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Commanders of Putin's Long War

Purged, Reshuffled and Disgruntled

Pavel K. BAEV



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Abstract

The trend of reshuffling the Russian top military command in the course of a fast-evolving and far from successful war has progressed unevenly both across the Armed Forces' structures and in time. The rationale for and timing of the abrupt cadre decisions made by Commander-in-Chief Putin often defy logical explanation, and the rare official clarifications are no more informative than the usual information blackout. Putin typically prioritizes loyalty over competence, which makes the command structure incapable of addressing sudden shifts in the combat environment. The recent profound shake-up of and purges in the Defense Ministry have resulted in a serious bureaucratic disorganization of this structure that is crucial for sustaining the war effort. The lack of any changes in the General Staff weakens the ability to learn from experience and compromises the authority of the high command. Angst and anger among the fighting generals caused by the ineptness of the high command is a major source of political risk, which Putin can neither ignore nor properly address.

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Introduction

In any long war, the quality of leadership is a major factor in deciding the outcome. Making the decision to launch the aggression against Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin did not plan for a long war and badly overestimated the potency of Russia's Armed Forces. The responsibility for this enormous blunder is ultimately his; the intelligence services, first of all, the Federal Security Service (FSB), are guilty of reinforcing his misperceptions, but the military leadership can be blamed for misinforming the Commander-in-Chief, preparing entirely unfeasible plans for the campaign, and performing poorly in their professional role of commanding troops in combat operations.

Many obvious and embarrassing strategic failures have occurred during the 33 months of the fast-evolving war – from the badly prepared offensive operations toward Kyiv and Odesa in February-March 2022 to the attempt to establish a cordon sanitaire in the Kharkiv region in May-June 2024. What is striking about the political consequences of these setbacks is the reluctance of the Kremlin to put the blame on the high command or to turn particular commanders into scapegoats. Many generals were removed from their commands, but this punishment was always delivered quietly, without any Stalin-style attempts to use the fear factor. This treatment stands in contrast to the prosecution of corruption in the Ministry of Defense, which may be just a pretext for politically driven purges, but still typically involves exposure of the alleged crimes to public opinion.

Another contrast is the near absence of official or propagandist praise for successful generals, which probably attests to the Kremlin's worry about the emergence of high-profile military "heroes". Putin may declare positive impressions from meeting with commanders of the groupings of forces fighting in Ukraine, but the majority of this "excellent Pleiade" remains anonymous.¹ Scant information on the people leading the "special military operation" (SVO) can be found in the media or in the posts of "patriotic" mil-bloggers (*voenkory*). For instance, when General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff, was appointed commander of the combined group of forces executing the SVO in January 2023, his three deputies were

1. "Putin: v RF vyroslo pleâda komandirov, 'kotorââ vzyvâet ÷vstvo nadegi'" [Putin: A pleiade of generals who "inspire a feeling of hope" has emerged in Russia], TASS, June 12, 2024, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

the generals Sergei Surovikin, Oleg Salyukov, and Aleksei Kim.² Surovikin was removed from command after the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023, but nothing at all has been heard about the latter two. When Putin made a rare visit to the war zone in April 2023, generals Mikhail Teplinsky and Aleksandr Lapin were named as deputy commanders of the group of forces, but no further confirmation of their positions has since been given.³

It can be assumed, with reasonable confidence, that the commanders of five Russian military districts (Moscow, Leningrad, Central, Southern, and Eastern) are performing the duties of commanders of the five main groupings comprising the combined group of forces: West, North, Centre, South, and East, but there is uncertainty about the extra grouping called Dnepr, which is assumed to be led by Teplinsky, who is also the commander of the Airborne Troops (VDV).⁴ Information on commanders of the armies and the core formations in each strategic direction is too fragmented to be useful, and on the level of divisions and brigades, it is essentially non-existent. It is possible to establish the track record of engagements, mostly remarkably unsuccessful, of the famous Kantemirovskaya Guards Tank Division, but the name of the commander is unknown.⁵

The shortage of reliable data makes the task of examining the order of battle of the Russian Armed Forces in the war with Ukraine a complex research problem, and this report aspires to make a modest contribution. The aim here is to investigate the pattern of political decisions on appointments and dismissals of top officials in the Defense Ministry, the General Staff, and the Armed Forces, primarily the branches involved in waging war.

A note on the ranks in the military bureaucracy may be essential for clarifying the seniority of officials. Four ranks in the civil service correspond to four categories of generals, as indicated by stars on their shoulder boards: Active State Councillor (ASC) 1 class is equal to Army General/Fleet Admiral (big star); ASC 2 class – to Colonel-General/Admiral (Col-Gen/Adm 3 stars); ASC 3 class – to Lieutenant-General/Vice-Admiral (Lt-Gen/V-Adm 2 stars); State Councillor 1 class – to Major-General/Rear-Admiral (M-Gen/R-Adm 1 star). Currently, there are some 78 ASCs 1 class in the Russian state bureaucracy, but only three army generals in the

2. “Glava Genštaba VS RF naznačen komanduūšim ob’edinennoj gruppirovkoj vojsk v zone SVO” [The head of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation has been appointed commander of the joint group of troops in the area of SVO], *Interfax*, January 11, 2023, available at: www.interfax.ru.

3. “Peskov ob’āsnil otsutstvie Gerasimova i Őojgu v poezdke Putina v LNR i Hersonskuū oblast’” [Peskov explained the absence of Gerasimov and Shoigu on Putin’s visit to the LNR and Kherson region], *TASS*, April 18, 2023, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

4. “Vstreča s komanduūšimi vojskami voennyh okrugov” [Meeting with military districts’ commanders], March 15, 2024, available at: <http://kremlin.ru>.

5. D. Axe, “Russia’s 1st Guard Tank Army Has Won Its First Battle in Two Years”, *Forbes*, January 31, 2024, available at: www.forbes.com.

Armed Forces: Valery Gerasimov, Oleg Salyukov, and Sergei Surovikin. Sergei Shoigu still holds this rank in the position of secretary of the Security Council, and Aleksandr Dvornikov as the chairman of DOSAAF (Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy).

Purges in the Defense Ministry

The absence of any cadre reshuffling in the Defense Ministry (MoD) during the first two years of the war was, for most experts, as counter-intuitive as the severe purges unleashed by Putin in the leadership of this vast bureaucracy since late April 2024. Officials in the ministry, whether civilian or military, cannot be held responsible for the poor planning and ill-fate execution of combat operations, but they certainly can be blamed for the shortage of material resources needed to sustain the war effort and for the massive logistical problems with mobilization in autumn 2022, which is one of the reasons that make Putin reluctant to order a second one.⁶ The number of high-level MoD officials accused of corruption in several unrelated and, by Russian standards, not very large-scale cases, is increasing every week, but former Defense Minister Army-Gen Sergei Shoigu (b 1955) and most of his closest associates have so far been spared of this charge.

Shoigu's record-long political career started in April 1991, when he was given the task of transforming the dilapidated Soviet civil defense into an efficient Ministry for Emergency Situations. He accomplished this with remarkable success and gained considerable popularity in public opinion. In November 2012, he was appointed Defense Minister and brought with him a team of loyal followers, including ASC 1 Ruslan Tsalikov (b 1956) and Army-Gen Pavel Popov (b 1957), while retaining several efficient bureaucrats, including Army-Gen Nikolai Pankov (b 1954), Army-Gen Dmitry Bulgakov (b 1954), and ASC 1 Tatyana Shevtsova (b 1969), as key deputies. This team of trusted loyalists (mostly of the same age group) was gradually expanded with younger henchmen; for instance, ASC 1 Timur Ivanov (b 1975), who led the construction corporation Rosoboronstroj and had started his career in the nuclear corporation Rosatom (under Sergei Kiriyenko, currently a deputy head of presidential administration), was promoted to deputy minister in May 2016.⁷

The immediate task for Shoigu was to restore confidence in political leadership among the officer corps shaken by the reforms executed by his predecessor Anatoly Serdyukov with blunt disregard for traditions and

6. V. Inozemtsev, "Will Russia Face a New Mobilization?", *Riddle*, April 11, 2024, available at: <https://ridl.io>.

7. S. Kanev, "He Knew Exactly Where to Take a Bite", *The Insider*, May 4, 2024, available at: <https://theins.ru>.

strategic assessments.⁸ Working closely with the newly appointed chief of the General Staff Army-Gen Valery Gerasimov (b 1955), Shoigu managed to gain trust from the top brass, not least because he was able to secure a massive increase of funding for modernizing the Armed Forces.⁹ Where he succeeded in particular was in promoting the image of a mighty modern army by exploiting various propaganda tools, from the *Zvezda* TV channel to the newly constructed theme park Patriot with a military-style cathedral.¹⁰ In that image-making, the intervention in Syria, presented as a highly efficient projection of modern force, particularly air power, was highly instrumental. In contrast, the deployment of army units for fighting in Donbas was never mentioned.

The inflated assessments of Russia's military might, which were reflected in many Western expert analyses, underpinned the decision to launch the invasion into Ukraine in February 2022 – and were shattered during the first few weeks of the campaign.¹¹ Putin had to internalize the reality of several humiliating setbacks, starting with the retreat from Kyiv's suburbs in late March 2022. He replaced many high-level generals (more on that later) but kept his irritation against Shoigu in check. The narrative on the “special military operation” progressing “according to plan” implied continuity of the leadership. The first manifestation of his angst was the shocking arrest of Timur Ivanov on April 24, 2024, which was hailed by many “patriotic” commentators as due punishment for embezzlement and depleting military capabilities.¹² Ivanov, with his lavish lifestyle, served as a convenient target, particularly since he was not a part of and had few connections with the military elite. Shoigu was transferred to the prestigious but non-executive position of secretary of the Security Council on May 12, 2024, and within a week, most of his deputies, including Pankov, Popov, Shevtsov, and Tsalikov, were dismissed (by one terse presidential decree), and Bulgakov was arrested.¹³ Shoigu was not allowed to bring any of his loyalists into the apparatus of the Security Council, and Popov was arrested in late August 2024.¹⁴

8. D. Gorenburg, “The Russian Military under Sergei Shoigu: Will the Reform Continue?”, *PONARS Eurasia Memo*, June 14, 2013, available at: www.ponarseurasia.org.

9. S. Seibt, “Serguei Shoigou et Valeri Guerassimov, les maîtres de guerre de Vladimir Poutine”, *France 24*, March 3, 2022, available at: www.france24.com.

10. R. McDermott, “Shoigu Builds Mythical Russian Army”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 24, 2016, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

11. J. Hackett, N. Childs and D. Barrie, “If New Looks Could Kill: Russia's Military Capability in 2022”, *IISS Military Balance blog*, February 15, 2022, available at: www.iiss.org.

12. Y. Fedorov, “Timur i ego komanda” [Timur and his team], *TopWar.ru*, April 28, 2024, available at: <https://topwar.ru>.

13. I. Volzhsky, “Vorovat' – ne voevat” [Stealing is not fighting], *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, August 6, 2024, available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu>.

14. “Čem izvesten èks-zamministra oborony Pavel Popov” [What is known about former deputy defense minister Pavel Popov], *Kommersant*, August 29, 2024, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

Putin's motivations for this purge are still far from clear, but he was apparently ready to accept the inevitable disorganization in the crucially important ministry. It is also rather obvious that the newly appointed Defense Minister ASC 1 Andrei Belousov (b 1959) has no experience in military matters and no useful connections with the defense-industrial complex. His telegrams of congratulations to units capturing Ukrainian villages are hardly producing any moral boost.¹⁵ He is trying to assemble a new leadership in the Defense Ministry, but the administrative quality of his deputies – for instance, ASC 1 Pavel Fradkov (b 1981), son of a former prime minister – is doubtful, while the evidence of corruption is plentiful.¹⁶ One role Belousov is definitely incapable of performing is that of an authoritative commander, while Shoigu became rather too fond of playing, visiting the HQs of groups of forces and instructing fighting generals. In this vain posturing, he may have overstepped the Kremlin's boundary for subordinates to the one absolute war leader, and his performance in over-decorated uniform during the May 9 Victory Day parade in Moscow could have been a show too far that provoked Putin's vexation.

With all his apparent vanity, Shoigu was keen to emphasize his loyalty to the Commander-in-Chief, underpinned by long efforts in cultivating personal ties, particularly during several two-men-only Siberian vacations. He is, nevertheless, the only politician in Russia with a long-established independent track record, distinct profile, particular support base and a team of devoted followers. The war may not have added to his popularity, but it put him at the forefront and increased his access to material and organizational resources. Shoigu stood out in the Kremlin's hierarchy, and Putin quite probably recognized this prominence as a potential political risk and moved pre-emptively to eliminate it.

15. "Belousov pozdravil voennyh s osvoboždeniem Novoselovki Pervoj" [Belousov congratulated the military on the liberation of Novoselovka Pervaya], *RIA-Novosti*, August 6, 2024, available at: <https://ria.ru>.

16. G. Cherkasov, "Lûdi s biografiâmi: kakim polučilos' novoe rukovodstvo rossijskogo Minoborony" [People with Bios: What is the new leadership of the MoD], *Forbes.ru*, June 21, 2024, available at: www.forbes.ru.

The immovable and the promoted

A fast reshuffle of the top command is to be expected in a war that fails to follow the initial plan for a quick victory and progresses from one setback to another. All the more surprising, then, is the lack of any personal changes in the Russian General Staff, which designed the plan for the invasion of Ukraine and is responsible for coordinating the ongoing operations. Army-Gen Valery Gerasimov was promoted to lead the Genshtab (as it is commonly called) in November 2012, and in January 2023, he was appointed commander of the combined group of forces engaged in the “special military operation” (SVO). Traditionally, the chief of the General Staff works closely with the Defense Minister, but after removing Sergei Shoigu from the position he had held since November 2012, Putin confirmed that no changes in the General Staff were planned.¹⁷ Besides advancing the concept of “hybrid war”, Gerasimov pioneered the reorganization of the Armed Forces for waging dynamic modern wars, in which highly mobile battalion tactical groups (BTGs) were supposed to be the key unit.¹⁸

The reality of trench warfare is strikingly different from the pre-war mainstream of Russian strategic thinking¹⁹; yet, Gerasimov remains in charge of combat operations, while becoming rather unpopular among the battle-hardened officer corps.²⁰ His three main deputies – First Deputy Col-Gen Nikolai Bogdanovsky (b 1957), Head of the Main Operational Directorate Col-Gen Sergei Rudskoi (b 1960), and Head of the Main Organizational-Mobilization Directorate Col-Gen Yevgeny Burdinsky (b 1960) – also remain in their respective chairs, which they have occupied for many years. The Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) experienced several command reshuffles in the 2010s, but since 2018, Adm Igor Kostyukov (b 1961) has been the director, despite many shocking fiascoes, like the failure to provide solid assessments of the concentration of Ukrainian forces for the incursion into the Kursk region in August 2024.²¹

17. “No Changes Planned for General Staff, Putin Says”, *Moscow Times*, May 15, 2024, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com.

18. M. Kofman and R. Lee, “Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military’s Ill-fated Force Design”, *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2022, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

19. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes [Russian strategic thought and culture]*, Paris: Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2023.

20. “Putin Has No Other General Staff”, *Re: Russia*, April 17, 2023, available at: <https://re-russia.net>.

21. “Russian General Staff Ignored Intel Reports Predicting Incursion into the Kursk Region”, *Kyiv Post*, August 9, 2024, available at: www.kyivpost.com.

Besides the General Staff, several other main branches of the Russian Armed Forces have not seen any change in command in the last decade. Col-Gen Sergei Karakayev (b 1961) has been in charge of the Strategic Rocket Forces since June 2010; Army Gen Oleg Salyukov (b 1955) has been the commander-in-chief of the Ground Forces since May 2014; Col-Gen Aleksandr Golovko (b 1964) has led the Space Forces since their formation in August 2015 (and was in charge of the Airspace Defense Forces from 2012 to 2015). Another notable veteran is Col-Gen Vladimir Zarudnitsky (b 1958), who has presided over the Military Academy of the General Staff since November 2017. By the standards of military service, all these commanders are pushing the age limit, but this is not, apparently, an issue for Putin. His reluctance to change many top commanders for a decade and more stands in contrast with more frequent reshuffles of government ministers; if, prior to the war, it may have reflected his satisfaction with the modernization of the Armed Forces, currently, it may be a sign of mistrust in the new generation of war-hardened generals.

Despite so many “immovable” commanders in the high echelons of the military hierarchy, promotions to and in the ranks of general/admiral have been accelerating over the course of the war, and official data on these changes are reasonably reliable. The shifts in Putin’s attitude are easy to see: in the first year of the SVO, he was reluctant to award the big stars (the traditional June decree wasn’t issued at all), but since mid-2023, he has opted to be more generous with promotions, and in 2024, this “benevolence” has reached a new high, particularly regarding granting the first star.

Table 1. Promotions to the ranks of general/admiral by presidential decrees

Date of decree	1 star	2 stars	3 stars
17.02.2022	26	5	—
07.12.2022	21	6	2
17.02.2023	17	10	4
06.06.2023	31	11	3
07.09.2023	—	1	2
08.11.2023	11	3	1
06.12.2023	24	9	—
19.02.2024	18	4	1
02.05.2024	15	6	—
11.06.2024	30	8	2

Source: Russian portal for official publication of legal acts, available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru>.

Fewer than usual promotions to the top ranks is also a clear trend, and it is possible to identify who among the fighting generals has earned Putin’s approval. All except one of the present-day commanders of military districts (and, accordingly, groupings of forces) were appointed in spring 2024, and

most MDs have seen several changes (EMD had six), sometimes abrupt, so the chief of staff had to assume acting command. There is no certainty, for that matter, that Gol-Gen Gennady Anashkin (b 1968) and Lt-Gen Aleksandr Sanchik (b 1966) will be approved as commanders of the SMD and EMD, respectively, even if Putin commented on their performance at the May 15 meeting. These appointments and dismissals are rarely officially announced, and cross-referencing various media sources and social networks gives a picture rich in inexplicable inconsistencies.

Table 2. Current commanders of the MDs and their predecessors

MD	Current	Appointed	Predecessor	Appointed	Changes since 01.01.22
SMD	Col-Gen Anashkin	May 2024 (acting)	Col-Gen Kuzovlev	January 2023	3
EMD	Lt-Gen Sanchik	May 2024 (acting)	Col-Gen Kuzmenko	April 2023	6
CMD	Col-Gen Mordvichev	February 2023	Maj-Gen Linkov	November 2022 (acting)	3
WMD	Disbanded	March 2024	Col-Gen Nikiforov	December 2022	5
LMD	Col-Gen Lapin	March 2024			1
MMD	Col-Gen Kuzovlev	May 2024			1

Only one of the current top commanders has strongly risen in the ranks over the course of the war: Andrei Mordvichev (b 1976), who commanded the 8th Army of the SMD and led the assault on Mariupol in spring 2022. That battle gave a boost to his career, and he was appointed deputy commander of the SMD in October 2022 and promoted further to command the CMD in February 2023, receiving the rank of Col-Gen in September 2023, at the unusually young age of 47. His resolve in the battle for Avdiivka in February 2024 earned him rare praise in the Russian media.²²

22. V. Sokirko, "General-proryv. Mordvičev bral Mariupol', seičas Avdeevku, pojdët i dal'se" [General-breakthrough: Mordvichev took Mariupol, now Avdiivka, and will go further], *Argumenty & Fakty*, February 18, 2024, available at: <https://aif.ru>.

More typical are the transfers from one MD to another, like the moves of Col-Gen Sergei Kuzovlev (b 1967), who was deputy commander of the SMD from February 2019 to late 2022, then briefly commanded the WMD, moved back to command the SMD in early 2023, and, with two months' delay, was appointed to command the newly created MMD in May 2024. Similar swings marked the career of Col-Gen Aleksandr Lapin (b 1964), who commanded the CMD since November 2017 and led the Center group of forces in the assault on Lisichansk in the summer of 2022. The disorganized retreat of Russian troops from the Kharkiv region in autumn 2022 was sharply criticized by mil-bloggers, and Ramzan Kadyrov lambasted Lapin personally.²³ In November, Lapin was removed from command

(Maj-Gen Linkov became acting commander), but instead of disappearing, like many others, he assumed the less demanding position of chief of staff of the Ground Forces before taking charge of the newly created LMD in March 2024. The debacle of the Ukrainian incursion into the Kursk region in August 2024 triggered a new deluge of criticism from “patriotic” bloggers, but Lapin is never mentioned personally and can retain his command over the North group of forces. Another notable survivor is Col-Gen Mikhail Teplinsky (b 1969), who was appointed commander of Airborne Troops in June 2022, and allegedly raised strong objections against using the elite VDV units as line infantry.²⁴ Rumors about his dismissal were, however, disproved, and Teplinsky is presumed to command the Dnepr group of forces, even if holding defenses along the River Dnipro is hardly an appropriate task for a paratrooper-general.

Overall, preferences in promotions and transfers among the “fighting” generals are as obscure in terms of logical explanation as is the rationale for retaining many apparently under-performing generals in key positions, particularly in the General Staff. Putin has become keen to expand the cohort of one-star generals by promoting colonels but is wary about increasing the ranks of top generals. He is generous with praise for the battle-hardened commanders, but the frequent shifts in command of the key groupings may be a sign of concern about the emergence of teams of subordinates loyal to a particularly ambitious and experienced war leader.

23. D. Erozbek, “Kadyrov obvinil general-polkovnika Lapina v otsutstvii na boevoy pozicii” [Kadyrov accused Col-Gen Lapin of abandoning combat position], *Kommersant*, October 27, 2022, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

24. O. Romashova, “Tak kto komanduet VDV Rossii? Haos v armii — na primere predpolagaemoj otstavki generala-desantnika” [Who commands Russian VDV? Chaos in the army—on the example of the alleged resignation of a paratrooper general], *Media-Zona*, January 23, 2023, available at: <https://zona.media>.

The demoted, the disgraced and the disappeared

The setbacks in the execution of the initial plan for war and in conducting further combat operations have inevitably resulted in the removal of many top-level commanders, though perhaps not as early and as many as common strategic sense would prescribe. In most cases, no explanations were officially given, and little, if any, information about the further exploits of fired generals can be found in open sources. One recent example is Yevgeny Nikiforov (b 1970), who was appointed to command the WMD in December 2022 and promoted to the rank of Col-Gen in February 2023, but with the formation of the LMD and the MMD in early 2024, he disappeared from openly available records. One common feature of such removals is that no cozy political office, like State Duma deputy or regional governor, has been granted to such relatively young retirees as, for instance, Lt-Gen Roman Berdnikov (b 1974), who commanded the WMD in September-December 2022, or Col-Gen Aleksandr Chaiko (b 1971), who commanded the EMD from November 2021 to July 2022. The only confirmed high-rank casualty is Lt-Gen Oleg Tsokov (b 1971), killed by a missile strike on the command center in Berdyansk on June 11, 2023.²⁵

One particular case is Army-Gen Aleksandr Dvornikov (b 1961), who commanded the SMD from September 2016 and was appointed to command the Joint Group of Forces in April 2022. Before this appointment, each group of forces had operated separately, in a striking departure from the tenets of Russia's rigidly hierarchical strategic culture.²⁶ Dvornikov apparently failed to take effective overall control and was replaced in early October 2022 by Army-Gen Surovikin.²⁷ What makes the case stand out is that Dvornikov was the first commander of the Russian group of forces in Syria from September 2015 to June 2016 and sought to make that

25. M. Jankowicz, "Ukraine Took Out a Top Russian General with a Storm Shadow Missile", *Business Insider*, July 12, 2023, available at: www.businessinsider.com.

26. M. Galeotti, P. Baev and G. Herd, "Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, Morale, and the Ukraine War", Marshall Center Strategic Competition Seminar, November 15, 2022, available at: www.marshallcenter.org.

27. M. Ilyushina and N. Abbakumova, "Kremlin, Shifting Blame for War Failures, Axes Military Commanders", *Washington Post*, October 8, 2022, available at: www.washingtonpost.com.

intervention into a training course for top- and mid-level generals.²⁸ His theorizing on the dynamic multi-domain character of modern wars was proven to be wide of the mark, and in early 2024, Dvornikov was rather humiliatingly “elected” chairman of the voluntary paramilitary society DOSAAF.²⁹

Another, and very different, special case is that of Army-Gen Sergei Surovikin (b 1966), who took responsibility for the decision to withdraw from the Kherson stronghold on the right bank of the River Dnipro and commanded the orderly and fast retreat.³⁰ He also supervised the construction of defensive positions that the Ukrainian counter-offensive failed to breach in summer 2023.³¹ As Army-Gen Gerasimov assumed the position of commander of the Joint Group of Forces in January 2023, Surovikin remained as one of his deputies, while retaining the position of commander-in-chief of the AirSpace Forces, to which he was appointed in October 2017, after commanding the EMD since October 2013. It was the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023 that became Surovikin's undoing as he was accused – without much-known evidence – of supporting Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion, placed under arrest, and subsequently appointed to the insignificant position of head of the CIS Coordinating Committee for Air Defense.³² Whatever ties with Prigozhin Surovikin did cultivate, those were probably less important for his demotion than the reputation and authority he had gained in the officer corps – definitely making him culpable in the eyes of the Kremlin.

Another high-rank casualty of Prigozhin's mutiny was Col-Gen Mikhail Mizintsev (b 1962), who had held the position of chief of the National Defense Control Center since 2014 and was appointed Deputy Defense Minister in September 2022 before assuming the unusual post of deputy commander of the Wagner Group in May 2023. He was not directly implicated in the mutiny but obviously failed to report on its preparation. The only known fact

28. R. McDermott, “Putin's Leading War Generals and the Legacy of Syria”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 13, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

29. “Byvšij komanduščij ŪVO Dvornikov vozglavil DOSAAF Rossii” [Former commander of the SMD Dvornikov to lead the DOSAAF], *Vedomosti*, February 3, 2024, available at: www.vedomosti.ru.

30. S. Cropsey, “The Retreat from Kherson”, *Read Clear*, November 14, 2022, available at: www.realcleardefense.com.

31. J. Epstein, “Ukraine's Front-line Forces Are Trying to Fight Their Way Through Russia's Formidable Surovikin Line”, *Business Insider*, September 6, 2023, available at: www.businessinsider.nl.

32. I. Volzhsky, “Where Is General Surovikin?”, *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, July 17, 2024, available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu>.

about him is that he was not aboard the plane that crashed on August 23, 2023, killing Prigozhin and his several associates.³³ The Wagner Group activities in Africa have been reorganized into several outfits, like Redut and the Africa Corps, controlled primarily by the GRU, but Mizintsev is not in the picture.³⁴

Two admirals were sternly but not “demonstratively” punished for the failure of the Black Sea Fleet to establish control over the maritime theatre. Admiral Igor Osipov (b 1973), who had held command since May 2019, was replaced in August 2022, taking the blame for the sinking of the flagship cruiser *Moskva*.³⁵ His successor Viktor Sokolov (b 1962) was promoted to admiral in June 2023, but continuing losses of combat ships to Ukrainian missile and drone strikes cut his career short, and Vice-Adm Sergei Pinchuk (b 1971) was appointed to command the much-reduced fleet in February 2024. The commander-in-chief of the Navy was also replaced in March 2024, but this appears to be a normal transition, as Admiral Nikolai Evmenov (b 1962) stayed in this post for the traditional four years and is currently chief of the Naval Academy, while Admiral Aleksandr Moiseev (b 1962) has assumed the C-in-C position after commanding the Northern Fleet since May 2019.³⁶

The exception to the pattern of quiet dismissals is the case of Maj-Gen Ivan Popov (b 1975), who took command of the 58th Army of the SMD in June 2022, and was released from this duty in July 2023 after a blunt report to Army-Gen Gerasimov on the problems with logistics and rotation of units. What made the case extraordinary was the huge resonance of this dismissal, which was produced by the publication of its true reasons by Popov's supporters in the State Duma.³⁷ Popov was swiftly appointed to a command post in the Russian grouping in Syria, which had become a strategic backwater rather than a career booster, but that was not the end of his travails.

33. E. Abramov, “Posle neudačnoj popytki vooružennoĝo mâteĝa, iz mediĝnogo prostranstva propal general Mizincev” [After an unsuccessful attempt at an armed rebellion, General Mizintsev disappeared from the media space], *Cherepovetskaya istina*, July 10, 2023, available at: <https://ku.life>.

34. C. Faulkner, “Wagner Group Setback in Mali challenges Russia's Strategy in Africa and the Region's Faith in Russian Mercenaries”, *The Conversation*, August 9, 2024, available at: <https://theconversation.com/>.

35. G. Carbonaro, “Putin Replaces Navy Chief Igor Osipov After Moskva Flagship Sunk”, *Newsweek*, August 19, 2022, available at: www.newsweek.com.

36. C. Miller and M. Seddon, “Russia Sacks Naval Commander After Humiliating Black Sea Losses”, *Financial Times*, March 11, 2024, available at: www.ft.com.

37. K. Armstrong, “Ukraine War: Russian General Fired After Criticizing Army Leaders”, *BBC*, July 13, 2023, available at: www.bbc.com; A. Ponomareva, “‘Spartak ploho končil’. Blogery ob otstavke generala Popova za kritiku” [‘Spartak ended badly’. Bloggers about the resignation of General Popov for criticism], *Svoboda.org*, July 14, 2023, available at: www.svoboda.org.

In May 2024, he was arrested on the charge of corruption, but the criminal case has again gained high publicity, and in July, he was released from jail and placed under house arrest.³⁸ For Gerasimov, a “demonstrative dismissal” would have presumably been quite satisfactory for restoring the damaged authority, but the specter of rebellion by angry fighting generals is probably haunting the authorities in the Kremlin, and Popov’s prosecution was supposed to exorcise it, delivering instead the opposite effect. Unlike the purges in the Defense Ministry, which are widely perceived as just punishment, this single case of persecution of a war hero keeps generating public discontent against the high command, while Popov demands the pardon on the condition of returning to the war zone, granted increasingly often to many corrupt officials.³⁹

Overall, in the first tumultuous year of the war, the dismissal of underperforming commanders was a clear trend in Putin’s cadre policy as he tried to reverse the trend of military setbacks. The Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023 forced him to execute several particular sackings, but Prigozhin’s betrayal also influenced his judgment of loyalty to the top brass in a more profound way. Competence and initiative have become less important and perhaps more suspicious qualities in commanders, particularly as the trajectory of the war became less volatile, and he became more alert to signs of independence in making tactical decisions and of disapproval of strategic decisions made by the supreme command.

38. I. Volzhsky, “General pečal’noj kar’ery” [General of a sad career], *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, July 16, 2024, available at: <https://novyagazeta.eu>.

39. S. Tolmachev and N. Sergeev, “Stavki generala sygrali na pobedu” [General gambled on a win?], *Kommersant*, October 16, 2024, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

Conclusion

The dynamics of reshuffling the top military command have been strikingly uneven across various structures of the Russian Armed Forces and across time. In the first year of the war, the High Command (which itself underwent no changes whatsoever) found it necessary to replace the underperforming commanders, Army-Gen Dvornikov being the prime example, and to promote generals that showed resolve and some ability to adjust to unexpected turns in the course of operations. As the war turned more static in its second winter, that pattern of dismissals and replacements was altered toward more stability, but it was the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023 that caused more cadre reshuffle and brought to the forefront the issue of loyalty. Putin's decision to unleash purges in the Defense Ministry and to transfer Army-Gen Shoigu to the high-profile but low-authority position of secretary of the Security Council was most probably driven by this issue rather than the desire to curtail corruption.

Putin has good reasons to worry that the war has a transformative impact on the corps of fighting generals, who develop combat camaraderie and disdain for bureaucrats and politicians. The names of the top commanders are almost never mentioned in the mainstream media, and the "patriotic" bloggers (*voenkory*), who are now held on a short leash, are discouraged from lauding the generals and also instructed to refrain from the personal insults that were typical of the Prigozhin-controlled social media.⁴⁰ The fate of the majority of dismissed commanders is also shrouded in mystery. This enforced anonymity and secretiveness come together with Putin's "generosity" in promoting colonels to one-star generals as brigades are transformed into divisions, often without any increase in personnel. The suppressed discontent among these commanders caused by the heavy casualties in the relentless attacks and the poor quality of reinforcements remains, nevertheless, a source of political risk. This may not manifest itself openly but it is all the more worrisome for the Kremlin because of this invisibility.

It makes perfect sense for Putin to focus this presumed anger on Army-Gen Gerasimov, who is therefore retained in the position of commander of the Joint Group of Forces and is allowed to keep his team of ageing subordinates in the General Staff. The demoralized Gerasimov apparently opted to ignore the intelligence reports on the concentration of

40. "Poka peremeny bol'she na slovah': 'voenkory' o pervoj vstreche s novym ministrom oborony Rossii" ["So far, the changes are more in words": "war correspondents" about the first meeting with the new Russian Defense Minister], *Republic.ru*, June 11, 2024, available at: <https://republic.ru>.

Ukrainian forces in the Sumy region, so the incursion into the Kursk region in early August 2024 achieved more than a tactical surprise.⁴¹ Putin initially defined this Ukrainian operation as a “provocation” and sought to respond with a counter-terrorist operation led by Army-Gen Aleksandr Bortnikov (b 1951), the director of the FSB, and Col-Gen Aleksey Dyumin (b 1972), newly-appointed secretary of the State Council and formerly an officer in the Presidential Security Service.⁴²

In operational terms, the North group of forces had to face the Ukrainian offensive, but its commander, Col-Gen Lapin, not known for tactical brilliance, did not dare to move forces from the two small bridgeheads in the Kharkiv region gained with heavy losses in spring, knowing that Putin cherishes the idea of a “cordon sanitaire”.⁴³ Instead, Lapin ordered the transportation to the war zone of raw conscripts from every unit in his Leningrad MD, from Kaliningrad to Murmansk.⁴⁴ The decision to create three new groups of forces – Belgorod, Bryansk and Kursk – announced by Belousov two weeks after the start of the Ukrainian offensive is poorly compatible with the existing command structure, and the appointment of commanders remains obscure.⁴⁵

This case, still unfolding at the moment of writing, illustrates the fundamental flaws in Putin's preferences in reshuffling the top brass. Prioritizing loyalty over competence has been a feature of his cadre policy for many years, with the exception of several key figures (like the head of the Central Bank of Russia, Elvira Nabiullina) in the economic part of the government. The war, however, demands a different approach, which Josef Stalin did not hesitate to adopt to turn the tide of defeats in the disastrous initial period of the Great Patriotic War.

Generals in Putin's army are perfectly capable of leading (albeit from a safe distance) costly attacks on the Ukrainian defenses, delivering proof for the Commander-in-Chief's belief in holding the strategic initiative. In a fast-changing combat environment, when the orders from above invariably come too late, they tend, however, to err on the side of inaction, granting the adversary the advantage of choice in making the next move. The capacity to learn from mistakes and setbacks is limited by the pronounced reluctance to admit blunders and, even more, by the absence of any younger and combat-hardened generals in the retrograde General Staff. The angst of

41. T. Porter, “Ukraine Exposed Russia's Sluggish Command with Its Kursk Incursion”, *Business Insider*, August 12, 2024, available at: www.businessinsider.com.

42. B. Quenelle, “Alexei Dyumin, Putin's Ex-bodyguard, Expected to Head Kursk Operation”, *Le Monde*, August 15, 2024, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

43. P. Wasielewski and W. Courtney, “Putin's *cordon sanitaire* in Ukraine”, *RAND Commentary*, April 9, 2024, available at: www.rand.org.

44. A. Staalsen and G. Chentemirov, “As Ukraine Advances in Kursk, Families of North Russian Conscripts Cry Mercy”, *The Barents Observer*, August 15, 2024, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

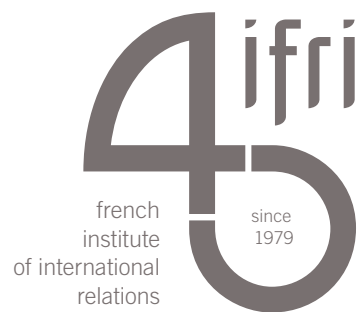
45. “V Rossii sozdali tri novye gruppirovki vojsk” [Three new groupings of forces are created in Russia], *RIA-Novosti*, August 20, 2024, available at: <https://ria.ru>.

the fighting generals caused by the ineptness of the high command is accumulating, and Putin has no reliable measure for this risk, typically swinging between ignoring it and assuming it to be imminent. It was his war to start, and the urge to control all key decisions, combined with mistrust in the “pleiade” of seasoned but disgruntled commanders, makes it his war to lose.

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