

Russian Military Mobilization During the Ukraine War

Evolution, Methods, and Net Impact

Paul Schwartz and Dmitry Gorenburg
with contributions by Olga Thomas



Abstract

This paper examines Russian military mobilization efforts in the decades leading up to and during the war in Ukraine. The paper first highlights the evolving nature of Russia's mobilization strategy from the Soviet era to the 2008 New Look reforms, finding that the strategy shifted significantly based on changes in the country's geopolitical position, economic and financial conditions, underlying demographics, and expectations regarding future wars. Next, the paper examines Russia's efforts to reform the mobilization process from 2008 to the eve of the Russia-Ukraine war, when Russia disbanded the Soviet-era mass mobilization force in favor of a permanent brigade structure. Most of the paper concentrates on Russian efforts to mobilize additional combat personnel to sustain the war effort in Ukraine. It finds that the Kremlin resorted to several "covert" mobilization methods to generate additional combat troops while seeking to avoid the mass mobilization of Russian reservists before ultimately calling for partial mobilization in September 2022. Finally, the paper examines how Russia sustained combat power through the end of 2023 before summarizing mobilization's effects on Russian forces in Ukraine and the larger war effort. Russia has found ways to sustain its forces in Ukraine through a series of ad hoc yet relatively effective methods of mobilization.

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David Knoll, Research Program Director
Countering Threats and Challenges Program
Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine met with unexpectedly stiff resistance from Ukrainian armed forces, causing Moscow's multi-axis offensive into Ukrainian territory to founder quickly. The conflict then shifted to southeastern Ukraine, where it devolved into a large-scale war of attrition. Russia's military reversals in Ukraine resulted in massive losses of Russian combat personnel, which drove the Kremlin to pursue a wide range of mobilization activities to replenish Russian combat forces in Ukraine. These included recruiting additional contract soldiers, expanding private military contractors, forming regional volunteer battalions, deploying Chechen militias, forcibly mobilizing Ukrainian separatists in the Donbas region, and—most important—activating Russian reservists.

This paper examines Russia's military mobilization measures during the ongoing war in Ukraine. To provide context, the first section of this paper examines the historical role played by mobilization in Russian military strategy, including during the Soviet period. It also evaluates Russian efforts to reform the mobilization process from the beginning of the New Look reforms through the eve of the Ukraine invasion. The following section assesses the many measures used by Russia to mobilize additional combat troops for the war in Ukraine, seeking to replace its growing battlefield losses and achieve some semblance of victory. The last section sets forth the study's key findings and discusses the future direction of Russian military mobilization based on lessons learned during the war. The key findings of this paper are as follows:

- Russia's mobilization strategy has undergone significant changes over the past several decades because of changes in borders, geopolitical position, prospective

adversaries, buffer zones, political will, and expectations regarding future conflict.

- During World War II, Russia maintained a large standing army backed by equally large mobilization echelons to counter the German Wehrmacht massed directly on its borders.
- During the Cold War, Russia leveraged its control of Eastern and Central Europe to maintain a large standing army forward deployed on the East German border to buy time to mobilize partially staffed cadre divisions farther to the rear.
- This mass mobilization army was maintained following the collapse of the Soviet Union until the Georgia war, after which it was disbanded in favor of a permanent readiness force based on fully staffed brigades. This decision was made to better prepare for local wars on Russia's periphery and was based on expectations that a war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would likely be short because of escalation risks.
- As a hedge, Russia developed a nascent mobilization capability from 2014 to 2022, although it was still a work in progress at the time of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.
- Russia faced three main problems associated with these decisions in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine:
 - First, Russia may have made the wrong decision when it disbanded the Soviet-era mass mobilization army without creating a viable alternative because it failed to anticipate becoming involved

in the kind of large-scale war of attrition that it is now waging in Ukraine.

- Second, because Russia failed to invest in an alternative mobilization capacity, when Putin finally ordered partial mobilization in September 2022, Russia lacked the mobilization mechanisms and structure to mobilize effectively, resulting in a chaotic, ad hoc effort.
- Third, despite efforts to create a nascent mobilization capacity, Putin was unwilling to order mobilization during the initial phase of war because of concerns over the associated political costs. Ordering a partial mobilization would have been inconsistent with the Kremlin’s characterization of the war as a “special military operation” to be carried out by Russia’s standing army without disrupting the general populace.
- These constraints led Putin to favor a “covert mobilization” strategy for much of the war, supplemented by his call for partial mobilization in September 2022. Thus, mobilization unfolded in three phases during the conflict:
 - An initial covert mobilization phase, which took place from February to September 2022. During this phase, Russia resorted to a wide range of measures to mobilize additional combat troops for the battlefield while avoiding the mass mobilization of Russian reservists at all costs.
 - A second phase centered on partial mobilization, which lasted from September 2022 to January 2023. During this phase, Putin finally ordered partial mobilization, calling up 300,000 Russian reservists when his depleted forces came under intense pressure due to Ukrainian counteroffensives at Kherson and Kharkiv.
- A return to covert mobilization methods, highlighted by three principal lines of effort: recruiting additional combat personnel by the Wagner Group and other Russian private military contractors, recruiting additional contract soldiers for Russia’s regular armed forces, and recruiting additional volunteers for a wide range of Russian irregular forces.
- During the initial phase, Russia relied on a patchwork of mobilization measures to recruit or impress into service additional combat troops needed to support the war effort. These included efforts to recruit additional contract soldiers, establish volunteer battalions, mobilize separatist forces in the Donbas, form new Chechen militia units, activate Russian Combat Army Reserve active reserve units, and recruit additional private military contractors. Russia used a combination of conscription and voluntary recruiting methods— involving a corresponding mix of coercion and voluntary cooperation—with varying degrees of success.
- During phase two, Russia ordered the partial mobilization of Russian reservists. Partial mobilization was an ad hoc, chaotic affair with many problems due to both lack of proper preparations and loss of mobilization capacity during the war. These included inaccurate reservist registries, reliance on manual processes, and large-scale efforts to evade call-up. Russia also lacked the necessary bases, military trainers, and equipment stores to properly train and equip newly mobilized reservists.

Nevertheless, partial mobilization generated 300,000 combat troops for the war effort, and they proved instrumental in stabilizing the battlefield.

- During the third phase, the Kremlin returned to the covert mobilization methods adopted during phase one but with greater success, having applied lessons learned during earlier mobilization efforts. The Kremlin concentrated on three principal lines of effort:
 - First, the Wagner Group was given free rein to pursue large-scale prisoner recruiting, which proved highly successful in delivering tens of thousands of combat troops for operations near Bakhmut.
 - Second, Russia secured tens of thousands of additional volunteers for both existing and new regional volunteer formations and other irregular combat units.
 - Finally, and most important, after refining its approach, Russia successfully recruited at least tens of thousands of additional contract soldiers by providing high salaries and benefits and using carefully targeted messaging to appeal to the sense of duty and patriotism held by many Russian military-aged men.
- Russian mobilization efforts have had mixed effects on Russian forces in the field. Reliance on such a wide range of mobilization measures undermined unity of effort and resulted in a patchwork of regular and irregular combat units at the front, leading to coordination problems and a fragmented chain of command. The influx of poorly trained personnel also led

to a general degradation in the quality of Russian combat forces, which drove Russian military leaders to favor continuous infantry assaults over more sophisticated combined arms operations. These assaults contributed to further Russian battlefield losses, thereby perpetuating an insatiable demand for more combat troops.

- Mobilization has been sufficient to allow Russian forces to blunt Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive and more recently to achieve gains at Avdiivka. The Kremlin's revised covert mobilization strategy has thus far been good enough to sustain Russian forces on the battlefield without the need for a second wave of mobilization. However, if Russia were to incur serious reversals on the battlefield akin to those it suffered during the Kharkiv counteroffensive, the Kremlin could very well feel compelled to resort to a second wave of mobilization.
- There are early indications that Russia is planning to revise its mobilization strategy based on lessons learned during the Russia-Ukraine war. The Kremlin recently decided to build and maintain a larger standing army to reduce the country's reliance on mobilizable reserves. Specifically, Russia's armed forces will increase from 1.15 million troops to 1.5 million troops in total. The additional forces will be used to form a new army corps, 7 additional motorized rifle divisions, and 19 new brigades over the course of 2024.¹
- This force expansion will be achieved by increasing the number of contract soldiers to 695,000 without a corresponding increase in conscription. To this end, the Kremlin also recently announced plans to recruit

¹ Riley Bailey et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 25, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Oct. 25, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-25-2023>.

an additional 400,000 contract soldiers in 2024. It appears highly unlikely that Russian military leaders will be able to achieve these lofty ambitions given the many difficulties that Russia has encountered in keeping pace with its ongoing battlefield losses. Yet these pronouncements offer an early view of how Russia is thinking about a revised mobilization strategy over the near- to mid-term in light of its experiences in Ukraine.

Russia's mobilization strategy evolved through trial, error, and adaptation, resulting in a diverse force plagued by coordination issues and diminished quality.



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INTRODUCTION

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine met with unexpectedly stiff resistance from Ukrainian armed forces, causing Moscow's multi-axis offensive into Ukrainian territory to founder rapidly. During the first two months of the war, Russia suffered extensive battlefield casualties as its initial invasion force proved highly vulnerable to Ukrainian countermeasures. After Russian forces withdrew from around Kyiv and reconcentrated in the Donbas region, the conflict devolved into a grinding large-scale war of attrition, generating massive additional losses for Russian combat personnel. By July 2022, Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns estimated that Russian casualties had already reached 15,000 killed and 45,000 wounded.²

The magnitude of Russian battlefield casualties in Ukraine drove the Kremlin to pursue a wide range of mobilization activities in an attempt to replenish Russian combat forces in Ukraine. These included recruiting additional contract soldiers, deploying private military contractors, forming regional volunteer battalions, expanding Chechen militias, forcibly mobilizing Ukrainian separatists in the Donbas region, activating Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS) combat personnel, and, most important, enacting a large-scale "partial mobilization" of Russian military reservists.

Such measures were only partially successful in replenishing Russian combat forces in Ukraine and

restoring Russian military power. Continuing high casualty rates have generated repeated cycles of mobilization and further attrition, which have left Russian forces at the front precariously thin throughout the war. By late summer 2022, Russian forces had become so depleted that they were especially vulnerable to Ukrainian counteroffensives launched at that time.

Throughout the war, however, Russia has managed to generate sufficient combat troops to sustain the war effort. Most recently, the influx of reinforcements was sufficient to allow Russian forces to blunt the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive and preserve their previous gains in Ukraine. So how did Russia manage to achieve these successes?

Structure of the paper

To address this question, this paper examines Russian military mobilization activities, methods, and processes used during the ongoing war in Ukraine.³ To set the stage for this discussion, the first section of this paper explores the role of mobilization in Russian military strategy. The first part of this section examines the history of mobilization during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras up to the beginning of the New Look reforms in 2008. It examines how Russian mobilization changed over this period in response to the country's changing internal conditions and geopolitical situation.

² Phil Stewart, "CIA Director Estimates 15,000 Russians Killed in Ukraine War," Reuters, July 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/cia-director-says-some-15000-russians-killed-ukraine-war-2022-07-20/>.

³ For purposes of this review, *mobilization* is defined as the structures, methods, and processes used by the Russian armed forces to scale up their combat forces from standing peacetime levels to the levels required to sustain large-scale combat operations in Ukraine. The term also includes ongoing efforts to replenish Russian combat forces in Ukraine and sustain Russian combat power as casualties continue to mount. The definition is intended to be expansive, encompassing a range of activities used to generate additional combat troops for the Russia-Ukraine war, whether assigned to Russian regular forces, such as the Ground Forces, Naval Infantry, or Airborne Forces, or the many irregular combat units that have been used in Ukraine, including private military contractors, volunteer battalions, and Chechen militias. Mobilization also includes the activation of Russian military reservists, which is a narrower but more commonly used definition of the term.

The second part of this section examines Russian efforts to reform the mobilization system from the start of the New Look reforms in 2008 to the eve of the Ukraine invasion in 2022. It examines disbandment of the Soviet-era mass mobilization system following Russia's uneven military performance during the Georgia war. Transitioning to a force based on permanent readiness brigades represented a fundamental shift in Russia's mobilization strategy. However, the need to maintain a modified mobilization capability also influenced Russian thinking during this period, leading to additional reforms to restore some degree of mobilization capability. Yet these reforms were still very much a work in progress in February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine.

The second section of the paper provides an in-depth assessment of Russia's ongoing mobilization efforts during the Russia-Ukraine war. It examines the various mobilization efforts undertaken by Russia during the conflict, ranging from the recruitment of additional contract soldiers to the deployment of irregular Chechen militias. The applicable review period for this paper runs from February 24, 2022 (the date of the invasion) through December 31, 2023. For each line of effort, the paper describes the particular force structure being mobilized or replenished, the reasons why Russia chose to pursue that line of effort, the methods used to recruit or mobilize additional combat troops, and the net effect on Russian combat forces in Ukraine. This section of the paper is structured so that each part offers different insights into Russia's mobilization methods and processes.

The first part of this section examines Russian mobilization efforts from February to September 2022, during what is called the covert mobilization period. During this phase of the conflict, Russia adopted a wide range of measures to generate additional combat troops for its forces in Ukraine while purposely avoiding the large-scale call-up of

military reserves. This part provides a broad view of the many measures used by the Kremlin to generate additional combat troops by covering six separate lines of effort pursued by Russian leadership to mobilize and recruit new combat troops. This part is intended to illustrate the decentralized nature of Russian mobilization efforts as well as the country's reliance on a wide range of both regular and irregular combat forces in Ukraine.

The second part examines Russia's response to President Vladimir Putin's September 2022 decree ordering a partial mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Russian reservists. Although partial mobilization was both chaotic and technically challenging, the generation of 300,000 combat troops played a major role in restoring Russian combat power in Ukraine. This part offers an in-depth review of partial mobilization while providing a detailed assessment of the many challenges that Russia faced in carrying it out as well as the ultimate successes achieved. It also emphasizes the heavy political costs incurred by the Kremlin in ordering partial mobilization, which triggered substantial political backlash and significant emigration.

The third part examines alternative Russian mobilization efforts both during and after completion of partial mobilization, providing a more focused assessment of Russian mobilization during 2023. It focuses its assessment on the three most important mobilization lines of effort undertaken by Russian leadership during 2023: the continued mobilization of combat personnel by Russian private military contractors, most notably the Wagner Group; efforts to recruit additional volunteers for the many irregular combat units deployed in Ukraine; and efforts to recruit additional contract soldiers for Russia's regular armed forces, which became the most important Russian mobilization effort during 2023. Although Russia continued to rely on a variety of other methods to generate additional combat power, these three measures were the principal lines of effort in 2023.

The final section of the paper sets forth the study's key findings and conclusions. It also describes lessons learned by Russia in effectively mobilizing combat power during the war. This section concludes by briefly discussing Russia's plans to expand its military and the viability of such plans.

Scope, methodology, and sources

The foregoing assessments were driven by a series of research questions based on discussions with the sponsor:

- How has Russia's mobilization strategy evolved over the past several decades? What factors have driven changes in Russia's mobilization strategy?
- What measures did Russian leaders take to develop a viable mobilization strategy during the period from the 2008 New Look reforms to the eve of the invasion? How effective were those preparations?
- During the Russia-Ukraine war, what measures has Russia taken to scale up its peacetime combat forces for armed conflict with Ukraine and sustain Russian combat power in Ukraine? How has Russia's approach to mobilization evolved over time? What particular lines of effort has Russia pursued?
- For each line of effort, what specific measures did Russian leaders take to bolster their combat forces in Ukraine, why did they pursue such measures, how successful were these measures, and what was the net effect of the measures on the battlefield?
- How well have Russian mobilization efforts as a whole met Russia's troop requirements on the battlefield? In what ways have they strengthened Russia's war effort, and in what ways have they undermined it?
- How sustainable are Russia's current mobilization efforts likely to be over the near term as the conflict continues? Under what conditions is the Kremlin likely to resort to a second wave of mobilization?
- What lessons have Russian leaders learned from their experience with mobilization during the Russia-Ukraine war? To what extent is Russia likely to modify its mobilization strategy over the near- to mid-term in light of these lessons learned?

To address these questions, the project team systematically collected relevant data covering both the pre-war period and the relevant review period for the war in Ukraine (i.e., February 2022 through December 2023). For the pre-war period, the research team relied heavily on data from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, including Russian military journals, local media reports, in-depth analyses, and other scholarly works. For the war in Ukraine, the project team systematically reviewed daily and weekly reports on the war (especially those compiled by groups such as the Institute for the Study of War and Rochan Consulting) while supplementing these sources with articles, reports, and other analytical and specialized materials drawn from a variety of sources. These resources included primary and secondary Russian-, English-, and Ukrainian-language sources, open-source media reporting, social media, official documents and statements, journals, think tank reports, and Western and Ukrainian declassified intelligence reports.

The collected data were then subdivided into various categories, each of which corresponded with an individual line of effort pursued by Russia to mobilize additional combat troops for the war effort. Next, the project team collected additional data to expand the research and develop greater confidence in the initial findings. In the process, the collected data were validated using applicable rules of evidence and

other indicia of reliability. For example, preference was given to the following: objective reporting from credible sources, reports that were corroborated, admissions by Russian sources of shortcomings in mobilization efforts, detailed reporting, and well-reasoned and in-depth analyses from recognized experts in the field.

The paper's focus is Russia's efforts to shore up its "combat forces" in Ukraine as opposed to its internal security forces. For this reason, the paper excludes coverage of Rosgvardia (Russia's national guard), Ministry of Interior forces, and Federal Security Service FSB security forces (such as the Russian Coast Guard). Even though these forces have played a role at times in Russian combat operations in Ukraine, their main mission is defending the homeland, addressing the country's internal security problems, and pacifying occupied territories.

For the same reason, the paper excludes coverage of Russian conscription efforts during the Russia-Ukraine war. Even though conscription is an important tool for maintaining the total force size of Russia's regular armed forces, Russian conscripts are generally prohibited by Russian law from being committed to armed combat except in the case of a full military mobilization or a declaration of martial law.

Absent such declarations, conscripts are required by law to be used solely within the borders of the Russian Federation. Although several hundred Russian conscripts were sent into battle during the initial invasion, once this became publicly known, deployed conscripts were quickly withdrawn from the front and have since been largely withheld from Russian combat operations in Ukraine. Hence, ongoing conscription efforts do not directly support Russia's efforts to replenish its combat forces in Ukraine.

THE HISTORY OF SOVIET AND RUSSIAN MILITARY MOBILIZATION

Mobilization does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, how a country plans for mobilization and how it actually mobilizes for armed conflict are a function of many factors, including demographics; economic, industrial, and financial constraints; political will and political cohesion; existing force structure; and overall military doctrine. Mobilization strategy is also dependent on a country's strategic posture, the geopolitical conditions that it faces, and, most important, the kinds of wars that it is preparing to fight.

In Russia's case, its mobilization strategy has undergone substantial revisions over the years as the country's internal and external conditions have changed. The Soviet Union's pre-World War II mobilization strategy was designed for a country facing a large and well-equipped German army without a suitable buffer zone separating the two forces. This situation required Russia to maintain a large standing army on its western border with an even larger set of rapidly mobilizable cadre divisions deployed at varying distances to the rear.

During the Cold War period, the Soviet Union's armed forces were able to forward deploy in Central Europe, affording them greater time to mobilize in the event of conflict with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This situation necessitated a change in approach centered on maintaining permanent ready forces near the East German border supplemented by partially staffed mobilization cadres at varying levels of readiness. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the

loss of its Eastern European empire, Russian forces lost most of their strategic depth, necessitating further revisions to Russia's mobilization strategy. However, because of the chaotic conditions facing Russia in the 1990s and internal resistance to large-scale military reforms, the country failed to make the required changes to its mobilization strategy until 2008, in the aftermath of the Georgia War.

Russia's mobilization strategy, which was designed primarily for a large-scale war with Germany and later NATO, proved repeatedly to be poorly suited to the kinds of wars that the Soviet Union and later Russia actually fought. The war in Afghanistan, the two Chechen wars, and the Georgia war all posed serious challenges to Russia's mobilization strategy because its standing army, which was heavily reliant on partially staffed cadre divisions, was unable to muster enough troops to effectively fight these small wars without improvised measures, such as drawing forces from units across the country.⁴ Thus, in each case, the existing mobilization system was incapable of supporting the kind of rapid deployment required.

The Kremlin's growing recognition of these deficiencies finally drove it to make radical changes to Russia's mobilization strategy starting in 2008 as part of the New Look reforms. The disbandment of the mass mobilization system in favor of permanent ready combat brigades that could be rapidly deployed was the most notable outcome of these reforms. However, the system that emerged would prove once again to be poorly suited to the kind of

⁴ During the run-up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia also drew forces from various units across the country. But in this case, such efforts were carried out in accordance with pre-war planning, in which brigades and divisions were each expected to force generate one to two battalion tactic groups. By contrast, during the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Georgia, Russian leaders had to scrape together forces in an ad hoc manner from existing partially staffed cadre units across the country.

large-scale protracted war that Russia finds itself waging in Ukraine.

Given the long-term evolution of Russian mobilization strategy, a review of Russia's historical experience with mobilization and its evolving mobilization capabilities and strategies is warranted to provide useful context for understanding Russia's mobilization approaches in Ukraine and the challenges that it has faced during the ongoing conflict. The first parts of this section examine Russia's experience with mobilization during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods up through the end of the Georgia war. The following subsections evaluate changes made to the mobilization system under the New Look reforms together with efforts to create a complementary mobilization strategy before the Ukraine invasion. As this section will show, many of the approaches adopted by Russia during previous mobilization efforts as well as the problems that it encountered have reemerged in relation to Russian mobilization efforts during the current war in Ukraine.

The Soviet Union's WWII mobilization system

Although the experience of World War II is usually considered to play a foundational role in Soviet and subsequent Russian military thinking, the most influential Soviet military theorists, such as Alexander Svechin and Vladimir Triandafillov, wrote their key texts in the period leading up to that war. They initially focused on developing war plans and strategies aimed at defending the Soviet Union against revanchist

Eastern European successor states such as Poland and Romania, possibly backed by major Western European powers. These plans required a relatively modest mobilization capacity.⁵ Nevertheless, this period was significant because it was the first Soviet experience with planning for mobilization, and it set the stage for future developments.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet military developed a mobilization capacity based on territorial and militia forces that were responsible for training conscripts and reservists during peacetime. These trainees could then be incorporated into the regular military in the event of a major war. Sixty percent of infantry divisions were territorial militia units, generally staffed and maintained by specific regions located in the country's interior. In addition, one division and three regiments were based on specific nationalities rather than territories.⁶ Only those infantry divisions located in border areas were maintained at full staffing.⁷ During this period, all male citizens aged 19 to 40 were subject to military service, which officially included two years of training followed by five years of regular service and then reserve duty. In practice, conscripts served two to four years, depending on the military branch, and were thereafter granted furlough and moved into the reserve. Those who were conscripted into territorial units received three months of training during the first year of service and one to two months per year thereafter while continuing to live in their own homes and maintaining their civilian employment.⁸ Territorial units were maintained at three manning levels, with first-line divisions staffed at 20 percent during peacetime, second-line divisions at 5 percent,

⁵ David Glantz, "Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War, 1924–1942: A Survey," *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 5, no. 3 (1992), p. 325.

⁶ Glantz, "Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War," p. 330. Russia would return to these themes during the ongoing war in Ukraine by forming new combat units staffed and equipped by the regions as well as units based on specific nationalities, such as Chechen and Cossack forces.

⁷ S. V. Lipitsky, "Voennaia reforma 1924–1925 godov" [The military reforms of 1924–1925], *Kommunist* no. 4 (Mar. 1990), p. 106.

⁸ Glantz, "Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War," pp. 328–29. During the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia would deploy analogous forces, namely BARS units that during peacetime were made up of part-time military reservists who continued to hold full-time civilian jobs but who could be mobilized in time of war.

and third-line divisions consisting of just a few permanent cadre units that would lead any leftover reserve personnel. Cadre units in the regular military were also not fully staffed, with first-line divisions staffed at 33 percent and second-line divisions at 5 percent, the same level as the second-line territorial divisions. War plans included a mobilization calendar that would in theory ensure “a smooth transition from peacetime to wartime footing,” allowing the Soviet state to more than double the size of its military in the event of a war.⁹ In other words, mobilization was expected to occur gradually during the early stages of hostilities.

As the global political situation deteriorated in the late 1930s, the Soviet Union identified Germany and Italy as the most likely and serious threats and determined that a much larger peacetime army was required to counter the growing danger of large-scale war. The 1938 war plan called for full mobilization before the start of hostilities rather than the prior plan for a more gradual mobilization. The plan more than doubled the overall size of the mobilizable force “from under 200 divisions in the 1920s to well over 400 by 1941.”¹⁰ This increase in size and speed of potential mobilization required more complex mobilization planning and led to a transition to a fully cadre-based military that provided much greater mobilization capacity starting in the mid-1930s.

Given the much greater threat perception in the late 1930s, the Soviet military recognized that its existing territorially based force generation system was inadequate. As one Russian analyst highlighted,

“One of the main reasons [for this inadequacy] was that the temporary manpower of territorial units and formations at short muster already [was] not in a condition to master the new complex technology and learn how to employ it in ever-changing conditions.”¹¹ As a result of this analysis, the Soviet military began to shift to a fully cadre-based system in 1937 and had phased out all territorial divisions and nationality-based units by January 1939. The legal basis for this transformation included a new law that increased the term of military service to three years and provided for better training. At the same time, “the military district system was reformed to improve efficiency in processing military manpower.”¹² The new manning system retained three levels of readiness, with first-line divisions at 50 percent strength during peacetime, second-line divisions at 36 percent, and third-line divisions described as reserves that would form during mobilization.¹³ These changes allowed the Soviet military to grow in size from 1.5 million personnel at the start of 1938 to 4.2 million by the end of 1940.

As fears of war accelerated from 1939 through the first half of 1941, the Soviet military undertook a concealed partial mobilization that then transitioned into full-scale wartime mobilization after the German invasion on June 22.¹⁴ During the first stage of this effort, the military increased its manpower above regular peacetime strength by retaining the 1916 birth cohort in active service and partially mobilizing men of the 1913–1920 birth cohorts who were not already serving.¹⁵ A second secret mobilization

⁹ Glantz, “Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War,” pp. 329–30.

¹⁰ Glantz, “Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War,” p. 336.

¹¹ I. B. Pavlovsky, *Sukhoputnye voiska SSSR* [The ground forces of the USSR] (Moscow, 1985), pp. 65–68.

¹² Glantz, “Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War,” p. 341.

¹³ S. A. Tiushkevich, ed., *Sovetskie vooruzhennye sily* [The Soviet Armed Forces] (Moscow, 1978), p. 236.

¹⁴ Russian use of covert (concealed) mobilization has been a continuing theme during the ongoing war in Ukraine.

¹⁵ Albert Z. Conner, “Soviet Ground Force Mobilization Potential: Lessons of the Past and Implications for the Future,” *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 1, no. 2 (1988), p. 217.

was carried out in the spring of 1941, including additional mobilization of men from the 1913–1920 birth cohorts, “the accelerated induction of two-thirds of the 1922 and one-half of the 1921 year groups and the cancellation of all furloughs.”¹⁶ At least 30 divisions were moved from interior military districts to border regions between April and June 1941. In addition, 800,000 reservists were called up for service starting in late May. By the time of the German invasion, 56 divisions and 2 brigades were in the immediate vicinity of the border, with 52 divisions located 50 to 100 kilometers from the border. Another 62 divisions were held in reserve 100 to 400 kilometers from the border.¹⁷

The Soviet mobilization system on the eve of World War II not only planned for the deployment of troops to the front before the outbreak of hostilities and in the early stages of the war but also focused on the need to rotate personnel every four to eight months during a long war. This system required “timely and uninterrupted training of called-up contingents.”¹⁸ To achieve this goal, the 1938 law on universal military service created several military training programs and implemented military training among the population. This system provided basic training to 14 million men before the start of the war.¹⁹

The Soviet military underestimated the timing, speed, and scale of the German offensive and misjudged the locus of Germany’s attack, which resulted in the serious military defeats of the early period after the

German invasion. At the same time, the German military underestimated the significance of the Soviet mobilization system, largely disregarding third-line divisions with their insignificant peacetime staffing in its assessments of Soviet military strength.²⁰ Given that German planners believed that they could achieve the military objectives of Operation Barbarossa in approximately four months, they also believed that the Soviet Union would be unable to generate additional forces before its defeat. As it turned out, the Soviet military fielded 291 new divisions and 94 new brigades between June 22 and December 1, 1941, because of rapid full-scale mobilization of personnel. Approximately 100 of the 291 “new” divisions were existing third-line divisions that were brought to full strength and transferred to the front, and close to 200 divisions were formed from scratch purely from mobilized personnel. This mobilization was carried out by calling up all physically fit men aged 20 to 35 over a six-month period at a rate at which newly forming units could absorb the personnel.²¹ An additional 50 new divisions were formed in 1942, and another 67 divisions were reformed with mobilized personnel to replace those lost at the front.²² This process continued as the war went on, with another 42 divisions and 44 brigades formed in 1943, although at a slower rate because by this point the Soviet Union had achieved numerical superiority. After 1943, the Soviet military stopped creating new units, with fresh conscripts being used to refresh existing units.²³

¹⁶ Conner, “Soviet Ground Force Mobilization Potential,” p. 218.

¹⁷ Andrei Antonovich Grechko and Dmitrii Fedorovich Ustinov, eds., *Istorii vtoroi mirovoi voiny 1939–1945, T-3* [History of the Second World War, vol. 3] (Moscow, 1974), p. 441.

¹⁸ R. A. Savushkin, *Razvitie sovetskikh vooruzhennykh sil i voennogo iskusstva v mezhuvoennyi period 1921–1941 gg* [The development of the Soviet Armed Forces and military art in the interwar period] (Moscow: Lenin Military-Political Academy, 1989), p. 6.

¹⁹ Glantz, “Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War,” p. 345.

²⁰ Ukrainian forces and their Western backers have at times underestimated Russia’s ability to mobilize additional combat personnel to sustain its forces during the current war in Ukraine.

²¹ Conner, “Soviet Ground Force Mobilization Potential,” p. 218.

²² A. G. Khor’kov, “Nekotorye voprosy strategicheskogo razvertyvaniia Sovetskikh Vooruzhennykh Sil v nachale Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny” [Some questions of the strategic deployment of the Soviet Armed Forces at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War], *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* no. 1 (Jan. 1986), p. 13.

²³ A. I. Evseev, “Manevr strategicheskimi rezervami v pervom periode Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny” [The maneuver of strategic reserves in the first period of the Great Patriotic War], *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* no. 3 (Mar. 1986), pp. 12–14.

According to military historian David Glantz, these waves of newly mobilized forces “put at the disposal of the [High Command] sizeable fresh strategic reserves after each operational disaster and provided staying power for the Red Army.”²⁴ This mobilization allowed the Soviet military to compensate for its initial failure to reach mobilization targets, assessed as being caused by “an inadequate amount of trained reserves, especially officers, an inadequate amount of reserve armament and equipment, and an inadequate transportation system.”²⁵ Even though the speed of the German advance overwhelmed the Soviet military repeatedly in the early months of the war and prevented existing mobilization plans from being fully implemented as designed, the Red Army was able to adapt to the situation, modify its plans on the fly, and eventually stop the German advance by exploiting the numerical advantage of its large population.²⁶

Cold War—era mobilization plans

At the conclusion of World War II, the Soviet military undertook an organized demobilization effort that by its conclusion at the end of 1947 had reduced the size of the military by 70 percent, from more than 10 million to just 3 million personnel.²⁷ The effort involved a rapid increase in the number of military districts, with each district organizing the demobilization effort on its own territory. The demobilization took place “in six stages beginning with the 13 oldest year groups.”²⁸

At the same time, the military developed a plan to rapidly restore itself to its wartime manning level of 10 million. The Soviet Army “positioned a number of cadre formations forward, in their zone of occupation in Germany.” It also reduced the number of units in a way that allowed subsequent rapid expansion. Indeed, “many divisions became the component regiments of other divisions in 1945–1948 but had the potential to be reconstituted as a division on mobilization.”²⁹

This mobilization plan involved several phases. In the first phase, support troops, including all conscripts serving their 2 years of mandatory military service, would be sent to the front in the first 5 days after mobilization was declared. The first set of reserves would be mobilized within 30 days, including the recall of all reserves 3 or fewer years from their mandatory service. This phase would bring the total active force to more than 6 million personnel. In the next phase, which would last 120 to 150 days after the start of mobilization, reserves up to age 35 would be called up and rear service and training establishments would be deployed to the front, bringing the total force strength to more than 10 million.³⁰ This plan remained more or less in place into the late 1980s, when the US Department of Defense’s *Soviet Military Power* publication assessed that the Soviet Union could quickly mobilize up to 9 million active reservists who had been trained within the last 5 years to bring reduced-strength units, cadre units, and mobilization bases consisting of inactive equipment sets to full strength within 60 days.³¹

²⁴ Glantz, “Soviet Mobilization in Peace and War,” p. 352.

²⁵ Conner, “Soviet Ground Force Mobilization Potential,” p. 225.

²⁶ Russian forces have likewise demonstrated a remarkable ability to improvise new mobilization methods on the fly during the ongoing war in Ukraine, albeit with mixed success.

²⁷ Военный Энциклопедический Словарь [Military Encyclopedic Dictionary] (Moscow: Ministry of Defense of the USSR, 1983), pp. 227–28.

²⁸ Conner, “Soviet Ground Force Mobilization Potential,” p. 219.

²⁹ David Isby, “Uncle Joe’s Last Army: Stalin’s Post-War Army and Its Lessons for Gorbachev’s Post-Cold War Army and Russia’s Post-Soviet Army,” *Colloquium on Contemporary History*, Dec. 18, 1991, no. 6, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/stalins-cold-war-military-machine.html#isby>.

³⁰ Conner, “Soviet Ground Force Mobilization Potential,” p. 227.

³¹ Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*, 6th ed., Mar. 1987, p. 96.

These phases interlock with the three levels of combat readiness described in Soviet-era General Staff Academy lecture materials on combat readiness. The first level, described as constant readiness, represents normal routines such as regular training and exercises of peacetime units. The second level, called increased combat readiness, includes personnel being recalled to garrisons, leave being canceled, and exercises being used as cover for covert partial mobilization. The third level, called full combat readiness, includes full mobilization of all personnel “with the aim of bringing units to their full combat strength.”³²

The Afghan War

Although the Soviet military did not conduct a general mobilization at any point before or during the Afghan War, it did conduct some limited mobilization activities related to the deployment of the so-called Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces to Afghanistan in December 1979. This mobilization was necessary because during the Cold War few Soviet units were at a high state of readiness.³³ A recently published article in the authoritative military journal *Military Thought* analyzes this experience and suggests some lessons for current Russian military operations and

planning.³⁴ In the run-up to the Soviet intervention, five divisions were brought to full readiness. At the time of deployment, the military did not announce a mobilization but instead conducted “individual mobilization events...under the guise of training exercises.”³⁵ Forces from the Turkestan and Central Asian military districts were brought to full readiness, including calling up more than 55,000 reservists to serve in the 40th army.

Because there was no prohibition on combat service for conscripts, the bulk of the initial force of 120,000 personnel consisted of conscripts undergoing their regular two-year service commitment.³⁶ As it became clear that the war would extend for a long period, the question of troop rotation gained prominence. Initially, soldiers were selected for service in Afghanistan from the general population of conscripts after completing six months of basic training. Starting in 1982, soldiers selected for service in Afghanistan were provided with additional training to account for the battlefield conditions in Afghanistan.³⁷

The nature of the mobilization revealed shortcomings that have relevance for the Russian military’s mobilization effort in attacking Ukraine. The hidden nature of the mobilization meant that commanders and military commissariats thought that the effort

³² John Yurechko, “The Soviet Combat Readiness System,” *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 1, no. 2 (1988), pp. 235–37.

³³ Rod Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), p. 12, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/577/>.

³⁴ V. E. Kalugin, S. V. Kukharskiy, and V. M. Svatalov, Историческая роль и результаты работы организационно-мобилизационных органов при подготовке и применении соединений и воинских частей Вооруженных Сил СССР на территории Демократической Республики Афганистан [The historical role and results of the work of organizational and mobilization bodies in the preparation and use of formations and military units of the USSR Armed Forces on the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan], *Voennaya Mysl* (Jan. 2024), pp. 122–30.

³⁵ Kalugin, Kukharskiy, and Svatalov, Историческая роль и результаты работы организационно-мобилизационных органов при подготовке и применении соединений и воинских частей Вооруженных Сил СССР на территории Демократической Республики Афганистан [The historical role and results of the work of organizational and mobilization bodies in the preparation and use of formations and military units of the USSR Armed Forces on the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan], p. 124.

³⁶ By contrast, the prohibition on using Russian conscripts for combat missions has served as an important constraint on Russian mobilization efforts during the current war in Ukraine.

³⁷ Kalugin, Kukharskiy, and Svatalov, Историческая роль и результаты работы организационно-мобилизационных органов при подготовке и применении соединений и воинских частей Вооруженных Сил СССР на территории Демократической Республики Афганистан [The historical role and results of the work of organizational and mobilization bodies in the preparation and use of formations and military units of the USSR Armed Forces on the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan], p. 127.

was simply an exercise and focused on meeting deployment numerical and timeline targets rather than assuring the quality of deployed personnel. As a result, once the real nature of the operation was revealed, a sizeable percentage of personnel turned out not to be combat capable and had to be replaced. In addition, because personnel were being drawn primarily from reserves living in Central Asia, most of whom had fulfilled their conscription service in construction troops rather than in the regular forces, there were gaps in many needed positions.³⁸ There have been certain parallels to this situation during the current war in Ukraine, in which Russian leaders have likewise resorted to covert mobilization methods giving highest priority to generating large numbers of combat troops—often at the expense of troop quality.

The post-Soviet period

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in serious upheaval in the Soviet/Russian military. The combination of insufficient funding, withdrawal from Eastern Europe, and loss of military prestige in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan caused havoc in the Russian military's manpower system. The Russian military suffered serious manpower shortages throughout the 1990s, resulting primarily from the inability of the conscription system to meet its manpower targets. The breakdown of the system was the result of a decline in prestige in military service, leading to both a growth in legal deferments and outright draft evasion. Even though the Russian military was simultaneously executing a

drawdown plan aimed at decreasing the overall size of the military, the manning system proved unable to meet the lower target quotas. As a result, regular units could be staffed at only 60 percent manning throughout the decade.³⁹

The 1993 Russian law on military service exempted more than three-quarters of the draft-age population from conscription for educational, medical, and family reasons, among others. In addition, for those who did not fall into one of the exemption categories, enforcement of conscription notices was quite lax, making evasion a relatively low-cost proposition. Many of the personnel who were conscripted were unfit or barely fit for service because of poor fitness levels or mental health issues. The educational deferments in particular ensured that the most capable young men did not enlist.⁴⁰ The manpower shortfalls made it difficult for the Russian military to find enough personnel to fight what was by its standards a relatively small war in Chechnya. The Russian government's response was to extend the term of service for conscripts from 18 to 24 months, which further increased draft avoidance.⁴¹

Given these problems with regular staffing of the military, the prospect of mobilization of additional personnel for contingencies became a remote fantasy during the 1990s. Throughout this period and until the start of the 2008 New Look reforms discussed in the next part of this section, the Russian military formally retained the Soviet model of military mobilization: a large standing army staffed by conscripts with virtually no professional enlisted personnel and centralized planning for mobilization

³⁸ Kalugin, Kukharskiy, and Svatalov, *Историческая роль и результаты работы организационно-мобилизационных органов при подготовке и применении соединений и воинских частей Вооруженных Сил СССР на территории Демократической Республики Афганистан* [The historical role and results of the work of organizational and mobilization bodies in the preparation and use of formations and military units of the USSR Armed Forces on the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan], p. 125.

³⁹ Charles J. Dick, "A Bear Without Claws: The Russian Army in the 1990s," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 10, no. 1 (1997), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Robert W. Duggleby, "The Disintegration of the Russian Armed Forces," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 11, no. 2 (1998), p. 16.

⁴¹ Christopher C. Locksley, "Concept, Algorithm, Indecision: Why Military Reform Has Failed in Russia Since 1992," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 14, no. 1 (2001), p. 9.

of reserves in the event of a large-scale war. The combination of widespread conscription avoidance with general disarray in military planning caused by loss of qualified personnel in the General Staff, rampant corruption among those who remained, and an overall absence of military funding resulted in the collapse of the reserve system necessary to allow the mobilization model to function.⁴²

The system depended on regular training of reserve personnel to maintain their readiness to deploy if called upon. This training was not possible in an environment in which even the standing military did not have the financial resources to adequately feed and house their personnel, much less train them.⁴³ In addition, the mobilization system depended on the authoritarian Soviet political system's ability to track its population through meticulous recordkeeping and the housing registration system known as *propiska*, which controlled where people lived. This system had also collapsed in the 1990s; deregulation of the housing market meant that a large percentage of the population no longer lived at the address where they were officially registered.⁴⁴

Russian military mobilization plans did not change significantly in the first decade of the 2000s. On paper, the Russian military remained committed to the notion of working with a combination of a standing army at high readiness manned primarily by conscripts together with a large number of skeleton units that essentially consisted of warehouses of equipment cared for by a small cadre of officers. These units would theoretically be filled out with reserves in the event of a mass mobilization, with the officers taking command of these newly mobilized

troops. In reality, such a system remained unworkable for the same reasons as during the 1990s.

Addressing constraints

Although mobilization plans played a major role in the Soviet and, to a lesser extent, post-Soviet Russian militaries, the Soviet experience shows that these plans were constrained by several factors. In World War II, the one case in which full-scale mobilization was actually implemented, these constraints affected all aspects of the mobilization system, including manpower, availability of equipment, and transportation. The biggest constraint for the system at the onset of World War II was the capacity of the rail system, which limited the number of troops that could be brought to the front and played a role in the development of the wave mobilization system that characterized all Soviet and post-Soviet mobilization plans. Although there was no shortage of manpower in the Soviet Union before the start of World War II, the relatively short period between the formulation of mobilization plans in 1938 and the start of the war in 1941 meant that there was a dearth of fully trained reserves, which somewhat slowed the speed with which mobilized units could be sent to the front. Limitations on production of military equipment also contributed to delays in mobilization of units to the front during this period.

During the Cold War period, the Soviet government sought to address all three of these constraints. It established a robust training program to ensure that an adequate supply of reasonably trained personnel would be available. It created large forward-deployed storehouses of military equipment along

⁴² Andrew Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition, Appendix D: Military Personnel Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), p. 59, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3099.html.

⁴³ Stephen J. Blank, "Valuing the Human Factor: The Reform of Russian Military Manpower," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999), pp. 64–93.

⁴⁴ "The Residence Permit System (Propiska)," in *Russian Federation: Ethnic Discrimination in Southern Russia*, Human Rights Watch, Aug. 1998, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/russia/srusstest-04.htm>. Problems caused by insufficient training of Russian military reservists and inaccuracies in Russian mobilization registries reemerged during the current war in Ukraine.

the western border and in Eastern Europe to both ensure adequate supply and reduce transportation bottlenecks. It also expanded railroad networks and developed a specialized force of railroad troops dedicated to maintaining these networks⁴⁵ to alleviate transportation bottlenecks.

Throughout the Soviet period, the military was acutely aware of the economic costs of maintaining a large standing military. Keeping large numbers of working-age men in the military meant that they were not available for jobs in factories and agriculture, resulting in shortages in necessary goods (including potentially military equipment) in the short term and decreased economic production in the medium to long term. At the same time, the Soviet leadership believed that a relatively large military was needed to deter aggression, initially from Germany and then from the United States and its NATO and Asian allies during the Cold War. The answer to this dilemma was to maintain a relatively sizeable standing military force while ensuring that a much larger force could be raised relatively quickly through rapid mobilization.

Most Soviet and post-Soviet Russian enlisted personnel were conscripts rather than professional soldiers. This focus on conscription had multiple benefits. In the immediate term, it reduced expenses for maintaining the force because conscripts did not have to be paid more than a token stipend and did not require more than basic barracks-style housing. In the longer term, a conscript-based standing military allowed the mobilization system to function because demobilized conscripts served as the basis for the reserve force. Basing the Soviet military on a conscription model was also perceived as having

benefits in terms of inculcating patriotic values in the population and building a Soviet identity among citizens from a wide range of ethnic groups and geographic locations. This goal was largely behind the elimination of ethnically based units in the 1930s and continued to play an important—although usually only implicitly discussed—role throughout the Cold War period.

In the post-Soviet period, the constraints caused by the economic collapse and political chaos brought about the effective collapse of the military mobilization system. As described previously, although the Russian military retained Soviet-era mobilization plans after the collapse of the Soviet Union, these became essentially a fiction in the 1990s. In addition, negative public attitudes toward the military in general and conscription in particular resulted in serious manpower shortfalls even among the standing army. These factors pushed the military to begin to consider shifting to a professional military or, anticipating insufficient volunteers to serve in such a military, at least a mixed manning model.⁴⁶ Vladimir Putin proposed such a shift as early as 2001 but was constrained by a combination of insufficient funding and resistance among an older generation of military leaders who believed that a mass mobilization military was needed for contingency planning and that conscription was therefore required to provide basic military training to potential future reserves.⁴⁷ Although professionalization did not progress much beyond a few token units in the early 2000s, the increasing understanding that manpower shortages would serve as an enduring constraint created conditions for subsequent efforts to move away from dependence on conscription and from the mass mobilization military.

⁴⁵ Emily Ferris, *Russia's Railway Troops: The Backbone Sustaining Russian Military Force Posture*, CNA, Apr. 2023, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/04/russias-railway-troops>.

⁴⁶ Rod Thornton, "Military Organizations and Change: The 'Professionalization' of the 76th Airborne Division," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 3 (2004), pp. 449–74.

⁴⁷ "Putin (Again) Announces End of Compulsory Military Service in Russia," Warsaw Institute Russia Monitor, Apr. 19, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/putin-announces-end-compulsory-military-service-russia/>; Thornton, "Military Organizations and Change," p. 453.

Effect of threat perception on mobilization plans

During both World War II and the Cold War, the Soviet military planned for large-scale, long-duration wars, first against Germany and then against the United States and its allies. These were the kinds of wars that required not only large-scale mobilization but also the ability to sustain repeated waves of mobilization over a period of months or years. In the end, these were not the types of wars that the Soviet Union fought. The Afghanistan war was of even longer duration but on a much smaller scale and in a very different geographic environment, one that was poorly suited to the mass frontal warfare envisaged by Soviet military planners. It not only highlighted the value placed by Soviet military planners on covert mobilization but also showed that gaps in organization of deployment of personnel persisted despite decades of planning.

In the initial post-Soviet period, the Russian military continued to plan for large-scale warfare despite an absence of potential adversaries. The experience of fighting a series of smaller local and regional wars in Chechnya and Georgia in the 1990s and early 2000s highlighted the mismatch between the organizational structure of the Russian military and its likely missions. The Russian military also had to come to terms with the inadequacy of thinking that “any lead-up to...a war would involve a prior buildup of tension that would allow time for the mobilization of reservists.”⁴⁸ As military planners began to recognize the need to adapt to a threat environment that encouraged a focus on mobility of military forces rather than large frontal warfare, they decided on a reform that scrapped the mass mobilization military.

The next section addresses the effect of this reform on Russian mobilization planning.

The 2009 military reform’s effect on mobilization

On October 14, 2008, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov announced that the Russian military would undergo a radical restructuring during the next four years. The main elements of the reform were to include a cut in the total number of military personnel, especially officers, and a transformation of the military’s organization to a permanent readiness model with fully staffed units. This reform suggested that the Russian government had decided to dismantle the Soviet mass mobilization military model because this model was based on maintaining numerous units that were essentially just warehouses filled with vast caches of outdated and unneeded weapons overseen by an equally vast number of officers with very little battlefield training and no combat experience.⁴⁹ These officers and weapons were the remains of an army inherited from the Soviet Union designed to fight NATO on the European plains and were judged to have served no functional purpose since the end of the Cold War. As described in a previous section, in that system the reserve was composed of former conscripts who had completed their mandatory military service. They were then transferred to the active reserve and subject to occasional call-ups that tested mobilization capabilities. During these exercises, they were assigned to so-called cadre units that were otherwise essentially unstaffed.⁵⁰

These cadre units were disbanded in the 2009 reform, “as there was a belief that resources were

⁴⁸ Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Roger N. McDermott, “The Restructuring of the Modern Russian Army,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 22, no. 4 (2009), pp. 485–501.

⁵⁰ Charles K. Bartles, “Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, no. 1 (2011), pp. 55–80.

being wasted on maintaining a mass mobilization capability to the detriment of bringing active units up to full levels of operational readiness.”⁵¹ Furthermore, “the mass-mobilization structure of the armed forces meant that even dealing with limited local wars on Russia’s borders required the leadership to call at least a partial mobilization,” which in turn generated domestic unrest.⁵² In other words, although mobilization was required for military effectiveness, it was no longer politically feasible, so the Russian leadership decided to scrap it. This aspect of the reform was implemented relatively quickly and largely ended the Russian military’s dependence on mass mobilization to fight future wars. Under Serdyukov, the numerous military units that existed mostly on paper and could take up to one year to become combat ready were eliminated, and the military began a gradual transition to a structure based on fully staffed units that could mobilize in less than a week.⁵³

The mobilization system was not entirely dismantled, however. Instead, the Defense Ministry decided to establish a smaller but more prepared operational reserve with an initial target of 700,000 personnel.⁵⁴ Originally, this reserve was to be staffed by some of the 60,000 junior officers who were to be dismissed from active service as part of the overall reform effort.

In the end, the Russian military decided to establish this new operational reserve while also retaining the traditional large strategic reserve for potential mass mobilization. Initial planning suggested that the reformed reserve system would be based on a US model, with both active and inactive reserve components. The goal was to have 80,000 to 100,000 personnel in the active reserve.⁵⁵ Personnel in the active reserve would conduct annual two-week training exercises and receive monthly stipends.⁵⁶ As Grau and Bartles note, “The intent [was] to maintain a cadre of officers and enlisted soldiers who regularly train[ed] with particular active units; in the event of their unit’s mobilization, the reservist would be called to duty to provide support or backfill as needed.”⁵⁷ However, this idea fell out of favor with the military leadership and was terminated in 2014.⁵⁸

As US models increasingly fell out of favor in Russia after Serdyukov was replaced as defense minister by Sergei Shoigu, the Russian military looked into building out territorial defense units as an operational reserve, a model that it had last used in the early 1930s.⁵⁹ This system was in favor during the late 2010s, and two territorial defense battalions and one regiment with a total of 5,000 personnel were set up on a trial basis and staffed by a professional reserve cadre. This program did not continue, however, and the primary

⁵¹ Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), p. 15.

⁵² Andrew Monaghan, *Russian State Mobilization: Moving the Country on to a War Footing*, Chatham House, May 2016, p. 12, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-05-20-russian-state-mobilization-monaghan-2.pdf>.

⁵³ James A. Marshall, “Russia’s Struggle for Military Reform: A Breakdown in Conversion Capabilities,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 2 (2014), pp. 189–209.

⁵⁴ Aleksandr Golts, *Voennaia Reforma i Rossiiskii Militarizm* [Military reform and Russian militarism] (St. Petersburg: Norma, 2019), p. 143.

⁵⁵ Monaghan, *Russian State Mobilization*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ V. A. Odrinsky, Новая система подготовки и накопления военнообученных граждан, пребывающих в запасе, и нахождение их в резерве [A new system to train and accumulate trained reservists and their service in the reserves], *Voennaia Mysl* (Sept. 2008), pp. 43–47.

⁵⁷ Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Golts, *Voennaia Reforma i Rossiiskii Militarizm* [Military reform and Russian militarism], p. 195.

⁵⁹ Aleksei Ramm, Пора вернуть резерв в строй [It is time to return the reserve to the formation], *Voенно-promyshlennyi kurier*, Oct. 8, 2014.

focus of territorial defense battalions turned to civil defense rather than military mobilization.⁶⁰

Overall, mobilization systems in the Russian military in the period from 2009 to 2021 have been characterized as afflicted by a high level of disarray. Military and civilian leaders have continuously disagreed about how to structure the reserve, leading to a lack of clarity in mobilization structures. Because of this disarray, the Russian military expended little effort on organizing and training its potentially available reserve force during this period.⁶¹ Although at the end of the 2010s the Russian military reserve had more than 2 million former conscripts on paper, only 10 percent of them had received any kind of refresher training after completing their initial terms of service.

To remedy this reserve force shortfall, in 2021 the Russian military formed the BARS, a return to the volunteer active reserve model proposed more than 10 years earlier. In this model, reservists sign three-

year contracts, are paid, and participate in regular training 2 to 3 days per month plus 20 days once per year while maintaining their civilian employment. As in the United States, in the event of a mobilization, these reservists would form separate military units rather than integrate into existing active-duty units. When mobilized, BARS units were designed to protect and defend critical military and government facilities, maintain law and order in populated areas, and provide assistance to evacuees, allowing regular military units to concentrate on warfighting.⁶² BARS was initially organized in the Southern Military District, where 38,000 reservists had supposedly been inducted by October 2021, with an additional 9,000 in the Central Military District. Other reports suggested that these were target numbers and that it would take three years to reach this strength level.⁶³ Overall, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) announced a target of 100,000 members of BARS, but how many it was able to recruit before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is unclear.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*, p. 58.

⁶¹ Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*, p. 58.

⁶² Стань резервистом [Become a reservist], *Rossiiskoe voennoe obozrenie*, Oct. 31, 2021.

⁶³ Sam Cranny-Evans, "Understanding Russia's Mobilisation," RUSI, Sept. 28, 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/understanding-russias-mobilisation>.

⁶⁴ Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, and Brian Babcock-Lumish, "Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization," Institute for the Study of War, Mar. 5, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/explainer-russian-conscription-reserve-and-mobilization>.

RUSSIAN MOBILIZATION DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Covert mobilization

Introduction

As the preceding section showed, mobilization reforms were still very much a work in progress at the beginning of the Ukraine invasion on February 24, 2022. At the same time, Russia's assembled invasion force was poorly suited to conduct the kind of large-scale ground campaign required to subdue Ukraine, the second-largest country in Europe with a sprawling landmass and a large ground force of its own. With just 150,000 combat troops, Russia's invasion force lacked sufficient combat power to carry out such an ambitious campaign.⁶⁵ Consequently, during the actual event, Russian forces proved incapable of subduing Ukrainian forces, displacing the Zelensky regime, and occupying large parts of Ukrainian territory as originally planned.

Moreover, Russia's aggressive campaign plan, which envisioned a fast-moving, multi-axis blitzkrieg across five separate fronts, magnified Russian troop shortages by dissipating Russia's available forces, leaving Russian mechanized forces insufficiently concentrated to achieve the kinds of sustained breakthroughs needed to accomplish Russia's

objectives. At the same time, inadequate infantry left Russian forces highly vulnerable to effective Ukrainian counterattacks.⁶⁶

Faced with such challenges, Russia's hoped-for blitzkrieg rapidly culminated, with the war gradually devolving into a grinding war of attrition that inflicted increasingly large losses on Russian ground forces. Russian casualties were especially high during the first two months of the war, lending greater urgency to the need for adjustments in strategy.⁶⁷ Although Russian leaders were committing their available reserves, the Kremlin soon realized that it needed to do more to address the rapidly deteriorating situation.⁶⁸

Consequently, in April 2022, the Kremlin withdrew Russian forces from around Kyiv and reconcentrated them in the Donbas region for further offensive operations. By then, Russian leaders were struggling to address the many problems that had emerged with Russian combat operations. As a result, when Russia renewed offensive operations in the Donbas in April 2022, it incurred massive additional casualties while achieving modest results. As operations intensified over the next several months, Russia's increasing battlefield losses led to a growing imbalance of

⁶⁵ James Beardsworth, "Russia Scrambles for Soldiers amid Ukraine War Manpower Shortage," *Moscow Times*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/05/23/russia-scrambles-for-soldiers-amid-ukraine-war-manpower-shortage-a77750>.

⁶⁶ Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/not-built-for-purpose-the-russian-militarys-ill-fated-force-design/>.

⁶⁷ Jonas Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In: Russian Military Manning, Manpower and Mobilisation in the Light of Russia's War in Ukraine*, FOI, FOI-R—5461—SE, Mar. 2023, p. 17.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Tepperman, "Why Russia Is Losing: Gen. David Petraeus on the War in Ukraine," *The Octavian Report*, Mar. 23, 2022, <https://octavian.substack.com/p/why-russia-is-losing-get-david-petraeus>; Quint Forgey, "Putin Sends 'Nearly 100 Percent' of Russian Forces at Border into Ukraine," *Politico*, Mar. 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/07/putin-russia-combat-forces-ukraine-00014699>.

forces on the ground in favor of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which had been continually mobilizing additional personnel.

At this point, Russia was still able to offset its growing troop shortages on the ground by relying on its overwhelming superiority in mass firepower. However, after Ukrainian forces began using the US High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) in June 2022, Russia lost its advantages in firepower, forcing it to abandon combined arms operations more and more in favor of sustained infantry assaults. Yet the latter were even more manpower intensive, resulting in even more casualties among Russian combat troops. Russia's growing battlefield losses finally reached an inflection point in September 2022, when Ukrainian forces launched successful counteroffensives at both Kherson and Kharkiv, achieving breakthroughs and recapturing significant portions of Russian-occupied territory.

Despite Russia's growing losses on the ground, Putin remained completely unwilling to call for the mobilization of Russian military reservists, even though doing so was the most surefire way to generate additional combat troops. He was clearly concerned that such a move might lead to widespread unrest among the Russian people with uncertain consequences for his regime.

One of the main reasons that Putin was unwilling to call for mobilization was that he had launched the war assuming a quick victory and had done virtually nothing to prepare the Russian people for a prolonged struggle. Instead, he had entered into a tacit bargain with them, proclaiming that he was undertaking a special military operation while strongly implying

that the war would be conducted exclusively using Russia's standing armed forces.⁶⁹ In return, Putin hoped to gain if not outright support for the war at least the Russian peoples' general acquiescence. Yet even Putin refraining from mobilization was insufficient to avert a wave of Russian émigrés, with tens if not hundreds of thousands of people electing to leave the country.⁷⁰

Faced with such political constraints, Putin decided instead to embark on what is best termed a "covert mobilization" campaign to replenish Russian forces at the front. The campaign was "covert" in the sense that it was intended to minimize disruption among the Russian populace by avoiding unpopular measures such as forced conscription. Instead, Russia used a range of ad hoc measures to generate additional combat troops, measures that were designed to target elements of the populace who were either most willing to be recruited or least able to resist.⁷¹ The covertness explains the lack of domestic unrest in response to Russia's mobilization efforts.

The Kremlin's covert mobilization approach encompassed a variety of measures, including attempts to attract additional contract soldiers to serve in the regular armed forces, forced mobilization of separatist troops in the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LNR/DNR), expanded use of Chechen militias through the formation of new combat units, and a mass recruiting drive to generate "volunteer battalions" in regions across Russia. In addition, Russian leaders elected to mobilize Russia's ready reserve troops serving in Russian BARS formations. However, these methods proved woefully inadequate to replenish Russia's ground forces.

⁶⁹ Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman, "What Mobilization Means for Russia: End of Putin's Bargain with the People," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 27, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/what-mobilization-means-russia>.

⁷⁰ Georgi Kantchev, Evan Gershkovich, and Yuliya Chernova, "Fleeing Putin, Thousands of Educated Russians Are Moving Abroad," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 10, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fleeing-putin-thousands-of-educated-russians-are-moving-abroad-11649583003>.

⁷¹ Tim Lister and Josh Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine. Prior Experience Isn't Always Required," *CNN*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/29/europe/russia-recruits-volunteer-battalions-ukraine-war-cmd-intl/index.html>.

There is significant irony in the foregoing. First, having abandoned the Soviet-era mass mobilization model in 2008, Russia found itself in precisely the kind of large-scale war of attrition that it was least prepared to fight. As a result, Russia lacked the means to mobilize sufficient forces to wage such a large-scale conflict. Second, even though Russia had taken steps during the reform period to build an alternative mobilization capacity, at the very moment it was most needed, Putin lacked the will to use it, at least during this phase of the war.

Contractors

The recruitment of additional contract soldiers was an important component of Russia's covert mobilization efforts during the initial phase of the war. Soldiers serving under a contract made up most of the initial invasion force, and they remain the backbone of Russian combat forces in Ukraine. Russian contractors traditionally serve under long-term contracts that are two to three years in duration.⁷²

Contractors typically account for roughly 70 percent of the total enlisted personnel in the Russian armed forces, with conscripts making up the other 30 percent.⁷³ The percentage of contractors in the Ground Forces has tended to be lower. For example, in 2019, contractors made up just 53 percent of enlisted personnel in the Ground Forces.⁷⁴ Contractors—especially those who reenlist—typically receive substantially more training than do Russian conscripts, including in-depth training on advanced

weapon systems.⁷⁵ By contrast, conscripts serve for only one-year terms, leading to high turnover rates. As a result, much of the military's collective experience and institutional knowledge reside in the contractor ranks.

Under current Russian law, conscripts cannot be deployed outside the country, which precludes their being used in actual combat operations. Given this stricture, contract soldiers have borne the brunt of the fighting in Ukraine, incurring exceptionally heavy losses in the process. Although estimates vary, according to British officials, by May 2022 nearly one-third of the 150,000 Russian troops who initially invaded Ukraine had been either killed or wounded.⁷⁶

In response, from March to September 2022, Russian leaders made a concerted effort to recruit additional contract soldiers to replenish the force. To support this effort, Russian leaders adopted a series of legal measures to make recruiting new contractor personnel easier. In May 2022, the Duma adopted a new law abolishing the age limit for those entering military service for the first time to expand the pool of potential candidates with sought-after technical skills.⁷⁷ In September 2022, the Duma passed legislation offering Russian citizenship to foreign nationals after serving under a contract for at least one year; previously, three years of military service were required.⁷⁸

To make service more attractive, in May 2022, Russian leaders began to increase incentives to encourage new enlistments, which included offering substantial

⁷² Those reenlisting for their third and subsequent terms typically sign five-year contracts.

⁷³ Kofman and Lee, "Not Built for Purpose."

⁷⁴ Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 43.

⁷⁵ Natalya Piskunova, "Contract Service," *Boevaia vakhta*, May 27, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/77531325>.

⁷⁶ Beardsworth, "Russia Scrambles for Soldiers amid Ukraine War Manpower Shortage."

⁷⁷ Совет Федерации одобрил законопроект о повышении возраста граждан, поступающих на военную службу по контракту [The Federation Council approved a bill to raise the age of citizens entering military service under a contract], *Moskovskaya Pravda*, May 25, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/77417008>; Rochan Consulting, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor – 23-29 May 2022," Issue 92, May 29, 2022.

⁷⁸ "Foreign Citizens Serving in the Russian Army Under Contract to Be Able to Obtain Citizenship of Russia Under a Simplified Procedure," Duma.ru, Sept. 20, 2022, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/55276/>.

Contractors—especially those who reenlist—typically receive substantially more training than do Russian conscripts, including in-depth training on advanced weapon systems.



payments for new recruits while decreasing the length of military contracts.⁷⁹ For example, the MOD began offering large salaries to those willing to sign short-term military contracts, typically of three to six months' duration. In Tula, those opting for three-month contracts were offered roughly 170,000 rubles (\$2,900) a month, nearly four times the average local salary.⁸⁰ Before the war, contractors typically received about 64,900 rubles (\$1,100) per month, according to the *Washington Post*.⁸¹ Potential recruits were also offered hefty enlistment bonuses. In Chechnya, for example, new recruits were offered bonuses of 300,000 rubles (\$5,200) to sign short-term

contracts.⁸² In some regions, recruiters also promised bonuses for "heroic acts" such as "destroying a tank, a plane, [or] an armored personnel carrier."⁸³

At the same time, Russian federal and local officials began aggressively promoting contract service to obtain new recruits (Figure 1). Likewise, military commissariats began posting help wanted ads for military service on major job search websites and social media. One such advertisement was seeking "grenade launchers," people who fire "rocket-propelled grenades, and grenades with shaped charges...[at] enemy armored vehicles and suppress firing points."⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Rochan Consulting, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor – 23-29 May 2022."

⁸⁰ We have included several references in this report to amounts paid to Russian fighters who have been recruited, impressed into service, or otherwise mobilized to participate in the ongoing war effort. These amounts are often stated in both rubles and dollars. In every case, the amounts stated in the underlying source documents have been restated without modification, with the aim of providing a general sense of the amounts paid to Russian fighters participating in the war and how those amounts may have evolved. No attempt has been made to reconcile these reports or to adopt a standard ruble-dollar conversion rate.

⁸¹ Natalie Colarossi, "Russia Offering Soldiers Signing Bonuses in Desperate Plea for Manpower," *Newsweek*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-offering-soldiers-signing-bonuses-desperate-plea-manpower-1709226>; "Russia Turns to Recruiting Trucks, Big Wages to Woo Volunteer Soldiers," Reuters, Sept. 18, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-turns-recruiting-trucks-big-wages-woo-volunteer-soldiers-2022-09-18/>.

⁸² Beardsworth, "Russia Scrambles for Soldiers amid Ukraine War Manpower Shortage."

⁸³ Yury Baranyuk, "Wanted: Contract Soldier. Good Pay. Bonus for Destroying Ukrainian Tanks," RFE/RL, June 10, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-soldier-recruitment-ukraine-war/31892914.html>.

⁸⁴ Baranyuk, "Wanted: Contract Soldier."

Figure 1. Russian contractor recruiting poster (My History/My Heroes/My Soul/My Country/My Path)



Source: Russian MOD.

Recruiters also began converting trucks into mobile recruiting centers to gain better access to potential contractor candidates (Figure 2). Russian recruiters at times resorted to more nefarious means to meet increasingly stiff recruiting quotas. Commissariats in several regions began delivering unofficial summonses to military-age men that were designed to look like

conscription notices. The men who appeared were then pressured to sign a military contract.⁸⁵

By the same token, Russian officials ramped up efforts to pressure active conscripts to sign long-term contracts.⁸⁶ In August 2022, for example, Russian military officers began coercing conscripts who were approaching the end of their mandatory terms into signing military contracts. Reportedly,

⁸⁵ Anastasia Stogney et al., "If You Are a Sniper from God, God Ordered You to Participate': Hidden Mobilization Began in Russia," BBC Russia, May 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-61434395>.

⁸⁶ Valentin Lazarev, "Военкомат опроверг принудительную вербовку срочников в Тверской области на спецоперацию" [The Military Registration and Enlistment Office has denied the forced recruitment of conscripts in the Tver Region for a special operation], ridus.ru, Aug. 29, 2022, <https://www.ridus.ru/voenkomat-oproverg-prinuditelnuyu-verbovku-srochnikov-v-tverskoj-oblasti-na-specoperaciyu-388193.html>.

Figure 2. Mobile enlistment office



Source: Russian MOD, included in Beardsworth, “Russia Scrambles for Soldiers amid Ukraine War Manpower Shortage.”

one unit went further by locking conscripts into a room without windows or water to coerce them into signing a military contract.⁸⁷

The Russian effort to recruit additional combat personnel under short-term contracts was more of a stopgap measure than a serious effort to replace long-term contractors lost on the battlefield. Given the urgent need for more troops, new contractors typically received as little as three to seven days of training before being sent to the front, a far cry from traditional contractor training.⁸⁸ Fresh recruits were often used as cannon fodder—assigned to assault units and then rushed into battle, where they often suffered significant casualties.

Although reliable estimates are hard to find, Russian efforts to recruit contractors in sufficient numbers to balance battlefield losses fell short of the mark. As one local military recruiter admitted, the unit that he supported had deployed just three or four new contract soldiers to Ukraine by mid-August. Although other candidates expressed interest, they often failed to complete their documentation, mainly because interest in contract service had declined significantly since the invasion.⁸⁹ Likewise, according to other reports, despite increased pay and benefits, commissariats struggled to recruit new contract servicemembers.⁹⁰ Although we were unable to find actual figures for the number of soldiers signing new contracts since the war began, evidence suggests

⁸⁷ Kateryna Stepanenko et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 29,” Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 29, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-29>.

⁸⁸ Mason Clark et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 21,” Institute for the Study of War, June 21, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-21>.

⁸⁹ “Непонятно, чё может быть. Петербуржцев зовут на службу по контракту, запугивая мобилизацией” [It’s not clear what could be. Petersburgers are called to serve under contract, pressured to mobilize], Fontanka.ru, Aug. 13, 2022, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/08/13/71568227/?isPreview=1>.

⁹⁰ Sergio Miller, “Russia’s Conscripts Problem,” Wavell Room, Sept. 23, 2022, <https://wavellroom.com/2022/09/23/russias-conscripts-problem/>.

that the numbers were relatively small—although increasing—during this phase. In August 2022, the United Kingdom (UK) Ministry of Defense issued a statement that the Russian military was recruiting very few new contract servicemembers.⁹¹ By August 2022, however, the Kremlin had commenced a large-scale recruiting campaign to increase enlistment of new contract servicemembers.⁹²

LNR/DNR mobilization efforts

The mobilization of pro-Russia Ukrainian separatist forces in the LNR/DNR likewise played a prominent role in Russia's covert mobilization campaign during the initial phases of the war. Putin relied heavily on LNR/DNR separatist forces to support the Russian war effort and LNR/DNR leaders to generate additional troops as battlefield losses mounted. Putin felt that he could count on LNR/DNR leaders to support mobilization because they were so heavily dependent on the Kremlin to remain in power. This situation was a legacy of the 2014 Ukraine crisis when Moscow helped to establish the LNR and DNR as semiautonomous republics under de facto Russian control.⁹³ Before the invasion, these forces grew into a separatist army supplied with heavy equipment from Russia.⁹⁴

To sustain the war effort, the Kremlin pressured LNR/DNR leaders to undertake at least three waves of forced mobilization before September 2022, impressing thousands of local residents into military service.⁹⁵ The first wave commenced on February 19, just before the invasion, when LNR/DNR leaders called up thousands of men with prior military experience for combat training.⁹⁶ Days later, mobilization was expanded to include all men aged 18 to 27, including those without prior military experience.⁹⁷ Right from the start, however, LNR/DNR leaders encountered widespread resistance, with local residents bribing officials and even going into hiding to evade call-up.⁹⁸ As a result, the first wave of mobilization failed to meet leadership objectives.

After Russia reconcentrated its efforts in the Donbas region in early April, LNR/DNR forces began to incur heavy losses as fighting intensified, which led separatist leaders to launch new waves of forced mobilization over the next several months. During another wave, which ran from April to May 2022, conscription efforts intensified, with local authorities conducting regular street patrols to round up potential conscripts in an attempt to mobilize an additional 26,000 "reservists."⁹⁹

⁹¹ Miller, "Russia's Conscripts Problem."

⁹² Michael Starr, "Russia Is Expanding Its Military—but Source of Recruits Unclear—UK," *Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 29, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-715744>.

⁹³ Filip Bryjka, "The Involvement of Irregular Armed Groups in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin No. 59, Apr. 11, 2022, <https://pism.pl/publications/the-involvement-of-irregular-armed-groups-in-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

⁹⁴ Bryjka, "The Involvement of Irregular Armed Groups in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine." LNR/DNR forces would later be redesignated as the First and Second Army Corps, reporting to the Russian Eighth Army within the Southern Military District.

⁹⁵ Regina Gimalova and Igor Burdyga, "Mobilization and Conscription: How Donetsk Is Surviving the War in Ukraine," Deutsche Welle Russia, Apr. 26, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/vojna-mobilizacija-prizyv-kak-doneck-perezhivaet-vtorzhenie-v-ukrainu/a-61581026>; Жизнь здесь катится в хреновую сторону [Life here is going in a bad direction], Meduza, July 6, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/06/zhizn-zdes-katitsya-v-hrenovuyu-storonu>. Reports vary about the precise start and end dates of each mobilization wave, indicating that to some degree, forced mobilization took place more or less continuously.

⁹⁶ Gimalova and Burdyga, "Mobilization and Conscription"; В 'ДНР' и 'ЛНР' объявлена всеобщая мобилизация [General mobilization announced in DPR and LPR], Deutsche Welle Russia, Feb. 19, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-dnr-objavili-vseobshhujuu-mobilizaciju/a-60839410>.

⁹⁷ Gimalova and Burdyga, "Mobilization and Conscription."

⁹⁸ Жизнь здесь катится в хреновую сторону [Life here is going in a bad direction].

⁹⁹ "Russia Now Holds Night Ambushes to Forcibly Send Donbas Men to Ukraine War," Euromaidan Press, Aug. 19, 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/08/19/russia-now-holds-night-ambushes-to-forcibly-send-donbas-men-to-ukraine-war/>.

After the second wave ended, mobilization subsided for a time. However, in August 2022, as combat losses mounted, authorities launched a third wave of forced mobilization, including renewed street patrols and planned raids to ferret out those still in hiding. Authorities also imposed mobilization quotas on state-owned enterprises, netting significant additional troops in the process.¹⁰⁰

Thus, despite sustained efforts to evade call-up, forced mobilization of LNR/DNR forces was relatively successful, yielding tens of thousands of additional combat troops for separatist forces. According to the Eastern Human Rights Group, by mid-June, as many as 48,000 LNR/DNR residents had been pressed into service, although estimates vary.¹⁰¹ They were used to establish new LNR/DNR combat units and replenish depleted units.

Yet despite succeeding quantitatively, LNR/DNR forced mobilization generated troops of consistently low quality. To meet quotas, local leaders often resorted to questionable practices, such as conscripting older residents and those with serious medical issues.¹⁰² In addition, mobilized troops typically received only limited training and substandard equipment. According to one source, this “mass of untrained, unequipped and unmotivated people was [then] thrown into the [assaults] on Volnovakha, Mariupol and Maryinka” against Ukrainian troops dug into well-fortified positions and armed with the latest NATO weapons, suffering heavy casualties in the process.¹⁰³

Private military contractors

Russian leadership also turned to private military contractors (PMCs) early on, most notably the Wagner Group, as a means to shore up Russian combat forces during the covert mobilization phase. The Wagner Group helped bolster Russian forces in Ukraine significantly, especially around Bakhmut. For its part, Russia’s Redut PMC, which is closely associated with Russia’s MOD, played a prominent role both during the initial invasion and later in the war. However, during initial fighting near Kyiv, Redut was largely incapacitated and was quickly withdrawn to Russia (for more details on Redut, see the section on PMCs under Return to Mobilization by Other Means).¹⁰⁴

The Kremlin did not initially plan for Wagner to have a major role in Russian combat operations in Ukraine.¹⁰⁵ After Russian regular forces failed to achieve a breakthrough in the Donbas, however, the Kremlin turned to the Wagner Group for additional combat power. This decision was made for several reasons. First, Wagner mercenaries had played a significant role in the Donbas region since 2015 and thus were familiar with the local terrain. Second, their leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, maintained close ties with Putin and had shown a willingness to take on difficult tasks. Third, Wagner PMCs had gained significant combat experience outside of Russia, especially in Syria, Libya, and sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, the Wagner Group had acquired a growing reputation inside Russia as an elite combat force, allowing it to

¹⁰⁰ “Russia Now Holds Night Ambushes to Forcibly Send Donbas Men to Ukraine War.” According to the human rights group Zmina, the Alchevsk metallurgical plant received a quota to furnish 1,700 men for mobilization on top of previous mobilization quotas of 1,000, 500, and 400 workers during prior mobilization waves.

¹⁰¹ Жизнь здесь катится в хреновую сторону [Life here is going in a bad direction].

¹⁰² Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 20,” Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 20, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-20>.

¹⁰³ Жизнь здесь катится в хреновую сторону [Life here is going in a bad direction].

¹⁰⁴ “A Mercenaries’ War: How Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Led to a ‘Secret Mobilization’ That Allowed Oligarch Evgeny Prigozhin to Win Back Putin’s Favor,” Meduza, July 14, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/07/14/a-mercenaries-war>.

¹⁰⁵ “Experts Have Assessed How Many People Prigozhin Can ‘Recruit’ to His PMC and What His Political Future Is,” Strana Today, Jan. 30, 2023, <https://strana.today/news/423512-mobilizatsionnyj-potensial-chvk-vahner-i-perspektivy-evhenija-prihozhina-analitika.html>.

maintain its own recruiting network at a time when Russia struggled to mobilize additional troops.¹⁰⁶

The Kremlin began deploying Wagner PMCs to the Donbas region in late March 2022, and they were committed to combat starting in April. In May and June 2022, Wagner mercenaries enjoyed significant battlefield success, playing a key role in capturing Popasna and in the drive toward Bakhmut. These early successes led the Kremlin to give Wagner an expanded role in Ukraine along with increased operational independence. Wagner soon became one of Russia's main strike forces in the Donbas.¹⁰⁷

During the first few months of the campaign, Wagner had only a few thousand troops in Ukraine, including a core group of approximately 1,500 highly qualified specialists. At this stage, Wagner troops consisted almost entirely of former Russian contractors and conscripts. For the officers' corps, Wagner gave preference to recruiting experienced combat veterans.¹⁰⁸ As operations progressed, however, and as Wagner's losses mounted, the group took additional measures to replenish its forces. In July, Wagner sent an unspecified number of its forces from Libya and Syria to Ukraine. That same month, the Kremlin gave the Wagner Group *carte blanche* to enlist new volunteers in large numbers.¹⁰⁹

In July 2022, Wagner launched a significant recruiting drive, and over the next two months, it focused its efforts on recruiting volunteers to serve under short-term contracts, using advertising and other means (see Figure 3). In July 2022, for example, Wagner was actively recruiting volunteers in the Tyumen region to sign one-year contracts for deployment to Ukraine.¹¹⁰ Prospective recruits were offered generous salaries ranging from \$1,500 to \$4,000 per month, depending on former military rank. New recruits were permitted to keep their former military ranks, and their families were promised substantial death and disability benefits.¹¹¹

Prigozhin's efforts to maintain a sense of esprit de corps among Wagner personnel contributed significantly to the group's success in attracting new recruits.¹¹² Ultimately, Wagner was able to recruit a few thousand additional troops to serve under short-term contracts, with a large number coming from economically depressed regions of the Russian Federation. Thus, by the end of August, Wagner core mercenaries had grown to roughly 4,500 to 5,000 personnel.¹¹³

Around the same time, Prigozhin was given the green light to recruit Russian prisoners for the Wagner Group. Initial recruiting efforts began in July, and the first set of prisoners arrived at the front the same

¹⁰⁶ Jakub Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut. The Wagner Group in the Russia-Ukraine War*, Centre for Eastern Studies, OSW Commentary 511, Apr. 28, 2023, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW_Commentary_511.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ "A Mercenaries' War"; Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

¹⁰⁸ "Experts Have Assessed How Many People Prigozhin Can 'Recruit' to His PMC and What His Political Future Is"; Adam Potočňák and Miroslav Mareš, "Russia's Private Military Enterprises as a Multipurpose Tool of Hybrid Warfare," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 35, no. 2 (2022), p. 194.

¹⁰⁹ "A Mercenaries' War"; "Special Online Briefing with General Stephen J. Townsend Commander, U.S Africa Command (U.S AFRICOM)," US Department of State, July 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/special-online-briefing-with-general-stephen-j-townsend-commander-u-s-africa-command-u-s-africom/>; Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

¹¹⁰ Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 24," Institute for the Study of War, July 24, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-24>.

¹¹¹ Magdalena Ickiewicz-Sawicka, "History, Structure and Management of Private-State Military Groups—Legionnaires and Wagnerians," *Internal Security* 15, no. 1 (2023), p. 172.

¹¹² Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

¹¹³ Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 30," Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 30, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-30>.

Figure 3. Mural depicting Wagner Group mercenaries



Source: Зачем Кремлю Группа Вагнера? [Why does the Kremlin need the Wagner Group?], Voice of America, Mar. 27, 2023, <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/7023749.html>.

month.¹¹⁴ By September 2022, prisoner recruiting had risen significantly, based partly on personal visits that the charismatic Prigozhin made to various prisons. Russian prisoners were offered monthly salaries of about \$1,400 and full amnesty after six months' service.¹¹⁵ Prisoners had to meet minimal health requirements, but the nature and extent of

their crimes were largely disregarded.¹¹⁶ According to a Russian human rights group, Wagner had recruited 7,000 to 11,000 prisoners by mid-September.¹¹⁷

Wagner mercenaries traditionally underwent combat training at Molmino, home of the 10th Special Mission Brigade, or at Russia's Spetsnaz University in Chechnya.¹¹⁸ Wagner combat veterans often

¹¹⁴ Yulia Krasnikova, ЧБК Вагнера вербует заключенных колоний Петербурга для поездки на Донбасс [PMC Wagner recruits prisoners from St. Petersburg colonies to travel to Donbass], Важные Истории, July 4, 2022, <https://stories.media/reportages/2022/07/04/chvk-vagner-verbuet-zaklyuchennikh-kolonii-peterburga-dlya-poezdki-na-donbass-idthi-v-avangarde-pomogat-obnaruzhivat-natsistov/>.

¹¹⁵ Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*; Pjotr Sauer, "We, Thieves and Killers, Are Now Fighting Russia's War," Guardian, Sept. 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/20/russia-recruits-inmates-ukraine-war-wagner-prigozhin>.

¹¹⁶ Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

¹¹⁷ Sergey Goryashko et al., "There Was Such a Flood of Them That No One Expected.' How Prisoners React to Calls to Join Wagner PMC," BBC Russia, Sept. 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-62934135>; Sauer, "We, Thieves and Killers, Are Now Fighting Russia's War."

¹¹⁸ Potočňák and Mareš, "Russia's Private Military Enterprises as a Multipurpose Tool of Hybrid Warfare," pp. 194–95; Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 21," Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 21, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-21>.

worked as instructors at Wagner training camps.¹¹⁹ By contrast, newly recruited prisoners were typically given as little as one week of training on infantry assault tactics.¹²⁰

From August to September 2022, the addition of core mercenaries coupled with a mass influx of newly recruited prisoners significantly helped to shore up Wagner forces in the Donbas. During this period, the Wagner Group became the backbone of Russian assault efforts in and around Bakhmut and Soledar. In typical fashion, experienced Wagner combat personnel planned and oversaw continuous infantry assaults carried out by recruited prisoners. Experienced Wagner combat personnel followed these assaults with succeeding waves of attacks.¹²¹

Despite such efforts, Russian forces failed to capture Bakhmut during this period while incurring heavy losses in the attempt, especially among newly recruited prisoners. Entire units were destroyed in sustained frontal assaults against prepared Ukrainian positions.¹²² Nevertheless, Wagner managed to tie down significant Ukrainian forces, preventing them from joining the Ukrainian counteroffensive at Kharkiv, which helped Russia buy time to mobilize its forces and eventually stabilize the front.¹²³

Chechen militias

Russia also relied to some extent on Chechen militias (Kadyrovtsy) to bolster Russian regular forces in Ukraine during the covert mobilization period. The

Kadyrovtsy are Chechen paramilitary forces originally formed under the leadership of Akhmat Kadyrov after he joined sides with Russia during the Second Chechen war. His son, Ramzan Kadyrov, who currently controls Chechnya, inherited control over the Kadyrovtsy after his father's death in 2004. Following Russia's victory in Chechnya, the Kadyrovtsy became a critical instrument of regime control.

Kadyrov, a longtime Putin ally, receives substantial funding and support from the Kremlin and significant autonomy as well. In return, Kadyrov is expected to maintain stability in Chechnya and support Putin's policies. Kadyrov remains highly dependent on the Kremlin for his continuing survival and prosperity, which makes him a reliable ally for the Kremlin who is willing to make troops available to support Putin's foreign adventures.¹²⁴

The Kadyrovtsy are a capable militia based originally on a core cadre of battle-hardened soldiers who fought in the two Chechen wars, although most of them have since retired. Although they technically fall under Russia's national guard, Rosgvardia, they are commanded by Kadyrov.¹²⁵ On the eve of the Russia-Ukraine war, Chechen forces comprised a mix of both paramilitary and security forces, including motorized rifle units, riot control troops, and an elite special forces unit. At the time, the 141st Motorized Rifle Regiment was the only force equipped for combined arms operations. Other Chechen units were lightly armed and better geared for rear area security.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ "Experts Have Assessed How Many People Prigozhin Can 'Recruit' to His PMC and What His Political Future Is."

¹²⁰ Sauer, "We, Thieves and Killers, Are Now Fighting Russia's War."

¹²¹ Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

¹²² "Experts Have Assessed How Many People Prigozhin Can 'Recruit' to His PMC and What His Political Future Is."

¹²³ Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

¹²⁴ Emma Graham-Harrison and Vera Mironova, "Chechnya's Losses in Ukraine May Be Leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Undoing," *Guardian*, Mar. 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/22/chechnyas-losses-in-ukraine-may-be-leader-ramzan-kadyrovs-undoing>.

¹²⁵ "Chechens Fighting in Ukraine: Putin's Psychological Weapon Could Backfire," *The Conversation*, Mar. 18, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/chechens-fighting-in-ukraine-putins-psychological-weapon-could-backfire-179447>.

¹²⁶ Sergey Kozlov, "Ramzan Kadyrov Is Forming a New Regiment," *Defense & Security*, July 18, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/78838841>; Sam Cranny-Evans, "The Chechens: Putin's Loyal Foot Soldiers," *RUSI*, Nov. 4, 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chechens-putins-loyal-foot-soldiers>.

During the initial months of the invasion, elements from the foregoing units participated in the initial drive toward Kyiv.¹²⁷ They suffered significant casualties, however, without achieving their objectives and were subsequently withdrawn. Starting in March, Chechen forces were instrumental in achieving the reduction of Mariupol.¹²⁸ The Kadyrovtsy initially deployed roughly 1,200 troops to Ukraine, although by August 2022 hundreds more were fighting in Ukraine.¹²⁹

By late spring 2022, as Russian losses mounted, Putin turned to Kadyrov for additional forces. He responded by announcing formation of a new motorized rifle regiment (the 78th (Akhmat) Motorized Rifle Regiment) in July 2022.¹³⁰ This new all-volunteer force was to comprise four separate battalions of 500 troops each.¹³¹

The Chechen leader reportedly faced challenges recruiting enough volunteers to staff the new units and had to offer high salaries and substantial enlistment bonuses to get people to join. In September 2022, Chechen recruiters were reportedly

offering 300,000 rubles (\$5,200) per month for those enlisting in the new regiment, plus a signing bonus of one month's salary.¹³²

When these incentives proved insufficient, Chechen authorities resorted to more coercive measures to get people to enlist in the new "volunteer" battalions, including intimidation, blackmail, and threats of torture. In one case, a prospective recruit was reportedly imprisoned on fabricated criminal charges until he signed a contract. Still, many Chechens willingly joined the Kadyrovtsy to fight in Ukraine.¹³³

Although exact numbers are difficult to come by, the deployment of the Chechen 78th Motorized Rifle Regiment and additional volunteers likely provided between 2,000 and 3,500 additional troops to the Russian order of battle in Ukraine.¹³⁴ By September 2022, an estimated 8,000 Chechen troops were reportedly fighting in Ukraine, mainly around Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and other parts of Luhansk province.¹³⁵

¹²⁷ Graham-Harrison and Mironova, "Chechnya's Losses in Ukraine May Be Leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Undoing."

¹²⁸ Cranny-Evans, "The Chechens."

¹²⁹ Mansur Mirovalev, "The Real Role of Pro-Russian Chechens in Ukraine," Al Jazeera, Aug. 18, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/18/the-real-role-of-pro-russian-chechens-in-ukraine>.

¹³⁰ Cranny-Evans, "The Chechens."

¹³¹ Cranny-Evans, "The Chechens."

¹³² Huileng Tan, "Russia's Military Is Offering Signing Bonuses 4 Times as Big as Monthly Salaries to Recruit Soldiers amid a Manpower Crunch in the Ukraine War," Business Insider, May 24, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-offers-soldiers-signing-bonuses-ukraine-war-manpower-crunch-2022-5>.

¹³³ "Chechen Authorities Using Threats and Blackmail to Recruit Soldiers for Ukraine—Investigation," *Moscow Times*, June 15, 2022, https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/77996364?searchFor=Chech*+battalion*+Ukraine; Manon Fuchs, "On Chechen Soldiers in Ukraine," InkStick, Sept. 9, 2022, <https://inkstickmedia.com/on-chechen-soldiers-in-ukraine/>.

¹³⁴ Cranny-Evans, "The Chechens"; Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 11," Institute for the Study of War, Sept. 11, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-11>.

¹³⁵ Lister and Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine"; Fuchs, "On Chechen Soldiers in Ukraine." Russian news agency TASS put the figure even higher, claiming that as many as 20,000 Chechen combatants had taken part in the campaign as of November 2022, with 9,000 troops currently on the front line. See "Kadyrov Reveals Number of Chechen Fighters Involved in Ukraine Special Operation," TASS, Nov. 15, 2022, <https://tass.com/society/1537039>.

Chechen troops' performance in Ukraine was mixed, however. Chechen forces in existence before the war reportedly fought well. In Mariupol, when DNR combat units were struggling to advance in dense urban neighborhoods, Kadyrov's forces managed to make progress, forcing Ukrainian forces to retreat.¹³⁶ By contrast, the newly created motorized rifle battalions were less distinguished, in part because of insufficient training. Other Chechen units have primarily performed rear-areas functions, which are significantly less challenging.¹³⁷

Integrating Chechen troops with Russian regular military units proved challenging for Russian military leadership because the Chechen chain of command runs directly through Kadyrov. Effective integration has been undermined by persistent feuding between Chechen commanders and the Russian military and intelligence services.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Chechen forces have contributed significantly to the Russian war effort in Ukraine, although not enough to materially alter the balance on the ground.

Volunteer battalions

To further shore up Russian forces in Ukraine, the Kremlin made a concerted effort beginning in June 2022 to recruit fresh "volunteer battalions" across the country to support ongoing operations in Ukraine.¹³⁹ The Kremlin reportedly wanted all 85 Russian oblasts to recruit volunteer battalions for the war in Ukraine, although not every oblast participated.¹⁴⁰

Formation of volunteer battalions ramped up significantly in July and August, drawing inspiration from Kadyrov's earlier decision to form a new all-volunteer motorized Chechen regiment. By August, new units were being formed on a near-daily basis.¹⁴¹ The drive to recruit volunteer battalions largely eclipsed efforts to recruit fresh contractors because of Russian citizens' widespread reluctance to join regular army units after the major reversals in Ukraine.

¹³⁶ Cranny-Evans, "The Chechens"; Бойцы уже скоро освободят Мариуполь от националистов [Soldiers will soon liberate Mariupol from nationalists], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, Apr. 8, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/75832805>.

¹³⁷ Kozlov, "Ramzan Kadyrov Is Forming a New Regiment"; Taz Ali, "What Is the Vostok-Akhmat Battalion? The Chechen 'TikTok Warriors' Helping Russia in Ukraine After Wagner Exit," *inews.co.uk*, Aug. 16, 2023, <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/vostok-akhmat-battalion-chechen-tiktok-warriors-russia-ukraine-wagner-exit-2548342>.

¹³⁸ Graham-Harrison and Mironova, "Chechnya's Losses in Ukraine May Be Leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Undoing"; "Chechens Fighting in Ukraine."

¹³⁹ Специальная добровольческая операция: Как регионы формируют подразделения для участия в СВО на Украине [Special volunteer operation: How regions form units to participate in the Northern Military District in Ukraine], *Kommersant*, Aug. 8, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5501970>.

¹⁴⁰ Lister and Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine"; Rochan Consulting, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor – 8-14 August 2022," Issue 145, Aug. 14, 2022.

¹⁴¹ Aleksandr Stepanov, "Volunteer Territorial Defense Battalions Are Being Formed in Russian Provinces to Deploy to a Special Military Operation in Ukraine," *Defense & Security*, Aug. 17, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/79555480>; Kateryna Stepanenko, "Russian Volunteer Units and Battalions," Institute for the Study of War, July 16, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-volunteer-units-and-battalions>.

Volunteer battalions were composed of troops drawn exclusively from the local populace in each oblast, who were supposed to train together and later serve together in Ukraine. It was believed that units comprising local countrymen would be easier to recruit and have greater cohesion.¹⁴² Each volunteer battalion was given a designated mission spanning the gamut from combat (e.g., tank, motorized rifle) to combat support (e.g., signals and logistics).¹⁴³

Recruiting drives were led by regional administrations with the support of local veterans' groups who often appealed to the patriotism of the local populace. Eligibility requirements were fairly lax, however. In most regions, for example, prior military service was not required.¹⁴⁴ By contrast, in Tatarstan, the local battalion accepted only men who had previously served in the military.¹⁴⁵

Although new recruits were motivated by a variety of factors, in most cases high pay was the most important factor.¹⁴⁶ Monthly salaries varied by region, ranging from 130,000 to 300,000 rubles per month (\$2,100 to \$5,000), up to 10 times the local salary.¹⁴⁷ New volunteers often received signing bonuses that were

typically equal to the first month's salary. Although they had to sign MOD contracts, the contracts were fairly short, ranging from 4 to 12 months.¹⁴⁸

Local regions were responsible for providing clothing and individual equipment, and the MOD and armed forces provided ammunition and weapon systems for the new battalions.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, the MOD paid monthly salaries, and the regions paid enlistment bonuses.¹⁵⁰ During initial formation, each volunteer battalion was assigned to a regular Russian military unit where new recruits would undergo training. For example, the "Tigr Battalion," formed in Primorsky Krai, was attached to the 155th Guards Marine Brigade (a naval infantry unit) based in Vladivostok, which made its training staff and ranges available to train the new battalions.¹⁵¹

The plan was for each volunteer battalion to have 400 men. Thus, assuming all 85 oblasts participated, this effort would yield 34,000 additional troops.¹⁵² Ultimately, however, recruiting fell well short of this objective; not every oblast participated, and those that did were often unable to recruit enough troops to fully staff each battalion. For example, the Perm

¹⁴² Специальная добровольческая операция: Как регионы формируют подразделения для участия в СВО на Украине [Special volunteer operation: How regions form units to participate in the Northern Military District in Ukraine].

¹⁴³ For example, the region of Bashkiria generated two motorized rifle battalions, including a naval infantry battalion named after Minigali Shaimuratov, a Red Army military leader during the Great Patriotic War, and an airborne battalion named after Alexander Dostavlatov, a combat veteran of the Second Chechen war. See Специальная добровольческая операция: Как регионы формируют подразделения для участия в СВО на Украине [Special volunteer operation: How regions form units to participate in the Northern Military District in Ukraine].

¹⁴⁴ Stepanenko, "Russian Volunteer Units and Battalions."

¹⁴⁵ Lister and Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine."

¹⁴⁶ Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ "Russian Regions Form 40 Volunteer Battalions—Kommersant," *Moscow Times*, Aug. 8, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/08/08/russian-regions-form-40-volunteer-battalions-kommersant-a78528>.

¹⁴⁸ Lister and Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine."

¹⁴⁹ Специальная добровольческая операция: Как регионы формируют подразделения для участия в СВО на Украине [Special volunteer operation: How regions form units to participate in the Northern Military District in Ukraine].

¹⁵⁰ Stepanenko, "Russian Volunteer Units and Battalions."

¹⁵¹ "Volunteer Battalions / Dobvolcheskij Batalon," [globalsecurity.org](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/volunteer-bn.htm), accessed Dec. 27, 2023, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/volunteer-bn.htm>.

¹⁵² Lister and Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine."

Krai battalion reportedly recruited just 90 people, enough for a single company.¹⁵³ According to *Novaya Gazeta*, by August 2022, 33 Russian oblasts had formed a total of 52 volunteer battalions, well short of 85 Russian oblasts in total.¹⁵⁴ Volunteer recruiting efforts tended to concentrate on poorer, non-Russian ethnic regions, however, where financial incentives carried the greatest weight.¹⁵⁵

Several volunteer battalions were later combined to form the 3rd Army Corps, which was intended to bolster Russian forces in the Donbas. Although on paper the 3rd Army Corps was a powerful formation with more than 10,000 troops, in reality it was a hollow force staffed by aging, poorly trained volunteers. Thus, when it was rushed to the front in September to help blunt Ukraine's Kharkiv counteroffensive, the 3rd Army Corps incurred heavy losses before abandoning its equipment and joining the general retreat.¹⁵⁶ Other volunteer units "were scattered to fill gaps [in the] Kherson, Kharkiv, Melitopol, and Mariupol regions," where they often performed poorly while suffering high casualties.¹⁵⁷

BARS units

Although Russia refrained from ordering a full mobilization during the covert mobilization period, Russian leaders did mobilize and deploy BARS units during this period. As noted previously, BARS units were intended to serve as a ready reserve system akin to the active reserve system in the United States.¹⁵⁸ Before the Russia-Ukraine war, BARS reservists signed three-year contracts with the MOD, received small monthly salaries, and took part in regular military training and exercises while retaining their civilian jobs.¹⁵⁹

In times of war, BARS reservists were subject to being mobilized to participate in combat operations.¹⁶⁰ Unlike in the US system, however, BARS recruited only those who were already members of Russia's reserves, having completed their military service terms.¹⁶¹ Thus, new BARS recruits did not need to undergo basic training.

¹⁵³ Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 24," Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 24, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-24>.

¹⁵⁴ "Infantry Is Worse than Bondage," *Novaya Gazeta*, Aug. 10, 2022, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/08/10/pekhota-pushche-nevoli>.

¹⁵⁵ Lister and Pennington, "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine."

¹⁵⁶ Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 10," Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 10, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-10>; Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 5," Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 5, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-5>; David Axe, "The Russians Spent Months Forming a New Army Corps. It Lasted Days in Ukraine," *Forbes*, Sept. 15, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/09/15/the-russians-spent-months-forming-a-new-army-corps-it-lived-days-in-ukraine/?sh=94ed52456e60>.

¹⁵⁷ ChrisO_wiki (@ChrisO_wiki), "However, the Ukrainian counter-offensives at the end of August meant that the original plan was abandoned," Post, X, Nov. 8, 2022, https://twitter.com/ChrisO_wiki/status/1590040745414918144; Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 18," Institute for the Study of War, Aug. 18, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-18>.

¹⁵⁸ "We Were Nothing to Them: Russian Volunteer Reservists Return from War Against Ukraine Feeling Deceived," RFE/RL, Aug. 12, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-volunteers-ukraine-treatment-minimal-training-war/31985377.html>; Anastasia Tenisheva, "Glory Hunters or Gold Diggers? The Shadowy World of Russia's 'Volunteers' Fighting in Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, Jan. 15, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/15/glory-hunters-or-gold-diggers-the-shadowy-world-of-russias-volunteers-fighting-in-ukraine-a79766>.

¹⁵⁹ Cranny-Evans, "Understanding Russia's Mobilisation"; "Russia's Project BARS—How State Employees Were 'Conned' into Volunteering for Putin's War," *Kyiv Post*, Nov. 7, 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/23753>.

¹⁶⁰ Tenisheva, "Glory Hunters or Gold Diggers?"

¹⁶¹ Боевой Армейский Резерв Страны – БАРС [Combat army reserve of the country—BARS], Temryuk District, Dec. 10, 2021, <https://www.temryuk.ru/presscenter/news/boevoy-armeyskiy-rezerv-strany-bars/>.

Following the creation of BARS, the MOD did very little to actively promote it until August 2021, during the run-up to the war in Ukraine.¹⁶² At that point, the MOD launched a major recruiting drive (BARS-21) in the hope of recruiting 80,000 to 100,000 BARS troops in total.¹⁶³ Although hard numbers are unavailable, BARS recruiting efforts fell well short of their targets. For example, one Russian city reported that even though it had planned to recruit 220 people, only 20 people signed up.¹⁶⁴

During the initial phase of the war, approximately 10,000 BARS reservists were reportedly called up to serve in Ukraine. Mobilized BARS servicemembers were assigned to BARS units that were deployed to locations across the theater. After BARS forces incurred significant combat losses in Ukraine, Russian leaders made significant efforts to recruit additional combat personnel for BARS units. In this case, however, rather than recruiting additional active reservists, Moscow sought to recruit fresh volunteers for immediate full-time employment to the conflict. The Union of Donbas Volunteers, a quasi-official organization established by Alexander Boradai, who formerly headed Russian-backed forces in the DNR, played an instrumental role in such recruiting efforts, focusing on enlisting veterans of the 2014–2021 conflict in the Donbas. Such efforts initially targeted former officers and enlisted soldiers who were already eligible to join BARS. According to official Russian recruiting notices, BARS accepted enlisted recruits up to 42 years of age and former officers up to 57 years of age. However, these rules were later relaxed, with many BARS enlisted personnel joining as late as age 50.¹⁶⁵

Monthly salaries for those volunteers who joined BARS full-time after the conflict broke out varied depending on region. New volunteers from Tatarstan were promised 205,000 rubles (\$3,365) a month, plus bonuses and combat pay. By contrast, one recruit from the Rostov region reportedly received a salary of 330,000 rubles (\$5,420) each month. In many cases, however, BARS reservists did not receive all that they were promised. Another BARS recruit reported that his unit had received aging army uniforms and rusty rifles, which they had to repair themselves.¹⁶⁶

At the beginning of the invasion, several BARS units were reportedly mobilized and sent to the front. Over time, BARS units expanded such that by the end of 2022, at least 20 separate BARS units with approximately 10,000 combat personnel were operating in Ukraine.¹⁶⁷ BARS battalions later evolved into a patchwork of both regular combat units and irregular forces such as PMCs and members of volunteer battalions. Although several BARS battalions remain attached to the Russian MOD, others are affiliated with groups such as the Union of Donbas Volunteers. In addition, some BARS units are now made up exclusively of PMCs, such as Convoy, which is led by former Wagner Group leader Konstantin Pikalov.¹⁶⁸ Thus, BARS has evolved significantly from an active reserve system to a broader military structure designed to mobilize additional personnel through various channels to support the war effort.

The deployment of BARS units to Ukraine and their subsequent expansion provided a modest but significant boost to Russian combat capabilities, serving

¹⁶² "We Were Nothing to Them."

¹⁶³ Stepanenko, Kagan, and Babcock-Lumish, "Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization."

¹⁶⁴ Stepanenko, Kagan, and Babcock-Lumish, "Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization."

¹⁶⁵ "We Were Nothing to Them."

¹⁶⁶ "We Were Nothing to Them."

¹⁶⁷ "We Were Nothing to Them"; Tenisheva, "Glory Hunters or Gold Diggers?"

¹⁶⁸ Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 24, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Mar. 24, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-24-2023>.

as yet another channel for Russia's covert mobilization campaign. BARS units allowed the Kremlin to draw upon Russia's large repository of veteran military reservists as well as former separatist fighters from the Donbas region. BARS recruiting thus complemented efforts to recruit less experienced troops to serve in volunteer battalions. On the other hand, BARS units comprise mainly older soldiers and increasingly those without military experience. BARS demonstrated anew the highly decentralized, often-competing patchwork of Russian covert mobilization efforts used to replenish Russian forces during the campaign.

Partial mobilization

By September 2022, the shortcomings of the Kremlin's covert mobilization efforts were becoming increasingly clear. The gradual infusion of additional combat troops from contractor recruiting efforts, the formation of volunteer battalions, growing reliance on PMCs, and LNR/DNR forced mobilization efforts was insufficient to replace the heavy combat losses that Russia had sustained during the Russia-Ukraine war. Although estimates vary, according to an August 2022 US intelligence report, Russian forces had incurred a staggering 70,000 to 80,000 casualties during the first six months of the war, including 15,000 to 20,000 deaths.¹⁶⁹

The growing shortage of combat infantry was especially problematic. Because of prior force design decisions, Russia entered the war with insufficient infantry forces to conduct effective combined arms operations.¹⁷⁰ Russia's infantry shortages grew even

worse during the grinding battles of attrition in the Donbas region following Russia's withdrawal from Kyiv. The military's situation was further aggravated by Russia's growing reliance on continuous infantry assaults to spearhead offensive operations as its ability to conduct mechanized operations declined.¹⁷¹

Russia's decision to rely on covert mobilization (in lieu of actual mobilization) contributed significantly to its growing battlefield problems. As noted above, covert mobilization did not generate enough forces to replenish Russian forces in Ukraine. Moreover, because of overreliance on different mobilization methods, Russian forces became a patchwork of both regular and irregular forces encompassing contract soldiers, Kadyrovtsy, Wagner PMCs, BARS units, and volunteer battalions, among others. Coordinating such a diverse set of forces proved challenging because of parallel chains of command, incompatible training and equipment, and ethnic discord, which led to poor coordination, internal friction, and operational ineffectiveness.¹⁷² In addition, increased reliance on poorly trained soldiers serving under short-term contracts undermined both the quality and stability of Russian forces in the field.

The bill for Russia's growing personnel shortages (and infantry shortages in particular) finally came due in September 2022 when Ukrainian forces launched successful counteroffensives in both the Kherson and Kharkiv regions. Rapid Ukrainian breakthroughs resulted in substantial losses of Russia-occupied territory and significant combat losses for Russian forces. The Kharkiv counteroffensive in particular

¹⁶⁹ Yevgenia Albats, "Six Months of War: What Putin Wanted; What Putin Got," *Moscow Times*, Sept. 1, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/79894968>.

¹⁷⁰ Kofman and Lee, "Not Built for Purpose."

¹⁷¹ Rob Lee and Philip Wasielewski, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Critical Vulnerabilities to Russia's Military Operations and Systems," Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 30, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/06/russias-war-in-ukraine-critical-vulnerabilities-to-russias-military-operations-and-systems/>.

¹⁷² For details on Russia's fragmented chain of command, see Mark Galeotti, Pavel Baev, and Graeme P. Herd, *Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, and Morale and the Ukraine War*, Marshall Center, Nov. 15, 2022, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2022-11/SCSSFY23_%232Summary.pdf.

posed a serious threat to Russian forces in the region, risking their collapse, a situation that finally drove Putin to declare a partial mobilization.

Decision to mobilize

In the face of Russia's growing troop shortages and Russian defeats at both Kherson and Kharkiv, the Kremlin finally decided to order "partial mobilization" in late September 2022.¹⁷³ Putin said that the decision to mobilize was necessary to secure Russian control of the LNR/DNR and protect against Western plans to inflict a military defeat on Russia.¹⁷⁴ Defense Minister Shoigu likewise defended partial mobilization as a means "to stabilize the situation, protect new territories, and conduct further offensive operations."¹⁷⁵ The consensus among Western leaders, however, was that Russia mobilized to compensate for its large-scale troop losses in Ukraine.¹⁷⁶

On September 21, Putin formally announced that he had ordered a partial mobilization of Russian reserves

during a televised broadcast.¹⁷⁷ Although the decree itself did not list any numbers, Shoigu set a target to mobilize 300,000 troops for the war in Ukraine.¹⁷⁸ According to the decree, mobilization would be targeted at military reservists between the ages of 25 and 35 with either prior military experience or a military specialty of importance to the war effort.¹⁷⁹ However, the decree exempted former soldiers who had served recently along with fathers of three or more children and those with criminal records.¹⁸⁰ The decree also authorized defense workers to defer military service for the duration of their employment.¹⁸¹

According to Russian authorities, all mobilized servicemembers would be given the same status as soldiers serving under a contract in the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁸² In addition, mobilized servicemembers would receive a salary of about 195,000 rubles (\$2,800) per month, nearly five times the national average.¹⁸³

At the time, Russia had more than 2 million people in the reserves, including former contractors, conscripts, and retired officers.¹⁸⁴ However, the vast

¹⁷³ Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn from Its Failures in Ukraine?," *Foreign Affairs*, Mar./Apr. 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-russia-got-wrong-moscow-failures-in-ukraine-dara-massicot>; Ekaterina Vorobeva, "How Putin's Partial Mobilization Turned into Total Mobilization of Migrants," *Russian Analytical Digest* 21, no. 288 (Nov. 2022), p. 2, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/86966/ssoar-russanald-2022-288-vorobeva-How_Putins_Partial_Mobilization_Turned.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-russanald-2022-288-vorobeva-How_Putins_Partial_Mobilization_Turned.pdf.

¹⁷⁴ Что получит и что потеряет Путин от объявленной им мобилизации [What Putin will win and lose from mobilization], BBC Russia, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-62978727>.

¹⁷⁵ "Video: Vladimir Putin Spoke at an Expanded Meeting of the Defense Ministry Board Held at the National Defense Control Centre on Frunzenskaya Street," Kremlin.ru, Dec. 21, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70159>.

¹⁷⁶ Karl Ritter, "Putin Orders Partial Military Call-Up, Sparking Protests," AP News, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-donetsk-f64f9c91f24fc81bc8cc65e8bc7748f4>; Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 18.

¹⁷⁷ "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," kremlin.ru, Sept. 21, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>.

¹⁷⁸ "Russia Issues Partial Mobilisation Order, EU Slams Putin's Desperation," France24, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220921-live-putin-announces-partial-mobilisation-in-russia>.

¹⁷⁹ Vorobeva, "How Putin's Partial Mobilization Turned into Total Mobilization of Migrants," p. 2.

¹⁸⁰ Stepanenko, Kagan, and Babcock-Lumish, "Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization."

¹⁸¹ Ekaterina Shulman, "Posting on Mobilization Decree," Telegram channel: "ESchulmann," Sept. 21, 2022, <https://t.me/eschulmann/4874>.

¹⁸² "Is the Mobilization in Russia Complete? Understanding the Statements of Putin, Peskov and the Ministry of Defense," Meduza, Nov. 1, 2022, <https://meduza.io/cards/tak-zavershena-mobilizatsiya-v-rossii-ili-vse-taki-net>.

¹⁸³ "Russian Military Announces Plan to Expand, Create New Units," AP News, Dec. 21, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/putin-finland-sergei-shoigu-ee953abf7f9bf217ccdaa61ec1b35ddd>.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, James Beardsworth, "Explainer: What Does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' Mean?," *Moscow Times*, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/21/explainer-what-does-russias-partial-mobilization-mean-a78854>.

majority (around 90 percent) had received little or no additional training since leaving the military.¹⁸⁵

Putin's decree also included other provisions designed to address Russian troop shortages, such as a stop loss order to prevent contract soldiers serving on short-term contracts from leaving the front at the end of their terms.¹⁸⁶ This provision essentially locked all contract soldiers serving under short-term contracts into service indefinitely.¹⁸⁷ The decree also contained criminal penalties for contract servicemembers who refused to participate in the war.¹⁸⁸

Putin's mobilization decree also specified how mobilization was to be carried out. It designated the MOD to set mobilization quotas and deadlines for each of the Russian Federation's constituent regions. The decree also directed regional governors to carry out mobilization in their respective regions.¹⁸⁹ Each region in turn established a local draft commission to oversee mobilization in that particular region.¹⁹⁰ Local commissariats carried out mobilization by issuing the necessary call-up orders and handling intake.

Resistance to mobilization

From the start, Putin's announcement of partial mobilization was deeply unpopular among large sections of the Russian populace. Anti-mobilization protests erupted across the country despite stiff new laws imposing up to 15 years' imprisonment for criticizing the military or the war. According to a Russian human rights group, more than 1,200 protesters were arrested.¹⁹¹

The mobilization order also triggered a mass exodus, with up to 700,000 people electing to leave Russia during the two-week period following Putin's decree.¹⁹² At one point, departing reservists were so numerous that they formed long lines at various border checkpoints.¹⁹³ To avoid call-up, many resorted to bribing officials to get their draft notices canceled or their names removed from official registries. Others sought to obtain deferments by enrolling in a university or obtaining employment with a major information technology company.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁵ Beardsworth, "Explainer: What Does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' Mean?"

¹⁸⁶ Lawrence Freedman, "All the Tsar's Men: Why Mobilization Can't Save Putin's War," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 23, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/all-tsars-men>.

¹⁸⁷ Pavel Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia: 2023 Spring Conscripts and Volunteers," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 94 (June 12, 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/tricky-recruiting-in-russia-2023-spring-conscripts-and-volunteers/>.

¹⁸⁸ "'Mobilization' and 'Wartime' Were Added to the Russian Criminal Code. What and Who Does This Threaten?," *BBC Russia*, Sept. 20, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-62974676>. This provision closed a previous loophole that contractors had used to evade service at the front by arguing that they were not obligated to deploy to an undeclared war (i.e., a "special military operation").

¹⁸⁹ Zoya Sheftalovich, "Full Text of Putin's Mobilization Decree—Translated," *Politico*, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/text-vladimir-putin-mobilization-decree-war-ukraine-russia/>.

¹⁹⁰ Nikolai Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency," *Russia.Post*, Oct. 27, 2022, <https://russiapost.info/politics/demonstration>.

¹⁹¹ Vorobeva, "How Putin's Partial Mobilization Turned into Total Mobilization of Migrants"; Ritter, "Putin Orders Partial Military Call-Up, Sparking Protests." Reportedly, however, antimobilization protests across Russia failed to gain momentum.

¹⁹² Yulia Saponova and Elena Tofanyuk, *Россию после 21 сентября покинули около 700 000 граждан* [About 700,000 citizens left Russia after 21 September], *Forbes Russia*, Oct. 4, 2022, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/478827-rossiu-posle-21-sentabra-pokinuli-okolo-700-000-grazdan>.

¹⁹³ Saponova and Tofanyuk, *Россию после 21 сентября покинули около 700 000 граждан* [About 700,000 citizens left Russia after 21 September].

¹⁹⁴ Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency."

Most important, mobilization undermined Putin's popularity among the Russian populace while also changing the country's outlook on the war. According to a poll by the independent Levada Center, in September, 44 percent thought the war should definitely continue, but by October, just 36 percent thought the same.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, many Russians began to openly criticize the president for his handling of the war.¹⁹⁶ Sliding poll numbers reflected a general decline in support for the war as it began to personally affect a larger proportion of the population.¹⁹⁷

Procedural and implementation issues

Problems with the government's handling of partial mobilization also emerged quickly. In multiple cases, people were called up for mobilization even though they fell outside the parameters of Putin's mobilization order. Despite clear instructions to mobilize people with prior military experience and important technical skills, local and regional commissariats in some areas began issuing blanket call-up orders in an effort to meet their quotas.¹⁹⁸ In several cases, commissariats conscripted the elderly, those with disabilities, and people without prior military service, as well as students and others

expressly exempted from mobilization.¹⁹⁹ Notices were also addressed to citizens who had long been dead, confirming that the reservist database had not been maintained properly.²⁰⁰

Although Putin's decree exempted the defense industry from mobilization, local recruiters continued to send call-up notices to defense workers, which led to frantic lobbying by industry executives attempting to shield their workforce from mobilization, albeit with mixed success.²⁰¹ Regional authorities also took more aggressive measures to meet their induction quotas, such as handing out conscription notices at places of business, public squares, local markets, the metro, and even border crossings.²⁰²

In short, mobilization efforts were often chaotic, inflicting great hardship on significant portions of the Russian populace while leading to inefficiencies and delays. These problems were soon highlighted by the Russia media, leading to increased pressure on the Kremlin and eventually prompting an official response. For example, Margarita Simonian, the editor of state-controlled RT, publicly blamed military commissariats for the chaotic state of mobilization.²⁰³ Putin himself weighed in—although he acknowledged that problems had occurred, he blamed them on outdated registries and use of old forms.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁵ "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022," Levada Center, Nov. 1, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/conflict-with-ukraine-october-2022/>.

¹⁹⁶ Egor Maksimov, Надеется, что Путин ему скажет: "Нет-нет, ты мне нужен!" [He hopes that Putin will tell him: "No, no, I need you!"], Current Time, Feb. 10, 2023, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/nadeetsya-putin-ostanovit-i-skazhet-ty-mne-nuzhen-pochemu-chvk-prigozhina-perestala-verbovat-zekov/32264288.html>.

¹⁹⁷ "Conflict With Ukraine: October 2022."

¹⁹⁸ Andrew Bowen, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects*, Congressional Research Service, Sept. 14, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47068>.

¹⁹⁹ Vorobeva, "How Putin's Partial Mobilization Turned into Total Mobilization of Migrants," p. 2.

²⁰⁰ Rochan Consulting, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor – 19-25 September 2022," Issue 175, Sept. 26, 2022.

²⁰¹ Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency."

²⁰² Polina Ivanova, Max Seddon, and Daria Mosolova, "They Grabbed Whoever They Could: Putin's Draft Puts More Strain on Russian Businesses," *Financial Times*, Nov. 29, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/join/licence/f33933e3-2aca-474c-be1d-36154f4f6b0e/details?ft-content-uuid=893b76bd-b58e-4ae4-a5d5-12d45d825cec>.

²⁰³ Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 21.

²⁰⁴ Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 21.

Geographic and sectoral disparities

In addition, the burden of mobilization tended to fall disproportionately on rural areas, small towns, and ethnic minorities.²⁰⁵ Whereas urban professionals were more likely to avoid mobilization by moving overseas or obtaining an employer exemption, ethnic and religious minorities were usually not that lucky.²⁰⁶

As a result, there were vast disparities in the mobilization rates in different regions. According to one Asian nongovernmental organization, mobilization rates were six times higher in regions close to the Mongolian border than they were in western Russia. Likewise, indigenous people in Russia's far north were reportedly "rounded up [wholesale] in their villages," with enlistment officers handing out "summonses to anyone they met."²⁰⁷

Likewise, approximately 7,000 and 6,000 reservists were mobilized in Ryazan and Kaliningrad, respectively, both outlying areas, constituting approximately 2.5 percent of the total military-age men in these regions. The proportion called up in Sevastopol, Crimea, likewise reached 3 percent of all men between 18 and 50 years of age. By contrast, in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where options for evasion were greater, only 0.3 to 0.7 percent of men aged 18 to 50 were called up.²⁰⁸ Disparities also emerged between employees of large enterprises and employees of small businesses, with the

former enjoying significantly better protection from mobilization than the latter.²⁰⁹

Inadequate training and equipment

The Russian military also had enormous problems absorbing, training, and equipping the large numbers of activated reservists who began flowing into training centers following Putin's mobilization order. Only about 10 percent of registered reservists had received any additional training following their discharge from service, and in many cases that training had taken place years earlier.²¹⁰ As a result, most reservists were in urgent need of combat training. Thus, despite the Kremlin putting a positive spin on military preparations for newly mobilized personnel (see Figure 4), local training garrisons were wholly unprepared to handle the resulting influx of activated reservists because they lacked both experienced personnel to train them and equipment to outfit them properly.²¹¹

At the time, local training camps were facing a severe shortage of both officers and senior contractor personnel able to train activated reservists because most of them had been sent to the front.²¹² The shortage of military trainers was further exacerbated by competing demands to train both newly formed volunteer battalions and conscripts inducted during the spring and fall recruiting cycles.²¹³

²⁰⁵ Keir Giles, *Russia's Military Plans and Demographic Reality, Part 2*, Chatham House, Apr. 2023, p. 10, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377557567_Russia's_Military_Plans_and_Demographic_Reality_Part_Two?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7InBhZ2UiOiJwdWJsaWNhdGlvbilInByZXZpb3VzUGFnZSI6bnVsbH19.

²⁰⁶ Peter Weber, "Russia's 'Catastrophic' Missing Men Problem," *The Week*, May 9, 2023, <https://theweek.com/russia/1017914/russias-catastrophic-missing-men-problem>.

²⁰⁷ Weber, "Russia's 'Catastrophic' Missing Men Problem."

²⁰⁸ Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency."

²⁰⁹ Ivanova, Seddon, and Mosolova, "They Grabbed Whoever They Could."

²¹⁰ Kofman and Lee, "Not Built for Purpose."

²¹¹ Michael Starr, "Russian Mobilized Troops Poorly Trained, Lack Proper Gear for War—Western Intel," *Jerusalem Post*, Sept. 29, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-718458>.

²¹² Andrew Bowen, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects*, Congressional Research Services, Sept. 14, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47068>.

²¹³ Bowen, *Russia's War in Ukraine*; Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 13," Institute for the Study of War, Sept. 13, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-13>.

Figure 4. Putin visits Ryazan to check on preparations for newly mobilized soldiers



Source: Russian MOD.

Most important, training was cut short for many incoming reservists because of the urgent need for troops at the front to counter ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives. In many cases, inductees were quickly sent to the front with as little as a few days' training, where they often incurred heavy losses.²¹⁴ Those lucky reservists who were spared from this ordeal typically received more training and were eventually used to form new units or reconstitute depleted units.²¹⁵

Mobilization efforts were further undermined by serious shortages of functioning military equipment. In many cases, activated reservists were given an aging rifle and a poorly fitting uniform but little else. Many had to buy their kit themselves, ranging from thermal underwear to body armor. One reservist reportedly painted his rifle just to cover up the rust.²¹⁶

As a result, some regional authorities worked with local businesses to purchase equipment for newly mobilized servicemembers, often at heavily inflated costs.²¹⁷ In other cases, the responsibility

²¹⁴ Christina Lu, "Who Is Fighting Putin's War?," *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 18, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/18/russia-war-mobilization-ukraine-putin-training/>.

²¹⁵ Bowen, *Russia's War in Ukraine*.

²¹⁶ Pjotr Sauer, "The Army Has Nothing: New Russian Conscripts Bemoan Lack of Supplies," *Guardian*, Oct. 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/20/the-army-has-nothing-new-russian-conscripts-bemoan-lack-of-supplies>.

²¹⁷ Nikolai Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency," Oct. 27, 2022, <https://russiapost.info/politics/demonstration>.

for purchasing basic necessities fell on the wives and families of activated servicemembers, which also drove prices up.²¹⁸ For example, the price of body armor jumped from 7,000 rubles in January to 135,000 rubles in October, a near 20-fold increase, because of higher demand.²¹⁹ In some regions, local officials furnished additional items ranging from drones, radio communications, electronics, night vision devices, and laser and optical detection devices to proper uniforms, outdoor equipment, medicine, hygiene products, food, building materials, and even vehicles.²²⁰ Such measures were insufficient, however, to fully equip newly mobilized servicemembers, many of whom were dispatched to the front without adequate equipment.

End of mobilization and net effect

On October 28, just five weeks after mobilization was announced, Shoigu reported to Putin that partial mobilization had ended successfully.²²¹ Commissariats halted further draft notices the same day, resuming their premobilization functions instead.²²² On November 4, Putin publicly proclaimed that mobilization had been a success, generating an additional 300,000 troops for the military. He added that 49,000 of them had already been sent to the front and were engaged in armed combat.²²³

By all accounts, partial mobilization had proven to be a chaotic affair. Early on, the system proved incapable of absorbing, training, and equipping the vast number of newly mobilized troops.²²⁴

The machinery of mobilization performed poorly, mainly because the country had failed to implement appropriate reforms during the pre-war period. As a result, the system had to be reformed on the fly. Over time, however, Russian military leaders made various adjustments, leading to a gradual improvement in the mobilization process. For one, despite having to rush tens of thousands of newly mobilized personnel to the front, Russia held back most mobilized personnel and provided them with more extended training. In addition, Russian military leaders established better training courses over time for newly mobilized personnel.²²⁵ They also gradually expanded the capacity to handle the influx of newly mobilized troops.

Early on, however, newly mobilized troops were often sent to the front without sufficient training, where they served as cannon fodder, suffering heavy casualties in the process. There were numerous reports, for example, of mobilized servicemembers being forced to launch repeated infantry assaults without adequate training. In short, the infusion of thousands of poorly trained reservists contributed to a general decline in the quality of Russian forces in Ukraine.

Yet despite all the problems, partial mobilization successfully delivered on its main objective, generating sufficient combat troops to replenish Russia's frontline forces. In December 2022, Putin announced that of the approximately 300,000 troops raised through mobilization, 80,000 were sent directly to the front, another 70,000 would

²¹⁸ Sauer, "The Army Has Nothing."

²¹⁹ Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency."

²²⁰ Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency."

²²¹ Встреча с Министром обороны Сергеем Шойгу [Meeting with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu], kremlin.ru, Oct. 28, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69703>.

²²² "Is the Mobilization in Russia Complete?"

²²³ Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Sends Ill-Trained Draftees into Combat amid Losses, Analysts Say," *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/04/world/europe/russia-ukraine-conscripts-combat.html>.

²²⁴ Petrov, "Mobilization as a Demonstration of the Regime's Inefficiency."

²²⁵ Mike Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization: Across Russia, Military Recruiters Send Out New Orders," RFE/RL, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-mobilization-recruitment-ukraine/32321587.html>.

play a defensive role and support logistics, and the remaining 150,000 would undergo further training.²²⁶ The mass influx of freshly mobilized troops proved instrumental in helping to halt the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives and stabilize the front lines.

Return to mobilization by other means

Introduction

Following the September 2022 announcement of partial mobilization, Russian military leaders spent the next few months absorbing all the newly mobilized reservists. The flow of fresh troops also helped Russia finally bring a halt to the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives at Kharkiv and Kherson. After the initial rush to send troops to the front to stem these twin Ukrainian counteroffensives, Russian leaders held some of the newly mobilized troops in reserve, sending additional soldiers to the field incrementally. According to one report, by early November 2022, 80,000 newly mobilized troops had already been dispatched to Ukraine.²²⁷ The gradual influx of 300,000 additional combat troops was sufficient for Russia to achieve greater balance and stability on the battlefield in Ukraine.

Russian troop shortages persisted across the battlespace, however, especially in the Bakhmut area, where the Wagner Group remained on the offensive, sustaining high losses and thus an ongoing need for fresh troops to replenish the forces. This situation

drove Wagner to engage in an intensive campaign during the fall and winter period to recruit additional prisoners to staff assault squads and former military personnel to augment its core cadre of combat mercenaries. These recruiting drives took place in parallel with the military's own efforts to complete partial mobilization.

Russian losses continued to mount, however, as the campaign progressed in early 2023, creating a growing need for additional combat troops. By February 2023, nearly 200,000 Russian troops had reportedly been killed or wounded or had gone missing in Ukraine, according to Western sources.²²⁸ This number was subsequently confirmed in March 2023 by a US State Department spokesperson, who characterized Russian casualties as catastrophic.²²⁹

Faced with such losses and with a Ukrainian spring offensive looking increasingly imminent, Russian military leaders felt compelled to boost troop levels again in early 2023.²³⁰ Initially, the Kremlin appeared to be seriously considering a second wave of mobilization. According to Ukrainian intelligence, beginning in January 2023, Russian officials adopted a series of measures to support a second wave of mobilization. These measures included changes in mobilization laws, increases in readiness of military training, and measures to verify the credentials of Russian reservists, restrict external travel, and modernize the registration system.²³¹

Ultimately, however, Putin decided against a second wave of mobilization, fearing a public backlash based on the people's response to the September 2022

²²⁶ Bowen, *Russia's War in Ukraine*.

²²⁷ "Ukraine Conflict Monitor – 7-13 November 2022," Rochan Consulting, Issue 198, Nov. 14, 2022.

²²⁸ Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Soaring Death Toll Gives Grim Insight into Russian Tactics," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/02/us/politics/ukraine-russia-casualties.html>.

²²⁹ Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization."

²³⁰ Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization."

²³¹ январь-февраль будет тяжёлым [January–February will be difficult], Verstka, Jan. 12, 2023, https://verstka.media/priznaki-novoy-mobilizacii?tg_rhash=86cf5f61f61288.

partial mobilization.²³² Instead, the Kremlin pursued other courses of action, including most prominently the expansion of volunteer recruiting of irregular forces and the large-scale recruitment of contract soldiers for Russia's regular armed forces. These were not the only options that Russia pursued, but they were the most important ones. Combined with PMC recruiting, these three principal lines of effort proved sufficient to raise enough troops to avoid another round of mobilization.²³³ Nevertheless, facing a protracted war of attrition and pressured by the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russia has continued to struggle to address persistent shortages of combat manpower.²³⁴

Private military contractors

Despite partial mobilization, the Wagner Group maintained an intensive recruiting campaign throughout the fall and winter period. Putin likely gave Wagner permission to continue recruiting efforts while Russia's regular armed forces were struggling to absorb the hundreds of thousands of newly mobilized personnel. This decision was made in part because of Wagner's successful record of advancing at the front when Russia's regular combat units were unable to make much headway.²³⁵ Moreover, Wagner's prisoner recruiting efforts had proven to be a useful channel for mobilizing additional combat personnel. At the same time, Wagner could make use of its own training personnel, thereby augmenting the hard-pressed training resources of Russia's regular armed forces.²³⁶

Consequently, in the fall of 2022, the Wagner Group intensified efforts to mobilize additional combat personnel. These efforts included a second, more intensive wave of prisoner recruiting over the fall and winter period. Prigozhin also increased efforts to recruit additional combat personnel among the general populace for Wagner's core cadre of combat mercenaries.

Wagner's efforts to recruit additional prisoners were aided by a new law that Putin signed in November 2022 that specifically authorized mobilization of those convicted of serious crimes, a practice that had technically been prohibited previously.²³⁷ The terms of prisoner recruiting remained largely unchanged during the second wave. Prisoners continued to receive combat pay of approximately 100,000 rubles (\$1,600) per month and promises of clemency after six months' service at the front. In the event of death, prisoners would receive the title of "Hero of Russia," and their families were promised lump sum payments of 5 million rubles.²³⁸

During this period, Prigozhin became more actively involved in prisoner recruiting, visiting prisons throughout Russia and making personal appeals to assembled prisoners (see Figure 5). In November 2022, for example, Prigozhin visited a penal colony in the Chelyabinsk region, making a spectacular entry via helicopter, where he told a group of prisoners why they should join Wagner. He started by telling them that Russia's regular army was no good, filled with drinking and drug taking and troops quick

²³² "Moscow's Army Recruitment Drive Hits 2023 Target Early, Mayor Says," *Moscow Times*. Nov. 15, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/11/15/moscows-army-recruitment-drive-hits-2023-target-early-mayor-says-a83121>.

²³³ Anton Bayev and Yelizaveta Surnacheva, "Investigation: Russia Violates Promises of Pay, Pardons for Contract Soldiers," RFE/RL, Nov. 8, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-systema-investigation-contract-soldiers-pay-pardons-promises-broken/32676712.html>.

²³⁴ Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

²³⁵ "Ukraine Conflict Monitor – 13-19 March 2023," Rochan Consulting, Issue 92, Mar. 20, 2023.

²³⁶ Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 26, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Feb. 26, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-26-2023>.

²³⁷ Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 21.

²³⁸ Yulya Krasnikova, "The Prigozhin Method: Inside Wagner Group's Russian Prison Recruitment," WorldCrunch, Nov. 20, 2022, <https://worldcrunch.com/war-in-ukraine/prigozhin-wagner-group-prisons>.

Figure 5. Prisoner recruiting by someone appearing to be Yevgeny Prigozhin



Source: Alya Ponomareva, Воевать будут и зэки, и дети. Блогеры о вербовке заключенных на войну [Both prisoners and children will fight. Bloggers about recruiting prisoners for war], Radio Svoboda, Sept. 16, 2022, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/voevatj-budut-i-zeki-i-deti-blogery-o-verbovke-zaklyuchennyh-na-voynu/32036729.html>.

to retreat under fire. If they enlisted in Wagner, however, they would be joining an elite force with a successful combat record in Ukraine.²³⁹

During that same visit, Prigozhin expressed a preference for prisoners convicted of crimes such as murder and robbery because these crimes were good indicators of the kind of strong will needed to survive at the front. He candidly explained that the work was dangerous because he was only recruiting troops for assault squads. Although he promised them three weeks' training, most would receive just one week of training before being sent to the front.²⁴⁰

Wagner prisoner recruiting would continue until February 2023, when Prigozhin abruptly announced a halt to the practice, apparently under pressure from the MOD, which had decided to pursue its own prisoner recruiting campaign.²⁴¹ Before prisoner recruiting was halted, however, Wagner had successfully recruited 40,000 additional prisoners since the announcement of partial mobilization, a notable contribution to Russia's mobilization efforts.

In parallel, Prigozhin ramped up efforts to recruit additional combat mercenaries from the general populace for Wagner's core cadre of PMCs (see Figure 6). In doing so, he prioritized recruiting experienced combat veterans to serve as training instructors,

²³⁹ Krasnikova, "The Prigozhin Method."

²⁴⁰ Krasnikova, "The Prigozhin Method."

²⁴¹ "Russia's Wagner Group Opens Dozens of Recruitment Centers," *Moscow Times*, Mar. 10, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/10/russias-wagner-group-opens-dozens-of-recruitment-centers-a80450>.

Figure 6. Wagner Group recruiting poster



Source: Ai.geba/Shutterstock.com.

weapons experts, and combat specialists.²⁴² Faced with growing battlefield losses, however, Wagner was forced to relax its recruiting standards, including the need for prior combat experience.²⁴³ On the other hand, new mercenaries received far better training and pay than fresh prisoner recruits.

To secure new candidates, Wagner made extensive use of its national recruiting network and social media. At one point, Wagner used pithy advertising on Telegram to recruit prospective candidates. For example, one

ad highlighted an opportunity to take a “3-month business trip to Ukraine.”²⁴⁴ Starting in March, after prisoner recruiting had been halted, Wagner intensified its efforts to recruit new mercenaries, opening Wagner recruitment centers in 42 Russian cities.²⁴⁵ Prigozhin also launched targeted recruiting drives at sporting clubs and martial arts centers.²⁴⁶

Collectively, Wagner Group recruiting became an important vehicle for Russia’s ongoing mobilization efforts. Between September 2022 and January 2023,

²⁴² Мобилизационный потенциал ЧВК Вагнер и перспективы Евгения Пригожина. Аналитика [Ukrainian experts estimated how many people Prigozhin can “call up” to his PMC and what his political future is], Strana Today, Jan. 30, 2023, <https://strana.today/news/423512-mobilizatsionnyj-potentsial-chvk-vahner-i-perspektivy-evhenija-prihozhina-analitika.html>.

²⁴³ Мобилизационный потенциал ЧВК Вагнер и перспективы Евгения Пригожина. Аналитика [Ukrainian experts estimated how many people Prigozhin can “call up” to his PMC and what his political future is].

²⁴⁴ Raphael Parens, “Wagner Group Redefined: Threats and Promises,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, Jan. 30, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/wagner-group-redefined-threats-and-responses/>.

²⁴⁵ “Russia’s Wagner Group Opens Dozens of Recruitment Centers.”

²⁴⁶ “Wagner Reportedly Opens Mercenary Recruitment Centers at Russian Sports Clubs,” RFE/RL, Mar. 5, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/wagner-recruitment-russia-sports-clubs-ukraine-war/32301711.html>.

Wagner recruited an estimated 40,000 prisoners and at least 10,000 additional combat mercenaries.²⁴⁷

Newly recruited prisoners and—to a lesser extent—new PMCs were often used as cannon fodder, forced to conduct continuous infantry assaults while suffering heavy losses in the process.²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Wagner played a major role in tying down Ukrainian troops during the fall of 2022 and winter of 2023, affording Russia time to complete partial mobilization.²⁴⁹ Wagner Group forces were also instrumental in the capture of Bakhmut in May 2023 following a grueling nine-month battle.²⁵⁰

After the Battle of Bakhmut, however, Wagner Group forces were withdrawn from the front, with most being relocated to Belarus. At the time of the withdrawal, Wagner reportedly had only 20,000 troops remaining.²⁵¹ In June 2023, Prigozhin launched his now-famous coup attempt, culminating in his death in a plane crash in late August. Since then, the Wagner Group has had only a limited role in Russia's ongoing mobilization efforts.

More recently, the Kremlin has been turning to other PMC groups, such as Pobeda and Redut, to sustain

combat power in Ukraine. Both groups are closely associated with Shoigu.²⁵² Redut is probably the best known of the two, although technically it is not a private military company at all. Instead, it has been characterized as a state program disguised as a PMC created and managed by the Russian MOD and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) to help recruit people for the war in Ukraine.²⁵³

Redut is a composite force made up of at least 20 Russian armed formations of various kinds, including groups such as Tiger, Lynx, Wolves, Veterany, Nevsky, Espanyola, and the St. George Brigade. Redut groups are composed primarily of volunteers from various sources. For example, Veterany is made up of former policemen, FSB, soldiers, and security forces. Whereas some Redut groups recruit directly, others rely on outside groups to aid in recruiting, including most notably the aforementioned Union of Donbas Volunteers.²⁵⁴

Estimates of Redut's total size range from 7,000 to 25,000 total volunteers depending on the source. Redut is especially attractive to recruits willing to sign six-month contracts as an alternative to

²⁴⁷ Русь сидящая: из 50 тысяч заключенных, завербованных ЧВК Вагнера, на фронте остались только 10 тысяч [Sitting Rus: Out of 50 thousand prisoners recruited by Wagner PMC, only 10 thousand remained at the front], Meduza, Jan. 23, 2023, <https://meduza.io/news/2023/01/23/rus-sidyaschaya-iz-50-tysyach-zaklyuchennyh-zaverbovannyh-chvk-vagnera-na-fronte-ostalis-tolko-10-tysyach-ostalnye-libo-pogibli-libo-dezertirovali>; Мобілізаційний потенціал ЧВК Вагнер і перспективи Євгенія Пригожина. Аналітика [Ukrainian experts estimated how many people Prigozhin can "call up" to his PMC and what his political future is].

²⁴⁸ Tim Lister, Frederik Pleitgen, and Victoria Butenko, "Deadly and Disposable: Wagner's Brutal Tactics in Ukraine Revealed by Intelligence Report," CNN, Jan. 26, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/23/europe/russia-wagner-tactics-report-ukraine-intl/index.html?fbclid=IwAR0BTxtBBU_qF0Rb6mYneNwV7knBnoltBd7sjKJTUCUFvXnB6-Fj8KBTG_QY.

²⁴⁹ Ber, *From Popasna to Bakhmut*.

²⁵⁰ "Russia Says Ukrainian City of Bakhmut Captured," Reuters, May 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-wagner-claims-bakhmut-kyiv-says-situation-critical-2023-05-20/>.

²⁵¹ Adam Taylor, "How Russia Learned from Mistakes to Slow Ukraine's Counteroffensive," *Washington Post*, Sept. 8, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/08/russia-ukraine-defense-counteroffensive/>.

²⁵² Мобілізаційний потенціал ЧВК Вагнер і перспективи Євгенія Пригожина. Аналітика [Ukrainian experts estimated how many people Prigozhin can "call up" to his PMC and what his political future is].

²⁵³ "The Redut Ruse: Inside Russia's Fake Private Mercenary Company Fighting In Ukraine," RFE/RL, accessed Feb. 20, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/redut-fake-russia-gru-pmc-ukraine/32708853.html>.

²⁵⁴ Хитрість Редут [Cunning redoubt], Radio Svoboda, Dec. 2, 2023, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/chvk-redut-gru-skhemy-systema/32708817.html>.

indefinite service in the regular army. Redut salaries range from 110,000 to 220,000 rubles (\$1,200 to \$2,500) per month, up to three times the average Russian salary. For these reasons, Redut has proven to be effective at bolstering Russia's overall mobilization efforts.²⁵⁵

Irregular volunteers

Russian leaders continued to rely heavily on volunteer recruiting for irregular combat units during the second year of the war. As mentioned previously, during the initial covert mobilization period, Russia recruited additional combat personnel from across the country to serve in volunteer battalions. These volunteer formations were considered irregular forces and were intended to supplement Russian regular combat units that carried out the bulk of the fighting. In many ways, this recruiting was a continuation of efforts to recruit volunteer battalions during the first year of the war, especially in the summer of 2022. These earlier efforts were suspended in September 2022 following Putin's decision to order partial mobilization.²⁵⁶ In early 2023, however, as Russian losses continued to mount, officials turned once more to volunteer recruiting as a supplemental source of fresh combat troops. Volunteer recruiting appealed in particular to those who wished to serve but were disinclined to join Russian regular forces. Unlike contract soldiers, volunteers were not subject to Putin's stop loss order and could thus leave service at the end of their contracts.

Russian leaders adopted additional measures to aid in recruiting irregular volunteers, including a new law recognizing volunteer formations as official military units so they could more effectively use official MOD channels for provisioning resources.²⁵⁷ Another measure extended regular social benefits to volunteers serving at the front and included a stipulation that volunteers sign individual contracts with the MOD or their volunteer formations to obtain the necessary legal status.²⁵⁸ Putin himself became more actively involved in the effort, acknowledging prior legal and financial problems with volunteer recruiting while committing to address them to make volunteer service more attractive.²⁵⁹ Volunteer compensation was also maintained at a high level and even increased in some regions. For example, new volunteers were offered salaries of 300,000 rubles (\$3,450) per month in the Khabarovsk Krai region.²⁶⁰ In November 2023, the Moscow region began offering signing bonuses of 1 million rubles (\$11,200) for those enlisting in a new elite volunteer unit.²⁶¹

Buoyed by such measures, volunteer recruiting ramped up sharply starting in March 2023 as Russian forces were increasingly depleted during near-continuous combat operations in the Donbas.²⁶² Such efforts included targeted advertising on the social media platform Telegram to entice candidates to join existing volunteer battalions. Some regions also set up mobile recruitment centers to attract volunteers. There was a key difference between this campaign and the 2022 volunteer recruiting drives, however.

²⁵⁵ "Хитрість Редут" [Cunning redoubt].

²⁵⁶ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 26, 2023."

²⁵⁷ Dmitry Makarov, Добровольцы становятся контрактниками [Volunteers become contract workers], Flag Family, June 16, 2023, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/86313170>.

²⁵⁸ Makarov, Добровольцы становятся контрактниками [Volunteers become contract workers].

²⁵⁹ Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 8, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Mar. 8, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-8-2023>.

²⁶⁰ "New Volunteer Battalions Are Being Formed in the Khabarovsk Territory," Vostok Today, June 26, 2023, <https://vostok.today/46517-y-habarovskom-krae-formirujut-novye-dobrovolcheskie-batalony.html>.

²⁶¹ "An Elite Regiment Will Be Created in the Moscow Region to Be Sent to the Northern Military District Zone," RIA Novosti, Nov. 20, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20231115/svo-1909628049.html>.

²⁶² Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 6, 2023."

Whereas earlier recruiting efforts were focused primarily on staffing for new volunteer battalions, the 2023 campaign focused on replenishing existing volunteer battalions and supporting formation of other irregular forces, including BARS units, Cossack battalions, and PMCs.

Russian regions formed several new volunteer formations beginning in March 2023. These included new volunteer battalions in Dagestan, Bashkortostan, Kursk, Nizhny Novgorod, and other regions.²⁶³ The Republic of Bashkortostan became a key actor, establishing several new volunteer battalions in 2023, including the Sergei Zorin volunteer tank battalion, which was successfully operating in Ukraine as of December 2023, and Vatan, a special forces unit formed in April 2023.²⁶⁴ These units and others were later incorporated into a Bashkir volunteer regiment. Other regions also formed new volunteer formations, including Khabarovsk Krai, Kursk, and Ulyanovsk oblasts. Russian authorities also formed new cross-regional volunteer formations for the first time, including the Siberia battalion, which comprised Cossacks from Siberia, the Far East, and Central Russia.²⁶⁵

Volunteer recruiting also ramped up for other irregular combat units, such as the Sudaplatov battalion, which had been formed earlier in the Russia-occupied Zaporizhzhia oblast and subsequently attached to a BARS unit.²⁶⁶ Likewise, in April 2023, Ural billionaire Igor Altushkin, the owner of Russian Copper, sponsored formation of the Ural volunteer battalion.²⁶⁷

Collectively, Russian efforts to recruit additional troops for irregular volunteer formations proved reasonably effective in 2023, yielding a reported 80,000 new volunteers by October 2023, according to former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev.²⁶⁸ Although this figure may be somewhat inflated, the Russian MOD had earlier reported that more than 40 volunteer formations were actively involved in the Russia-Ukraine war.²⁶⁹ There is little doubt that recruiting for volunteer formations made a sizable contribution to Russian mobilization efforts in Ukraine in 2023.

Contractor recruiting

In addition to increased reliance on PMCs and volunteer battalions, the main pillar of Russia's mobilization efforts during 2023 was the recruitment

²⁶³ Shamil Khairullin, "Dagestan: Popular Support for the Special Operation Is Growing," *Krasnaia Svezda*, Dec. 6, 2023, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/94194200>.

²⁶⁴ Nikolay Netunaev, Вести в номер [Lead to the room], *Ural'skie voennye vesti*, Dec. 1, 2023, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/94183672>; "Volunteer Detachment of Bashkortostan Vatan," *bashinform.ru*, Apr. 12, 2023, <https://www.bashinform.ru/news/svo/2023-04-12/dobrovolcheskiy-otryad-bashkirii-vatan-prisoedinitnya-v-svo-k-svoim-zemlyakam-3216558>.

²⁶⁵ Третий добровольческий казачий батальон сформируют в ближайшее время [The Third Volunteer Cossack Battalion will be formed in the near future], *TASS*, Apr. 21, 2023, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/17579471>.

²⁶⁶ Evgeniy Balitsky, Евгений Балицкий: Добровольческий батальон Запорожской области и отряд БАРС-32 имени Павла Судоплатова до 4 ноября проводит контрактирование добровольцев по упрощенной процедуре [The volunteer battalion of the Zaporozhye Region and the BARS-32 detachment named after Pavel Sudoplatov are contracting volunteers using a simplified procedure until November 4], *zp-news.ru*, <https://zp-news.ru/society/2023/10/31/234714.html>.

²⁶⁷ Избежавший санкций уральский миллиардер Алтушкин финансирует штурмовой батальон Минобороны [Ural billionaire Altushkin, who escaped sanctions, finances the assault battalion of the Ministry of Defense], *Moscow Times*, Apr. 5, 2023, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2023/04/04/izbezhavshii-sanktsii-uralskii-milliarder-altushkin-finansiruet-shturmovoi-batalon-minoboroni-a38930>.

²⁶⁸ Медведев сообщил о 385 тыс. поступивших на службу в ВС РФ контрактников и добровольцев [Medvedev reported about 385 thousand contract soldiers and volunteers who entered service in the RF Armed Forces], *Izvestiya*, Oct. 25, 2023, <https://iz.ru/1595026/2023-10-25/medvedev-soobshchil-o-385-tys-postupivshikh-na-sluzhbu-v-vs-rf-kontraktnikov-i-dobrovoltcev>.

²⁶⁹ Российские военные сообщили более чем о 40 добровольческих формированиях [Russian military reported more than 40 volunteer formations], *Interfax*, June 10, 2023, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/905738>.

of additional contract soldiers to bolster the country's regular armed forces in Ukraine. Contractor recruiting continued from September 2022 through March 2023. According to a Ukrainian intelligence officer, Russia was enlisting around 20,000 troops per month through contractor recruiting and other means during that period.²⁷⁰ Contractor recruiting ramped up significantly starting in March 2023 when the Kremlin launched a major drive intended to reconstitute Russian combat forces in Ukraine by recruiting additional contract servicemembers. The plan called specifically for the enlistment of 400,000 additional contract soldiers through a nationwide recruiting effort.²⁷¹ The Kremlin hoped that contractor recruiting would serve as an effective alternative means to sustain Russian combat forces in Ukraine without the need for a second wave of mobilization.

In preparation for this effort, the government adopted several new laws to help facilitate contractor recruitment. Russian authorities began offering one-time enlistment bonuses for new contractors in certain cases, something that had become standard practice for volunteer battalions.²⁷² In 2023, the MOD announced a reduction in the initial contract term from two years to one, although many contract soldiers had

been previously allowed to sign short-term contracts as well.²⁷³ The requirement for new contract soldiers to have already completed a term of conscription or relevant technical or professional education was also eliminated.²⁷⁴ To encourage foreign nationals to sign up, on May 10, 2023, the government reduced the term of military service required to obtain Russian citizenship from five years to one while simplifying the nationalization process.²⁷⁵

Reflecting its importance, the new campaign was overseen by former president Dmitry Medvedev.²⁷⁶ In preparation for the campaign launch, Medvedev began holding teleconferences with regional governors in February 2023.²⁷⁷ The Kremlin also assigned recruiting quotas for each region. For example, the Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk regions were each assigned quotas of 10,000 new contractors by the end of 2023. For Perm, the quota was 9,000, and Moscow reportedly received a quota of 27,000 contractors.²⁷⁸ Local commissariats were given primary responsibility for recruiting new contract soldiers. They in turn were directed to assist regional governors, who were responsible for disseminating information and supporting local recruiting efforts. This division of labor was intended to avoid the internal conflict that had plagued prior recruiting efforts.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁰ РФ щомісяця вдається мобілізувати близько 20 тисяч осіб [Russian Federation manages to mobilize about 20,000 people every month], Ukrainian Ministry of Defense Main Directorate of Intelligence, Mar. 21, 2023, <https://gur.gov.ua/content/rf-shchomisiatia-vdaietsia-mobilizuvaty-blyzko-20-tysiach-osib.html>.

²⁷¹ Igor Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers], URA.ru, Mar. 10, 2023, <https://ura.news/articles/1036286412>; "Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin," kremlin.ru, Dec. 14, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72994>.

²⁷² Есть Такая Профессия [There is such a profession], Russian Ministry of Defense, May 10, 2023, <https://ric.mil.ru/Novosti/item/489973/>.

²⁷³ Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

²⁷⁴ Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

²⁷⁵ Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

²⁷⁶ Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization."

²⁷⁷ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers].

²⁷⁸ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers]; "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 27, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Mar. 27, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-27-2023>.

²⁷⁹ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers].

The contractor recruiting drive was officially launched in March 2023. As an initial step, regional authorities began sending out notices to draft-aged men asking them to update their personal contact information in military registries.²⁸⁰ In Udmurtia, these inquiries created quite a stir, leading the regional governor to offer reassurances that authorities were not preparing for a new round of mandatory mobilization.²⁸¹ Other regions experienced similar turmoil in response to such notices.

The program was centered on two main pillars, both designed to make military service more attractive. The first involved a carefully targeted mass information campaign to increase the appeal of military service. The second entailed plans to offer substantially increased salaries and financial benefits to further incentivize contractor enlistment.²⁸²

The mass information campaign got underway in earnest in late March 2023.²⁸³ Reportedly, special propaganda teams attached to the military commissariats were assigned to manage local outreach in each region.²⁸⁴ Authorities used a variety of channels to disseminate advertising for the new campaign, including official websites, local newspapers, and social media.²⁸⁵ Military recruiters

also made cold calls to potential recruits while working at local universities and social service agencies to reach students and unemployed workers.²⁸⁶ Mobile recruiting trucks were also used to expand the reach of local commissariats (see Figure 7).

In parallel, Russian authorities began offering higher monthly salaries for contractor personnel. New recruits were initially offered a starting salary ranging from 200,000 to 300,000 rubles (\$2,200 to \$3,300) per month, depending on region, roughly three to four times the average monthly salary. Candidates in Moscow and nearby regions were offered even more attractive financial terms.²⁸⁷ In Moscow, for example, recruiting brochures promised salaries of up to 340,000 rubles (\$4,160) per month for those taking part in the special military operation.²⁸⁸

In some regions, new recruits were offered one-time enlistment bonuses of up to 195,000 rubles (\$2,390). Candidates in some regions were offered additional bonuses for destroying Ukrainian tanks, helicopters, and other weapon systems, or for the rate of advances on the ground.²⁸⁹ One ad promised additional benefits such as property tax exemptions, household utility allowances, and vouchers for vacation resorts.²⁹⁰ In some regions,

²⁸⁰ Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization."

²⁸¹ Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization."

²⁸² Farida Rustamova, "How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024," Faridaily, Dec. 23, 2023, https://faridaily.substack.com/p/how-russian-officials-plan-to-recruit?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=774882&post_id=139988197&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=44inp&utm_medium=email.

²⁸³ Rustamova, "How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024."

²⁸⁴ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers].

²⁸⁵ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers].

²⁸⁶ "Putin Orders Russian Military to Boost Troop Numbers by 170,000," *Guardian*, Dec. 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/02/putin-orders-russian-military-to-boost-troop-numbers-by-170000>.

²⁸⁷ Rustamova, "How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024."

²⁸⁸ "\$4,000 to Fight: What Russia's Military Recruitment Looks Like," RFE/RL, Apr. 15, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-military-recruitment-photos-moscow/32363946.html>.

²⁸⁹ Amanda Macias and Natasha Turak, "Putin Says Nuclear Weapons Transferred to Belarus; Ukraine 'Will Be Equal to NATO Allies,'" *CNBC*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/16/russia-ukraine-live-updates.html>.

²⁹⁰ Anton Troianovski et al., "'Aren't You a Man?': How Russia Goads Citizens Into the Army," *New York Times*, Aug. 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/23/world/europe/russia-war-military-recruitment-campaign.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Figure 7. Russian contractor recruiting truck



Source: Russian MOD, included in Beardsworth, "Russia Scrambles for Soldiers amid Ukraine War Manpower Shortage."

bonuses increased even further as the recruiting drive progressed. In November 2023, for example, Moscow began offering prospective recruits a lump sum bonus of 1 million rubles (\$10,790) to sign a new contract.²⁹¹

Despite such measures, Russian authorities faced serious challenges in meeting their recruiting targets. As the war progressed, fewer and fewer people were willing to sign contracts solely for patriotic reasons. Recruiting messages that focused on the Kremlin's official rationale for the invasion played a diminishing role in contractor recruiting. As one official reportedly put it, "The people who went to war for patriotic reasons have run out."²⁹² The MOD also faced growing competition from

Russian industry, which, because of a national labor shortage, offered increasingly attractive salaries for new personnel without the attendant combat risks.

To offset such challenges, Russian recruiters engaged in targeted messaging campaigns to increase the appeal of enlistment. Such messaging involved promoting a warrior image among potential Russian candidates and comparing army life favorably to the bleak local conditions facing many candidates.²⁹³ As the *New York Times* noted, "The appeal to masculinity [was] pervasive, attempting to tap into deeply entrenched expectations of duty and service [among] Russian males."²⁹⁴ Patriotism remained an important factor in contractor recruiting, especially outside the largest Russian cities.

²⁹¹ "The Ministry of Defense Is Raising Rates," Telegram channel: "Mobilization News," Nov. 6, 2023, <https://t.me/mobilizationnews/16304>, cited in Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 6, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Nov. 6, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-6-2023>.

²⁹² Troianovski et al., "'Aren't You a Man?'" ; Rustamova, "How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024."

²⁹³ Troianovski et al., "'Aren't You a Man?'"

²⁹⁴ Troianovski et al., "'Aren't You a Man?'"

Contractor recruiting was also expanded beyond traditional populations of young Russian men. Russian officials recruited heavily in Crimea, reportedly mobilizing as many as 60,000 residents for the war in Ukraine.²⁹⁵ They also targeted foreign volunteers by launching contractor recruiting drives targeting citizens from Central Asia, Cuba, Armenia, and even Nepal.²⁹⁶ Moreover, after Wagner was forced to halt prisoner recruiting, the Russian MOD continued the practice, recruiting about 15,000 additional prisoners for the Russian armed forces.²⁹⁷

According to Russian officials, the contractor recruiting drive exceeded all expectations. In December 2023, Shoigu claimed that 490,000 contract servicemembers and volunteers had been recruited since the start of the year.²⁹⁸ Putin claimed that the army had recruited 500,000 contract soldiers so there would be no need for a new round of mobilization.²⁹⁹ According to Medvedev, volunteers accounted for about 21 percent of those who enlisted during 2023. Thus, if Shoigu's headline figure of 490,000 troops is to be believed, the Russian armed forces successfully recruited 387,000 contract servicemembers in 2023.

There are strong reasons to believe that Russian official numbers have been substantially inflated,

however. For one, Russian officials have in some cases contradicted their own figures. For example, Medvedev gave two different figures for the total number of soldiers recruited between January 1 and May 2023 (117,400 versus 134,000, respectively).³⁰⁰ Second, Russian officials took measures that likely artificially inflated contractor recruiting totals. For example, because of Putin's stop loss order, Russian soldiers serving on short-term contracts were usually compelled to sign new contracts when their original terms expired.³⁰¹

Likewise, the Russian MOD made efforts to transition volunteer formations, Chechen militias, and PMCs to contractor status, which may have artificially inflated contractor recruiting totals.³⁰² Most important, there is little evidence of such a mass influx of new contractor personnel in Ukraine. As military analyst Dara Massicot noted in August 2023, "Soldiers are not being relieved or regularly rotated on the front, suggesting there is still a manpower problem."³⁰³ In addition, there were insider reports that some Russian factions were promoting a second wave of mobilization as late as September 2023, further evidence that contractor recruiting likely fell short of its targets.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁵ Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment July 31, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-31-2023>.

²⁹⁶ Ministry of Defence (@DefenceHQ), "Latest Defence Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine – 03 September 2023," Post, X, Sept. 3, 2023, <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1698212159715459238?s=20>; "A Small Country Far from Ukraine Is Sending Hundreds to War, on Both Sides," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/20/world/asia/ukraine-russia-nepal.html>; "Why Russia Is Luring Foreign Fighters," *Newsweek*, Sept. 7, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-military-lures-foreign-fighters-ukraine-war-1825057>.

²⁹⁷ Новые Гвардейцы Шойгу: Убийца, Насильник, Вор-Рецидивист [Shoigu's new guards: Murderer, rapist, repeat offender], June 15, 2023, <https://verstka.media/novye-gvardejcy-shojgu>.

²⁹⁸ Rustamova, "How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024."

²⁹⁹ Andrew Roth and Pjotr Sauer, "Putin Says No Peace Until Russia's Goals in Ukraine Achieved," *Guardian*, Dec. 14, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/14/vladimir-putin-peace-russia-ukraine-president>.

³⁰⁰ Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

³⁰¹ Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

³⁰² Luzin, "Tricky Recruiting in Russia."

³⁰³ Troianovski et al., "'Aren't You a Man?'"

³⁰⁴ Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 12, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, Sept. 12, 2023.

Nonetheless, the 2023 contractor recruitment drive was still quite effective. The Kremlin was able to maintain sufficient troops on the ground to mount an effective resistance to Ukraine's summer counteroffensive without resorting to a second round of mobilization. By the same token, during the summer and fall timeframe, contractor recruiting and other measures were sufficient to allow Russia to maintain enough forces at the front to hold on to previous gains. As noted by the UK Defense Ministry, despite previous losses, by spring 2023 Russia was still able to maintain some 200,000 troops in Ukraine, roughly the same number that it had at the start of the invasion.

Net effect of mobilization on Russian forces in Ukraine

As the foregoing discussions have shown, since the initial invasion, Russia's military mobilization program has been a haphazard and at times highly chaotic affair based on a series of poorly coordinated individual lines of effort of varying degrees of success. These include recruiting additional contract soldiers, forming volunteer battalions, forcibly mobilizing separatist forces in the Donbas, deploying new Chechen militia units, activating BARS units, recruiting PMCs, and, most important, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Russian reservists.

Although definitive numbers are not available, it is possible to develop a rough estimate of the total

number of Russian combat troops mobilized through these lines of effort based on estimates of other key measures made during the war. According to various sources, the Kremlin committed about 190,000 soldiers to the initial invasion.³⁰⁵ However, that force included roughly 50,000 members of Russian security forces and Rosgvardia, Russia's national guard forces. Thus, actual Russian combat forces during the initial invasion have been estimated at approximately 140,000 troops in total.³⁰⁶

Based on a declassified US intelligence report released in December 2023, Russia has incurred approximately 315,000 total casualties since the war's inception, including both those killed in action and those seriously wounded.³⁰⁷ According to recent reporting by the Royal United Services Institute, which has been reliably reporting on the war throughout, Russian forces in Ukraine comprised around 470,000 troops in total as of the beginning of January 2024.³⁰⁸

It is generally agreed that partial mobilization added approximately 300,000 combat troops to Russian forces in Ukraine, although many were held in reserve for several months.³⁰⁹ Assuming that the foregoing numbers are reasonably accurate, Russia was able to successfully mobilize about 645,000 additional combat troops through both partial mobilization and other means. Assuming the validity of these totals, Russia mobilized an additional 345,000 troops through the various covert mobilization efforts employed since the war began. Notably, in

³⁰⁵ See, for example, Seth G. Jones, *Russia's Ill-Fated Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons in Modern Warfare*, CSIS Brief, June 2022, p. 6.

³⁰⁶ Mark F. Cancian, "Russian Casualties in Ukraine: Reaching the Tipping Point," CSIS, Mar. 31, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-casualties-ukraine-reaching-tipping-point>; Kjellén, *Bringing the Soldier Back In*, p. 15.

³⁰⁷ Jonathan Landay, "U.S. Intelligence Assesses Ukraine War Has Cost Russia 315,000 Casualties—Source," Reuters, Dec. 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-intelligence-assesses-ukraine-war-has-cost-russia-315000-casualties-source-2023-12-12/>; "US Says Russia Has Suffered 315K Casualties in Ukraine," The Hill, Feb. 16, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4472378-russia-315k-casualties-ukraine-us/>.

³⁰⁸ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024," RUSI, Feb. 13, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-military-objectives-and-capacity-ukraine-through-2024>.

³⁰⁹ "The Kremlin Got Its 300,000 Troops. But How Did Russian Society Fare?," *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 31, 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2022/1031/The-Kremlin-got-its-300-000-troops.-But-how-did-Russian-society-fare>.

September 2023, Putin claimed that the Russian army had recruited 270,000 additional troops over the previous six months, excluding the 300,000 obtained through partial mobilization. Although in absolute terms Putin's numbers are roughly in line with those stated above, given the duration and variation in mobilization methods used by Russia throughout the war, Putin's claim to have mobilized 270,000 troops in just six months appears to be significantly overstated.

These numbers should be taken with a large grain of salt given the wide range of competing estimates made throughout the war. Nevertheless, they are generally congruent with the findings in this report if we discount the Kremlin's more expansive claims of having recruited 490,000 contract soldiers and 80,000 volunteers in 2023. Those numbers would have to be substantially lower, assuming the relative accuracy of the other estimates in this section.

In any event, Russian covert mobilization efforts have been sufficient to allow Russia to maintain enough forces at the front to both blunt the Ukrainian counteroffensive and, more recently, conduct sustained offensive operations around Avdiivka without resorting to another round of partial mobilization. That in itself is compelling evidence that Russia's covert mobilization efforts have thus far been successful in delivering large numbers of additional combat troops to support the war effort.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Russian mobilization has undergone significant revisions during the past several decades as the underlying conditions that the country is facing have changed. In particular, changes in Russia's mobilization strategy have been closely linked to changes in the country's borders, geopolitical situation, prospective adversaries, buffer zones, political will, and, most important, internal projections of the kinds of wars that it is most likely to face. During the World War II era, Russia elected to maintain a large standing army combined with equally large layered mobilization echelons to meet the challenge of the Wehrmacht massed directly on its borders. During the Cold War, Russia was able to leverage its large Eastern and Central European buffer zones to maintain a sizable standing army on its borders with NATO backed by a series of partially staffed cadre divisions deployed in echelons at various distances from the fronts. This forward-based approach was intended to buy time for Russia to mobilize additional combat personnel.

Because of resistance to reforms and outright inertia, the same mobilization structure was maintained during the post-Soviet era up until the end of the 2008 Georgia war. At that point, the Soviet-era mass mobilization army was finally disbanded and replaced with a permanent readiness force based on fully staffed combat brigades. This action was taken mainly because Russia expected that it would no longer need to fight a large-scale protracted ground conflict given the nature of the contingencies that it was most likely to face (exemplified by the wars in Georgia and Chechnya). The Kremlin believed that those wars had shown that what was needed most was a high-readiness force that could be committed quickly to conflicts arising on the country's periphery. At the same time, Russian leaders expected that a

large-scale conflict with NATO would not last very long because of the potential for rapid escalation up to and including the nuclear level. Thus, maintaining a large standing army was no longer seen as necessary for a NATO contingency either. As a hedge, Russia's standing army was to be backstopped by a call for either full or partial mobilization in the event of a protracted large-scale conflict with NATO (or possibly China).

There were three ironies associated with these decisions. First, as events in Ukraine have shown, Russia may have made the wrong bet when it shifted away from the Soviet-era mass mobilization army in favor of a permanent readiness force. The Kremlin failed to anticipate the kind of large-scale protracted war of attrition that it is now fighting in that country; this kind of war requires a substantially larger standing army coupled with a large mobilization capability. Although the Soviet-era mass mobilization army was likely not the right model either, Russia's decision to rely on a permanent readiness force that was not adequately supported by an effective mobilization system has been problematic for the war in Ukraine. This new approach may have been justified for purposes of fighting "new generation wars" that were expected to be short, intense, and reliant on precision strike, air superiority, and rapid maneuver on the ground. However, reliance on a smaller permanent ready force without an adequate mobilization capability left the country facing severe manpower shortages once it became embroiled in a large-scale war of attrition.

Second, Russia failed to invest in the necessary reforms to develop a viable partial mobilization capability. For example, Russian efforts to create an active reserve system (i.e., BARS) fell well short of the

Kremlin's goals because of inadequate investment and therefore contributed only marginally to the war effort in Ukraine. As a result, when Putin finally ordered a partial mobilization, Russia had to develop the necessary mobilization machinery on the fly while the conflict continued to rage. This task was made more difficult because by then Russian forces had incurred such heavy casualties that they had dissipated much of their mobilization capacity, having lost large numbers of experienced military trainers in Ukraine and a large percentage of their best frontline combat equipment.

Finally, Putin was unwilling to call for mobilization even after it became clear that he needed to do so, mainly because of political constraints. Issuing a partial mobilization decree at the start of the war would have been deeply inconsistent with his vision of a quick and decisive special military operation conducted entirely with Russia's standing army without disrupting the rest of the country. This consideration was so important for Putin that even after the invasion went off track, he was unwilling to order a partial mobilization until September 2022, nearly seven months into the war, when his forces came under heavy duress.

In lieu of a true mobilization involving the activation of Russian reservists, Putin elected instead to employ a covert mobilization strategy for much of the war ("covert" in the sense that it was designed to be less visible and to some extent more legitimate to the Russian people). This approach caused mobilization to unfold in three phases, commencing with an initial covert mobilization phase that lasted from February to September 2022. During this period, the Kremlin employed a diverse array of measures designed to mobilize additional combat troops for the war. The second phase, which was centered on partial mobilization, lasted from September 2022 through approximately January 2023. During this phase, Putin finally declared a partial mobilization that

involved the activation of hundreds of thousands of Russian reservists after his forces came under intense pressure from the twin Ukrainian counteroffensives at Kherson and Kharkiv. The third phase (which partially overlapped the second) ran from January 2023 through December 2023, the end of the study's review period. During phase three, the Kremlin returned to its covert mobilization strategy.

During the initial "covert mobilization" period, Russia relied on a patchwork of mobilization measures to sustain its hard-pressed combat forces at the front. Each of these methods focused on a particular segment of the population, and each had its own comparative advantages for the segment being targeted. For example, contractor recruiting appealed most to those wishing to join the regular military, albeit on a short-term basis, but contractor recruiting was not very successful during phase one because of the deterrent effect of reports of high casualties at the front. By contrast, forced mobilization of LNR/DNR separatists relied primarily on coercion made possible because of the high dependence of Donbas separatist leaders on Kremlin support and a populace less able to resist. Covert mobilization during this phase of the conflict was generally insufficient to offset Russian losses in Ukraine. Although precise numbers are hard to come by, covert mobilization efforts during phase one likely yielded no more than a third of the estimated 345,000 troops generated by Russia through covert mobilization measures throughout the conflict.

By contrast, partial mobilization during phase two, although chaotic, was far more successful. Partial mobilization faced many problems due to both lack of proper preparations and loss of capacity to mobilize during the war. These included inaccurate reservist registries, reliance on manual processes, inadequate training and equipment, and large-scale efforts to evade call-up. Nevertheless, partial mobilization generated 300,000 combat troops

for the war effort at a time when Russian forces desperately needed them, and these troops were instrumental in stabilizing the battlefield.

During the third phase, the Kremlin returned to the covert mobilization methods adopted during phase one, albeit with greater success, having applied lessons learned during earlier mobilization efforts. During this phase, the Kremlin concentrated on three principal lines of effort: contractor recruiting, enlistment of irregular volunteers, and expansion of PMCs.³¹⁰ The effort to recruit additional contractor personnel was the most important mobilization measure, with Russia demonstrating learning by refining its approach. This new approach included substantially higher salaries, a carefully targeted messaging campaign to appeal to prospective recruits, and coercive measures to supplement voluntary recruiting. Collectively, efforts during phase three likely accounted for approximately two-thirds of the estimated 345,000 additional troops generated through covert mobilization efforts during phases one and three combined.

Russia's mobilization efforts have had a mixed effect on its forces in the field. The Kremlin's reliance on such a wide range of mobilization measures undermined unity of effort and resulted in a patchwork of combat forces including both regular and irregular units, which led to poor cohesion, coordination problems, and a fragmented chain of command. Moreover, Russia's ad hoc approach to mobilization resulted in a general degradation in the quality and capability of its combat forces in Ukraine because the insatiable need for fresh combat troops drove local commissariats to send a never-ending stream of poorly trained and equipped soldiers to

the front. This decline in troop quality contributed to a decline in the quality of battlefield tactics; this vast pool of poorly trained personnel was used primarily to conduct sustained infantry assaults because they lacked the proper training to conduct effective combined arms operations. Yet the large casualties resulting from mass infantry assaults have further fueled Russia's demand for additional combat troops. Nevertheless, mobilization has successfully delivered where it was needed most, proving sufficient to sustain Russian combat power in Ukraine. Mobilization was instrumental in allowing Russia to blunt Ukraine's summer 2022 counteroffensive and—more recently—to make significant gains against Ukrainian forces at Avdiivka. Mobilization thus helped Russia's military turn the tide of the war by providing sufficient reinforcements to alter its course during 2023. As noted in December 2022 by General Valery Zaluzhny, then commander of Ukraine's armed forces, "Russian mobilization has worked. It is not true that their problems are so dire that these people will not fight. They will. A tsar tells them to go to war, and they go to war."³¹¹ This statement remains as true today as it was in December 2022.

Whether Russia's covert mobilization efforts will prove sufficient for Putin to avoid a second wave of mobilization remains to be seen. We can draw relevant conclusions based on the findings of this study. Throughout the war, the Kremlin has gone out of its way to avoid calls for mobilization. It failed to call for mobilization until its troops were placed under heavy pressure by the twin Ukrainian counteroffensives at Kharkiv and Kherson. Moreover, when Putin did finally order mobilization in September 2022, the measure proved politically

³¹⁰ Russia continued to pursue a wide range of additional measures during phase three, including several of the methods used during phase one as well as other methods, among them recruiting volunteers in Russia's near abroad and from countries such as Nepal and Turkey.

³¹¹ "An Interview with General Valery Zaluzhny, Head of Ukraine's Armed Forces," *Economist*, Dec. 15, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/zaluzhny-transcript>.

costly for him, triggering internal dissent and a mass exodus of Russian citizens from the country. Therefore, Putin is making a concerted effort to avoid a second wave of mobilization. Instead, Russia has been spending enormous sums to provide inflated salaries and financial benefits for newly recruited personnel. If anything, the Kremlin's desire to avoid another politically divisive mobilization wave is even more important today, given the upcoming 2024 presidential elections. Thus far, Putin has been able to get away with this approach because covert mobilization has been sufficient to sustain Russia's combat power and preserve its gains at the front. Even so, the stakes in the war for Russia and for Putin's regime are equally high. Thus, if Russian forces face another major setback akin to what they faced during the Kharkiv counteroffensive or if they become so depleted that they become vulnerable to such an attack, Putin could very well call for a second wave of mobilization.³¹²

We can also draw some preliminary conclusions regarding the effect of the war on Russia's future mobilization strategy. There are early indications that Russia is planning to revise its mobilization strategy based on lessons learned during the conflict. For example, Russian leaders recently decided to maintain a larger standing army to reduce the country's reliance on mobilizable reserves. Specifically, in December 2022, Shoigu announced plans to expand the size of the military from 1.15 million troops to 1.5 million troops in total.³¹³ The

armed forces reportedly plan to use these additional forces to form a new army corps, 7 additional motorized rifle divisions, and 19 new brigades over the course of 2024.³¹⁴

Shoigu claims that the new plan does not imply any "significant expansion of conscription" but will rely instead on gradually recruiting more volunteers. Specifically, the Kremlin plans to increase the number of contractors from approximately 400,000 contract servicemembers immediately before the war to 695,000 in coming years. By then, contractors are expected to make up nearly half of the new force size.³¹⁵ The Kremlin also recently announced plans to recruit an additional 400,000 troops in 2024.³¹⁶ Such efforts will likely require continued payment of high salaries and benefits as well.³¹⁷ It appears highly unlikely that Russian military leaders will achieve these lofty ambitions because mobilization is barely keeping up with Russia's ongoing battlefield losses.

At the same time, Russia's military leadership continues to modify mobilization structures and processes to address problems that have emerged during the war. In addition to digitizing and updating registries of Russian reservists and military-aged men, the military has taken other measures to strengthen mobilization processes and capacity, including improving the military logistics system and the structure of military commissariats. In addition, the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff has created a multilevel

³¹² Some assessments indicate that a second wave of mobilization is likely as long as Russia's personnel losses persist. See, for example, Mike Eckel, "In Ukraine, Russia's Military Has a Manpower Problem. Now It's Becoming A Political Problem," RFE/RL, Nov. 21, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-manpower-problem-protests-politics/32694046.html>.

³¹³ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers].

³¹⁴ Медведев сообщил о 385 тыс. поступивших на службу в ВС РФ контрактников и добровольцев [Medvedev reported about 385 thousand contract soldiers and volunteers who entered service in the RF Armed Forces].

³¹⁵ Sergeev, Российские власти готовятся к набору 400 тысяч контрактников [Russian authorities are preparing to recruit 400 thousand contract soldiers].

³¹⁶ Kramer, "Russia Sends Ill-Trained Draftees into Combat amid Losses, Analysts Say."

³¹⁷ Rostamova, "How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024."

management system under the National Defense Management Center to oversee mobilization efforts. It has also created new military-political bodies with expanded mobilization authorities. A unified system of military control of weapons and military and special equipment (VVST) has also been created to aid in equipping newly mobilized troops.³¹⁸ Whether Russia will pursue more fundamental changes in its mobilization apparatus and strategy remains to be seen, and these questions likely will not be addressed until after the war. These activities and pronouncements are nonetheless an early indication of how Russia is thinking about a revised mobilization strategy over the near- to mid-term in light of its experiences in Ukraine.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that Russia has yet another card to play when it comes to mobilizing combat personnel for a protracted, high-end conflict with NATO, namely the option of calling for “full mobilization” of the country’s manpower resources. As its name suggests, a full mobilization would entail mobilizing Russian reservists at a scale that potentially far exceeds that seen during the current war in Ukraine. According to one recent report, the Kremlin can currently draw upon a reserve mobilization force of more than 2 million former soldiers who have served within the last several years.³¹⁹ A call for full mobilization would also entail placing the country’s economy on a greater war footing, including the large-scale mobilization of Russian industry to support the war effort. Although a full mobilization would almost surely exceed Russia’s capacity to absorb and train newly mobilized personnel on short notice, if past performance is any indication, Russia can be expected to scale up its mobilization and training efforts over time, absent political constraints.

³¹⁸ Yulia Kozak, В Авангарде Строительства И Развития Вооружённых Сил [At the forefront of the construction and development of the Armed Forces], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, Mar. 6, 2024, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/95960271>.

³¹⁹ “‘Partial Mobilization’ of Russian Reservists—A Sign of Putin’s Desperation?,” France24, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220921-partial-mobilisation-of-russian-reservists-may-reveal-putin-s-desperation>.

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