the GRU a slightly higher degree of independence than its subordination to the Chief of the General Staff would indicate.

Similar to other departments of the General Staff, the GRU also has experienced changes as a reaction to major security and strategic events. For example, during then-Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov's command in late 1970s and early 1980s, two new offices were created under the GRU to improve its abilities to analyze the strategic plans of potential opponents.<sup>75</sup> A new Central Research Institute was also subordinated to the GRU and tasked with studying the military potential of foreign countries.<sup>76</sup>

However, its role is not limited to intelligence collection and analysis. It also "[provides] conditions conducive to the successful implementation of the policy of the Russian Federation in the field of defense and security" and "[assistance in] the economic development, scientific and technological progress of the country and military-technical security of the Russian Federation."<sup>77</sup> In other words, while the GOU is responsible for planning the activities that the Armed Forces and the military districts are tasked with implementing in their respective areas of responsibility, it is the GRU that is responsible for supplying intelligence used in planning and implementing those measures short of overt military operation (with the exception of battlefield reconnaissance). These measures include covert military operations by its kinetic special forces (*spetsnaz*), cyber and information operations, diversion, and sabotage.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Rudskoi, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>77</sup> MoD, undated-d.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, *Understanding Russian Subversion: Patterns, Threats, and Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-331-A, 2020; and Quentin E. Hodgson, Logan Ma, Krystyna Marcinek, and Karen Schwindt, *Fighting Shadows in the Dark: Understanding and Countering Coercion in Cyberspace*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2961-OSD, 2019.

As of this writing, the GRU is headed by Colonel General Igor' Kostyukov (born in 1961), who started as a naval officer. After graduating from the Military-Diplomatic Academy, he spent most of his military career in the GRU.<sup>79</sup> Kostyukov is reported to have played a key role commanding military operations in Syria, given his senior status within the GRU.<sup>80</sup> Unsurprisingly, given his career-long service within the GRU and opacity behind which the institution operates, little additional information is known about Kostyukov's military service.

## Main Organization and Mobilization Directorate

The tasks of the Main Organization and Mobilization Directorate (*Glavnoe organizatsionno-mobilizatsionnoe upravlenie*—GOMU) are related to ensuring combat readiness of troops according to war plans created by the GOU. That is, the GOMU is responsible for “planning mobilizational training and deployment of the Armed Forces, other troops, military formations and bodies”; “planning the recruitment of mobilization reserves for the Armed Forces, other troops, military formations, bodies and coordination of work on maintaining military registration of citizens of the Russian Federation”; and “planning the provision of the Armed Forces with the main types of weapons, military equipment and other material resources.” The Directorate also plans and organizes measures to “improve the structures of military command and control bodies, formations, military units and organizations of the Armed Forces.”<sup>81</sup> Most of the tasks assigned to the GOMU appear to be focused on wartime preparations. However, the GOMU also has the lead role in ensuring that the Armed Forces are equipped adequately for their missions.<sup>82</sup>

The GOMU is headed by Colonel General Evgenii Burdinskii (born in 1960). He graduated from the Ussuriysk Suvorov Military School in 1977, the Blagoveshchensk Higher Tank Command School in 1981, the Frunze Military Academy in 1997, and the Military Academy of the General Staff in 2001. Before joining the General Staff in 1997, he served in the Western Military District as Head of the Organization and Mobilization Directorate, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Western Military District for organization and mobilization. In 2013, Burdinskii was appointed the First Deputy Chief of the GOMU, and in March 2018 he was promoted to the position of the head of the GOMU.<sup>83</sup>

## Main Communications Directorate

The Main Communications Directorate (*Glavnoe upravlenie svyazi*—GUS) is responsible for organizing the communications in the Armed Forces. It “plans and implements measures to maintain constant combat and mobilization readiness of the Signal Troops of the Armed Forces.” The task of the GUS focuses on the organization, monitoring, provision, support, and maintenance of communications and automated control systems in the Armed Forces. It also plans, organizes, and maintains courier-postal communications.<sup>84</sup>

The GUS is headed by Lieutenant General Vadim Shamarin (born in 1971). Shamarin does not have an official bio on the MoD website, but other open-source outlets indicate that in 2004, he entered the Military Academy of Communications, and in December 2010 was appointed the Deputy Chief of Staff of the

<sup>79</sup> “Istochnik: nachal'nikom GRU naznacheni vitse-admiral Igor' Kostyukov,” TASS, December 10, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> “Istochnik: nachal'nikom GRU naznacheni vitse-admiral Igor' Kostyukov,” 2018.

<sup>81</sup> MoD, “Glavnoe organizatsionno-mobilizatsionnoe upravlenie General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” webpage, undated-e.

<sup>82</sup> Yuliya Kozak, “Effektivnoe planirovanie—Zalog uspekha,” *Krasnaya zvezda*, No. 21, 2021, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> MoD, “Burdinskii Evgenii Vladimirovich,” webpage, undated-b.

<sup>84</sup> MoD, “Glavnoe upravlenie svyazi Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” webpage, undated-f.

Eastern Military District for Communications.<sup>85</sup> Sometime between 2014 and 2016,<sup>86</sup> he was appointed the deputy head of the GUS and then the head of the GUS in May 2020 after his predecessor was arrested for embezzlement.<sup>87</sup>

## National Defense Management Center

The NTsUO was established only in 2014, replacing the Central Command Post of the General Staff. The NTsUO was modeled on the MChS Management Center, which was built under Shoigu's leadership.<sup>88</sup> The NTsUO operates 24 hours a day under the same C2 structure as would be employed in wartime. Its two main functions are to provide centralized combat command and control of the Armed Forces and to enable the whole-of-government response to security threats. The NTsUO is organized into the following three control centers:

Strategic Nuclear Forces Command Center controls the use of nuclear weapons.

Combat Control Center monitors the military-political situation in the world and the socio-political situation in the Russian Federation, analyzes and forecasts the development of threats, develops ways to respond, and controls the use of the Armed Forces, as well as troops and military formations that are not part of the structure of the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Day-to-day Operations Management Center monitors all areas of comprehensive support of the Armed Forces and coordinates the activities of federal authorities to meet the needs of other troops, military formations, and bodies for defense purposes.<sup>89</sup>

The NTsUO manages all spheres of the Armed Forces' activities—it monitors the readiness of troops; personnel training and recruitment; and financial, logistical, medical, and housing support for troops.<sup>90</sup> The NTsUO is only one part of a broader, nationwide network of centers that are intended to provide situational monitoring and C2. Similar centers have been established at the headquarters of service branches and of combat arms, as well as in the headquarters of military districts, armies, corps, divisions, and brigades.<sup>91</sup> The Armed Forces also have newly acquired portable satellite videoconferencing systems that support classified communications between field units and the NTsUO.<sup>92</sup> The NTsUO also monitors the fulfillment of the State Defense Order through roughly 700 video cameras that are installed at more than 500 military-industrial complex sites and facilities.<sup>93</sup>

The interagency coordination function of the NTsUO is statutorily mandated. Requirements for information exchange between the MoD and other federal executive bodies were defined in the Presidential Decree of

<sup>85</sup> Mikhail Malyshev, "Kadrovye izmeneniya v vostochnom voennom okruge," *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, June 1, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> MoD, "V Vostochnom voennom okruge nachalas' masshtabnaya trenirovka po svyazi," webpage, July 8, 2014; and Dmitrii Voronin, "Park 'Patriot' v Efire!" *Soyuz Radiolyubitelei Rossii*, October 20, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> "Sud Priznal Zakonnym Prodlenie Aresta Eks-Zamglave Genshtaba Arslanovu," TASS, September 16, 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Shoigu was the Minister of Civil Defense and Emergency Situations from 1991 to 2012; see Aleksei Egorov, "Voennaya priemka. Natsional'nyi tsentr upravleniya oboronoi. Chast' 2. Effektivnoe upravlenie," *Telekanal Zvezda*, December 21, 2019b.

<sup>89</sup> "NTsUO Rossiiskoi Federatsii zastupil na boevoe dezhurstvo," *Rossiiskoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 12, 2014.

<sup>90</sup> MoD, "Natsional'nyi Tsentr Upravleniya Oboronoi Rossiiskoi Federatsii," webpage, undated-i.

<sup>91</sup> "NTsUO Rossiiskoi Federatsii zastupil na boevoe dezhurstvo," 2014, p. 8.

<sup>92</sup> Aleksei Egorov, "Voennaya priemka. Natsional'nyi tsentr upravleniya oboronoi. Chast' 3. Dal'nie rubezhi," *Telekanal Zvezda*, December 28, 2019c.

<sup>93</sup> "NTsUO Rossiiskoi Federatsii zastupil na boevoe dezhurstvo," 2014, p. 9.

September 1, 2014, *On the Procedure for Collecting Information on the Defense of the Russian Federation and Exchanging This Information*, and the list of bodies and organizations required to cooperate with the NTsUO has expanded since its inception.<sup>94</sup> The status of representatives of state authorities seconded to the NTsUO is also regulated by presidential decree; this appears to provide evidence that the coordinating role of the center has strong support from the President.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, the NTsUO developed standard reporting forms for all participants of information exchanges to facilitate real-time data processing.<sup>96</sup>

In terms of the technical capability and capacity provided by the NTsUO, it can accommodate representatives from all ministries and federal agencies.<sup>97</sup> By 2019, the NTsUO had established information exchanges with more than 70 federal executive bodies (ministries and agencies) and over 1,300 state corporations and enterprises of the military-industrial complex.<sup>98</sup> The NTsUO continues to improve its telecommunication capabilities to facilitate the exchange of both classified and unclassified information. It appears that real-time classified information exchange between the military and the federal subjects of the Russian Federation was established only in 2020.<sup>99</sup>

The NTsUO is equipped with modern computing facilities, including a supercomputer with a speed of 16 petaflops and storage capacity of 236 petabytes, which supports NTsUO modeling and forecasting.<sup>100</sup> According to Shoigu, the NTsUO uses supercomputing and artificial intelligence to forecast the unfolding of crises (domestically and abroad) using data from prior conflicts and simulates various scenarios to develop proposals for decisionmaking at all levels, from tactical to strategic.<sup>101</sup>

The NTsUO is led by Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev (born in 1962). After graduating from the Kiev Higher Combined Arms Command School (1984), he served as a reconnaissance officer in the Western Group of Forces and in the Transcaucasian Military District. From 1991 to 1993, he served as a commander of motor rifle battalions in the Transcaucasus. From 1993 to 1996, he attended Frunze Military Academy. After graduation, Mizintsev joined the General Staff as a senior officer-operator of the GOU. From 2001 to 2003, he studied at the Military Academy of the General Staff and subsequently was promoted to the position of chief of a group in the GOU (2003–2007). In 2007, he left the General Staff to cycle through military districts as their Head of Operations Directorate and Deputy Chief of Staff—2007–2010 in the Moscow Military District; 2010–2011 in the North Caucasus Military District; and 2011–2012 in the Southern Military District. In August 2012, he returned to the General Staff to head the Central Command Post of the General Staff, and in December 2014, he was appointed the first head of the National Defense Management Center.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Fedor Kozanchuk, “Dal’neishee sovershenstvovanie informatsionnogo vzaimodeistviya v oblasti oborony strany,” *Rossiiskoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 11, 2015, p. 15.

<sup>95</sup> Aleksandr Tikhonov, “Kreativ mezhvedomstvennogo vzaimodeistviya,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, No. 129, 2017, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Kozanchuk, 2015, pp. 15–16.

<sup>97</sup> “NTsUO Rossiiskoi Federatsii zastupil na boevoe dezhurstvo,” 2014, pp. 8–11.

<sup>98</sup> Viktor Khudoleev, “Operativnost’ prinyatiya reshenii povyshena v razy,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, No. 100, 2019, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> MoD, “Ministr oborony RF Sergei Shoigu zayavil o sozdanii zakrytoi sistemy dlya obsuzhdenii s predstavatelyami vlasti,” webpage, November 20, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> “Shoigu rasskazal o moshchnosti superkomp’yutera Tsentra upravleniya oboronoi,” *RBK*, December 31, 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Aleksei Egorov, “Voennaya priemka. Natsional’nyi tsentr upravleniya oboronoi. Chast’ 1. Dezhurnaya smena,” *Telekanal Zvezda*, December 15, 2019a.

<sup>102</sup> MoD, “Mizintsev Mikhail Evgen’evich,” webpage, undated-h.

## Operational Training Directorate

The main tasks of the Operational Training Directorate (*Upravlenie operativnoi podgotovki*—UOP) seem to be twofold. First, UOP oversees short- and mid-term planning of training activities of the Armed Forces. The UOP monitors the coordination and approval of plans for operational training in the Armed Forces, controls their implementation, analyzes the results of operational training, and drafts recommendations for the plans' improvement. Secondly, the UOP is responsible for planning and overseeing the conduct of high-profile training activities—i.e., operational training under the leadership of senior officials of the Russian Federation, the Minister of Defense, the Chief of the General Staff, or some combination thereof; training with international partners; or training with troops and military formations outside the MoD. The UOP provides yearly summaries of the results of the training and sets training tasks for the following year.<sup>103</sup>

The UOP is headed by Major General Fanil Sarvarov (born in 1969). Sarvarov started his military career as an officer in the armored forces. In 1990, Sarvarov graduated from Kazan Higher Tank Command Red Banner School. Between 1992 and 2003, he gained six years of combat experience in the Ossetian-Ingush conflict and the Chechen Wars. He graduated from Malinovsky Military Armored Forces Academy in 1999 and the Military Academy of the General Staff in 2008. After graduation, Sarvarov continued his military service in the GOU and the UOP. In 2015 and 2016, he was involved in organizing and conducting the military intervention in Syria, but the details of his efforts are not publicly available. Sarvarov was appointed the head of the UOP in 2016.<sup>104</sup>

## Additional Directorates

The Directorate of Electronic Warfare Troops leads the development, training, and maintenance of the combat readiness of the Electronic Warfare Troops; plans and organizes electronic warfare measures; manages and protects electronic warfare equipment for interservice use; and serves as the main radio frequency authority of the MoD.<sup>105</sup> This directorate was promoted in rank in 2009, when Electronic Warfare troops were elevated from a combat support element to a combat arm. Previously, Electronic Warfare forces were housed under a combined General Staff element from the Soviet era, "the General Staff Main Directorate for automated command and control systems and electronic warfare."<sup>106</sup>

The Military Topographic Directorate is the central body of the military command and control of the Topographic Service of the Armed Forces. The lineage of the Topographic Service dates back to 1796, and its role has always been to plan, organize, and improve the system of topographic, geodesic, and navigation support of the Armed Forces and other troops, military formations, and bodies. The Topographic Service is responsible for collecting geospatial information about the topographic and geodetic features of terrain, its facilities, and its infrastructure, both on the territory of the Russian Federation and foreign countries. The Topographic Service also develops concepts for building a navigation support system for the Armed Forces and organizes the operations of satellite navigation equipment and other means of navigation support for service branches, combat arms, and military C2 bodies.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> MoD, "Upravlenie operativnoi podgotovki Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii," webpage, undated-l.

<sup>104</sup> MoD, "Sarvarov Fanil Fanisovich," webpage, undated-j.

<sup>105</sup> MoD, "Upravlenie nachal'nika voisk radioelektronnoi bor'by Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii," webpage, undated-k.

<sup>106</sup> Jonas Kjellén, *Russian Electronic Warfare: The Role of Electronic Warfare in the Russian Armed Forces*, Stockholm: FOI, FOI--R--4625--SE, September 2018, p. 29

<sup>107</sup> MoD, "Voenno-topograficheskoe upravlenie General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii," webpage, undated-m.

The Directorate for the Construction and Development of Unmanned Aerial Systems was established in 2013. Its role is to organize and coordinate efforts to develop systems based on UAVs, coordinate equipping the Armed Forces with these systems, organize comprehensive support for their use, and organize training of personnel necessary to operate and sustain UAVs. This directorate oversees the 924th National Unmanned Aviation Center, responsible for training unmanned aviation specialists, conducting tests of complexes with UAVs, and conducting other scientific work in the field.<sup>108</sup>

The 8th Directorate oversees the State Secret Protection Service of the Armed Forces, which fulfills the state secret protection tasks of the General Staff. The State Secret Protection Service supervises the classified information protection bodies within the Armed Forces, manages cryptographic activities in the Armed Forces, certifies information protection means, and licenses state secrets protection activities of military units and organizations of the Armed Forces.<sup>109</sup> This directorate is responsible for cybersecurity of military information systems.<sup>110</sup>

The Archive Service of the Armed Forces comprises 14 personnel with the task of organizing and managing the archival work of the Armed Forces, including the declassification of historical records. It enables the examination of archival documents, provides methodological guidance, and coordinates the activities of the Central Archive of the MoD and the archives of service branches, arms, and military districts.<sup>111</sup>

## Concluding Observations

The structure and tradition of the General Staff—as a headquarters body, not just an administrative or advisory body—that emerged following World War II persists. The core responsibilities of the Russian General Staff are to analyze dynamically evolving military-political situations, anticipate further developments, plan for contingencies, ensure combat readiness of the Armed Forces, and perform centralized command and control of the Armed Forces. Hence, the General Staff can be best conceptualized as the single professional military interface between Russia’s political leadership and the Armed Forces in their warfighting function.

The chain of command flows from the President as the Supreme Commander in Chief to the Minister of Defense to the Chief of the General Staff. Additionally, Shoigu, the Minister of Defense, has a strong personal relationship with the President.<sup>112</sup> Shoigu arrived at the top post at the MoD after 22 years at the helm of the Ministry for Civil Defense and Emergency Situations, a period that included his explicit siding with Boris Yeltsin in 1991 and 1993.<sup>113</sup> Shoigu further demonstrated his loyalty in these early years by declining to leverage his political popularity to challenge Putin for the presidency in 1999.<sup>114</sup> This personal relationship and demonstrations of loyalty fundamentally condition the influence of the MoD and, by extension, the influence of the General Staff.

The President and the Minister of Defense are responsible for formulating and defining the *political will* of Russia, and the General Staff is responsible for the military aspects of its execution through the employ-

<sup>108</sup> A. V. Novikov, V. V. Zevin, and I. A. Rasshchepkin, “Problemy ekspluatatsii robototekhnicheskikh kompleksov voennogo naznacheniya vozdušnogo primeneniya v Vooruzhennykh Silakh Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” *Voennaya mysl*, No. 7, 2018, p. 80.

<sup>109</sup> Roman Biryulin, “V chest’ vekovogo yubileya Sluzhby,” *Krasnaya zvezda*, No. 130, 2018, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> Yurii Kuznetsov, “Sto let na okhrane sekretov gosudarstva,” *Krasnaya zvezda*, No. 123, 2018, p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> MoD, “Arkhivnaya sluzhba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” webpage, undated-a.

<sup>112</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, “Is Russia’s Defence Chief Emerging as Putin’s Possible Successor?” *Al Jazeera*, September 14, 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Renz, 2018, p. 117.

<sup>114</sup> Kirill Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics Within the Russian Military*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021, p. 3.

ment of the Armed Forces. In other words, while technically the President as the Supreme Commander in Chief or the Minister of Defense can give orders directly to any military unit, in practice, these orders come through the General Staff.

Moreover, the Chief of the General Staff is personally responsible for the fulfillment of the tasks assigned to bodies directly subordinate to him, especially for the combat readiness of the Armed Forces. The Chief of the General Staff is directly subordinated to the Minister of Defense, but, contrary to most Western countries, the subdepartments of the MoD seem to be a *support* rather than a *control* body for the General Staff—i.e., while the General Staff defines the equipping and sustainment needs of the Armed Forces, it is the MoD that is responsible for solving problems of logistic, financial, housing, medical, and other support, and for organization of acquisition of weapons and military equipment.<sup>115</sup>

Consequently, there is a symbiotic relationship between the Minister of Defense and his first deputy, the Chief of the General Staff: The Minister of Defense cannot build a strong political position if the Armed Forces are weak, and the Chief of the General Staff cannot strengthen the influence of the Armed Forces in the broader national security system if the Minister of Defense does not have a strong position in the government to fight for power and resources. The position of the General Staff in this broader national security system is therefore a function of three interdependent variables: the political strength of the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff and the relationship between them, the intellectual potential of the General Staff and combat capabilities of the Armed Forces, and the perception of importance of military means in responding to existing security threats among senior political leaders.

Relatively successful Russian military interventions in Ukraine (2014–2021) and Syria (2015–2019) appeared to have increased the influence of Shoigu and the military within the broader national security system.<sup>116</sup> The poor performance of the Russian Armed Forces during the first month of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 could moderate this influence. However, it is not clear where fault for the military's ineffectiveness in executing this invasion will ultimately be found—i.e., the Kremlin, the military, or the intelligence services.<sup>117</sup>

A widely used explanation for this centralized command approach is the fact that, historically, Russia has had to fight wars in or near its territory, which increases the need for an effective day-to-day operational command of the troops in the territory and changes the overall force command dynamics.<sup>118</sup> While this is of course just one potential explanation of several for the centralized command approach, prominent Russian military scholar for former Chief of the Russian General Staff, Makhmut Gareev described it in the following way:

Russia, as in the last war, is not going to fight in distant overseas territories. If necessary, it needs to be ready to defend its territory when the High Command, through the General Staff, directly controls the fronts, individual armies and other military structures. In the event of a large-scale war, as experience has shown, the Minister of Defense holds the post of Deputy Supreme Commander in Chief, and the General Staff functions under the leadership of the Supreme Command Headquarters. As the experience of the wars of

<sup>115</sup> Il'ya Kramnik, "Reforma Serdyukova–Makarova," *Natsional'naya Oborona*, No. 12, 2011.

<sup>116</sup> Fredrik Westerlund, *The Role of the Military in Putin's Foreign Policy: An Overview of Current Research*, Stockholm: FOI, FOI-R--5070--SE, February 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Isaac Chotiner, "The Purges in Putin's Shrinking Inner Circle," *New Yorker*, March 22, 2022.

<sup>118</sup> This experience is contrasted with the U.S Joint Chiefs of Staff; the United States generally fights wars far from its national borders. See, for example, Gareev, 2003. Of course, additional explanations for this centralized command approach also exist, including the potential that this model simply reflects the top-down political system in Russia, which has regularly been concerned about maintaining the loyalty and control of its military.



the 20th century has shown, violation of this principle complicates the control of the Armed Forces and reduces its efficiency.<sup>119</sup>

The fact that the General Staff is an Armed Forces headquarters rather than an administrative body is treated by Russian authors as a way to ensure flexibility and more effective command and control. Shaposhnikov wrote that “it is impossible to properly prepare for war and ensure effective control of the armed forces with the outbreak of war, if the General Staff and its chief are shackled in their action in a peaceful time and not endowed with the appropriate rights.”<sup>120</sup> According to Gareev, it is important that the military hierarchy is drawn along the line of headquarters rather than simply along the lines of command for the ability to respond to the challenges of modern warfare. It is specifically relevant for the ability to respond and adjust to information- and technology-related issues that demand a “unified regulation of headquarters service, the organization of communications, covert command and control of troops, information security,” which is possible only if all lower-level headquarters act under the leadership of higher headquarters.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Makhmut A. Gareev, “Point of View: General Staff Versus the Committee of Chiefs of Staff,” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, July 12, 2002.

<sup>120</sup> Shaposhnikov, as retold in Gareev, 2003.

<sup>121</sup> Gareev, 2003.



## The Russian General Staff in Comparative Context

Having detailed the legal mandate and organizational structure of the Russian General Staff in Chapter Two, in this chapter, we place the organization in comparative institutional context with the U.S. Joint Staff. This high-level comparison provides a reference for policymakers and warfighters alike who engage with their counterparts in Russia, and it illuminates structural differences and how they affect how U.S. and Russian military leadership make and execute decisions. This chapter is not meant to provide an exhaustive comparative analysis that mirrors the structure of Chapter Two. It is intended to broadly illustrate the key respects in which the mandates of these two institutions diverge.

First, we briefly discuss the history of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and how the institution has evolved since its instantiation during WWII. Drawing on Title 10 of the U.S. Code,<sup>1</sup> the next section outlines the roles, responsibilities, and authorities assigned to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and the Joint Staff, noting where these responsibilities differ from their Russian counterpart. Then we compare the organizational charts of these two bodies and their relative positions in their respective chains of command and discuss those authorities that are explicitly excluded from the JCS and CJCS's mandate.

The analysis in this chapter demonstrates how different the Russian General Staff and JCS are as organizations, so it is perhaps unsurprising that their organizational structures, authorities, and roles in their respective national security decisionmaking processes vary considerably. Yet, the asymmetries in the mandates of these institutions are consequential. Thus, we conclude this chapter with a high-level assessment of the potential implications of each model.

### History and Responsibilities of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

Unlike the centuries-old tradition of the Russian General Staff, the JCS was formed during World War II. The JCS was established in 1942 by President Franklin Roosevelt without a formal charter or articulation of roles and responsibilities. When the attack on Pearl Harbor drove the United States into the war, the U.S. military lacked a means to coordinate large-scale global campaigns either internally or in concert with allies. Roosevelt sought to fill this void with the JCS, which included senior officers from the Army and Navy and the air components of these services, who reported to him directly.<sup>2</sup>

The National Security Act of 1947 created many aspects of the national security apparatus that exists today, including the JCS.<sup>3</sup> Among other things, the act merged the military services, under the authority of a Secretary of Defense, under one department. In addition to formalizing the JCS into a permanent organization with

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Code, Title 10, Armed Forces.

<sup>2</sup> Steven L. Rearden, *Council of War: A History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1942–1991*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012, pp. xi, 2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “National Security Act of 1947,” webpage, undated.

defined roles and responsibilities, chief among which was providing strategic military advice to the President, the act also created the Joint Staff as a body of no more than 100 individuals at ranks below the Chairman.<sup>4</sup>

The role of the CJCS was established in 1949 to lead the JCS; over time, the influence of the CJCS has become greater than the JCS, despite early hesitations over vesting too much military authority in one individual.<sup>5</sup> Although the JCS began as a group of equals responsible for advising the President in his role as Commander in Chief, some believed it would be more efficient to have one representative who was unconstrained by responsibilities to their service to liaise between the JCS and the President.<sup>6</sup>

Competition among the services for influence was evident from the beginning of the CJCS's creation. For example, the first CJCS, Army General Omar Bradley, was confronted with concerns from the U.S. Navy over waning naval influence in a national security strategy that was increasingly reliant on nuclear weapons, which the Navy did not have at the time.<sup>7</sup> This instance demonstrates a broader trend in JCS relations described as *service parochialism* by Peter Roman and David Tarr, who echo Carl Builder's arguments that each service has its own culture and identity that can impede service integration—i.e., jointness.<sup>8</sup> The Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 expanded the Joint Staff to 400 officers to better enable joint planning, but adding more people did not change the fundamental issue of interservice disagreements that delayed decisionmaking.<sup>9</sup> As demonstrated later in this chapter, interservice competition became a persistent theme that also affects the modern-day joint force.

Furthermore, the Reorganization Act codified the Joint Staff as a military planning staff to the Secretary of Defense in his role overseeing the military command structure, while the relationship between the CJCS and military commanders grew stronger.<sup>10</sup>

Under the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the Joint Staff was removed from the chain of command between the President and the services, which now flowed from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the Combatant Commander.<sup>11</sup> The combatant commands (CCMDs) were given responsibility for operational planning and execution, while the services were to focus exclusively on their organize, train, and equip mission.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the legislation implemented the following organizational changes:

- The CJCS became the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.
- The role of Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (VCJCS) was created.

<sup>4</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, "The Joint Chiefs of Staff Celebrates 72 Years Today," July 26, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Steven L. Rearden, *The Role and Influence of the Chairman: A Short History*, Washington, D.C.: Joint History Office, Office of the Director, Joint Staff, Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 2011, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Rearden, 2011, pp. 3–4; and Nathan S. Lowrey, *The Chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1949–2016*, Washington, D.C.: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2016, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Rearden, 2011, pp. 8–9. See also Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Roman and David W. Tarr, "The Joint Chiefs of Staff: From Service Parochialism to Jointness," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 113, No. 1, Spring 1998, p. 92; and Builder, 1989. The term *joint* or *jointness* is used in this report to describe activities that involve more than one military department.

<sup>9</sup> Public Law 85-599, Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, August 6, 1958.

<sup>10</sup> Lowrey, 2016, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Public Law 99-433, Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, October 1, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Kimberly Jackson, Natasha Lander, Colin Roberts, Dan Madden, and Rebeca Orrie, "Historical Milestones Narrative," in *Movement and Maneuver: Culture and the Competition for Influence Among the U.S. Military Services*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2270-OSD, 2019, p. 193.

- The Joint Staff came under the control of the CJCS.<sup>13</sup>

The Joint Staff was also mandated to include roughly equal representation across the services. As summarized in a prior RAND report, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986

fundamentally changed the power dynamic within DoD and laid the foundation for the modern era of U.S. military internal interactions. By reorienting and redefining roles and relationships within DoD, Congress helped mitigate the negative consequences of service competition and poor interservice coordination and communication that resulted in operational blunders in the Iranian hostage crisis, the Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, and the Grenada invasion.<sup>14</sup>

The modern-day JCS, post-Goldwater-Nichols, comprises the CJCS, VCJCS, and U.S. military service chiefs (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard Bureau, and Space Force).<sup>15</sup>

The next section focuses on the responsibilities of the CJCS and JCS and provides comparative observations where the responsibilities or organizational structures differ from those of the Chief of the Russian General Staff and General Staff.

## Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

The National Security Act of 1947 codified the roles and responsibilities of the CJCS, chief among them being the provision of strategic military advice to the President.<sup>16</sup> Title 10 of the U.S. Code provides the statutory basis for this advisory role and regulates the President’s appointment of the individual serving in this position. While the appointment can be extended, the position is initially limited to a four-year term and selection is subject to congressional approval.<sup>17</sup> In the modern era, the CJCS has three functions specified in Title 10: (1) planning, advice, and policy formulation; (2) preparing a National Military Strategy; and (3) submitting an annual report to Congress regarding requirements of the CCMDs.

With respect to the first function, in addition to its advisory role assisting the President and Secretary of Defense in the provision of strategic direction to the armed forces, the CJCS is responsible for (in part): assisting with strategic contingency planning; providing advice on global military integration, i.e., advice concerning ongoing military operations and the allocation of forces among geographic and functional commands; evaluating the overall preparedness of the joint force; assessing technology and concept of operations advances to advise the Secretary of Defense regarding potential new and alternative joint military capabilities; developing doctrine and policy for the employment of the joint force; and recommending a budget to the Secretary of Defense for the activities of the unified and specified CCMDs.<sup>18</sup> Recall that the Chief of the General Staff has all of these same responsibilities in the Russian context, but with much more latitude, formulating strategy and doctrine, assessing readiness, and developing force structure requirements and associated budgets for the entire Russian military.

Preparation of the National Military Strategy includes the responsibility for assessing the “strategic environment,” assessing the “military ways, ends, and means” of supporting the objectives in the National Security Strategy, developing “military options” to address the identified threats, assessing “joint force capabilities,

<sup>13</sup> Pub. L. 99-433, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Pub. L. 99-433, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Joint Staff,” webpage, undated-a.

<sup>16</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019; and Lowrey, 2016, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Code, Title 10, Armed Forces; Section 151, Joint Chiefs of Staff: Composition, Functions, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Code, Title 10, Armed Forces; Section 153, Chairman: Functions.

capacities, and resources" relative to those threats, and establishing "military guidance for the development of the joint force."<sup>19</sup> The most similar responsibilities between the CJCS and the Chief of the Russian General Staff reside in the areas of strategic planning and doctrine development. For example, the U.S. National Military Strategy, in terms of substantive content, has parallels with the Defense Plan developed by the Chief of the General Staff.<sup>20</sup> Both leaders thus have significant roles in developing the strategic direction for the armed forces in the United States and Russia. Yet the CJCS is responsible for developing only *joint* doctrine, whereas the Chief of the General Staff has purview over doctrine development for the entire armed forces.

Recently, then-CJCS General Joseph Dunford successfully advocated for an increased role of the CJCS, specifically the role of *global integrator*, an authority legally added to the CJCS's mandate in 2016.<sup>21</sup> Although it still falls within an "advisory" capacity, this integration role tasked the CJCS with providing recommendations to the Secretary of Defense and President regarding the global allocation of forces—a significant expansion of the CJCS's responsibilities. One article characterized this new responsibility as having "transformed" the role of the CJCS from a "principal military advisor" to "*the* principal official considering global tradeoffs."<sup>22</sup> This responsibility also shares similarities with that of the Chief of the General Staff, although the role is more constrained in the U.S. context. For example, the Chief of the General Staff is responsible for the coordination and integration of the five military districts—or *Obyedinennyye strategicheskiye komandovaniya* (OSKs) in wartime—and is endowed with command authority to achieve this integration. The CJCS, although its integration role has expanded, does not possess any operational authority; the CJCS's authority as integrator is limited to advice.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the CJCS's Annual Report on Combatant Command Requirements entails a consolidated "integrated priority list of requirements" submitted by the CCMDs.<sup>24</sup> With this report, the CJCS is intended to provide their expert advice to Congress regarding the rationale for the CJCS's consolidation and prioritization of requirements, describe the "funding proposed in the President's budget" to address these requirements, and address each "deficiency in readiness" identified by the CJCS's assessment of joint readiness.<sup>25</sup> In the Russian context, the Chief of the General Staff plays a role more aligned with that of a U.S. geographic Combatant Commander. Even then, the Chief of the General Staff's responsibilities are broader, defining and prioritizing acquisition requirements for the entire Russian military in the development of the State Armaments Program that equips the entire force.<sup>26</sup>

## The Joint Staff

The personnel that comprise the Joint Staff and report to the Chairman must be assigned in roughly equal numbers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force. Unlike the General Staff, person-

<sup>19</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 153.

<sup>20</sup> Russia's *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, which the General Staff plays a lead role in developing, more closely resembles the U.S. National Security Strategy. See Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 153.

<sup>22</sup> Paul D. Shinkman, "The Joint Chiefs' Power Surge," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 30, 2019, emphasis added. Concerns were raised in this same article about whether this new responsibility alters the balance of power between civilian and military officials in favor of the military.

<sup>23</sup> Shinkman, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 153.

<sup>25</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 153.

<sup>26</sup> Grau and Bartles, 2016, p. 10.

nel appointed to the Joint Staff do not lose their service affiliation, and this appointment is rotational. By contrast, appointments to the General Staff constitute a permanent placement, and these officers exchange their service insignia for that of the General Staff and serve within this body for the rest of their career. In the U.S. model, serving in a joint role, developing this perspective, and developing these intraservice relationships are intended to help the U.S. military overcome service parochialism and increase joint capabilities. For the Russian General Staff, the additional steps of permanent reappointment of officers and striking their service affiliations similarly serve as mechanisms to overcome service parochialism, albeit with more emphasis.<sup>27</sup>

The size of these two organizations also diverges significantly. While the Joint Staff is capped at no more than 1,500 members of the armed forces assigned to the entire body, the Main Operations Directorate alone appears to be staffed by more than 1,500 personnel.<sup>28</sup> Selection to serve on the General Staff is considered extremely prestigious—these officers represent the elite within their field, particularly in the case of the GOU; only officers with the highest of aptitudes are selected for these billets, and these officers are often identified and selected at early stages of their military career. Until the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which required officers to perform a joint service assignment prior to being promoted to the General or Flag officer level, service on the Joint Staff was considered to be the “kiss of death.”<sup>29</sup>

Even with this reform, the services still prioritize service assignments over joint assignments. As of 2008, for example, a significant number of officers were not in compliance—i.e., were not fulfilling their joint duty requirements—and the lack of joint experience was rewarded to some degree, given that these officers were promoted significantly faster than officers with joint experience.<sup>30</sup> Goldwater-Nichols has had more-recent success: The vast majority of officers have joint experience, although a recent RAND study still found that the service-specific experience of officers significantly outweighs joint experience.<sup>31</sup>

More-recent RAND analysis also suggests that there is variation among services in terms of the point in an officer’s career at which joint service is emphasized. For example, in the Navy, joint assignments carry a greater level of emphasis once officers ascend to the Flag Officer level, whereas in the Army, joint assignments are emphasized earlier in an officer’s career.<sup>32</sup> Prior RAND analysis also demonstrates that certain services emphasize filling director billets and staff positions with greater frequency than others. For example, the Army and Marine Corps dominated leadership of the J3 Operations directorate during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, given the leading roles that these services assumed during combat operations.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Grau and Bartles, 2016, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Code, Title 10, Armed Forces; Section 155, Joint Staff. Specific personnel numbers are difficult to pinpoint in the Russian literature. We derived this number by compiling points made in two sources: Pavel Felgenhauer, “A Profound Change in the Russian Military May Be Happening as the Power of the General Staff Is Undermined,” *Perspective*, Vol. 19, No. 1, April 2009, p. 5; and Galeotti, 2021, p. 5. Felgenhauer notes, “It’s reported that 300 senior general and officers of GOU . . . will be ousted.” Galeotti (2021) notes, “The GOU managed to keep the headcount reduction at 20%, and has since been brought back up to its original strength.” Assuming these estimated personnel numbers are roughly correct, that would mean the GOU is staffed with approximately 1,500 personnel.

<sup>29</sup> Michael C. Veneri, “The U.S. Military’s Implementation of the Joint Duty Promotion Requirement,” *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 34, No. 3, April 2008, p. 419; Pub. L. 99-433.

<sup>30</sup> Veneri, 2008, p. 424.

<sup>31</sup> Kimberly Jackson, Katherine L. Kidder, Sean Mann, William H. Waggy II, Natasha Lander, and S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Raising the Flag: Implications of U.S. Military Approaches to General and Flag Officer Development*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4347-OSD, 2020, p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson et al., 2020, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Zimmerman et al., 2019.

## Comparative Organizational Structures and Responsibilities

Presently, the Joint Staff is organized into eight Directorates, which encompass all aspects of military planning and operations. These Directorates typically are led by three-star generals or admirals, although exceptions may occur. The Directorates, their leaders as of October 2021, and their areas of responsibility are summarized in Table 3.1.

Figure 3.1 provides an organizational chart for the U.S. JCS. For a similar chart depicting the Russian General Staff, see Figure 2.1.

The directorate titles in Figure 3.1 and Figure 2.1 might give one the impression that these two organizations have many of the same responsibilities, but such a conclusion misses important nuances. Rather than being structured to reflect the relatively limited statutory functions of the CJS, the Joint Staff directorates mirror the functional directorates of the services' headquarters staff functions.<sup>34</sup> This organizational chart thus was adopted as part of a broader effort intended to facilitate cross-service communication. The service headquarters' staffs were organized this way to create a common understanding of directorates and roles across service arms. For example, the number 4 as a symbol is in use across the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Joint organizations, which promotes a common understanding that these organizations are responsible for logistics. The Joint Staff provides planning and advice and assists with policy formation in each of these substantive areas, but it has the narrow purview of considering such concepts as operations, logistics, and force structure solely as each relates to jointness. The Army logistics staff, on the other hand, is focused solely on supplying Army forces.

Some of the responsibilities of the Russian General Staff are more closely aligned to that of a regional U.S. CCMD, but for the entire war effort rather than a specific theater of operations. For example, U.S. European Command (EUCOM) has the autonomy to develop operational plans, set the military exercise training schedule, and develop force planning requirements for the CCMD. The Russian General Staff retains the same responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> The commander of the Western Military District thus does not have the same responsibility for strategy formulation, planning, and implementation that the EUCOM commander possesses. Grau and Bartles offer a helpful description of the vast responsibilities of the General Staff relative to the U.S. model:

In terms of equivalency, the Russian General Staff has the same responsibilities for long-term planning duties conducted by the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense and unified combatant commanders; elements of strategic transportation performed by USTRANSCOM [U.S. Transportation Command]; doctrinal and capabilities development, as well as equipment procurement for all branches of the Ministry of Defense. It even has an inspector-general like function for ensuring that its standards and regulations are adhered to.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 155.

<sup>35</sup> Note that the services and OSKs are responsible for combat training in the Russian model. The General Staff and the OSKs are responsible for *operational training*—"the capabilities of the C2 system and abilities of commanders and their staffs to execute war plans." See Whisler, 2020b, p. 246.

<sup>36</sup> Grau and Bartles, 2016, p. 10.

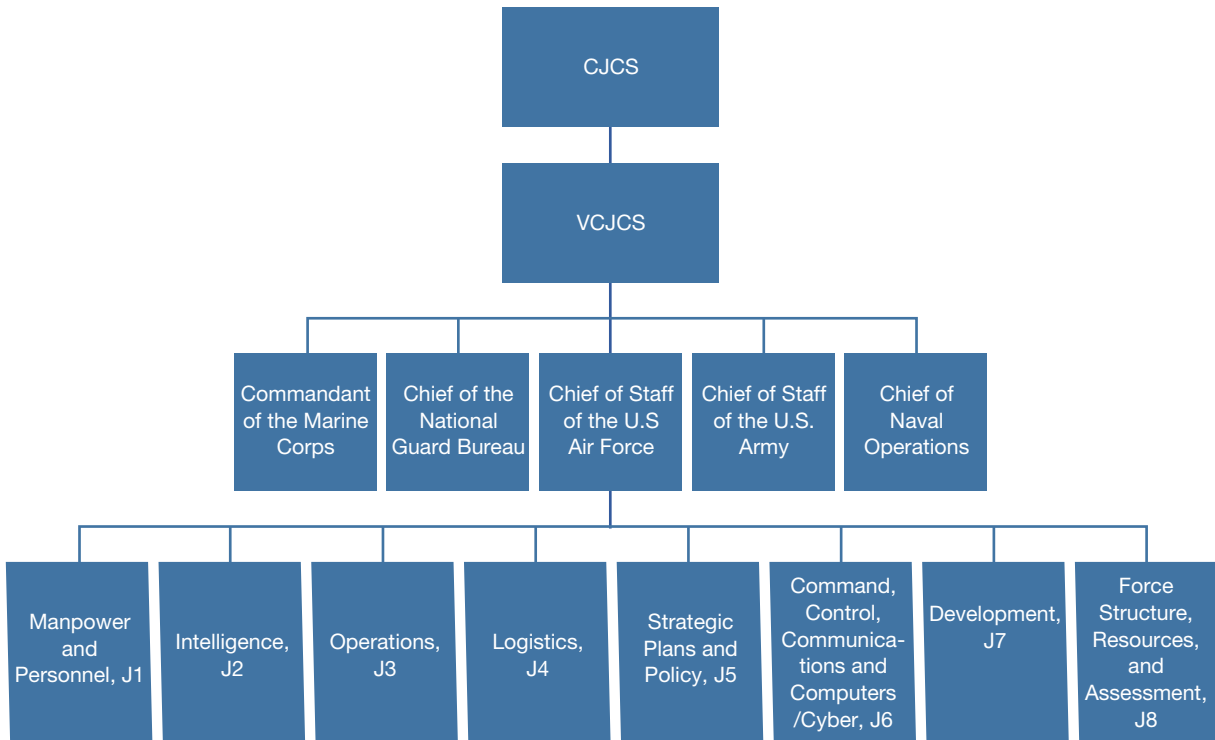


**TABLE 3.1**  
**Joint Staff Directorates and Responsibilities**

Directorate	Director as of 2021	Area of Responsibility
J1—Manpower and Personnel	Maj Gen Lenny Richoux, U.S. Air Force	“[Provides] the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff manpower and personnel counsel and support in order to develop best military advice to national decision makers and provide strategic direction to the Joint Force, enabling global integration to achieve maximum comprehensive Joint Force readiness.”
J2—Intelligence	VADM Frank D. Whitworth, U.S. Navy	“[Supports] the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff and Unified Commands. It is the national level focal point for crisis intelligence support to military operations, indications and warning intelligence in DoD, and Unified Command intelligence requirements.”
J3—Operations	LTG James J. Mingus, U.S. Army	“[Assists] the Chairman in carrying out responsibilities as the principal military advisor to the President and Secretary of Defense, developing and providing guidance to the combatant commanders and relaying communications between the President and the Secretary of Defense and the combatant commanders regarding current operations and plans.”
J4—Logistics	Lt Gen Sam C. Barnett, U.S. Air Force	“[Leads] the logistics enterprise, drive joint force readiness and provide the best logistics advice to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to maximize the joint force commander’s freedom of action.”
J5—Strategy, Plans, and Policy	VADM Lisa Franchetti, U.S. Navy	“[Proposes] strategies, plans, and policy recommendations to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to support his provision of military advice across the full spectrum of national security concerns to the President and other national leaders and to ensure those recommendations are informed by a larger strategic context—coordinated with interagency and alliance partners—account for the view and requirements of the combatant commanders, and assess risk in executing the National Military Strategy.”
J6—Command, Control, Communications, and Computers/Cyber	Lt Gen Dennis A. Crall, U.S. Marine Corps	“[Assists] the CJCS in providing best military advice while advancing cyber defense, joint/coalition interoperability and C2 capabilities required by the Joint Force to preserve the Nation’s security.”
J7—Development	VADM Stuart Munsch, U.S. Navy	“[Is responsible] for the six functions of joint force development: Doctrine, Education, Concept Development & Experimentation, Training, Exercises and Lessons Learned.”
J8—Force Structure, Resources, and Assessment	VADM Ronald A. Boxall, U.S. Navy	“[Charged] with providing support to CJCS for evaluating and developing force structure requirements. J-8 conducts joint, bilateral, and multilateral war games and interagency politico-military seminars and simulations. It develops, maintains, and improves the models, techniques, and capabilities used by the Joint Staff and combatant commands to conduct studies and analyses for CJCS.”

SOURCES: RAND analysis of Joint Chiefs of Staff, “J1: Manpower and Personnel,” webpage, undated-b; “J2: Joint Staff Intelligence,” webpage, undated-c; “J3: Operations,” webpage, undated-d; “J4: Logistics,” webpage, undated-e; “J5: Strategy, Plans, and Policy,” webpage, undated-f; “J6: Command, Control, Communications, and Computers/Cyber,” webpage, undated-g; “J7: Joint Force Development,” webpage, undated-h; and “J8: Force Structure, Resources, and Assessment,” webpage, undated-i.

**FIGURE 3.1**  
**Organizational Chart of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff**



## Authorities

### Excluded Authorities from Joint Staff and Chairman

Since its inception, the Joint Staff has been expressly prohibited from functioning as a general staff.<sup>37</sup> Title 10, section 155 states that “The Joint Staff shall not operate or be organized as an overall Armed Forces General Staff and shall have no executive authorities.” Thus, the role of the Joint Staff is strictly limited to supporting the CJCS in carrying out his duties.

Title 10 provides a similar exclusion for the Chairman, stipulating, “he may not exercise military command over the Joint Chiefs of Staff or any of the armed forces.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act specifies that the chain of command “runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense; and from the Secretary of Defense to the commander of the combatant command.” The act allows the Chairman to transmit communications from the President and Secretary of Defense to the Combatant Commanders, but the act again specifies that the CJCS “does not exercise military command over any combatant forces.”<sup>39</sup>

These prohibitions reflect long-standing hesitation in the United States over vesting too much military authority in one individual.<sup>40</sup> These prohibitions also reflect traditional concerns in the United States about

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 155.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 152, Chairman: Appointment; Grade and Rank, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Pub. L. 99-433.

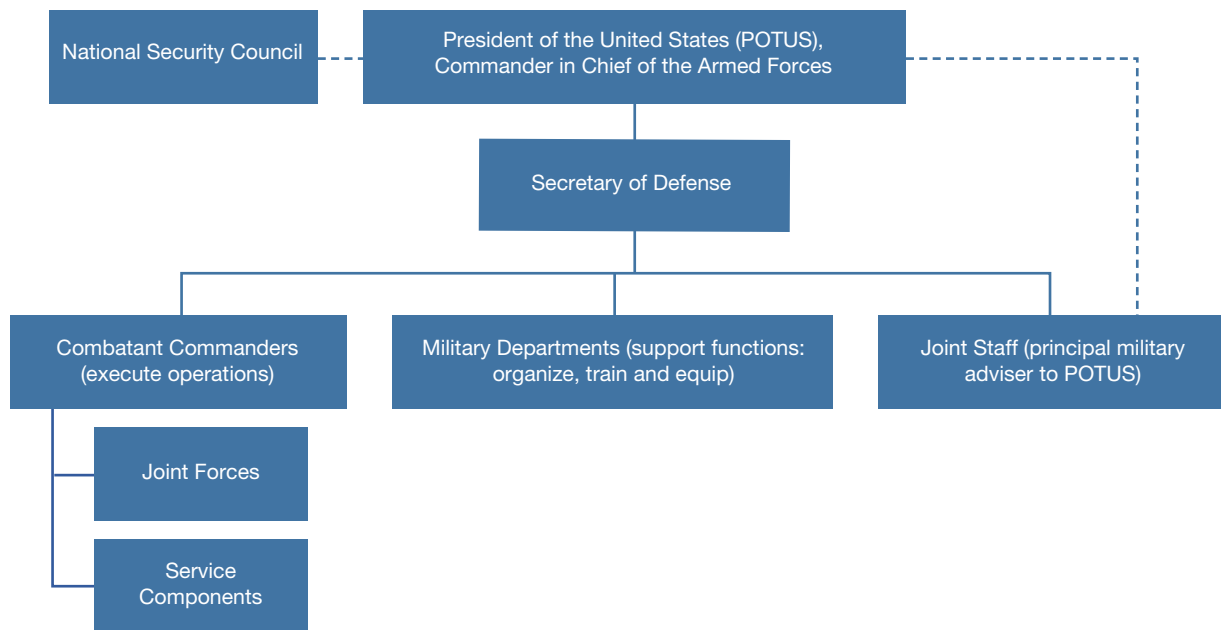
<sup>40</sup> Rearden, 2011, p. 2.

the dangers of a peacetime army and the potential for military demands and considerations to dominate political demands.<sup>41</sup>

### Comparative Chains of Command

Figure 3.2 provides the chain of command in the United States as defined in Section 152 of Title 10, while Figure 3.3 provides the chain of command in Russia, as defined by the law “On Defense” and by the General Staff. Both organizational structures are designed such that minimal changes to the chain of command are required to transition from peacetime to wartime footing.<sup>42</sup> Note that multiple federal executive elements fall under the Russian General Staff in the chain of command, consistent with the General Staff’s mandate to coordinate the activities of all federal organs of the executive. Because such a reporting structure does not exist in the U.S. context—i.e., the Department of State does not report to the President through the Department of Defense—we do not include additional federal executive elements in the figure depicting the U.S. chain of command.

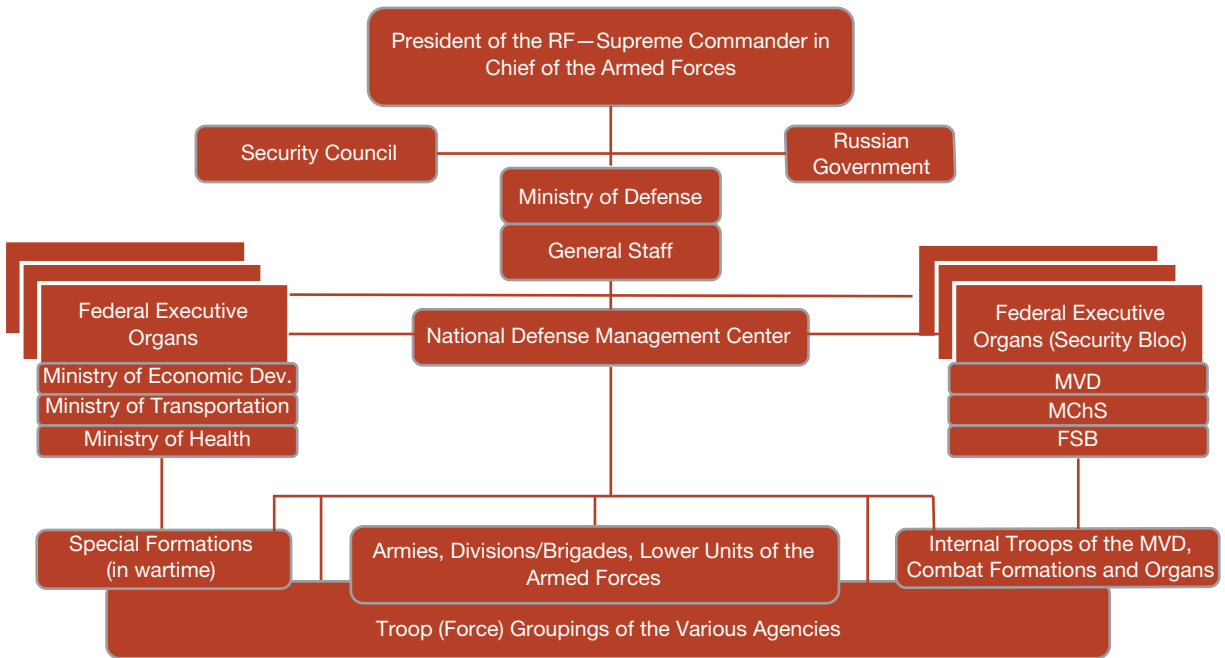
**FIGURE 3.2**  
**Strategic Command Elements of the Military Organization of the United States**



<sup>41</sup> L. B. Wheildon, “Militarization,” *Editorial Research Reports 1948*, Vol. I, 1948.

<sup>42</sup> Gerasimov, 2015.

**FIGURE 3.3**  
**Strategic Command Organs of the Military Organization of the Russian Federation**



SOURCE: Translated from Gerasimov, 2014.

NOTE: Dev. = development; MVD = Ministry of Internal Affairs; RF = Russian Federation. Graphic slightly altered for clarity. No change to content.

### Command and Control Authorities in Comparative Context

In the U.S. Department of Defense, the term *command and control* is defined as “the exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission.”<sup>43</sup> The U.S. term thus pertains to a single concept: authority for troop direction. As previously noted, the CJCS and Joint Staff are explicitly prohibited from exercising such authority.

Command and control is a more complex issue in the Russian General Staff. The assertion by some experts that the General Staff “does not exercise operational control over armed forces” might lead one to surmise that Russian statute similarly constrains the C2 authorities of the General Staff.<sup>44</sup> This point warrants further, more-nuanced consideration. It is certainly the case that the Chief of the General Staff and his supporting elements do not select the operational plan or give general-purpose soldiers tactical orders to “pull the trigger.”<sup>45</sup> However, the General Staff not only devises—and resources—the overall military strategy; it also builds the operational templates that the Joint Strategic Command (OSK) commanders use as the

<sup>43</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, last updated November 2021.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Charles K. Bartles, “Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2011; McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 12; and Bartles, 2019, p. 56.

<sup>45</sup> We make this distinction of *general-purpose forces* because the Strategic Rocket Forces and Russian Airborne Troops are controlled by the Supreme High Command, which is directly subordinate to the General Staff. Thus, the General Staff can give the order to “pull the trigger” to this subset of Russian forces. See Bartles, 2019, p. 52.

basis for developing an operational plan suited to the specific characteristics and objectives of the specific conflict.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the General Staff manages the coordination between OSKs in wartime.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, in the Russian context, the terms used to describe the command and control of forces have different meanings and encompass different kinds of responsibilities. For example, one expert notes the Russian term *upravleniye voyskami* (literally *management of forces*) is translated as *troop control* or *command and control*.<sup>48</sup> This expert further observes that this term “encompasses a much broader range of activity than control in battle. . . . *upravleniye voyskami* includes, as a first priority, maintaining permanent readiness to go to war, and only as a second, the training, preparation, and leadership of the forces to carry out their duties in war.”<sup>49</sup>

The concept of control by itself also deviates from the Western meaning. In the Russian context, the concept of *kontrol'* (control) entails more of an oversight function. One expert argues that, in the Russian military,

[i]t is the duty of the commander, with the help of staff, to exercise *kontrol'* over his subordinates, i.e. to check that they have carried out their orders, as an element of *upravleniye voyskami*. *Kontrol'* does not mean “control” but “monitoring” or “checking.”<sup>50</sup>

Thus, relative to the Joint Staff, the General Staff exercises significant C2 authorities over the armed forces, even absent operational control of general-purpose forces, and does so in a more expansive manner than any officers with command authority in the U.S. military. Recall that the officers of the GOU are embedded with fielded units and participate in day-to-day operations planning. In the Russian model, the General Staff acts as a mechanism to improve the information flow between the General Staff and lower-echelon C2 bodies—hence its deployment with fielded forces—plausibly serving as a support function. Yet, the General Staff simultaneously serves as a mechanism for ensuring that the information reported by lower-echelon commanders is accurate—i.e., a control function.

The scope of the General Staff’s authority within this context thus in many ways contradicts the assessment of some experts that the General Staff does not have operational control of forces. Moreover, while the commanders of Military Districts bear full responsibility for the military operations in their respective areas of responsibility and the service branches and combat arms commands are responsible for training and equipping their respective troops, the presence of the officers of the Main Operations Directorate seems to ensure that the decisions at these lower echelons align with the plans developed by the Main Operations Directorate.<sup>51</sup>

Another noteworthy difference between the authorities of the Russian General Staff and the Joint Staff pertains to control over a variety of “strategic” assets, including GRU Spetsnaz Brigades and Russian Airborne Troops (VDV), which serve as the most professional, “permanently ready” rapid reaction force in the Russian military.<sup>52</sup> The Strategic Rocket Forces and VDV are combat arms directly subordinate to the MoD

<sup>46</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 251; Gerasimov, 2015; and McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> Rudskoi, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Donnelly, 1988, p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> Donnelly, 1988, p. 136.

<sup>50</sup> Donnelly, 1988, p. 136.

<sup>51</sup> Whisler, 2020b.

<sup>52</sup> Rod Thornton, *Organizational Change in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, December 1, 2011, pp. 3, 9, 14.

and General Staff.<sup>53</sup> There were attempts to reposition the VDV to become subordinate to Operational Strategic Commands (also called military districts) during the New Look reforms, but in a 2010 magazine interview, then-head of the VDV Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov discussed his successful efforts to halt the reform proposal that would have distributed the VDV brigades and divisions among the military districts.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the Russian emphasis on managing escalation such that the damage inflicted on an adversary can be carefully calibrated to sober but not enrage suggests that these kinds of strategic assets may remain under the operational-strategic-oriented authority of the General Staff.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, control over strategic assets includes nuclear forces. In the United States, only the President is authorized to order the use of nuclear weapons. By contrast, in Russia, the Chief of the General Staff is one of three individuals in the Supreme High Command in possession of a so-called nuclear briefcase that includes nuclear launch codes. The President and Minister of Defense retain possession over the other two nuclear briefcases, and permission to launch nuclear weapons is authorized when codes are received from two of the briefcases.<sup>56</sup>

## Divergent Mandates, Divergent Aptitudes

The Russian General Staff and the Joint Staff have been tasked with two very different mandates: The General Staff is the "central body" responsible for ensuring Russia's defense, and the Joint Staff is responsible for providing military advice and advocating for jointness. Moreover, while their organizational structures are similar in some ways, these parallels appear to reflect that these two organizations are merely similar in *type*—i.e., they are both a military staff. Yet these two bodies are very different in *kind*. The General Staff does not compete with other military organizations for authority within the MoD. The General Staff sits above the services and the military district/OSK commanders in the chain of command. In the U.S. model, on the other hand, the Joint Staff is at best a peer of the services and CCMDs. The General Staff is thus not developing solely joint doctrine; it is developing *all* doctrine, and it has this more expansive role within each of its directorates.

Although there are certainly additional explanations, the differences in the mandates of these two bodies can in part be explained by historical experience and perceptions of the threats to the state. With its long history of being invaded (and being the invader) and its enormous land mass, the Russian military is postured for homeland defense with a heavy emphasis on ground forces. Expectations that a conflict will occur within or near its vast borders—which constitute several potential fronts to defend—require a C2 structure that allows for swift decisionmaking and a highly integrated defensive effort. In this context, imbuing a single, centralized body with the authority to coordinate and manage the state's defense appears logical. The United States places less emphasis on territorial defense, having historically benefited from peaceful relations with its nearest neighbors. Instead, the United States military is postured for force projection over vast distances and for its forces to execute combined operations with allies. In this context, it appears logical to give authority

<sup>53</sup> MoD, undated-o.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Thornton, 2011, p. 61: *Boss Magazine*, interview with Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov, July 15, 2010, quoted in BBC Monitoring World Media Monitor. Moreover, Shamanov also said in this interview that the General Staff could direct the VDV.

<sup>55</sup> Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Leonid Ryabikhin, "Russia's NC3 and Early Warning Systems," Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, July 11, 2019, p. 4.

to the commander in the relevant theater who knows the conditions on the ground and is best positioned to coordinate and manage the resources in the theater.

## Observations Based on High-Level Comparative Analysis

The preceding analysis highlighted key differences in the U.S. and Russian approaches to organizing their military staffs. It also highlighted how the functions that the U.S. Joint Staff and Russian General Staff serve in their respective militaries diverge in important respects. The analysis emphasized the substantial difference in the centrality of each organization within its respective national security decisionmaking processes. This section seeks to leverage the broad comparison presented in this chapter, in combination with the analysis in Chapter Two, to distill key, high-level insights regarding the potential implications of these two divergent organizational approaches.

### Observation 1. The Russian General Staff Displays a Highly Centralized Leadership Structure at the Strategic Level

The breadth of the General Staff's responsibilities and authorities are so expansive that Russia appears to have centralized strategy development, force planning and requirements, force structure, prioritization of resources, and the command and control of forces via the OSK commanders within one organization.

This model gives one body the responsibility and authority to make and prioritize decisions. Russia scholar Greg Whisler argues, for example, that

the simplified organizational structure and clearly defined roles and responsibilities, with a powerful arbiter at the top, enables defense policy consistency over time, a greater ability to make hard strategic and organizational choices.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, this model potentially enables a faster decisionmaking cycle to the degree that the General Staff does not need to coordinate across so many stakeholders. The Russian model embodies the paradigm of top-down decisionmaking: The General Staff sets the military's priorities and oversees the execution of this prioritization based on guidance from the President of the Russian Federation. However, if senior leaders lack guidance from the top or fear making the wrong decision, even this theoretically more efficient decision-making process can still be sluggish. Scholars have pointed to this tendency, noting that Putin often rejects taking a clear position.<sup>58</sup>

Centralized leadership within the Russian General Staff appears to have potential advantages compared with the U.S. model for strategy and force planning, doctrine, capability requirements, procurement, and other functions. These responsibilities are divided among, at a minimum, the National Security Council staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the CCMDs, the services, and the Joint Staff. This dynamic reflects the checks and balances that are a critical component of U.S. government and military authority. Yet, the more complex system of actors required to weigh in on key issues has the potential to slow decisionmaking, planning, and execution. Whisler further notes,

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<sup>57</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 256.

<sup>58</sup> Ananyev, 2018, p. 43.

From an organizational and process standpoint, the competing resource demands of the various COCOMs [sic, CCMDs], and the resulting de-confliction and adjudication responsibilities of OSD and the Joint Staff, are cumbersome and inflexible and can often result in disjointed policies.<sup>59</sup>

On other hand, the Russian model of centralization and specialization also contains inherent friction points. First, the Russian model relies heavily on the competence of the commanding officer at all levels, from operational-strategic to tactical.<sup>60</sup> At the operational-strategic level, the Russian military is highly dependent on the General Staff's ability to accurately foresee the future of war and craft the appropriate force structure, weapons, and operational concepts to defeat these threats. At the tactical level, the Russian military is highly dependent on the commander's ability to correctly assess the situation, decide on a course of action, and disseminate orders.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, as other authors have noted, "commander's intent" does not exist in the Russian model.<sup>62</sup> Information-challenged or -denied environments could therefore paralyze the decisionmaking process or the execution of operations if subordinates fail to receive orders from their superiors.<sup>63</sup> This approach is in contrast to the U.S. model, which incorporates staff from multiple directorates into the planning process to facilitate more-thorough options for a commander's consideration.<sup>64</sup>

Feedback from the bottom up is also relatively more constrained in the Russian model. Units from the General Staff are embedded in the theater headquarters, but it is not clear whether they provide feedback or incorporate changes to tactics and strategy in real-time using data on ground conditions.<sup>65</sup> This is partially because the high degree of centralized command authority and specialization discourage creativity and flexibility, especially at the lowest levels. In contrast with the U.S. model, subordinates at the lowest levels of the Russian Armed Forces lack the broad expertise, training, or authority to adapt orders if the situation does not reflect the commander's assessment or plan of action. Moreover, the commander is personally accountable for the actions of their subordinates. Commanders thus have little incentive to encourage initiative, because, if that initiative goes awry, the commander will be held responsible.<sup>66</sup>

## Observation 2. Russian Military Officers Are Highly Specialized, Particularly in Terms of Their Expertise at a Specific Level of War—Operational-Strategic Versus Tactical

The Russian model emphasizes specialization, which has the benefit of developing officers steeped in the execution of one particular task within a particular service branch at one particular level of war—i.e., operational-strategic or tactical. Officers on the General Staff are trained to think about the conduct of war at the operational-strategic level, while officers outside this organization focus solely on the tactical level. In addition to enabling officers to gain a deeper degree of expertise, this model enables a potentially greater level

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<sup>59</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 255.

<sup>60</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, pp. 29–33; and Donnelly, 1988, p. 152.

<sup>61</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 32.

<sup>65</sup> This does not foreclose the ability of the General Staff to incorporate lessons learned, in general, which the General Staff does appear to be quite proficient at, as we discuss in the Syria case study in Chapter Six.

<sup>66</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 28; and Donnelly, 1988, p. 152.



of effectiveness executing that specific task because officers have repetitively drilled, rehearsed, and developed these specific skills.<sup>67</sup> Bartles, for example, thus argues that the Russian model,

develops a caste of professional planners for handling operational-strategic matters, while freeing the remainder of the Russian Armed Forces officer corps to continue to specialize in their particular branch of service and arms at the tactical level.<sup>68</sup>

Although specialization promotes advanced understanding of a specific set of issues at a specific level of war, a lack of well-rounded officers means that deficits of officer-level expertise in one area might not be easily backfilled by new officers. It also appears to make the system inherently more prone to micromanagement. For example, the General Staff officers stationed in Moscow appear to lack trust in the officers in line units, and they attempt to micromanage tactical decisions from Moscow. This behavior occurred in Chechnya and contributed to failures in Georgia, when ground and air campaigns were run out of Moscow separately.<sup>69</sup> Planning by military districts similarly appears to be constrained, with limited freedom to conduct planning.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, forgoing jointness for specialization within one's service could create challenges for interoperability within the Russian military, as we discuss in the following section. Although not directly relevant to the discussion of the General Staff, it is noteworthy that this specialization also appears to be crucial to the Russian conscription model. Officers have a year to train conscripts—who generally have a lower level of education because they typically do not attend university and thus do not obtain an education-related deferment. This time constraint inherently circumscribes the skills that can be taught to any particular soldier. Thus, training is kept as simple as possible; conscripts learn how to perform (at most) two basic military tasks and to follow orders.<sup>71</sup>

### Observation 3. Service Parochialism Drives Decisions in the U.S. and Russian Militaries, Albeit in Different Ways

The General Staff model is also structured to moderate the likelihood and impact of service parochialism.<sup>72</sup> It is perhaps axiomatic to observe that organizations pursue their own institutional interests at the expense of broader interests. The U.S. model, by design, encourages competition among the services and various theater commands. While the intent is to encourage creativity, innovation, and efficiency, it also creates bureaucratic rivalries as each lobby for finite resources.<sup>73</sup> In the Russian model, on the other hand, the General Staff's dominant role dampens these rivalries (at least to some degree). Whisler argues, for example,

There appears to be little to no lobbying for resources by the OSK commanders to Moscow or competition between the OSK headquarters for the assignment of centrally assigned units. . . . The General Staff, which has had a long-standing culture that transcends parochial service politics, sits atop a vertical planning and

<sup>67</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> Bartles, 2019, p. 57; and Golts, 2019, p. 159.

<sup>69</sup> M. S. Barabanov, A. V. Lavrov, and V. A. Tseluiko, *The Tanks of August*, Ruslan Pukhov, ed., Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010.

<sup>70</sup> However, as the report details in Chapter Six, this tendency toward micromanagement appears to have been moderated in the planning for the campaign in Syria.

<sup>71</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, pp. 28–29; Donnelly, 1988, pp. 151–152, 175–180; and Grau and Bartles, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Donnelly, 1988, p. 144; and Grau and Bartles, 2016, p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> Builder, 1989, pp. 3–16; and Whisler, 2020b, p. 255.

resource distribution process, giving each OSK according to the priority placed on their respective strategic direction.<sup>74</sup>

While centralization of authority in the General Staff creates a powerful arbiter authorized to adjudicate between the parochial interests of the services and theater commanders, this model has only elevated parochialism to a higher level: the parochial interests of the General Staff.<sup>75</sup> And the Russian General Staff (and Russian military culture in general) is dominated by ground troops, which indicates a preference for the Ground Forces over the other services in terms of those in senior leadership positions.<sup>76</sup> Except for the Northern Fleet, officers with Ground Forces backgrounds occupied the top three senior command positions of all of the military districts since mid-2013.<sup>77</sup> Whisler assesses, "such a bias may place limitations on the extent to which the Russian Armed Forces will embrace 'jointness' as defined by the US military."<sup>78</sup> However, even if the General Staff is culturally Ground Forces–dominant, it does show a recent tendency to align priorities and spending in accordance with Russian strategy and operational needs, at times designating the Ground Forces as a lower priority.<sup>79</sup> The General Staff encourages interservice competition and discourages interservice rivalry. One of the ways that the General Staff does this is by recommending the direction of procurement and other modernization monies where strategy dictates.<sup>80</sup>

Some within Russia's military appear to recognize the limitation of this bias towards the Ground Forces in combination with the strong emphasis on specialization. For example, General-Major Fedotov, a senior researcher of the Center for Military-Strategic Studies of the General Staff Academy, argues,

[t]he commander of the military district forces, as a rule, is a representative of the tank or motor rifle forces and has a thorough understanding of the algorithm of the work of the officials in the structural elements of the OSK in commanding the Ground Force grouping. However, at the present time he is in no way prepared to effectively command a force grouping of Air Force, Air Defense, and Naval forces that are included in the force structure of the military district.<sup>81</sup>

The Russian preference for ground troops may thus "hurt Russian operational effectiveness depending on the tasks assigned to a specific 'inter-branch grouping of troops.'"<sup>82</sup> However, Russia is showing early signs of changing this mentality by placing commanders from different service branches in charge of the Operational Group of Forces in Syria.

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<sup>74</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 255.

<sup>75</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 256.

<sup>76</sup> This preference for the Ground Forces does not manifest in budget or strategy development. The Ground Forces usually receive far less money than the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS), for example. See Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Military Modernization Plans: 2018–2027," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 495, November 22, 2017. The Ground Forces also do not play a role in strategic deterrence, so there are key factors that limit the prestige of the Ground Forces. See Samuel Charap, Dara Massicot, Miranda Priebe, Alyssa Demus, Clint Reach, Mark Stalczyński, Eugeniu Han, and Lynn E. Davis, *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4238-A, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 257.

<sup>78</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 258.

<sup>79</sup> Charap et al., 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Charap et al., 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Igor A. Fedotov, "Napravleniia razvitiia operativno-strategicheskogo komandovaniia voennogo okruga na sovremennom etape stroitel'stva Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 4, No. 57, 2016, p. 67.

<sup>82</sup> Whisler, 2020b, p. 258.

The career path of current General of the Army, Sergei Surovikin, also suggests Russia may be beginning to understand the constraints its model places on the ability to achieve jointness. When the VKS were first stood up in 2015, combining the Air Force, Air Defense, and Aerospace Defense Forces, the first Commander was the former Commander in Chief of the Russian Air Force, Colonel-General Viktor Bondarev.<sup>83</sup> This selection is consistent with the Russian tradition of specialization. Yet, in 2017, the upwardly mobile then-Colonel-General Surovikin, a former Ground Forces commander, was promoted as his replacement. This appointment is not consistent with the traditional Russian model, to say the least. As Russian news agency TASS notes, “He became the first combined-arms commander in the history of Russia and the USSR to head the VKS (Air Force) of Russia and the USSR.”<sup>84</sup> This appointment suggests there might be a growing understanding that these two services, the Ground and Aerospace Forces, must operate in an integrated manner, which requires officers to build expertise in both branches. On the other hand, there has been no indication that the Russian military is considering the alternative approach—i.e., having an Aerospace officer, for example, take command of an Army Group.

## Concluding Observations

The high-level institutional comparison presented in this chapter reveals a couple of key insights. First, C2 takes very different forms in practice within the Russian and U.S. military contexts. The Chairman of the Joint Staff does not possess command authority—a deliberate decision that reflects the United States’ long-standing reluctance to vest too much military authority in one individual and the concern that military demands and considerations might dominate political demands.<sup>85</sup> After an examination of the authorities and responsibilities of the Russian General Staff, this reluctance does not appear to be a particularly strong concern for Russia. Second, there does not appear to be a correct model in terms of whether centralization or decentralization of military command authority is the best approach. Each model has its potential advantages and disadvantages. The relative benefit of each appears to depend on the kinds of wars each military is being asked to fight and on subjective considerations about the importance of oversight relative to speed of decisionmaking or the importance of broad yet shallow expertise versus deep yet narrow specialization.

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<sup>83</sup> Victor Dorofeev, “Shoigu nashel na Urale glavkoma dlya kosmosa,” *URA News*, July 14, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> “Putin prisvoil zvaniye generala armii glavkomu VKS RF Sergeyu Surovikinu,” TASS, August 16, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Rearden, 2012, p. 2; and Wheildon, 1948.



## The General Staff and the Balance of Power

Very much is required from the Chief of the General Staff. A governing body such as the General Staff, which has traditionally high authority and great rights, if not carefully analyzed, systematically monitored, and not corrected in time, can turn into a bureaucratic machine working primarily for itself.

—S. F. Akhromeev and G. M. Kornienko, 1992<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapter demonstrated the expansive role bestowed on the General Staff in Russian law for ensuring the adequate defense of the state. The Russian General Staff represents an ideal type alignment of authority and responsibility. Thus, the General Staff appears well-positioned to rapidly modernize the Russian Armed Forces in the wake of its humbling “victory” against Georgia.

This intuition was largely borne out during the 2008 reforms implemented by then–Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov and then–Chief of Staff Makarov. The overall purpose of these reforms was to create mobile forces with high readiness units equipped with modern equipment and weapons.<sup>2</sup> The reforms marked a watershed moment in terms of the structure of Russian forces, transforming the military from a division-based force to a brigade-based force and reducing the number of military districts from six to four, with interservice groupings of troops deployed to each district. The reforms also created the VKS in 2015 and removed the service main commands from the chain of command.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Serdyukov and Makarov implemented significant personnel cuts—including a large reduction in the number of officers and units.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the reforms created a new, more transparent system of financial accounting and placed civilians with accounting backgrounds in charge of key departments that controlled large financial resources.<sup>5</sup>

These reforms, among others, continued to evolve and mature in the subsequent years and generally are credited with explaining the transformation of the Russian Armed Forces witnessed in Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015), specifically in terms of the military’s increased effectiveness in these limited operational contexts.<sup>6</sup> However, the rapid and expansive nature of these reforms begs the question: Why did these reforms not occur sooner?

At the end of the Cold War, the Russian military found itself in a state of chaos. This period is described by one former Russian Chief of the General Staff as “so unbalanced that it was unrealistic to talk about any pros-

<sup>1</sup> Akhromeev and Kornienko, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolay Makarov, “Reformi Prodolzhayutsa,” *Armeiskii Zbornik*, No. 8, August 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Makarov, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> “Chief of the General Staff Army General Nikolai Makarov Reported About Completion of the First Stage of Transition of the Army to the New Look,” *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, June 6, 2009, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Nadja Douglas, “Civil-Military Relations in Russia: Conscript vs Contract Army, or How Ideas Prevail Against Functional Demands,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2014, p. 517; and Golts, 2019, pp. 127–132.

<sup>6</sup> Renz, 2018.

pects. If we had existed for another three or four years in a similar state, it would probably have been impossible to assemble the Russian Army.<sup>7</sup> The General Staff was tasked with orchestrating the needed reforms and shepherding the newly formed Russian Armed Forces through the chaos. Although the dire economic conditions of the 1990s meant that the military lacked the funds to maintain equipment and training efforts, even after the influx of resources in the early 2000s, these forces were still in relative shambles and encountered many more challenges than anticipated in defeating Georgia, a much weaker opponent.

In this chapter, we begin by explaining the early, fitful attempts at defense reform, which were largely stymied by Russia's defense bureaucracy.<sup>8</sup> We begin here because the effectiveness of the Armed Forces actively and passively shapes the foreign policy options that are available to policymakers. Chapter Two detailed how military decisionmaking has been centralized within the General Staff for generations. However, this centralization is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it theoretically allows for a top-down-driven decisionmaking process that has the potential to align strategy, doctrine, force planning, capability development, and procurement. On the other hand, when power is concentrated in a single individual and institution, it renders the entire military system enormously dependent on the willingness of this executive body to make changes and on the mechanisms available to external actors to ensure this bureaucratic machine does not work for itself. Events in Ukraine since February 2022 suggest that this latter potentiality has come to fruition, providing an indication that these widely touted reforms have been neither as effective nor as complete as many had assessed.<sup>9</sup>

## Early Attempts at Russian Defense Reform: A Master Class in Obstruction

In the 1990s and 2000s, the Russian military found itself in dire need of reform. At least four rounds of various reforms were proposed to, among other initiatives, reduce the size of the Russian military; reduce the use of conscripts—i.e., professionalize the military; create a professional noncommissioned officer corps; change officer oversight and training; and implement greater political oversight over military spending.<sup>10</sup> Each one of these initiatives foundered on the rocks of what various accounts describe as the refusal of many Russian military officials to consider let alone implement such an extensive pivot away from the Soviet model of mass mobilization and strategic planning that envisioned preparing for large-scale war.<sup>11</sup> Multiple rationales

<sup>7</sup> "Yuriy Baluyevskiy: S NATO voyevat' ne sobirayemsa," *Rosiiskaya Gazeta*, 2005-11-19NBP-No. 089, November 19, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> The argument has been made by Greg Whisler ("Carving a Peacetime Force from a Mobilization Military: The Overlooked Pillar of Post-Soviet Russian Defense Reform," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2021) that, during the 1990s, the Russian military in fact began a "fundamental shift away from the Soviet military model based on mass mobilization" (pp. 357). Although it is certainly the case that senior-most individuals within the General Staff advocated for moving toward a permanently ready force, as Whisler demonstrates, the actual implementation of this objective was very modest. For example, Whisler notes that "the permanent readiness units were still largely staffed with conscripts," and the military engaged in the "purposeful under-manning of permanent readiness units" (2021, p. 378). The shift in the Russian military model really came to be implemented only after a variety of variables came into alignment, as we argue in this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Westerlund, 2021, p. 41; Renz, 2018, p. 197; Ruslan Pukhov, "Rossiiskaia vozduشناia operatsiia v Sirii," in M. J. Shepovalenko, ed., *Siriiskii rybez*, Moscow: Tsentr analiza strategii i texnologii, 2016; Johan Norberg and Martin Goliath, "The Fighting Power of Russia's Armed Forces in 2019," in Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna, eds., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective—2019*, Stockholm: FOI, FOI-R-4758--SE, December 2019, pp. 72–75; Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992–2016*, Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2017, p. 27; and David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1253-A, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> Golts, 2019.

were levied to stall, redirect, and curtail reform efforts, although we limit our description to four: the lack of capacity to undertake reforms, the lack of strategic direction on which to base reforms, ongoing wars, and dire financial conditions caused by cuts to the military budget.<sup>12</sup>

First, the General Staff insisted that the military was consumed by the enormous task of bringing forces and equipment back to Russia from former constituent states of the Soviet Union. Baluyevski opined that the General Staff was depleted by their efforts of,

inventorying the legacy of the USSR Armed Forces, organizing the withdrawal of troops from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and their deployment and arrangement within the territory of the Russian Federation with the creation of the groupings of troops in strategic directions.<sup>13</sup>

After completing the process of withdrawing forces, inventorying equipment, and redeploying these forces, the General Staff was supposed to progress to reorganizing the Russian military, making it smaller and more agile, and streamlining the command structure. Although the General Staff completed the first stage of this process, the next two phases appear to have been impeded at almost every turn by senior Russian military officials.<sup>14</sup>

Before any steps could be taken to reduce the size of the Armed Forces or reorganize the structure of the military, the General Staff insisted that several steps were required as prerequisites, most prominently the development of a litany of documents. These documents included a universal concept of national security, a new foreign policy, and a revised military doctrine following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet even after these policy documents were complete, the General Staff proceeded to find fault with these strategy development efforts, insisting that the documents be revised further to identify specific adversaries and threats to Russian national security.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, throughout this process, the MoD retained the “external threat” of large “military blocs and alliances” and the threat of “large-scale [regional] war” in various iterations of the *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*.<sup>16</sup> These threats justified retaining the ability to fight large-scale wars and with it the need to retain conscription.<sup>17</sup> Golts and Putnam argue that these “diversionary tactics” were “in large measure calculated to deflate political pressures for more comprehensive [military] reforms.”<sup>18</sup>

The war in Chechnya, which began in 1994, lasted until 1996, and broke out again in 1999, was subsequently leveraged as the rationale for why the Armed Forces could not be reformed. Russian military leaders argued that reforms could not take place while the military was simultaneously trying to fight a war. Yet analysts largely agree that Russia’s military performed abysmally in Chechnya from the outset. Logically, rather than leading to resistance to reform, the poor performance displayed by Russian forces and their dire state of readiness—e.g., more than a month passed before supposedly permanently ready units were able to deploy to a combat area *in country*—should have driven the General Staff to search for means and methods to field a more effective force.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a more complete history see Golts, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Baluevskii, 2006; and “Yuriy Baluyevskiy: S NATO voyevat’ ne sobirayemsiya,” 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Golts, 2019, pp. 24–26.

<sup>15</sup> Igor Rodionov, “Osnovniye napravleniya voennoi reformy,” *Nazavisimoye Gazeta*, April 4, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Igor Rodionov, “Osnovy voyennoy doktriny Rossii (Proyekt),” *Voennaya mysl’*, June 16, 1992; and Steven J. Main, “Russia’s Military Doctrine,” Conflict Studies Research Centre, Occasional Brief No. 77, April 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Felgenhauer, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, pp. 135–137.

Finances also were used by the military to justify curtailing reforms. This argument took two forms: first, that the military's budget was insufficient to accommodate reforms, and second, that the cost of implementing a contract-based system for manpower outstripped the MoD's resources.<sup>20</sup> It was certainly the case that the Russian Armed Forces found themselves in dire financial straits in the 1990s. The MoD was unable to pay service members and personnel for long periods in the 1990s and early 2000s, let alone train and equip these forces.<sup>21</sup> Yet even as the military's budget increased in the early 2000s by more than 20 percent per year, and combat readiness improved in the conflict with Georgia (relative to the extremely poor readiness demonstrated in Chechnya), the overall sense of Western analysts was that the Russian Armed Forces were ill-prepared to wage a large-scale conventional war against a technological superior.<sup>22</sup> The military also rejected the idea of moving away from conscription, arguing that a volunteer-based military would be inordinately expensive.<sup>23</sup> The cost of transitioning to a volunteer-based military was estimated by the military to cost \$4.3 billion, or more than three times the entire defense budget in 2005.<sup>24</sup> More than a decade into the post-Soviet period, civilians inside and outside the Ministry lacked the access to the pertinent budgetary information to validate these numbers and were thus "deprived of real levers in management."<sup>25</sup>

## Explaining the Generals' Success in Obstruction

That said, some reforms were attempted throughout this early period. Some of these reform efforts failed because of a lack of funds or because the concepts being implemented were ill-advised, among other reasons external to the military. However, the General Staff and the military played a role in stymieing reform efforts by taking a variety of active and passive steps to avoid and slow the implementation of these policies.<sup>26</sup> Given the dysfunctional state of the military, which then-Chief of the General Staff Anatoly Kvashnin described as being in a "post-critical state," how the General Staff and military could resist reforms merits further consideration.<sup>27</sup> A review of the literature suggests multiple factors led to this outcome, which we assess as falling within three broad themes, each of which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. The first factor is the centuries-long conditioning of Russian culture to defer to the military and the strong association between having powerful military and being a great power.<sup>28</sup> The second factor is deeply embedded strategic

<sup>20</sup> Golts, 2019, pp. 86–96.

<sup>21</sup> Anika Binnendijk, Dara Massicot, Anthony Adler, John Drennan, Khrystyna Holynska, Katya Migacheva, Marek Posard, and Yuliya Shokh, *Russian Military Personnel and Proficiency: Policies, Reforms, and Recent Trends*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Aron, *Russia's Revolution: Essays 1989–2006*, Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2007, p. 281.

<sup>24</sup> Aron, 2007, p. 281; and Connolly, 2019, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> A. A. Kokoshin, *Defense Leadership in Russia: The General Staff and Strategic Management in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, Mass.: Kennedy School of Government, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Discussion Paper 2002-15, November 2002, pp. 58–59.

<sup>26</sup> Greg Whisler, "Strategic Command and Control in the Russian Armed Forces: Untangling the General Staff, Military Districts, and Service Main Commands (Part One)," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2019, pp. 479–480.

<sup>27</sup> Felgenhauer, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> See Menning and Mahoney, 1982, p. 27; Isabelle Facon, "The Russian Way of War: In Crisis?" in Julian Lindley-French and Yves Boyer, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of War*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 283; Golts and Putnam, 2004, p. 141; and Renz, 2018, p. 14.



visions and operational concepts within the military.<sup>29</sup> The third factor is the organizational independence and autonomy of the military, which severely constrained the ability of external entities to scrutinize and manage the armed forces.<sup>30</sup> These three factors combine to help explain both *why* the Russian military would resist reform and *how* it would be enabled to do so.

## Militarism in Russian Culture

Culture plays an essential enabling role in explaining the military's ability to resist reform. As Mahoney argues, "Among its different functions, culture mediates a society's approach to reality by supplying an understanding of what is reasonable or 'rational.'"<sup>31</sup> Since Peter the Great in the 1700s, the Russian state has conditioned its citizens to perceive service to the military—universal conscription—as rational.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Golts and Putman argue that the state has long cultivated an attitude of *oboronnoye soznaniye* (defense-mindedness): a culture of "deference and sacrifice to military needs and priorities" that has conditioned society to continue to defer to the military.<sup>33</sup> In one particularly memorable quote, then–Defense Minister Igor Rodionov told journalists in 1997 that victory for Russia required neither modern equipment nor combat-ready forces; with *oboronnoye soznaniye*, "we shall be capable of killing all enemies with sticks alone."<sup>34</sup>

For its citizens to acquiesce to these continued demands of blood and treasure, though, the ends must be perceived to justify the means. For Russian citizens and their political and military leaders, there is an "understanding that Russia's destiny is to be a great power" and realizing this destiny requires a powerful military.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Russia's experience in the early post-Soviet period, when its military was in shambles, was perceived to validate this viewpoint. Renz notes:

As Russia's conventional military disintegrated . . . so did the country's international prestige image as a global power. This did not escape the country's political elite, which promised to restore the Russian military to its former glory on multiple occasions.<sup>36</sup>

## Embedded Strategic Visions and Concepts

Although the strategic visions and concepts that hold sway in the General Staff emphasize non-contact warfare and the employment of other tools of state power (other than military force) to achieve political objectives, Russian writing on these topics began to find traction only in the early 2000s.<sup>37</sup> Through the 1990s and

<sup>29</sup> Facon, 2012, p. 283; and Golts, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Vendil Pallin, 2009, p. 172; Kokoshin, 2002, pp. 58–59; and Golts, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Menning and Mahoney, 1982, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Mukhin, "V voennykh reformakh zaputalos' ne tol'ko obshchetvo, no i rukovodstvo strany," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 21, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Renz, 2018, pp. 22–30.

<sup>36</sup> Renz, 2018, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> See Clint Reach, Alexis Blanc, and Edward Geist, *Russian Military Strategy: Organizing for Operations in the Initial Period of War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A1233-1, 2022. Of course, the first prominent advocate of this concept was then–Chief of Staff Nikolai Ogarkov in the 1980s, who envisioned reform plans that called for the creation of separate Army Corps (*Otdelnye armeiskiy korpusa*) capable of carrying out highly mobile operations behind enemy lines with the strike force consisting of motorized rifle and tank brigades.

early 2000s, Russian military thinking relied on the crucial lesson of WWII: the decisiveness of mass. Golts opines that, at that point in time, the General Staff Academy had "mythologized [the] experience of the Great Patriotic War, which teaches that victory comes from numbers rather than knowledge or knowhow."<sup>38</sup>

As observed in the previous section regarding militarism in Russian culture, conscription prior to the collapse of the Soviet period had provided the military with access to a seemingly limitless supply of manpower. This source of manpower has been the central organizing principle for the Armed Forces and has served as the basis of Russian military art for generations.<sup>39</sup> Although modern Russian strategic thinking embraces permanently ready, professional forces, conscription continues to be viewed by the Russian military not only as a mechanism to instill *oboronnoye soznaniye* in subsequent generations of Russians but also as an essential mobilization base for the defense of the state—i.e., a human strategic reserve.<sup>40</sup> In the military's opinion, Russia's massive landmass and its position within a historically dangerous region require a mobilization system that can support a nationwide defensive effort.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Felgenhauer postulated in 2005 that

[t]he legacy of World War II is still considered, in our military academies, as the finest of modern military tactics, operational art and strategy. Suggestions that drastically would cut numbers in exchange for increasing quality are dismissed as pro-Western diversions that are intended to "disarm Russia" in the event of an imminent U.S.-lead NATO invasion.<sup>42</sup>

## An Organizational Island

Finally, as detailed in Chapters Two and Three, the General Staff specifically and the Russian military in general exist as largely autonomous bodies, and this was particularly the case prior to 2008. There are few truly "civilian" individuals who staff the MoD, except for (most notably) Shoigu. This has been a long-standing historical practice. Distinct advantages accrue from such institutional autonomy and reverence. Conveniently, by monopolizing these positions, the military also has been able to claim a monopoly on military-technical knowledge.<sup>43</sup> This construct created a dominant ethos whereby one Russian lawmaker observed, "Officials in epaulets are perceived not simply as civil servants who can make mistakes or pursue narrow bureaucratic interests, but as priests who know a sacrament of truth inaccessible to civilians."<sup>44</sup>

Prior to 2008, the Russian military also exercised even broader discretion with the budget. Throughout its decade of obstruction, the Russian MoD exercised a significant amount of budgetary control, including the allocation of resources for planning and procurement.<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that the Russian military automatically received the budgets it requested. On the contrary, in a significant change from the Cold War period during which the military received preferential treatment and was relatively protected from economic

<sup>38</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> Donnelly, 1988, p. 86. Also noted in Westerlund, 2021, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> V. I. Ostankov, "Strategicheskikh rezervov net," *Voenno-promyshlennvi kur'er*, March 17, 2014; and Ronald R. Krebs, "A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Spring 2004.

<sup>41</sup> Gerasimov, 2015, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Felgenhauer, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Kokoshin, 2002, pp. 58–59.

<sup>44</sup> Aleksei Arbatov and Petr Romashkin, "Bjudzhet kak zerkalo voennoi reformy: S takim planirovaniyem voennykh rashodov nel'zya reshat' seryeznykh zadach," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 17, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, p. 123.

shocks, the Kremlin placed the MoD on a starvation diet.<sup>46</sup> But, the MoD, and by extension the military, had arguably unchecked control over the use of the funds that *were* allotted to it. During this pre-2008 period, the military had enormous discretion over the spending of funds. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the lack of oversight and the chaotic attempt to transition from the Soviet economic model, embezzlement and graft ran rampant. Embezzlement schemes existed throughout the officer ranks; even general officers were charged with overstating costs for their units to siphon the excess, embezzling millions of rubles from MoD coffers, or selling military equipment internationally via arms smugglers.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, to the degree that information is power, the military also appears to have monopolized it on multiple fronts in terms of the condition of the armed forces, the size of the armed forces, and how and where money was spent.<sup>48</sup> Putin directly spoke to this lack of transparency when justifying his appointment of a nonmilitary individual as the new Minister of Defense in 2007, noting Serdyukov's "experience in the economic sphere."<sup>49</sup> Multiple scholars thus argued that civilian leaders lacked the know-how to construct reform plans for the military to fulfill and the mechanisms to verify and validate the changes that were demanded of the military.<sup>50</sup>

## How the Stars Aligned Behind Change

Just as instructive as understanding how the military was able to obstruct reform is an understanding of the elements that had to materialize and coincide to enable the 2008 reforms. Discussions of military reforms began as early as the 1980s in the Soviet Union; even then, the administrative reforms that were announced and implemented were later revoked when the main proponents of the reforms left their positions.<sup>51</sup> We identified at least six factors that were necessary but by themselves insufficient for creating the conditions for reforms to succeed. These include numerous accidents and demonstrations of ineptitude, a broadly popular president, placing an outsider at the helm of the MoD, firing several of the most senior members of the General Staff and MoD, an enormous influx of oil rents, and dismissing up to 30 percent of the officer cadre. Given the extended period over which the military was able to resist reforms, it appears that all these factors had to coincide for reforms to actually take hold.

## Ineptitude on Display

Although accurate figures are difficult to come by, the official Russian military death toll during the first Chechen War was reported to be roughly 6,000 soldiers; independent calculations suggest the number is perhaps double. Civilian casualties are estimated to be as high as 100,000.<sup>52</sup> Timothy Thomas describes the hellish experience of one unit during the initial assault on Grozny:

<sup>46</sup> Renz, 2018, pp. 52–55.

<sup>47</sup> Sergey Turchenko, "The Smaller the Army, the More the Crimes," *Svobodnaya Pressa*, March 24, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Golts, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Ivan Safronov, "Komandir Udarnoi Dizizii," *Kommersant*, November 6, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Vendil Pallin, 2009; and Westerlund, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Felgenhauer, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Higgins, "The War That Continues to Shape Russia, 25 Years Later," *New York Times*, December 10, 2019.

The first unit to penetrate to the city center was the 1st battalion of the 131st "Maikop" Brigade, the latter composed of some 1,000 soldiers. By 3 January 1995 [over three days], the brigade had lost nearly 800 men, 20 of 26 tanks, and 102 of 120 armored vehicles.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the losses experienced in Chechnya, many tragic military incidents happened during this time, such as the sinking of the submarine *Kursk* and its botched rescue operation in 2000, fires on several other submarines in the early 2000s, the crash of a military transport helicopter in a minefield in Chechnya in 2002 that killed at least 100 soldiers, the crash of at least seven more military helicopters that year, and explosions at several arms depots.<sup>54</sup> Finally, in 2008, while casualties were significantly lower—a reported 64 killed and 283 wounded—the performance of the Russian Armed Forces in Georgia was sufficiently poor to "raise doubts as to whether its military would be able to wage war against a more advanced adversary or one able to deploy larger forces or attract help from a third party."<sup>55</sup> As then-commander of the Russian Air Forces General Aleksandr Zelin grimly noted in 2009 of the military's lessons learned from the conflict, "mistakes were made, but conclusions had been drawn."<sup>56</sup> Then-Chief of Staff General Makarov observed,

taking into account both military training of troops and experiences from military conflicts in recent years, among which the military action of our troops in Southern Ossetia, it is impossible to not notice a certain gap between theory and practice.<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, ineptitude alone was not sufficient prerequisite for reform, or the Armed Forces would have made more meaningful progress toward reform after the Second Chechen War. Even so, within months of the end of Russia's conflict with Georgia, the Minister of Defense announced the New Look defense reforms, in many ways using poor performance during the Georgian conflict as a public rationale for the significant changes and expenditures that would follow. For example, Russian scholar Roger McDermott notes that "very little difference can be found between the criticisms of the campaign in either civilian media or official sources, suggesting the presence of an orchestrated effort by the government to 'sell' reform to the military and garner support among the populace."<sup>58</sup>

## Distracted by the Alligator Closest to the Boat

During the first Chechen war, Yeltsin ordered the military to "employ all means at the state's disposal" to swiftly quash Chechen demands for independence, contrary to the public disagreement of his generals that such an action would be a "blood bath."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps ironically, this horrific performance and experience left

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<sup>53</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, "The Battle of Grozny: Deadly Classroom for Urban Combat," *Parameters*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Summer 1999, p. 87.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "Giant Helicopter Crashes in Russia," *New York Times*, August 20, 2002; and "Russia Says New Blast at Arms Depot Kills 8," Reuters, November 23, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009, p. 418; and "Russia Lost 64 Troops in Georgian War, 283 Wounded," Reuters, February 21, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> "Russian Air Force Chief Discusses Reform, Training, Modernization, Projects," *Interfax*, August 5, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Viktor Litovkin, "Genshtab informiruet zagrantsu," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 46, December-January 2008/2009, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Conventional Armed Forces and the Georgian War," *Parameters*, Vol. 39, No. 1, Spring 2009, p. 67.

<sup>59</sup> Higgins, 2019.

Yeltsin unable to implement the reforms that were so clearly needed, having materially weakened his political standing.<sup>60</sup>

Yet in the midst of Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, with calamities wracking the country—including the collapse of the ruble and the Russian government defaulting on its debts—the newly elected president had much more pressing domestic problems that sapped the political will to force military reforms.<sup>61</sup> Scholars Rivera and Rivera argue that newly elected President Putin had two primary objectives in 2000: reestablish the primacy of the federal government (over regional governments) and increase the state’s control over society, replacing the dominant roles of criminals and oligarchs.<sup>62</sup> It was not until his second term, having consolidated his agenda of “sovereign democracy” and overseen a dramatic improvement in living standards, that Putin possessed both the bandwidth and the domestic public support to direct sustained attention to the issue of military reform.<sup>63</sup>

## A Hatchet Man

Even with the necessary domestic support, efforts at reform were stymied for lack of a Minister of Defense who was willing to weather the public firestorm that would inevitably result from carrying out the decision to fire thousands of military personnel and bring accountability to the military’s financial system. Enter Anatoly Serdyukov, formerly the head of the Federal Tax Service and the first true outsider to be placed at the helm of the MoD. U.S. Ambassador William J. Burns described Serdyukov’s appointment in the following manner:

Serdyukov has his work cut out for him in bringing order to a ministry badly in need of reform. While he lacks military credentials, Serdyukov has proven capable of making tough decisions—and serving as a hatchet man when called upon.<sup>64</sup>

Serdyukov was entrusted with this role for several reasons, perhaps most importantly because he visibly demonstrated his commitment to Putin’s central endeavor of clawing back control of the state from Russian oligarchs. Specifically, Serdyukov used his authority as head of the Federal Tax Service to serve the Yukos oil company with a 98 billion ruble tax claim.<sup>65</sup> Doggedly pressing this claim through the courts, Serdyukov eventually bankrupted Yukos.<sup>66</sup> During Serdyukov’s tenure, tax revenues subsequently soared and counter-suits disputing federal taxes plummeted. Moreover, Serdyukov created and implemented a financial accounting system at the federal level that allowed this office control and insight into returns and tax collection.<sup>67</sup> Given the vast flows of money entering the MoD and the relatively anemic capabilities being acquired for these resources, Putin needed a loyal individual with the requisite experience to create “a more transparent

<sup>60</sup> Higgins, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Clint Reach, “The Origins of Russian Conduct,” *PRISM*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2021, pp. 4–5.

<sup>62</sup> David W. Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera, “The Militarization of the Russian Elite Under Putin: What We Know, What We Think We Know (but Don’t), and What We Need to Know,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2018, p. 222.

<sup>63</sup> Treisman, 2018a, p. 10; Reach, 2021, p. 5; and Golts, 2019, p. 75.

<sup>64</sup> “Nachinaet pokazivat’sia iz teni,” *Russkii Reporter*, February 4, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 127.

<sup>66</sup> Shamiev, 2021, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 127.

system of rational and targeted spending of budget appropriations" and eliminate duplicative functions.<sup>68</sup> Serdyukov thus had the experience and qualities that Putin required to implement military reforms.

## A "New Broom" Approach

Though the exact size of Russia's Armed Forces is notoriously opaque, the number of personnel in Russia's military was well over 2 million after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This figure shrank to 1.2 million in 1999 but largely appears to have stayed in the range of 1.1–1.3 million in subsequent years.<sup>69</sup> The majority of reductions appear to have resulted because of the collapse in the size of the conscript pool rather than a similar reduction to officer ranks, who were still left in command of cadre units.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, whereas previous Ministers of Defense could not or would not make significant changes to the force structure and officer cadre, Serdyukov and then-Chief of the General Staff Makarov accepted the task, discharging a reported 200,000 officers (out of an estimated 355,000) and disbanding cadre units.<sup>71</sup>

Cuts to the officer corps were not limited to colonels and lieutenant colonels. The Chief of the General Staff at the time was ousted (and replaced by Makarov) after he openly disagreed with Serdyukov's proposed reforms and publicly criticized his lack of knowledge of the military domain.<sup>72</sup> Other generals, such as the former Chief of the Ground Forces General Vladimir Boldyrev, who echoed the Chief of the General Staff's criticisms of Serdyukov, were also shown the door.<sup>73</sup> Whereas previous versions of this "generals' rebellion" had halted reforms in their tracks, Serdyukov and Makarov retained the support of Putin and continued with these changes. Golts notes that Serdyukov faced multiple public denunciations from current and former members of the military, but further asserts that,

Serdyukov . . . continued to hold the line, mercilessly firing dissenters, and carrying out a large-scale reshuffling of the top military leadership. . . . By the first half of 2008, more than 70 percent of the cadre of deputies and chiefs of services in the Defense Ministry were new people.<sup>74</sup>

The new individuals brought in by Serdyukov to replace these bureaucrats were trusted agents from his own network in the form of his former personnel from the Federal Tax Service.<sup>75</sup>

It was certainly the case that not all senior figures within the military establishment opposed reforms. Writings from the period suggest that several active duty and retired military personnel wrote about concepts that would ultimately be implemented under what came to be known as the New Look reforms.<sup>76</sup> Serdyukov

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<sup>68</sup> Vladimir Mukhin, "Serdyukov optimiziruet oboronu," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, April 12, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Aleksandr Kholkhov, "Ministr proveril: Svyaz' bez Braka," *Novie Izvestiya*, April 8, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Golts, 2019, pp. 7, 146.

<sup>71</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> This was not the first time that Baluyevki had spoken publicly against aspects of the military reform. He had previously (in 2003) criticized the Duma for narrowing the concept of military reform, which, according to him, made it "impossible to carry out the reform"; see Vladimir Ivanov, "General-Polkovnik Baluyevskiy—Post Prinyal," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 2004-07-23 NVO-No. 027, July 23, 2004.

<sup>73</sup> Baluyevski's career in security continued and he was soon appointed to the Security Council. One of the generals that was at least dismissed (officially) was Rukshin, the head of the GOU. Baluyevski's successor Makarov was reportedly hand-picked by Serdyukov; see Felgenhauer, 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 163.

<sup>75</sup> Douglas, 2014, p. 517.

<sup>76</sup> Even then-Chief of the General Staff Baluyevsky—who was fired by Serdyukov for his public disagreements with the minister—advocated for changes that would increase readiness. Baluyevsky wrote in 2004, for example,

and Makarov identified and promoted these individuals. For example, Makarov was reportedly hand-picked by Serdyukov to serve as Baluyeski's replacement as the Chief of the General Staff because he was willing to implement reforms or possibly his strong visions for what was needed to modernize the armed forces.<sup>77</sup>

## More Money, But Limited Progress

As noted in earlier sections, a key objection to previous reform efforts was the contention that the military was insufficiently resourced to undertake such an overhaul.<sup>78</sup> It was certainly the case that the military suffered a shock in the 1990s, when the defense budget was cut to less than U.S. \$20 billion by 1998.<sup>79</sup> However, throughout the 2000s, when the price of oil per barrel steadily increased, reaching a peak around \$100 per barrel, Russian defense spending increased steadily, growing to roughly \$58 billion by 2008.<sup>80</sup> In purchasing power parity exchange rate terms, defense budget increases appear even sharper. Russian defense spending increased steadily over this period, with spending on the Russian military reaching \$80 billion in 2005 and approaching \$125 billion by 2010.<sup>81</sup>

Despite these increases, readiness improved only modestly in the 2000s. Many structural problems persisted. For example, the sluggish Russian defense industry failed to provide modern equipment to the force, and the Russian General Staff did not implement new training methods. These kinds of structural problems persisted, and the consequences of these problems manifested during combat operations. In 2008, when Russian airborne units arrived in Abkhazia by sea and rail, ground forces were unable to communicate with air forces to call in supporting fires (among other issues), and Russia's air forces lost ten aircraft against an opponent that lacked fighter aircraft or advanced air defenses.<sup>82</sup>

## The "Swollen Egg" Is Cracked

The final explanatory variable required to understand the reforms that were initiated in 2008 is demographics. Russia simply did not have access to the same masses of manpower to which the Soviet Union could avail itself. For example, in 2009, an estimated three-quarters of a million people would need to be drafted to maintain the numerical strength of a million-person military. That same year, only 840,000 men turned 18, more than half of whom would be eligible for deferments based on health- or college-related reasons.<sup>83</sup>

However, resistance to changing the system of conscription makes sense in the bureaucratic context. Unlike Western militaries, the Russian military in 2008 had a ratio of officers to enlisted soldiers that

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In connection with the fact that, geopolitically, potential military threats to Russia's security exist in the West, in the East, and in the South, their neutralization should provide for reliance on the concept of strategic mobility and nuclear deterrence. [The threats] call for the presence of a small number of permanent readiness troops that could quickly and effectively influence local conflicts, rapid reaction forces capable of quickly moving to any region along the perimeter of Russia, as well as performing peacekeeping functions, quickly and effectively suppress dangerous, in relation to the Russian Federation, actions, reinforce control over currently threatened sections of the border, and act in cooperation with the forces of the Russian allies at a considerable distance from their bases (Iu. N. Baluevskii, ed., *Voennaya bezopasnost' Rossiiskoi Federatsii v XXI veke*, Moscow: Center for Military-Strategic Studies of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, 2004, p. 24).

<sup>77</sup> Shamiev, 2021, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Baluevskii, 2006.

<sup>79</sup> Renz, 2018, p. 55, citing the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Military Expenditure Database.

<sup>80</sup> Petrov and Nazrullaeva, 2018, p. 113.

<sup>81</sup> Connolly, 2019, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009. The count of ten aircraft lost includes aircraft that were damaged beyond repair in the conflict.

<sup>83</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 168.

appears to have been roughly 1:2. Serduykov noted at the time, "Our army is today like an egg—swollen in the middle—we have more colonels and lieutenant colonels than junior officers."<sup>84</sup> Yet this surplus can be rationalized in the warfighting strategy that emphasizes mass mobilization and under-strength peacetime units (i.e., skeleton units). In such a strategy, numerous senior officers would be required to prepare and lead reservist units. Beyond a justification for their existence, military elites would have been reasonably motivated to resist reforms to the degree that it required a much greater portion of these officers to possess skill sets and experience beyond training mass conscripts to follow orders and complete the most rudimentary tasks.<sup>85</sup>

As noted previously, Serdyukov and Makarov possessed the political top-cover to upend this system, discharging roughly 200,000 officers and disbanding cadre units.<sup>86</sup>

## Concluding Observations

Understanding the fraught history of Russia's reform efforts, particularly during the decade prior to 2008, offers several instructive insights regarding the role of the General Staff in decision- and policymaking. First, it is striking how many factors had to coincide to undermine the military's resistance to reform. Legacy ideas and vested bureaucratic interests held the peacetime military decisionmaking process hostage. The centuries-long militarization of Russian culture and the high degree of autonomy granted to the military organization allowed these concepts and authority structures to persist.

And it is not clear that the 2008 reforms have fully broken through these legacy ideas and deference to the military. For example, the Russian military has not abandoned the idea of possessing a manpower reserve available for mobilization. While the 2008 reforms were designed to transition the Russian military to a permanently ready, professional force, a 2015 presidential decree provided funds to the MoD for the formation of a mobilization reserve, although little progress has been made as of the time of this writing, and the mobilization base remained largely dormant in the 2010s.<sup>87</sup> However, in a 2013 speech, Shoigu highlighted "development of the mobilization base" as one of his priorities.<sup>88</sup> These developments suggest these legacy concepts may continue to exercise a gravitational pull over the peacetime military decisionmaking process.

Second, this history illustrates the critical peacetime role of the General Staff in the process of reforming the Russian Armed Forces and in preparing the military for the threats of the post-Cold War environment. Given the alignment of authority and responsibility within this one body, when the General Staff as an organization supported reform, the speed of change was impressive. On the other hand, in this chapter, we also showed that when the organization opposed change, it was clear that the organization possessed sufficient autonomy to choose to act in its own best interests, and to do so for at least a decade. Moreover, the performance of Russian Armed Forces one month into its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine suggests that there are limits to the kinds of conflicts that this reformed military is suited to fight: Large-scale operations present

<sup>84</sup> Felgenhauer, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Golts and Putnam, 2004, pp. 154–155; and Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009, p. 414.

<sup>86</sup> Golts, 2019, p. 142.

<sup>87</sup> Reach, Blanc, and Geist, 2022, pp. 44–45.

<sup>88</sup> S. K. Shoigu, "Vystuplenie ministra oborny Rossiiskoi Federatsii generala armii S. K. Shoigu," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 1, No. 42, 2013, p. 7. On the other hand, Putin has scrupulously avoided giving defense spending "absolute priority"—a sharp difference from the Soviet years when the military received preferential allocation of resources; see Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's Defense Spending and the Economic Decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, January 2016.



a much greater challenge than the limited actions that characterize the annexation of Crimea and intervention in Syria (which will be discussed in the following chapters).

This case study thus demonstrates that the General Staff is an organization like any other, and the extreme degree of autonomy, responsibility, and authority invested in this institution creates an opportunity for a similarly extreme degree of obstructionism. The General Staff's compliance was crucial for implementing the 2008 reforms. However, these reforms shied away from implementing the kinds of systemic changes that might have curtailed the independence of the General Staff, thus leaving open the potential for this body to again resist, stymie, or roll back reforms. Without the support of the General Staff, at least some portion of the reforms—and the military effectiveness gained from them—could quickly unravel. Although the 2022 war was still in its early stages as of this writing, the challenges impeding the Russian military during the first month of its invasion of Ukraine lend credence to the contention that relatively few barriers prevent institutional interests within the military from reasserting their dominance and acting in ways that undermine the 2008 reforms, and these challenges call into question the Russian Armed Forces' ability to operate effectively in a large-scale, complex operation.

Third, this history demonstrates that while informal personal networks might dominate *national security* decisionmaking consistent with the civil-military relations literature, bureaucratic rules and procedures appear to dominate *military* decisionmaking as it relates to the preparedness of the Armed Forces for potential conflict. Aligning authority and responsibility to such an extreme degree within one institution raises obvious concerns about the ability of political leaders to ensure that the military institution serves the interests of the state rather than itself. It certainly appears to be the case that the use of force by Russia reflects the will of political leaders and not the military.<sup>89</sup> However, the arduous process of reforming the Russian military demonstrates that the ability of the political leadership and other institutions to play an effective oversight role is highly constrained in the Russian context.

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<sup>89</sup> Westerlund, 2021, p. 56.



# The General Staff in a Practical Context: Ukraine Case Study

## Introduction

The preceding chapters largely examined the Russian General Staff's behavior, organization, and culture through an operation-agnostic lens. The purpose of Chapters Five and Six is to place this body in the context of two recent military efforts, Russian military operations in Ukraine (2014–2021) and Syria (2015–2019). These case studies afford the opportunity to observe the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the General Staff in practice.

We selected these two cases because they represent recent examples of Russia's post-Cold War military engagements abroad.<sup>1</sup> Thus, both offer a window into the actualization of the modernization and professionalization efforts that the Russian Armed Forces embarked on following their lackluster performance in the 2008 conflict with Georgia.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, given that Russia is believed by many scholars to operate as a highly personalized decisionmaking system and power structure—with proximity to Putin functioning as a broad indicator of clout—organizations' and individuals' formal authorities, relationships, and structures are not always indicative of their roles in practice.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while it is valuable to examine the General Staff's functions and dynamics as detailed on paper, it is equally important to understand how they operate in practice within the context of real-world campaigns. Although both Ukraine and Syria exemplify limited Russian military engagements, the divergences between the two cases highlight how the Russian military establishment and specifically the General Staff operate in different settings. Finally, the role of the General Staff in either of the cases has not yet been addressed in any detail in the relevant literature.

## Crimea, the Donbas, and the Russian General Staff

In the wake of the ousting of then-President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 and the ushering in of a new government following months of mass demonstrations in Ukraine's capital city of Kyiv, nearly 1,000 km away on the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, anonymous "volunteer" forces seized all strategic sites across

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<sup>1</sup> We exclude the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine from this chapter; that conflict commenced after the study's period of analysis had concluded.

<sup>2</sup> For in-depth treatments of these efforts, see Renz, 2018; and U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, Washington, D.C., 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia's Relationship with China: The Role of Domestic and Ideational Factors," *International Politics*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2019; Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz, "The Siloviki in Russian Politics," in Treisman, 2018; and Marten, 2015, p. 71.

the peninsula, including the Crimean parliament, where new authorities took power in a matter of weeks.<sup>4</sup> Under the pretext of safeguarding the Crimean people's political freedoms from oppressive authorities in Kyiv, these forces facilitated a referendum vote on March 16, 2014.<sup>5</sup> The Kremlin alleged that Crimeans overwhelmingly supported joining Russia in the referendum.<sup>6</sup> A treaty signed on March 18 formalized Russia's absorption of the peninsula and the city of Sevastopol.<sup>7</sup> A week later, the roughly 22,000 Ukrainian forces stationed in Crimea "laid down their arms."<sup>8</sup> Although the true identity of the masked forces responsible for the Crimean annexation was revealed by visible clues, such as the Russian-issued arms and equipment, only later did Putin claim ownership of the operation.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, simmering tensions reportedly provoked by Yanukovich's ousting erupted in early March 2014, resulting in the seizure of several government buildings in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk, and the establishment of the Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkov People's Republics in April of that year.<sup>10</sup> The founders of these movements, who shifted the narrative from demands for greater regional autonomy to calls for secession from Ukraine, were believed to have had ties to Russia.<sup>11</sup> This local unrest evolved into armed offensives, although the extent to which these early separatist activities in the Donbas formed organically (versus manufactured by various Russian actors) is debated.<sup>12</sup> In an effort to prevent a Crimean-like scenario in the country's eastern reaches, authorities in Kyiv launched an anti-terrorist operation in mid-April to counter secessionist movements.<sup>13</sup> Although the details of the Russian military's role in the first months of the conflict remain murky, evidence indicates that by late May,

<sup>4</sup> We characterize these forces as *volunteer* because there are reports that these forces operated Russian-issued artillery and anti-aircraft systems; these are systems that civilians would have no experience using. Yet, until December 2015, the Kremlin propagated the official narrative that the separatist militias self-organized and never fought alongside Russian troops in the Donbas. See Andrew E. Kramer and Michael R. Gordon, "Ukraine Reports Russian Invasion on a New Front," *New York Times*, August 27, 2014b; and Shaun Walker, "Putin Admits Russian Military Presence in Ukraine for First Time," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2015. As we have defined it, the Ukraine case encompasses both the 2014 military operation in support of Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the Russian Armed Forces' role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region from 2014 through 2021. Moscow's efforts to deliberately shroud Russia's hand in Crimea and the Donbas has affected the volume and veracity of publicly available information. This data challenge is exacerbated by the fact that in Ukraine, the General Staff's military intelligence body, the GRU, appears to have had the heaviest hand of any General Staff-affiliated entity. As an intelligence body, the GRU's work is opaque by design, and the evidence available is slim. Throughout this chapter, we are transparent about the limitations of the evidence presented.

<sup>5</sup> Lucian Kim, "Kremlin TV: Vladimir Putin's New Faux Documentary Is Trying to Rewrite the History of His Own Aggression," *Slate*, March 19, 2015. This claim was later widely disputed.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Pifer, "Five Years After Crimea's Illegal Annexation, the Issue Is No Closer to Resolution," blog post, Brookings Institution, March 18, 2019; and Paul Roderick Gregory, "Putin's 'Human Rights Council' Accidentally Posts Real Crimean Election Results," *Forbes*, May 5, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Lavrov, 2015, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Lavrov, 2015, pp. 157–186.

<sup>9</sup> Lavrov, 2015, p. 163; and Kim, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Oleya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operation in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, RR-1498-A, 2017, pp. 6–7; Richard Balmforth and Lina Kushch, "Pro-Moscow Protesters Seize Arms, Declare Republic, Kiev Fears Invasion," Reuters, April 7, 2014; David M. Herszenhorn and Andrew Roth, "In East Ukraine, Protesters Seek Russian Troops," *New York Times*, April 7, 2014. Note that the Ukrainian transliteration of the city Kharkiv differs from the Russian transliteration, Kharkov. We use the latter to refer to the people's republic because its founders were likely Russophones.

<sup>11</sup> Kofman et al., 2017, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 233.

<sup>13</sup> D'Anieri, 2019, p. 234.

volunteers from Russia (some of whom were reportedly Russian forces on leave) had a robust presence in the fighting. Late August 2014 witnessed the entry of regular Russian troops, arms, artillery, and equipment on the Donbas battlefields for the first time.<sup>14</sup> In the months that followed, Russian troops mounted several additional offensives against Ukrainian forces in the Donbas.

While the Crimean annexation and conflict in the Donbas have been subject to much scholarship and analysis, little of that analysis has addressed the role of the Russian General Staff in these campaigns specifically. The following sections will examine both campaigns through this specific lens.

## Russian Intervention in Crimea

The question of who influenced the decision to seize Crimea is hotly debated in scholarly and analytical circles. Putin has declared that the decision was his own, in reaction to events unfolding on the ground.<sup>15</sup> The implication that the decision appears to be Putin's alone is consistent with what numerous scholars and analysts understand to be the nature of Russian power dynamics. Particularly for major foreign policy and security decisions, authority is believed to be increasingly centralized, with decisionmaking power concentrated at the top echelons of the presidential administration, notably residing with Putin and a small coterie of trusted aides.<sup>16</sup>

Although Putin appears to serve as final arbiter in high-profile foreign policy decisions, some evidence indicates that he nevertheless solicits information from an inner circle, whether in the form of small informal discussions or formal briefings.<sup>17</sup> Scholars Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz argue the decision to launch the Crimean campaign might have been informed by information presented to him in these venues.<sup>18</sup>

We know that in the case of Crimea, Putin claims to have met with a small cadre hailing from Russia's power ministries on this issue.<sup>19</sup> In a 2015 state-produced documentary *Crimea: Path to the Motherland*, Putin recounted how he met with four colleagues February 22–23, 2014, regarding the decision to intervene in Crimea.<sup>20</sup> Gerasimov does not appear to have been present at this specific meeting, although his direct

<sup>14</sup> Kramer and Gordon, 2014b.

<sup>15</sup> According to scholar Daniel Treisman, who spoke with the president at a 2015 reception in Sochi during which he asked whether the Crimean campaign was long in the making, Putin responded, "Not at all. It was spontaneous. . . . We saw what was happening in Kiev and I made a decision" (Treisman, 2018a, p. 279). Putin rebuffed the question of inputs from trusted advisers, telling Treisman "No. I told them we will do this and then that. I was even surprised at how well it all went" (Treisman, 2018a, p. 288). In the same vein, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has maintained this narrative publicly, telling the TVC television channel that "It was a personal decision of the head of state. He was the only person who could and had to make it and who made it" ("Decision on Crimea Made Solely by Putin—Kremlin Spokesperson," TASS, April 19, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, p. 2; and William E. Pomeranz, "Putin's Cosmetic Constitutionalism," blog post, Wilson Center, January 16, 2020. It is important to caveat that some scholars studying this issue assert that for domestic policy issues (notably domestic economic policies), decisionmaking is less personalized; Putin plays a smaller role than with such decisions as the annexation of Crimea. See Ananyev, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Soldatov and Rochlitz, 2018, pp. 101–105.

<sup>18</sup> Treisman, 2018a, p. 288.

<sup>19</sup> The term *power ministries* is one of several (others being *force ministries* and *power agencies*) used in scholarly and analytical circles to refer to such organs as Russian security services and military bodies. For a discussion of definitions see Vendil Pallin, 2007; and Taylor, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> On February 23, 2014, the president claims to have wrapped a nightlong meeting on Yanukovich's exfiltration involving four senior Kremlin advisers "at about seven o'clock in the morning," according to Putin (John W. Parker, *Understanding Putin Through a Middle Eastern Looking Glass*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Strategic Perspectives 19, July 2015, p. 29). As the president and his advisers parted, Putin recalled in his own words

superior in the chain of command, Shoigu, was present. The MoD has not provided any accounting of potential interactions between Shoigu and Gerasimov in the early phases of the Crimean operation.

## Russian Intervention in the Donbas

Even less concrete evidence is available on Russia's decision to militarily intervene in the Donbas. Details on Russia's role in the early separatist unrest and skirmishes remain murky. This is in large part by design because of the denied nature of Russia's operation. Furthermore, the maze of actors involved—from official Ukrainian military forces and Ukraine's volunteer battalions on the one hand to pro-Russian separatists, Russian mercenaries and contractors, Russian forces, and foreign fighters on the other—makes it even more challenging to pinpoint when the Russian military's role officially commenced and who was responsible for this decision.<sup>21</sup> Complicating matters, the Kremlin propagated the official narrative that the separatist militias self-organized and never fought alongside Russian troops in the Donbas.<sup>22</sup> In practice, this means few details about the Russian military's role in this period have surfaced.

Starting in early March 2014, prior to the Crimean referendum, reports of large numbers of Russian troops exercising and massing along Ukraine's eastern border piqued anxieties in Kyiv and in Western capitals.<sup>23</sup> Observers speculate that these movements, which by April 2014 involved around 40,000 troops, initially were designed to serve as cover for Russian troop movements into Crimea.<sup>24</sup> Later, these movements served a different function—intimidating authorities in Kyiv with the goal of paralyzing decisionmaking and responsiveness.<sup>25</sup> The literature on decisionmaking dynamics in Russia suggests that while Putin might have been responsible for authorizing these movements at the macro level, it is unlikely that he was intimately involved in the mechanics of their execution.<sup>26</sup> Looking at the available evidence on the Russian military establishment, it is also likely that the General Staff was involved in the planning and strategy related to these major troop movements and snap exercises.<sup>27</sup>

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that "I will not hide it, I told all of my colleagues, there were four of them: The situation has unfolded in Ukraine in such a way that we have to start work on the return of Crimea to being part of Russia" (Parker, 2015, p. 29).

<sup>21</sup> According to scholar James Sherr, the labyrinthine nature of Russia's operation in the Donbas is in fact reflective of the state of Russia's environs:

Russia's purposes are advanced by the modalities of the "network state" that has been established inside Russia and which, by design and default, has blurred the distinction between "state" and "private" and established a sub rosa web of patron-client relationships inside the country and beyond it. Thus, the participants in the Donbass war are not only serving officers of the GRU and FSB but also retired servicemen and deserters; the private security forces of oligarchs (Ukrainian and Russian); Cossack, Chechen, and South Ossetian fighters; adventurers and criminals (James Sherr, "Ukraine and the Black Sea Region: The Russian Military Perspective," in Stephen J. Blank, ed., *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2019, p. 796).

<sup>22</sup> Walker, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Ron Synovitz, "Explainer: What Do Russian Troop Movements Near Ukraine's Border Signify?" *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 13, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Synovitz, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Kofman et al., 2017, pp. 25–26.

<sup>26</sup> See Ananyev, 2018, pp. 29–48.

<sup>27</sup> In April 2014, the European Union (EU) added Gerasimov to its sanctions roster. The EU documents stated that the Chief of the General Staff was "responsible for the massive deployment of Russian troops along the border with Ukraine and the lack of de-escalation of the situation," as the rationale for his inclusion. See Council of the European Union, "EU Restrictive Measures in View of the Situation in Eastern Ukraine and the Illegal Annexation of Crimea," background note, July 29, 2014, p. 4.

Beginning in April 2014, the EU began to sanction various Russians, including former GRU chief Igor Sergun, citing his “responsib[ility] for the activity of GRU officers in Eastern Ukraine” as justification.<sup>28</sup> As discussed in detail in the following section, the GRU is believed to have had a prominent role in both the Crimea and Donbas campaigns, although accounts differ as to when its involvement commenced. In the case of the Donbas, some evidence points to the activities of Igor Gerkin (*nom de guerre* Strelkov) in the March–April 2014 time frame as some of the earliest involvement of the GRU in the unrest brewing in eastern Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> Strelkov and his men materialized in the Ukrainian city of Sloviansk, where they stormed the police department and seized a fairly large cache of weapons.<sup>30</sup> Strelkov then installed himself as mayor.<sup>31</sup>

Strelkov, a retired FSB colonel, is believed to have been on the GRU payroll and has publicly referred to his own status as that of a “Russian reserve officer.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, EU sanctions documents identify him as “staff of the . . . GRU.”<sup>33</sup> However, Strelkov insists that his militia’s assault on Sloviansk was not ordered by the GRU or other authorities in Moscow.<sup>34</sup> Whether at Moscow’s behest or not, Strelkov and his fellow separatist leaders’ actions in eastern Ukraine shaped the tide of events in the Donbas by reinvigorating local separatists’ stalled momentum by lending combat experience and reframing the movement’s objective from that of increased autonomy to secession.<sup>35</sup> Evidence indicates the battle for the Donetsk Airport in late May was the first major engagement involving a significant presence of Russian volunteer forces.<sup>36</sup> Evidence has since surfaced that implicates Russia’s hand in arming the separatists in summer 2014 in response to a handful of Ukrainian victories on the battlefield.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Russia’s involvement in the Donbas escalated again in August 2014, when between 1,000 and 4,000 regular Russian forces with arms and equipment flowed into eastern Ukraine, where they engaged and defeated the Ukrainian military at the Battle of Ilovaik.<sup>38</sup> Then, in the first months of 2015, the Russian military once again escalated its involvement at the Battle of Debaltseve where Russian forces—which are believed to have swelled to 10,000 at this point—defeated Ukraine’s anti-terrorist operation forces.<sup>39</sup>

Each of these points in the first months of hostilities—Strelkov’s actions at Sloviansk, the funneling of weapons over the border, the surges of “volunteers” and later regular forces—at which Russian political leadership, military leadership, or both, including the senior-most levels of the General Staff, likely informed the decisions to intervene in the Donbas.

<sup>28</sup> Council of the European Union, 2014, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Putin’s Secret Weapon,” *Foreign Policy*, July 7, 2014b.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Kots and Dmitry Steshin, “Komandujushhij samooboronoj Slavjanska Igor’ Strelkov: Zaderzhannye nabljudateli—kadrovye razvedchiki,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 26, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Kots and Steshin, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Sergey Shargunov, “Semnadcat’ kilometrov my shli marshem cherez granicu,” *Svobodnaya Pressa*, November 11, 2014; Kofman et al., 2017, p. 38; and Galeotti, 2014b.

<sup>33</sup> Council of the European Union, “List of Persons and Entities under EU Restrictive Measures over the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,” February 16, 2015, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Shargunov, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Kofman et al., 2017, pp. 38–39.

<sup>36</sup> Kofman et al., 2017, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> Carlo Muñoz, “U.S. European Commander: Russia Supplying Anti-Aircraft Weapons to Ukrainian Separatists,” *USNI News*, June 30, 2014; Andrew E. Kramer and Michael R. Gordon, “Russia Sent Tanks to Ukrainian Separatists, U.S. Says,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2014a; and Conflict Armament Research, *Weapons of the War in Ukraine: A Three-Year Investigation of Weapon Supplies into Donetsk and Luhansk*, London, UK, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Kofman et al., 2017, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Randy Noorman, “The Battle of Debaltseve: A Hybrid Army in a Classic Battle of Encirclement,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 17, 2020.

## The Russian General Staff's Role in Executing the Crimea and Donbas Campaigns

Once the Kremlin decided to intervene in Crimea, the operation had to be planned and executed. This became the point at which the General Staff—and more specifically the GRU—seems to have become more central. The GRU was not alone in its efforts because the FSB (successor to the Soviet-era KGB), its Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are also believed to have operated in Ukraine broadly and Crimea specifically.<sup>40</sup>

### Russian General Staff, GRU Units, and Affiliated Forces in Crimea

General Staff-aligned units, notably Russia's new Special Operations Forces (*Sily spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*, SSO) and GRU-Spetsnaz, are believed to have played a prominent role in both the operation to seize Crimea and Russia's incursion in the Donbas.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the first Russian military boots to set foot on Crimean soil once Putin relayed his decision to seize the peninsula are believed to have been those of the GRU's 45th Airborne Spetsnaz unit, which was secretly airlifted to Sevastopol on February 24, 2014.<sup>42</sup> The 45th Airborne Spetsnaz unit was the first of five such brigades (out of seven existing) suspected to have been inserted into the peninsula by March 5.<sup>43</sup> Russia's initial force presence was limited to lightly equipped units that relied on approximately 150 BTR-80 armored personnel carriers and Tigr armored vehicles.<sup>44</sup> The light nature of the GRU-Spetsnaz and SSO forces enabled these forces' agility, secrecy, and speed, characteristics on which Russia capitalized at the outset of the seizure.<sup>45</sup>

The unavowed militia responsible for the seizure of the Crimean parliament on February 27 are believed to have included SSO and GRU-Spetsnaz forces among their ranks. Evidence suggests the "little green men" or "polite people"—as they are known in the Russian lexicon—likely were operators hailing from the 45th GRU-

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<sup>40</sup> Service in the Black Sea Fleet, for instance, functioned as a cover for approximately ten GRU and FSB intelligence and counterintelligence detachments during this period (Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services*, policy brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2016c, p. 4).

<sup>41</sup> In 2013, Russia unveiled a new Special Operations Forces Command (*Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*, or KSSO). Designed to mirror the U.S. Delta Force, the total KSSO is believed to be between 1,000–2,500 strong, including support personnel. Some analysts speculate that SSO forces—unlike other Russian Spetsnaz forces, which traditionally have been used as enablers for conventional forces—are designed to operate independently, on the basis of their force structure. Regarding the chain of command, the KSSO is subsumed under the General Staff. Sources diverge on whether the command reports directly to the General Staff or one rung down the chain of command to the GRU. Writing in 2017, one source asserts the KSSO has been juggled between the General Staff and GRU, having most recently landed under the latter, albeit "with a very significant degree of autonomy." Another contends that unlike the Spetsnaz brigades, which answer to the GRU, the KSSO reports directly to the General Staff. Either way, because General Staff-aligned forces have participated in Russia's incursions into Ukraine, this body falls squarely within this case's scope. See Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas," *Parameters*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Summer 2016, p. 15; Alexey Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces—Eight Years and Three Wars," in Ruslan Pushkov and Christopher Marsh, eds., *Elite Warriors: Special Operations Forces from Around the World*, Minneapolis, Minn.: East View Press, 2017; and Marsh, 2017, pp. 17–21.

<sup>42</sup> Marsh, 2017, p. 21; and Lavrov, 2015, pp. 163–164. That is, aside from the Russian forces permanently stationed in Crimea as part of the 2010 Kharkiv Pact, there remains an agreement extending Russia's lease of Crimean-based naval facilities through 2042.

<sup>43</sup> Charles K. Bartles and Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Military Operation in Crimea: Road-Testing Rapid Reaction Capabilities," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2014, p. 57.

<sup>44</sup> Lavrov, 2015, p. 169.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Spetsnaz: Operational Intelligence, Political Warfare, and Battlefield Role," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Security Insights, No. 46, February 2020.



Spetsnaz brigade and SSO forces.<sup>46</sup> These forces' tactics, arms, and equipment—none of which were available to those outside the Russian Armed Forces—provide further evidence of their affiliation.<sup>47</sup> SSO and GRU-Spetsnaz units also are believed to have taken part in the Russian military's capture and occupation of key strategic sites across the peninsula.<sup>48</sup> Putin has since spoken of his decision to rely on GRU-Spetsnaz and SSO forces early on in Crimea, noting,

to blockade and disarm 20 thousand well-armed people [referring to Ukrainian forces stationed on Crimea] we needed a certain set of personnel—not just in terms of quantity, but also quality. We needed specialists who could pull this off. That's why I gave orders and instructions to the Ministry of Defense . . . to deploy special forces of the Main Intelligence [Directorates] special forces to Crimea, disguised as reinforcements for our own military facilities there.<sup>49</sup>

However, the characteristics that made these forces an asset at the outset of the Crimean operation also represented a later liability because GRU-Spetsnaz forces are not designed to operate independently.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in the lead-up to the Crimea referendum, these units needed to be reinforced with conventional forces armed with heavy equipment, such as heavy artillery and air defense systems.<sup>51</sup>

Irregular forces in the form of private military companies (PMCs), mercenaries, gangs, and other paramilitary organizations, also are believed to have participated in the seizure of Crimea.<sup>52</sup> Although these forces officially fall outside the formal structure of the Russian armed services, many of these irregular forces appear to have connections with Russian military leadership.<sup>53</sup> Many Russia experts point to the Crimean annexation as the debut of the Wagner Group, a Russian PMC with reportedly close ties to the GRU.<sup>54</sup>

## Command and Control and Chain of Command of the General Staff and GRU Forces in Crimea

What little we can say about the C2 and chain of command of the General Staff-aligned forces in Crimea is extrapolated from what is known about Russian C2 and command structures more broadly. The GRU-Spetsnaz brigades report directly to GRU leadership, which is subsumed under the General Staff. That said, when operating in combat, these units often are loaned to the territorial commander(s) in charge of the

<sup>46</sup> Lavrov, 2015, pp. 163–164; and Marsh, 2017, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Lavrov, 2015, pp. 163–164.

<sup>48</sup> Leaked video footage titled “Report on the outcome of missions by Squad 0900 [an SSO unit] in the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea,” appears to implicate these forces in the seizure of the installation that is home to the Ukrainian Army's Krym tactical group, the Ukrainian Navy's headquarters in Sevastopol, Ukraine's 204th Tactical Aviation Brigade, and the Ukrainian Navy's 1st Independent Marine Brigade. See Nikolsky, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Daniil Turovsky, “What Is the GRU? Who Gets Recruited to Be a Spy? Why Are They Exposed So Often? Here Are the Most Important Things You Should Know About Russia's Intelligence Community,” trans. Kevin Rothrock, *Meduza*, November 6, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Galeotti, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Lavrov, 2015, p. 172. For a detailed discussion of the conventional units deployed to Crimea as part of the seizure, which falls outside the scope of this case study, see Kofman et al., 2017; and Lavrov, 2015, pp. 157–184.

<sup>52</sup> Jamestown Foundation, “War By Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad,” webpage, undated.

<sup>53</sup> Kimberly Marten, “Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: the Case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> “Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed,” *Bellingcat*, August 14, 2020.

operation "subject to the final authority of the General Staff."<sup>55</sup> Although we cannot be certain which leaders were responsible for commanding the GRU-Spetsnaz and SSO forces involved in the Crimean seizure, we assume based on the high-profile nature of the operation that GRU and General Staff senior leaders were likely closely involved.

Additionally, evidence tying key Wagner personnel with the Russian military chain of command and security service has surfaced. For instance, Dmitry Utkin, whose *nom de guerre*, Wagner, served as the namesake for the PMC, is believed to have served as a field commander for the organization, including in Ukraine.<sup>56</sup> According to Ukrainian intelligence, Utkin has known ties to the GRU, whose leadership reportedly served as Utkin's chain of command in the Donbas. We detail this relationship in the section devoted to the execution of the Donbas campaign that follows.<sup>57</sup>

## Executing the Donbas Operation

The evidence related to the nascent phases of the war in the Donbas is insufficient to determine exactly how prominent the Russian military's role was in precipitating the conflict. However, by piecing together snippets of evidence revealed by the Ukraine's security service responsible for counterintelligence, the Security Service of Ukraine (*Informatsionnaya sistema boyevogo upravleniya*, or SBU), and investigative organizations and journalists, we can sketch out the broad contours of General Staff-aligned forces in the execution of the Donbas operation.

The presence of Russian forces, their arms, and their equipment on the battlefields in eastern Ukraine has been substantiated by satellite imagery, video footage, and still images disseminated through social media, interviews, and firsthand accounts, and by the capture and arrests of GRU operatives.<sup>58</sup> Although regular Russian forces played an important role in the escalation of the conflict in the Donbas, this section is devoted to exploring the evidence implicating General Staff- and GRU-aligned forces in eastern Ukraine.<sup>59</sup> According to Mark Galeotti, writing in 2016,

A much more significant role is currently being played by the intelligence and security agencies in the Donbas conflict, compared with Crimea. The GRU . . . appears not just to be providing and coordinating auxiliary units. Its operation in the nearby city of Rostov-on-Don has been identified as the main routing

<sup>55</sup> Grau and Bartles, 2016, p. 11; Galeotti, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> As *Bellingcat* notes, its investigators have "found open-source data that strongly suggests Col. Dmitry Utkin was not in the driver's seat of setting up this private army but was employed as a convenient and deniable decoy to disguise its state provenance" (see "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death," 2020).

<sup>57</sup> András Rácz, "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State," blog post, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 21, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 17; Steven Rosenburg, "Ukraine Crisis: Meeting the Little Green Men," BBC News, April 30, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> In mid-December 2021, concrete evidence surfaced that acknowledged the presence of regular Russian troops in the Donbas. As part of a legal case in which a food vendor was implicated in bribing local officials in Russia's Rostov region (on the border with Ukraine), legal documents delivering the verdict stated that the food in question was "intended to be sent to military units of the Russian Armed Forces stationed on the territory of the DNR [Donetsk People's Republic] and LNR [Luhansk People's Republic]." In publishing these documents, Russian authorities unintentionally recognized the existence of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine. Because the Kremlin continues to deny this is the case, the documents were swiftly removed from the public domain. See Mary Ilyushina, "A Russian Court Document Mentioned Russian Troops 'Stationed' in Eastern Ukraine. Moscow Insists There Are None," *CBS News*, December 17, 2021.

station for volunteers heading to and from the war . . . The GRU and . . . FSB have also been implicated by Kiev and the West in a campaign of low-level terrorism behind the Ukrainian lines.<sup>60</sup>

Relatedly, some accounts point to the consistent presence of several hundred GRU operators on the ground in the Donbas, at least in the conflict's first year.<sup>61</sup>

GRU operators are believed to principally serve in a command and control function for the mosaic of irregular forces on the ground, such as Russian volunteers, militias, foreign fighters, and PMCs (including Wagner). The January–February 2015 Battle of Debaltseve serves as one such instance. According to after-action analyses of the battle, “regular separatist formations were reinforced with so-called volunteers and supported by Russian military advisors, often with Spetsnaz operators or GRU operatives attached, especially for the conduct of reconnaissance and sabotage missions.”<sup>62</sup> Russian forces employed UAVs to identify targets for rocket and artillery fires from the skies above Debaltseve, and GRU operatives present on the ground simultaneously worked to pinpoint and report back on potential targets while also serving as the Russian military's eyes on the ground.<sup>63</sup> In addition to these support roles, in some cases GRU-Spetsnaz forces also have been involved in direct action.<sup>64</sup> Accounts of battle-wounded GRU-Spetsnaz troops have surfaced on social media and through the capture of these personnel by Ukrainian authorities.<sup>65</sup>

## Russian General Staff and GRU Forces' Command and Control and Chain of Command in the Donbas

According to Ukrainian military intelligence, one of the most senior leaders responsible for the military operation in the Donbas as of early 2015 is Colonel General Sergei Istrakov, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>66</sup> Evidence uncovered by investigative groups helps to substantiate this claim.<sup>67</sup> Several other GRU officers have been linked to the Donbas. Phone calls intercepted by Ukrainian signals intelligence revealed Dmitry Utkin reporting to GRU Colonel Oleg Ivannikov and land forces commander Major General Evgeniy Nikiforov, chief of staff of Russia's 58th Army.<sup>68</sup> Investigative groups also uncovered evidence linking Ivannikov and the Buk missile system provided to separatists shortly before the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) over eastern Ukraine in 2017.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's ‘New Way of War?’” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016a, pp. 285–286.

<sup>61</sup> However, the overarching composition of these forces—notably with which parts of the GRU they are affiliated—remains unclear (Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, 4th ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, pp. 351–352).

<sup>62</sup> Noorman, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Amos C. Fox, “Battle for Debal'tseve: The Conventional Line of Effort in Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine,” *ARMOR*, Vol. CXXVIII, No. 1, Winter 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson, 2015, pp. 351–352.

<sup>65</sup> “‘Royal Flush.’ Russian Special Forces Soldier Fighting in Ukraine Showed Us All!” *InformNapalm*, June 3, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, “Servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces Who Took Part in Combat Actions in Ukraine,” accessed through the Internet Archive, June 8, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> DFRLab, “Watchdog Finds Russian General's Separatist Ties with a Watch,” blog post, Medium, November 21, 2017. In a 2017 gaffe, DNR leadership publicly gifted Istrakov a watch in commemoration of his “significant personal contribution to the formation and development of the Donetsk People's Republic,” a gesture that the DNR christened in a formal document published on its website.

<sup>68</sup> Rącz, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> “Putin Chef's Kisses of Death,” 2020.

In 2020, the SBU published what it alleges is additional evidence of the GRU's hand in the Donbas.<sup>70</sup> The service points to additional intercepted phone conversations that it released that took place between a Ukrainian national (call sign "K") and GRU leadership. In these calls, K—who the SBU identifies as the GRU facilitator on the ground responsible for establishing the DNR structure—is heard speaking to retired GRU Major General Sergey Dubinsky (*nom de guerre* Khmury) serving under Igor Strelkov.<sup>71</sup> Dubinsky is also implicated in the MH17 downing and is being tried in absentia for his role in supplying the Buk responsible for the incident.<sup>72</sup>

In interviews, Strelkov has alluded to a base in Krasnodon, Luhansk, established in July 2014, which houses a coterie of "senior, retired, 'General Staff' experienced generals."<sup>73</sup> Other accounts have corroborated this assertion and have placed Ivannikov (discussed previously) at this command center.<sup>74</sup> This group, according to Strelkov, did not report to Vladislav Surkov (the former Kremlin vizier on Ukraine) and instead operated independently.

Lastly, the early political leaders that emerged in key positions in the newly formed DNR and LNR, notably Aleksandr Borodai (Russian political consultant turned DNR prime minister), his replacement Alexander Zakharchenko, and Igor Plotinsky (Minister of Defense then later Prime Minister of the LNR), are all suspected of having ties to the Russian General Staff through various indirect connections, as depicted in Figure 5.1.

## Key Decisions, Actors, and Relationships in the Ukraine Conflict

Because relationships can affect the degree of influence that actors typically wield on decisions, we examined the networks of people and organizations that appear to be involved in the Ukraine case study using our analysis of publicly available documentation.<sup>75</sup> This case study highlights the Russian General Staff's internal dynamics and operations focus. The case features complex, opaque relationships that tend to obscure both key decisions and decisionmakers. It seems likely that some key decision points include the establishment of the KSSO in March 2013, and three inflection points during which Russia ramped up military involvement in 2014 and 2015, including the preliminary authorization given to seize Crimea in January 2014.<sup>76</sup> The available evidence and our analysis revealed less about Russia's decisions to engage specific entities—be they

<sup>70</sup> Taras Kuzio, "The FSB Returns to Ukraine," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 7, No. 100, May 24, 2010b; and Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 16. The SBU is responsible for counterintelligence, national-level law enforcement, and domestic counterterrorism efforts. As the successor to the Soviet-era KGB of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, many vestiges of its previous affiliation with Russian security services remain, including suspected infiltration by Russian sympathizers or agents, although this is believed to be changing with the institution of recent policies.

<sup>71</sup> "Ukraine Detains Deep Cover GRU Sleeper Agent Who Might Be Highest Ranking MH17 Witness Yet," *Euromaidan Press*, July 8, 2020; Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy, "SBU zatrymala pozashtatnoho spivrobotnyka HRU, yakyj buv odnym iz kuratoriv kerivnytva 'DNR,'" July 7, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> "In Leaked Tapes, MH17 Suspects Discussed Buk Transfer Hours Before and After Plane Downed," *Moscow Times*, April 12, 2021.

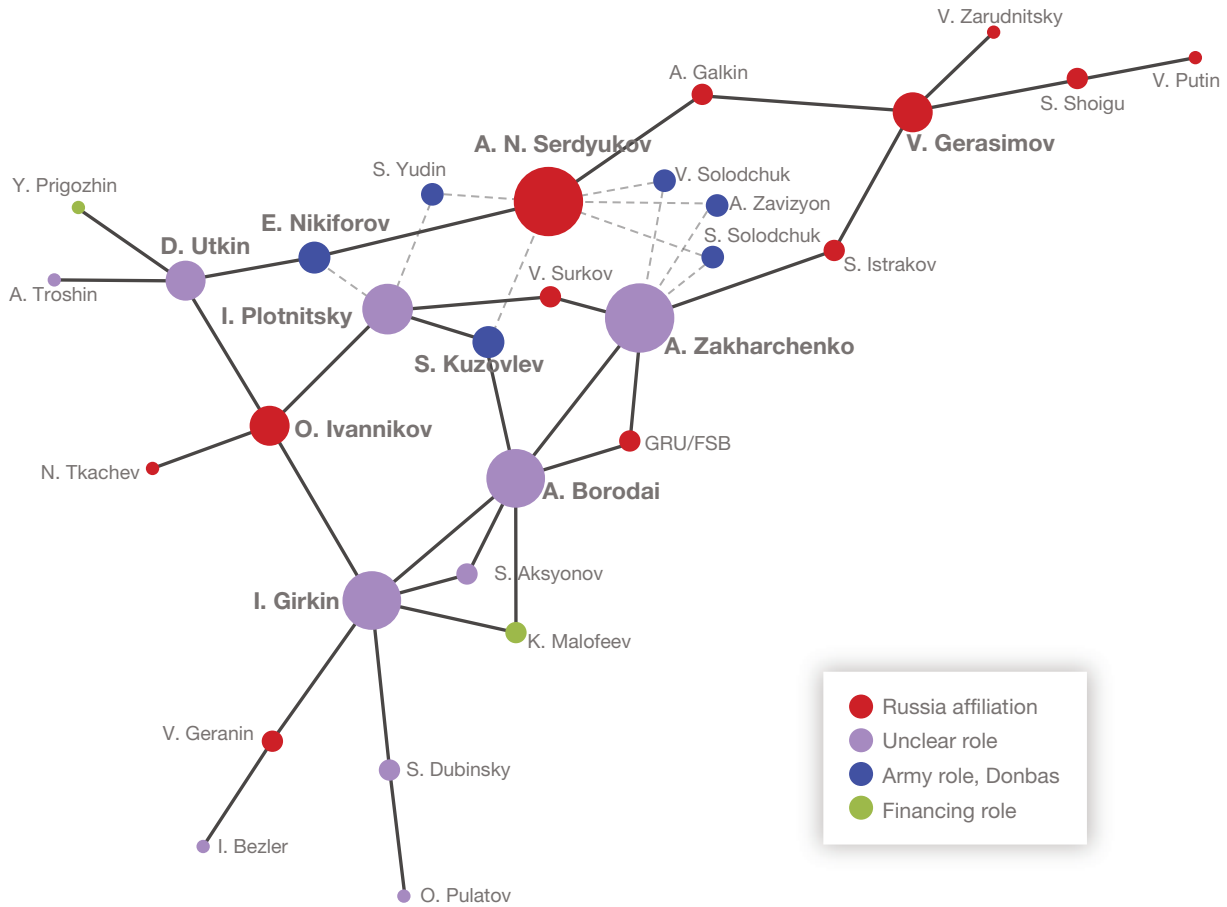
<sup>73</sup> Kofman et al., 2017, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> Denis Dmitrev and Grigory Levchenko, "Oh Hello, Mr. Oleg 'Orion' Ivannikov: Unmasking a Chief Suspect in the MH17 Attack, Who Just Happens to Work for Russian Intelligence," trans. Kevin Rothrock, *Meduza*, May 25, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen P. Borgatti, Martin G. Everett, and Jeffrey C. Johnson, *Analyzing Social Networks*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Treisman, 2018a, pp. 277–284.

**FIGURE 5.1**  
**Depiction of Apparent Ties Among Key Actors in the Ukraine Case Study**



NOTE: The way actors are color-coded in the Ukraine figure differs from how nodes are coded in the Syria figure later in the report. These analytical choices have to do with the actor characteristics that are most relevant to each case. In the Ukraine case study, most of the actors are Russian and their specific roles are salient, whereas the Syria figure features a mix of international actors and therefore country of origin is salient. Actors in this figure are color-coded by their apparent role, with red denoting those actors with known employment by the Russian military or security services, purple denoting those actors with suspected but unconfirmed roles, blue denoting those actors who commanded Army Corps in Donbas in 2015, and green denoting entities that might have financed some portion of operations. Black ties represent connections established via documentation (e.g., via known communication events or other connections from the literature), while gray dashed ties are tentative: ties that are strongly suspected, based on command relationships, but are hard to pinpoint.

selected Russian governmental bodies, proxies, or other actors—in the operations in Ukraine or decisions about where to undertake specific operations.

The nodes (or circles) in Figure 5.1 represent a selection of those individuals and organizations with ties to the General Staff, specifically those who feature in the Ukraine case study.<sup>77</sup> The relationships or ties that

<sup>77</sup> The way actors are color-coded in the Ukraine figure differs from how nodes are coded in the Syria figure later in the report. These analytical choices have to do with the actor characteristics that are most relevant to each case. In the Ukraine case study, most of the actors are Russian and their specific roles are salient, whereas the Syria figure features a mix of international actors and therefore country of origin is salient.

connect the various nodes in Figure 5.1 are based on documented connections, including meetings, phone calls, and other connections (e.g., gifts provided, formal adviser-advisee relationship).<sup>78</sup>

Figure 5.1 shows a central cluster of nodes with peripheral actors branching outward from the center. The number of ties between nodes ranged from 1 to 7. The actors with the highest-degree centrality scores—the most popular in this network—include Andrei Nikolayevich Serdyukov (number 5, seven ties), Alexandr Zakharchenko (number 5, seven ties), Aleksandr Borodai (number 1, six ties), Igor Girkin (number 11, six ties), and Igor Plotnitsky (number 12, six ties). Except for one red node (number 5), these highly central nodes are purple, meaning that the actors' roles are unclear. Actors with higher-degree centrality scores can be influential because they are popular in the network, meaning that they are connected to a larger proportion of nodes. Table 5.1 lists and describes the central actors' roles in Ukraine, and Table 5.2 lists all actors in Figure 5.1.

It is also noteworthy that the node representing Putin (number 29) appears in a cluster of red nodes (those with known Russian affiliations) and is a few steps away from the central cluster of actors in the figure. In that part of the figure, Valerii Gerasimov (number 26) appears to be a bridging node between three periph-

**TABLE 5.1**  
**List of Central Actors Represented in the Ukraine Network**

Actor	Affiliated Campaign	Description of Role in Ukraine
Aleksandr Borodai	Donbas	Russian political consultant turned prime minister to DNR until August 2014; previously served as adviser to Sergey Aksyonov, head of Crimea at the time; reportedly close confidant of Igor Girkin.
Valerii Gerasimov	Crimea and Donbas	Chief of the General Staff; in the formal chain of command; reported to Shoigu at the time of Crimea and Donbas operations.
Igor Girkin	Crimea and Donbas	Also known as "Strelkov"; is a retired FSB agent; reports to GRU; reportedly played key role in Crimean annexation and initial phase of the Donbas conflict; charged in MH17 trial.
Sergey Kuzovlev	Donbas	A Major General in the Russian Armed Forces, was promoted in 2015 to Commander of Armed Forces in Ukraine; served as commander over DNR and LNR until spring 2015.
Evgeniy Nikiforov	Donbas	Chief of staff of the 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District); Commanded 2nd Army Corps of Russian troops in Donbas in 2015.
Andrei Serdyukov	Crimea and Donbas	Serdyukov was then-Chief of Staff and First Deputy Commander Southern Military District (until 2016)
Igor Plotnitsky	Donbas	Separatist leader in LNR; assumed several positions in LNR leadership, including head of Battalion Zarya, minister of defense, and prime minister; received training in Russia in spring 2014.
Dmitry Utkin	Donbas	Retired GRU; formerly served as part of the Slavonic Corps in Syria and Ukraine.
Alexandr Zakharchenko	Donbas	Zakharchenko replaced Borodai following the MH17 trial, although Borodai was kept on as an adviser.

<sup>78</sup> Network figures were produced using Gephi. The same force-directed, multilevel algorithmic layout was used to space nodes in each figure; see Y. F. Hu, "Efficient and High-Quality Force-Directed Graph Drawing," *Mathematica Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2006.

**TABLE 5.2**  
**List of All Actors Represented in the Ukraine Network in Figure 5.1**

Actor	Affiliated Campaign	Affiliation
Aleksandr Borodai	Donbas	Russian proxy, political leader (DNR)
Aleksandr Galkin	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Aleksey Zavizyon	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Alexandr Zakharchenko	Donbas	Russian proxy, political leader (DNR)
Andrei Serdyukov	Crimea and Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Andrey Troshin	Donbas	Russian proxy forces
Dmitry Utkin	Donbas	Russian proxy forces
Evgeniy Nikiforov	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
GRU FSB officials, unnamed	Donbas	Russian security services
Igor Bezler	Donbas	Russian proxy forces, reported to GRU
Igor Girkin	Crimea and Donbas	Russian proxy forces, reported to GRU
Igor Plotnitsky	Donbas	Russian proxy forces, LNR leader
Konstantin Malofeev	Crimea	Provider of financing
Nikolai Tkachev	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, GRU ties
Oleg Ivannikov	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, GRU
Oleg Pulatov	Donbas	Russian proxy forces, GRU ties
Sergey Aksyonov	Crimea	Russian proxy, political leader (Crimea)
Sergey Dubinsky	Donbas	Russian proxy forces, GRU ties
Sergey Istrakov	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Sergey Kuzovlev	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Sergey Shoigu	Crimea and Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Sergey Solodchuk	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Sergey Yudin	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Valerii Gerasimov	Crimea and Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Valerii Solodchuk	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Vasily Geranin	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, GRU
Vladimir Putin	Donbas	Russian Armed Forces, Commander in Chief
Vladimir Zarudnitsky	Crimea	Russian Armed Forces, leader
Vladislav Surkov	Crimea and Donbas	Russian official
Yevgeny Prigozhin	Crimea and Donbas	Provider of financing, established proxy force (Wagner)

NOTE: The categories included in this table do not directly mirror those in the analogous table for the Syria case later in this report. The idiosyncrasies of the two cases are such that it did not make sense to replicate the descriptions within the categories verbatim.

eral nodes—Putin (number 29), Sergey Shoigu (number 23), and Vladimir Zarudnitsky (number 30)—and other parts of the network.

It is likely that this network figure does not fully capture the actual influence of peripheral actors or even absent actors given data limitations. This limitation, along with similar limitations, such as the unclear role of many actors, underscores the complex and ambiguous domestic relationships that informed Russia's engagement in Ukraine.

## Lessons Learned by the General Staff from Crimea and the Donbas

When Igor Sergun assumed the role as chief of the GRU in 2011, the General Staff's intelligence service was suffering from a tarnished reputation and diminished political clout. The GRU's stale intelligence and inaccurate analyses during Russia's 2008 conflict with Georgia contributed to several Russian military missteps and subsequent loss of cachet for the GRU.<sup>79</sup> As part of the defense reforms that followed, the GRU staff was cut by 1,000 officers, nearly 80 percent of its general officer corps was discharged, three of the eight Spetsnaz brigades under its command were dissolved while the remaining brigades were reassigned to regular commands, some of its research institutes were shuttered, and it was renamed the Main Office of the General Staff of the Defense Ministry, or GU.<sup>80</sup> Observers credit Sergun with restoring the GRU's favor with Putin and regaining command and control authority over the GRU Spetsnaz forces.<sup>81</sup> Observers also speculate that the perceived success of the Crimean operation and the GRU's role in it might have contributed to the GRU's reinvigorated standing. In the words of scholar Mark Galeotti, "the chaos in Ukraine was a boon for the GRU, which was one of the lead agencies both in the seizure of the Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent destabilization of the Donbas."<sup>82</sup>

However, precious little appears to have been written about the operation to seize Crimea in the Russian military-scientific literature. Even less analysis is devoted to the conflict in the Donbas. In those mentions that do exist, the West is identified as the perpetrator of aggression, and Russia's role is characterized as defending against the West's nonlinear warfare targeting Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> Aside from these strategic-level characterizations, the military-scientific literature available to us does not address the operational or tactical levels of either engagement. It is difficult to glean from these writings whether these beliefs about the United States' and Russia's roles in Crimea and the Donbas are genuine or rather reflect another effort by the military establishment to maintain plausible deniability, even in its own reflections.

Although they are not explicitly documented in the Russian military-scientific literature, we can nevertheless speculate about the types of lessons the General Staff may have learned based on the observable events related to the seizure of Crimea and Russia's military operations in eastern Ukraine. First, General Staff leadership may have observed that the military's use of secrecy and deniability can prove operationally advantageous when used in limited, tightly scoped operations, as was the case in Crimea. However, this secrecy also placed significant constraints on the Russian General Staff's orchestration of the conflict in the Donbas. By

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<sup>79</sup> Galeotti, 2016a, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> Turovsky, 2018; Mark Galeotti, "Ukraine: A Perversely 'Good' War for the GRU," blog post, In *Moscow's Shadows*, May 1, 2014a; and Galeotti, 2016a.

<sup>81</sup> Galeotti, 2014a.

<sup>82</sup> Mark Galeotti, "We Don't Know What to Call Russian Military Intelligence and That May Be a Problem," *War on the Rocks*, January 19, 2016b.

<sup>83</sup> V. Puzenkin and V. V. Mikhailov, "The Role of Information and Psychological Means in Ensuring the Defense of the State," *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 7, July 2015.



continuing to publicly maintain the narrative that the conflict in eastern Ukraine was a civil war—in which Russian regular forces had no part—the Russian military establishment was forced to work with and through proxies and others. These proxies and other actors were not directly subordinate to the General Staff, which would have been the case had the operation been conducted in a more overt, conventional manner.

Relatedly, reliance on proxies and other shadowy figures that fell outside the formal chain of command and military institutions—as was the case in the Donbas—introduced a unique element of unpredictability that sharply contrasts with the General Staff model of centralized C2 and the practice of closely monitoring and overseeing decisions made at lower echelons. A similar trade-off between the advantages of using proxies and the desire for operational oversight is seen in the Syria conflict, as is discussed in the next chapter. The reliance arguably led to a crucial turning point in the conflict—the downing of MH17—which united support within Western governments for more-robust sanctions against Russia. Although not explicitly part of this analysis, it is worth noting that, as of this writing in early 2022, Russia appears to have chosen to use secrecy again in service of its recent invasion of Ukraine, which, at this early stage of the conflict, appears to have been a stumbling block in the military’s initial performance. Notably, the initial evidence emanating from the evolving conflict indicates that personnel in the Russian armed services, including mid-grade officers, were not apprised of Russia’s plans to invade Ukraine in advance.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Copp and Tucker, 2022; and Strobel, 2022.



# The General Staff in a Practical Context: Syria Case Study

## Introduction

In recent years, the Russian intervention in the conflict in Syria has served as a laboratory for the General Staff to test new operational concepts, C2 systems, and weapon systems. The conflict also offers a window into the influence of the General Staff in Russian national security decisionmaking and the relative influence of different components of the General Staff, the General Staff's relationship with nonstate actors, and ties between the General Staff and foreign militaries. This case study begins with an overview of Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict with a particular emphasis on the role of the General Staff in decisionmaking related to the conflict. It then discusses the key lessons that the General Staff has learned from the conflict in Syria.

With regard to strategy and planning, readiness, C2, and coordination, this Syria case shows that the General Staff undertook all of its traditional roles and responsibilities in the conflict while testing new methods of command and control and new weapon systems and enabling Russian forces to gain significant hybrid warfare experience. Regular Russian forces—ground troops, fighter jets, bombers, transporters, reconnaissance aircraft, and naval assets—flowed into Syria, and the General Staff developed the strategy and planning for the employment of these forces. The General Staff also appears to have leveraged the Syria conflict as a means of increasing readiness; a significant number of Russian service members cycled through Syria. The conflict also provided the General Staff with an opportunity to employ and test new and emerging C2 concepts. A *combat control group* (*gruppa boevogo upravleniya*—GBU) led by officers from the GOU, was established to provide in-theater oversight of the campaign. Finally, the NTsUO was used to provide a mechanism for coordination among the General Staff, the MoD, combat forces on the ground in Syria, and Russian political leadership.

## Russian Intervention in Syria

The Russian military began deploying its forces to Syria in late summer 2015.<sup>1</sup> At that time, the Syrian civil war had been ongoing for more than four years. Soon after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia began to view Syria as a potential means of demonstrating its return to great power status and ability to have influence in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Over the next several years, Russia provided supplies and arms transfers to the Syrian regime. A more robust Russian military intervention in the conflict was set in motion in the summer of 2014 when the then-leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the establishment of

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<sup>1</sup> Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow," Reuters, October 6, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Parker, 2015, pp. 8–9.

a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The United States subsequently launched airstrikes on Islamic State targets in Syria while providing support to moderate opposition groups within Syria. By May 2015, the city of Palmyra fell to the Islamic State, representing a significant threat to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>3</sup> As experts have noted, for Russia, it appeared that the "window to save its client regime in Damascus was closing," which therefore necessitated an expanded Russian effort to preserve the Assad regime.<sup>4</sup>

The deployment of Russian forces followed a formal request made by Assad in July of that year. In his request for Russian military assistance, Assad emphasized that the Syrian military lacked the manpower necessary to deal with emerging threats from the Islamic State and other terrorist groups operating in Syrian territory.<sup>5</sup> Following Assad's request, the GRU played a significant role in making the case for Russia's initial intervention in Syria. In particular, the GRU identified "at least 4,000 [Islamic State] fighters . . . as being Russian citizens." This evidence was cited in support of the notion that the establishment of a caliphate in Syria might "lead to a spillover effect into Russia itself," thereby transforming a conflict within Syrian territory into a potential national security threat to Russia.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have noted, however, that although this may have been a legitimate concern, it was secondary to Russia's overarching goals of maintaining strategic deterrence and establishing itself as a leading power in Middle East affairs.<sup>7</sup>

Russian military forces began arriving in Syria shortly after the signing, on August 26, 2015, of an agreement between Russia and Syria allowing Russian forces to use Khmeimim air base in the Mediterranean port city of Latakia.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the month of September, Russian fighter jets, bombers, transporters, and reconnaissance aircraft began arriving at Khmeimim.<sup>9</sup> During September and October, Russian warships, including the Black Sea Fleet's flagship, the *Moskva*, arrived in the Mediterranean to provide air defense support to Khmeimim. On October 16, 2015, the deputy chief of the General Staff and chief of the GRU, Kartapolov, publicly stated that going forward, Russian Navy ships "may be involved in . . . strikes on [Islamic State] targets in Syria."<sup>10</sup> Russian naval forces were based at Tartus, which had originally been established as a Soviet naval facility during the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Robert Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein, "Setting the Stage for the Intervention," in Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein, eds., *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Subsequent analysis suggested that many of these "terrorist groups" were in fact U.S.-backed insurgent groups.

<sup>6</sup> Marina Miron and Rod Thornton, "Emerging as the 'Victor'(?): Syria and Russia's Grand and Military Strategies," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2021, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Miron and Thornton, 2021, p. 8. According to Anna Borshchevskaya, Russia "exaggerated the threat that the [Islamic State] posed to Russia"; see Anna Borshchevskaya, *The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 2020, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Birnbaum, "The Secret Pact Between Russia and Syria That Gives Moscow Carte Blanche," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Anton Lavrov elaborates on this timeline: "On September 18, four Su-30SM fighter aircraft from Domna air base in Siberia landed there. The next day, a squadron of 12 modernized Su-25SMs arrived. In the following two weeks, 12 Su-24M and four advanced Su-34 bombers joined them. In addition to these 32 aircraft, several military transport and reconnaissance aircraft were located at the base" (see Anton Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, COP-2018-U-017903-Final, June 2018).

<sup>10</sup> "Russian Navy Ships May Join Syria Operation-General Staff," TASS, October 16, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> As early as 2012, Russian warships were spotted heading for Tartus. See Andrew E. Kramer, "Russian Warships Said to Be Going to Naval Base in Syria," *New York Times*, June 18, 2012.

By the end of September 2015, a combined operations center, which included Iran, Iraq, Russia, and Syria, had been established in Baghdad.<sup>12</sup> Separately, during the United Nations General Assembly meeting in late September, Putin and then-President Barack Obama met to discuss the deconfliction of Russian and U.S. operations in Syria; this conversation led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding that established a deconfliction channel between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> On September 30, 2015, the Russian parliament formally granted Putin authorization to deploy Russian forces in Syria.<sup>14</sup> Airstrikes targeting rebel-controlled areas of Homs and Hama provinces in western Syria began the same day. Over the course of the first month of operations, Russian pilots flew 1,292 bomber missions largely using unguided munitions.<sup>15</sup> In mid-October, the Syrian government with Russian air support began an offensive to retake Aleppo. That offensive was identified in the media as the “latest of at least four [offensives] launched with Russian air support in the past two weeks.”<sup>16</sup> Russian commentators described the offensive as the “liberation” of the city and an “unprecedented humanitarian operation.”<sup>17</sup> The rate of daily sorties increased further following the downing of Metrojet Flight 9268 in Egypt on October 31, 2015, which was claimed by the Islamic State and killed all 224 individuals on board, of whom 219 were Russian citizens.<sup>18</sup>

From the beginning of the Russian intervention, the “general planning of the use of troops was carried out by the General Staff,” while “detailed planning was carried out by the force group commander” on the ground in Syria.<sup>19</sup> Targets were identified and developed by the GRU and Syrian intelligence. The operation gradually expanded over the course of the fall. On November 17, 2015, Gerasimov reported to Putin that Russia had added “ten reconnaissance satellites to provide support for its operations against terrorists in Syria.”<sup>20</sup> On November 24, 2015, a Russian aircraft was shot down by a Turkish F-16, and the Russian pilot was killed by Syrian rebel forces. In response to the resulting tensions with Turkey, Russia deployed additional air defenses in the region, including a new long-range surface-to-air missile system and upgraded air-to-air capabilities.<sup>21</sup>

On December 3, 2015, Gerasimov had a telephone conversation with the Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces regarding collaboration to counter the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup> Starting that month, Russia also started to expand al-Shayrat air base, located near the city of Homs, which included added fortifications and runways. Media reports stated that this was evidence that Russia “intend[ed] to use [the base] as their second air

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Kalin, “Iraq Says Russia, Iran, Syria Cooperating on Security Issues in Baghdad,” Reuters, September 27, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Shaun Walker, “Russian Parliament Grants Vladimir Putin Right to Deploy Military in Syria,” *The Guardian*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Recent analysis suggests that most of these early strikes targeted Western- and Turkish-backed opposition groups, rather than the Islamic State (Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 2).

<sup>16</sup> “Syria Conflict: ‘Thousands Flee Aleppo Offensive,’” BBC News, October 19, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> The lessons learned from this “humanitarian operation,” according to Aleksandr Lapin, allowed Russian forces to later “carry out an even larger humanitarian operation” in East Ghouta. Lapin characterized this operation as having “no analogs . . . in the history of civilization” and contrasted the actions of Russian troops with those of the “Western coalition . . . in the liberation of Raqqa and Mosul,” which had led to “mass deaths of civilians” (Aleksandr Lapin, “The Syrian Academy,” *VPK News*, April 24, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> “Syria Crisis: Russian Air Strikes Against Assad Enemies,” BBC News, September 30, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Dvornikov, 2018, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> “Russia Involves 10 Reconnaissance Satellites in Syria Operation—General Staff,” TASS, November 17, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> “Turkey Shoots Down Russian Warplane on Syria Border,” BBC News, November 24, 2015; and “Turkey’s Downing of Russian Warplane—What We Know,” BBC News, December 1, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> “Chief of Russia’s General Staff Discusses Syria with US Counterpart,” TASS, January 10, 2018.

base in the country.”<sup>23</sup> On December 11, in a televised meeting, Putin ordered Russian military forces to “act as tough as possible” in Syria, specifying that “any target that poses a threat [to Russian forces or infrastructure] ha[d] to be destroyed immediately.”<sup>24</sup> At the end of December, Gerasimov met with the Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces in Moscow, where they conducted further discussions regarding the situation in Syria and “confirmed their intention . . . to keep an undivided and secular Syria.”<sup>25</sup>

During the 60 days between December 24, 2015 and February 22, 2016, Russian military forces “conducted about 6,500 sorties in Syria—on average, 107 flights per day.”<sup>26</sup> On February 27, 2016, a truce and cessation of hostilities, brokered by the United States and Russia, was declared. While this did not result in a termination of Russian aerial engagements, the rate of daily sorties decreased. Experts have characterized the months that followed—during winter and spring 2016—as the “most hopeful time for peace since the start of the war.”<sup>27</sup> On March 14, 2016, Putin announced that Russia’s mission in Syria was “on the whole accomplished” and ordered a withdrawal of most Russian forces. In March, the remaining Russian forces in the theater focused on retaking the city of Palmyra.<sup>28</sup> Russia used the cessation of hostilities, however, to redouble its efforts alongside Syrian government forces to retake the eastern half of the city of Aleppo, which was under the control of a coalition of opposition groups.<sup>29</sup> Between June and October, Russian forces carried out airstrikes on Aleppo.<sup>30</sup> That fall, as the Russian assault on Aleppo continued, the United States withdrew from a proposed joint intelligence-sharing and targeting center in Geneva. In response, Russia “launch[ed] a parallel process that excluded the United States and United Nations,” known as the Astana Process. At a meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, in January 2017, Russia was joined by representatives from the Assad regime, as well as Iran and Turkey.<sup>31</sup>

On January 6, 2017, the Russian MoD announced a drawdown of Russian forces in Syria, although Russia continued to conduct military operations in the country. On March 2, 2017, the chief of the GOU, Sergei Rudskoi, announced that the city of Palmyra had been recaptured once again with the support of Russian airstrikes and Russian special forces.<sup>32</sup> In May 2017, Russian and Syrian government forces began a “sustained campaign against Islamic state forces in central Syria.”<sup>33</sup> On June 9, 2017, Rudskoi announced the signing of the Astana memorandum, which formalized the Astana Process and established de-escalation zones within Syria.<sup>34</sup> On June 19, 2017, Russia announced that warplanes flown by U.S.-led coalition forces flying west of the Euphrates River would be tracked by Russian anti-aircraft capabilities and treated as legitimate targets.<sup>35</sup> U.S. officials downplayed this threat, however, and reiterated that a deconfliction channel between the two

<sup>23</sup> “Russia Expanding Second Syrian Air Base Near IS-Held Areas,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, December 4, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> “Putin Orders Russian Military to Act Tough in Syria,” *Moscow Times*, December 11, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> “Russian, French General Staff Chiefs Confirm Intention to Preserve Undivided Syria,” TASS, December 24, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Lavrov, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Lavrov, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Lavrov, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> “Russia Says Its Military Advisers, Special Forces Behind Palmyra Recapture,” Reuters, March 3, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, pp. 4–5.

<sup>34</sup> “Situation in Syria Improves After Signing Deal on De-Escalation Zones—General Staff,” TASS, June 9, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> MoD, “Statement of the Russian Defence Ministry concerning downing of the Syrian Su-22 near the town of Resafa,” Facebook post, June 19, 2017.

countries was still open.<sup>36</sup> By fall 2017, both the United States and Russia seemed to be gaining the upper hand over the Islamic State in the Euphrates River Valley.<sup>37</sup>

On November 23, 2017, Gerasimov announced that the Russian task force in Syria would be “considerably cut.”<sup>38</sup> However, he noted that Russia’s air bases in Syria would remain open for the time being. During this period of diminishing Russian presence in Syria, Gerasimov met several times—first in December 2017 and again in January 2018—with the CJCS, General Joseph Dunford, to discuss the situation in Syria.<sup>39</sup> At the time, the conflict appeared to be “winding down,” with the Russian intervention having successfully preserved the Assad regime.<sup>40</sup> On July 11, 2018, Gerasimov met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow to discuss the situation in Syria.<sup>41</sup> The next month, Rudskoi announced that Russia would deploy military police to the Golan Heights between Syria and Israel as part of an effort to continue countering the Islamic State in the region.<sup>42</sup> Over the next 18 months, however, hostilities flared several times, first east of the Euphrates and then in Idlib.<sup>43</sup> Even so, Russian involvement in Syria decreased significantly over the following year, and on August 19, 2019, Rudskoi announced that Russian aviation flights in Syria had been “reduced to a minimum and [were being] performed only for combat training and reconnaissance.”<sup>44</sup>

## Command and Control and Chain of Command in Syria

The overall C2 scheme for Russia’s intervention in Syria has been described as a “three-tiered structure.”<sup>45</sup> Serving in a coordinating function was the NTsUO, which had been launched in April 2014 to “fill a perceived gap in Russia’s central planning and foresight capabilities.” The NTsUO has been described as a “whole-of-government management center.”<sup>46</sup> Gerasimov has “partially credit[ed] the success of Russian operations in Syria” to the NTsUO, which provided a mechanism for coordination among the General Staff, the MoD, combat forces on the ground in Syria, and Russian political leadership.<sup>47</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 6.1, the NTsUO played a coordinating function for the overall campaign, while at the strategic and policy level, the General Staff “advised Putin, Minister of Defense Shoigu, and the Russian Security Council while devising the overall military strategy and organizing the resources to support

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, “Russia Warns US Its Fighter Jets Are Now Potential Target in Syria,” *The Guardian*, June 19, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> “Syria to Cut Task Force in Syria—General Staff,” TASS, November 23, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> “Chief of Russia’s General Staff Discusses Syria with US Counterpart,” 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> “Netanyahu to Discuss Situation in Syria with Lavrov, Russian General Staff Chief,” TASS, July 23, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Denis Pinchuk and Tom Balmforth, “Russia to Deploy Military Police on Golan Heights,” Reuters, August 2, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, pp. 6–7.

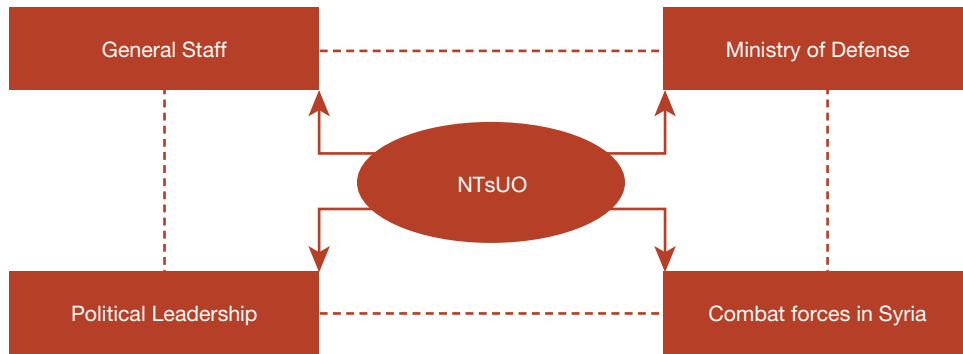
<sup>44</sup> “Russia Aviation’s Flights in Syria Reduced to Minimum—General Staff,” TASS, July 29, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Whisler, 2020b, pp. 251–252.

<sup>46</sup> Mason Clark, *The Russian Military’s Lessons Learned in Syria*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, January 2021, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, 2021, p. 16. Michael Kofman characterizes the NTsUO as “at the top of [the command and control] structure” in Syria, serving as a “sort of . . . high command”; see Michael Kofman, “Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow’s Military Strategy and Operational Performance,” in Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, 2020, p. 47.

**FIGURE 6.1**  
**Coordinating Function of the NTsUO**



it.” At the operational level, the General Staff worked with the Khmeimim expeditionary headquarters to “develop specific campaign plans and marshal the necessary resources.”<sup>48</sup> A GBU led by officers from the GOU was established “to serve as the primary oversight entity of the campaign.”<sup>49</sup> A cell within the GOU of the General Staff conducted initial operational planning, while pertinent details were “filled in by the operational group commander” at Khmeimim.<sup>50</sup> Within the Khmeimim headquarters, there were planning cells responsible for different geographic zones of responsibility within Syria.<sup>51</sup> Other planning cells were created as demanded by ongoing operations—for example, this included the creation of a naval aviation planning cell at one point during the conflict.<sup>52</sup> At the tactical level, the Khmeimim expeditionary headquarters “direct[ed] Russian advisory groups embedded in major Syrian formations with a supporting staff to oversee Syrian army actions in service of specific [Russian] objectives.” These processes were refined as the conflict progressed; Russian military scholarship suggests that the General Staff “optimized the operational composition of the Khmeimim command post” over the course of the Syrian conflict.<sup>53</sup> The relationship among these entities is shown in Figure 6.2.

<sup>48</sup> Dvornikov, 2018, p. 5. Moreover, it appears that Putin was given frequent updates on the Syria campaign strategy. In 2017, Gerasimov explained that he reported to the Minister of Defense “every morning and evening,” and the Minister of Defense reported to Putin in person once or twice a week. See Victor Baranets, “Nachal’nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov: ‘My perelomili hrebet udarnym silam terrorizma,’” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Dvornikov, 2018, p. 5; Galeotti, 2021, pp. 12–13. Galeotti provides further insight into the GBU in Syria, noting that these officers were supplemented by specialists from military intelligence, the Aerospace Forces, and the SVR. He also notes that the GBU is “not an operational command structure” but rather an entity that “set[s] strategy and monitor[s] progress.”

<sup>50</sup> Kofman, 2020, p. 43. Kofman notes that the Syrian General Staff was supposed to provide input at this stage, but they “proved incompetent for the task,” necessitating that “much of the operational-level planning” be done by the Russian commander in Syria. Gerasimov has said, however, that he “often” had contact with his counterpart at the Syrian General Staff, including “both by phone and in person” (Baranets, 2017).

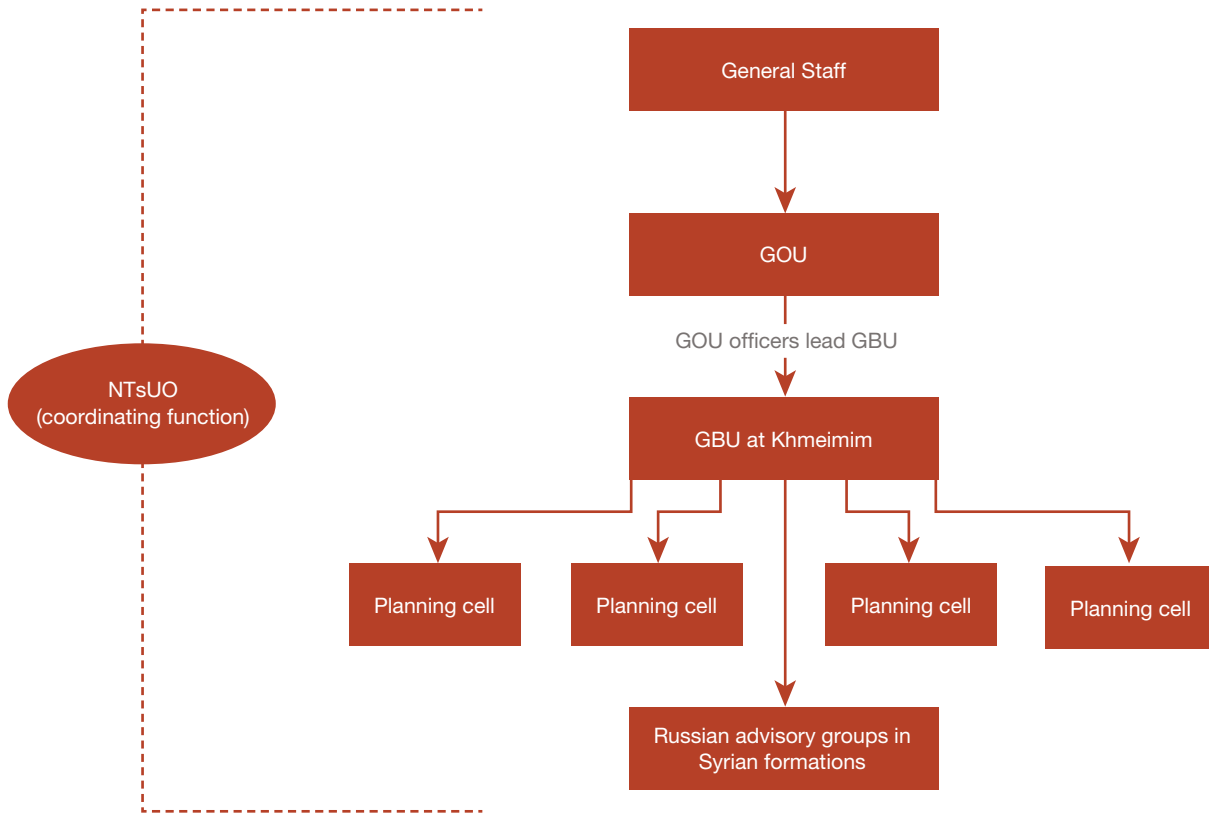
<sup>51</sup> Kofman, 2020, p. 43. Gerasimov characterized these formations as “command posts” that were located “in the areas where hostilities [were] being conducted”; see Baranets, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Kofman, 2020, pp. 43–44.

<sup>53</sup> Dvornikov, 2018, p. 5.



**FIGURE 6.2**  
**Russian Command and Control in Syrian Conflict**



## Syria Key Decisions, Actors, and Relationships

The Syria case study shows a relatively clear if higher-level timeline of actors, events, and apparent decision points. The actors (people and organizations) mentioned are depicted in Table 6.1.

Key decisions in the Syria case study seem to include:

- July 2015: Assad made a formal request for Russia to conduct airstrikes in Syria.<sup>54</sup>
- August 2015: Russia and Syria signed a treaty regarding Russia’s use of Khmeimim air base in Latakia.<sup>55</sup>
- September 2015: The Russian parliament granted Putin the right to deploy the Russian military in Syria.<sup>56</sup>
- March 2016: Putin announced “mission accomplished” and ordered the withdrawal of most Russian forces, although airstrikes continued.<sup>57</sup>
- June 2017: Astana memorandum on the establishment of de-escalation zones in Syria was signed.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Bassam and Perry, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Birnbaum, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Walker, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Neil MacFarquhar and Anne Barnard, “Putin Orders Start of Syria Withdrawal, Saying Goals Are Achieved,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> “Situation in Syria Improves After Signing Deal,” 2017.

**TABLE 6.1**  
**List of Actors Represented in the Syria Case Study**

Actor	Location	Type
Hulusi Akar	Turkey	Foreign military
Bashar al-Assad	Syria	Foreign leader
Ashton Carter	United States	Foreign military
Joseph F. Dunford	United States	Foreign military
Valerii Gerasimov	Russia	Russian General Staff
Sergei Lavrov	Russia	Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Avigdor Lieberman	Israel	Foreign military
Mark Milley	United States	Foreign military
Benjamin Netanyahu	Israel	Foreign leader
Barack Obama	United States	Foreign leader
Yevgeny Prigozhin	Russia	Russian PMC
Vladimir Putin	Russia	Russian leader
Sergey Shoigu	Russia	Russian MoD
Qassem Soleimani	Iran	Foreign military
Ali Akbar Velayati	Iran	Foreign official
Pierre de Villiers	France	Foreign military
Chief of Syrian General Staff	Syria	Foreign military
GOU	Russia	Russian General Staff
GRU	Russia	Russian General Staff
Russian Parliament	Russia	n/a
Wagner Group	Russia	Russian PMC

- August 2018: Military police deployed to the Golan Heights between Syria and Israel.<sup>59</sup>
- August 2019: Reduced air combat and support.<sup>60</sup>

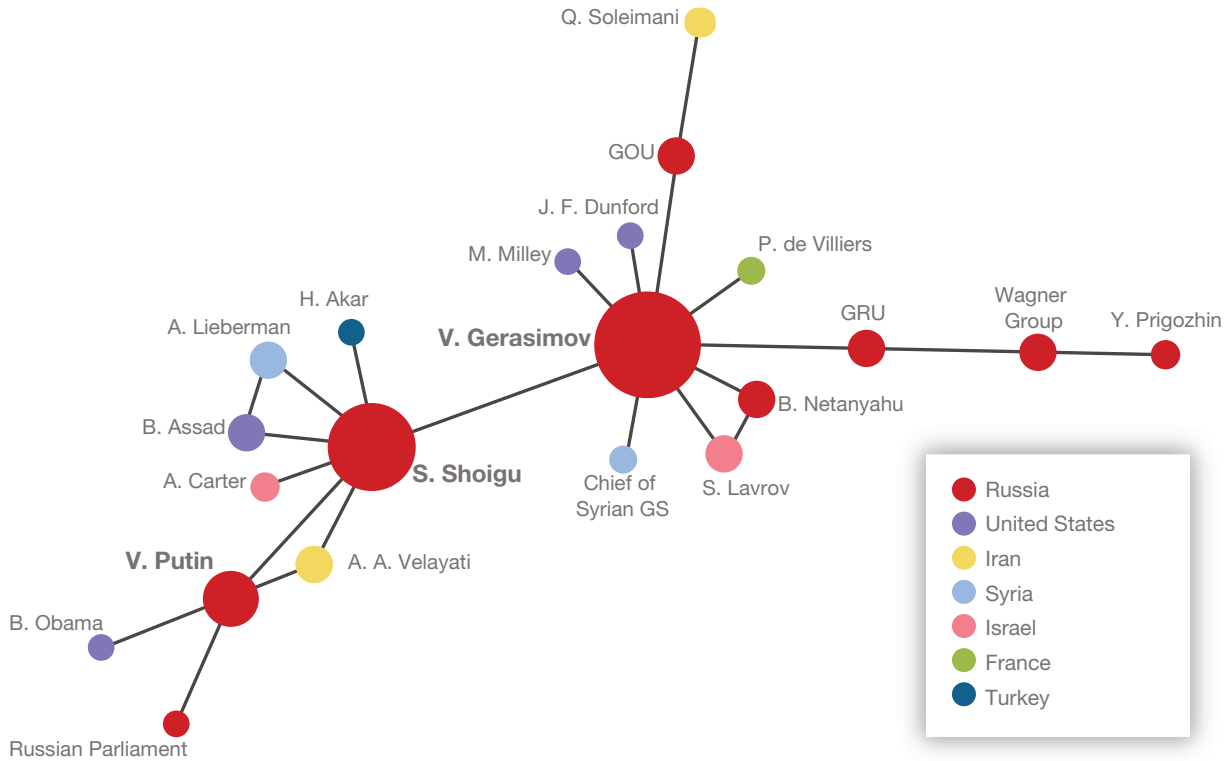
Figure 6.3 depicts the network of actors who are documented in the Syria case study. As with the Ukraine case, the ties among actors are based on data regarding documented interactions, which in this instance primarily include meetings between key actors. Additionally, as with the previous case study, this network depiction can be said to represent a partial but still informative view of the people and organizations involved in the Syria conflict and their relationships to one another.

In terms of the actors who dominate the Syria case study, most appear to be individuals who are formally affiliated with either the Russian or foreign governments. This network is composed of one component held together by three Russian actors, Putin (number 17), Shoigu (number 19), and Gerasimov (number 9). Gerasimov has the highest degree centrality score (nine ties), followed by Shoigu (seven ties) and Putin (four ties).

<sup>59</sup> Pinchuk and Balmforth, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> "Russia Aviation's Flights in Syria Reduced to Minimum," 2019.

**FIGURE 6.3**  
**Depiction of Ties Among Key Actors from the Syria Case Study**



NOTE: Node size is based on the number of ties connected to a given node; the larger the nodes, the greater the number of ties affiliated with that node. Node color is based on the country represented by each actor.

These individuals also have high betweenness centrality scores, which indicates that they are influential in both relative “popularity” and in bridging different parts of this network.<sup>61</sup>

Putin’s position in the network suggests that he is a bridge between the Russian Parliament, international leaders (specifically Obama), and Shoigu’s network. Similar to the Ukraine case, Putin appears to be peripheral or more likely farther up the chain from operator entities, such as the GRU. Shoigu and Gerasimov, who have higher degree centrality scores, feature prominently in both the Syria conflict and the Ukraine conflict, as is noted in several places throughout this report. Shoigu appears to have more ties with diplomatic actors, whereas Gerasimov has a mix of ties, including ties to operator organizations. This makes sense given his role as the head of the General Staff, which has more of an emphasis on operational matters.

## Key Lessons Learned

In addition to the insights generated through the network analysis described in the preceding section, our analysis of the Syria case study reveals several insights regarding the role of the General Staff in decisionmaking and the importance of the Syria conflict for the General Staff.

<sup>61</sup> *Betweenness centrality* is a measure that captures the extent to which a node lies on the shortest path to all other nodes; see Linton C. Freeman, “Centrality in Social Networks: Conceptual Clarification,” *Social Networks*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1978–1979. In essence, a node with a high betweenness centrality score connects different parts of a network.

## Syria as a Laboratory for the General Staff

The conflict in Syria functioned as a laboratory for the General Staff to experiment with and test new operational concepts and C2 systems. In a March 2019 speech at the annual meeting of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, Gerasimov characterized the Syria conflict as playing an "important role" in the development of Russia's "strategy of limited action." This strategy, he explained, relies on "self-sufficient groupings of troops" to achieve a limited set of tasks in an overseas conflict. In his speech, Gerasimov highlighted that the Syria conflict had further tested the use of Russian forces to conduct "humanitarian operations" to protect the local civilian population.<sup>62</sup> Gerasimov has stated repeatedly that the Syria conflict has allowed the General Staff to become more adept at conducting hybrid warfare. In 2016, he stated that Syria was a "striking example" of the "combination of traditional and hybrid methods" that had proven the necessity of investing in high-tech weapons to ensure Russia's success in future hybrid warfare.<sup>63</sup> In a 2017 article, Gerasimov similarly noted that the conflict in Syria had provided the General Staff with a "clear example of the use of hybrid [warfare] methods," including an opportunity to practice using information influence and social networks to achieve military aims.<sup>64</sup> The Kremlin has characterized the Russian intervention in Syria as a "foundational shaping experience" for Russian forces.<sup>65</sup> The General Staff has drawn on its experience in Syria to "inform doctrinal development and training," viewing the Syrian conflict as a "prototypical example of future war" and seeking to improve Russian capabilities by studying the conflict.<sup>66</sup>

Among the lessons learned in Syria was the utility of the establishment of a flexible expeditionary military headquarters at Khmeimim, which allowed for the coordination of Russian assets in Syria from a single location.<sup>67</sup> Gerasimov characterized this headquarters as a "modern command post," noting in 2017 that things were "going smoothly."<sup>68</sup> The General Staff has cited the Syria experience as highlighting the need for Russia to develop its ability to deploy flexible expeditionary forces to carry out "limited actions" abroad.<sup>69</sup> Russian analysts have noted the "flexibility" of this expeditionary headquarters, the composition of which was "frequently changed based on the needs of the combat situation and Russian assets in theater."<sup>70</sup> According to Dvornikov, one of the benefits of this arrangement was that it "erased" the "boundaries between the tasks of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels." It also provided a mechanism for coordinating the activities of "scattered, irregular [Syrian] armed formations," which were "united under the control of the [Russian] commander" at Khmeimim and were therefore able to "[act] according to a single plan."<sup>71</sup> In addition, the Special Operations Forces, a unit under the Special Operations Forces Command of the General Staff, played an "increasingly prominent role in supporting combat operations with diversionary operations, punitive raids, and target designation missions" during the conflict.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "Vectors of the Development of Military Strategy," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 4, 2019. For additional information on the definition of the strategy of limited action, see Dara Massicot, "Anticipating a New Russian Military Doctrine in 2020: What It Might Contain and Why It Matters," *War on the Rocks*, September 9, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "On the Syria Experience," *VPK News*, March 7, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, "World on the Brink of War," *VPK News*, March 13, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Clark, 2021, p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Clark, 2021, p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Clark, 2021, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Baranets, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Clark, 2021, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Clark, 2021, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander Dvornikov, "Headquarters for New Wars," *VPK News*, July 23, 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Kofman, 2020, p. 42.

The conflict also provided the General Staff with an opportunity to test new weapon systems under operational conditions. In 2017, Gerasimov noted that Russian forces had “tested more than 200 types of weapons and equipment” in Syria, including “those that were recently adopted, [those] which were going to be adopted, [and those] which were already in service.”<sup>73</sup> In a speech before the Russian Parliament the same year, Shoigu similarly stated that Russian forces had “tested 162 types of contemporary and modernized weapons in Syria” and that these weapons had shown a “high level of effectiveness.”<sup>74</sup> This served two purposes: First, it allowed the General Staff to see whether these weapons functioned effectively under operational conditions, and second, it allowed Russia to demonstrate its military capabilities to adversaries and partners alike, thereby serving “as a warning and . . . deterrent to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization],” and a means of securing future arms sales.<sup>75</sup> In particular, Gerasimov noted that the Syrian conflict provided Russia with an opportunity to test new drone technology; he characterized modern combat operations as “unthinkable without drones.”<sup>76</sup> Dvornikov similarly stated that the Syria conflict had provided Russia with an opportunity to make “significant improvements [in] measures to counter enemy UAVs.”<sup>77</sup>

Russian tactics evolved throughout the conflict in the types of weapons deployed and methods of attack. Early on, such attack aircraft as the SU-24M were used in light bombing roles because of limited air threats, but they were later retrofitted with stronger air-to-air weapons after the downing of one of these aircraft by Turkey in late 2015. New sighting systems were added to older aircraft to improve their precision in targeting unguided bombs, which were heavily used during the conflict. In addition, Russia deployed a new fleet of drones during the conflict, as well as counter-drone defenses at some of its facilities in Syria. Bombers transitioned from being assigned multiple aircraft for each heavily preplanned target on insurgent installations to being allowed free rein to engage smaller Islamic State targets identified during routine patrols.<sup>78</sup>

The Russian Navy also commissioned a variety of new vessels during the conflict, which provided platforms for field-testing new weapon systems. This included the Kalibr family of cruise missiles, which had a range of 2,500 km. In October 2015, Russian forces fired 26 Kalibr-NK missiles from warships in the Mediterranean. In December of that year, Russian forces first fired the Kalibr-PL cruise missile from a submarine.<sup>79</sup> A new aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, saw combat for the first time in Syria in 2016. It subsequently carried out hundreds of sorties, although it also experienced multiple accidents.<sup>80</sup> Both the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Sea Flotilla received significant operational experience through their support of combat operations in Syria.<sup>81</sup>

More broadly, the Syrian conflict provided a significant portion of the Russian military with combat experience in a complex operational environment; Gerasimov noted that advancement in the Russian military is contingent on experience in Syria, at least to some degree.<sup>82</sup> Russian media sources have stated that

<sup>73</sup> Baranets, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Lucian Kim, “Russian Defense Minister Says His Military Has Tested 162 Weapons in Syria,” *NPR*, February 23, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Miron and Thornton, 2021, pp. 9–10.

<sup>76</sup> Baranets, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Dvornikov, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Lavrov, 2018, pp. 3, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Igor Delanoë, “Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War,” in Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, eds., 2020, p. 116.

<sup>80</sup> Lavrov, 2018, pp. 24–25.

<sup>81</sup> Igor Delanoë, *Russia’s Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, IOP-2019-U-020190-Final, June 2019, p. 28.

<sup>82</sup> “More Than 48 Thousand Russian Soldiers Received Combat Experience in Syria,” *RIA Novosti*, December 22, 2017.

more than 48,000 Russian service members “gained invaluable combat experience in Syria.”<sup>83</sup> Over 90 percent of VKS pilots, for example, were deliberately cycled through deployments to Syria.<sup>84</sup> With respect to the General Staff specifically, rotations to Syria (among other conflicts) have enabled almost half of the GOU's generals and officers to gain combat experience.<sup>85</sup> According to analysts, the Russian military has “become, by any measure, much better for its Syrian experience.”<sup>86</sup> As Gerasimov stated in a speech at the General Staff Academy in March 2018, Russian military commanders have been “conditioned by [their] combat experience” in Syria, which has developed their abilities to “forecast the situation [and] decisively act” in future conflicts. In what Gerasimov has termed a “mandatory internship,” Russian military trainers and scholars are studying lessons learned from the Syria conflict related to C2.<sup>87</sup>

## The Role of Private Military Contractors in Syria

Another area in which the Syrian conflict has been instructive for the General Staff is the use of PMCs. PMCs—specifically, the Wagner Group—played an important role in indirectly supporting Russian military operations in Syria.<sup>88</sup> During the Syrian conflict, the Russian military strategy in Syria relied on a small footprint of official Russian forces with Syrian government forces and Iranian proxies, supplemented by Russian PMCs, doing much of the fighting on the ground.<sup>89</sup> Although mercenaries are outlawed under Article 539 of the Russian criminal code, Gerasimov has highlighted the importance of coordination with Russian-backed “participants” to achieve a “strategy of limited actions.”<sup>90</sup> Putin himself, moreover, has tacitly acknowledged Wagner's presence in Syria.<sup>91</sup> While there is no official relationship between the Russian government and the Wagner Group, other than a luncheon in Moscow where senior Russian military officials met jointly with Khalifa Haftar of Libya and Prigozhin, head of Wagner assets, there are believed to be close ties—including some degree of operational coordination—between the GRU and Wagner.<sup>92</sup>

It has been reported that in Syria, Wagner participants were organized into four reconnaissance and assault brigades.<sup>93</sup> These reports suggest they were used like regular Russian formations to conduct intelligence-gathering and reconnaissance missions and protect Syrian military objects and critical infrastructure targets while also providing training to Syrian forces.<sup>94</sup> The total number of Wagner fighters who fought in Syria is unknown, but in 2016, it was estimated that there were between 2,000 and 2,500 Wagner participants in the

<sup>83</sup> “More Than 48 Thousand Russian Soldiers Received Combat Experience in Syria,” 2017.

<sup>84</sup> “Over 90% of Russian Military Pilots Have Combat Experience, Says Defense Chief,” TASS, November 7, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Rudskoi, 2018, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Miron and Thornton, 2021, p. 9.

<sup>87</sup> Valerii V. Gerasimov, “Thoughts on Future Military Conflict,” presentation to the General Staff Academy, March 2018b.

<sup>88</sup> Experts note, however, that compared with the conflict in Ukraine, fewer private military contractors participated in hostilities in Syria. See Borshchevskaya, 2020, pp. 8–9.

<sup>89</sup> Kofman, 2020, pp. 39–40.

<sup>90</sup> Miron and Thornton, 2021, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> “No Denial from Putin on Wagner Mercenaries in Donbas,” UNIAN, December 20, 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Charles Bartles and Lester Grau, “The Russian Ground-Based Contingent in Syria,” in Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, eds., 2020, p. 77; and Rącz, 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Bartles and Grau, 2020, p. 79.

<sup>94</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, “Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond,” blog post, Jamestown Foundation, December 18, 2019.

country. Analysts have noted that in the Syrian conflict, Wagner “is often used as elite infantry, which naturally leads to casualties much greater than special forces typically see.”<sup>95</sup>

Reliance on Wagner forces and other PMCs allowed Russia to exert influence in the Syrian conflict while minimizing the risk to Russian forces. It also provided the Russian military with plausible deniability, such that Russia “never . . . end[ed] up with ownership of the conflict.”<sup>96</sup> As one analyst notes, the participation of Wagner forces in Syria was “born out of a need for plausible deniability in Moscow’s military operations” in the country.<sup>97</sup> For example, during a four-hour firefight between U.S. forces and pro-government Syrian forces fighting alongside Russian mercenaries on February 7, 2018, approximately 100 individuals from the Wagner forces were killed. Russian officials claimed, however, that they had “no control” over the fighters.<sup>98</sup> During the Syrian conflict, reliance on the Wagner Group also might have been motivated by a desire to exert reflexive control over Russia’s adversaries, cultivating a sense of ambiguity and confusion regarding the Russian military’s ability to mobilize and deploy its forces in Syria.<sup>99</sup> Although this approach had clear advantages for Moscow, it also might have encouraged Wagner participants to engage in risk-taking and degraded Russia’s ability to control escalation in the conflict.<sup>100</sup>

This trade-off—between the advantages associated with the use of PMCs, such as deniability and the cultivation of confusion and ambiguity in observers, and the disadvantages associated with relinquishing some degree of operational oversight and direct C2 over private forces—was a calculated one. Although featuring less prominently in the course of hostilities in Syria relative to the case of Ukraine, the use of PMCs appears to have served as a means of making the military campaign more politically palatable to Russian observers and decisionmakers—particularly by providing a means of constraining the costs of Russia’s involvement and limiting the number of military casualties.<sup>101</sup> Both of these rationales appear to have been in political pursuit of cultivating popular support for the war in Russia. In one instance, though, as noted previously, when Wagner forces clashed with U.S. forces in February 2018, the use of contractors for this purpose appears to have complicated the General Staff’s command and control efforts.

<sup>95</sup> Aleksandr Gostev and Robert Coalson, “Russia’s Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge from the Shadows,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, December 16, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Kofman, 2020, p. 40.

<sup>97</sup> Neil Hauer, “The Rise and Fall of a Russian Mercenary Army,” *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Candace Rondeaux, *Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare*, Washington, D.C.: New America, November 2019, p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Rondeaux, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Marten, 2019, p. 198.





## Drawing Conclusions About the Role of the General Staff in National Security Decisionmaking

Having characterized the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the General Staff in statute and practice, placed this institution in comparative context, described the fraught process of modernizing the Russian military, and detailed the role of the General Staff in practice, in this chapter, we present our conclusions regarding what the organization of the General Staff reveals about the leadership system it serves and the balance of power within Russia's national security decisionmaking structure.

First, we position the General Staff within the context of the broader Russian national security system, considering how this formal institution interacts with the informal Russian power structure. Although the tendency in the literature has been to focus on the question of whether the Russian General Staff and military have a seat at the table in foreign policy decisionmaking, this binary question shrouds important nuances about the General Staff's role.<sup>1</sup> We seek to provide a more complete answer in this chapter.

Second, we offer some tentative conclusions about what these various analytical facets suggest regarding Russian views on the relative importance of the variety of potential threats to the state—domestic security, crisis management, and war.

### Formal and Informal Systems Inform Decisionmaking

The Russian foreign policy and national security decisionmaking system has both formal and informal network elements. Although formal elements of an organization, such as official titles or codified documentation, including laws and charters, can provide a map for how actors are supposed to relate to one another, informal relationships speak to how decisionmaking is conducted in practice. Formal and informal networks can be highly correlated or divergent depending on the context of the organization or setting.

In the case of the Kremlin, the foreign policy and national security decisionmaking system can be described as having two parts: the formal system, which is composed of government bodies, advisory boards, and key senior personnel, and a second informal system that is based on patronage and consists of networks of elites and other loyalists who advise Kremlin leaders on sensitive national security decisions. Membership in these two systems is not mutually exclusive, and a few individuals have influence in both. The Kremlin decisionmaking system is an insular system. Those who are on the bottom or middle rungs of the hierarchy try to move up in the hierarchy through formal positions, and those on the outer rims of influence attempt to move inward closer to the center horizontally through informal connections.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception to this point is Westerlund (2021), in which the author considers both the willingness and ability of the Armed Forces to comply with political policy preferences.

<sup>2</sup> Gleb Pavlovskiy, "Russian Politics Under Putin: The System Will Outlast the Master," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016.

In a formal system, power typically is obtained by leveraging established processes or procedures or ascending a formally established hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> In the informal system, on the other hand, power is established not through titles or formal roles but through one's centrality versus periphery in key social networks. Although membership might shift, the greatest degree of stability lies in closeness to Putin. Key networks of influence or key players include intelligence and security services, political and diplomatic circles, financial advisers, technocrats, and state-owned enterprises. Power tends to increase as one moves toward the center of informal networks—in the Russian case, toward Putin.

These dynamics are particularly visible in the case of the decision to intervene in Crimea, as discussed in detail in Chapter Five. If decisionmaking in Russia operated as a formal system, we would expect Lavrov to have occupied a seat at the table for the February 22–23, 2014, meeting during which Putin reportedly instructed his confidants to “start work on the return of Crimea to being part of Russia.”<sup>4</sup> In a system of formal power structures, a meeting to convey a decision with such weighty ramifications for Russian foreign policy likely would have included the country's top foreign policy official. And yet, evidence indicates Lavrov was absent from the discussion. Instead, “the heads of our special security services and the Ministry of Defense,” including Sergey Shoigu, Sergey Ivanov, Nikolay Patrushev, and Aleksandr Bortnikov, are believed to have been in the room.<sup>5</sup>

The literature on the Russian foreign policy and national security decisionmaking process has been dominated by debates over whether the so-called power ministries exercise dominant influence.<sup>6</sup> Given the covert, opaque, and deinstitutionalized nature of the Russian decisionmaking process, this debate is perhaps unresolvable. Experts on Russian decisionmaking generally agree that the security and intelligence communities have disproportionate influence over the decisionmaking process, but that this influence is exercised not through institutional roles but rather through personal links and loyalty to the central player, Putin.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, the Crimean case is instructive. As we might expect in either a formal or informal power structure, Shoigu is believed to have been present when Putin relayed his decision to intervene in Crimea, and he served as a key player in the campaign's execution. Not only would his role as Minister of Defense dictate his involvement in national security policymaking and military operational planning, but beyond that on the informal side, Shoigu and Putin reportedly have a close working and personal relationship. In turn, observers also speculate that Shoigu was responsible for appointing retired vice admiral (and a long-time Shoigu confidant) Oleg Belaventsev as the commander of Russian forces in Crimea, in spite of the admiral's inexperience in local Crimean politics. Why, then, might Shoigu have tapped Belaventsev, assuming this was the case? His

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this report, we use the following definition of *power*: “the ability to exert traction inside the system, or to transmit ideas and lobby for benefits or changes in course,” per Fiona Hill, “Understanding and Deterring Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies,” testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, February 10, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Parker, 2015, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Parker, 2015, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the institutions that comprise the *silovye struktury* (*force structure*) see, Renz, 2018, pp. 86–120. For the debate over the influence of the force ministries, see, among others, Rivera and Rivera, 2018; Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008; Bettina Renz, “Putin's Militocracy? An Alternative Interpretation of Siloviki in Contemporary Russian Politics,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 6, September 2006, pp. 912–922; Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution*, New York: Scribner, 2006; and Olga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White, “Putin's Militocracy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Galeotti, “The Intelligence and Security Services and Strategic Decision-Making,” George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Security Insights, No. 30, May 2019b; Hill, 2016; Marten, 2019; Rivera and Rivera, 2018; Monaghan, 2014; Alena Ledeneva, “Open Secrets and Knowing Smiles,” *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2011; Soldatov and Rochlitz, 2018; and Marie Brancaleone, *The Russian Elite in the Post-Putin Era*, Belgium: Centre d'étude des crises et conflits internationaux, Note d'analyse No. 76, March 2021; Treisman, 2018a; and Renz, 2006.

decision might have been motivated by a desire to maintain deniability. Rather than dispatching an insider, perhaps Shoigu hoped to distance the Kremlin through the appointment of a lesser-known character. It is also possible that Shoigu weighed his own personal allegiances to and trust in Belaventsev over Belaventsev's experience or formal command structures. Such instances as these lend weight to hypotheses about influence as a function of personal clout and proximity to the Kremlin inner circle.

Given this broad consensus that power is exercised informally and decisions are made outside “well-defined constitutional bodies or bureaucratic institutions . . . behind closed doors by unknown individuals,” it logically follows that the influence of the General Staff and the military in general would flow through the Chief of the General Staff's personal relationship with either the Minister of Defense or Putin.<sup>8</sup>

As noted in Chapter Two, the political weight of Gerasimov, as the Chief of the General Staff, has grown over time. This influence appears to be driven primarily by two factors. First, similar to Leonid Brezhnev, Putin's decision to militarize Russian foreign policy inherently makes the advice and professional expertise of the General Staff and Chief of the General Staff relatively more prominent.<sup>9</sup> Second, as the case studies demonstrated, the relatively successful operations in Ukraine and Syria showed that the Armed Forces can be a useful foreign policy tool that contributes to Russia's position in the global arena.<sup>10</sup> Yet this outcome—i.e., the military's growing influence—may have been, to some degree, overdetermined. The structural factors that constrained the growth of the Russian economy and the militarization of Russian policy prior to Ukraine and Syria (e.g., invading Georgia in 2008 and the 2012 crackdowns on domestic dissent) weakened two of Russia's alternative foreign policy tools: economic leverage and diplomacy.<sup>11</sup>

It appears analytically fraught to make claims about whether the influence of the General Staff and military on foreign and national security decisionmaking has grown or contracted. On the one hand, there is conceivably greater influence given the militarization of Russian foreign policy and because (as a recent Swedish Defence Research Agency report notes) the military's threat perception and world view has largely become compatible with that of civilian leaders.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, civilian checks and balances continue to be modest, although civilians have gained greater financial control over the military with then-Defense Minister Serdyukov's implementation of a new financial distribution system that reduced the military elite's discretionary control on funding allocations.<sup>13</sup> Civilian control is thus stronger but limited to the executive level rather than inclusive of representative institutions or civil society.<sup>14</sup> However, in the course of our research, we found no reason to dispute Westerlund's recent conclusion that “currently, any use of Russian military force toward other states reflects the intentional will of the political leaders of Russia, and not that of its military.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Marten, 2015, p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Menning and Mahoney, 1982, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, it should be noted that the General Staff particularly enjoys considerable latitude in how it goes about supporting these foreign policy goals.

<sup>11</sup> Minchenko Consulting, 2019, pp. 9, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Westerlund, 2021, pp. 42–43. This world view consistency is in stark contrast to the Yeltsin years and the era of perestroika and glasnost.

<sup>13</sup> Bettina Renz, “Civil-Military Relations and Russian Military Modernisation,” in Roger N. McDermott, Bertil Nygren, and Carolina Vendil Pallin, eds., *The Russian Armed Forces in Transition: Economic, Geopolitical and Institutional Uncertainties*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Tsyppin, “Lessons Not to Learn: Post-Communist Russia,” in Thomas C. Bruneau and Florina Cristiana Matei, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013, p. 120; and Renz, 2012, p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Westerlund, 2021, p. 56.

Here too, the Crimean case reinforces this conclusion. As discussed in Chapter Five, if we are to take Putin and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov at their word, the decision to intervene in Crimea "was a personal decision of the head of state. He was the only person who could and had to make it and who made it," in the words of Peskov.<sup>16</sup> We have found little evidence to challenge this assertion, suggesting that while military leadership may have provided expertise and guidance to help shape Putin's decisionmaking on Crimea, the decision appears to have been his alone.

## Passive and Active Influence: More Complicated Than a Seat at the Table

Beyond questions about the relative weight of formal versus informal influence within the Russian system, crucial nuance is lost in this relatively simplistic question of whether the General Staff participates in foreign policy and national security decisionmaking. Multiple passive and active opportunities exist for the General Staff to influence the Russian decisionmaking process, other than participating in the actual decision to use military force. As was shown in Chapter Four, the military has numerous *ex ante* and *ex post* opportunities to influence said decisionmaking. First, as this report has demonstrated, the General Staff has the primary role in determining what kind of military is available to decisionmakers before any particular foreign policy decision is made. Second, as this report also has shown, once a decision has been made it must be implemented, and the General Staff again plays the central role in determining the effectiveness and capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces in this implementation role. Thus, the *formal* decisionmaking system of the General Staff appears to uniquely condition the *informal* decisionmaking system that dominates national security.

### Ex Ante Influence

The first section of this report detailed the central role of the General Staff in leading Russia's strategy, doctrine, force planning, capability development, and procurement processes. For example, the Main Operations Directorate sets the direction of development of the Armed Forces based on its long-term threat assessment, develops defense policy, defines training and equipment requirements, and plans for new concepts of operations. As a result of this broad authority, Galeotti argues, the Directorate is well positioned to influence, promote, and block policy, "especially when there is no clear steer from the Minister or the Kremlin."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it seems plausible that the capabilities and perceived effectiveness of Russia's Armed Forces could significantly affect how political leaders decide to wield the country's military instrument as part of Russia's foreign policy.

Of course, the inverse is also plausible. That is, political decisions and constraints can also influence how operations are planned and executed. For example, the desire to maintain plausible deniability at the political and diplomatic levels appears to have affected how many Russian forces could go into Donbas, how proxies were used, how forces were disguised, how personnel were recruited, and how their service and combat deaths were handled.

And, as we showed in Chapter Four, the General Staff, with its attachment to legacy ideas around conscription and mass mobilization, materially affected the readiness and structure of the forces available to political leaders in both Chechen wars and in Georgia. Russia's international prestige collapsed in tandem with its military, and Renz argues, "This did not escape the country's political elite."<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the General Staff and the military bureaucracy in Russia played a passive but no less impactful role in the foreign policy decisionmaking process.

<sup>16</sup> "Decision on Crimea Made Solely by Putin," 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Galeotti, 2021, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Renz, 2018, p. 25.

The decade of obstructionism orchestrated by military elites constrained meaningful reform of Russia's Armed Forces. Russia's conventional military disintegrated as the General Staff held on to its strategic visions of fighting a great power war with operational concepts fueled by mass conscription until multiple factors forced a change in the late 2000s. The General Staff and military elites thus enfeebled a key foreign policy tool and constrained the options available to decisionmakers. Although circumstances have improved and the Russian military appears to have obtained a greater level of competence, the circumstances continue to exist for the General Staff and military elites to reverse these reforms. If at some future point the General Staff's support for reforms is lost and institutional interests become the greater priority, it seems plausible that at least some portion of the reforms—and the military effectiveness that Russian forces appear to have gained from them—could quickly unravel.

Finally, the General Staff plays a leading role in setting the conditions that Russia's Armed Forces could encounter given its responsibilities in facilitating security agreements with other countries, including arms control agreements. The General Staff continues to have a substantial role in the preparation of official positions and recommendations for Russian government delegations to international negotiations on security and arms control matters. The General Staff analyzes and plans negotiations and, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prepares the "draft directives" for Russian representatives engaged in the talks. Thus, the General Staff serves as an advisory body to the MoD and government more broadly. The General Staff also monitors the weapons development programs of the United States and other NATO countries to ensure both strategic and conventional parity. The General Staff would be the implementing body of the results of any such negotiations, specifically ones on the reduction of strategic offensive weapons, which require the General Staff to determine how to implement the agreement.<sup>19</sup>

### Ex Post Influence

After a decision is made, someone needs to implement it. The self-reinforcing cycle noted previously—whereby Russian decisionmakers tend to exercise military instruments for lack of more-robust alternatives—has created the conditions under which the bodies responsible for actualizing Kremlin decisionmaking has increasingly become the General Staff and Russian Armed Forces. The relative effectiveness of Russia's Armed Forces in Ukraine and Syria and the consequent uptick in support from Kremlin leadership have intensified this cycle and further raised the influence of the military.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, the more the military is used as Russia's principal tool for foreign policy, the more Russia's other foreign policy levers are likely to become all the more anemic and less effective as Russia is marginalized on the world stage, e.g., sanctioned and cut off from the international banking system.<sup>21</sup>

As discussed in Chapters Two and Four, the increased military effectiveness that has resulted from moving toward a more-mobile, permanently ready, professional force has been supported by improvements in the C2 capabilities of the General Staff with the establishment of the NTsUO. The NTsUO enables both efficient command and control of the Armed Forces and real-time coordination of a whole-of-government response to emerging threats, increasing the General Staff's ability to effectively implement decisions. As the Syrian case study demonstrated, this capability was central to the orchestration of the campaign. Although the General Staff traditionally has held a central role in the coordination of executive bodies and other secu-

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<sup>19</sup> Baluyevski, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Radin, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, Eugeniu Han, Dara Massicot, Matthew Povlock, Clint Reach, Scott Boston, Samuel Charap, William Mackenzie, Katya Migacheva, Trevor Johnston, and Austin Long, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3099-A, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Minchenko Consulting, 2019.

rity forces, with the new capabilities of the NTsUO, the General Staff also will have increasingly more influence over the distribution of tasks within the interagency process. This influence already can be seen in the tasking of the General Staff with several nonmilitary crisis responses, such as fighting wildfires and opening coronavirus disease 2019–related medical facilities.<sup>22</sup> The NTsUO thus provides the capability and capacity to manage information flows, information processing, decisionmaking, and command and control, all of which will create a center of gravity in decisionmaking that sits directly under the General Staff in the chain of command.

How the General Staff goes about implementing the direction of political leaders also constitutes a source of influence. In this regard, both case studies appear to offer an instructive lesson concerning the extent to which the General Staff may be willing to compromise on core values for operational success. For example, in the Donbas, the General Staff appears to have at least indirectly participated in covering up soldiers' deaths in the name of plausible deniability. In Syria, the General Staff worked with mercenary formations—even though such formations are illegal in Russia—seemingly to increase the likelihood of operational success and preserve plausible deniability. These examples, although not enabling definitive conclusions, suggest that there is a culture within the General Staff of succeeding at all costs in service of military objectives, career advancement, satisfying superiors, or some combination thereof.

The Syria and Ukraine cases in particular, and this report in general, thus offer practitioners and analysts a richer understanding of the ways in which the Russian military establishment broadly and the Russian General Staff specifically behave in practice—e.g., how they perceive the threat environment, plan, and operate. Although our analysis did not examine the 2022 conflict in Ukraine, some of the findings of our research nevertheless are relevant to the war. Almost four weeks into Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, signs that the Russian military has so far struggled to achieve objectives in Ukraine through its use of force have surfaced. Reports have appeared of airborne troops dropped deep behind Ukrainian lines having become cut off from resupply. The now infamous 40-mile-long convoy of Russian armor has encountered many logistical and other impediments on its way to Kyiv.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, poorly prepared ground forces have struggled to advance, secure, and hold territory in the face of Ukrainian resistance. Russian losses in materiel are speculated to be significant.<sup>24</sup> And the elaborate situational awareness that NTsUO was supposed to provide does not appear to have properly captured the actual state of the Russian military (or that of its opponent) for senior political and military leaders.<sup>25</sup>

There are various possible explanations for these challenges, some of which are particularly pertinent to the issues discussed in this report, although it is too early as of this writing to offer a definitive explanation. First, as many observers have noted, decisions made at the strategic level by Putin, his closest advisers, and perhaps the seniormost Russian military brass appear to have had significant second- and third-order effects for Russia's military at the operational and tactical levels. In particular, the apparent decision at the strategic level to shroud Russia's invasion in secrecy until the last moments likely influenced the Russian General Staff's and OSK Commander's planning, preparedness, and execution at the operational and tactical levels, respectively. Reports indicate that Russia's most-senior military leaders informed operational and tactical

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<sup>22</sup> Galeotti, 2021, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Max Hauptman, "Russia's 40-Mile-Long Convoy Outside of Kyiv Is 'Stalled'—and a Big Sitting Duck," *Task and Purpose*, March 3, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Sam Jones, John Paul Rathbone, and Demetri Sevastopulo, "A Serious Failure: Scale of Russia's Military Blunders Becomes Clear," *Financial Times*, March 12, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Copp and Tucker, 2022; and Strobel, 2022.

commanders of the mission only one day before the invasion.<sup>26</sup> From a practical perspective, this is insufficient time for necessary preparatory activities. According to military analyst Jack Watling,

working out which units a formation is to collaborate with in order to set up encrypted radios takes time; studying the map and assessing routes takes time; and getting in the right headspace to go to war takes time. The failure to give subordinates time to prepare reveals a dysfunctional command culture in which troops are treated as an expendable resource in the pursuit of objectives.<sup>27</sup>

At the strategic level, decisions about when, how, and where to invade look to have been informed, at least in part, by misguided intelligence about the appetite in Ukraine for Russian intervention. A former chief of the United Kingdom's Joint Forces Command, General Richard Barrons, notes, "there is something here that is systemically wrong . . . somewhere in the Russian intelligence architecture, facts on the ground are being converted into an analysis, but that analysis is actually a narrative to support the preconceptions of the senior [Kremlin] leadership."<sup>28</sup> Past precedent suggests that these intelligence missteps might be at least partially attributable to the GRU. For instance, in the wake of Russia's successful annexation of Crimea in 2014, the GRU and FSB reportedly misperceived then oversold the receptiveness of eastern Ukrainians and fragility of the Ukrainian government when encouraging Kremlin leadership to support a proxy conflict in the Donbas.<sup>29</sup> Thus, from the outset, conditions for victory in the first few weeks of the conflict were not set, perhaps because of missteps at the strategic level.

It is also plausible that the broader, bottom-up issues discussed in this report—from the General Staff's tight grip on information and its treatment of knowledge as currency, to the military's institutional resistance to reforms, to the General Staff's highly hierarchical C2 structure, and the influence of corruption on the armed services—are also partly responsible for the Russian military's performance in Ukraine thus far.<sup>30</sup>

What the war in Ukraine suggests for a potential future conflict between Russia and NATO is not entirely clear. If primacy is again given to secrecy—perhaps because of a lack of trust in the individuals outside the inner circle—such that the General Staff and OSK commanders have a tightly constrained window to plan and prepare, Russia's existing struggles could be amplified in this substantially larger theater of operations. Apparent challenges because of misguided intelligence and the emphasis on rigidly hierarchical C2 similarly might be exacerbated in a larger operation. Likewise, the logistics challenges stymieing the Russian military's ability to flow forces into the theater—as exemplified by the 40-mile long convoy of Russian armor—plausibly could be exacerbated in a large-scale operation against NATO.

However, it seems implausible that Russian political and military leaders would concoct a similar strategy in the context of a Russia-NATO war. Perhaps most prominently, there would be no expectation of indifference to Russian invading forces. Additionally, we know from the case study of Syria that Russian forces can operate in a more sophisticated combined-arms manner, employing UAVs to suppress electronic signals and find and fix targets and using precision-guided munitions to destroy targets from stand-off ranges; these tactics have not been systematically employed at scale at least one month into the conflict in Ukraine. The morale of Russian soldiers and thus their will to fight also might plausibly be different in the context of a conflict with NATO. And it also seems plausible that Russia would have less incentive to hold portions of its

<sup>26</sup> Jack Watling, "Just How Tall Are Russian Soldiers?" *RUSI Defence Systems*, Vol. 24, March 11, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Watling, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, Rathbone, and Sevastopulo, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Spooks in the Kremlin," *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2019a.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, Rathbone, and Sevastopulo, 2022.

more sophisticated conventional weapons in reserve in such a conflict. Finally, Russian emphasis in the air likely would be on the defensive—denying air superiority to NATO as opposed to trying to achieve it.

Given the interaction of these factors, the difficulty of knowing which factors might arise in a potential conflict with NATO, and the reality that the war in Ukraine seems far from over and future developments could reveal important additional information about the state of Russian forces, further research will be required to develop stronger findings regarding the future implications of this conflict.

However, the analysis in Chapter Four suggests that military reforms might be neither politically possible nor necessarily be able to improve Russia's ability to effectively fight absent structural changes to combat corruption within the military and military-industrial complex. History might at least rhyme again, with Putin—similar to Yeltsin in the wake of the first Chechen war—finding himself in public disagreement with his generals and having materially weakened his political standing. It is possible that, even if Russian forces eventually prevail in Ukraine in some form, Putin's political position might have been so damaged that focusing on military reform or identifying individuals willing to implement these reforms simply will be untenable. Depending on the damage to the Russian economy by Western sanctions at that future point, this reform challenge will only be more difficult.<sup>31</sup>

## Divining Priorities from Organizational Structure

Mindful that the General Staff conditions the policy options available to decisionmakers and of the increasing move toward further centralization and top-down leadership demonstrated by the case studies of Ukraine and Syria, this concluding section considers what the organization of the General Staff reveals about the leadership system that it serves and the threats that the General Staff views as most pressing.

First, civilian executive-level leaders ultimately make high-level decisions with foreign policy implications and exercise relatively more control over the military than prior to the 2008 reforms. However, the expansive roles, responsibilities, and authorities the General Staff has retained suggest that the tendency to defer to the military on lesser decisions remains robust. Moreover, the military continues to influence political decisions in all the indirect ways mentioned previously. This suggests that the Russian system's prioritization of attachment to personal authority and elite prerogatives—rather than legal-rational or constitutional considerations—continues to dominate.<sup>32</sup> Russian decisionmaking elites and society appear to be willing to align authority and responsibility in a top-down way that allows defense to take pride of place over accountability. The idea of *taxpayer dollars* does not appear to resonate; rather than government serving the people, more often than not, the people serve the state.<sup>33</sup>

Second, this organizational structure is set up in such a way that prioritizes making a "sufficient" decision quickly over making the "best" decision.<sup>34</sup> The emergence of a system that discourages alternative views and concentrates authority so centrally appears to stifle the creativity and innovation arguably needed to weigh alternative operational or tactical approaches and arrive at the most effective path forward. The model

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<sup>31</sup> However, these observations are in no way meant to imply that United States' assessments of Russian military capabilities should be predicated on these initial observations that were derived from solely the first few weeks of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

<sup>32</sup> Menning and Mahoney, 1982, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> We encountered a single reference to "taxpayers" deserving to hear from military elites about how their money was being spent on modernizing the army. Perhaps ironically, this 2008 article was berating then–Minister of Defense Serdyukov for his reforms and "absolute disregard not only for the opinions of military service professionals, but also for the public." See Viktor Litovkin, "General's Afront," RIA Novosti, March 28, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> McDermott and Bartles, 2020, p. 39.



reveals either that military elites are highly confident in their competence and that of the commanding officer at all levels, or that military elites may not assess they have a choice *but* to rely on their own recognizance. For example, as recently as 2010, then–Chief of the General Staff Makarov expressed a lack of confidence in the competence of even the General Staff’s officer corps.<sup>35</sup> At one point, then–Minister of Defense Serdyukov lamented that many of the *generals* were “unqualified” for their positions.<sup>36</sup> This lack of confidence plausibly created a lack of trust in the competence of lower levels to execute and manage the responsibilities with which a soldier might be tasked in the U.S. military, for example.

Finally, our research suggests that the General Staff may have an increasingly central role in the Russian national security decisionmaking process, shaping this process, and implementing those decisions. Moreover, the 2013 and 2020 *Regulations* expanded the internally focused responsibilities of the General Staff, assigning this body with the responsibility for mobilizing and coordinating all of Russia’s various forces to confront domestic issues. This legal remit certainly gives this body a more powerful role over internal problems. However, the central focus of the General Staff still appears to be confronting external—not internal—threats.

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<sup>35</sup> Greg Whisler, “Strategic Command and Control in the Russian Armed Forces: Untangling the General Staff, Military Districts, and Service Main Commands (Part Two),” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2020a, pp. 97–98.

<sup>36</sup> Interfax, March 5, 2010, as quoted in Whisler, 2020a, p. 98.



# Abbreviations

C2	command and control
CCMD	combatant commands
CJCS	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic
EU	European Union
EUCOM	European Command
FSB	Federal Security Service
GBU	<i>Gruppa boevogo upravleniya</i>
GOMU	<i>Glavnoe organizatsionno-mobilizatsionnoe upravlenie</i>
GOU	<i>Glavnoe operativnoe upravlenie</i>
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate
GU	Main Directorate
GUS	<i>Glavnoe upravlenie svyazi</i>
JCS	U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff
KSSO	<i>Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii</i>
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic
MChS	Ministry for Civil Defense and Emergency Situations
MH17	Malaysian Airlines Flight 17
MoD	Ministry of Defense
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NTsUO	<i>Natsional'nyy tsentr upravleniya oboronoy</i>
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
OSK	<i>Obyedinennyye strategicheskiye komandovaniya</i>
PMC	private military company
SBU	<i>Informatsionnaya sistema boyevogo upravleniya</i>
SSO	<i>Sily spetsial'nalnykh operatsii</i>
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UOP	<i>Upravlenie operativnoi podgotovki</i>
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VCJCS	Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
VDV	Russian Airborne Troops
VKS	Russian Aerospace Forces
WWII	World War II



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The Russian General Staff is unlike any single organization within the U.S. defense establishment. The absence of an analog in the United States means that audiences within the U.S. civilian and military communities largely are unfamiliar with the concept of a General Staff. Because of the increasing militarization of Russian foreign policy since 2008, it is important to understand not only the formal authorities and responsibilities of this institution but also its capacity to influence Russia's national security decisionmaking process.

In this report, the authors develop a foundational text for policymakers and warfighters to improve collective understanding of the Russian General Staff. The authors first draw on a variety of primary and secondary Russian-language sources—e.g., statutes, speeches by political and military elites, and academic military writings—to inform their characterization of the General Staff's statutory mandate. They then place the General Staff in a comparative institutional context, providing a high-level evaluation of the institutional roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the General Staff's U.S. counterpart—the Joint Staff. They consider what the formal roles and responsibilities of the General Staff suggest about the relative balance of power among Russia's political leaders, the General Staff, and the broader Russian military.

The authors then take this understanding and apply it to the roles and responsibilities of the General Staff in a practical context by analyzing two case studies of this institution's involvement in recent conflicts: Ukraine (2014–2021) and Syria (2015–2019).

\$40.00

ISBN-10 1-9774-1094-4  
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-1094-8



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