

## Bear or Phoenix, Russia Rising

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The Russian military is undergoing a transformation that will fundamentally alter its organization and the way it fights. In the coming decades, the blunt instrument that destroyed the Wehrmacht was poised to steamroll Western Europe, and utterly annihilated Chechnya will be no more. Under the directorship of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, the Russian army is becoming smaller, more mobile, and professionalized. It is also modernizing. The end goal of this transformation is to create a well armed, well trained, professional army capable of battling both Muslim insurgents, like those the Russians fought in Chechnya, and conventional forces, like China's People's Liberation Army.

No episode better illustrates Russia's current military problems than the Chechen conflict. In December 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin ordered the 58<sup>th</sup> Army to invade and pacify the breakaway republic. The advance to the capital, Grozny, less than 50 miles from the border, took weeks with Russian columns being slowed by protestors, guerillas, and dissent in the ranks. The initial assault on Grozny, launched on New Year's Eve, was a disaster with two regiments rolling into an ambush and being destroyed by Chechen fighters. It took Russian forces several weeks to finally take Grozny, and months of fighting afterwards to subdue the country. Russian tactics were heavy handed to say the least, relying on massive artillery barrages, massed armor, and heavy air strikes to battle Chechen light infantry who used cities and towns for cover. Ill-prepared and undertrained Russian forces occupied the capital until August 1996, when Chechen forces infiltrated and drove them out. The Russians agreed to a ceasefire soon after. When the Russians re-took Grozny in 2000 they fought a campaign of annihilation, reducing the city and several large towns in the south and east to ruins.

At first glance, Anatoly Serdyukov would seem a strange pick to head Russia's Ministry of Defense. He is, in fact, an economist by training and he held several jobs in the Federal Tax Service before becoming its director in 2004. Under his stewardship, the Federal Tax Service became more centralized and secretive--more semi-independent from the Ministry of Finance. On 12 May, 2007, President Vladimir Putin appointed Serdyukov the Minister of Defense. He quickly fired the military service chiefs and replaced them with generals of his choosing--generals he could trust to implement his reforms.<sup>1</sup>

The most basic change Serdyukov has brought to the Russian army is organization. Like their American counterparts, the Russian army is moving away from division-centric ground forces in favor of semi-independent brigades. While a brigade will maintain three regiments, its support components-- logistics and fire support--will increase so that they are organic to the formation. Unlike the American transformation, which will maintain the Divisional organization, the Russians are planning to eliminate divisions altogether. Unlike their Soviet fore bearers, who were categorized in terms of

their combat readiness (only about a quarter of Soviet Divisions were fully ready to fight,) these new brigades will be fully manned and combat ready. When the transformation is complete, the Russian army should comprise 60 combat ready brigades. Russia's five airborne divisions are also being paired down to regiment sized formations.

The army is undergoing large scale personal changes as well. The size of Russian ground forces is shrinking by over 100,000 to just over 1 million men. The bulk of these reductions will come from the officer corps, which is considered by many to be bloated. The planning staff and Ministry of Defense are also being paired down. As the Russians have traditionally relied upon conscription to fill the ranks, it has been deprived of a steady, professional Non Commissioned Officer Corps of the kind seen in western armies. Building one is an important component of Serdyukov's program, but it will take more than a decade to do so, as the skills necessary can only be learned over time. To streamline costs, the nation's more than 100 academies and schools are being consolidated, with facilities being closed and redundancies, such as multiple armor schools, being eliminated. Serdyukov plans to use at least some of these savings to increase soldier's pay, which is far behind their western counterparts. In 2009, a cash bonus program was begun for officers.

Conscription is being radically altered, with terms of service being reduced from 18 months to one year. In the future, conscripts will not be sent to front line areas (such as the Caucasus.) They will instead function as a kind of reserve should large scale war break out. At the end of the first year, conscripts will be offered a chance to reenlist for a period of three years, at the end of which they will be eligible for American style benefits like the GI Bill. To promote the program, a kind of ROTC is being introduced into Russian secondary schools and colleges.<sup>2</sup>

Accompanying the reorganization is a crash modernization program. The first step in this program is research and development which, under Serdyukov's plan, has seen a sizable increase from just over 6% of the ministry's procurement budget in 2005 to just over 20% in 2006, and 19.8% in 2007. Heavy emphasis, amounting to more than 180 billion rubles by 2015, is being placed on developing Russia's long morbid electronics industry. To help facilitate weapons development, on 23 November, 2007, the Russian State Technologies Corporation was formed. Answering to the president, Russian State Technologies will oversee all aspects of military production and procurement. Among its first actions, it was to begin consolidating the many factories scattered throughout the nation.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian army is slowly acquiring new T-90 tanks with advanced fire control systems featuring thermal and laser imaging, electronic jamming (against laser targeting), and laser warning systems (for incoming ordnance .) It also comes equipped with explosive reactive armor. The T-90 has a lower hull silhouette than older Russian models, making it harder to spot and hit, and a 1,000 horsepower engine. India has been purchasing the T-90 for more than a decade, boasts a fleet of 300, and has ordered 347 more. Russia plans to purchase 62 T-90 tanks, per year, enough to equip two battalions. Even so, the T-90 would appear to be a temporary program meant to be a bridge between 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century designs.

Russia is also procuring a new class of infantry fighting vehicle, the BMPT. The new BMPT has a twin 30mm cannon, a 7.62 coaxial machinegun, a guided missile launcher capable of firing HEAT and thermobaric missiles, and two grenade launchers. It is designed to fight alongside the T-90 and provide support fire against anti-tank missile armed infantry. The BMPT will also have reactive armor and will house a crew of 5. This vehicle should be well suited to fight in urban terrain, a serious deficiency suffered by the Russians during the Chechen wars.<sup>4</sup>

Russian modernization is not limited to conventional forces. In December 2009, Russia will deploy the new RS-24 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile. Based on the older Topol-ms design, the RS-24 is a Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicle (MIRV). Russian authorities have stated that the missile will carry 'no less' than four warheads. The first batch of RS-24s are most likely going to Russian rocket regiments in the 34<sup>th</sup> Guards Mobile Division, based out of Teykovo--about 100 miles northeast of Moscow. When the deployment is complete, each regiment will count 18 missiles in its arsenal. These are mobile units, designed to travel along roads. Further deployment of silo based RS-24 missiles will occur sometime in 2010 or after. In April of 2009, General Nikolai Solovtsov, commander of Russia's strategic rocket forces, announced that he plans for 80% of his force to be replaced by 2016. He envisions the overall force being smaller, though of a higher quality than the previous one.<sup>5</sup>

Like the army, the Russian air force is modernizing. For the moment, the current fleet of combat aircraft (more than 200 bombers and 800 fighter bombers) will remain in service. There will be technological upgrades to current aircraft, though of what nature the Russians are not saying. A next generation fighter is also in development. The Russian's are currently concentrating on improving their helicopter airlift fleet, with plans to acquire more than 150 various models by 2015, a goal which fits in with Serdyukov's plan for a more mobile army. Right now, the greatest handicap faced by the Russian air force is flight time. Because of fuel shortages and budgetary constraints, flight time is often restricted to 20 hours a year. Whether or not training and technological upgrades can close the gap between the Russian air force and its western counterparts is unclear. Soviet era aircraft were at a significant disadvantage to western designs. For example, during the 1982 Lebanon War, the Israeli Air Force shot down 86 Soviet made Syrian aircraft without suffering any losses. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Coalition forces downed 42 Iraqi jets losing none themselves. Clearly the Russians have a long way to go.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian navy, which has shrunk by 2/3rds since the end of the Cold War, is undergoing a renaissance as well. Most notably, the Russians plan to build as many as six next generation aircraft carriers, each displacing from 50,000-60,000 tons (about the size of the fleet's current carrier) and carrying aircraft capable of vertical takeoff and landing. These ships will each cost up to \$4 billion dollars to build, not counting crew, air contingent crew, and escorts, making it unlikely the Russians will ever be able to afford such a large fleet. In recent years, Russian ships have taken to the high seas. The battle cruiser Kirov visited Venezuela in 2008, a calculated slap at the United States. Russian vessels are also participating in international piracy patrols off the horn of Africa. In 2004, Russia negotiated basing rights in the Syrian port of Tartas.<sup>7</sup>

The first test for the transforming Russian military came during August of 2008 in the Republic of Georgia. For years, Georgia had enjoyed strong relations with the west, especially the United States who provided equipment and advisors to the new Georgian army. In return, an entire Georgian combat brigade fought alongside American troops in Iraq. The ultimate goal of Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili was to establish full Georgian control over the north central region of Ossetia and to bring the nation into NATO. He had good reasons to seek out help from the west.

Though Putin was no longer president (his handpicked successor, Dmitri Medvedev, was elected earlier that year), few doubted he wasn't calling the shots. He saw Georgia, indeed the entire Caucasus, as part of Russia's natural sphere of influence and had greatly resented American efforts there. Two provinces of Georgia had been agitating for independence--Abkhazia in the northwest and Ossetia in the north central. Russia had been actively encouraging separatist forces in these areas, going so far as to arm local militias and even issuing Russian passports to whomever wanted one. A Russian peacekeeping battalion was deployed to Tskhinvali on the southern border. As such, Georgia did not really exercise sovereignty over the town, though it did control the villages upon the heights above. There had been periodic skirmishing between Ossetian and Georgian forces throughout the year. In one instance, Russian aircraft violated Georgian airspace, a move seen as a message to Saakashvili. In July, both nations held military maneuvers, each aimed at deterring the other.

In fact, Georgia had been massing troops outside of Tskhinvali for some time. These included the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigades, and the Artillery Brigade, which deployed batteries on the heights outside of town. The Russians had made extensive preparations to come to the aid of their allies in Ossetia, with units of the 58<sup>th</sup> Army being made ready to march with little warning, and much of the army was on military maneuvers when the war began. In early August, Ossetian and Georgian forces began sniping at one another. Artillery barrages were often exchanged. On 3 August, the Ossetians evacuated women and children from Tskhinvali. The artillery duel intensified; by 6 August, the exchanges were almost continuous, with Ossetian forces training their guns on Georgian villages. At this point, President Saakashvili ordered the army into Tskhinvali.<sup>8</sup>

While both sides had army units ready to enter Ossetia, there is some controversy as to who entered first. A spokesman for the Georgian government, Patrick Worms, says the Georgian army only attacked Tskhinvali when they had intelligence that Russian forces had entered the Roki Tunnel. The Georgians believed that Russian forces were driving south and were, in fact, trying to drive through the town to engage Georgian forces to the north. The Russians claim they only entered Ossetia after the Georgian army attacked.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the case, the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali began with an artillery and rocket barrage. This was soon augmented by Georgian SU-25 attack aircraft. As Tskhinvali was being pounded, Georgian troops encircled the town. Once the envelopment was complete, Georgian forces entered. Theirs was a two pronged thrust towards the parliament and the presidential palace in the city center, with one brigade

driving north along Stalin Street and another pushing east. Ossetian militia first offered stout resistance just south of the presidential palace destroying at least four Georgian tanks and several armored vehicles in heavy fighting. Hard fighting also erupted in the south eastern section of the city. Once these areas were cleared out, Georgian forces continued north, encountering heavy resistance again in the groves north of the city and taking heavy fire from Ossetian militia in the neighboring town of Tamarasheni. At least seven more Georgian vehicles are destroyed here, though Georgian troops did clear out the village.

While Georgian troops were battling the Ossetian militia for control of Tskhinvali, a small Georgian force, about company strength, raced north and attempted to close the Roki Tunnel. Here they were met by several hundred Ossetian militiamen. The outnumbered Georgians were pushed off the main road and forced to dig in on the heights above the tunnel. From here they engaged Russian forces, destroying numerous vehicles, but were unable to completely stop them. A Georgian commando unit further delayed the Russians near a bridge along the road to Tskhinvali, destroying several vehicles before they were wiped out.

These efforts delayed the Russian advance, but they could not stop it, and by the morning of 10 August, six regiments (three from the 19<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Division, two from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorized Rifle Division and a mixed group from the 76<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division) were on the northern outskirts of Tskhinvali. The Russians took Tamarasheni after a few hours of fighting and then entered Tskhinvali, inflicting heavy losses on the Georgians, who retreated to the heights above towns. Russian forces attacked these positions as well, taking them from the Georgians by the end of the day. Georgian forces mounted a last ditch effort to hold the Russian advance at the village of Zemo-Nikozi, south of Tskhinvali. Georgian forces managed to hold off the Russians for several hours before being forced out of the town. Meanwhile, in Abkhazia, local militia attacked Georgian troops defending the Kodori Gorge. The Russians flew elements of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 76<sup>th</sup> Parachute Divisions to help. Elements of the 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division also raided bases in the western part of the country including the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's barracks at Semki and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade's at Kutaisi. The Black Sea town of Poti was also visited by Russian commandos.

The Russian air force was active during the war, bombing targets throughout Georgia. Many sorties were launched against the Kodori Gorge and central Georgia, especially the area around Gori. However, Georgia had a modern air defense network including a battalion of six SA-11 self propelled surface to air missile systems, a battalion of eight updated SA-8 SAMS, several dozen man-portable SA-16 SAMs, a dozen ZSU-23 anti-aircraft guns, modern radar installations at Gori and Tbilisi, and an electronic radar monitoring system capable of identifying aircraft types. As a result, the Russian air force took surprisingly heavy casualties, losing three SU-25s attack jets and one backfire bomber on the 7<sup>th</sup>, an SU-24 Fencer on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, and a fourth SU-25 on the 9<sup>th</sup>. Three more SU-25s were damaged. After exerting considerable effort against the Georgian SA-11 and SA-16 battalions, the Russians claimed to have destroyed them by the end of the war.<sup>10</sup>

Having been ejected from Ossetia, Georgian forces rallied at Gori. They did not stay there long, however, as Russian troops entered Georgia proper. As such, Georgian forces continued to fall back until they reached the high ground to the east and north of Tbilisi. As the Russians pursued, taking Gori and Shenask, some Georgian units appear to have disintegrated, leaving equipment including APCs and T-72 tanks on the road. Dozens of vehicles were captured by the Russians. With international pressure against Russia increasing, especially from the United States and a visibly angry George Bush, on 12 August, the Russians decided to halt the advance. A ceasefire, negotiated by French President Nicholas Sarkozy was reached that same day. Official Russian statements place their casualties at 71 dead and 356 wounded and perhaps 150 Ossetian militiamen killed. The Georgians say they suffered 170 military dead.<sup>11</sup>

In one day, three brigades of the Georgian army had been decisively defeated by the Russians. This victory was followed up by a swift invasion of Georgia and the seizure of Gori. A series of commando raids against the Georgian military infrastructure were also well executed by the Russians. While Russian air and artillery did destroy some civilian targets, it pales in comparison to the destruction visited upon Chechnya, suggesting the Russians may be learning the propaganda value of limiting civilian losses. Over all, a fine performance by an army whose recent military experience was Chechnya and Afghanistan.

The war with Georgia shows the Putin/Medvedev regime plans to reestablish Russia as the premier military power in Eurasia. Since the war, Russia has continued its vehement opposition to NATO's eastward expansion and American plans for missile defense bases in Eastern Europe. Russia has also announced its intention to form a special Arctic military force to guard Russian claims to the oil reserves believed to lie below the Ocean floor. Given the current economic situation, Russia's arctic and naval plans are overly ambitious. Even in the best of times, a fleet of six aircraft carriers would be a pipedream. Still, Russia's armed forces are improving.

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<sup>1</sup>Kommersant, 16 February, 2007

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of Serdyukov's plan, see Phukov, Ruslan. *Serdyukov's Plan for Russian Military Reform*. Moscow Defense Brief, Vol. IV, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Frolov, Andrey. *Post-Soviet Russia's National Armament Program*. Moscow Defense Brief, Vol. IV, 2008

<sup>4</sup> For the T-90 and BMPT programs see Fofanov, Vasily. *Short Term Rearmament Prospects of Russia's Armed Forces*. Moscow Defense Brief, Vol. I, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> For the current state of Russia's nuclear forces visit [www.Russianforces.org](http://www.Russianforces.org), a Russian blog dedicated to the subject. Also see Russia can Launch ICBMs at a Minute's Notice- Missile Forces Chief. Novosti 11 February 2009 and Itar-Tass *Strategic missile force to be reduced somewhat by 2016 : Colonel General Nikolai Solovtsov*, 7 April, 2009

<sup>6</sup> Petrov, Nikita. *Russian Air Force Recovery*, Novosti, 14 August, 2008

<sup>7</sup> Kislyakov, Andrei. *Will Russia Build the World's Second Largest Fleet*. Novosti, 13 November, 2007

<sup>8</sup> For the run up to the war see *The Chronology of a Caucasian Tragedy*. Der Spiegle, 25 August, 2008. See also *Russia Boosts Force in Abkhazia to 9,000*—IFax. Reuters, 11 August, 2008

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<sup>9</sup> For Patrick Warm's remarks, and a pro Georgian interpretation of events see Michael Totten, *The Truth About Russia in Georgia*, 26 August, 2008, [www.michaeltotten.com](http://www.michaeltotten.com).

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, Michael. *Russian Air Force Underestimated Georgian Air Defenses*. Air Force Times, 18 September, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> For the Russian view of ground operations see Barabanov, Mikhail. *The August War Between Russia and Georgia*. Moscow Defense Brief, Vol. I 2009, for a western account highly critical of the Georgians see *The Ossetian War*, [www.radiobergen.com](http://www.radiobergen.com).