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# **The All-Volunteer Force in the Russian Mirror: Transformation without Change**

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*To my beloved daughters, Jela and Lara*

## Acknowledgements

*Here it is, a fruitful autumn!  
It was brought in rather late.  
But for fifteen blissful springs  
I didn't dare rise from the earth.  
I watched it so closely,  
I pressed against it, embraced it full length,  
And into this doomed body  
It mysteriously poured a mysterious strength.*

(Anna Akhmatova)

At last...at last, the autumn has arrived! The harvest is safely brought into the barn. After five years of intensive work, the idea that the crop is safely gathered in from the storm gives a profound feeling of accomplishment, relief, and ultimately joy. It is a moment to sit down and look back to the process that came from a small seed -a rough idea- into a matured and ripe product. As in Anna Akhmatova's poem, this process has changed me as a person and molded my thinking. However, without the help of other people the matured crop would never have been harvested: it would have been neglected, left alone, mistreated, and ultimately destroyed...The harvest, this book, is the product of a collective endeavor!

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When someone is fanatically working on a project, he forgets that there are still other things in life then reading, researching and writing. I hope that Jela and Lara, my beloved daughters, can forgive me for not playing the role I should have played: their father. They have to know that their smile helped me to go on with my project. I also want to thank Andjuka for her support. I hope I can express this some time to her personally. To other members of my family, Hilde, Jan, Gert-Jan, Tineke, Thomas, Tine, Bas, Han: thank you for your support. Finally, I owe a very special debt of gratitude to my parents. I thank them for their never-ending support and their encouraging words. How can I thank them enough?

Needless to say, I alone am responsible for the contents of this book.

Joris Van Bladel  
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# Introduction

*'When we say that change should be considered as a sociological problem, we mean that it is men who change, that they do not change passively, and, moreover, that they change in their collectivity, and as a collectivity: not individually, but in their relations with one another and in their social organization.'*

(Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, *Actors and Systems*, p. 213)

In 1988-89 Soviet military reform became an issue of lively public debate. This happened at the height of «Gorbyphoria» when Mikhail Gorbachev's twin policies of glasnost and perestroika achieved their greatest momentum.<sup>1</sup> It was a time of high hopes and unprecedented, and in some ways unlimited, freedom of speech. Very soon, the army, one of the pillars of the Soviet system and a bastion of secrecy, came under severe attack. Reports of fraud and abuses within the ranks were widely publicized, particularly in liberal newspapers such as *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, *Ogonyok*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* and *Argumenti i fakti*. The press tested the limits of glasnost when it questioned the competence of the Soviet generals. The army came under greatest fire over such issues as military competence in Afghanistan, peacetime deaths, and the tradition of *dedovshchina* – an informal control and disciplinary system among soldiers -that had apparently grown beyond the control of the officer corps. Horrific stories of immense suffering due to bad leadership and neglect at the small unit level shocked the public. The traditional image of the military organization and of military service crumbled within only a few months. The Soviet military High Command was on the defensive and realized that its institutional power had suffered a serious blow. What seemed to be a rather clumsy and arrogant reaction of the military elite (and yet one which might be quite understandable from the perspective of the 'bureaucratic phenomenon') only accelerated the process of the loss of legitimacy. It was as if the mindset of the generals had remained in Brezhnev's 'golden period', a period characterized by social and political prestige, and an impressive budget.<sup>2</sup>

In this atmosphere, the debate over military service assumed considerable societal importance. Indeed, the fate of the conscript soldier -as a victim of the 1979-89 Afghanistan war, or of brutal hazing and ethnic violence in the barracks- played a catalyzing role in the defense debate. Very quickly, the call for the abolishment of compulsory military service became overwhelming. It began with the students of Moscow State University, supported by the directorate of the university and later by the whole liberal intelligentsia, all asking for deferment of military service for higher education students. Their demand was met in July 1989 by Gorbachev and can be seen as a major defeat for the Ministry of Defense. Soon, the students' protest was joined by parents who did not want their sons to go to Afghanistan or – mindful of stories of peacetime deaths - simply did not want their sons to be victims of army life. The 'anti-service movement' originated in urban areas and among a liberal, western-

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<sup>1</sup> Martin McCauley divides Gorbachev's perestroika effort in three parts, namely perestroika Mark I, Mark II and mark III. The first period (1985-87) was concentrated on economic reform by devolving greater decision-making power to management and labor. The second period (1987-89) was intended to initiate reform from below. It was the beginning of political reform and it gradually revealed the ills of Soviet society. In The third period (1990-91) it was attempted to achieve consensus. It was the period in which Gorbachev acted as the executive president. Martin McCauley, *Gorbachev*, London: Longman, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy J. Colton, 'Perspectives on Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet Union', in: Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson (Ed.), *Soldiers and the Soviet State, Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p.25-29.

mind community, but spread rapidly across the country and attained a nationalist character. People in republics on the borders of the Soviet Union, especially those in the Baltics and Caucasus, were even more reluctant to fulfil their military obligations than people in Russia. When, finally, young officers openly joined the public campaign against conscription, it broke another psychological barrier within the Soviet High Command. The centuries-old institution of universal, compulsory military service and the myth of the military as the progenitor of 'Soviet Man' and the vehicle of social cohesion was now challenged by public criticism. The Soviet Union collapsed one year after a mass coalition against the draft took shape. In the new Russia of the 1990's the military did not overcome the public's resentment toward it, and the issue of military service remained controversial.

The fact that recruitment was problematic compelled the High Command to adapt its recruitment policy. They were also pushed to do so by vocal military reformers who wanted the abolishment of military service and the creation of an all-volunteer force. So, parallel with the criticism of military service, there was an ever-growing call for a professional army. Therefore, both discussions -the critique against conscription and the discussion about an all-volunteer force - can be seen, at least in the Russian case, as complementary. Until the end of the Soviet Union, the debate over an all-volunteer force was fierce and reflected the divisions within Soviet society. The Soviet High Command, led by Minister of Defense General Dimitrii Yazov, and the 'coalition' of conservative, communist, and statist forces defended compulsory military service. They stood against the liberal, western and democratic forces who supported an all-volunteer force. The debate over military service evolved from a strictly military issue to an all-embracing political debate. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not bring public consensus to the issue and Russia is still struggling with its recruitment policy. The issue of the all-volunteer force, which received an empty promise in 1996, when President Yeltsin signed a decree announcing the abolishment of conscription by the year 2000, has remained a dominant one for the military. Influential officers such as Generals Boris Gromov, Pavel Grachev, Igor Rodionov, Igor Sergeev and others were not opposed to a professional army, in principle. However, they cited the practical obstacles to installing it, and their position remained ambivalent. The economic crisis of August 1998, a flagging anti-draft movement, the Kosovo crisis of 1999 followed by the Second Chechen War put a *de facto* end to the discussion over recruitment and the reform debate in general. It is no longer the hot political issue it was in the 1988-1996 period. The recruitment problem is far from over, however. As demonstrated in the First Chechen war, the Russian participation in SFOR and KFOR, and operations in other so-called hot spots [*goriachie tochki*]. Russia still struggles with a huge recruitment problem and a highly unmotivated contingent of soldiers. The public debate, though, has been silenced and compulsory military service has 'survived' for now.

The debate over military service and the formation of professional armed forces was central in the years of reform from 1988-1998. The fact that professionalization did not occur and that compulsory military service survived, surprised analysts. During the early years of reform - a period which saw Edvard Shevardnadze and Andrei Kozyrev as ministers of foreign affairs- warmer relations with the United States seemed to increase the likelihood of a volunteer military. The end of the Cold War diminished the threat of a massive attack on the Soviet Union. Many Western countries quickly adapted to the changed environment and effected a rapid transition to an all-volunteer force, a 'revolution in Military Affairs' that was closely watched in Russia. How is it possible that Russian decision-makers remained committed to compulsory military service? Why is military service such an enduring institution, capable of withstanding fierce public and political attack, the disaster of several conflicts, and a number of attempts from inside to change it? It is this question which forms the basic problem of this dissertation.

Many explanations are given for this contradiction. In the Russian debate, especially in the generals' arguments against the all-volunteer force, the economic argument prevails. The Soviet and Russian High Command (and, one might add, a number of Western analysts) have consistently repeated the line that an all-volunteer force is only possible to maintain in an affluent country.<sup>3</sup> In the view of other researchers, the Russians' resistance toward structural change in the military is explained as the consequence of the loss of status as a superpower in the international system.<sup>4</sup> In this reasoning, the Russians wanted to maintain their superpower status and a militarized society of which nuclear weapons and a (Soviet type) mass army are the exponents. Did the Soviet army not prove to be successful in the Second World War and was it not able to deter possible invaders afterwards? Another explanation that is offered argues that Russia's refusal to give up its traditional armed forces reflects purely a psychological barrier to change and the basic reason therefore must be found in the historic experience of the Imperial and Soviet State. Each of these factors –or a constraining combination of them- may have influenced the process of change in the Russian military. Indeed, reform in a turbulent social and economic environment is extremely difficult. And Russia has its international reputation to consider. Finally, the Russian military is haunted by its past glories, and is resentful about the 'constant retreat' under Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower. All these factors are, however, not enough to explain Russia's apparent failure to introduce military organizational change. These arguments reduce the Russian military organizational crisis to 'an aggregate of tangible problems' as Crozier and Friedberg warned in a discussion on organizational change:

“A great deal of energy and money are invested in the study, analysis, and processing of the technical and economic aspects of the problems. But the planners fail to bear in mind that the problems in question exist only through the systems of action designed to deal with them. These systems cannot be reduced to an aggregate of tangible problems. As human constructs, they are never mechanically or automatically responsive to injunctions or decisions handed down from above or relayed through a central regulatory mechanism.”<sup>5</sup>

In this study, two alternative (less tangible) arguments are used to explain Russia's inertia in matters of military reform, namely an internal political (institutional) argument and a socio-cultural argument in which the individual in interaction with the organization is highlighted.

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<sup>3</sup> It is revealing, for instance, to note that the Sovet po vnechni I oboronnoi politike [the Council on Foreign and Military Policy]-a non-governmental research organization led by Sergei Karaganov-issued a book 'Strategiia dlia Rossii: povestka dnia dlia prezidenta-2000' [A strategy for Russia: an agenda for the President in the year 2000] in which chapter 4 is dedicated to military policy and the military organization. In the sixth paragraph of this chapter on 'reforma professional'noi voennoi podgotovki' the authors main argument against an AVF is an exclusive economic one. This is the more interesting because this chapter was the result of several roundtable discussions and other meetings in which many persons participated who dominated the defense discussion in the 1990's. The participants were: A. Arbatov, P. Zolotarev, P. Pomachkin, V. Chilkov (the authors of the chapter), A. Belkin, S. Karaganov, E. Kozhokin, A. Mordovin, S. Oznobishchev, D. Trenin, V. Tret'iakov, A. Tsalko, (members of a work group on military reform) V. Danilov, A. Zakharov, V. Manilov, S. Sokut, M. Gareev, V. Zorkal'tsev, I. Kovalev, A. Kokochin, V. Lukin, E. Primakov, S. Rogov, U. Rodionov, V. Rubanov, V. Samsonov and A. Sprengel (participants on several discussions) See Sergei Karaganov (Ed.), *Strategiia dlia Rossii, Povestka dnia dlia prezidenta-2000*, Moskva: Vagrius, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: G. A. Zyuganov (Ed.), *Voennaia reforma: otsenka ugroz natsional'noi bezopasnostu Rossii*, Moskva: RAU-universitet, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, *Actors & Systems, the Politics of Collective Action*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 233.

Before detailing these two arguments, the study's use of two concepts, namely 'military reform' and 'military organizational change' need to be defined.

In examining the concept of *military reform* the focus of the study will be on the broad political process relating to the discussion about change in the military structure. Military reform is thus seen in this study as a political concept, which will be detailed in Part Two of this dissertation. It is a typical top-down approach to the phenomenon of organizational change. The problem of the actors and the institutions that are part of the decision-making processes of military reform and the efficiency with which they perform are at the center of attention.

*Military organizational change* is a broader concept that addresses the global environment influencing change. It relates to a more diffuse and less tangible discussion, certainly in comparison with the political approach. In this study, the concept of military organizational change refers to the socio-cultural context in which military change occurs. This is a bottom-up approach, which complements and balances the top-down view of the politics of change. In the discussion about a possible end to the system of compulsory military service, it is interesting to concentrate on the problem of the drafted soldier. How does the soldier fit into the process of military change? Is he an obstacle or an impetus to organizational change? The way conscript soldiers are seen by the Russian High Command is also discussed. Finally, what is the socio-cultural impact of the soldiers' problem on society at large?

Two basic ideas guide this study. Firstly, the Russian military is seen as a complex, bureaucratic organization. The theory about change in bureaucracies as part of organizational sociology is therefore seen as a fundamental background for this dissertation. Secondly, and this is more controversial, modernization theory - as part of the sociology of change - is taken as a guideline. There has been much criticism addressed at '19th century' ideas about change. Robert Nisbet, Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein-to mention only the most well known-have attacked modernization theories since the 1970's.<sup>6</sup> However, in this dissertation modernization theory is seen as a valuable reference point for the reason that it has, implicitly, influenced a great deal of work in the field of military sociology- work which can be drawn upon to explain many aspects of change in the contemporary and the so-called post-modern military organization. Moreover, recent world-wide and longitudinal research based on value surveys (which included Russia) provide some evidence for basic assumptions in modernization theory, which give additional ground for choosing this approach.<sup>7</sup>

Alternative arguments to explain the failure of military reform will be developed to examine the research question, which asks: to what extent and in what way have institutional, political and especially socio-cultural factors contributed to the failure of military reform in Russia during the period of 1988-1998? In particular I would like to examine the case of the post-modern 'all-volunteer-force' debate which is the outward manifestation of a widely recognized need for military reform and effective organizational change in the Russian armed forces. In order to investigate this problem, the thesis argument will be divided into the following three parts: Protracted failure: the Russian military and the concept of the post-

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance: Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science. The Limits of Nineteen-Century Paradigms*, Cambridge: Polity Press: 1991; Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1984; and Robert Nisbet, 'Developmentalism: a Critical Analysis', in: J.C. McKinney and E. A. Tiryakian (Ed.), *Theoretical Sociology*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970, pp. 167-204. For a good review of modernization theory and the critique on it see: Piotr Sztompka, *The Sociology of Social Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 129-142.

<sup>7</sup> See: Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, 'Modernization, cultural change, and the persistence of traditional values', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1, February 2000, pp. 19-51; as also Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, Princeton: Princeton University press, 1997.

modern all-volunteer force; protest against choice: decision-making in the Russian military; and Cultural encounter: the soldiers' question.

The first part, protracted failure, explains the basic theoretical ideas that support this research and confronts them with the Soviet Russian debate on the conscript v. volunteer issue. The first chapter sheds some light on insights in the (dynamic) interaction between 'the actor' and 'the system'. It concentrates on change of the bureaucratic organization and applies it to the military organization. The main goal is - based on a sociological and Western understanding of professionalization of the armed forces - to provide insight into the model of the post-modern all-volunteer force and the logic of how military organizations evolve toward this type of organization. The long and turbulent history of military organizations as it occurred in the West will therefore be reviewed from a macro-sociological perspective, with a particular focus on the watershed changes of the 1990's. Besides this theoretical approach, the evolution is followed and illustrated with the experience of France, The Netherlands and Belgium –three countries that decided on and implemented the zero-draft in the 1990's –is presented. Some structural military manpower indicators of these countries -sociological and organizational variables- are shown as well as some comments are made on the political discussion that precipitated the all-volunteer army decision. In a second chapter, the Soviet-Russian structural manpower problems are put in context. Therefore the Soviet style mass army is outlined and the Russian structural crisis in manpower policy, based on a comparative view with the experience of France, Belgium and The Netherlands, defined. Finally, the third chapter concludes with a discussion that motivates the approach that is followed in this study. Based on the specific characteristics of the Russian reform failure and structural crisis, the chosen approach, which concentrates on decision-making problems in politics and cultural restraints on the reform effort, is motivated. It gives at the same time the opportunity to discuss the abundant literature on Soviet-Russian crisis in military affairs and links this study with several authors and applied studies in the field of Soviet-Russian military studies.

In the second part, protests against choice, military reform is considered as a problem of political decision-making. Accordingly, the military organization is put in its political context and the theoretical assumptions of effective decision-making are confronted with Russian political life during the turbulent 1988-1998 period. Although the influence, the achievements and failures of Gorbachev are not neglected, this period may be roughly considered as the era which was dominated by Boris Yeltsin. Therefore, the political reality with its specific Yeltsin stamp receives much attention. After the political context is outlined, the various reform plans, as published in the media, are outlined and confronted with ideas of efficient decision-making theory. The goal is to determine the extent to which the political process of reform (the way decision-making bodies were installed and decisions were made) contributed to organizational inertia, bearing in mind the enormous pressures that existed in the period 1988-1998.

The third part, cultural encounter: the soldiers' question, concentrates on the Russian military conscription system as it functioned in the 1990's. It puts the Russian conscript soldier in his socio-cultural and historical context. The hard living conditions, hazing and other realities of the Russian army are the main point of study and are related with specific mass army traits outlined in the first part of this study. Moreover, violence among soldiers is related to the question of violence in Russian society as a whole. It is here that modernization theory is used and a fundamental question is posed, namely: is the post-modern all-volunteer force structure compatible with the socio-cultural conditions in Russia? Is the contemporary soldier a barrier to structural change in the Russian military? In an effort to explore this, findings of field interviews with Russian soldiers are drawn upon.

Speaking with Russian soldiers is still a difficult undertaking. Soldiers are reluctant to speak openly about their army experiences, despite what the coverage of the soldiers' problem

in newspapers may suggest. Through the Soldiers' Mothers Organization in St.-Petersburg however, it was possible to interview personally about fifty soldiers, to participate in several information sessions and to read fifty declarations or -so called *zaiavleniia* -in which Russian conscripts asked for help and revealed many aspects of the life of a Russian soldier [*soldatskii byt*']. The personal interviews were done in cooperation with a Russian psychologist and a medical doctor, voluntarily working with the Soldiers' Mothers Organization of St.-Petersburg. This method is impressionistic and certainly biased –by the fact that only problematic cases present themselves with the Soldiers' Mothers-, but together with other scientific and journalistic publications, it can reconstruct a picture of contemporary army life in the Russian barracks. The results of these interviews can therefore also be inscribed in the field of 'the anthropology of the soldier'. In Appendix I, an extensive account is given on the methodology used to justify the reconstruction of the Russian soldier.

As mentioned above, this study is led by the question: why is a certain expected policy not implemented? Why has the all-volunteer army not become a reality in Russia? It may be strange to ask why a social event or change did not take place. With this question it is not insinuated that Russia is in one way or the other conditioned by socio-cultural and historical factors that render it incapable of or immune to change. On the contrary, Russia changes permanently and turbulently! Russia has always seemed to be confronted with turbulent change and stagnation at the same time. However, change is neither a linear, nor a chronological event and it is never steered by simple (well-meant) intentions. Organizational change must be first and foremost addressed as a problem of human choices made in the realm of power-relations, of influence, of bargaining, and of calculation. The outcome of an effort to change the military organization depends thus on the results of a 'game' in which the actor is confronted with the system as this fundamentally means: "that it reflects choices made by the actor in order to take advantage of available opportunities within the framework of constraints imposed upon him".<sup>8</sup> The interesting element in this point of view is that "...behavior is never entirely predictable, since it is not determined but, on the contrary, always contingent", which means "both dependent on a context, on opportunities and constraints (material and human), and indeterminate, hence free."<sup>9</sup> This study wants thus to bring the individual back in, as it is essentially an analysis of human choices made in a turbulent changing environment.

While the specific nature of the Russian context; with its particular tensions and contradictions, are borne in mind, an implicit comparative perspective is employed throughout this analysis. This is an intentional process, based on scientific justified considerations, as traditional authors on Russian historical and military affairs have done before.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Riasanovsky noted that: "In this, as in so many other cases, the evolution of Russia seems to offer a sharper and cruder version of what happened to the west of it?"<sup>11</sup> and Ellen Jones, "...that the Soviet military has some characteristics in common with its counterpart in noncommunist states, while others are unique to the society and political culture in which it is embedded".<sup>12</sup> This implicit comparative approach contains the idea that Russia and the West struggle in essence with comparable organizational problems on which debate is possible. Moreover, it may be clear that a Western model confronted with the Russian case can open

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, *Op.Cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18 and p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Lorenz, *De constructie van het verleden, een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis* [The Construction of the Past, an Introduction in the Theory of History], Amsterdam: Boom, 1994 (fourth edition), pp.180-214.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "The Problem of the Peasant", in: Wayne S. Vucinich (Ed.), *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 263.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Jones, *Red Army and Society, a Sociology of the Soviet Military*, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985, p. xv.

new perspectives on the Russian problems, and that the Russian experience may add something to the theoretical insights that govern the Western scientific discourse on this issue. This mutual 'impregnation' of Russian experience with the western debate and vice versa is seen as an original contribution of this study to the literature on Russian military affairs. Finally and crossing the conventional limits of scientific debate, the hope is expressed that this study can be seen as a stimulus for debate and dialogue on military affairs on both ends of the European continent, wherever eventual borders may have been or are situated.