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The Red Army Gets Robbed

June 13, 2011: The Russian government has been striving, for the last two decades, to reform the armed forces. This has been difficult, partly because so many Russians didn't realize how badly reform was needed. Few in Russia, the heart of the old Soviet Union, believed there was much need for any reform at all before 1991. But after the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, there were a few years when lots of previously closed (and very, very, secret) archives were open to Russian and foreign researchers. Moreover, many veterans of the old Soviet forces (the "Red Army") were now willing to speak freely. What all this information revealed was the Soviet Armed forces had been falling apart for decades. Despite all the new weapons and equipment received in the 70s and 80s, and lots of enthusiastic officers (including a few very visionary ones), the force was stuck in the past. The Red Army only looked modern. It was all for show.

In the last few years, the government has gone public with details of its reform efforts, if only to put pressure on the parliament to keep the money coming, and to assure the public that efforts were being made to fix the problems that had long been whispered about. Every veteran of the Soviet Armed Forces knew of the problems. Although the truth was supposed to be kept secret, with most adult males having been conscripted, it was hard to conceal the truth.

Despite billions of dollars in new equipment, weapons and facilities, and shrinking the armed forces to a fifth of its 1991 size, many serious leadership problems remained. This has recently been emphasized again as more fuel and ammunition was made available for training. Many troops had not been able to use their major weapons (like tanks) or heavy equipment for years, because of the cash shortages. But now that the troops are out there driving the tanks around and firing the guns it has become obvious that a generation of skills have been lost. Training is now often a matter of the unskilled leading the untrained. More perceptive officers point out that, while this isn't pretty, it is the beginning of progress. During the Great Patriotic War (World War II), over twenty million men were trained quickly. Back then, there was a big incentive to do it well, because otherwise your chances of surviving the war fell sharply. Moreover, Russia now has the example of Western armies, which have developed the tools (simulations, drills) and techniques (imparted by experienced NCOs) that work. Russians are not shy about adopting Western techniques. This has helped transform and grow the economy. While the path ahead is clear enough, the army continues to be hobbled by corruption, not enough Western style NCOs and too many officers stuck in the Soviet past.

The government is also openly critical of Russian defense companies. These firms are the survivors of the collapse of the Soviet economy in the 1990s, during which the Russian military budget was cut by over two-thirds. Then it got worse. The government believes that about a third of the military budget is lost to corruption. Like civilian bureaucrats, those in the military tend to demand bribes to do anything. This includes some promotions, and taking care of basic functions like building housing or providing food and fuel.

But what bothers the government most is the flaws in Russian high tech weapons. Jet engines and electronics end up having serious flaws revealed when they are sold to foreigners, who, unlike the Russian armed forces, are not shy about complaining loudly. Weapons that look better on paper than in reality, is an old problem with Russian equipment. There have been some improvements since the 1990s because most of the expensive, high tech, weapons have been exported. This seemed to inspire Russian manufacturers to tighten up on quality control. While things got better, they did not get better enough as foreign customers began to notice that the more expensive Western weapons were also much more reliable and, apparently, a lot more effective. So senior government officials are leaning on defense industry executives, in the hope that this kind of pressure will produce positive results. That's not a sure thing, as an old Russian tradition (the "Potemkin Village") encourages deception rather than decisive action.