



The Future of Russia's Military Elite

The Russian military elite consists of decision-making, decision-influencing, and decision-implementing individuals at the highest levels of the military's career structure. In alignment with the Russian regime's political leadership, these individuals plan and coordinate Russia's wars, command Russia's armies and navies, and coordinate the military's role in implementing Russia's strategic and geopolitical goals over the short, medium, and long term. Patterns of promotion to highest officer cadres of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (Armed Forces) are poorly understood and rarely studied. To understand what promotion patterns in the Russian military reveal about the evolution of the Russian military elite, we used publicly available data to address the following questions:

- What factors contribute to *rapid promotion* of leaders in the Russian military?
- What role does *battlefield performance* play in military promotion in the Armed Forces?
- What are the backgrounds of the *various types of leaders* the Russian military is selecting?

Key findings

The Russian military promotion system is responsive to battlefield reversals. The poor performance of the Russian military in the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war corresponded with a wave of removals and demotions. At the same time, the leadership of the General Staff (GS) has been entirely untouched by removals since the start of the war (and in fact since 2018), suggesting that Chief of the GS Valery Gerasimov may be protecting his subordinates in much the same way Shoigu protected his subordinates until he was replaced.

Commanders are demoted, but bureaucrats are arrested. Most commanders are removed from their position, some retire, and others shifted to other commands. Meanwhile, MOD bureaucrats are likely to be not only removed from their position but also arrested and prosecuted. The few cases of operational commanders being placed under arrest are highly heterogeneous, with no clear pattern.

The Russian military has a bifurcated career system, which is divided into a primary track and satellite specialized tracks that do not intersect with each other. The primary track has a core system of elite promotions based within the ground and airborne forces; this system feeds the GS and the military districts (MDs). Several separate and highly siloed tracks exist for the navy, aerospace, and strategic rocket forces as well as some specialized parts of the ground forces. Certain units and MDs act as feeders and training grounds for future leaders. Russia's 2010 military reform and its experience in Syria in 2015 changed aspects of upper tier elite promotion patterns: geographic rotation became ubiquitous after the reform, and the Syria operation created a new leadership credential that frequently led to MD command. Combat credentials generally accelerate promotion into senior command positions, but turnover in operational commands has increased during the Russia-Ukraine war.

Officers in the operational track frequently rotate through positions at the same level in multiple geographic locations. This pattern suggests that lateral repetition at the same tier is valued as a qualification for the next level—particularly in the operational track, in which geographic breadth may be seen as a sign of adaptability. However, the wartime reshuffling since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has eroded district-specific career patterns in favor of ad hoc placement driven by operational needs.

Age at promotion is highly correlated with promotion to senior leadership. Russian general officers have a higher likelihood of being promoted to three- and four-star level if they are below age 46 when promoted to major general. This likelihood is the strongest finding from our demographic analysis of all Russian general officers since 1991.

The Hero of Russia award is more a recognition for command excellence than a battlefield decoration that leads to top positions. Most of these awards are given to junior and senior officers, but when general officers do receive the award, they do so mostly after they have attained general officer rank and been appointed to top positions, suggesting that the award is a reward for career achievement rather than a marker of potential future greatness.

Implications

Cohort experiences shape worldview and military culture. Officers who enter military service in a certain period have common experiences that shape their worldviews. Officers who joined the Russian military in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the Soviet Union saw itself as an expanding power, had very different formative experiences than those who joined between 1985 and 2005, when the reputation of the military and internal morale were relatively low. As that later generation approaches retirement, it will be replaced by potentially higher quality officers who joined when the military was expanding and more opportunities were available. A fourth generation of junior officers is forming now, when patriotic education plays a major part in decisions to join the military and combat experience is frequent for those who join. These generational factors are likely to influence how Russian military leaders view Russia's position in the world and the role that the military can play in Russia's foreign policy. Cohort analysis of Russia's officer corps may help researchers understand these generational shifts and how they affect the Russian military and Russian strategic culture.

Exigencies of wartime can affect career patterns in the long term. The Russia-Ukraine war is already affecting senior officer career patterns; these effects are certain to continue and will likely increase over the next 10 to 15 years. The war has compressed tenure lengths, fragmented the senior promotion pipeline, and created entirely new feeder categories for top positions. The Russia-Ukraine war has also caused rapid turnover in operational commands. The experience of wartime command will shape the careers of both generals in top positions and the midgrade officers who will form the next cohort of Russian military leadership. Analysts will need to continue to track how the war is affecting promotion patterns in the Russian military, both as the war continues and after it ends.

Rapid replacement of leaders may harm military effectiveness. Russian military senior operational leadership is turning over at an unprecedented pace, with district commanders' terms now lasting just one year on average. This level of churn may negatively affect military leaders' ability to perform their duties; newly appointed commanders are likely to have less experience managing large military bureaucracies, and short terms of service may diminish their ability to learn their jobs before being rotated. Fear of replacement or demotion may also affect leaders' decision-making, potentially making them more cautious about taking risks. In addition, rapid churn may harm the ability of commanders to develop patronage networks with their subordinates and simultaneously reduce the extent to which subordinates develop loyalty to their superior officers.

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