

The Future of Russia's Military Elite

Promotions, Careers, and Advancement in the Russian Senior Officer Corps

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Abstract

The Russian military elite consists of decision-making, decision-influencing, and decision-implementing individuals who plan and coordinate Russia's wars; command Russia's armies, navies, and other military forces; and coordinate the military's role in executing Russia's strategic and geopolitical goals in alignment with the Russian regime's political leadership. Promotion to high rank is the sole means of entering the military elite. Leveraging four unique datasets, we found that the likelihood of promotion to upper tier elite positions improves when one is promoted younger as a one-star general or flag officer. Career paths to senior leadership follows a shifting set of regular patterns; likely inflection points include the military reforms of 2010, the Syria experience of 2015, and the current war in Ukraine. In addition, we found that being granted a Hero of Russia award is not a reliable indicator of career advancement, and that among military elites and their civilian counterparts in the Ministry of Defense, officers are more likely to be dismissed or retired, whereas civilians are more likely to be arrested.

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Executive Summary

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.

The Russian military elite is selected through the mechanism of promotion to high rank, yet patterns of promotion to the highest officer cadres of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (hereafter "Armed Forces") are poorly understood and rarely studied. For this study, we sought to systematically examine patterns of promotion into the upper echelons of the Russian Armed Forces' officer corps. To do so, we used publicly available data. To understand what promotion patterns in the Russian military reveal about the evolution of the Russian military elite, we sought 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 Russian 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 to a wave of removals and demotions. Surprisingly few removals were connected to the Prigozhin Rebellion, whereas a significant number of senior civilian Ministry of Defense (MOD) bureaucrats were removed and, in some cases, arrested for corruption in the aftermath of Andrey Belousov replacing Sergey Shoigu as minister of defense in 2024.

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 appears across several tiers, including the MD commander and chief of staff levels as well as the naval fleet command. The 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. Less glamorous MDs that are well away from combat zones, such as the Siberian/Central MD, are used as locations to train potential future leaders. 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. Most but not all services have specific lower level units that are linked to future career advancement.

Age at promotion is highly correlated with promotion to senior leadership. Russian general officers have a higher likelihood of being promoted to the three- and four-star level if they are below age 46 when promoted to major general.¹ This likelihood is the strongest finding from our demographic analysis of all Russian general officers since 1991.

The Hero of Russia award is more of 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

¹ For the sake of conciseness, throughout this report we use the term *general officers* to refer to all general and flag officers.

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

Patterns of military elite promotion enable observers to predict potential future leaders. Patterns uncovered by our analysis enable us to predict likely future appointments to top positions, though promotion patterns during the current Russia-Ukraine war—a relatively brief war—may be systematically different from those in peacetime contexts. The Senior Commanders chapter of this report includes names of potential future leaders of the General Staff, military services, and military districts based on the patterns identified by our analysis.

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. Officers who joined in that period may have been of lower quality because the best and brightest were relatively unlikely to find a career in the military an attractive option.

As that later generation approaches retirement, it will be replaced by potentially higher quality officers who joined in the 2000s or later, 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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Russia's Future Military Elite

Who runs Russia's military, and who will do so in the future? The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the persistent threat posed by Russia to the US homeland and US interests abroad have highlighted how important it is for Western analysts to fully understand Russian strategic goals and operational practices. This understanding, in turn, requires a full picture of those who make, inform, and implement Russia's military plans.

Russia's military leadership, composed of general officers (alongside the high-level bureaucrats in the Ministry of Defense (MOD) who support them), encompasses the most important decision-making, decision-influencing, and decision-implementing actors in Russia's military. Senior uniformed leaders are crucial in determining the trajectory of a country's military development; they even influence foreign policy decision-making. Yet, with few exceptions, systematic research on the generals and admirals who lead the Russian Armed Forces is limited.

This study seeks to rectify this research gap, with an eye toward characterizing who will form Russia's future military elite. Understanding the types of people who are likely to be the next leaders of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (hereafter "Armed Forces") will give analysts and policy-makers a better idea of how a key adversary military will develop over the next two decades. To this end, we examined promotion patterns to identify commonalities in the careers of the modern Russian military elite and the factors that inform success and failure.

Our guiding research question was simple, if broad: What information can promotion patterns in the Russian military provide about the evolution of the Russian military elite?

Relevant general sub-questions included the following:

- 1) What factors contribute to the successful promotion of leaders in the Russian military?
- 2) What role do battlefield performance and other combat experiences play in military promotion in the Russian Armed Forces?

"Commanders play a key role in these conflicts....It is necessary to train versatile commanders who possess knowledge in all fields. They should be listed in the personnel pool of top military commanders, and it is necessary to keep an eye on them even now, to guide them and to provide them with opportunities for subsequent promotion."

—President Vladimir Putin

- 3) What can insight into the types of leaders the Russian military is selecting tell us about the future composition of the upper tier of the military elite? Who is being selected in, and who is being selected out?

To address these general questions, we used four unique datasets: (1) a dataset of the promotions of all general and flag officers (GOFs) in the Russian Armed Forces from 2000 to 2026,² (2) a dataset of officers being awarded the Hero of Russia award (the highest level medal for valor) since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, (3) a dataset of military elites and related military-bureaucratic officials removed from positions or arrested since the war began, and 4) a dataset tracking the career trajectories of all senior commanders in the combat services of the Russian Armed Forces since 2000.³

Taken together, insights from the four datasets helped us describe the current Russian military elite, explain the dynamics of their past and current career trajectories, and predict likely characteristics of its next generation. In doing so, we identified the most likely decision-makers within the future Russian military elite—that is, the leaders who will shape the trajectories of Russia’s military development, inform funding and procurement allocations, and determine strategic and operational plans in future conflicts.

The rest of this introductory section briefly discusses our specific research questions, provides an overview of selected findings, and describes the methodology behind our empirical approach. Subsequent sections provide insights into what constitutes a military elite, comparative lessons on officer careers in great power militaries, and legacies of promotion and career trajectories during the Soviet period and the first three decades of Russia’s post-Soviet military experience. In the last section, we present an extensive set of findings from the datasets and a concluding set of implications.

Data, questions, findings, and empirical approach

To answer the guiding research question, CNA engaged in an extensive data-gathering effort that ended with four distinct quantitative datasets. Data that shed light on promotion patterns in the upper echelons of Russia’s officer corps are limited for a variety of reasons, from the

² *GOF* is a US military acronym, and we use it in this report to differentiate our discussions of this dataset specifically from the broader report’s focus on general officers and military elites overall. For consistency, this report uses the term *general officer* instead of *general* and *flag officers* or *generals* and *admirals* to describe Russian higher officers, except when context necessitates otherwise.

³ We refer to these datasets as the Promotions, Hero of Russia, Removals, and Senior Commanders datasets throughout the report (capitalized to ensure distinctiveness).

macro-level difficulty of Russia’s adversarial relationship with the West to the more prosaic—but very relevant—sensitive nature of promotion decision-making within the bureaucratic confines of the Russian Armed Forces themselves.

Therefore, CNA developed a multipronged approach to identify initial patterns within the officer corps.⁴ No single methodological choice or data source is sufficient to provide full granularity to the complex picture of upper tier elite promotions. To understand who will be Russia’s future military elite, we examined what particular activities, experiences, or traits make one more likely to advance; what constitutes a successful career and how the definition varies across different parts of the Armed Forces; what potential pitfalls for advancement under wartime conditions exist; and how these factors have shifted over time.

By leveraging several datasets in combination with structured qualitative analysis, we gained an initial picture of Russia’s current and future military elite. These datasets allowed us to answer decisively eight distinct empirical sub-questions that feed into the broader general questions motivating this report. We itemize these sub-questions in Table 1.

Table 1. Empirical sub-questions

Promotions	Awards	Removals	Senior Commanders
1) What does the average general officer look like?	3) Who has received the Hero of Russia medal since the war began?	5) Who is targeted for dismissal, and who is arrested?	7) What does the average career look like for senior officers?
2) What characteristics are associated with reaching three- and four-star ranks?	4) Has being an awardee influenced future career prospects?	6) How has the type of officer targeted for dismissal changed over the course of the war?	8) Who are the most likely potential future military elites?

Source: CNA.

The Promotions dataset

In the Promotions dataset, we captured information on all active and retired Russian officers of one-, two-, three-, and four-star ranks from 2001 to early 2026. The dataset includes 2,113 entries, and we constructed it to provide the most complete list of general officers in the post–

⁴ The four datasets in this report are unique datasets we created using publicly available data. For the Promotions, Hero of Russia, and Removals datasets, we manually collected and coded the data without using an artificial intelligence (AI) model at any stage. We built the Senior Commanders dataset with AI assistance, and then we manually checked and completed it.

Soviet Russian military, given existing resource limitations. It is designed to answer two key questions:

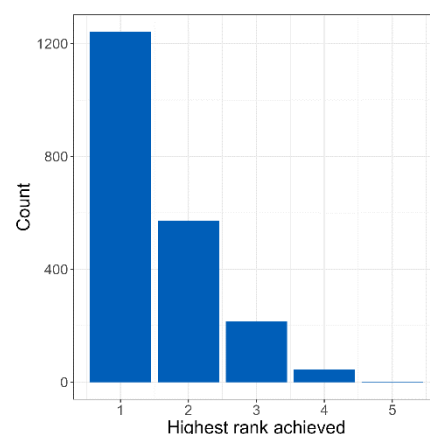
1. What are the characteristics of the average general officer in the Russian military?
2. What characteristics are associated with achieving three- and four-star ranks?

The dataset is organized by individual general officer, and each entry contains the full name of the officer, his promotion dates, his final or current rank (as of January 2026), whether he has received the Hero of Russia award, which service branch he belongs to, his age, his educational background, his service in conflicts with extended military operations (Chechnya, Syria, and Ukraine), his role in those conflicts, his position, and which units he has commanded.⁵ Figure 1 provides a visualization of the highest rank achieved by individuals counted in the dataset.

The Promotions dataset originated from CNA work on promotions in the Russian Navy in 2018 and a subsequent data collection effort in 2021 and 2022. We resumed this effort in 2025 and completed it in 2026.

To complete the dataset, we relied on Russian-language sources. These sources included books on Russian officers from authoritative Russian military publications (most importantly several editions of the *Military Elite of the Russian Federation: A Brief Encyclopedic Reference*), the official website of the Russian Armed Forces, and online publications that track Russian military elites.⁶

Figure 1. Highest rank achieved in the Promotions dataset



Source: CNA.

⁵ Data quality varies across these variables, and many biographies are impossible to find in public sources. Because of these limitations, coverage across the dataset also varies considerably. Appendix C: Promotions Dataset provides more information. We use confidence intervals and explicitly state when data are sufficiently partial that inferences must be made with caution. The dataset also likely contains some errors, although these had been mitigated to the best of CNA's ability at the time.

⁶ A. S. Kulikov, ed., *Military Elite of the Russian Federation: A Brief Encyclopedic Reference* [Военная Элита Российской Федерации: Краткий Энциклопедический Справочник], Club of Military Leaders of the Russian Federation (Moscow: Veche, 2020).

This dataset provides unparalleled descriptions of the demographic and career profile of the entire higher officer cadre of the Russian Armed Forces. It does not include field-grade or mid-grade officers.⁷ Therefore, it cannot tell us anything about promotion *into* the corpus of higher officers—only patterns after passing through that filter. Promotion into that higher corpus remains a key question that requires further research.

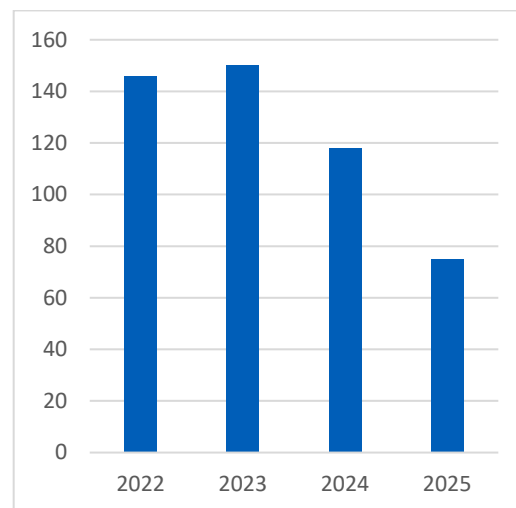
The Hero of Russia award dataset

The Hero of Russia (*Geroi Rossii*) award dataset captures all awardees of Russia's highest medal for valor from 2022 to 2025. We constructed it to address the common hypothesis that a prestigious award often associated with valor in combat operations accelerates Russian military careers and may influence the future composition of the military elite. We designed this dataset to answer two key questions:

1. Who has received the Hero of Russia medal since the war began?
2. Has being an awardee influenced future career prospects?

The dataset contains 490 entries. It includes the full name of the officer; his age, rank, service, unit, and reason for receiving the award; whether the award was posthumous; the awardee's home region; and any post-award promotions for the awardee. This dataset is original and collected by CNA analysts. Figure 2 provides the number of Hero of Russia awardees by year.

Figure 2. Number of Hero of Russia awardees by year



Source: CNA.

To CNA's knowledge, this dataset contains the full list of awardees who have been publicly announced as of March 1, 2026; the dataset is not missing any publicly known entries, although

⁷ Field-grade or mid-grade officers, or "senior officers" in Russian parlance, include colonels (*Polkovnik*), lieutenant colonels (*Podpolkovnik*), and majors (*Maior*) in most services or 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-rank captains (*Kapitan 1-, 2-, 3-go ranga*) in the Russian Navy.

awards that are classified or may only be announced years after the award is granted are uncounted.⁸

For data collection, we relied on publicly available presidential decrees on awardees listed on Russian government websites. These decrees provide unit entries as well as information on the reason for the award. Russian-language news articles provide further data on each individual recipient as well as information on subsequent promotions.

The Removals dataset

For the Removals dataset, we collected information on all upper tier military elites who were dismissed from bureaucratic or command positions or were arrested by the Federal Security Service (FSB) or the Investigative Service between 2022 and 2025. This dataset is designed to answer two key questions:

1. Who is targeted for dismissal versus who is arrested during the Russia-Ukraine war?
2. What kind of military figure is targeted, and how has this changed over the course of the war?

This dataset contains 41 entries. We define *military elites* here as upper tier officers and individuals who hold senior positions in the MOD. This dataset contains the name of the figure; identifies them as either a civilian, a uniformed military officer in a bureaucratic position, or a uniformed military officer in a command position; and lists the stated or reported reasons for the removal when possible.

This dataset selects as the dependent variable a removal in some capacity, relying on Russian-language reporting to identify relevant elites who have been removed. Because removals occur for a variety of reasons—including incompetence, criticism of leadership, political motivation or vendettas, perceived regime threats, and criminal activity—we used this dataset to illustrate the negative selection pressure on Russian military elites and the nature of that pressure.

The Senior Commanders dataset

Finally, for the Senior Commanders dataset, we pulled from the Promotions dataset to compile a list of the most highly ranked Russian military leaders since the 2000s. This dataset includes 125 Russian generals and admirals, including all General Staff (GS) chiefs, service branch heads, and military district (MD) commanders and their chiefs of staff. This dataset is designed to answer two key questions:

⁸ The Russian government does maintain a practice of private and classified awards. A subset of awards is revealed to the public after the fact, sometimes months or even years later. Tracking these awards precisely is not possible given data limitations, although some evidence suggests that the higher the rank achieved, the more likely a private or classified award will be revealed to the public. This pattern may also apply to posthumous awards, although at present it is difficult to make reasonable assertions about them.

1. What does the average career look like for officers who achieve senior positions?
2. Who should be tracked as the most likely future military elites?

Including individuals appointed to multiple positions, our Senior Commanders dataset includes 207 total entries.⁹ The collected data include these leaders' career assignments, promotion dates, and education, and whether the person received the Hero of Russia award.

The Senior Commanders dataset allows us to track career trajectories among highly successful upper tier military elites, which makes it an extraordinarily useful resource. It provides the exact career path of those who have "made it" into Russia's small cadre of individuals at the top of its military hierarchy. It also allows CNA to construct shortlists of individuals who most likely fit the general pattern of promotion into these senior leadership positions.

By combining these analyses, this report provides the most comprehensive picture of the Russian Armed Forces' upper tier military elites currently in existence.

The way ahead

In the next two sections, we provide comparative insights into military promotion patterns in great powers and the nature of military elites, as well as historical legacies of the Soviet military and the development of the modern Russian officer corps. We follow those two sections with four empirical sections that rely on the Promotions, Hero of Russia, Removals, and Senior Commanders datasets, respectively. We conclude with a final section that provides overall findings and implications.

⁹ This dataset is complete, and CNA analysts have manually checked every entry. We used an AI tool to pull the initial names as well as existing Russian-language biographical information for the initial research from a variety of publicly accessible online Russian-language biographies.

Russia's Military Elite

The Russian military elite consists of decision-making, decision-influencing, and decision-implementing individuals who plan and coordinate Russia's wars; command Russia's armies, navies, and other military forces; and coordinate the military's role in executing Russia's strategic and geopolitical goals in alignment with the Russian regime's political leadership over the short, medium, and long term. But who is included in this count, where do they come from, and what is their relationship to command, power, and authority?

In practice, the military elite consists of the cohort of general officers with operational command, apex staff positions, and strategic responsibilities in the Russian military as well as those individuals at the top of the hierarchy of authority across the MOD who wear a uniform. Russia's military elite is a unique product of a long-standing, institutionally complex authoritarian regime that has strong traditions of civilian control and oversight established over 100 years of organizational development across multiple political orders.

In this section, we first characterize Russia's military elite and summarize existing research on promotion patterns in peer great powers to produce a set of key potential factors for promotion and career trajectories.¹⁰ Second, we review promotion systems in more detail over the lifespan of the Soviet Union and the first three decades of the modern Russian Federation.

Characterizing the Russian military elite

The Russian military is highly professionalized and fully institutionalized—a legacy of more than 100 years of organizational development.¹¹ An individual in the Russian military elite is a

¹⁰ See Appendix A for a discussion about fitting military elites into a broader understanding of elites in Russia's authoritarian system as well as comparative considerations on career prospects for military elites in great power democracies and authoritarian regimes. This theoretical overview informs the key potential factors that determined our methodological approach.

¹¹ The professionalization and institutionalization are notable given regime changes in 1917 and 1991, radical organizational experimentation in the 1920s and 1930s, mass officer purges in the late 1930s, and considerable levels of institutional corruption throughout, with particularly bad episodes from the 1970s to the 2000s.

uniformed, commissioned officer in their Armed Forces of explicitly denoted senior rank.¹² In the Russian Armed Forces, these cadres of senior ranks are referred to as “higher officers” (*vysshiye ofitsery*), given the title of “general” or “admiral,” and assigned between one and four stars that represent seniority and command.

Within this military elite, we can identify an upper tier cohort of elites who make and influence decisions or take operational command as well as a lower tier cohort of elites who support, implement, and form the pool from which the next rising generation is drawn.¹³ Aspiring candidates to the military elite consist of the remaining officer corps.

The highest tier of the Russian military elite consists of politically relevant elites, primarily the chief of the General Staff (CGS) and sometimes the minister of defense. Whether or not the minister of defense even fits in the category of military elite depends on whether he is a civilian or a uniformed member of the Armed Forces (and in this sense, the role of the minister of defense can reside in a gray zone).¹⁴ Strictly speaking, the military elite does not include civilian bureaucrats in the MOD unless they

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¹² In professionalized militaries, the military elite is uniformed and subject to a closed hierarchy with clear, regular, and defined criteria for career advancement. Less professionalized militaries may have irregular entry into the de facto armed forces; may rely on militias, mercenaries, or even disorganized groups of armed men; and may have a variety of informal status and power differentials that determine an implicit hierarchy. On professionalized militaries, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Belknap Press, 1957). For less professionalized militaries, see, for example, Lisa Blaydes, “Rebuilding the Ba’thist State: Party, Tribe, and Administrative Control in Authoritarian Iraq, 1991–1996,” *Comparative Politics* 53, no. 1 (2020), pp. 93–115, and Kristen A. Harkness, “The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coup Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 4 (2016), pp. 587–616.

¹³ See Appendix A for distinctions between upper tier and lower tier elites, both in Russia as a whole and as applied to a particular organization such as the Russian Armed Forces.

¹⁴ For example, Minister of Defense Andrei Belousov (2024 to present) is clearly not a member of Russia’s military elite; instead, he is a civilian overseer and administrator of the vast MOD bureaucracy. Former Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu (2012–2024), although also a long-standing politician, was also a longtime head of Russia’s Ministry of Emergency Situations, a partially militarized executive ministry. Notably, Shoigu was given the rank general of the army in 2003 under President Vladimir Putin. Shoigu had previously been granted a one-star rank, and President Boris Yeltsin had granted him advancements for quickly supplying small arms to Yeltsin’s side during the 1993 constitutional coup. Shoigu is not quite a military elite in a strict sense, but he is much closer to it than Belousov. See Mira Livadina, “The Rise and Fall of Sergey Shoigu,” *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, July 4, 2023, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/07/04/the-rise-and-fall-of-sergey-shoigu-en>.

are uniformed because their career progression through the military hierarchy has absolutely no bearing on whether they are chosen by the Russian president to become the minister.

These two officials can also be referred to as Russia’s political-military elite because they act as the primary interlocutors in civil-military relations with the political leadership. The only other potential members of this group are irregular figures, such as the Chechen dictator Ramzan Kadyrov or the former Wagner chief Evgeniy Prigozhin, a “political-military baron” who directly commanded a considerable armed force and had a direct, quasi-feudal connection with political leaders in Moscow.¹⁵

Table 2. Higher officer ranks in the Russian Armed Forces and command positions

Star	Rank	Usual Command Position
Four-star	General of the army (General armii) Fleet admiral (Admiral flota)	CGS (always ^a) Minister of defense (sometimes) Deputy ministers of defense (sometimes)
Three-star	Colonel general (General-polkovnik) Admiral (Admiral)	Military district (MD) commanders (usually) Service branch heads (usually) Heads of GS directorates (usually) Deputy ministers of defense (sometimes)
Two-star	Lieutenant general (General-leytenant) Vice admiral (Vitse-admiral)	MD deputies (usually) Deputy heads of GS directorates (usually) Combat arms branches heads (usually)
One-star	Major general (General-maior) Rear admiral (Kontr-admiral)	Armies or army corps (usually)

Source: CNA.

^a These labels refer to the frequency with which holders of this position hold the rank listed.

The broader upper tier of Russia’s military elite is its senior leadership: GS directorate chiefs, service branch heads, MD commanders, and MD commanders’ chiefs of staff who hold the ranks of general of the army (four-star) or colonel general (three-star). We explore this specific group with our Senior Commanders dataset later in this report. This tier broadly overlaps with (and may be fully coterminous with) general officers who hold three-star and four-star ranks.¹⁶

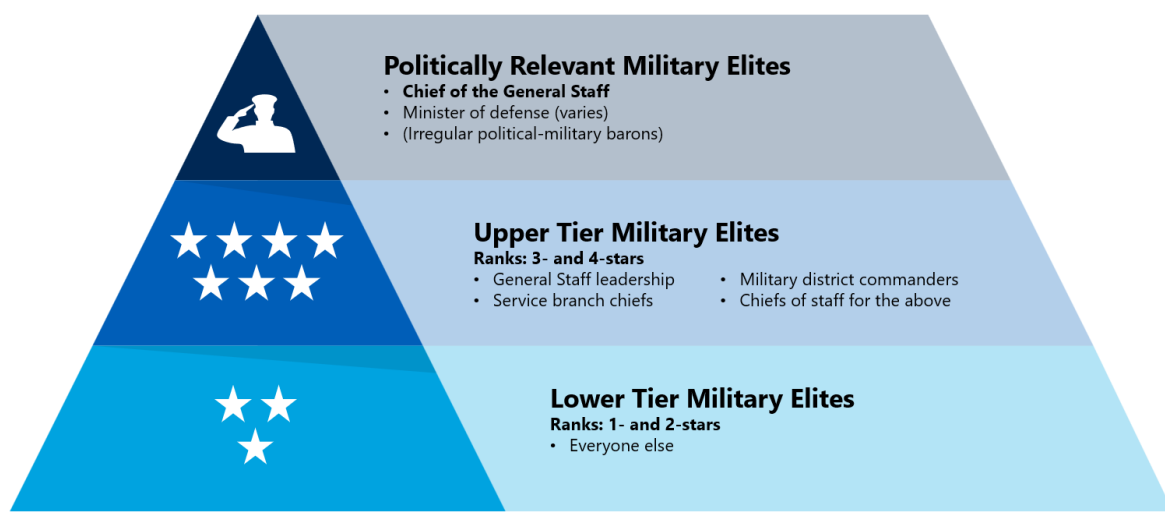
¹⁵ Julian G. Waller and Cornell Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations: Dimensions, Tensions, and Disruptions*, CNA, Jan. 2025, DRM-2024-U-038041-1Rev, <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2025/02/wartime-russian-civil-military-relations/>.

¹⁶ Note that in actual practice, some upper tier military elites (as defined by position) in the Russian Armed Forces are appointed at two-star or even one-star ranks because the number of positions the Armed Forces needs to fill is high and those positions do not need to be filled by a certain rank. We discuss this practice in greater depth in the following section as well as in the empirical section on the Senior Commanders dataset.

Russia's lower tier military elite, in turn, consists of the remaining one-star and two-star general officers, all of whom have planning, command, or implementation roles in the Russian Armed Forces. In Table 31, we provide information about the usual command positions associated with each general and flag officer rank.

Below the lower tier are aspirants among senior officers (colonels and navy captains specifically) who may pass a threshold through their own promotion into this much smaller cohort. Meanwhile, aspiring military elites represent midranking commissioned officers, referred to as "senior" or "field-grade" in Russian, whose highest rank is colonel. Below them are junior officers, who are the entry point into the pipeline for aspirants to military elite status. Figure 3 provides an abstract visualization of these distinctions.

Figure 3. Visualizing Russia's military elite corpus



Source: CNA.

Note: Sometimes two-stars (and rarely one-stars) may serve in senior leadership positions, most commonly as MD commanders. In this case, they are considered part of the upper tier military elite, and their quick rise should be considered a potential indicator of an accelerated career.

Distinctions between upper and lower tier military elites are useful because the categories enable us to make broader assessments about the officer cadres that make all decisions in the Russian Armed Forces. This ability is helpful, given the forces' unusually closed and strict hierarchies relative to other social, economic, political, and state organizations. For example, only Russia's political-military elite are potentially "in the room" for major strategic and political decisions that require President Putin's personal direction or intervention. However, the upper tier military elite is responsible for not only implementing those decisions but also significantly shaping them, developing the plans, and ultimately providing authority and leadership to commanders who then execute those plans in operations. Meanwhile, the lower

tier military elite, which is the middle part of the chain of command between high-level strategic and operational-strategic decisions and tactical maneuvers, command the corps, armies, and divisions that are then led by brigade commanders at the colonel level.

Furthermore, this conceptualization exercise provided us with important analytic leverage to study the nature, character, and career patterns within Russia's military elite. After we filtered our research questions through these definitions and distinctions, we restated them as one three-part question: Who becomes an upper tier military elite, what characteristics do successful entrants share, and what do the aspiring cohorts of lower tier elites who feed directly into this leadership cadre look like?

To better explain why we care so much about the career paths and promotion patterns of military elites, we highlight a set of key potential factors associated with career progression in the next subsection. (More detail on how these general factors are informed by comparative promotion patterns in great power democracies and authoritarian regimes is included in Appendix A: Elites and Militaries.) We then provide historical background on the Russian case specifically.

Key factors

Many potential demographic, institutional, experiential, network, and contingent factors may improve the career trajectory of a Russian officer on track for the upper tier echelons of the military elite. Synthesizing research previously conducted by CNA on the promotions in the Russian Navy as well as other (relatively sparse) research on the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces and those of peer militaries provides us with a list of plausible factors.

We note that some factors are unchangeable (e.g., when or where an officer was born or their social status), some are contingent (e.g., whether a conflict was ongoing during an important part of his life), and some are agential (e.g., whether an officer's ambitions motivated him to achieve or network with unusual success).¹⁷ We combine these factors into a single list in Table 3, understanding that they act in distinct dimensions and across different time periods.

¹⁷ Although agential factors are often highly relevant to advancement, they are typically the hardest to observe in any quantitative study, so our analysis focuses on the unchangeable and contingent factors.

Table 3. Potential factors for promotion within officer cadres

Category	Plausible Factors	Relevance to Promotion
Formation and networks	• Military education institute • Socialization when stationed • Military certificate programs	• Superior résumé items when reviewed for advancement • Chance to develop connections and friendships with other aspiring elites • Superior skills gained through quality instruction
Career path	• Service • Prestige of unit served • Commander served under	• Number of potential leadership positions available by service • Likelihood of seeing combat or being close to important institutions • Relevance and influence of patronage networks
Experience	• Experience in combat or in conflict zones	• Likelihood of showing merit or loyalty • Likelihood of receiving commendations or awards
Recognition	• Speedy promotion • Awards received • Political interest	• Flagged as person of interest by superiors to invest in
Demographics	• Region born and raised • Russian or ethnic minority	• Likelihood to see a career path in military service • Likelihood of being chosen for opportunities that improve promotion chances

Source: CNA.

Characterizing potential key factors

As we noted earlier, research on promotion patterns in large institutionalized militaries (including the Russian Federation) is surprisingly limited. CNA does not take a stance on whether any theoretical claims can be empirically justified, and for this report, we did not focus on theorizing *all* possible pathways for advancement in the Russian Armed Forces. In the following subsections, we describe potential factors for promotion, grouped across five families of potential causal mechanisms.

Formation and networks

First, educational pathways (and associated socialization and networking) are likely to influence promotion patterns. Attending a high-quality professional military educational institute may be critical in developing skillsets that help one get promoted. Going to the right school may also improve one's chances in the form of network effects. In any organization, personal connections increase the likelihood of being considered for advancement from a variety of mechanisms, ranging from friendships and patronage networks to communication skills to simply "being in the right place," that might not otherwise be reflected in standardized performance reviews or testing.

Data availability for networks and socialization patterns was limited, but data on educational background were more available (although still surprisingly difficult to find in public sources). We therefore focused, when appropriate, on educational background. The availability of educational background data is particularly useful in our Promotions dataset, in which we are able to identify commonly attended educational institutions.

Career path

Second, actual career paths and sets of positions taken may inform promotion to three- or four-star positions. These connections may be structural in nature (e.g., if there are more leadership slots for certain services or positions than for others), or they may be due to cultural biases within the military.

We can exhaustively track career paths through our Senior Commanders dataset and provide comprehensive assessments of the degree to which a specific type of career path is more likely to lead to entry into the Russian upper tier military elite. Through our Removals database, we are also able to identify those upper tier elites whose careers are more likely to be stalled or halted by removal.

Experiences

Third, experience in war—either in combat action itself or supporting combat operations in some capacity—is likely to improve career chances (particularly if the war goes well, although we cannot test this presumption). War experience is a means of both forcing socialization and proving merit. On the one hand, this experience may grant an officer success and identify him as a commander of promise; on the other, it can also mire an officer in failure and quickly end his career in ignominy or quiet retirement.

We present analysis capturing war experiences in three out of four of our datasets. Public data on war experience were the most difficult to find when considering the universe of general officers; we found that data availability was so poor in our Promotions dataset that we excluded it from nearly all analysis. In the other three datasets, it is a central component.

Recognitions

Fourth, prestigious awards and participation in special programs may improve promotion patterns. This correlation may be especially true during periods of reforms or in wartime, as a way to bolster the profile of otherwise unremarkable individuals. Recognitions may also matter more for individuals at certain places in the military elite than others.

We considered this a hypothesis to be tested rather than assumed and thus built a specific dataset to provide insight into the relevance of certain recognitions. For this report, we focused on the Hero of Russia award specifically because it is the highest level decoration in the Russian award system. We also analyzed Hero of Russia recipients using our Senior Commanders dataset.

Demographics

Finally, demographics may influence promotion patterns and the ability to achieve higher ranks within the Russian military elite. Many demographic features may be relevant for an individual's rise through the officer ranks. However, at higher levels of abstraction, two are notable: where the individual was born and raised and whether the individual is an ethnic Russian or from another ethnic minority group. Russia's regions vary widely in economic development, social structure, and other characteristics, all of which can strongly influence an individual's promotion chances.

Data inaccessibility limited our ability to explore this factor—we did not have good information on the ethnic background of the vast majority of Russia's military elite, either upper or lower tiers. However, we captured regional origin for recipients of the Hero of Russia award, which we present in that section.

Historical and Contemporary Russian Promotion Dynamics

The Russian system of military promotion grew directly out of the Soviet system. In this section, we discuss the rules that govern military promotion in Russia. We highlight the system’s key features, including the close link between position and rank and the lack of a true up-or-out system. (The evolution of this system from its origins in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian revolution until its solidification during and after World War II is explored in Appendix B.) We also show that very few changes were made after the collapse of the Soviet Union, other than the elimination of Communist Party oversight.

Promotion patterns in the Soviet Union

The system that emerged after Joseph Stalin’s period of rule stabilized into a three-tiered structure with well-defined promotion timelines. Table 4 shows the post–World War II rank structure for the Russian Army and the Russian Air Force.

Table 4. Soviet and Russian military rank structure

Rank	Typical Command Level
Colonel	Brigade or division
Major general	Corps, division, or (rarely) brigade
Lieutenant general	Corps or army
Colonel general	Army or front ^a
General of the army	Army or front
Marshal or chief marshal	Service branch or army
Marshal of the Soviet Union	Front or supreme command

Source: “Soviet Insignia of Rank—1935 Ranks.”

^a The Soviet term *front* refers to an army group that normally consists of three to five armies.

This system of ranks has remained essentially unchanged since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) era, although no marshals have been appointed since 1997. Contemporary Russian ranks are a direct legacy of the USSR’s rapid experimentation with—and then solidification of—a post-revolutionary military hierarchy pattern that worked (and one that, after two decades of changes, was more or less a variant of the Tsarist inheritance, stripped of aristocratic and service-specific quirks).

Promotions were governed by criteria including minimum service lengths, completion of military education, and evaluations of performance and political reliability. Each position up to lieutenant colonel had a minimum time-in-grade requirement: two years for junior lieutenant, three years for lieutenant and captain, four years for major, and five years for lieutenant colonel.

However, the absence of a *maximum* time-in-grade meant that no official “up-or-out” system existed, officers were under little pressure to advance in rank, and the highest ranked officers were not forced to retire early. Mandatory retirement began at age 40 for junior officers and went up to 60 for major generals. Above that rank, general officers could receive extensions and were effectively exempt from mandatory retirement. Nonetheless, in theory an officer could serve as a junior lieutenant until age 40. In practice, however, junior promotions were almost automatic once the time-in-grade requirement was met.¹⁸ Figure 4 shows this progression across the entire Soviet officer corps, including both the military elite and all other commissioned officers.

The Soviet centralized cadre system imposed strict top-down control over officer assignments and rotations. Officers were appointed to positions by the Main Cadres Directorate, and promotions were tied to positions, not solely to merit or seniority. Rotations across units, fronts, and districts were centrally planned, and a centralized cadre reserve identified and prepared promising officers for senior posts, thereby ensuring succession plans. Officers could be moved across fronts, MDs, or specialty branches to meet centrally determined priorities and to ensure that local commanders did not hoard talent. Political oversight at each level of the hierarchy reinforced party control over personnel; party committees reviewed officers for ideological reliability and loyalty, and political officers provided input on rotations and promotions.¹⁹

In the Soviet system, every position in the Armed Forces had an authorized rank level (*shtatnaya kategoriya*), defined in official tables of organization, and each position also had a maximum rank ceiling. An officer could not normally be promoted above that ceiling while holding the post, so that promotion typically required appointment to a higher category position first.²⁰ As a result, promotions were often position-driven rather than purely merit-driven, and rank distribution was strictly aligned with organizational tables. Although this

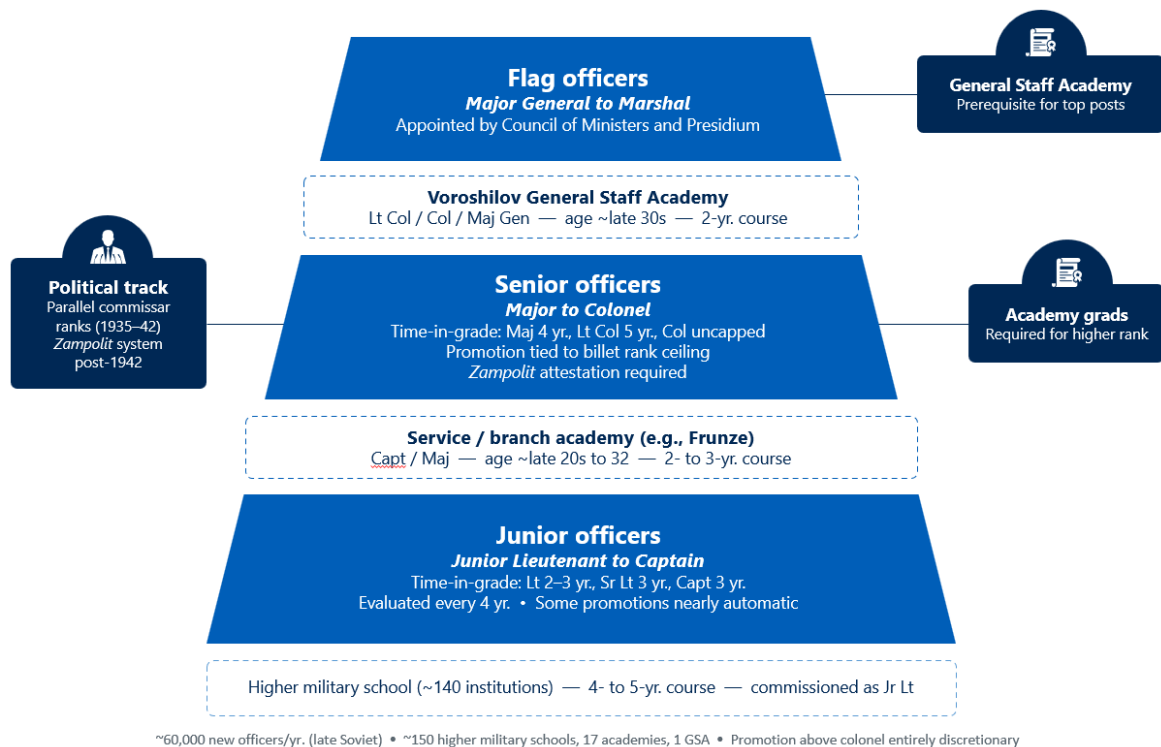
¹⁸ Mary Wood, “The Soviet Officer Personnel Management System,” US Army War College, Apr. 6, 1984, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA141191.pdf>, p. 8.

¹⁹ John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918–1941* (Routledge, 1985), pp. 471–75; Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War* (Cambridge UP, 2017), pp. 209–14; David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn* (University Press of Kansas, 2005), pp. 205–12; Roger R. Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought: The Red Army’s Military Effectiveness in World War II* (University Press of Kansas, 2011), pp. 91–94.

²⁰ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 480–82; Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, pp. 212–14.

system was occasionally disrupted, particularly during wartime, it remained the normative framework for the Soviet military.²¹

Figure 4. Soviet military officer career progression



Source: CNA.

The military education pipeline was the single most important structural determinant of career advancement. Upon reaching the rank of senior lieutenant or captain, many officers began preparing for competitive examinations to enter 1 of 17 military academies. Candidates had to have held a regimental command position, received excellent ratings, and been endorsed by the political directorate of their command or service. Graduation from a military academy was practically a requirement for advancement to higher rank. In particular, graduation from the General Staff Academy (GSA) was a prerequisite for appointment to top-level MOD and GS positions.²²

²¹ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*; Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, pp. 205–208.

²² Raymond Zickel, ed., “Soviet Union—A Country Study,” Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, May 1989, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-12899.html>, pp. 748–49.

The system was tiered. Officers entered their service's military academy as captains or majors in their late twenties to early thirties if they passed competitive entry examinations. To qualify for senior operational-strategic command, officers had to complete the GSA as a prerequisite for promotion to general officer ranks. Officers were admitted to the GSA in the ranks of lieutenant colonel, colonel, and major general, with most being colonels or newly promoted generals, typically in their late 30s.²³

The Communist Party exercised pervasive control over the promotion process through the deputy for political affairs (*zampolit*) system. The *zampolit*, meaning the deputy himself, attested annually to the political maturity and reliability of all officers in the unit, and officer promotion depended on his favorable judgment. From the 1960s onward, political reliability became an integral part of the promotion process; Communist Party organs and the Committee for State Security (the main Soviet intelligence agency, the KGB) conducted vetting through ideological assessments, informant reports, and concurrence requirements for advancements beyond captain. The *zampolit* reported through a separate chain, the Main Political Directorate (MPD), which sat within both the Communist Party structure and the MOD structure.²⁴

Promotion patterns in Russia

Rules of promotion in the post-Soviet period

The rules of promotion in the Russian military continued to be governed largely by Soviet-era rules until the Putin period. The only significant structural change in the 1990s was the unsurprising elimination of the Communist Party apparatus from the promotion process. The *zampolit's* annual attestation of political reliability, which in the Soviet system gave the political officer an effective veto over career advancement, disappeared with the abolition of the MPD in 1991. No comparable institution replaced it until the directorate was reinstituted in 2018, although the contemporary version still does not play quite the same role as it did in the USSR as a party-state.

Meanwhile, the Soviet system's tiered authority chain largely survived unchanged, even after the promulgation in 1999 of a new decree and set of regulations governing all aspects of military service, including rules for promotions. This decree and set of regulations, entitled "Questions of the Conduct of Military Service" (*Voprosy prokhozheniya voennoy sluzhby*) and

²³ Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR*, 3rd ed. (Westview Press, 1984); William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁴ Kent J. Goff, "The Political Officer (Zampolit) in the Soviet Army," Arkansas State University Graduate School, Dec. 1, 2005, <https://www.sovietarmy.com/the-soviet-army-the-political-officer-zampolit-in-the-soviet-army-by-kent-j-goff-maj-mi-usar/>.

“Regulations on the Procedure for Military Service” (*Polozheniye o poryadke prokhozheniya voennoy sluzhby*), respectively, formally replaced the Soviet-era regulations.²⁵

The time-in-grade requirements established by this decree (as amended in 2007) are as follows: two years for junior lieutenant, three years for lieutenant, three years for senior lieutenant, four years for captain, four years for major, and five years for lieutenant colonel. For general officers, a minimum of two years in the previous rank and at least one year in a position authorized for a general officer is required. Ranks up to colonel are assigned by authorized commanders, as listed in the regulations. No time-in-grade limits are set for ranks of colonel or above, preserving the Soviet principle that promotion above colonel is entirely discretionary. General and admiral ranks are assigned by the president of the Russian Federation (replacing the Soviet Council of Ministers and Presidium of the Supreme Soviet). The structure is almost identical to the late Soviet model.²⁶

The core Soviet mechanism that a junior officer cannot be promoted beyond the rank authorized for his position (*shtatnaya dolzhnost'*) carried over fully into the Russian system. An officer can receive accelerated promotion for exceptional personal merit, but he cannot be promoted above the rank authorized for the position he occupies, and in any case not above major.²⁷ Officers with academic degrees in teaching or research positions can be promoted up to colonel above their billet ceiling.²⁸ These rules mean, as in the Soviet era, that position assignment is the real bottleneck in terms of determining whether an officer can advance. Being assigned to a position with a higher rank ceiling matters more than time-in-grade or attestation scores, and promotions in rank often follow assignment to a new higher level position.

Military promotions in the 1990s

The post-Soviet Russian Army had an oversupply of officers. Although conscription cohorts could be reduced quite easily, downsizing the officer corps was more difficult, especially given that the government was required by law to provide retiring officers with housing. This

²⁵ President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 1237, “Questions of Military Service [Вопросы прохождения военной службы],” Sept. 16, 1999 (with amendments through Dec. 31, 2025), <https://base.garant.ru/180912/>.

²⁶ The main formal difference is that the Russian system dropped the old Soviet provision of a two-year time-in-grade for lieutenants who graduated from higher military schools, so the standard three-year timeline now applies uniformly to all lieutenants. See “Questions of Military Service.”

²⁷ For example, a lieutenant commanding a rifle platoon could be promoted ahead of schedule to senior lieutenant, but a senior lieutenant in that position could not be promoted to captain, because senior lieutenant was the highest authorized rank for that position. He would have to first be appointed to the position of rifle company commander and only then (or concurrently) promoted to captain.

²⁸ President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 1237, “Questions of Military Service.”

oversupply created a pathological dynamic in which far too many officers competed for too few positions with advancement potential.²⁹

In the Soviet military, the centralized cadre system imposed top-down order on assignments and rotations, whereas the post-Soviet system was decentralized and lacked a structured rotation mechanism. As a result, the post-Soviet system became more nepotistic, and the unit commander played a pivotal role. In this system, the unit commander had the final say on whether promotion was granted. If the officer was applying for a post outside his unit, the absence of a centralized clearinghouse for postings made the process exponentially more complex. This combination of factors made it much simpler to secure promotion within an officer's own unit than to obtain promotion elsewhere.³⁰

Because of this absence of rotation, many Russian officers lacked a broader, rounded service experience. Entire categories of "unpromising posts" existed in "unpromising units," depriving officers of access to career progression. Such unpromising units failed to attract career-minded officers and as a rule had the lowest morale and discipline standards.³¹

Changes under Putin

The 2008–2012 reforms initiated under Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov eliminated 35 percent of officer billets; the reforms reduced the number of generals from 1,107 to 886 and colonels from 25,665 to 9,114. Following the example of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Russian MOD cut the ratio of officers to enlisted personnel from 1:2.5 to 1:15. The cuts were designed to replace the "egg-shaped" structure of the officer corps (which before the reform had more colonels and lieutenant colonels than junior officers) with a standard pyramid structure.³² However, these reforms did not result in a fully regularized promotion system.

Structurally, the MOD Main Cadres Directorate remains responsible for officers' career management. The Main Cadres Directorate is one of the main MOD directorates that reports directly to the minister of defense. It is conceptually comparable to a personnel department within a large civilian organization, but it is adapted to military service conditions. It is

²⁹ Sergei Romanov, "Career Growth—Only for the Deserving [Карьерный рост - только достойным]," *Voenna-Promyshlennyy Kurer*, Oct. 6, 2010.

³⁰ This mechanism, prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, is a large part of the explanation for why modern-day generals often spent the early parts of their careers rising through a single formation. Roger McDermott, "Rewarding Merit in the Russian Officer Corps," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Nov. 16, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/rewarding-merit-in-the-russian-officer-corps/>.

³¹ Romanov, "Career Growth."

³² Dale Herspring and Roger McDermott, "Serdyukov Promotes Systemic Russian Military Reform," *Orbis* 54, no. 2 (2010), pp. 284–301, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2010.01.004>.

responsible for evaluating potential officers for appointment and rotation, planning these rotations, and monitoring their implementation. Institutional mechanisms for managing this system include an Armed Forces cadre reserve for senior officers up to the rank of colonel and a rotation principle that is supposed to “promote the acquisition of diverse professional knowledge and growth of practical skills among military leaders at various levels.”³³

Although the MOD Main Military-Political Directorate was reestablished in 2018, it does not have the formal role in officer promotions that its predecessor (the MPD) did in the Soviet system. Instead, its functions are framed as “providing assistance to the commander in evaluating and making cadre decisions,” with the commander retaining full authority in the decision-making process. In practice, the influence of the *zampolit* in this decision-making may be significant, although there is no evidence available in this regard.³⁴

In practice, Russia still lacks a genuine merit-based, centralized career management system comparable to the model implemented under the US Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, most particularly the explicit “up-or-out” requirement of the latter system. However, the MOD issued a rotation instruction in 2009.³⁵ Since then, Russian Armed Forces have emphasized rotation more; officers are more likely to move to different units or even different MDs than they were in the 1990s and 2000s. Nonetheless, promotions remain irregular and at the discretion of top leadership, with officers at the two- and three-star level frequently waiting as long as 6 to 8 years between promotions.

In the Putin era, promotion lists for general officers have typically been issued by presidential decree, usually timed to national holidays such as Defenders of the Fatherland Day (February 23), Russia Day (June 12), and Constitution Day (December 12).³⁶ The holiday-timed promotion cycles via presidential decree are a post-Soviet innovation. In the Soviet period, general officer promotions were issued by a Council of Ministers decree without the same

³³ Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, “First Directorate of the Main Personnel Directorate” [Первое управление Главного управления кадров], accessed Apr. 27, 2026, <https://old.mil.ru/100GUK/composition/1control.htm>.

³⁴ “Everything You Need to Know About the Zampolit—Who He Is, His Duties and Functions, Detailed Information [Все, что нужно знать о замполите — кто это, его обязанности и функции, подробная информация],” Floral City, Nov. 24, 2024, <https://floral-city.ru/blog/vse-cto-nuzno-znat-o-zampolite-kto-eto-ego-obyzannosti-i-funkcii-podrobnaya-informaciya>.

³⁵ “Methodological Recommendations on Implementation of the Provisions of the Instruction on Rotation of Officers in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation [Методические рекомендации по реализации положений инструкции о ротации офицеров в ВС РФ],” Forum for Legal Assistance to Military Personnel, Sept. 29, 2021, <https://voensud.ru/files/old/21/29.09.doc>.

³⁶ This pattern is evident from a review of dates of promotion decrees, as summarized by the Russian Defense Policy blog over the years. See “Defender’s Day List,” Russian Defense Policy, Feb. 18, 2022, <https://russiandefpolicy.com/tag/promotions/>.

calendar rhythm. The concentration of this authority in the president personally, rather than in a collective body, suggests a significant centralization of decision-making on the promotion of high-level officers.

Presidential Decree No. 823 of November 14, 2022, amended the regulations on promotions in several important ways. New provisions allowed officers at the rank of colonel general or admiral to serve to age 70, and those below that rank to serve to age 65. This provision represented a significant wartime relaxation of the peacetime retirement age limits, which under the Soviet system had scaled upward from 40 for junior officers to 60 for major generals, with general officers above that rank effectively exempt. The 2022 decree also created provisions for wounded combat veterans with state awards to be appointed to positions even after being found limited in fitness by medical boards.³⁷

³⁷ "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of November 14, 2022 No. 823 'On Amendments to the Regulation on the Procedure for Military Service, Approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of Sept. 16, 1999 No. 1237' [Указ Президента РФ от 14 ноября 2022 г. N 823 'О внесении изменений в Положение о порядке прохождения военной службы, утвержденное Указом Президента Российской Федерации от 16 сентября 1999 г. N 1237']," *Garant*, Nov. 14, 2022, <https://base.garant.ru/405702275/>.

Promotions and Awards: General Officer Cadres

In this section, we introduce findings from a quantitative analysis of Russian general officer demographics characteristics using the CNA-built Promotions database. This database is based on an existing CNA-constructed dataset of Russian Navy flag officers from 2000 to 2016, but we expanded it to cover other branches of the Russian Armed Forces and updated it through 2025. We used a full range of open sources, including official decrees, official and unofficial Russian military publications, and other public reporting to construct the database.³⁸

The quantitative analysis here highlights the key role of promotion age in determining the likelihood of career success. Those who are promoted earlier as one-stars are far more likely to become three- and four-star general officers. In addition, CNA found some evidence that attending a certain subset of military educational institutions is especially common among general officers promoted into higher ranks, although this finding was limited by data availability.

The universe of generals and admirals

CNA's Promotions dataset includes 2,281 general officers who served from 1991 to the present day. That number includes officers from all five starred ranks: 1,342 one-star, 616 two-star, 229 three-star, 52 four-star, and one five-star. Whether an officer is still active duty can be difficult to establish based on open sources. We have confirmed that at least 400 flag officers are currently on active duty. This number rises to 697 if we include officers who are not confirmed to be on active duty but have received promotions since 2020 and are not known to have died since then. The data include at least 182 generals who served in Chechnya, 180 who served in Syria, and 290 who have served in Ukraine.

The data include 2,504 general officer promotion dates, at a consistent rate of 75 to 100 promotion dates each year from 2013 to 2024, with a high of 200 in 2024. The highest number of promotions in one year—nearly 400—came in 1993, when then-Russian President Boris

³⁸ Because of data availability difficulties, the Promotions dataset contains entries in which variables are missing. These gaps reflect the lack of uniformity in public reporting across government and nongovernmental sources, especially across a list of figures stretching from the 1990s to the mid-2020s. Some variables have 100 percent coverage, many have more than 66 percent, and a few cover less than 20 percent. We moderate our findings and caveat appropriately throughout this section in light of this limitation. For details on data coverage, gaps, and other methodological choices, see Appendix C: Promotions Dataset.

Yeltsin overhauled the military’s leadership in the immediate wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

At least 122 general officers in the dataset have received the Hero of Russia award. At least 39 received the award before attaining general officer rank, 58 received it after or upon receiving flag rank or after retirement, and 11 received it posthumously. For the remainder, the order is unclear because of uncertain promotion dates.

Data quality for conflict experience is uneven and tentative. However, in Table 5, we report the percentages of three- and four-star general officers in the dataset who have publicly acknowledged conflict experience (either Chechnya, Syria, or Ukraine) among inactive general officers.

The data show very disparate patterns of conflict participation: upper tier airborne forces (VDV) general officers have considerable conflict experience, as do nearly 40 percent of the higher echelon ground forces general officers. This percentage is significantly lower for general officers in the aerospace forces (VKS) and the navy.

Table 6 summarizes the most important characteristics for ground forces general officers currently active as of January 2026. Tables summarizing VDV and VKS general officers and navy flag officers are included in Appendix C.

Table 5. Three- and four-stars with sustained conflict experience

Service Branch	Three-Star	Four-Star
Ground	36% (50%)	38% (43%)
Aerospace	21% (44%)	20% (33%)
Airborne	75% (83%)	100% (100%)
Navy	12% (15%)	0%

Source: CNA.
 Note: The first number in each cell measures the percent of service among known or assumed retired officers. The value for currently active officers is given in parentheses. These data do not count the Russia-Georgia war.

Table 6. Average characteristics across ranks (active), ground forces

Characteristics	One-Star	Two-Star	Three-Star	Four-Star
Total	125	62	31	3
Average age ^a	51.9	57.1	61.7	67.5
Average age at one-star promotion	46.5	45.6	43.5	38.9
Average age at latest promotion	46.6	52.0	56.0	60.7
Percentage served in Chechnya	10%	31%	41%	33%
Percentage served in Syria	17%	52%	65%	33%
Percentage served in Ukraine	62%	44%	71%	67%

Source: CNA.
^a Entries without observations are dropped from all averages.

The table provides descriptive evidence for clear patterns across the current active Russian ground forces general officer corps. The average age at promotion to major general decreases from nearly 47 years to just 39 years old depending on rank (that is, younger one-stars are on average more likely to reach upper tier echelons).

Most general officers end their careers in their early 50s, with upper tier three- and four-stars remaining into their late 50s and early 60s on average. Service in Russia's conflicts in Chechnya, Syria, and Ukraine generally reflects what might be expected for active ground forces generals given their generation (i.e., relatively few one-stars with Chechnya or Syria experience).

However, note that two- and three-stars in the ground forces appear to have higher rates of battlefield experience in Chechnya and Syria. For Syria in particular, this trend could suggest that the battlefield served as a proving ground for Russian military leadership. High rates of service in Ukraine simply reflect widespread participation in that conflict, particularly in the ground forces.

VKS general officers are promoted slightly later and are slightly older on average, and they generally display a less pronounced emphasis on younger promotion. The cohort of Aerospace general officers in two-, three-, and four-star positions is very highly experienced after service in Syria, which reflects the heavy use of air power in that conflict.

Meanwhile, one-star general officers in the VKS are far more involved in Ukraine than higher ranked general officers, at least on the evidence of their publicly available biographies. Navy promotion ages are generally similar to those of ground forces officers. Finally, navy flag officers have seen very little conflict service outside of Ukraine. The relevant tables can be found in Appendix C.

Career advancement is a younger man's game

In addition to describing key characteristics across cohorts of general officers, we can also leverage the entire corpus of the Russian general officer corps to estimate the likelihood of continuing to rise in the ranks. When viewed in toto, and based on available data, CNA found decisive evidence that age when promoted to one-star is the clearest indicator of likelihood of reaching a four-star rank, as shown in Table 7. This effect is strongest among the ground forces.

Table 7. Median age for all general officers based on highest achieved rank

Rank Cohort	One-Star Promotion Age, Median	Two-Star Promotion Age, Median	Three-Star Promotion Age, Median	Four-Star Promotion Age, Median
All	47.2	51.6	53.6	56.6
One-star	48.6			
Two-star	46.8	52.9		
Three-star	43.9	50.1	54.6	
Four-star	39.6	46.4	51.3	56.6

Source: CNA.

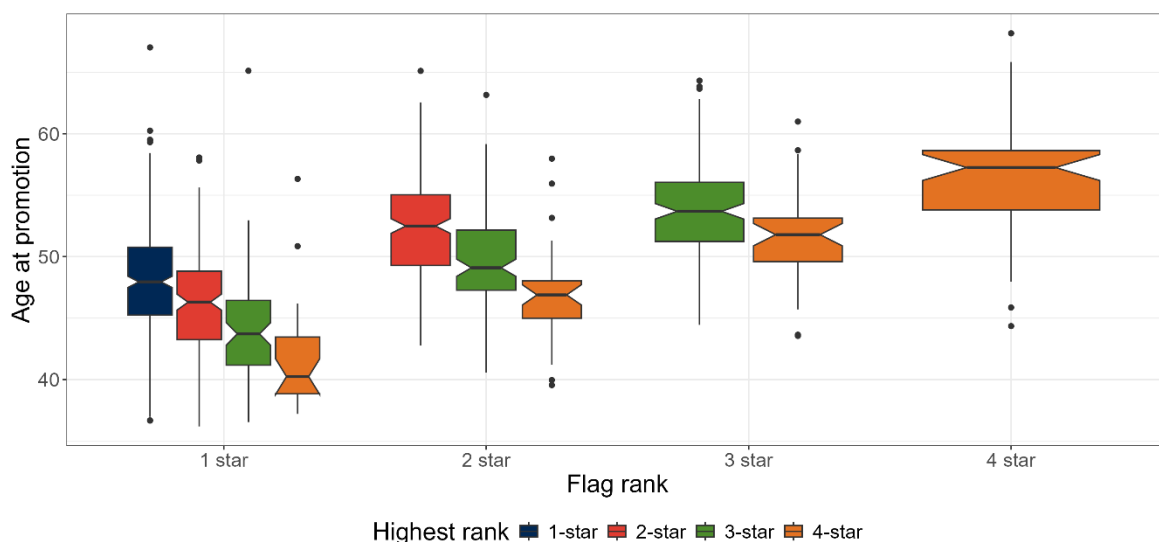
Note: These data exclude the five-star rank because Russia has had only one since 1991.

Across all generals and admirals with known birth dates and promotion dates, the median ages for promotions to one-, two-, three-, and four-star ranks were 47, 51, 53, and 56, respectively, with a largely normal distribution. This narrow overall difference reflects the early age at which three- and four-star generals achieve their promotions.

Figure 5 visualizes this trend with a notched box chart of ages at which a general officer achieved promotion organized by the highest rank that individual received. The line at the narrowest point of the notch indicates each group's median age at a given rank, and the upper and lower edges of the notches indicate the interquartile range. The whiskers and outlying points on each vertical axis indicate the full range of outliers for each category. If the notches of two box plots do not overlap, it suggests that the difference in medians is statistically significant.

The chart should be read by coloring: the furthest left grouping of bars denotes the age at which an officer received his first star, and each colored bar refers to the highest rank total. For example, if an officer terminates at a one-star rank, he will be counted in the dark blue bar only. If an officer is terminated at a two-star rank, he will be counted in the red bar (note that the density shifts visually toward a younger age at that promotion).

Figure 5. Distribution of promotion age by highest maximum rank achieved



Source: CNA.

The general trend indicates that the lower one's age of promotion at one-star is, the higher the individual's terminal rank will be. Moving to the right within the figure, the same pattern repeats: if an officer achieves a two-star rank, the age at that promotion is significantly higher if the ranking is terminal than if the individual continues to be on track for a three- or four-star terminal rank. Furthermore, the range notches do not overlap, indicating that the difference in median promotion age is statistically significant for different terminal ranks.

Ultimately, our analysis shows that general officers who have achieved a four-star rank consistently received promotions to each lower general officer rank at a significantly younger age than their peers. The same holds, although to a lesser degree, for those who reached three-star ranks compared to their one- and two-star peers. This pattern is the primary finding of the Promotions dataset.

Statistical analysis further corroborates this pattern. CNA fitted a logit regression model to the outcome of achieving three- and four-star rank, accounting for age at promotion to a one-star rank, possession of a Hero of Russia before one-star rank, and membership in one of the four core services (ground forces, VKS, navy, VDV).

We limited our training data to those general officers who achieved their one-star rank before 2022 in anticipation of applying the resulting model to those who have been promoted since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. These three independent variables represent the most usable variables in the dataset, and each reflects key factors: youthful

talent, tactical or operational excellence as an officer, or membership in the Russian heavyweight services.

Of these, the only independent variable with a statistically significant result was age at one-star promotion. At that stage, younger ages suggested a higher probability of achieving a four-star rank. In this analysis, increasing the age of one-star promotion from 38 to 40 decreases the probability of promotion to four-star rank by 21 percent (from 40 percent to 19 percent).³⁹ Using this model, we created a list of current Russian one-star general officers who are likely to be promoted to three- and four-star ranks, which is available in Appendix C: Promotions Dataset.

Schoolhouses

In addition to promotion age, CNA also found evidence that educational institutions matter in career trajectories. The Soviet and Russian military education system includes three tiers, each serving as a gatekeeper for the next level of career advancement. This structure, established in its mature form by the mid-20th century, has survived the collapse of the Soviet Union with remarkably few changes to its fundamental architecture.

The foundation of the officer corps is the network of higher military schools (*vysshie voyennye uchilishcha*) that commission new officers. As of the late Soviet period, approximately 140 such institutions existed across the country, each training officers for a specific armed service or combat arm. Applicants between the ages of 17 and 21 who held a secondary diploma could apply, as could serving enlisted personnel under 23. Upon graduation, cadets received university-equivalent diplomas and were commissioned as junior lieutenants. Together with reserve officer training programs in civilian universities, this system produced approximately 60,000 new officers per year in the late Soviet period.⁴⁰

In their late 20s to early 30s, officers could enter one of the military academies (*voyennye akademii*). Candidates were required to have passed competitive examinations, held a regimental command position, received excellent ratings, and been endorsed by the political directorate (in Soviet times) or the chain of command of their service (post-1991). Students generally entered for a three-year course of study, usually at the rank of captain, and qualified

³⁹ This model has predictive value, although it is limited. The implied p-value based on the chi-square score is well under 0.05, suggesting that it is useful for predicting which freshly minted one-star officers are most likely to reach a four-star rank. However, it limits any foresight analysis to officers who have already reached the general officer ranks. It also does not reflect how the Russia-Ukraine war is reshaping promotion patterns.

⁴⁰ Country Data, "Officers," in *Soviet Union: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), <https://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-12899.html>.

for promotion to major upon graduation. Each armed service and combat arm had its own academy.⁴¹

The GSA, founded in 1936, was and still is the senior professional school for the Soviet and Russian officer corps. Students are admitted in the ranks of lieutenant colonel, colonel, and major general, with most being colonels or newly promoted generals who are typically in their late 30s. The course of study is two years, with a focus on operational-strategic rather than tactical-level education. Graduation from the GSA was a prerequisite for appointment to important MOD and GS positions, and graduates who were not already generals or admirals before graduation area usually promoted to general rank shortly after completing the course.⁴²

The greatest degree of diversity in education is at the level of the commissioning school. In Table 8, we identify the three most common commissioning schools that active ground forces officers attended by terminal rank (along with any institutions tied for that mark).⁴³ In Appendix C: Promotions Dataset, we provide similar data for the VKS, VDV, and the navy.

Table 8. Common educational institutions attended by rank (active duty, ground forces)

Terminal Rank	Top Three Common Educational Institutions Attended
One-star	1. Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School (8.4%) 2. Novosibirsk Higher Military Command School (4.2%) 3. Leningrad Higher Combined Arms, Ryazan Higher Airborne (tied, 3.5% each)
Two-star	1. Moscow Higher Combined Arms School (8.1%) 2. Chelyabinsk Higher Tank, Kyiv Higher Combined Arms (tied, 6.5% each)
Three-star	1. Moscow Higher Combined Arms (21.4%) 2. Ryazan Higher Airborne (17.6%) 3. Baku Higher Combined Arms, Blagoveshchensk Higher Tank, Chelyabinsk Higher Tank, Ordzhonikidze Higher Combined (tied, 7.1% each)
Four-star	1. Chelyabinsk Higher Tank, Kazan Higher Tank, Moscow Higher Combined Arms (tied, 33.3% each)

Source: CNA.

The Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School (or Moscow School) is the highest status command school in the ground forces ecosystem. It is the oldest of Russia's cadet schools and is granted the honors of marching at the end of military parades in Moscow's Red Square and

⁴¹ Fast Scott and Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR*.

⁴² Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*.

⁴³ Figure 16 and Figure 17 in Appendix C: Promotions Dataset show service-based patterns in where ground forces and aerospace forces (VKS) generals received their entry-level training. Figure 19 provides the same for navy flag officers. The Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School is dominant among the ground forces, but entry-level training for VKS generals and navy admirals is more evenly distributed across schools. Notably, these figures do not factor in maximum rank attained.

holding its graduation parades there as well. The Kremlin Cadets, as its graduates are known, are a distinct cohort within the Russian military.⁴⁴ The disproportionately high number of Moscow School graduates reaching general officer level may be a sign of selection based on quality, or it may reflect network effects wherein its graduates benefit from better early assignments that compound over the course of their careers. Although the data do not allow us to distinguish between the two mechanisms, either mechanism would result in disproportionate numbers of Moscow School graduates reaching general officer rank.

In the Navy, although the Frunze Higher Naval School enjoys a slim lead over competitors like the Nakhimov Black Sea and Makarov Pacific Higher Naval Schools in all-time post-1991 admirals, this lead vanishes among current admirals. Today, only 14 percent of vice admirals and admirals (two- and three-stars) graduated from the Frunze School.

At the two-star rank, it comes in behind the Makarov Pacific School (18 percent) but ahead of the Kirov Caspian Naval School (9 percent); at the three-star rank, it lags behind the Komsomol Higher Naval Submarine School (57 percent) and the Nakhimov Black Sea Naval School (28 percent). VKS is significantly more ecumenical, with a wide variety of aviation and pilot schools. We identify these in greater detail in Appendix C: Promotions Dataset. The VDV general officers, meanwhile, overwhelmingly pass through the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School.

Hero of Russia awards

In this section, we summarize the findings from our analysis of military personnel who received the Hero of Russia award between 2022 and 2025 for actions related to the Russia-Ukraine war. Full details of the analysis can be found in Appendix D: Hero of Russia Awardees. The dataset includes 486 publicly known recipients of the award.⁴⁵ The dataset is based on published official decrees, press coverage, and sites devoted to tracking and profiling Russian soldiers.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Short History Course. Kremlin Cadets [Краткий курс истории. Кремлевские курсанты]," Istoriiia.RF, n.d., <https://history.ru/read/articles/kratkii-kurs-istorii-kriemlievskiie-kursanty>.

⁴⁵ Our dataset includes all individuals awarded the Hero of Russia since 2022. Most are military figures, but some are cosmonauts, politicians, or religious figures. We associated the award with the invasion of Ukraine based on whether the individual had a record of having served in Ukraine at the time of the action for which the award was given.

⁴⁶ "Heroes of the Country: International Patriotic Internet-Project," accessed Apr. 27, 2026, <https://warheroes.ru/>; "Hero of the Russian Federation," Wikipedia, 2026, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%93%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8.

The Hero of Russia award (also known as the Gold Star) is Russia's highest honor, given "for services to the government or nation connected to the execution of heroic acts."⁴⁷ The Hero of Russia can be awarded to both domestic and foreign civilians or military personnel, and the awardee can receive it while alive or posthumously.

Presidential decrees issued irregularly throughout the year are the official means of announcing Hero of Russia recipients.⁴⁸ Hero of Russia recipients and family members of deceased awardees receive generous financial benefits.⁴⁹ Beyond its financial benefits and symbolic significance, the Hero of Russia award provides insight into how the Kremlin recognizes and rewards leadership within the military, particularly among top officers.

We found no causal link between receiving the Hero of Russia award and being appointed to a top operational position, given that most awardees received it after attaining general officer rank. Since 1991, 109 generals have become Heroes of the Russian Federation.

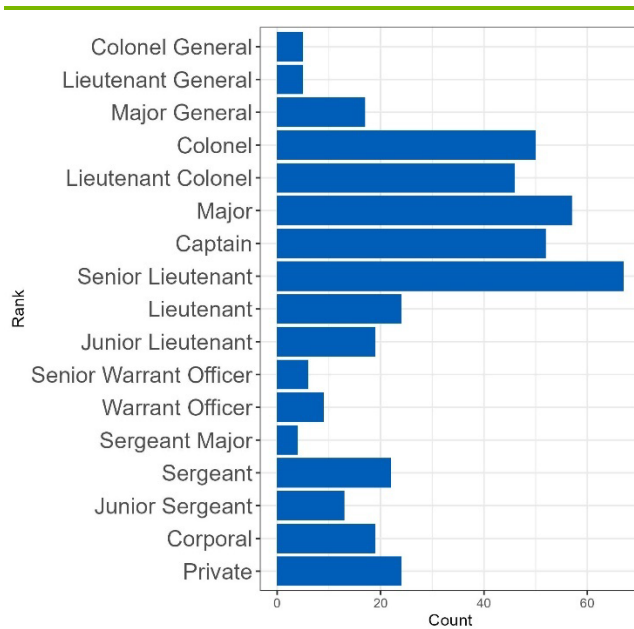
Of the 80 officers with known one-star promotion dates, 54 received the award after attaining general officer rank, and 32 received it before attaining that rank. Nine received it posthumously. Of the 14 four-star generals to hold the award, only 1 received it before attaining general officer rank, 5 (including Gerasimov) received the award after receiving their fourth star, and another 6 earned it as three-star general officers. These numbers suggest that the award may function as a kind of lifetime achievement award for senior general officers, rather than as a clear marker for selection into the military elite.

⁴⁷ "Hero of the Russian Federation," Kremlin, accessed Apr. 27, 2026, <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/catalog/glossary/9>; "On the Establishment of the Title of Hero of the Russian Federation and the Institution of the Badge of Special Distinction—the 'Gold Star' Medal [Закон РФ от 20 марта 1992 г. N 2553-I "Об установлении звания Героя Российской Федерации и учреждении знака особого отличия - медали "Золотая Звезда"]," Law of the Russian Federation, No. 2553, Mar. 20, 1992, <https://base.garant.ru/183986/>.

⁴⁸ Hero of Russia awards may be classified and either never revealed or only after some lag. Some analysis suggests that Putin is leaning more heavily on classified decrees than ever before. See "Almost 45% of Putin's 2025 Decrees Are Secret [Почти 45% указов Путина в 2025 году оказались секретными]," *Verstka*, Jan. 13, 2026, <https://verstka.media/pochti-45-ukazov-putina-v-2025-godu-okazalis-sekretnymi>.

⁴⁹ Sofya Popova, "For What Feats Can You Get the Title of Hero of Russia? Who Was awarded the Gold Star by Putin in 2025 [За какие подвиги можно получить звание Героя России? Кого Путин наградил «Золотой звездой» в 2025 году]," *Lenta*, Dec. 25, 2024, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2024/04/01/geroy-rossii/>.

Figure 6. Heroes of Russia by rank



Source: CNA.

Note: This graph shows rank at the time of the actions meriting the award. In cases in which a soldier was promoted shortly before the award and citations did not indicate a rank at the time of the action, we assumed a promotion from the rank immediately below.

are receiving the award.

Although the Hero of Russia award by itself is not a reliable indicator of the future elite in the Russian military, it could prove to be a worthwhile feature in combination with other indicators, such as promotions and leadership development programs. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a new initiative to create a pipeline for highly decorated officers.

Putin announced the creation of *Vremya Geroyev* (Time of Heroes), a new Russian leadership development program that trains Russia-Ukraine war veterans for future leadership roles in government agencies and state-owned companies.⁵⁰ Managed by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, the goal of the program is to prepare

The broader context of awarding the Hero of Russia award to general officers contrasts with the patterns emerging from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, during which the distribution of awards has reflected a different rank profile and a shift in focus, as shown in Figure 6. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, 465 individuals have received the Hero of Russia for military activities in or around Ukraine.

The median award recipient is 35 years old and a captain. Although the most common rank for an awardee from the Russia-Ukraine war was a senior lieutenant, award numbers are only slightly lower (and, importantly, are practically flat) among captains, majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels.

Assuming that the Russian military has fewer lieutenant colonels and colonels than captains and majors, this pattern suggests that a higher share of colonels

⁵⁰ "Heroes of Their Time [Герои своего времени]," *Novaya Gazeta*, Dec. 5, 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/12/05/geroi-svoego-vremeni>.

its candidates for future politically contingent defense roles—whether the veterans do so as active duty soldiers or as civilians.

We found that decorations likely play a large role in the selection of *Vremya Geroyev* cohorts. According to the Kremlin, since the inception of the program, 51 Hero of Russia awardees have participated in the *Vremya Geroyev* program.⁵¹ Out of the 51 participants, we managed to identify 33. In addition, we identified 10 Hero of Russia award recipients who were both selected as participants in the *Vremya Geroyev* program and promoted early following their award. However, the data suggest that rank may play an even more important role in the selection of *Vremya Geroyev* candidates because the rank profile of the recipients we identified overlaps strongly with midcareer officers.

This overlap between rank and selection criteria highlights how the Russian government may be using programs like *Vremya Geroyev* to strategically cultivate a new generation of military elites. In short, combined with accelerated promotion and recruitment into elite programs such as *Vremya Geroyev*, the Hero of Russia award could act as a credential linking battlefield prestige to the formation of a new elite loyal to the Kremlin.

⁵¹ "The List of Participants in the Second Stream of the 'Time of Heroes' Program Has Been Published [Опубликован список участников второго потока программы "Время героев"]," *RIA Novosti*, May 27, 2025, <https://ria.ru/20250527/uchastniki-2019434868.html>.

Removals: Wartime Dismissals and Arrests

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is shaping and will likely accelerate many Russian military elite careers. But it has also proven to be a dangerous time for existing upper tier elites in particular. Death in combat, assassinations by Ukrainian intelligence operatives, dismissals from command postings, and criminal proceedings are all part of the unusually uncertain ecosystem for Russian military and political elites.

To capture patterns of trouble in Russian military elite career trajectories, CNA analyzed the removals of upper tier military and military-political officials, which we collected in an original, hand-coded “Removals” dataset. This dataset represents the universe of publicly reported removals of high-ranking military elites and military-associated civilian elites in Russia during the Russia-Ukraine war.⁵² The dataset captures neither the full dynamics of Russian wartime criminal procedures nor the dismissals, demotions, or other internal military dynamics for general, flag, or other commissioned officers that do not attract public attention.

Analyzing the data provides insight into temporal and position dynamics for unexpectedly ended careers for upper tier elites in Russia’s political regime. This analysis also adds greater detail to the findings highlighted elsewhere in this report about the increased “churn” (and therefore potential for future promotions and career-making) in the upper tier military elite since the Russia-Ukraine war began in 2022.

Characterizing the Removals dataset

The Removals dataset consists of 41 entries from 2022 to the end of 2025. The data are organized by individual, so on a few occasions, the data indicate that one individual has been removed multiple times, which we note when relevant.⁵³ We categorize removals into two

⁵² Note that this dataset captures a wider span of the Russian upper tier elite than the Promotions, Hero of Russia, or Senior Leaders datasets because it includes civilian and uniformed elites in the MOD, elites in MOD-affiliated state corporations, and military elites in command positions in the Russian Armed Forces.

⁵³ For analysis of the full dataset, we counted the most politically meaningful removal, in terms of its effect(s) on the political system. For example, if a military elite was to be removed from a command position and then arrested, we would count his arrest as the more significant event for the broader elite system.

primary buckets: dismissals from positions and arrests.⁵⁴ In some cases, Russian-language sources make clear that dismissals from positions are due to wartime performance issues, politics, natural career moves or retirements, or other reasons for which there is no explicit public evidence.⁵⁵

We expanded our definition of *elites* slightly in the data collection for this dataset; we include both general officers and key military and civilian officials in the Russian MOD and military-industrial complex. This definition is the widespread one used for military elite removals in Russian-language sources, ranging from pro-regime newspapers to regime-critical Telegram channels.⁵⁶ In our expanded definition, we categorize three types of officials: military elites with command positions, military elites in the MOD bureaucracy, and civilian elites in the MOD bureaucracy or MOD-aligned industrial complex. We derived four findings from this dataset:

- Most removals of military elites in command positions are dismissals from their post or retirement (whether natural or forced) rather than arrests. Military elites who have been arrested are almost uniformly MOD bureaucrats with military ranks.⁵⁷
- Most civilian upper tier elites captured in the dataset are associated with the May 2024 removal of Sergei Shoigu from his longstanding position as minister of defense. Some of these elites were dismissed or shuffled around to new positions; others have been arrested.⁵⁸ The process of removing Shoigu-affiliated elites continued well into 2025.

⁵⁴ We did not distinguish between dismissals and demotions; in very few cases is demotion to a lower rank recorded. Examples of hierarchical, nonrank demotion from a higher status command to a lesser status command position (such as from commander to a chief of staff (COS)) exist but are not captured in this analysis because of inadequate data availability and reliability. Some demotions are not made public or are only revealed significantly after the fact. We therefore focus on removals of any type.

⁵⁵ This category therefore must be interpreted with caution, and we introduce sub-categories and qualitative granularity in the analysis to improve interpretation when possible. Arrests are far clearer; in almost all cases, an official will be announced as indicted with a public criminal charge. To code each entry, we relied on Russian-language and English-language newspapers.

⁵⁶ Relevant English-language sources that provide lists of dismissals and arrests include the following: Isabel van Brugen, "Putin Ramps Up War Machine Purge With New Arrests," *Newsweek*, Aug. 1, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-military-purge-defense-ministry-arrests-1933009>; Isabel van Brugen, "Full List of Russian Commanders Dismissed by Putin in Ukraine War," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/full-list-russian-commanders-dismissed-putin-ukraine-war-1813706>; Dmytro Levytskyi and Kateryna Danishevska, "Discarded Putin's Generals: How the Kremlin Losing Top Commanders in the War Against Ukraine," *RBC-Ukraine*, Oct. 5, 2023, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/analytics/eliminated-putin-s-generals-how-the-kremlin-1696484407.html>.

⁵⁷ For the sole non-politically charged exception (Major General Valery Mumindzhanov), see "A Senior Russian Military Commander Detained in a Fraud Case as Investigation Widens," Associated Press, Sept. 2, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-military-arrest-mumindzhanov-cd27a5587c5943be40ccf6f8ff0d8978>.

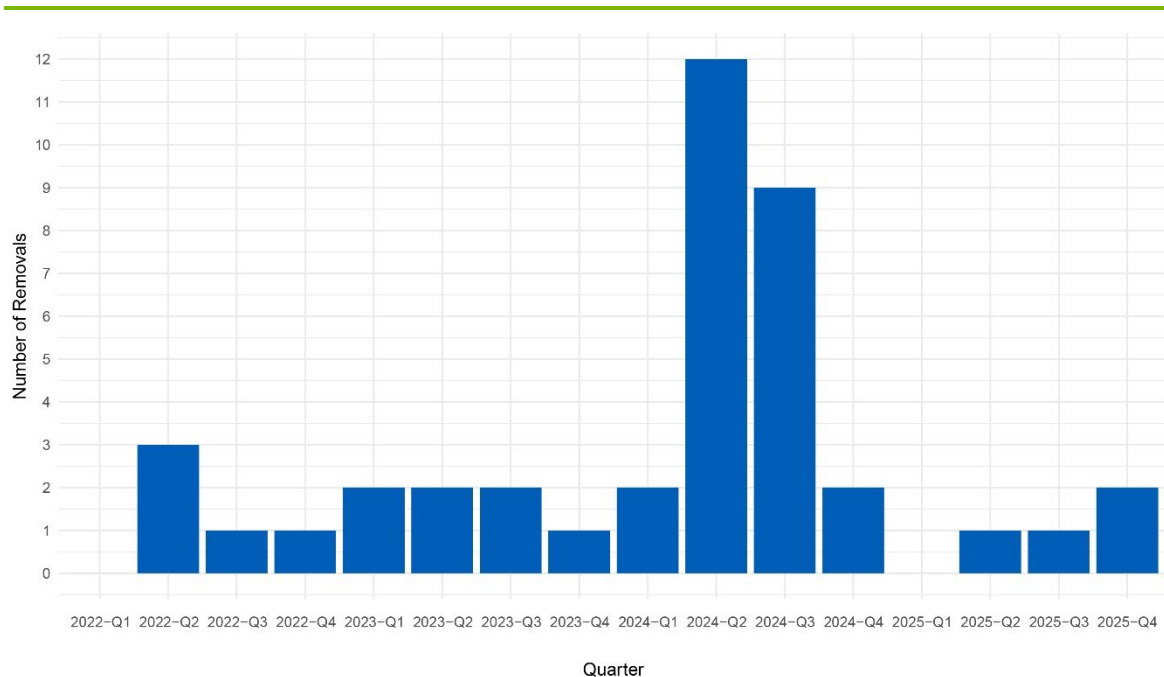
⁵⁸ For details on Shoigu's dismissal, see Robert Plummer, "Vladimir Putin Removes Sergei Shoigu from Russian Defence Ministry," *BBC*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-69000698>.

- The vast majority of public, upper tier elite removals occurred in 2024, immediately after the reshuffle. These removals were a mix of dismissals and arrests for corruption.⁵⁹
- The majority of the general officers who were dismissed are at the colonel general or general of the Army rank, which suggests that they held key operational commands and reflects potential punishment for poor wartime performance.

Temporal patterns, 2022–2025

Figure 7 shows the upper tier elite removal patterns over four years of war. Nearly 30 elites were removed in 2024, relative to less than 10 per year before or after.

Figure 7. Removals by quarter, 2022–2025

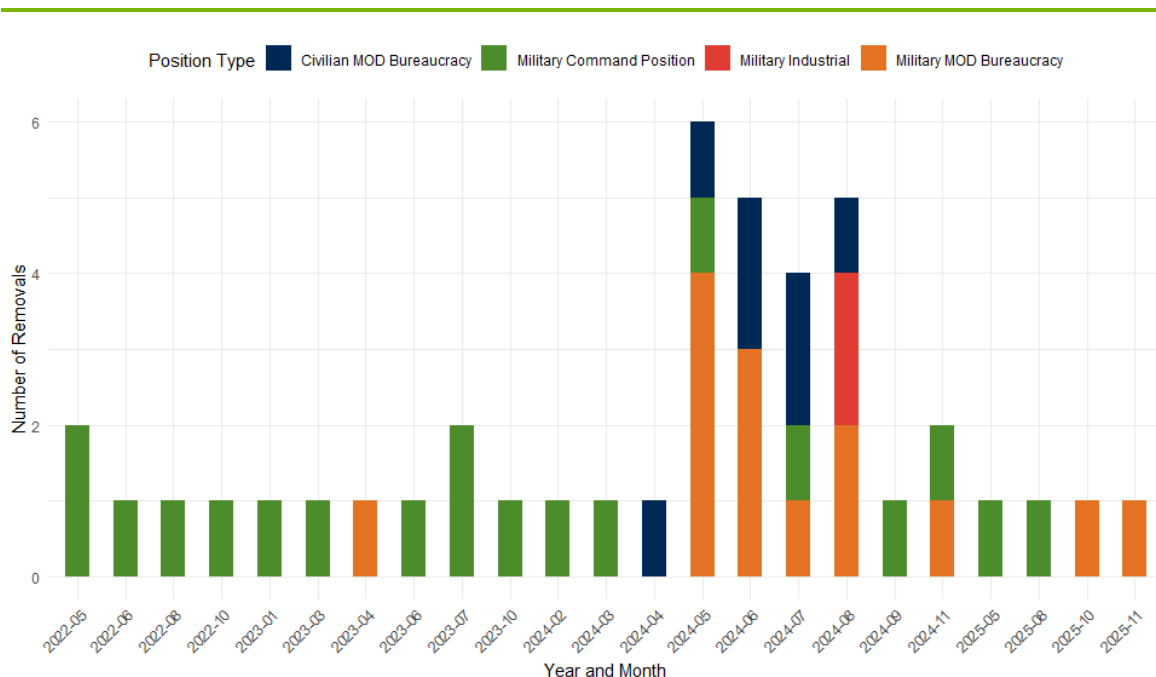


Source: CNA.

⁵⁹ For details on the dismissals before, during, and immediately after the 2024 cabinet reshuffle and subsequent purge, see “Putin Dismisses Deputy Defense Ministers, Replaces One with ‘Close Relative,’” *VOA News*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/putin-dismisses-deputy-defense-ministers-replaces-one-with-close-relative/7659415.html>; “Former Russian Deputy Defense Minister Arrested on Corruption Charges,” *Moscow Times*, July 26, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/07/26/former-russian-deputy-defense-minister-arrested-on-corruption-charges-a85837>.

Importantly, removals are not only unevenly distributed across the period but also periodized by the kind of official removed. Until 2024, nearly all removals were dismissals from command positions.⁶⁰ These dismissals occurred in a steady stream after the initial failure of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in spring and summer 2022 and across the first half of 2023, as depicted in Figure 8. Command removals in 2022 and 2023 were associated largely with perceived poor wartime performance, although barring a public statement, we cannot conclusively verify each individual removal. This ambiguity is one reason why we capture all removals regardless of assessed or reported motivation.

Figure 8. Removals by position type, 2022–2025



Source: CNA.

For example, Russian reporting makes clear that Admiral Igor Osipov was removed for poor performance; the sinking of the *Moskva* was a touchstone example of his brief wartime tenure.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Lieutenant-General Sergei Kisel was likely removed after his failure to

⁶⁰ A command position includes General Staff (GS) leadership, commanders-in-chief (CinCs) of service branches, military district (MD) heads and their deputies, and commanders of strategic groups of forces (as in conflicts) or operational units. A military bureaucratic position includes the minister of defense and deputies as well as heads of MOD directorates not under the GS.

⁶¹ Reported removed as commander of the Black Sea Fleet in August 2022. van Brugen, “Full List.”

capture Kharkiv.⁶² General of the Army Alexander Dvornikov, commander of the Southern MD and head of the Southern Group of Forces in the initial invasion of Ukraine, was reportedly appointed commander of the overall war in Ukraine in April 2022 after Russia lost the Battle of Kyiv because of his initial success in the southern theater of operations. Nonetheless, he was removed from overall war command sometime in May or June of that same year (although this was never publicly confirmed), and he was removed as commander of the Southern MD in January 2023.⁶³

Many generals tied to battlefield defeats were removed fairly quietly, including Western MD Commander Colonel General Alexander Zhuravlyov (removed September 2022), probably as a result of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and VDV Commander Andrei Serdyukov (replaced June 2022) after catastrophic airborne losses in the Battle of Kyiv during the Hostomel Airport operation. Serdyukov was demoted to VDV chief of staff (COS).⁶⁴

Another example is Colonel General Alexander Lapin, who was first removed in October 2022 as commander of the Central MD after Ukraine recaptured Lyman during its fall 2022 counteroffensive. Lapin is notable for being removed multiple times: he became COS of the ground forces in January 2023 and Leningrad MD commander (and head of the “North” group of forces in Ukraine) in March 2024, and he was finally dismissed entirely in August 2025. During his second command tenure, he came under sustained criticism for failing to coordinate defenses appropriately and was blamed for the initial success of Ukraine’s Kursk incursion in August 2024.⁶⁵ Lapin formally retired young at the age of 62 a month after his removal, one of the clearest cases of a forced retirement.⁶⁶

⁶² Removed as 1st Guards Tank Army commander in May 2022. See van Brugen, “Full List.”

⁶³ John Hardie, “Moscow Shakes Up Command of Its Forces in Ukraine (Again),” *Long War Journal*, Jan. 12, 2023, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2023/01/moscow-shakes-up-command-of-its-forces-in-ukraine-again.php>.

⁶⁴ van Brugen, “Full List”; “A Graduate of the Kyiv Suvorov Military School Has Been Appointed the New Head of the Western Military District [Новым руководителем Западного военного округа назначен выпускник Киевского суворовского училища],” *Fontanka*, Oct. 2, 2022, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/10/02/71702585/>; Clark Mason, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Grace Mappes, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 21, 2022,” Institute for the Study of War, June 21, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-21>.

⁶⁵ “Russian General’s Decision to Dissolve Kursk Defense Council May Have Enabled Ukrainian Incursion,” *Kyiv Post*, Aug. 21, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/37739>.

⁶⁶ Leo Chiu, “Russia’s Former Top General Lapin Dismissed from Military,” *Kyiv Post*, Sept. 21, 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/60564>.

The Prigozhin Rebellion was (mostly) noninfluential

Surprisingly, almost no quantitative uptick in removals occurred in association with the Prigozhin Rebellion in June 2023.⁶⁷ The rebellion simply did not lead to a large purge or dismissal of commanders, with one critical exception. The major target was Sergei Surovikin, commander-in-chief (CinC) of the VKS and deputy commander of the Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine. Surovikin is complicated to classify because he was demoted from full command of the war effort to deputy status in January 2023. The demotion was widely regarded as the losing outcome of bureaucratic high politics played by Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Valery Gerasimov.

More consequentially, Surovikin was reportedly placed under house arrest in June 2023 because of his somewhat murky association with Prigozhin. He was officially removed as CinC of the VKS in August 2023. According to reports, his arrest was short-lived, and he retained his general of the army rank and was quietly transferred to a position in Algeria as a kind of informal exile. In these data, his arrest is the most important turning point in his career; thus, he is captured in Figure 8 in June 2023.

In addition to Surovikin, the only two potential removals publicly associated with Prigozhin at all in Russian commentary are Major General Vladimir Selivyorstov, the 106th Guards Airborne Division commander, who was removed in July 2023, and Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, who was transferred from his position as deputy minister of defense for logistics to a deputy commander position within the Wagner Group in April, just months before the rebellion. Both are unique events that underline the notable lack of direct purging of the upper tier officer corps after Prigozhin's actions that summer.

2024: The year of purges

The year 2024 began with a small number of dismissals in the winter and spring (primarily from command positions). One notable example is Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov, the CinC of the Russian Navy. His removal is difficult to characterize; he was approaching retirement age but may also have been removed for the poor performance of the Black Sea Fleet.⁶⁸

The major wave of removals occurred in the period immediately before, during, and after the May 2024 cabinet reshuffle. During this reshuffle, Shoigu was removed from his position, and many of the members of his network within the MOD were either similarly removed from their

⁶⁷ For a review of the Prigozhin Rebellion, see Waller and Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations*.

⁶⁸ "Sources Reported the Resignation of the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, Admiral Yevmenov [Источники сообщили об отставке главнокомандующего ВМФ РФ адмирала Евменова]," *Izvestiya*, Mar.10, 2024, <https://iz.ru/1662759/2024-03-10/istochniki-soobshchili-ob-otstavke-glavnokomanduiushchego-vmf-rf-admirala-evmenova>.

positions or arrested under corruption charges.⁶⁹ In Appendix E: Removals Summary Table, we provide a list of all removals in the dataset who are affiliated with Shoigu.

The part of Shoigu's patronal network that has been targeted in wartime purges is somewhat amorphous but has been widely reported on in Russian media.⁷⁰ The network represents the accumulation of loyalists spread throughout the MOD bureaucracy in particular over Shoigu's tenure as minister, which lasted more than a decade.⁷¹ Among its highest status victims so far have been the civilian MOD bureaucrats Ruslan Tsalikov, First Deputy Minister of Defense (removed June 2024, arrested March 2026); Timur Ivanov, Deputy Minister of Defense for Construction (arrested April 2024); and General of the Army Pavel Popov, Deputy Minister of Defense for Innovation Research (removed June 2024, arrested August 2024).

The purge consisted primarily of deputy ministers and personal aides to Shoigu, although Russian commentators claim that the 2025 removal of General of the Army Oleg Salyukov, former CinC of the ground forces and Deputy Commander of the Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine, was due to his association with Shoigu. After Salyukov's removal, he retired and was sent to the Security Council, which Shoigu now chairs.⁷² Because Salyukov was close to retirement, whether this should be considered political removal or natural retirement is difficult to determine.

Post-purge developments

Following the 2024 purge, a much lower rate of removals took place during 2025. As we noted, in addition to Salyukov's plausibly normal retirement in May 2025, the incompetent Lapin was forcibly retired in August that year.⁷³ Two more Shoigu-affiliated military elites in the MOD bureaucracy (Colonel General Alexander Fomin, Deputy Minister of Defense for International

⁶⁹ On the cabinet reshuffle and its implications for civil-military relations, see Waller and Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations*. For an overview of the reshuffle, see "Reshuffle 2024: Who Is in Russia's New Government Cabinet," *Moscow Times*, May 15, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/15/reshuffle-2024-who-is-in-russias-new-government-cabinet-a85115>.

⁷⁰ As one example, the Russian business newspaper *Kommersant* has an entire theme page dedicated to the topic running from May 2024 to at least March 2026: "Arrests in the Ministry of Defense [Аресты в Минобороны]," *Kommersant*, accessed Mar. 20, 2026, <https://www.kommersant.ru/theme/3604>.

⁷¹ For analysis of the Shoigu network, or "clan," see also Mikhail Komin, "Unprecedented Defense Ministry Purge Sparks Concern in Russian Elite," *Carnegie Politika*, Jan. 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2025/01/shoigu-clan-repressions>.

⁷² Oliver Fisk, "Putin Dismisses Land Forces Commander in Fresh Military Leadership Reshuffle," *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, May 16, 2025, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/05/16/putin-dismisses-land-forces-commander-in-fresh-military-leadership-reshuffle-en-news>.

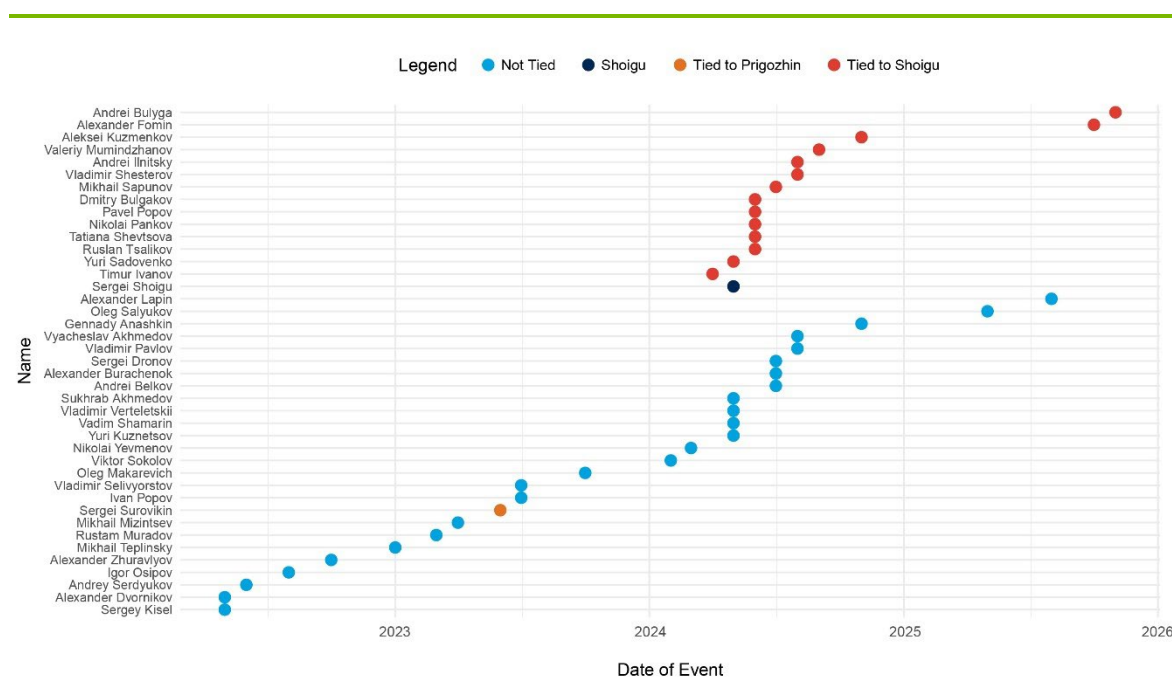
⁷³ Chiu, "Russia's Former Top General Lapin."

Military Cooperation, and Colonel General Andrei Bulyga, Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics) were removed in October and November 2025, respectively.⁷⁴

The temporal pattern is therefore one of initial removals of operational commanders for battlefield reversals (perceived or real), followed by a major politically motivated wave of purges, followed by a return to a low tempo of removals (although with more diversity in its targets) along with some natural retirements.

In Figure 9, we provide information on every removal by date, grouped according to whether they were associated with Shoigu or not. The density of the 2024 wave of removals is extremely clear, as is the fall from grace of Shoigu and its downstream consequences for his former subordinates.

Figure 9. Individual removals over time, 2022–2025



Source: CNA.

⁷⁴ "Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin to Resign—RBC," *Moscow Times*, Oct. 16, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/10/16/deputy-defense-minister-alexander-fomin-to-resign-rbc-a90834>; Katerina Tymanova, "Putin Appointed Sergei Medvedev as Commander of the South Group of Forces [Путин назначил Сергея Медведева командующим группировкой войск «Юг»]" *VZ.ru*, Nov. 20, 2025, <https://vz.ru/news/2025/11/20/1375349.html>.

Russian sources widely reported on these purges, even under a highly coercive authoritarian regime with significant passive and active wartime censorship pressures. Even in the Russian context, an understanding exists that although some removals are for performance issues, others are the result of dossiers collected on corruption by the Federal Security Service (FSB) or Investigative Committee and waiting for a signal to be used. One Russian professor noted during 2024 that purges were occurring:

We can state that large-scale purges have begun in the Ministry of Defense, and decision-making will begin based on the results of inspections carried out long ago....Now a serious cleansing, in my opinion, of the ministry itself will begin, and Belousov will be a symbol of this self-renewal.⁷⁵

Targeted cohorts and types of removals

What kind of elites have been removed since the war began? In Figure 10, we demonstrate just how highly associated high rank is with elite career disruptions since the Russia-Ukraine war began, across both command and MOD bureaucratic positions.⁷⁶ The vast majority of military elites who have been either dismissed from their position or arrested is concentrated in the three-star and (to a lesser but significant degree, considering their rarity) four-star ranks.

Four-star and three-star general officer cohorts have been disproportionately removed from command over the four-year wartime period. Among active-duty individuals holding four-star general officer rank in the Russian Armed Forces over 2022-2025, 64 percent were removed from their positions during this time (Shoigu, Pankov, Popov, Bulgakov, Surovikin, Dvornikov, Salyukov).⁷⁷ If we exclude the three general officers who were promoted to four-star rank after the war began, this removal rate rises to 88 percent.⁷⁸ That is, CGS Valeriy Gerasimov is the

⁷⁵ Konstantin Simonov, "We Can State That Large-Scale Purges Have Begun at the Ministry of Defense [Константин Симонов: «Можем констатировать, что в Минобороны начались масштабные чистки»]," BFM News, May 18, 2024, <https://www.bfm.ru/news/550155>.

⁷⁶ We generated the dataset using publicly announced removals of military and military-associated elites. The removals of lower tier military elites are much less likely to appear in major newspapers than those of high-ranking individuals; this rank-based difference undoubtedly skews the results.

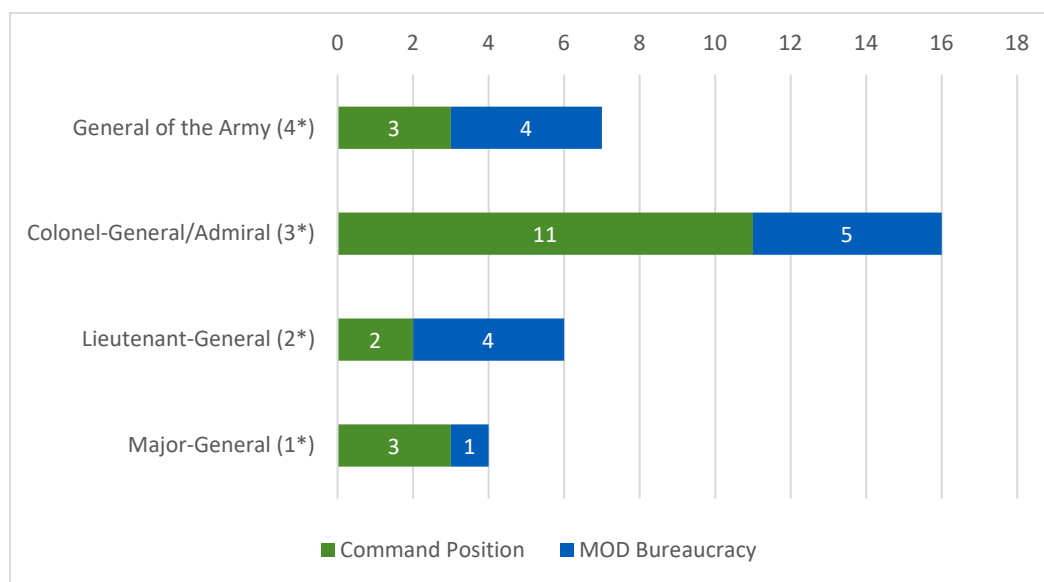
⁷⁷ Over the period 2022 to 2025, there were 15 individuals holding four-star ranks. Of those, four are non-military security service figures (the FSB head Aleksandr Bortnikov and his deputy Vladimir Kulishov, the Rosgvardiya head Viktor Zolotov, and the Federal Protective Service head Dmitry Kochnev), which leaves 11 active military four-stars.

⁷⁸ Two of the three general officers promoted to four-star rank over the 2022-2025 period, Viktor Goremykin (Chief of the Main Military-Political Directorate) and Yunus-Bek Yevkurov (Deputy Defense Minister), both of whom made General of the Army in December 2024, plausibly represent a downstream consequence of the Shoigu network purge. A third individual, Aleksandr Moiseev (Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy), was promoted to Admiral of the Fleet in December 2025, the first naval flag officer raised to four-star rank since the 2000s.

only four-star who held that rank in 2022 who was not removed from his position, retired, or arrested by the end of 2025.

Similarly, over the course of the war, as high as 28 percent of the active-duty three-star general officer cohort was removed from their positions.⁷⁹ We count at least 16 publicly-reported removals at the colonel-general/admiral echelon over 2022-2025, often in major operational commands relevant to the Ukraine war or in the MDs, as well as upper-tier elite MOD bureaucrats. The churn of upper-tier military elites in the Russian Armed Forces since the Russia-Ukraine war began is considerable and is at a far higher rate than lower-tier general officers, at least based on public data.⁸⁰

Figure 10. Number of military elite removals by rank, 2022–2025



Source: CNA.

* Andrei Ilnitsky, Information Policy Advisor to the minister of defense, is a lieutenant general but may be in the position as a civilian; in this figure, he is counted in the MOD bureaucracy for completeness.

Although this analysis cannot be conclusive, it suggests two downstream effects: (1) the Russian system imposes real consequences for command failure, and (2) considerable opportunity for promotion may arise soon, likely giving high-performing and youthful lower

⁷⁹ There are at least 56 colonel-generals or admirals in active duty over the wartime period, although this count may be slightly higher, given moderate data quality variance at this rank cohort.

⁸⁰ It is likely we are undercounting removals for major-generals and lieutenant-generals, as their removal from army command or COS positions is often not reported publicly or officially announced. We encourage future research to assess these removal rates as new data comes to light and compare to upper-tier removals.

tier GOFs an unusual ability to advance in the coming years. Given that senior leadership tenures are not capped but vary widely, the war may prove a shock to the system—a concentrated round of removals will cascade to lower parts of the promotions system while concentrating elite minds on their potential for near- or medium-term command positions.

Figure 11 provides more granular detail on the type of removals we can capture. These data are classified manually based on Russian- and English-language reporting and may reflect the biases of public news commentary on sensitive topics. We have broken down the categories into a general binary: removed from position (which can include a shift to another position, demotion, or retirement) or arrested. In this figure, we also provide a third category for removals that were followed by an arrest months later, and the figure includes all uniformed military elites in the dataset (i.e., both command and MOD bureaucracy positions).

Figure 11. Removals of GOFs by type of removal, 2022–2025



Source: CNA.

Categorizing the data in this manner emphasizes the lopsided nature of military elite removals, which are highly concentrated in the upper echelons of Russian higher officers (~70 percent are three- or four-stars) and mostly recorded as dismissals rather than arrests. Furthermore, most of the arrests are MOD bureaucrats. The only general of the Army in command to be arrested is Surovikin (after first being removed); the two other removed four-stars are Pavel Popov, Deputy Minister of Defense for Innovation Research (removed and then quickly

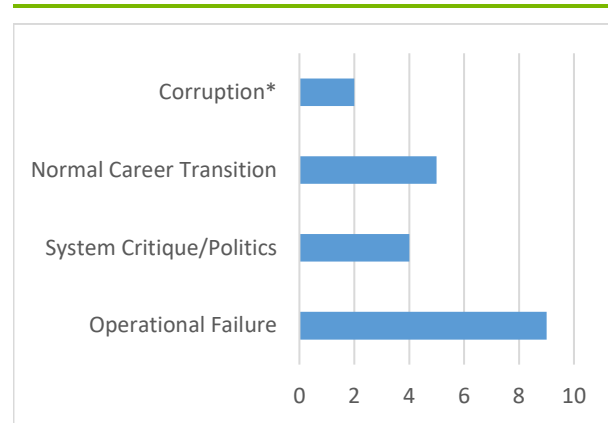
arrested) and Dmitry Bulgakov, former Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics (arrested in June 2024), both of whom were removed during the Shoigu network purge.⁸¹

Among lower tier arrests, three Shoigu-associated MOD bureaucrats stand out: Lieutenant-General Yuri Kuznetsov, Chief of the Main Directorate of Cadres; Lieutenant-General Vadim Shamarin, Chief of the Main Directorate for Communications; and Major General Vladimir Shesternov, Deputy Head of the Main Directorate for Innovative Development.⁸²

A variety of claimed or inferred reasons exist for the dismissal of military elites in command positions. These data, derived from Russian- and English-language reporting, should be treated with reservation, although they are illustrative. We can divide the reasons given for command removals into four categories: corruption, normal career transition or retirement, system critique or falling afoul of high politics, and operational failure (either as a scapegoat or genuine).

In Figure 12, we present these data for military elites holding command positions. Operational failure is the most common reason for removal during the Russia-Ukraine war. Second are normal career transitions. Some of these are perhaps borderline cases, such as Admiral Yevmenov or Colonel General Sergei Dronov (removed July 2024 as deputy CinC of the VKS and commander of the

Figure 12. Reason for removal (military elites in active command positions)



Source: CNA.

* Major General Ivan Popov is counted in both the Corruption and System Critique/Politics categories. Admiral Yevgeny Yevmenov is likely a border case with Operational Failure, but he is included only in the Normal Career Transition category because data are lacking.

⁸¹ "Putin Dismisses Deputy Defense Ministers"; "Former Russian Deputy Defense Minister Arrested."

⁸² Steve Brown, "Another Russian General Arrested for Corruption—Is Moscow Draining Its Swamp?," *Kyiv Post*, May 14, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/32631>; "Former Russian Army General Sentenced to 7 Years in Prison for Bribery," *Moscow Times*, Apr. 17, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/17/former-russian-army-general-sentenced-to-7-years-in-prison-for-bribery-a88770>; "The Head of Russia's Military Park and a Top Defense Ministry Official Are Arrested for Fraud," *Associated Press*, Aug. 5, 2024, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/head-russian-military-main-congress-130453170.html>.

air force). In these cases, no public commentary suggests a removal for performance, and both were at reasonable ages for retirement or a shift.⁸³

The third most common reason for removal is the diverse category of system critique or high politics, ranging from Surovikin's tale to Popov's criticism of battlefield conditions.⁸⁴ This category also includes the Prigozhin-affiliated figures Mizintsev and Selivyorstov as well as the very strange case of Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky. Teplinsky had been commander of the VDV (reportedly June 2022–January 2023), commander of the Dnepr Group of Forces (reportedly since October 2023), and deputy commander of the Joint Group of Russian forces in Ukraine (reportedly since April 2023).⁸⁵

He was removed at least once after publicly criticizing Shoigu and after reportedly even raising criticisms of MOD leadership to Putin himself.⁸⁶ Uncited rumors suggest that he was later made the de facto head of the Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine after the Prigozhin Rebellion, sidelining Gerasimov at the operational level; the truth of this cannot be ascertained at this time.⁸⁷

⁸³ "General Kobylash Appointed Commander of the Russian Air Force [Генерал Кобылаш назначен командующим BBC России]," *RIA Novosti*, July 24, 2024, <https://ria.ru/20240724/kobylash-1961830726.html>.

⁸⁴ Popov was removed in July 2023, arrested in May 2024 on corruption charges, and sentenced to five years of imprisonment in April 2025. See "The Downfall of General Spartak. Ivan Popov's Path from Frontline Commander to Prison Via a Voice Message," *Mediazona*, Apr. 24, 2025, https://en.zona.media/article/2025/04/24/general_popov.

⁸⁵ Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment," Institute for the Study of War, Oct. 29, 2023, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-29-13/>.

⁸⁶ In January 2023, Teplinsky refused orders to send a group of paratroopers to assault a position with insufficient artillery and aviation support. He subsequently resigned from his position as head of airborne troops, and then he went public with his critique in a video and was rumored to have directly appealed to Putin on March 15 regarding the defense ministry's poor direction of the war effort. He was then reappointed as commander of airborne troops on April 1. For more information on this incident, see Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 16, 2023," *Critical Threats*, July 16, 2023, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-16-2023>.

⁸⁷ Isabel van Brugen, "Did Putin Fire Russia's Top General? What We Know," *Newsweek*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/did-putin-fire-russia-top-general-valery-gerasimov-prigozhin-mutiny-1811877>.

Leadership: Senior Commander Promotion Patterns

In this section, we examine patterns in which general officers are appointed to top military positions, based on the CNA-constructed Senior Commanders dataset of Russian military leaders appointed to the seniormost military positions since 2000.⁸⁸ The dataset includes 125 Russian general officers, including the leadership of the GS, service commanders and branch heads, and MD commanders and their COS. Including individuals appointed to multiple positions, the dataset totals 207 entries. The collected data include these leaders' career assignments, promotion dates, education, and whether they were given the Hero of Russia award.⁸⁹

The positions that we analyzed included the following:

- **GS leadership:** CGS, first deputy CGS, chief of the Main Operations Directorate (*Glavnoe Operativnoe Upravlenie*, or GOU), chief of the Organizational-Mobilizational Directorate
- **MOD leadership:** chief of the Main Directorate of Combat Training
- **Ground forces leadership:** CinC, chief of staff (COS)/first deputy CinC, deputy CinC, head of missile forces and artillery (MF&A), and head of ground forces air defense (AD)
- **VKS leadership:** CinC, air force commander, AD force commander, space force commander
- **Other service branches leadership:** Navy CinC, Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) commander, VDV commander
- **MD leadership:** MD commanders and COS

We chose these positions because they are the main leadership positions in the key operationally oriented services and central military structures. The CGS and his first deputy are the senior commanders of the military. Although the GS and the MOD have several directorates, the selected directorates are the critical ones for organizing the functioning of the Russian Armed Forces. We included commanders of all the combat-oriented military services in the analysis, but we omitted rear services such as logistics, railway troops, and medicine.

⁸⁸ We chose the year 2000 to match the start of the first Putin presidency.

⁸⁹ We constructed and analyzed the dataset with AI assistance (Claude Opus 4.6). All data that were not manually entered were verified by a human analyst. All patterns uncovered by AI were checked and confirmed by a human analyst. We conducted the research and analysis in January and February 2026.

Given the importance of the ground forces within the Russian military, we provide greater depth of coverage for the leadership of this service, including the chiefs of staff and deputy commanders as well as the heads of the two main separate combat arms. Because the Aerospace forces are essentially an amalgamation of three formerly separate services, we included the commanders of the subsidiary branches as well. Finally, the commanders and chiefs of staff of the MDs serve as the chief operational commanders.

The Serdyukov reforms created a temporal break in some of the categories, especially MDs, which were amalgamated in 2010. Some of our analysis is divided temporally between pre-2010 and post-2010 data. Another shift occurred in 2015, when the Russian military created an amalgamated Aerospace Force and began its operation in Syria. Some analysis therefore takes this temporal dividing line into account. Finally, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has led to significant changes in both organization and operational environment for the Russian military. For elements in which wartime factors are significant, we also considered this temporal dividing line in the analysis.

We analyzed the collected data for patterns in the types of careers that led to appointment to the senior-most positions. We discuss these patterns in subsequent sections in this chapter. We then matched the identified patterns to all known active duty general officers in the Russian military, a subset of the dataset of all known GOFOs discussed in an earlier section, in order to identify more junior general officers who may be on track for promotion to the top positions we identified earlier. We discuss these findings in the final section of this report.

Military district leadership

District commanders

We examined 58 appointments at the MD commander level from 2000 onward, including both current districts and districts that existed before the 2010 reform. The data show that the system strongly favors operational experience over staff work, with successful command in a battlefield theater such as Syria seen as a plus. Almost two-thirds (38 of 58) were appointed at the rank of colonel general, which appears to be the standard rank for an MD commander. Most others (17) were lieutenant generals, 6 of whom were quickly promoted. Three were already army generals at the time of appointment.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ There was no temporal or geographic pattern found in rank at appointment for MD commanders.

Stepping stone positions

The most common immediate stepping stone to MD command is serving as the COS of a district.⁹¹ One third (19 of 58) of appointments came directly from this role, and several more in this position were first appointed to another position (such as first deputy chief of the GS) and then to MD commander. Before 2010, same-district COS promotions slightly outnumbered cross-district ones, whereas after 2010, these commanders usually served as first deputies in a different district from the one where they received their subsequent command.⁹² This pathway may be described as an internal promotion pathway in which an officer who is judged to be a successful number two in a district is then given another to command.

The second most common path (28 percent, 16 appointments) was a lateral transfer: officers who had already commanded one MD were appointed to command another, thus creating a cadre of serial district commanders. Although two of these appointments were the result of reorganizing MDs, the others involved actual transfers, including several commanders who transferred two or more times, as we show in Table 32 in Appendix F: Senior Leadership Careers Summary Tables. This path was particularly common before 2010 (26 percent) but became much rarer between 2011 and 2021 period (10 percent).

Together, these pathways account for more than 60 percent of all appointments. Other potential pathways included serving as first deputy chief of the GS (four appointments), another senior GS position (four appointments), or as commander of Russian forces in a conflict zone such as Ukraine or Syria (four appointments). The remaining appointments include positions such as deputy chief of the ground forces, naval fleet commander, deputy MD commander, and department head at the General Staff Academy (GSA).

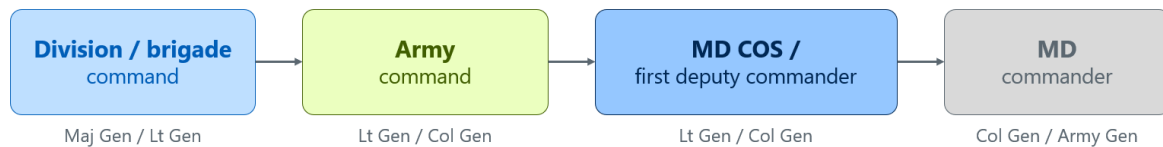
Wartime has created some new pathways to MD command, with 25 percent of post-2022 appointments coming directly from command of forces in Syria or Ukraine. The previously dominant path of MD COS to MD commander has sharply declined, dropping from 39 percent from 2000 to 2010 and 37 percent from 2011 to 2021 to just 19 percent from 2022 to 2025. Furthermore, the lateral move between MDs has returned; 25 percent of MD commander appointments from 2022 to 2025 were given to those already in command of a different MD.

⁹¹ In the Russian military command system, the COS of a unit is the second in command and generally also has the title of first deputy commander. A unit generally also has a deputy commander, and sometimes more than one, but these are lower tier positions than the COS.

⁹² For example, Aleksandr Dvornikov was deputy commander of the Central MD before assuming command of the Southern MD, Sergei Surovkin was deputy commander of the Central MD before assuming command of the Eastern MD, and Aleksandr Lapin was deputy commander of the Eastern MD before assuming command of the Central MD.

Typical career progression

Looking deeper into career histories, the data show a remarkably consistent progression through the ranks:



Before becoming an MD commander, 93 percent (54 of 58) of commanders had commanded a combined arms army at some point. Some armies appear particularly frequently in the data, especially the 20th Guards Army based in Voronezh (Western/Moscow MD) and the 58th Guards Army based in Vladikavkaz (North Caucasus/Southern MD), which appear eight and six times respectively across career histories. Several commanders also served stints as COS and deputy commanders of the 58th Army, whose prominence likely reflects its role as the primary combat formation in the North Caucasus during the Chechen wars.

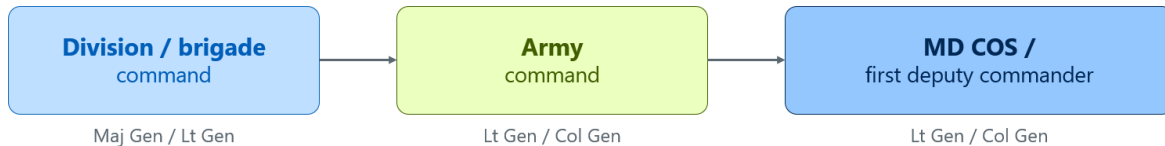
Only 22 percent (13 of 58) of commanders had a prior record of service in the GS or central MOD apparatus. This small percentage suggests that the pathway to MD command runs predominantly through operational and field commands rather than through staff positions in Moscow. Those who did have central experience typically served as chief of the GOU or deputy chief of the GS. Most interestingly, almost all these appointments took place between 2011 and 2021, when 37 percent of appointees had experience in the GS. By comparison, 9 percent (Gerasimov twice) had GS experience in the pre-2010 era, and 6 percent (one appointment) had it since 2022. In other words, GS experience was not common for MD commanders before the MD reform, but it became one of the most common paths afterward. It then disappeared again after the invasion of Ukraine.

Since 2015, command of battlefield forces has become a common springboard to MD command. Among the 17 post-2015 MD commanders, 35 percent (6 officers) had commanded Russian forces in Syria. Operational command in Syria appears to function as a combat credential that accelerates promotion, just as Chechen combat experience did in the 2000s and Afghanistan experience did in the 1990s. Although it is too early to tell definitively, some initial signs that successful command in Ukraine is going to serve a similar role in the future have appeared, even as poor performance has resulted in dismissals of previously successful commanders.⁹³

⁹³ "Full List of Russian Commanders Dismissed by Putin in Ukraine War," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/full-list-russian-commanders-dismissed-putin-ukraine-war-1813706>.

Military district chiefs of staff

The typical MD COS senior career pathway is as follows:



The COS typically holds the rank of lieutenant general while serving in that position, though some cases of appointments made at the major general level exist, usually followed by promotion. Approximately 10 appointees were already at the colonel general rank or were promoted concurrently with the appointment. Of the 40 individuals who served as MD COS, 14 officers later became MD commanders, whereas only 6 did not subsequently rise to a higher position.⁹⁴ The key structural insight is that these positions are sequential stages in the same pipeline, with army command serving as the critical gateway to becoming COS, which then in turn is the critical gateway to becoming commander.

Stepping stone positions

The most common immediate stepping stone to becoming MD COS is army or army corps command, accounting for 38 percent (20 of 52) of appointments. The second most common pathway is being COS of another MD, which accounted for 21 percent (11 of 52) of COS appointments (only slightly lower than the lateral transfer rate for MD commanders). Equally common was an upgrade from deputy commander to COS (also 11 of 52). Of these 11, 4 were promoted within the same district, and 7 moved to a different district. Finally, just under 10 percent (5 of 52) came directly from GS or central apparatus positions; this percentage is similar to the rate for MD commanders.⁹⁵ Overall, 25 percent had some experience in the GS or another central command position at some point in their careers; this rate is roughly comparable to the 22 percent for commanders.

Typical career progression

The vast majority (85 percent) of MD COS had commanded an army or army corps at some point, roughly comparable to the rate for commanders. The same armies keep appearing: command of the 20th Guards Army is the most common (appearing eight times across career histories), followed by the 58th Guards Army (six), and the Eastern District's 5th Guards Army

⁹⁴ This number includes some of the most prominent names in recent Russian military history: Valery Gerasimov, Sergey Surovikin, Vladimir Boldyrev, Aleksandr Baranov, Aleksandr Dvornikov, and Aleksandr Postnikov-Streltsov.

⁹⁵ For example, Gerasimov came from heading the Main Directorate of Combat Training, Surovikin from the Main Operations Directorate (GOU), and Sergey Kiziun from the Ground Forces Main Staff.

(four) and 36th Guards Army (four). The 20th and 58th Guards Army's roles as key proving grounds appear even more pronounced for COS than for MD commanders, with COS appointees also frequently appearing in lesser roles such as COS or deputy commanders of these armies. Tactical-level formation command is quite common for both COS appointees and MD commanders, with 81 and 74 percent respectively having had division or brigade command experience.

Several COS appointees had backgrounds in other services, primarily VDV (Mikhail Teplinskiy, Andrey Serdyukov, Aleksandr Bespalov, and Viktor Astapov). These nontraditional backgrounds are more visible in the COS data than in the commander data, in which the career paths more uniformly included ground forces experience.

Combat command experience matters for MD COS appointees, but it matters more for the older generation who had experience in the Caucasus or even Tajikistan. Only one COS (Aleksandr Chaiko) had Syria command experience. This paucity likely reflects the preferred level of Syria forces command in the Russian military, with most Syrian commanders being appointed after serving as MD COS and then moving on to MD commander billets after that posting.

Service leadership

Ground forces

The ground forces are divided into a large number of branches, including motorized rifles, tanks, MF&A, troop AD, various special corps and special forces, and logistics. For this study, we focused exclusively on the combat formations and did not consider logistics or the various specialized units. MF&A and troop AD have their own leadership structures, but motorized rifle and tank units do not.⁹⁶ The positions we analyzed thus included ground forces CinCs, ground forces COS, and ground forces deputy commanders as well as heads of MF&A and ground forces AD. We summarize the key findings in Table 33 in Appendix F: Senior Leadership Careers Summary Tables.

Ground forces commanders-in-chief

Ground forces commanders are the most operationally credentialed set of generals in the dataset; all of them have a prior history of both army-level command and experience as either commander or COS of an MD. This position is one of the most senior in the military, higher in status than that of MD commander. Commanding an MD is the dominant gateway; four of the

⁹⁶ Unlike the VKS, which is an amalgamation of three largely separate service branches, the ground forces are one service with some attached insular service arms. As a result, we do not provide any crosscutting patterns for the ground forces, but we do for the VKS.

seven ground forces commanders we analyzed arrived directly from MD command.⁹⁷ The other entry points included internal promotion from COS/first deputy commander of the ground forces itself, COS of the North Caucasus MD (NCMD), and deputy chief of the GS.⁹⁸

Remarkably, GS experience is almost entirely absent among ground forces CinCs. Only Oleg Salyukov, who served as deputy CGS, had spent any time in the GS or the MOD central apparatus. As we show later in this section, the lack of GS experience among these CinCs is in sharp contrast with the CGS position, whose four incumbents all had both field and staff experience. This disparity is another piece of evidence that the ground forces commander is viewed as an operational role first and foremost, earmarked for field commanders rather than staff planners. The typical career arc for this position is as follows:



The rank profile at appointment is primarily colonel general (six), with one army general. Three of the colonel generals were promoted to army general during their tenure in this position. Post-tenure fates suggest that the ground forces CinC position has largely served as a terminal appointment rather than as a springboard to a top role such as CGS; only one ground forces CinC went on to a position other than inspector general or retirement.

Ground forces chiefs of staff/first deputy commanders

Within the ground forces structure, ground forces COS is the most heterogeneous group, and no dominant pathway to this position is apparent. Some appointees came from MD command, some were MD deputy commanders, and some were on the GS. Only one was promoted from a directly subordinate role, that of COS/first deputy.⁹⁹

Of the 10 appointees, 4 had experience in the GS and MOD central apparatus. The implication is that this role is more accepting of officers who have spent time in Moscow when compared to ground forces commanders. Although rank profile is split between two- and three-stars, the last four appointees were already colonel generals at the time of appointment, suggesting that

⁹⁷ Nikolay Kormiltsev came from the Siberian MD, Postnikov-Streltsov from the Siberian MD, Vladimir Chirkin from the Central MD, and Andrey Mordvichev from the Central MD.

⁹⁸ Boldyrev, Maslov, and Salyukov, respectively.

⁹⁹ The anomaly that leaps out is Colonel General Aleksey Dyumin, who arrived from serving as the deputy head of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) after commanding special operations forces during the Crimea annexation. His career path is unique; he comes from an intelligence background and has a history as the head of Putin's personal security service, but he lacks any history of command in the regular ground forces and subsequently pursued a political career as a provincial governor and presidential adviser. This trajectory demonstrates that he was an unusual political-security track appointment rather than a conventional military one.

the position was upgraded in status around 2018. About half of the holders of this position moved on to higher positions, either in the GS or as MD commanders, and the rest retired or moved to civilian roles in the military.

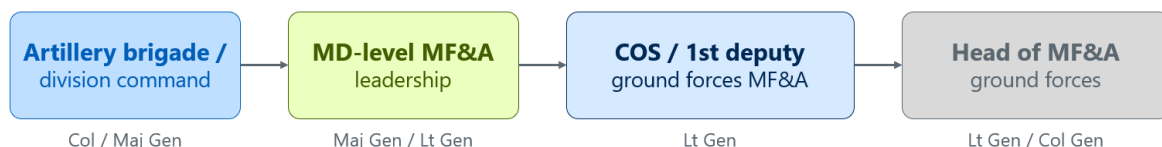
Ground forces deputy commanders

The deputy commander position also shows a wide range of entry pathways, including MD deputy commander, MD COS, MD commander, commander of forces deployed in Chechnya, deputy commander of VDV, and deputy commander for peacekeeping. No single category dominates. The one commonality is that all but two were in a deputy command role elsewhere before taking on the deputy commander position. Note that GS experience is completely absent from this set of appointees, suggesting that field experience is more of a prerequisite for the role, possibly because these deputies often oversee readiness and operational planning. Indeed, a majority of appointees have experience commanding forces in combat zones, primarily in Chechnya but also in Transnistria and Bosnia.

Ranks at the time of appointment varied widely, with lieutenant general being the most common, though two started at colonel general and Vladimir Bakin was already an army general at the time of appointment. Holders of this position generally moved on to higher roles, such as MD commander or head of a GS directorate.

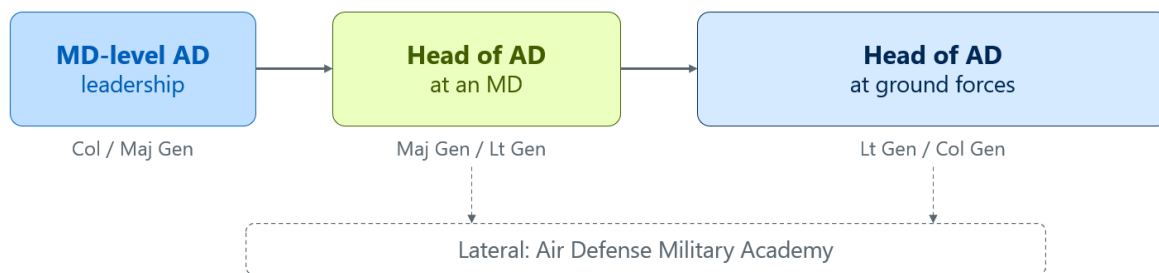
Heads of missile forces & artillery and ground forces air defense

MF&A is a fairly insular combat arm whose heads have largely been promoted internally. The typical pathway is as follows:



The rank profile for MF&A heads has dropped in recent years. Although earlier appointments were made at the colonel general level, appointments since 2008 have been at the rank of lieutenant general, suggesting that the MF&A was reduced in status during the Serdyukov reforms. All previous incumbents retired after completing their appointment at this position.

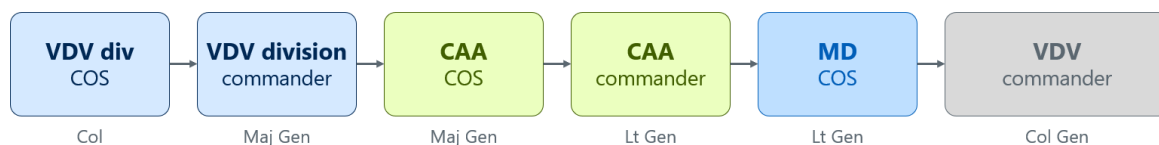
Similar to MF&A, ground forces AD is a highly insular career track, with all appointees spending most of their careers within AD. Both AD and MF&A operate as completely self-contained career silos with essentially zero crossover to the maneuver or operational command world. The typical career pathway for this role is thus entirely within the AD ecosystem:



Airborne forces commanders

VDV leaders follow a unique career pattern. Leaders of other services and branches either rotate through the MD system or follow an insular career within their service or branch. VDV leaders follow both paths; the general trend is to hold early and mid-career command positions within the VDV, move to leadership positions in the MD system at the senior level, and then return to the commander role in the VDV. Four of the six VDV commanders served in an MD as COS or deputy commander before becoming VDV commander. For example, Vladimir Shamanov served as an army commander in the North Caucasus, left the military for a political career, returned to serve in the GS, and then became VDV commander. Only Valery Yevtukhovich served his entire career within the VDV without taking up any regional command positions.

Combined arms army (CAA) command is the critical credential for subsequent appointment to VDV command; it appears in five of six of the careers in this set. VDV commanders have usually been appointed at the lieutenant general level with subsequent promotion to colonel general, although the last two commanders were already colonel generals when appointed. As a result, the following career progression is fairly typical:



After retirement, VDV commanders have been the most politically prominent of any branch: Georgy Shpak became a regional governor, Shamanov had already served as governor before his appointment and became chairman of the Duma Defense Committee afterward, and Aleksandr Kolmakov became first deputy minister of defense and then chairman of the Volunteer Society for the Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy. Three of the five retired VDV commanders in our dataset thus transitioned into significant political or ministerial roles, suggesting that the VDV commander position carries a public profile and political capital that other branch commands do not.

Aerospace forces

Analysis of promotion patterns of VKS commanders is complicated by the reorganizations that the branch and its components have undergone in recent years. The current leadership structure, which has been in place since 2015, is headed by the CinC of Aerospace forces, together with a COS and a deputy CinC. The VKS is subdivided into three branches: the air force, the air and missile defense force, and the space force. Each branch has its own commander who is also a deputy CinC of the VKS as a whole. Before 2015, the air force and space force were independent services, and the air and missile defense force was a branch within the air force.

The VKS is one of the more insular services in the Russian military. Across all positions, officers not only spent their careers within a single domain but were also never appointed to positions in the GS or MDs. The only exception to complete insularity was the appointment of Sergey Surovikin as VKS commander. Although the vast majority of MD and GS positions were filled with officers from the ground forces or VDV, some naval officers have been appointed to both types of positions. Officers from the various branches that now comprise the VKS, in contrast, are entirely absent, underscoring just how hermetically isolated these branches are from the larger senior military career system.

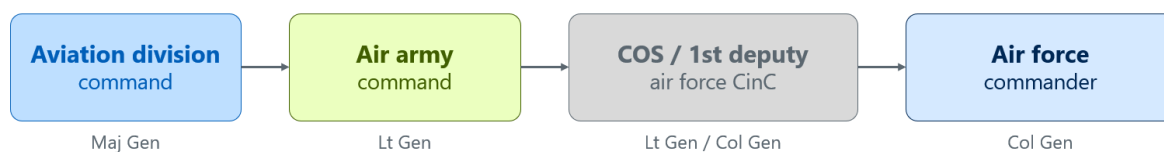
Aerospace forces commanders-in-chief

Since the VKS was established in 2015, it has had only four CinCs, all of whom were appointed at the rank of colonel general. However, each came from a radically different background (aviation, ground forces, AD), which suggests three possible interpretations for the position's career pipeline: it is still evolving, it is deliberately being filled on a rotational basis, or it is being filled on an ad hoc basis, with the choice being driven by political and operational considerations rather than institutional norms.

The first commander, Viktor Bondarev, was a career aviator who was already in charge of the air force when it was merged into the VKS, and he simply continued that role under the new title. Sergey Surovikin, his successor, was a ground forces officer with zero aviation experience when he was appointed commander; his prior career had been typical for MD commanders. Surovikin's selection was counter to all VKS norms and appears to have been driven by his performance commanding forces in Syria and by Putin's personal confidence rather than any of the normal career patterns for this service. Viktor Afzalov, the most recent commander, came from the AD branch, and his immediate prior position was as the COS/first deputy CinC of the VKS itself. Aleksandr Chaiko, appointed in May 2026 as this report was being finalized, is similar in background to Surovikin, being a typical ground forces officer with no previous aviation experience. This set of appointments highlights that the 2015 merger that established the VKS disrupted established career paths without creating clear new ones.

Air force commanders

The pre-2015 air force shows the clearest and most consistent career ladder of any position in the entire dataset. Three of the four commanders were promoted directly from COS/first deputy air force commander. The one exception, Anatoly Kornukov, had commanded the Moscow AD District. He was also the only Air Force commander to come from the AD forces. Most of the commanders were colonel generals at the time of appointment. Bondarev was initially only a major general, but he was very quickly promoted to a two-star position and then to colonel general two years later. The typical career ladder, which is remarkably consistent, is as follows:



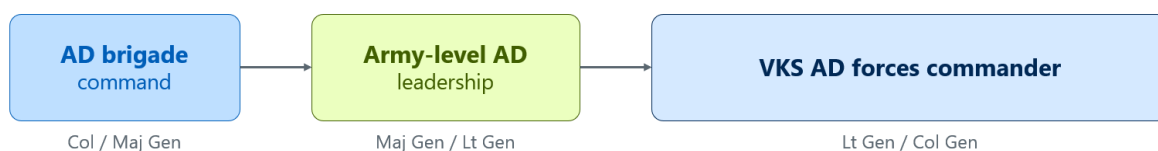
After the 2015 merger that created the VKS, the air force commander role was downgraded from service commander to a first deputy position under the commander of VKS. The career data reflects this demotion. The rank at appointment drops from colonel general to lieutenant general. The pathways for the three post-merger commanders are more varied than for commanders from the pre-2015 era. Andrey Yudin came directly from commanding an MD-level air and AD command in the Southern MD, Sergey Dronov had been deputy commander of the VKS, and Sergey Kobylash had commanded the air force's long-range aviation command. Although commanders were still drawn exclusively from within the aviation branch, the prerequisite to serve in a COS position before appointment no longer existed.

Before being appointed to the air force central command, the commanders had most commonly led air armies in NCMD and the Eastern MD, though one came from the Central MD and one from long-range aviation. Most commanders served in at least two distinct geographic regions before becoming air force commander, which suggests a tendency within the position toward some geographic mobility rather than remaining stationary within a single district. However, at earlier career stages, these commanders' histories show less mobility than do those of ground forces and MD commanders; air force officers are usually promoted from COS to commander of the same air and AD army without moving geographically.

When the air force was an independent service, all four commanders retired after holding the position. This trend has not necessarily continued since the command was downgraded. For example, Yudin became VKS deputy commander. For Dronov, no position was announced after his departure from the commander role, but he also has not been reported to have retired. Note that Dronov served as VKS deputy commander before his air force command, whereas Yudin did so after, suggesting that the two positions are considered as roughly equivalent in the current VKS structure.

Air defense forces commanders

AD did not exist as a separate branch between 1998 and 2015. Since being reconstituted, it has had four commanders. Two rose from positions in the Moscow region AD central command: one from the Central MD and one from the surface-to-air troops. These officers' recorded command histories consist of progressively senior positions within the AD system, rising from brigade-level to army-level and then to branch-level AD leadership. Rank at appointment was consistently lieutenant general. Two commanders retired after completing their terms, one became the deputy commander (Armament) of the VKS, and one is still serving.



Space forces commanders

The space forces, which existed as a separate service from 2001 to 2015, represents the most technically specialized and organizationally isolated career track in the entire dataset. Three of the four commanders were previously heads of the Plesetsk Cosmodrome, and three of the four served as COS/first deputy of either the space forces itself or of the strategic rocket forces (SRF) before it separated from the space forces.¹⁰⁰ Ranks at appointment varied from major general to colonel general.

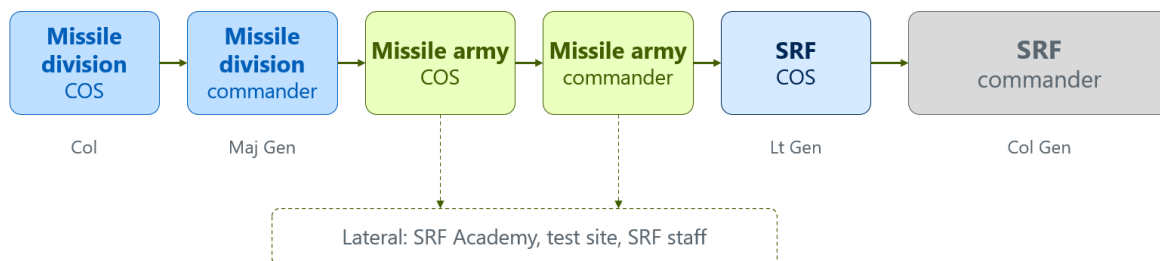
The three retired commanders all went on to head Roscosmos later in their careers, though two first served as deputy ministers of defense before retirement from the military. The space forces to Roscosmos pipeline is unique in the Russian system. No other military branch feeds so directly and consistently into a specific civilian agency. This unique pattern likely reflects the deeply intertwined nature of Russia's military and civilian space programs and the small pool of qualified senior officers with space launch and satellite operations expertise. However, Aleksandr Golovko's long tenure in his position means that after more than a decade of ex-military leadership, Roscosmos has been headed by civilians since 2015.

Strategic rocket forces commanders-in-chief

Russia's SRF is entirely insular in terms of career progression. All four force commanders in our dataset had previously served as first deputy commanders of the SRF and had commanded a missile army and a missile division. Three came directly from serving as the COS/first deputy

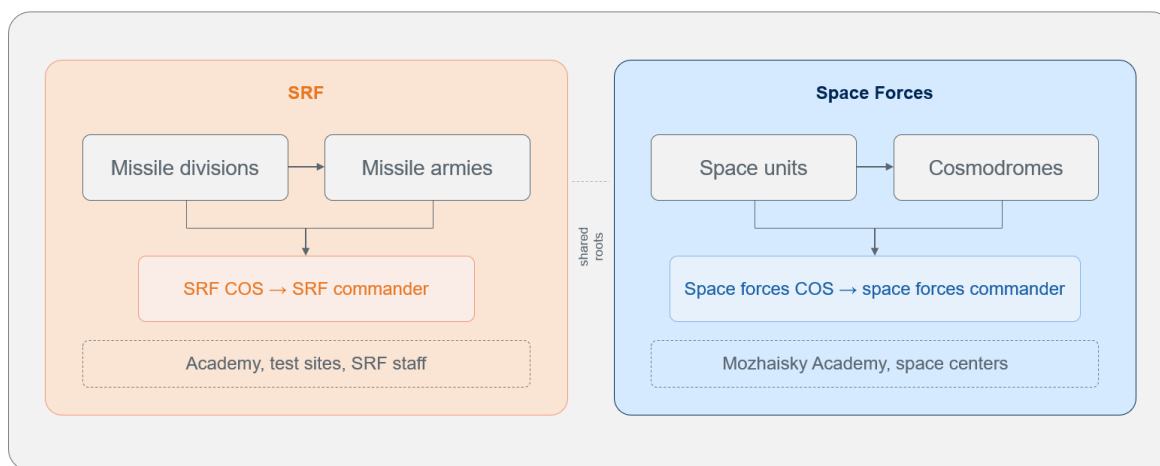
¹⁰⁰ Vladimir Popovkin was unique in that before becoming COS of the space forces, he rose through command positions in the GOU of the GS. The other three were all space forces insiders. Golovko has served as a space forces commander for over 13 years, by far the longest tenure among service and branch commanders (and exceeded in the entire dataset only by the tenure of Gerasimov as CGS, who was appointed a month before Golovko).

commander of the SRF: Vladimir Yakovlev, Andrey Shvaichenko, and Sergey Karakaev. The one exception, Nikolay Solovtsov, came from heading the SRF Academy, but he had previously served as a first deputy commander and as a missile army commander. The typical career progression reads as a series of progressively senior positions within the SRF's own organizational structure:



Rank at appointment is split between colonel general (two) and lieutenant general (two), which are lower on average than the navy or ground forces commander positions; however, two of the four were promoted to a higher rank while serving. Two commanders retired after leaving the position, but Yakovlev had an active subsequent military career. He served as COS of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, as an advisor to the head of Rosoboronexport, and as head of the GSA, and he ultimately retired 11 years after the conclusion of his SRF command.

Figure 13. The nuclear-space career complex



Zero crossover with operational track (ground forces, navy, VDV)

Source: CNA.

The space forces analysis above showed a comparable pattern of cosmodrome and missile division backgrounds. Anatoly Perminov, who commanded the space forces, came to that position from a stint as COS/first deputy commander of the SRF, confirming the organizational kinship. The SRF and the space forces together form what might be called Russia's "nuclear-space career complex," as shown in Figure 13, which in essence is a self-contained world of missile and space officers that operates in complete isolation from the conventional forces.

Russian navy commanders-in-chief

CNA analyzed promotion patterns in the Russian Navy in a 2018 report. In that report, we found that promotion to navy CinC was correlated with three elements:

- Serving as commander of either the Northern or the Black Sea Fleet
- Serving a tour as COS of one of the four navy fleets, usually the Baltic Fleet or the Northern Fleet
- Serving a command tour at the Primorsky Flotilla or the Kola Flotilla, either as commander of submarine forces in the Northern or Pacific Fleet or as commander of the Forces in the Northeast of Russia¹⁰¹

The two navy CinCs appointed since that report was published confirm these findings. Overall, of the seven navy CinCs who have served since 2000, two commanded the Northern Fleet, one commanded the Black Sea Fleet, and two commanded both in succession. The last three navy CinCs all came to the position directly from command of the Northern Fleet. Six of the seven CinCs served in COS roles in the Baltic or Northern Fleet.

Furthermore, the last three all served as COS in the Northern Fleet, further highlighting the primary role played by that fleet in the Russian navy promotion system. The Northern Fleet has over the past decade become the clear feeder into the CinC role, which likely reflects its status as Russia's most powerful and strategically important naval formation. In the past, the fleets were somewhat more balanced.

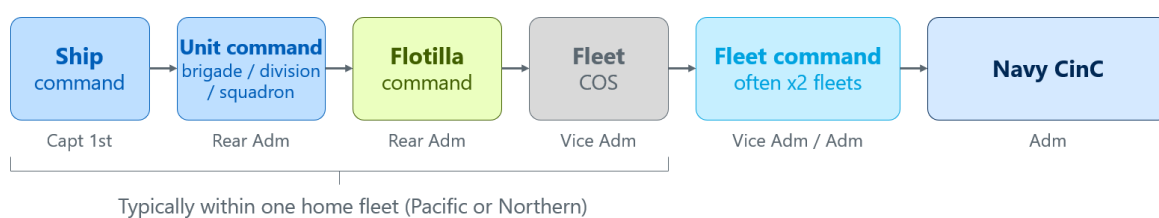
The rising importance of submariners is made clear by recent appointments. Although the first four CinCs in the list all came from surface warfare, the last three are all submariners, and all three served as commanders of submarine forces in the Northern or Pacific Fleet earlier in

¹⁰¹ The Forces in the Northeast of Russia is a joint command that includes naval, air, and ground forces on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Before becoming a joint command, it was known as the Kamchatka Flotilla. See Dmitry Gorenburg, Kasey Stricklin, and Samuel Bendett, *Russian Naval Leadership: Analysis of Service, Careers, and Personnel*, CNA, DRM-2018-U-017412-Final, Apr. 2018.

their careers. This new pattern likely reflects the increasing strategic importance of Russia's submarine fleet relative to its aging surface combatants.

Every CinC served in at least two fleets during their career, and two served across three. Even though naval officers tend to spend the bulk of their early and middle career in the same fleet, they must prove themselves across different geographic theaters once they attain senior levels if they are to reach the top. Interestingly, the dominance of the Northern Fleet is not as clear in terms of where the CinC started, with three starting in the Northern Fleet and four (including the second most recent) in the Pacific Fleet.

The naval career progression is quite standardized with only rare diversions, such as Aleksandr Moiseyev's relatively brief stint as deputy CGS.¹⁰²



In the early part of the period, navy CinCs were promoted from the navy COS position, but that practice has ceased, and navy COS is now largely a terminal position. Navy CinCs are appointed at the three-star level, and subsequent promotion to the four-star level is relatively common. With only one exception, navy CinCs have retired from the military at the conclusion of their service in this position.¹⁰³

General staff and Ministry of Defense leadership

Chiefs of the General Staff

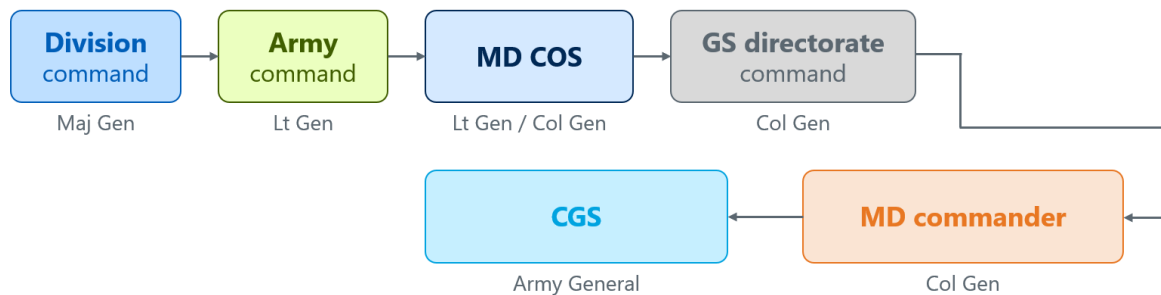
The CGS position is the apex of the Russian military hierarchy, and the pathway reflects it. Most CGSs were appointed at the rank of colonel general, followed by an almost immediate promotion to army general. CGSs have generally held MD command, though not necessarily

¹⁰² The Russian navy is subdivided into fleets, the largest of which has multiple flotillas that correspond to different geographical basing locations. A fleet is roughly comparable in organizational terms to an MD, and a squadron is equivalent to an army and is further subdivided into divisions and brigades. For more information about the organizational structure, see Gorenburg et al., *Russian Naval Leadership*.

¹⁰³ The one exception, Nikolay Yevmenov, is currently serving as head of the Kuznetsov Naval Academy, which may be seen as a quasi-retirement position.

immediately before their appointment to the top position.¹⁰⁴ However, unlike senior MD or service positions, all four appointees held senior positions in the GS itself before their appointment. This dual requirement of experience both in a top district role and a role in the GS appears to be unique to the CGS position.

Gerasimov's path is illustrative of a typical CGS career:¹⁰⁵



Appointees tend to stay in the position for a relatively long time (Anatoly Kvashnin for 7 years, Gerasimov for 13 years and counting) if they are not removed as a result of sharp changes in the direction of the military (as both Yuri Baluyevsky and Nikolay Makarov were four years into their terms).¹⁰⁶ After the end of their term, CGSs who are not in disfavor tend to receive political appointments, such as presidential envoy to the Siberian Federal District for Kvashnin and deputy secretary of the Security Council for Baluyevsky. The absence of such a role for Makarov was another sign of his disfavor after dismissal.

First deputy chiefs of the General Staff

The first deputy CGS is the principal deputy of the CGS but does not have a specifically defined role based on statute beyond being the second-in-command at the GS. Appointees to this position are quite heterogeneous in origin, having arrived from significantly different backgrounds: Valery Manilov from the Security Council and a career largely in the MOD press service, Baluyevsky and Aleksandr Burutin from increasingly senior roles within the GS Main Operations Directorate (GOU), and Nikolay Bogdanovsky from a more standard ground forces officer career that culminated in command of the Central MD. Their tenures have not matched those of their CGS (i.e., Gerasimov), suggesting that they are not seen as a team in the same way

¹⁰⁴ Only Yuri Baluyevsky did not command an MD, having come from a career almost entirely within the GS.

¹⁰⁵ One key difference between Gerasimov and his predecessors is that he had multiple postings in key positions, such as MD COS and MD commander. Given his long tenure, it is not clear whether this is unusual or a sign of a new pattern to watch for in the future.

¹⁰⁶ This is somewhat consistent with Soviet practice, in which successful GS chiefs tended to stay in their positions for five to seven years and others were removed after much shorter periods due to perceived failures or changes in political direction.

that defense ministers and CGS have been in recent decades. The most common rank at appointment is colonel general, though Burutin was and remained a lieutenant general. Overall, appointment to the position is less predicated on having field experience than on doing well in senior staff positions, though the small sample size and its heterogeneity mean that firm conclusions cannot be made.

Chiefs of the Main Operations Directorate

The GOU is the operational nerve center of the GS, and its seven chiefs show two distinct entry pathways. The first is internal promotion within the GOU itself: three chiefs (Baluyevsky, Aleksandr Rukshin, and Sergey Rudskoy) rose through the GOU's own ranks to various senior GOU positions, deputy chief, and then chief.¹⁰⁷

The second pathway comes from field command at the MD level: Andrey Kartapolov and Andrey Tretyak arrived as COS/first deputy of MDs (Western and Leningrad, respectively), Vladimir Zarudnitsky arrived as deputy commander of the Southern MD, and Surovikin arrived as commander of the 20th Guards Army. Field experience seems to be more important than for the first deputy CGS position, given that even those chiefs who rose to leadership through the directorate had field COS or commander roles earlier in their careers.

The one thing that representatives of both paths largely shared is senior command positions in proximity to Moscow. All four chiefs who came through the field command track served stints at either the Moscow MD-based 20th Guards Army or in the Moscow or Western MDs. With the exception of Surovikin (major general), appointments were made at the lieutenant general or colonel general levels, and two-stars were promoted to colonel general during their term.¹⁰⁸ The position seems to have become more important recently; the last two appointees were already colonel generals at the time of appointment.

In most cases, this position was a stepping stone to higher office in the military. The most common path was to MD command (Surovikin, Zarudnitsky, and Kartapolov), but Baluyevsky moved to first deputy CGS and then CGS. The two who retired were both removed in the context of purges related to the Serdyukov reforms. The GOU chief position is thus uniquely bidirectional, both receiving officers from the field and sending them back, whereas alumni from most other GS positions are less likely to return to field commands.

¹⁰⁷ Rukshin and Rudskoy in particular spent most of their careers inside the GOU, representing a deeply specialized staff track.

¹⁰⁸ Lieutenant General Tretyak is an exception; he resigned after one year in the post and thus before promotion.

Chiefs of the Main Organizational-Mobilizational Directorate

The Main Organizational-Mobilizational Directorate (*Glavnoe Operativnoe-Mobilizatsionnoe Upravlenie*, or GOMU) handles the structural architecture of the Armed Forces and enables the forces to expand in wartime by mobilizing personnel and equipment. It manages the conscription and reserve systems and develops and maintains the organizational structure of the Armed Forces.¹⁰⁹

Its four leaders are a highly insular and specialized, though senior, group. All four chiefs were either appointed as colonel generals or promoted to that rank during their tenure. Three of the chiefs came directly from within the mobilization apparatus itself, either from within GOMU itself or from mobilization directorates in other structures, with no prior history of army or division command or battlefield command experience.¹¹⁰ This pattern suggests that organizational-mobilizational service is a largely separate career track within the Russian military system. Officers enter the mobilization planning world relatively early and stay in it, rather than rotating through operational commands.

Chiefs of the Main Directorate of Combat Training

The Main Directorate of Combat Training (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Boevoy Podgotovki*, or GUBP) is a structural subdivision of the MOD that is not directly subject to the GS. GUBP is responsible for organizing combat training of troops and directing the development of training infrastructure. The directorate was established in 1998, briefly disbanded in 2011 during the Serdyukov reform, and then reconstituted in 2013.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ “On Issues of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (including the ‘Regulations on the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation’)” [“Указ Президента РФ от 23.07.2013 № 631 (ред. от 26.02.2024) «Вопросы Генерального штаба Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации» (вместе с «Положением о Генеральном штабе Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации)»],” ConsultantPlus, last modified Feb. 26, 2024, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_149773/.

¹¹⁰ Vladislav Putilin came from the strategic rocket forces’ mobilization directorate, Vasily Smirnov from GS mobilization planning, and Yegeny Burdinsky from serving as first deputy chief of the Main Organizational-Mobilizational Directorate (GOMU). The one exception to this pattern is Vasily Tonkoshkurov, who came from commanding the 41st Army after fighting in Chechnya. He appears to be an outlier who brought operational experience to a role that otherwise values administrative and planning specialization. He is also the only GOMU chief who went on to another position, having been promoted to COS of the ground forces; his two predecessors retired at the end of their terms.

¹¹¹ “Main Directorate of Combat Training of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation [“Главное управление боевой подготовки ВС РФ”],” Rus-data.ru, accessed Mar. 20, 2026, <https://rus-data.ru/organizations/glavnoe-upravlenie-boevoy-podgotovki-vs-rf/>; Alexander Artemyev, “Differences Between Combat and Political Training [“Отличия боевой и политической подготовки”],” Gazeta.ru, Sept. 10, 2010, www.gazeta.ru/politics/2010/09/10_a_3418221.shtml.

The six chiefs of the GUBP have highly varied backgrounds, with no single immediate prior command dominating. All but one had significant field experience, mostly in second-in-command positions at the MD and CAA levels. Most also had served as a deputy or a COS, either in an MD or in the ground forces command structures. Most chiefs were appointed at the two-star level and were then promoted to the three-star level while serving in this position.¹¹²

Unusually, this group had a notably high rate of division-level command (five of six), paired with a relatively low rate of army command (only one of six). This inverted ratio is relatively unique because most senior leaders who commanded divisions also subsequently commanded armies. This finding suggests that this directorate may value officers with hands-on experience at the tactical formation level (in which training and readiness are built) but does not necessarily require the operational-strategic experience of army command.

The post-departure fates show that this directorate can serve as either a stepping stone or a final post: Gerasimov used it as a springboard to COS of the Far Eastern MD and eventually CGS, Shamanov moved up to command the VDV, and the others retired.

Crosscutting patterns across the highest levels of military leadership

Operational versus specialist career tracks

The Russian military essentially runs parallel career pyramids that rarely intersect, as shown in Figure 14. The first pyramid (86 people) includes ground forces and airborne officers who rotate through MDs and the GS and are thus involved in operational decision-making. The second pyramid (42 people) includes leaders whose careers follow tracks within their own service or specialty. The latter leaders include the navy CinCs, commanders of the VKS and its subordinate branches, SRF commanders, space forces commanders, chiefs of AD and MF&A within the ground forces, and the GOMU directorate within the GS.

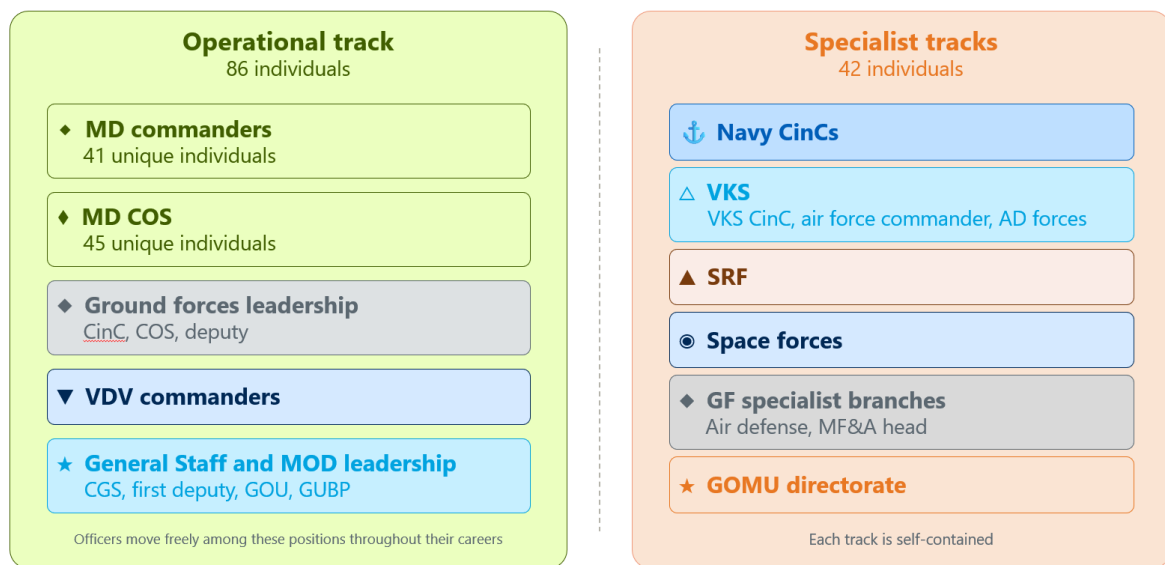
Of the 126 individuals in the dataset, only three have had senior positions both on the operational side and on the specialty side.¹¹³ Four others had careers that crossed these two sets at more junior levels, including two navy admirals who were appointed to senior MD

¹¹² Lukin is the main exception, having been appointed as a major general and having served most of his senior career in roles in the GS and the MOD central structures. Shamanov is also unusual in that he left the military after commanding the 58th Army to serve as governor of Ulyanovsk Oblast, before returning to head this directorate and then going on to command the airborne troops.

¹¹³ These exceptions are Sergey Surovkin, the ground forces commander who served almost six years as VKS CinC, Vasily Tonkoshkurov, who spent five years as GOMU chief in the middle of an otherwise relatively standard ground forces commander career, and Aleksandr Chaiko, who was appointed VKS CinC in May 2026.

positions.¹¹⁴ The low rate of crossover highlights that the Russian senior military does not have one career system; instead, it has one primary system and a number of satellite systems that almost never overlap with the primary system or with each other.

Figure 14. Russian military career tracks



Source: CNA.

This finding is further corroborated by the extent to which ground forces officers are found across multiple positions in the dataset while officers from other branches are not. Gerasimov leads with seven entries across three of the four categories (MD commanders, MD COS, service leaders, GS leaders), followed by Surovikin with six in all four categories, and then Lapin, Bogdanovsky, and Boldyrev with five entries each across three categories. All nine officers with four or more entries in the dataset are ground forces operational officers.

No navy, SRF, space forces, or AD officer appears in another category in the dataset. This absence quantifies something we observed qualitatively: the operational career world is a deeply interconnected web in which the same officers rotate between MDs, the GS, ground

¹¹⁴ Konstantin Sidenko commanded both the Pacific Fleet and Baltic Fleet before being appointed the first commander of the Eastern MD after the 2010 reorganization. Nikolay Maksimov commanded the Northern Fleet before becoming COS of the Western MD. Both were cases of naval officers being inserted into a ground forces command structure during the 2010 reforms, presumably because the newly enlarged MDs encompassed naval assets and Moscow wanted naval leaders involved. The other two are Vladimir Popovkin, who held positions in the GOU of the GS before being appointed space forces commander, and Aleksandr Moiseyev, who served as deputy chief of the GS before later being appointed navy CinC.

forces, and VDV commands, whereas the specialist career worlds are self-contained silos in which officers climb a single ladder and never appear elsewhere in the dataset.

Temporal patterns

Analyzing patterns in length of service (as shown in Table 34 in Appendix F: Senior Leadership Careers Summary Tables) leads to several important takeaways:

- MD commanders and COS turn over at the fastest rate, with the three major services (ground forces, aerospace forces, and navy) close behind.
- Commanders of specialist branches stay in their positions far longer than the operational positions, possibly because specialist branches are technically narrow domains in which institutional continuity matters and the pool of qualified replacements is small.
- VDV commanders are notable for long tenures even though VDV is an operational service.
- GS positions are the most stable, possibly because institutional knowledge and continuity across planning cycles have value in those positions.
- The ground forces COS tenure is identical to that of MD COS, reinforcing the theory that COS positions across the system function as transitional billets rather than destination postings (meaning that officers pass through them on the way to command rather than settling in).

Variation across temporal periods is clear. We considered the pre-reform period (2000 to 2010), the post-reform period (2011 to 2021), and the wartime period (2022 to 2025). Average tenure across all positions dropped from 3.6 years from 2000 to 2010 and 4.1 years from 2011 to 2021 to just 1.4 years since 2022. This decrease is significant even after controlling for the shorter length of the wartime period. The MD commander rank shows the sharpest drop; most appointments in the wartime era last around a year, and the maximum tenure is 2.2 years.

No wartime MD commander has lasted as long as the median pre-2010 commander. To some extent, this trend reflects performance-related removals, but it also highlights a broader pattern of rapid reshuffling even among successful commanders. MD COS and service branch commanders follow the same trajectory, though with a much smaller sample size.

The GS is the exception that proves the rule. From 2011 to 2021, GS tenures actually increased to an average of 8.1 years, up from 4.0 from 2000 to 2010. This increase reflects the consolidation under Gerasimov's long incumbency. Even more significantly, the dataset contains zero wartime-era GS appointments. The CGS (Gerasimov), the first deputy CGS (Bogdanovsky), and the major directorate chiefs have all been in place since before 2022. This tier of the system is the only one in which continuity has been preserved through the war. The GS appears to be a fixed institutional anchor while everything below it churns.

The wartime picture is thus one of institutional stress expressing itself primarily at the operational level. The system is burning through MD commanders and COS at roughly double the peacetime rate while leaving the GS untouched. This trend may be due to a combination of desire for stability at the strategic planning level and accountability at the operational level, but the sheer velocity of wartime turnover among MD commanders raises questions about whether commanders have enough time to learn their districts and implement changes before being moved on.

Educational excellence

Of the 126 officers in the dataset, 14 graduated from the GSA with a gold medal, and another 8 graduated with distinction (Appendix F: Senior Leadership Careers Summary Tables Table 35).¹¹⁵ These high achievers appear at every level of the system, but they are concentrated at the very top. They include three CGS (Kvashnin, Makarov, and Baluyevsky), three navy CinCs (Vladimir Kuroyedov, Vladimir Vysotsky, and Aleksandr Moiseyev), and Surovikin, the VKS commander who also had the most wide-ranging career in the dataset.

The finding that three navy commanders graduated with gold medals is notable because it shows that even though the navy is otherwise a fairly insular branch, it has produced more GSA gold medalists at the CinC level than any other branch. That said, although GSA high achievers are significantly overrepresented at the CGS level and among navy CinCs, the career trajectories of high achievers in general are broadly indistinguishable from the rest of the dataset. The credential seems to matter the most if either the position demands strategic-intellectual capacity (CGS) or if alternative credentialing mechanisms such as combat experience are scarce (navy).

Effect of awards

As we discussed previously, Hero of Russia is the highest award for merit in the Russian system. Of the 29 holders of this award in the dataset, 7 received the award before becoming generals, and 16 received it while holding one of the seniormost command positions tracked in the dataset. Of those 16, 8 to 10 were serving as MD commanders, and another three were serving as CGS. The remaining seven were generals at the time of the award but serving in positions one rung below what the dataset tracks; specifically, they were serving as army or division commanders, deputy MD commanders, or deputy CGS.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ In the Russian academic tradition, graduating with distinction (с отличием) or with a gold medal signifies top academic performance across all subjects.

¹¹⁶ The uncertainty in exact numbers derives from insufficient information on the exact date of the award when compared to the exact date of appointment to a new position.

The rate of these awards for generals in top positions accelerated greatly starting in 2016. These findings suggest that although the Hero of Russia award is often thought of as a battlefield decoration, in this population it is more likely to represent recognition for command excellence, including for performance in directing Syria or Ukraine operations (or Chechnya for an earlier cohort), rather than for personal battlefield valor.¹¹⁷

The correlation between Hero of Russia awards and battlefield performance or command means that certain types of positions are much more likely to be filled with Hero of Russia awardees than others. The rate is 75 percent for CGS, 67 percent for VKS CinC, 58 percent for Central MD commanders, 50 percent for VDV commanders, and 45 to 47 percent for Southern, Eastern, and North Caucasus MD (NCMD) commanders.

The previous finding about the timing of the award means that there is no causal link between receiving the award and being appointed to a top operational position, given that most of the holders received the award after their appointment. In contrast, because the Hero of Russia award is given out for battlefield performance or command, none of the leaders of specialist branches and services have received it.

Geographic patterns

Promotion patterns vary across MDs, as shown in Table 9. For example, the COS-to-commander pipeline operates very differently across districts. In the Eastern MD, promotion from deputy chief of the GS (four of seven) or commander of Russian forces in Ukraine (two) to Eastern MD commander is a common pattern. The set of Central MD commanders highlights a balanced geographic intake. Central MD commanders' prior careers include the Siberian MD (four), Far Eastern MD (four), Moscow MD (three), NCMD (three), Volga-Ural (two), and Leningrad (two). This distributed feeder pattern is the most even of any post-2010 district. The Southern MD, by contrast, draws heavily from the Siberian MD (five) and NCMD (four), reflecting its inheritance of the North Caucasus operational mission. The Western MD draws primarily from the Far Eastern (four) and Siberian (three) MDs, which are geographically distant districts. This pattern suggests that the Western MD command is filled by officers being moved across the country rather than promoted locally.

Syria experience clusters in exactly two post-2010 districts: Eastern (50 percent) and Western (43 percent). Every other district is at or near zero percent. This pattern is not the result of Syria experience being geographically relevant to these districts; rather, it reflects the fact that Syria veteran officers were assigned to the Eastern and Western MDs upon return. The Eastern MD has become the wartime rotation slot. The Western MD connection likely reflects that

¹¹⁷ Of the 29 awards, 10 were for performance in Chechnya, 9 for Syria, 5 for Ukraine, and 2 for Georgia; the final 3 were awarded for actions unrelated to one of these conflicts.

district's role facing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) territories and managing the Ukraine front so that officers with recent combat experience were prioritized for the most operationally sensitive commands.

Table 9. MDs as career incubators

MD	Officers	To Top	%	Function	Key Formations and Notable Facts
Siberian MD	30	19	63%	Career-building	41st Army (7/12 to top) 36th Army (6/12 to top)
Leningrad MD	18	12	69%	Career-building	6th Army 4 future GF CinCs
Moscow MD	26	11	42%	Prestige rotation	20th Guards Army (4/11 to top) Late-career rotation; most built careers elsewhere
NCMD	28	11	39%	Credentialing	58th Army (6/16 to top) 44% Hero of Russia rate
Far Eastern MD	6	4	67%	Career-building	5th Army Feeds into Eastern MD
Volga-Ural MD	8	5	63%	Career-building	None Transit between Siberian MD and NCMD
Central MD (successor to Siberian and Volga-Ural)	18	7	39%	Career-building (dispersed)	Career-building function no longer concentrated; dispersed across all four districts
Southern MD (successor to NCMD)	24	7	29%	Credentialing	Continues NCMD function, but updated for Syria and Ukraine eras
Western MD (Moscow and Leningrad)	29	6	20%	Overburdened	Lower than either predecessor; split back to Moscow and Leningrad MDs in 2024
Eastern MD (successor to Far Eastern)	34	6	18%	Revolving door	Largest pool but lowest conversion rate; transition point for generals rotating between Syria and Ukraine, not incubator

Source: CNA.

^a Officer counts include all individuals who served in command or COS positions within each district, plus officers whose prior career histories include service in formations within the district.

^b "To top" = subsequently reached MD commander, service branch CinC, or GS leadership. % = percent rising to top positions.

Siberian/Central MD: In the pre-2010 MD structure, the Siberian MD was the most important MD in terms of producing officers who reach top positions. Of the 30 officers who passed through it, 19 reached top positions. These officers included six ground forces CinCs, three GOU chiefs, two air force CinCs, two VDV commanders, and a CGS. The district in effect functioned as a COS training ground; its COS went on to command five other districts. This pattern may have arisen because the Siberian MD was considered geographically quiet and operationally low stakes, making it an ideal place to develop staff officers before sending them to more demanding commands.¹¹⁸

When the Siberian MD was subsumed into the Central MD, this pattern became less pronounced. The Central MD has continued to produce top leaders, but the overall structure has shifted.¹¹⁹ Whereas the Siberian MD was the dominant mid-career rotation district for an entire generation, when it was subsumed into the Central MD in 2010, that career-building function dispersed across all four new districts.

North Caucasus/Southern MD: Of the 28 officers who passed through leadership positions in this district, 11 went on to top commands. This rate is much lower than that of the Siberian and Leningrad MDs, highlighting the NCMD's position as a credentialing environment rather than a career-building one, even though its alumni include two of the four CGSs (Gerasimov and Kvashnin). NCMD command, particularly during the period of the Chechen wars, signaled that an officer has been tested operationally in a way that peacetime districts cannot replicate.

Similarly, the NCMD COS position fed commanders to the Volga-Ural, Siberian, Far Eastern, Moscow, Leningrad, and Central MDs. No other district's COS position produced anything close to this breadth of subsequent senior appointments in the 2000s. The NCMD tended to produce the next generation of senior leadership in the early 2000s, when its leaders were involved in the Second Chechen War and thus at the operational center of Russia's only active combat theatre.¹²⁰

The NCMD's significance is that it was where a subset of officers earned the combat reputation and Hero of Russia awards that distinguished them from peers, and those officers went disproportionately to the very top. But it was not, on a population basis, the most reliable path to senior leadership. Although several key officers passed through the NCMD COS position and went on to major commands, many other NCMD alumni did not advance to top positions despite working in the district. Although the district produced more Heroes of Russia than the

¹¹⁸ Two of its formations were particularly significant: the 41st Army produced 12 officers in our dataset, 7 of whom reached top positions, and the 36th Army also produced 12 officers, 6 of whom reached top positions.

¹¹⁹ For example, Lapin advanced from Central MD commander to ground forces COS and three further MD commands. Mordvichev advanced from Central MD commander to ground forces CinC.

¹²⁰ Generals such as Baranov, Vladimir Bulgakov, Aleksey Maslov, Postnikov-Streltsov, and Gerasimov all served as NCMD COS before going on to command other districts, lead the ground forces, or become CGS.

Siberian MD (29 percent versus 13 percent) and has a stronger combat association, the Siberian MD turns out to have been the more productive career incubator despite being a quieter district.

The Southern MD is more or less the direct successor to the NCMD, since it inherited the same territory, the same headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, and the same conflict-facing orientation in the Caucasus. Its COS position has become a genuine springboard to command positions.¹²¹ The Southern MD has thus essentially continued the NCMD's function as the place where combat-tested officers get credentialed, now updated for the Syria and Ukraine eras. The 58th Army is the key formation in this MD and is strongly associated with combat experience.¹²²

Leningrad/Moscow/Western MDs: The Moscow MD was a prestige command in the pre-2010 system rather than a formative one. Its alumni include Gerasimov, Makarov, Zarudnitsky, Chirkin, Shamanov, and Kartapolov. These names are all significant, but most of them built their careers elsewhere and commanded the Moscow MD as a late-career rotation before moving to top positions in the GS or ground forces. The key formation in the district was the 20th Guards Army; the dataset includes 11 commanders from this army, including four (Surovikin, Lapin, Postnikov-Streltsov, and Istrakov) who went on to top positions.

The Leningrad MD also had several future top leaders rotate through on their way to higher positions.¹²³ Like the Siberian MD, Leningrad was a geographically quiet district that appears to have functioned as a polishing rotation for officers destined for higher positions. The key formation here was the 6th Army, which contributed 15 commanders to the dataset, including four future ground forces CinCs.

The Western MD absorbed both the Moscow and Leningrad MDs in 2010, but only 20 percent of its commanders moved on to top positions, which is a lower rate than those of the other post-2010 districts and much lower than that of either of its predecessors (Moscow at 42 percent, Leningrad at 69 percent). This lower rate may be connected to the operational burdens facing the district in recent years, including its geographic position directly facing NATO and its role in managing forces for the Ukraine conflict. The 2024 decision to reconstitute the Moscow and Leningrad MDs as separate entities may implicitly acknowledge that merging them into a single district overburdened the structure.

¹²¹ Serdyukov and Teplinsky moved up to become VDV commanders, and Kuzovlev and Zhuravlyov each had two subsequent MD commands.

¹²² Almost half (44 percent) of the 58th Army's commanders were awarded the Hero of Russia. Key alumni include Gerasimov, Shamanov, Kartapolov, Bulgakov, and Chirkin, all officers who earned their reputations in Chechnya and went on to the highest operational commands. Nonetheless, its leaders' rate of promotion to top positions (6 of 16) is actually lower than for the main armies of the Siberian/Central MD.

¹²³ These included Baluyevsky (CGS), Gerasimov (CGS), Bogdanovsky (first deputy CGS), Lapin (GF COS, three MD commands), Serdyukov and Shpak (VDV commanders), and Tretyak (GOU chief).

Far Eastern/Eastern MD: The Eastern MD has the largest pool in the dataset at 34 officers but a relatively low rate of promotion to top positions. Rather than serving as a career-building environment, this district tends to function as a revolving door for combat-tested generals rotating between battlefield commands in Syria and Ukraine. This district shows up across multiple metrics simultaneously. Nine officers have served as Eastern MD commander, and the same number have served as COS in the period since the district was established in 2010, meaning that the district has had far higher turnover than any other district. Half of its commanders had Syria command experience, which is a much higher rate than for the other districts. In addition, seven of its nine commanders have received the Hero of Russia award, which is also far higher than any other district.¹²⁴ Furthermore, four of the awards were given before the person was appointed district commander.¹²⁵

Eastern MD's COS position is filled at the major general rank (the lowest entry rank of any COS position in the dataset) 89 percent of the time, which reflects the constant commander turnover. Officers pass through the Eastern MD because they are already on a senior trajectory, not because Eastern MD service puts them on one.

The overall pattern is fairly consistent: armies based in the quieter eastern and central districts are producing top leaders at higher rates than the more combat-oriented army formations in the western and southern districts. The NCMD and the 58th Army produce combat credentials and awards for heroism, and the Siberian and Eastern MDs and their associated formations have produced the officers who have gone on to run the military.

Analysis of senior leadership potential

For our analysis, we applied career trajectory patterns identified in the historical dataset of Russian senior military leaders since 2000 to 400 active duty general officers identified in the Promotions dataset. Our goal was to match these officers' early career trajectories to patterns detected among the officers who have been appointed to the top positions in the Putin era. Although this type of analysis is inevitably based on some assumptions of continuity in the types of careers that lead to appointments to top positions, we took into account temporal shifts in patterns of appointment outlined in the previous section.

¹²⁴ The next highest is the Central MD at four out of seven.

¹²⁵ Not surprisingly, the list of Eastern MD commanders reads like a roster of Russia's most active operational generals of the last decade: Surovikin, Aleksandr Zhuravlyov, Gennady Zhidko, Chaiko, Rustam Muradov, and Aleksandr Lapin. These officers were cycled through Eastern MD command between stints commanding forces in Syria and Ukraine. The district has in effect become less of a geographic command than a high-tempo staging post for the military's most combat-tested leaders.

Most importantly, the Russia-Ukraine war may be leading to a gradual shift in appointments. Although four years is insufficient to fully understand the development of new promotion patterns, evidence is gradually accumulating that having spent significant time in active theater command is an advantage for promotion decisions. This shift may lead to changes in the types of careers necessary for appointment to top level positions, something that will only become clear over the next 5 to 10 years.

General Staff

Every CGS since 1997 has followed a core career pattern, including a senior position (commander or COS) of an MD, a career in multiple districts, and some experience in the GS or MOD hierarchy. The typical appointment age has ranged from 55 to 62, and the appointment has usually been made at the colonel general rank, with subsequent quick promotion to army general. Gerasimov, the 70-year-old current CGS, is unusually old to still be in the post, which has led to expectations that he will be replaced within the next year or two.

In terms of a successor, **Surovikin** would have been the obvious answer before the Prigozhin Rebellion. Aged 59, he was already an army general, and he had served as the chief of the GOU, an Eastern MD commander, and the CinC of the VKS. He had received a Hero of Russia award, had commanded the 20th Guards Army (a key feeder unit), and had commanded Russian forces in both Syria and Ukraine. However, his ties to Wagner and its leader Prigozhin scuttled his chances and have resulted in his de facto exile as Russia's military representative to Algeria.

Strictly following the patterns exhibited by previous CGS appointees, we estimate that **Aleksandr Chaiko** or perhaps **Sergey Kuzovlev** would be the likeliest successors to Gerasimov. Chaiko's career closely mirrors Gerasimov's own pre-CGS career. He has had two stints as deputy CGS, and he previously commanded the 20th Guards Army and the Eastern MD. In addition to serving as deputy CGS, he has worked in three MDs and has had four stints commanding Russian forces in Syria. In May 2026, he was appointed commander of the Aerospace Forces, which adds another level of breadth to his command experience. At 54, Chaiko is in the prime age window for an appointment to CGS in the next 2-3 years.

Kuzovlev is currently commanding the Moscow MD, which puts him in proximity to the central military apparatus, and Moscow MD has historically been a common stepping stone to senior GS positions. His career has run through the two most important feeder formations (58th Guards Army COS and 20th Guards Army commander), three districts, and command of forces in Chechnya, Syria, and Ukraine. At 58, he is on the older side for a potential CGS appointee, but he is still viable.

However, the most likely candidate for appointment may actually be **Andrey Mordvichev**. Promoted to major general at the extremely young age of 37 (and to colonel general at 47), he became ground forces CinC at 49, which is historically unprecedented. He has had leadership

positions in all four post-2010 MDs, and he commanded the Central MD before being appointed to his current position.¹²⁶ The main uncertainty is that with Gerasimov expected to depart relatively soon, Mordvichev may be somewhat too young for the CGS position. However, his fast rise suggests that he could be the youngest CGS in modern Russian history and is being groomed for a long term in that position.

Military districts

The identified patterns show that appointment as an MD commander typically requires command of a CAA, especially one of the units identified as feeder formations (58th Army, 20th Army, 5th Army, 36th Army, and 41st Army), prior service as an MD COS/first deputy commander, experience in three to four MDs, operational experience in the Southern MD (previously NCMD), combat experience in Syria or Ukraine, and a rank of colonel general at appointment. The typical MD commander appointee is in his early to mid-50s at appointment.

Based on these patterns, several current generals are potential candidates for future appointment as MD commanders. The most common pathway to MD command is a prior stint as an MD COS. There is no publicly available information on who is serving as COS of the recently reformed Moscow and Leningrad MDs. The other three serving COS are all very likely candidates for promotion:

- **Denis Liamin** (Colonel General, 46): currently the COS of the Central MD; previously commanded the 58th Army of the Southern MD and the 22nd Army Corps of the Black Sea Fleet.
- **Aleksandr Tokarev** (Lieutenant General, 48): currently COS of the Southern MD; previously commanded the 5th Army and served as COS of the 41st Army in the Eastern MD.
- **Andrey Kozlov** (Major General, age unknown): currently COS of the Eastern MD.¹²⁷

An alternative path to an MD command position is for someone who has previously served in this position to return to it. Three such candidates exist: **Andrey Kuzmenko** (Colonel General, 53), **Yakov Rezantsev** (Lieutenant General, 52),¹²⁸ and **Gennady Anashkin** (Colonel General, 57), who is currently the head of the Combined Arms Academy and previously served as the

¹²⁶ 4th Guards Kantemir Tank Brigade (Western MD), 68th Army Corps (Eastern MD), 8th Army (Southern MD), and Central MD.

¹²⁷ We are lacking biographical information on Andrey Kozlov, other than rank and current position.

¹²⁸ Kuzmenko and Rezantsev are both potential candidates for ground forces CinC; see the ground forces information on this page for biographical information.

COS (and briefly acting commander) of the Southern MD and as deputy commander of the 58th Army.

Four other younger lieutenant generals are worth watching for potential future appointment to MD commander or COS ranks: **Dmitry Glushenkov** (Central MD Deputy Commander, 52), **Andrey Kolotovkin** (58th Army COS, 53), **Roman Berdnikov** (29th Army Commander, 51), and **Mikhail Kosobokov** (49th Army Commander, 51). All these generals have commanded forces in Ukraine.

Ground forces

Looking at our dataset, the track to appointment as ground forces CinC has been somewhat variable, though some constants remain. Some commanders came to the position directly from MD command, but others were in deputy roles in the ground forces or GS after their MD command posting. The consistent threads are command of one of the feeder combined arms armies and, most of the time, command of the Central MD or one of its pre-2010 predecessors. As we previously explained, command in Ukraine is likely to be a prerequisite as well.

Based on these considerations, we list several possible candidates for the next promotion to ground forces CinC in order of likelihood:

1. **Andrey Ivanayev** (Colonel General, 53): has served in three MDs (Eastern, Western, and Southern). Was COS of 36th Army and commander of 20th Army (both key feeder formations). Awarded Hero of Russia for command in Ukraine. Currently commanding the Eastern MD, where he has spent the bulk of his senior career.
2. **Andrey Kuzmenko** (Colonel General, 53): has served in three MDs (Eastern, Western, and North Caucasus). Was COS and then commander of 6th Army; also taught at the GSA. Was Eastern MD commander before Ivanayaev and commanded forces in Ukraine in this role. Current position unknown.
3. **Valery Solodchuk** (Colonel General, 54): has served in three MDs (Central, Eastern, and Southern). Was COS and then commander of 36th Army (a key feeder formation). Awarded Hero of Russia in 2025 for command in Ukraine. Currently commanding Central MD, the most frequent commonality of previous ground forces CinCs. Background in the VDV is a complication; VDV has not generally been a path to the ground forces CinC position.
4. **Yakov Rezantsev** (Lieutenant General, 52): has served in three MDs (Western, Central, and Southern). Was COS of 20th Army and commander of 41st Army (both key feeder formations). Has fought in Syria and Ukraine. Has not had an MD command, however, and his current position is unknown. Unlikely to be next CinC, but could be a future candidate in three to five years.

Airborne forces

VDV leaders tend to have had significant commands in combined arms formations rather than a purely VDV career. The key credentials have included CAA command, MD-level deputy command experience, and leadership of an airborne division. Mikhail Teplinsky, the current commander, is 56 and was appointed to his position in 2022. Most VDV commanders have stayed in the position for seven to eight years, so the rotation is likely to occur in three to four years.

Determining who might be the next commander of the VDV is complicated by the absence of information on current incumbents of the COS position in several MDs, as this position has frequently been a stepping stone to VDV command. We found no such candidates exist at present, but two potentially strong candidates and one alternative present themselves:

1. Dmitry Glushenkov (Lieutenant General, 52): currently serving as deputy commander of the Central MD. Although deputy commander is not a COS role, it is possibly the closest equivalent in our data. Commanded the 31st Airborne Brigade and the 106th Airborne Division before becoming deputy commander of the 36th Army and commander of the 68th Army Corps in the Eastern MD.

2. Mikhail Kosobokov (Lieutenant General, 51): currently commanding the 49th Army in the Southern MD. Was a deputy commander of the 58th Army and commander of the 7th military base in Abkhazia. Also briefly commanded Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War. His career roughly matches that of Teplinsky, beginning with airborne forces roots, then rising positions in regular combined arms units, and culminating in an army-level command.

3. Nikolay Choban (Lieutenant General, 53): commanded the 98th Airborne Division and has had two stints as a deputy COS of the VDV (his current position). However, has no army command or MD-level staff experience. Presents an alternative should Russian leadership prefer someone with a more VDV-centric career in the mold of Yevtukhovich, who commanded the VDV in the late 2000s.

Aerospace forces

We are unable to predict the future leadership of the VKS based on prior patterns because the three holders of the position have come from three completely different career tracks. Furthermore, Afzalov is 57 and was appointed in October 2023, so he could have served for

many more years, in principle.¹²⁹ Data for air defense (AD) and space force branch commanders are also limited. We can predict potential candidates for leadership of the air force more confidently.

The commander of the air force has in recent years tended to be a lieutenant general who has commanded an Air and AD army at the MD level or has held senior aviation staff positions. Sergey Kobylash was appointed in 2024 and is likely to serve for several more years. Potential successors include **Oleg Makovetskiy** (Lieutenant General, 59), currently serving as commander of the 6th Air and AD Army (Leningrad MD), or **Vladimir Melnikov** (Lieutenant General, 56), currently serving as commander of the 14th Air and AD Army (Central MD). **Vladimir Tikhonov** (Lieutenant General, 50), who is currently the commander of the 11th Air and AD Army (Eastern MD), is another potential candidate, especially if Kobylash stays on for a longer term. Tikhonov could also serve as a long-term successor to Makovetskiy.

Data limitations prevented us from comprehensively assessing all potential candidates for command of the air and missile defense and space forces. One name to watch for the former is **Vyacheslav Skripko** (Major General, 52), who is the right age to potentially be part of the next generation in the air and missile defense leadership pipeline. The commander of the space forces has historically come from leadership of the Plesetsk Cosmodrome. The current commander is **Nikolay Bashlyaev** (Major General, 51), who would thus be the favorite to succeed the long-serving Aleksandr Golovko.

Russian navy

In our career patterns analysis, we found that naval leadership is highly regimented. Every CinC rotated through command of multiple fleets, and the recent trend is overwhelmingly toward submariners serving as Northern Fleet commanders. Recently appointed navy CinC Admiral Aleksandr Moiseyev has followed this path exactly. Beginning in 1987, he had a nuclear submarine career in the Northern Fleet in which he advanced through submarine squadron commander to Northern Fleet COS. He was then appointed Black Sea Fleet commander before he returned to command the Northern Fleet, and then he was appointed navy CinC. Because his appointment is recent, he can be expected to serve in his position for another three to five years.

¹²⁹ Afzalov was replaced in early May 2026 by Colonel General Chaiko, a ground forces general officer who has been head of the Eastern MD since 2021. Chaiko had fit the pattern for future CGS head, although contextual circumstances reported above made this far from inevitable. Chaiko is the second general officer from the ground forces to head the VKS, after Surovikin. "General Chaiko has become the new commander of the VKS [Новым командующим ВКС стал генерал Чайко]" *RBC*, May 4, 2026, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/05/2026/69f868af9a7947dd750ab765>.

The most likely potential candidate to eventually succeed Moiseyev is **Konstantin Kabantsov** (Admiral, 57). Kabantsov has the typical career track for a future navy CinC candidate: 24th Submarine Division commander (Northern Fleet) → Belomorsk Naval Base commander (Northern Fleet) → Primorsky Flotilla commander (Pacific Fleet) → Northern Fleet COS/first deputy commander → Northern Fleet commander. The only potential concern is that he will likely be over age 60 by the time Moiseyev's term is over; however, age did not prevent Moiseyev from ascending to the top position in the navy at 63.

The likeliest alternative candidate is **Viktor Liina** (Admiral, 57). Liina has also had a typical future navy CinC career, and our team flagged him as a potential future navy leader as early as 2019.¹³⁰ His career track in many ways parallels that of Kabantsov: 18th Submarine Division commander (Northern Fleet) → Belomorsk Naval Base commander (Northern Fleet) → commander of Northeast Group of Forces (Pacific Fleet) → Black Sea Fleet COS/first deputy commander → deputy CGS → Baltic Fleet commander → Pacific Fleet commander. However, he was not selected to command the Northern Fleet, which makes him a less likely candidate for ascension to the top position. He also has the same age concerns as Kabantsov.

One potential dark horse candidate for the future is **Sergey Pinchuk** (Admiral, 54), who has commanded the Black Sea Fleet since 2024. His career track includes postings as first deputy commander of the Leningrad naval base, commander of the Novorossiysk naval base, commander of the Caspian Flotilla, and COS of the Black Sea Fleet. He is young enough to potentially command one of the two major fleets in the near term and then succeed to navy CinC after Kabantsov or Liina. However, he is not a submariner, and no surface warfare officer has been commander of the navy since Viktor Chirkov retired in 2012. However, no submariners are currently of an appropriate age in positions of sufficient authority for us to consider them as potential future navy CinCs after Kabantsov or Liina.

Strategic rocket forces

In our analysis, we found that the SRF commander has historically had a highly regimented career progression from regiment command to division to rocket army to SRF COS and then to the top position. Every commander has followed this ladder. Karakaev, the current commander, has been in the position for almost 16 years and, at 64 years old, is likely to retire.

The most likely candidate to replace Karakaev is his current deputy and COS, **Igor Fazletdinov** (Lieutenant General, 58). His career traces the normal SRF ladder: 54th Rocket Division commander → 27th Rocket Army COS → 27th Rocket Army commander → SRF COS/first

¹³⁰ Dmitry Gorenburg, Kasey Stricklin, and Samuel Bendett, "A Guide to Becoming an Admiral in the Russian Navy," War on the Rocks, Aug. 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/a-guide-to-becoming-an-admiral-in-the-russian-navy/>.

deputy commander. He commanded the same rocket army that Karakaev commanded before becoming SRF COS and then commander. At 58, Fazletdinov's age is in the window for succession.

The strongest alternative candidate is **Andrey Burbin** (Lieutenant General, 57). His career ran through the SRF: 14th Rocket Division commander → 27th Rocket Army COS → 27th Rocket Army commander. He previously served as head of the SRF Control Center, showing central staff experience. He is one step behind Fazletdinov in the queue, but he may be appointed if there is some reason to pass over Fazletdinov. He is almost certainly too old to be in line to succeed Fazletdinov down the line if the latter is appointed the next SRF commander.

Findings, Insights, and Implications

Key findings

Age is the key factor for career advancement

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 ranks if they are below age 46 when promoted to major general. This correlation is the strongest finding from our demographic analysis of all Russian general officers since 1991.

Throughout the Russian Armed Forces, being younger is correlated with advancing in the military career system. However, this pattern is particularly notable for ground forces general officers, who provide the bulk of the senior command leadership. Youth is less pronounced in other services, although it is still a benefit.

The Russian military career system has distinct tracks

The Russian military has a bifurcated career system. The Russian senior military career system is not one unified system; instead, it is one primary operational track and several insular, satellite specialist tracks that almost never exchange personnel with each other or with the primary track. The primary track, which includes the ground forces and the VDV, is joint in nature and feeds the MD commander and GS positions that sit at the top of the military hierarchy. Several self-contained specialist systems orbit around the primary track, including several insular operational commands: the SRF nuclear missile track, the navy's fleet-based system, the VKS and its subsidiaries, the ground forces AD, and the ground forces artillery and missile forces. Each satellite has its own internal progression from junior command through branch-level leadership, and the boundary between them is nearly impermeable.

Officers in the operational track frequently hold multiple iterations of the same position type. This pattern appears across several tiers. At the MD commander level, Gerasimov, Boldyrev, and Kuzovlev all commanded three different districts, and many others commanded two. At the MD COS level, several officers served as COS in two different districts before promotion. In the navy, five of seven CinCs commanded two different fleets (typically their home fleet and then a small fleet as a broadening tour) before reaching the top job. The 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.

Less glamorous MDs are used as locations to train potential future leaders. Command of MDs well away from combat zones, and especially the Siberian MD, has been more important than command of MDs closer to the action, such as the NCMD. However, this pattern was strongest from 2000 to 2010 when the pre-reform district structure was intact. The 2010 merger of the Siberian MD into the Central MD diluted this geographic signal, and the wartime reshuffling has further eroded district-specific career patterns in favor of ad hoc placement driven by operational needs.

Most but not all services have specific lower level units that are linked to future career advancement. The 58th Army, 20th Army, 41st Army, 36th Army, and 5th Army appear repeatedly in the career histories of officers who go on to MD COS and MD commander appointments. In the navy, the Northern Fleet and Pacific Fleet account for all early and mid-career development of CinCs, and the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets serve as senior broadening tours rather than producing CinCs from scratch. For the SRF, the Plesetsk Cosmodrome serves as a key predecessor position to service command. For the air force, air army command in the Far East or North Caucasus is correlated with promotion to service command, though the track record is not as ironclad as for the navy. The other services lack clear feeder units.

Russian military elite careers are highly patterned but complex

The CGS career pattern is highly distinctive. The path to CGS is visibly different and more variable than are paths to positions at the next tier down, such as service chief or MD commander. The common thread among holders of this position is not a specific pipeline but an unusual breadth of experience. CGS appointees tend to have both operational field command and central staff experience, a combination that is rare at every other level.

Ground forces CinCs are highly operationally credentialed. All ground forces CinCs have a prior history of both army-level command and experience in one of the top two positions in an MD, but experience in the GS is almost entirely absent among this cohort. In other words, this position is viewed as a primarily operational role—one that is earmarked for field commanders rather than staff planners.

Ground forces CinC has generally been a terminal appointment, but that pattern may be shifting. None of the ground forces CinCs in the dataset moved upward from that position to a higher operational command; most retired at the conclusion of their terms. However, Mordvichev's appointment in May 2025 is historically unprecedented; he reached the position at a younger age than any of his predecessors, suggesting that for him, this position may become a springboard to appointment as CGS.

MD commanders represent the apex of the operational career track, and they have the highest turnover rate. The dominant feeder pipeline runs through MD COS positions, which supply about a third of all appointments, but the character of that pipeline has shifted over time. Before the 2010 reform, same-district COS-to-commander promotions outnumbered

cross-district ones; the 2010 reform inverted that ratio. Out of 41 unique individuals, 12 commanded multiple districts, accounting for nearly half of all appointments. This shift suggests that a small pool of trusted officers is regularly recycling across key commands.

VDV has a unique career pattern. Unlike other specialist branches, which are quite insular in their career tracks, VDV requires its commanders to build credentials outside the VDV system before returning to lead it. In other words, VDV requires its leaders to prove they can operate in the broader combined arms context.

Career patterns shifted markedly in 2010, 2015, and 2022

Although broad continuity exists over time, patterns have shifted at key inflection points. The 2010 military reform, the establishment of a unified VKS and intervention in Syria in 2015, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine each mark inflection points in career patterns, though they affect different aspects of the system. The 2010 reform amalgamated the MD, largely eliminated same-district COS-to-commander succession patterns, and temporarily increased the significance of GS experience. The share of MD commanders arriving from GS billets jumped from 0 percent before 2010 to 32 percent from 2010 to 2021. It then dropped back to 0 percent during the Russia-Ukraine war.

The 2015 creation of the VKS merged the air force, space force, and AD systems under a single command, opening the door for a ground forces officer (Surovikin) to lead an aerospace service. Surovikin's appointment is the only significant breach of the operational-specialist boundary in the entire dataset. The Syria intervention that began the same year created a new feeder pathway that produced multiple MD commanders. The 2022 invasion compressed tenure lengths, fragmented the senior promotion pipeline, and created entirely new feeder categories, such as Ukraine wartime command and direct army-to-MD commander appointments, while simultaneously freezing the GS in place.

The pre-2010 system was decentralized with strong district-specific career ecosystems, and from 2010 to 2021, the system was centralized through the GS; in contrast the current wartime system is ad hoc, driven by operational necessity rather than institutional design. The most structurally interesting question for the future is whether the wartime fragmentation of career pathways will prove temporary or permanent. In other words, will the system revert to its prewar patterns once the conflict ends, or will the war permanently diversify the routes to senior command?

Russian military elite careers benefit considerably from conflict

Combat credentials accelerate promotion. The wartime era has created feeder pathways into senior command that did not exist before 2015. This shift is exemplified by commanders of forces in both Syria and Ukraine being appointed to command of MDs and to top positions

in the ground forces and VDV. In earlier periods, command of forces in Chechnya or even in Afghanistan played a similar role.

Wartime leads to more rapid turnover in operational commands but longer terms in the GS. Average MD commander tenure dropped from 2.9 years before the war to 1.0 year since the war began; even the maximum wartime tenure of 2.2 years is shorter than the prewar median. At least four commanders were removed specifically for battlefield underperformance, and the tenure length of MD chiefs of staff and service branch CinCs dropped significantly. The GS, by contrast, has had zero new appointments since 2022, and all leadership positions remain unchanged since at least 2018.

Removal patterns show strong differences between operational commanders and military bureaucrats

Commanders are demoted, and bureaucrats are arrested. Most commanders are removed from their position, some retire, and others shift 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.

Criminal cases for corruption are used as a pretext for the removal of MOD civilian and military elite bureaucrats. We do not suggest that the corruption is not real—in many, and perhaps most, cases it certainly is. However, the pattern of indictments strongly aligns with the spring 2024 political decision to reshuffle the government, which led to a purge of almost the entire Shoigu network in the MOD.

Education and awards matter less for Russian military elites

A small set of educational institutions produce upper tier military elites at the three- and four-star ranks in the ground forces, navy, and VDV. The institutions include the Moscow Higher Combined Arms School (above all others for ground forces general officers), a group of aviation and pilot schools (for VKS general officers), the Komsomol Higher Naval Submarine School, Frunze Higher Naval School, Nakhimov Black Sea Higher Naval School, and Makarov Pacific Higher Naval School (for navy flag officers). Nearly all airborne flag officers pass through the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School.

GSA high achievement matters for only some positions. Graduating with a gold medal or with distinction seems to matter for appointment as navy CinC, CGS, SRF commander, and chief of the GOU; for all these positions, strategic thinking and academic excellence may be valued selection criteria. By contrast, ground forces CinC, ground forces deputy CinC, and air force CinC have zero gold medal or distinction graduates despite near-universal GSA attendance. The pattern suggests that academic distinction at the GSA matters most in positions in which strategic planning, analytical work, or technical specialization is central to the role and least in

positions defined primarily by field command experience. However, the relatively small number of incumbents in these positions means that this finding is merely suggestive.

The Hero of Russia award is more of a recognition for command excellence than a battlefield decoration that leads to top positions. Most Hero of Russia awards are given to junior and senior officers, but when general officers do receive the award, they most often do so after attaining general officer rank and being appointed to top positions. This pattern suggests that the award is much more a reward for career achievement than a marker of potential future greatness.

Insights into Russia's future military elite

Patterns of military elite promotion allow observers to predict potential future leaders.

The data show a set of patterns of promotion into the senior leadership positions, although the patterns vary significantly across types of positions. With the patterns we uncovered, we made predictions about likely future appointments to top positions; however, the wartime period may be affecting the nature of appointments, so the patterns of future appointments may be less likely to match the patterns from peacetime contexts.

By scoring active duty general officers against career pattern indicators, we identified candidates whose trajectories most closely match the historical pathways to specific positions. By these metrics, Chaiko emerged as the strongest CGS candidate—his breadth of experience across MD COS, MD command, deputy CGS, and Syria command mirrors the distinctive CGS pattern of combined operational and staff credentials. However, Mordvichev is the youngest ever appointee to ground forces CinC, he has directly arrived from wartime MD command, and he is also a strong CGS candidate. That Mordvichev is a viable candidate suggests that the war may be disrupting the traditional capstone character of that position. For the first time, ground forces CinC may become a springboard to the CGS position.

Several promising candidates could succeed Mordvichev as ground forces CinC; in particular, Ivanayev and Kuzmenko are both MD commanders with a record of wartime command and service in multiple MDs. Future MD commanders are particularly likely to come from current MD COS who are currently in their late 40s, such as Liamin, Tokarev, and Kozlov.

For the specialist branches, the predictions reflect the career silo dynamics. Glushenkov or Kosobokov would follow the characteristic crossover pattern for VDV chiefs. The likeliest successors for SRF commander and navy CinC are Fazletdinov and Kabantsov, respectively, given the relatively regimented career ladders in those services. Given the relative geographic variety of air army commands leading to the air force commander appointment, we have identified three potential successors for that position: Makovetskiy, Melnikov, and Tikhonov.

The Russian military promotion system is responsive to battlefield reversals. The poor performance of the Russian military during the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war corresponded with a wave of removals and demotions. Surprisingly few removals arose in connection to the Prigozhin Rebellion, but a significant number of senior civilian MOD bureaucrats were removed (and in some cases arrested) for corruption in the aftermath of Belousov replacing Shoigu as minister of defense in 2024. At the same time, the leadership of the GS has been entirely untouched by removals since the start of the war (in fact, since 2018), suggesting that CGS Gerasimov may be protecting his subordinates in much the same way Shoigu protected his subordinates until he was replaced.

Hero of Russia awards are not a reliable indicator of future members of the Russian military elite. Most of the general officers who have received the award during the Russia-Ukraine war did so after attaining general officer rank. Analysis of the Russian military's seniormost leadership shows a similar pattern not only during the invasion of Ukraine but also during past military operations, such as those in Syria and Chechnya. Hero of Russia is more a recognition for command excellence than a battlefield decoration that leads to top positions.

A large percentage of the awardees were recognized posthumously, especially early in the Russia-Ukraine war. Almost all these awards were for self-sacrifice, although the most common reason given for non-posthumous awards was tactical excellence. Senior lieutenants were by far the most frequently recognized rank for Hero of Russia awards, and more than half of them were rewarded with an early promotion to captain.

Implications

Career pattern analysis is a useful lens for assessing future Russian military leaders. At the most basic level, this study has shown that long-term patterns are present in the career trajectories of Russian military leaders. These patterns can help analysts understand the kinds of officers who are likely to be promoted to senior leadership positions in the future and thus understand which lower tier general officers to track as potential future military leaders.

The composition of Russia's military elite in both its upper and lower tiers is determined by a path of promotion that extends from the officer's time as a midranking officer through initial command experience as a colonel and then passing through the formal corpus of higher officers. The time between an individual entering the ranks of the Russian officer corps to the conclusion of his career as a general officer with at least one star is between 20 and 30 years.

This timeline means that the upper tier military elite of the current Russian Armed Forces had their formative experiences as junior and midlevel officers between the late 1990s and 2000s, and they achieved entrée into the higher officer cadres in the 2010s. Similarly, the medium-

and long-term future of the Russian military elite will be drawn from a pool of officers who gained formational experience in the 2010s and onward.

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. Officers who joined during that period may have been of lower quality because the best and brightest were relatively unlikely to find a career in the military an attractive option.

As the latter of those two generations approaches retirement, its members 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 analysts understand these generational shifts and how they affect the Russian military and strategic culture.

Exigencies of wartime can affect career patterns in the long term. Senior officer career patterns are already being affected by the war; these effects are certain to continue and likely to 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 war has also resulted in 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 affect military effectiveness. As we have shown, the 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 affect the extent to which they are able 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 also harm the ability of commanders to develop patronage networks with their subordinates while simultaneously reducing the extent to which subordinates develop loyalty to their superior officers.

Appendix A: Elites and Militaries

In this appendix, we provide theoretical insights into the nature of elites in order to situate the Russian military elite both in comparative perspective and in the specific Russian context. We highlight that military elites sit within a broader ecosystem of elite figures that can in turn be broken into distinct levels of relevance. This matters, especially as we consider the benefits to be gained from understanding the Russian military elite and how they interact (if they are particularly successful in their careers) with both their own organization and other entities in Russia's regime. We then identify a set of features of promotion patterns identified in scholarship for great power democracies and authoritarian regimes. Insights from these features informed the key potential promotion factors discussed in this study.

What is an elite?

Elites are key individuals (1) who hold a disproportionate amount of political, economic, or societal power, prestige, or skill or (2) who are otherwise in unique positions of decision-making authority, have special access to or control over resources or assets, and exist in a de facto or de jure hierarchy over others in a given polity.¹³¹ Exact definitions of inclusion in the category of elite vary widely, ranging from a relatively small coterie of actual decision-making figures to large socioeconomic classes that range in the hundreds of thousands to millions.

When we refer to a *military elite*, we want to capture the military version of that term's definition: individuals who are a part of a decision-making, specially privileged cohort and the ecosystem that feeds into it over time. Furthermore, we want to identify both the actual key decision-makers and the likely candidates who could become them, or as we will describe, the upper tier and lower tier of the military elite. To do so, we need to distinguish one from the other to ensure that we know exactly who we are talking about and why we are talking about them.

¹³¹ Geraint Parry, *Political Elites* (ECPR Press, 2024); John Higley, "Elite Theory and Elites," in *Handbook of Politics: State and Society In Global Perspective* (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2010), pp. 161–76; Alan Zuckerman, "The Concept 'Political Elite': Lessons from Mosca and Pareto," *Journal of Politics* 39, no. 2 (1977), pp. 324–44; C. Wright Mills, "The Power Elite," in *Social Stratification, Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective, Second Edition* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 202–11.

Defining elites

In authoritarian regimes such as Russia, elites are traditionally referred to as a broad category, one that ultimately captures tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of people (but often includes far fewer).¹³² In democracies, the same word is often used to describe far larger groups, ranging from the wealthiest 1 percent or 0.1 percent of a group or nation or the recipients of a college degree from a small subset of ranked institutions.¹³³ This understanding of elites can capture millions of individuals, depending on definition. Making choices about what we conceptually mean by *elite* matters because it determines the cohort under study and the assumptions surrounding their individual power, authority, or influence.

A broad approach to studying elites would capture the structural features of entire cohorts in society, including their social, political, and economic reproduction as well as patterns of advancement across a complex, national ecosystem of institutions, organizations, and groups.¹³⁴ However, any individual elite at that scale is unlikely to matter in a given instance and will tell us little about decision-making or entrance into the highest echelons of a given polity. In contrast, a narrow understanding of *elite* would provide far greater granularity in analysis: we may be able to name every elite, or we may be able to point to a few hundred, thousands, or tens of thousands of people as being relevant.¹³⁵

For this analysis, CNA took a narrow but multilevel approach. One standard definition of *elites* in the narrow sense states that such figures are “persons with power individually, regularly, and seriously to affect political outcomes at the macro level of organized societies.”¹³⁶ This definition would include not only the small group of actual decision-makers in a given political

¹³² Adlai Newson and Francesco Trebbi, “Authoritarian Elites,” *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue Canadienne d’Économique* 51, no. 4 (2018), pp. 1088–1117; Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹³³ John Higley and Michael G. Burton, *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2006); Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens, “The Bourgeoisie and Democracy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Social Research*, (1999), pp. 759–88.

¹³⁴ For examples, see Seth D. Zimmerman, *Making the One Percent: The Role of Elite Universities and Elite Peers* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016); Wilhelm L. Guttsman, “Social Stratification and Political Elite,” *British Journal of Sociology* (1960), pp. 137–50.

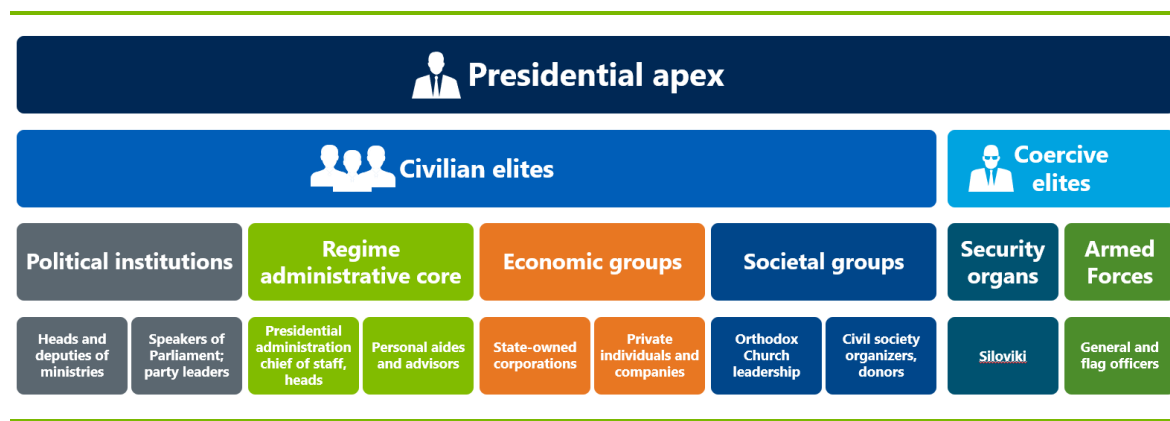
¹³⁵ Political scientists and sociologists working on Russia have long focused on more narrow versions of elites, ranging from cataloguing economic oligarchs to identifying position-holders in institutions. For further discussion of this topic, see Sharon Werning Rivera and William Zimmerman, “Introduction: New Directions in Survey Research on Russian Elites,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (2019), pp. 359–64; Peter Rutland, “The Political Elite in Post-Soviet Russia,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), pp. 273–94.

¹³⁶ John Higley, George Lowell Field, and Knut Groholt, *Elite Structure and Ideology: A Theory with Applications to Norway* (New York: Columbia UP, 1976).

order but also the wider field of individuals who support them in a hierarchy (and whose lower figures may rise to prominence in subsequent years).

Applying this definition to the modern Russian case, political scientists Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi claim that Russia’s authoritarian regime has a specific “ruling elite,” that is, “those elites with some official position and/or standing in the ruling regime,” which is made up of “legislators, governors, administrators, mayors, military officers, chiefs, oligarchs, employers, clan leaders, and the like.”¹³⁷ Therefore, a military elite is just one subset of a complex picture of influential figures, as illustrated in Figure 15.

Figure 15. Russia’s elite ecosystem, stylized and simplified



Source: CNA.

Dividing and specifying elites

A narrow elite can be divided into degrees of relevance. Most academic and policy literature is often imprecise on how one should weigh individual influence once one has “made the cut” to become part of the elite. One fruitful avenue is to divide elites into two categories: an upper tier elite and a lower tier elite.

The *upper tier elite* is the “core set of decision-making and decision-confirming actors” at the highest echelons of a given polity’s institutions (and in some cases broader society).¹³⁸ The president, his closest advisors and highest administrative deputies, his executive ministers, and the respective leader figures in other key institutions such as a parliament, constitutional

¹³⁷ Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi, “Elite Defection Under Autocracy: Evidence from Russia,” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019), p. 553.

¹³⁸ Julian G. Waller, “Elites and Institutions in the Russian Thermidor: Regime Instrumentalism, Entrepreneurial Signaling, and Inherent Illiberalism,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021), p. 7.

court, security services, and militaries constitute the upper tier elite of a regime when considered across an entire political order.

In some countries, economic oligarchs or religious figures who lack a formal position in the state may also fit in the upper tier elite. One can also replicate the upper tier elite construct within a given institution; thus, a parliament's upper tier elite would consist of its speaker, party leaders, and committee chairmen. However, only the speaker would truly be an upper tier elite in the broader matrix of the whole regime.

The lower tier elite consists of the members of the ruling or regime elite who occupy institutional positions (or hold considerable power in the economy or society) but lack any decision-making role at the individual level and, in contexts such as Russia, are also networked upward toward patrons above them.¹³⁹ These categories are relative, and any given institution will include upper and lower tier elites relevant to the organization itself.

Promotion patterns as elite career paths

The promotion patterns of commissioned officers vary widely across states and over time. As militaries developed institutionalized, hierarchical chains of authority in many different parts of the world, they inherited pre-modern and early modern promotion dynamics reliant on sociocultural and sociopolitical features, such as aristocratic class, the institution of purchasing rank, ethnic favoritism, and other non-meritocratic means of selecting military elites.¹⁴⁰ With professionalization came a more standard career progression based around commissioned officers rising up an increasingly regulated and standardized ladder of grades and titles, although this progression varies strongly by country and even by service branch within a given country.

Promotion can be understood as the process by which one gains access over a career to a narrowing band of elite cohorts, structured in an explicit hierarchy that concludes in the military elite proper and its internal distinctions. This layered set of elites, identified by institutionalized ranks, determines dominance, authority, roles, and responsibilities in a

¹³⁹ Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge UP, 2014).

¹⁴⁰ For further discussion, see, for example, George B. Eaton, "Theory, Ideals, and Reality: Military Theory and the Ideal and Real Roles of the Prussian Army, 1830–1871 or Who Influenced the Prussian Army and What Made Them Do What They Did?," (Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1990), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA225253.pdf>; Pamela M. Pilbeam, "Professional Armies and Civilian Militias," in *The Middle Classes in Europe, 1789–1914: France, Germany, Italy and Russia* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1990) pp. 144–72; Correlli Barnett, "The Education of Military Elites," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 3 (1967), pp. 15–35.

military hierarchy.¹⁴¹ In political scientist Caitlin Talmadge's words, promotion systems, whether explicitly or implicitly, "generate the human capital which should exert a powerful effect on everything else the military does, from the design of strategy to small-unit leadership in the field to decisions about weapons and doctrine."¹⁴²

In so doing, promotion systems and the quality of their output patterns are ultimately central to military performance, innovation, and future prospects.¹⁴³ The centrality of promotion is an important part of officer socialization into (and anxieties about) the profession because the functioning of promotion systems "affects directly the morale, cohesion, and efficiency of the institution as a whole."¹⁴⁴

However, promotion systems are riven with frustrations and suspicions of either institutional or personal bias, susceptible to changes over time in ways that can be detrimental to a given individual officer's career choice, and subject to temporal whims, political changes, or even impassive bureaucratic reforms far beyond any individual's control.¹⁴⁵ As the pseudonymous British author Sir Morgan O'Doherty described the process in a scathing and sarcastic letter to the editor of *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* in 1833, one must speak of "the caprice of promotion."¹⁴⁶

Most militaries have strict authorized officer and grade strengths assigned by either statute or internal regulation.¹⁴⁷ These strengths artificially constrain position openings, leading to a

¹⁴¹ See, for example, Jukka Mattila, Sampo Tukiainen, and Sami Kajalo, "Meanings of Military Ranks," *Defence Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017), pp. 359–78; R. Pigeau and C. McCann, "Re-Conceptualizing Command and Control," *Canadian Military Journal* (Spring 2002), pp. 53–64; A. Jaffe, "The Negotiation of Meaning in the Military," *Central Issues in Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (1984), pp. 31–46; Morris Janowitz, "Changing Patterns of Organizational Authority: The Military Establishment," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1959), pp. 473–93.

¹⁴² Caitlin Talmadge, "Different Threats, Different Militaries: Explaining Organizational Practices in Authoritarian Armies," *Security Studies* 25, no. 1 (2016), p. 115, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2016.1134192>.

¹⁴³ Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁴⁴ W. B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784–1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1942), p. 47.

¹⁴⁵ On the role of administrative shifts impacting career progression, see, for example, Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, Clifford M. Graf, and Jerry M. Sollinger, *General and Flag Officer Careers: Consequences of Increased Tenure*, RAND, RANDMR868OSD, 2001.

¹⁴⁶ Morgan O'Doherty, "On Military Promotion," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 8, no. 45 (1833), pp. 311–30, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/737ed0da8920d36f/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1795>.

¹⁴⁷ For the US, see, for example, "Authorized Strength," RAND, 2026, <https://www.rand.org/paf/projects/dopma-ropma/authorized-strength.html>.

sharp narrowing as one's career progresses.¹⁴⁸ Aspiring and ambitious military officers are well aware of this structuring feature, and they understand that it varies sharply by service branch and even type of officer path.

For example, US General George S. Patton was said to have stated that “a cavalryman might have to wait 13 years for promotion to first lieutenant, while an infantryman could expect this advance in at most 7 years.” Nonetheless, he chose the former because he received advice that holding a cavalry position in wartime completely changed this calculation.¹⁴⁹ Because he expected a war experience during his career, he made a choice that otherwise would not have aided the career of such an ambitious candidate for upper tier elite echelons. Both his gamble and his career aspirations paid off.

Although the professionalization of many Armed Forces occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries, promotion systems and patterns are not set in stone and may shift over time. In most cases, a single promotion pattern for an entire military is unlikely; rather, the military's promotions system will be informed by institutional quirks and nuances, the contingency of world or national events, the communities from which certain branches tend to select their junior officers, and even the changing preferences of entire demographic generations.

To narrow our discussion of military promotions, we turn to the small subset of great powers that are the most likely to mimic each other (relatively speaking) in terms of the investments in personnel development for their respective armed forces. Traditionally—and surprisingly—the study of military promotions has been limited largely to the US, the preeminent great power among Western democracies since the end of World War II.

Lessons from the US, although not always exactly mirrored in other countries, help generate certain hypotheses about promotions that may be relevant to the Russian case. We accompany these lessons with data from other democracies when possible. We then turn to existing knowledge on military promotions in large, long-standing authoritarian regimes with institutionalized militaries. With these comparative lessons aligned, we then look to the Russian case specifically in the next subsection. All of these lessons learned put together informed our framework and the methodological choices we made to build our datasets.

¹⁴⁸ For examples of the contouring influence of too many officers for too few positions, known sometimes as logjams, see Evan A. Laksmana, “Reshuffling the Deck? Military Corporatism, Promotional Logjams and Post-Authoritarian Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 5 (2019), pp. 806–36, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00472336.2019.1613556>.

¹⁴⁹ E. M. Coffman, *The Regulars: The American Army, 1898–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2004), pp. 149–50, cited in Victor P. Corona, “Career Patterns in the US Army Officer Corps,” *Public Organization Review* 11, no. 2 (2011), p. 109, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11115-010-0114-7>.

Military promotions in great power democracies

The US has long been subject to a small but important research tradition on officer promotion, with a major focus on trying to connect the most likely profiles of successful candidates to higher rank. Writing in the early Cold War, the scholar Morris Janowitz, for example, noted that more than 50 percent of US officers ranked brigadier general or higher in the 1950s came from a small, select group of academies.¹⁵⁰ Decades later, B. Mitchell Peck expanded on this finding, arguing that although academy graduation mattered significantly, it was also influenced heavily by variables such as seniority, officer education formats, and combat or noncombat roles as one climbed the ranks.¹⁵¹

This research suggested that educational background, the formative path of young officers, and performance in action are all relevant factors, but they are not the only elements that matter. Other scholars have suggested that performance up to a baseline level of merit is relevant, but elite connections through socialization, networking, and “visibility” are critical—indeed, they become increasingly important over time. For example, David Moore and Thomas Trout write that “performance, while a necessary standard for acceptability into a rather large pool of officers from which the elite will emerge, is nonetheless a minor influence on promotion and becomes even less discriminating as an officer’s career progresses.”¹⁵² Instead, they argue, “visibility” or “the extent to which an individual has developed contacts with peers and superiors who can influence his movement in the organization... begins [to matter] moderately and eventually becomes the dominant influence.”¹⁵³ Another way to say this is that socialization, networking, and even forms of patronage exist in all large militaries, even highly professionalized, great power democracies.¹⁵⁴ Institutionalization and regularization do not guarantee that connections and elite ties become meaningless.

¹⁵⁰ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).

¹⁵¹ B. Mitchell Peck, “Assessing the Career Mobility of US Army Officers: 1950–1974,” *Armed Forces and Society* 20 (1994), pp. 217–35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45346577>.

¹⁵² David W. Moore and B. Thomas Trout, “Military Advancement: The Visibility Theory of Promotion,” *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 2 (1978), pp. 452–68.

¹⁵³ Moore and Trout, “Military Advancement.”

¹⁵⁴ This pattern has been noted among minor power professionalized militaries as well. In the South Korean case, network structure, strength of ties, and “collective identity based around school ties” are critical factors for promotion. See Insoo Kim, and Tyler Crabb, “Collective Identity and Promotion Prospects in the South Korean Army,” *Armed Forces and Society* 40, no. 2 (2014), pp. 295–309, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0095327X12466037>.

Other potential influences abound, especially those operating at micro or marginal levels to improve chances. For example, Ulrich Mueller and Allan Mazur found that “facial dominance” was a factor in cadet rankings at West Point, as well as in late career promotions.¹⁵⁵ Studies of Vietnam-era and post-Vietnam-era officer cohorts in the US military, meanwhile, highlighted the importance of financial rewards to entice career continuation in an era

Table 10. Select promotion factors in great power democracies

Factors (Noted in Democracies)
• Military academy origin • Age at promotion • Experience in conflict • Socialization and networking • Performance • Degrees

Source: CNA.

when intangibles such as honor or family legacy were becoming less compelling.¹⁵⁶ Later US studies also noted that ethnoracial factors and advanced degrees mattered.¹⁵⁷

Finally, some scholars have highlighted the shock of war and conflict as providing new opportunities to show merit, be “in the action,” and further socialize with other colleagues also set for rapid advancement. The exogenous role of war and other crises can affect promotion patterns significantly, creating “career rhythms” that interact with more stable patterns such that “early promotion to captain, early awarding of a temporary higher rank during war, and career entry close to the onset of war are consistently associated with ‘star’ careers.”¹⁵⁸ Table 10 provides a list of potential factors derived from the existing research literature.

Military promotions in great power authoritarian regimes

Institutions in authoritarian regimes are sometimes believed to work differently than those in democracies.¹⁵⁹ Some scholars have found that authoritarian regimes are more likely to encourage corruption and nepotism in their institutions, whereas others have noted that the

¹⁵⁵ Ulrich Mueller and Allan Mazur, “Facial Dominance of West Point Cadets as a Predictor of Later Military Rank,” *Social Forces* 74, no. 3 (1996), pp. 823–50, <https://academic.oup.com/sf/article-abstract/74/3/823/2233473>; Allan Mazur, Julie Mazur, and Caroline Keating, “Military Rank Attainment of a West Point Class: Effects of Cadets’ Physical Features,” *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 1 (1984), pp. 125–50, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/228050>.

¹⁵⁶ Fumiyo T. Hunter, *Tenure Patterns of US Commissioned Officers in the 1970s and 1980s*, US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, No. ARIRN8863, July 1988, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA197609.pdf>.

¹⁵⁷ Erkan Doganca, “Officer Career Paths and the Effects of Commissioning Sources on the Survival Patterns of Army Officers,” (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2006), ADA457001.

¹⁵⁸ Corona, “Career Patterns in the US Army Officer Corps.”

¹⁵⁹ For further discussion, see Nathan J. Brown, Steven D. Schaaf, Samer Anabtawi, and Julian G. Waller, *Autocrats Can’t Always Get What They Want: State Institutions and Autonomy Under Authoritarianism* (University of Michigan Press, 2024).

very logic of nondemocratic rule enforces a broad selection preference for loyalty over competence.¹⁶⁰ Regimes such as Russia are said to have this pattern in civilian bureaucracies, and so-called “patronal” dynamics are generally found across Russian society.¹⁶¹

Militaries are not necessarily the same as civilian bureaucracies or the high elite politics of autocracy, although they can be. Scholars of civil-military relations point out that different authoritarian regimes can vary internally quite significantly, as can the degree of their own military’s professionalization.¹⁶² Table 11 presents a list of factors sometimes noted as relevant in the militaries of authoritarian regimes.

Table 11. Select promotion factors in great power authoritarian regimes

Factors (Noted in Authoritarian Regimes)
• Factors also present in great power democracies (see Table 10) • Service to regime decision-makers • Political patronage • Ideological loyalty • Ethnolinguistic, ethnoracial, or clan identity

Source: CNA.

Furthermore, the nuances of specific cases often interact, given the distinct military cultures or broader societal divisions that may or may not map onto institutional patterns. As a result, one should be wary of a one-size-fits-all approach.¹⁶³

Some scholars categorize militaries in authoritarian regimes into two major buckets: those that seek military effectiveness to succeed in wars, and those that seek internal protection by reducing the likelihood of coups. These two ideal types allow for notably distinct general characterizations between the two formats, presented visually in Table 12. For those states that seek maximal conventional military capability, Caitlin Talmadge notes the following:

The ticket to being a senior officer is competence, demonstrated either by wartime performance or performance in training. By the same token, incompetence and cowardice are quick routes to early retirement. Officers who perform poorly in war or training exercises are actively removed from command. Furthermore, an officer’s political views, sectarian background, or other ascriptive characteristics are largely

¹⁶⁰ Alexei V. Zakharov, “The Loyalty-Competence Trade-Off in Dictatorships and Outside Options for Subordinates,” *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016), pp. 457–66; Jingyuan Qian and Steve Bai, “Loyalty Signaling, Bureaucratic Compliance, and Variation in State Repression in Authoritarian Regimes,” *Comparative Politics* 56, no. 4 (2024), pp. 423–47.

¹⁶¹ Anna Schwenck, *Flexible Authoritarianism: Cultivating Ambition and Loyalty in Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2024); Hale, *Patronal Politics*.

¹⁶² Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹⁶³ Talmadge, “Different Threats, Different Militaries.”

irrelevant. The objective is to develop a high human capital base in the military, one that can better handle the challenges of warfare.¹⁶⁴

Table 12. Select trade-offs on promotion in the militaries of authoritarian regimes

Seeking Effectiveness	Seeking Survival
• Wartime performance • Training performance • Competence and bravery • High human capital	• Political loyalty • Sectarian, tribal, or ethnic identity • Incompetence • Low human capital

Source: Derived from Talmadge, Caitlin. "Different Threats, Different Militaries: Explaining Organizational Practices in Authoritarian Armies." *Security Studies* 25, no. 1 (2016): 111-141.

Those who maximize coup prevention likelihoods, in contrast, will select for other characteristics:

[They will] prize political loyalty and sectarian, family, or ethnicities in the promotion processes for the officer corps...promotion patterns often go beyond this preference to deliberately select against officers with proven combat prowess. It is not just that an officer's ascriptive traits or political views are salient but that the demonstration of competence actually harms an officer's career in such militaries. Officers who easily win battles can also plot conspiracies. They are likely to command the loyalty of fellow officers and the troops, making it plausible that their defection from the regime would find support. Weeding out these individuals reduces the risk of military overthrow even though it likely hurts the quality of human capital in the military as well.¹⁶⁵

Although all political regimes seek to avoid coups, only some can structure their militaries in a way that the threat can be assumed to be low or manageable. Those that can orient their efforts to professionalizing, rewarding merit, and encouraging performance will likely perform significantly better in armed conflict, all things equal.

Authoritarian regimes that prize effectiveness relative to coup-proofing often have other institutions that can rein in the latent coercive threat of a military against regime leadership, which almost always takes the form of civilian control of the military. Samuel P. Huntington identified the Soviet Union of the 1950s as an exemplar of this model of civilian control. He termed this "subjective control," referring to the Communist Party's penetration and oversight of the Soviet Armed Forces.¹⁶⁶ Russia broadly continues this civilian domination of the military

¹⁶⁴ Talmadge, "Different Threats, Different Militaries," p. 116.

¹⁶⁵ Talmadge, "Different Threats, Different Militaries," p. 118.

¹⁶⁶ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*.

to this day, which allows it to maintain control over the Armed Forces even under conditions of internal crisis and battlefield losses.¹⁶⁷

Other peer authoritarian regime adversaries can also maintain an effectiveness-oriented model of military organizational development and institutionalize promotion patterns that are at least directionally ordered toward merit. China's People's Liberation Army, for example, has evolved since 1989 toward what the academic Joseph Lin describes as "diversity, stability and professionalization," rather than the more nepotistic (and likely more coup-concerned) patterns of prior eras.¹⁶⁸ Promotion changes in this case have included continuing to privilege certain educational institutions, focusing on promoting younger generations, regularizing promotion cycles, and instituting a variety of reforms designed to reduce military influence in the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Waller and Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations*.

¹⁶⁸ Joseph Y. Lin, "The Changing Face of Chinese Military Generals: Evolving Promotion Practices Between 1981 and 2009," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22, no. 1 (2010), p. 75, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10163270903538123>.

¹⁶⁹ Lin, "The Changing Face."

Appendix B: Evolution of Soviet Military Ranks and Promotions, 1917–1940s

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks abolished the Imperial Russian Table of Ranks and initially abandoned traditional military ranks entirely, replacing them with positional titles that were acronyms of the full position name: *kombat* for battalion commander, *kombrig* for brigade commander, *komdiv* for division commander, and so on. Epaulettes were eliminated as well and replaced by collar patches. The ideological impulse was to destroy the Tsarist officer corps as a class institution. However, the purely egalitarian system caused confusion about command hierarchies and undermined discipline.¹⁷⁰ To fix these issues, the system was supplemented with “service categories” numbered K-1 through K-14 in 1924. These categories functioned essentially as ranks in disguise, indicating the experience and qualifications of a commander even though the Bolsheviks officially rejected the rank concept.¹⁷¹

The Bolsheviks faced a key dilemma when building the Red Army: they needed the military expertise of former Tsarist officers but did not trust them politically. This dilemma led the Bolsheviks to establish a dual-track command system in which political commissars and military commanders had equal power. In theory, commissars were meant to provide close oversight and ensure political loyalty to the Communist Party, whereas commanders were supposed to exercise day-to-day operational command. But because all orders had to be countersigned by the commissar, the military commanders gradually lost authority to the political commissars. This system proved unworkable, and Bolshevik leaders revised it in 1924 to reestablish single command by military commanders. By that point, the remaining Tsarist officers had been removed from the Red Army, and most military commanders were themselves members of the Communist Party. As a result, commissars faded away as an independent power center, but they continued to be key deputy commanders who ensured

¹⁷⁰ Ilya Kramnik, “General Ranks and the General Staff: The Political Weight of Military Commanders [Генеральские звания и генералитет: политический вес военачальников],” *RIA Novosti*, May 7, 2010, <https://ria.ru/20100507/231768844.html>.

¹⁷¹ “1917 Ranks—Army,” Global Security, last modified Jan. 24, 2017, accessed Mar. 20, 2026, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/army-rank-1917.htm>.

political loyalty and maintained a separate, Communist Party-controlled reporting system throughout the Soviet period.¹⁷²

On September 22, 1935, formal military ranks were then reestablished by a legislative decree, which also introduced higher pay and certain benefits for Red Army commanders. The highest military rank—marshal of the Soviet Union—was created at this time. However, because of political resistance against restoring traditional imperial rank titles such as colonel or general, the system remained a hybrid, combining traditional ranks such as lieutenant with functional titles such as *komdiv*.

The hybrid nature meant that a label such as *komdiv* could refer either to the position of division commander or to the rank associated with someone in that position. Separate rank tracks for political officers, engineers, and medical personnel were also retained. Because promotions did not necessarily immediately coincide with appointment to a new position, situations frequently arose in which someone with the rank of *kombrig* was commanding a division.¹⁷³

At the same time, Josef Stalin's paranoid personality and his establishment of a highly personalist political system led to exaggerated fears of a military coup. When combined with the tremendous control afforded by the totalitarian integration of state and society, these fears created an environment for a systematic and bloody purge.¹⁷⁴ The purge in 1937 and 1938 removed three of five marshals, 13 of 15 army commanders, 50 of 57 corps commanders, and 154 of 186 division commanders. Of the 1,863 officers holding general-grade ranks by end of 1936, almost two-thirds were arrested, and approximately half were executed within two years.¹⁷⁵

Stalin specifically targeted the most competent officers. Controlling for rank and party history, the probability of repression was higher for those who had reached high ranks early in their careers, reflecting a preemptive strategy against potential coup leaders rather than a response to any real conspiracy.¹⁷⁶ By comparison, the later Soviet and post-Soviet periods were generally stable, with relatively few removals, almost no imprisonments, and no executions. As

¹⁷² William R. Kintner, "The Military as an Element of Soviet State Power," *USNI Proceedings* 81, no. 7 (July 1955), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/july/military-element-soviet-state-power>.

¹⁷³ "Soviet Insignia of Rank–1935 Ranks," <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/army-rank-1935.htm>; Kramnik, "General Ranks and the General Staff."

¹⁷⁴ Roger R. Reese, "The Red Army and the Great Purges," in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. J. A. Getty and R. T. Manning (Cambridge UP, 1993), pp. 198–214.

¹⁷⁵ Alexei Zakharov and Konstantin Sonin, "The Anatomy of the Great Terror: A Quantitative Analysis of the 1937–38 Purges in the Red Army," Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper, University of Chicago, 2024–2015, https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/BFI_WP_2024-154.pdf.

¹⁷⁶ Zakharov and Sonin, "The Anatomy of the Great Terror."

we discuss later in this section, this stability has only recently started to dissipate as a reaction to failures and dissent related to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The hybrid rank system of the mid-1930s proved unworkable because of the continuing confusion between ranks and positions; traditional ranks were restored in 1940.¹⁷⁷ On June 4, of that year, 1,056 people received the first promotions to the newly established general officer ranks. The system still notably lacked a brigadier-grade rank at this time, mirroring the Imperial Russian Army, in which that rank had ceased to exist in the early 19th century. Most officers holding the *kombrig* rank were demoted to colonel, but a few were promoted to major-general, which was a one-star rank in effect equivalent to the Western brigadier general.¹⁷⁸

In early 1942, all functional ranks in technical and administrative corps were regularized. In October 1942, the system of military commissars was abolished along with commissar ranks, and political officers were fully integrated into the regular officer corps. In early 1943, all remaining functional ranks were abolished, the word "officer" (*ofitser*) became officially endorsed, and traditional epaulettes replaced the previous rank insignia. The rank of *Generalissimus* (Генералиссимус) was created in 1943 as an individual honor for Stalin.¹⁷⁹

During World War II, massive numbers of promotions were accelerated out of sheer necessity. Many officers who had been imprisoned during the purges were rehabilitated and returned to service. These accelerated wartime promotions arose from a combination of factors, primarily the need to compensate for catastrophic levels of casualties among the officer corps in the early part of the war. Subsequently, the rapid growth of the military in response to the German invasion created a massive demand for new officers at all levels.

Experienced officers were thus rapidly promoted to fill new positions and vacancies created by battlefield losses.¹⁸⁰ Promotions during the early part of the war were often based on necessity rather than formal timelines, with capable junior leaders promoted rapidly after demonstrating effectiveness. Battlefield losses meant that officers frequently served in positions above their rank before formal promotion. On occasion, even enlisted soldiers were

¹⁷⁷ Kramnik, "General Ranks and the General Staff."

¹⁷⁸ "Soviet Insignia of Rank—1935 Ranks."

¹⁷⁹ Kramnik, "General Ranks and the General Staff."

¹⁸⁰ David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 70–78; David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (University Press of Kansas, 1998), pp. 137–45; Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, pp. 206–14.

directly commissioned to officer rank without undergoing formal training because of shortages.¹⁸¹

This World War II system has remained essentially unchanged since then, although no marshals have been appointed since 1997. Contemporary Russian ranks are a direct legacy of the USSR's rapid experimentation, and then solidification, of a post-revolutionary military hierarchy pattern that worked (and one that, after two decades of changes, was more or less a variant of the Tsarist inheritance, stripped of aristocratic and service-specific quirks).

¹⁸¹ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, pp. 214–18; Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), pp. 178–82; Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, pp. 93–96; Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, pp. 210–12.

Appendix C: Promotions Dataset

This appendix provides additional analysis of the promotions dataset as well as more information on dataset coverage and methodology.

Additional analysis

In this section, we present data on characteristics across other service branches, cohort patterns over time, career predictions for one-star general officers likely to achieve higher positions, and common educational institutions attended by non-ground forces services.

Average characteristics across dataset

The following tables show the average characteristics of active general officers in the aerospace forces (VKS), the airborne forces (VDV), and the navy.

Table 13. Average characteristics across ranks (active), VKS

	One-Star	Two-Star	Three-Star	Four-Star
Total	53	20	8	1
Average age	55.7	60.8	62.1	59.5
Average age at first promotion	49.1	49.6	49.5	37.2
Average age at latest promotion	49.1	54.8	57.6	54.8
Percentage served in Chechnya	15	19	0	100
Percentage served in Syria	17	50	75	100
Percentage served in Ukraine	44	38	25	100

Source: CNA.

Table 14. Average characteristics across ranks (active), VDV

	One-Star	Two-Star	Three-Star	Four-Star
Total	13	5	3	1
Average age	56.0	57.9	64.7	62.7
Average age at first promotion	48.1	45.5	51.7	
Average age at latest promotion	48.1	51.5	55.7	61.4
Percentage served in Chechnya	46	100	67	100
Percentage served in Syria	31	60	100	0
Percentage served in Ukraine	46	0	100	0

Source: CNA.

Table 15. Average characteristics across ranks (active), navy

	One-Star	Two-Star	Three-Star	Four-Star
Total	63	34	7	1
Average age	55.5	59.5	59.3	64.0
Average age at first promotion	48.6	47.2	43.9	50.9
Average age at latest promotion	48.6	54.3	55.9	63.6
Percentage served in Chechnya	1.5	0	0	0
Percentage served in Syria	6.3	0	14	0
Percentage served in Ukraine	9.5	5.9	43	0

Source: CNA.

Cohort patterns

The tables in this subsection provide information on cohort promotions. We show four cohorts: those who were promoted to one-star rank between 1990 and 2010, those between 2010 and 2015, those between 2015 and 2022, and those between 2022 and 2025. We repeat this array in Table 17 for those who were promoted to two-star rank.

Table 16. Cohort characteristics among those achieving one-star rank

Cohort Group	Total	Active Duty as of 2026	Percentage Who Reached Three-Star by 2025	Percentage with Conflict Experience	Percentage with HOR ^a
1990–2010	585	16	6.5%	(Data coverage unreliable)	4.8%
2010–2015	234	110	11.1%	33.2%	4.7%
2015–2022	378	204	1.1%	30.4%	2.4%
2022–2025	294	291	0%	43.2%	8.5%

Source: CNA.

Note: *HOR* refers to the Hero of Russia award.

Table 17. Cohort characteristics among those achieving two-star rank

Cohort Group	Total	Active Duty as of 2026	Percentage Who Reached Three-Star by 2025	Percentage with Conflict Experience	Percentage with HOR
1990–2010	268	4	25.8%	(Data coverage unreliable)	6.8%
2010–2015	71	36	45.8%	54.3	12.8%
2015–2022	137	102	18.1%	53.6%	7.2%
2022–2025	95	94	4.2%	42.1%	9.5%

Source: CNA.

These cohort figures suggest one clear trend: clearing the two-star hurdle is a much better indicator for future potential than attaining one-star rank is. For those in the cohort from 1990 to 2010 (which has almost entirely retired) and the cohort from 2010 to 2015 (which has had time to reach its potential), three-star make-rates among two-stars are four to five times higher than among one-stars.

The data related to conflict experience and Hero of Russia are less straightforward. Although the percentage of 2022 to 2025 one-stars with conflict experience is higher than the past two cohorts, this trend reverses at the two-star level. Because these data do not identify when an officer gained their battlefield experience and does not count multiple tours of combat experience, determining whether Russia’s war against Ukraine is driving general selection toward those with combat experience because of that experience is difficult.

This trend may be occurring, but establishing it would require a finer grained analysis than these cohort snapshots provide. Similarly, that proportions of those who make two-star wearing the Hero of Russia are higher than those who are not does not mean that winning the Hero of Russia improves the odds of reaching two-star rank. Peeling back the numbers indicates that for every cohort, more flag officers won Hero of Russia after attaining flag rank than did before attaining high rank. Furthermore, our quantitative analysis indicates that the Hero of Russia is not a significant predictor of the odds of attaining three- or four-star ranks.

Career predictions

We applied a regression model to Russian officers promoted to major general since 2022, and we present those data in Table 18 and Table 19. This model produces an overview of the odds that these freshly minted officers will end their career at the four-star level decades later. The 10 officers identified in these two tables are those with the best chance of achieving three- and four-star rank. The possible candidates are drawn from the same pool, but we applied different models that fit for odds of attaining three- or four-star rank based on historic data.

Table 18. Most probable three-stars promoted to one-star since 2022

Name	Age at One-Star Promotion	Service
Roman Olegovich Fedorov	37	Navy
Maksim Aleksandrovich Krasnoshchekov	38	Ground forces
Vladislav Nikolayevich Cherkasov	36	Ground forces
Vitaly Aleksandrovich Kurbatov	36	Ground forces
Igor Leonidovich Romanov	37	VKS
Aleksandr Sergeyevich Nilov	39	Ground forces
Aleksandr Anatolyevich Zavatsky	40	Ground forces
Sergei Vladimirovich Lazarev	39	Unknown
Aleksandr Yurievich Maidankin	39	Ground forces
Andrey Aleksandrovich Builov	39	Ground forces

Source: CNA.

Note: We were unable to find details about Lazarev beyond his promotion date and birth date.

Table 19. Most probable four-stars promoted to one-star since 2022

Name	Age at One-Star Promotion	Service
Roman Olegovich Fedorov	37	Navy
Vladislav Nikolayevich Cherkasov	37	Ground forces
Vitaly Aleksandrovich Kurbatov	37	Ground forces
Igor Leonidovich Romanov	37	VKS
Maksim Aleksandrovich Krasnoshchekov	38	Ground forces
Aleksandr Sergeyevich Nilov	39	Ground forces
Aleksandr Yurievich Maidankin	39	Ground forces
Andrey Aleksandrovich Builov	39	Ground forces
Azer Nuraliyevich Ramazanov	39	Ground forces
Sergei Vladimirovich Lazarev	39	Unknown

Source: CNA.

Note: We were unable to find details about Lazarev beyond his promotion date and birth date.

Education

In the following tables, we identify the most common educational institutions attended by active general officers in VKS, VDV, and the navy.

Table 20. Common educational institutions attended by rank (active, VKS)

Rank	Top-Three Common Educational Institutions Attended
One-star	- Borisoglebsk Aviation (7.5%) - Barnaul Aviation, Mozhaisky Military Engineering (5.7% each)
Two-star	Borisoglebsk Aviation, Kacha Aviation, Stavropol Aviation, Yeisk Aviation (10% each)
Three-star	Armavir Aviation, Gorky Anti-Aircraft, Kharkov Aviation Engineering, Pushkin Radio Electronics, Stavropol Aviation, Voronezh Aviation, Yeisk Aviation (12.5% each)
Four-star	Omsk Combined Arms (100%)

Source: CNA.

Table 21. Common educational institutions attended by rank (active, VDV)

Rank	Top-Three Common Educational Institutions Attended
One-star	- Ryazan Higher Airborne Command (68%) - Kyiv Higher Combined Arms Command School, Kolomna Higher Artillery Command School, Novosibirsk Higher Military Command School (6.2% each)
Two-star	- Ryazan Higher Airborne Command (42%) - Chelyabinsk Higher Tank Command School, Krasnodar Higher Military School, Novosibirsk Higher Military Command School, Ryazan Higher Signals Command School (14.3% each)
Three-star	Ryazan Higher Airborne Command (100%)
Four-star	Ryazan Higher Airborne Command (100%)

Source: CNA.

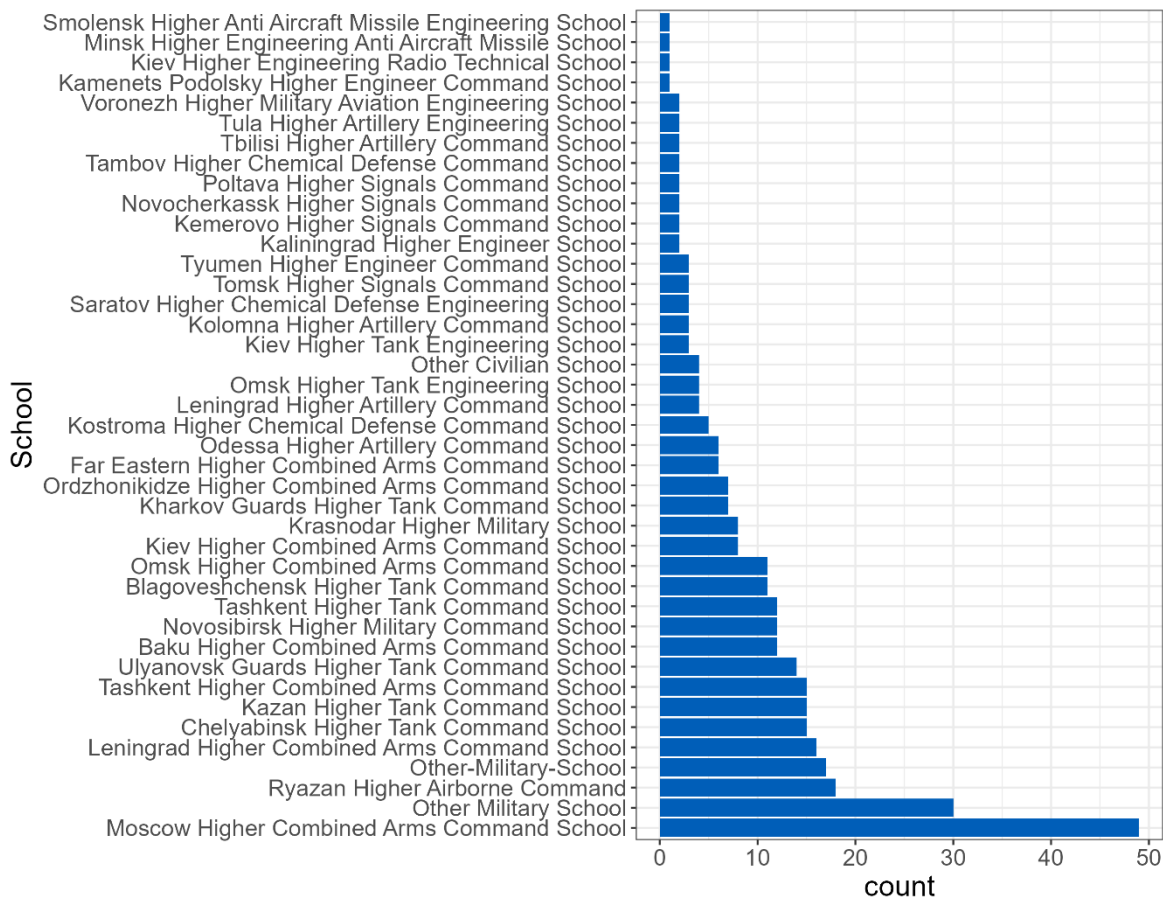
Table 22. Common educational institutions attended by rank (active Navy)

Rank	Top-Three Common Educational Institutions Attended
One-star	• Kaliningrad Higher Naval School (6.3%) • Komsomol Higher Naval Submarine School, P. S. Nakhimov Black Sea Naval School, S. M. Kirov Caspian Naval School, S. O. Makarov Pacific Naval School (3.2%)
Two-star	• S. O. Makarov Pacific Naval School (17.6%) • M. V. Frunze Naval School (14.7%) • S. M. Kirov Caspian Naval School (8.8%)
Three-star	• Komsomol Higher Submarine School (57%) • P. S. Nakhimov Black Sea Naval School (28.6%) • M. V. Frunze Naval School (14.3%)
Four-star	• Popov Higher Naval School of Radio Electronics (100%)

Source: CNA.

We also report numbers graphically for all generals (both active and retired) to illustrate the diversity of educational attendance across the general officer corps since 1991 (Figure 16, Figure 17, Figure 18, and Figure 19).

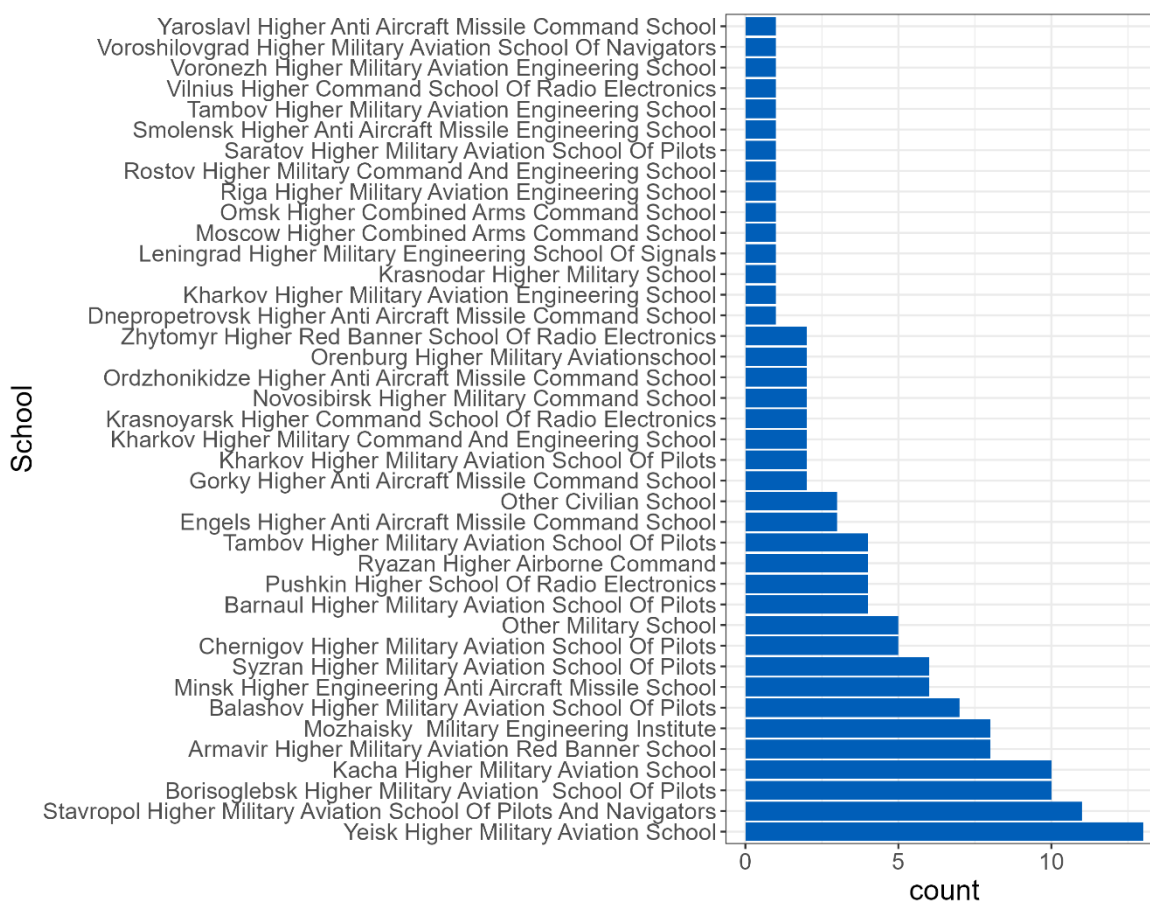
Figure 16. Entry-level schools for ground forces general officers (all since 1991)



Source: CNA.

Note: "Other military school" refers to schools that appear once in the data.

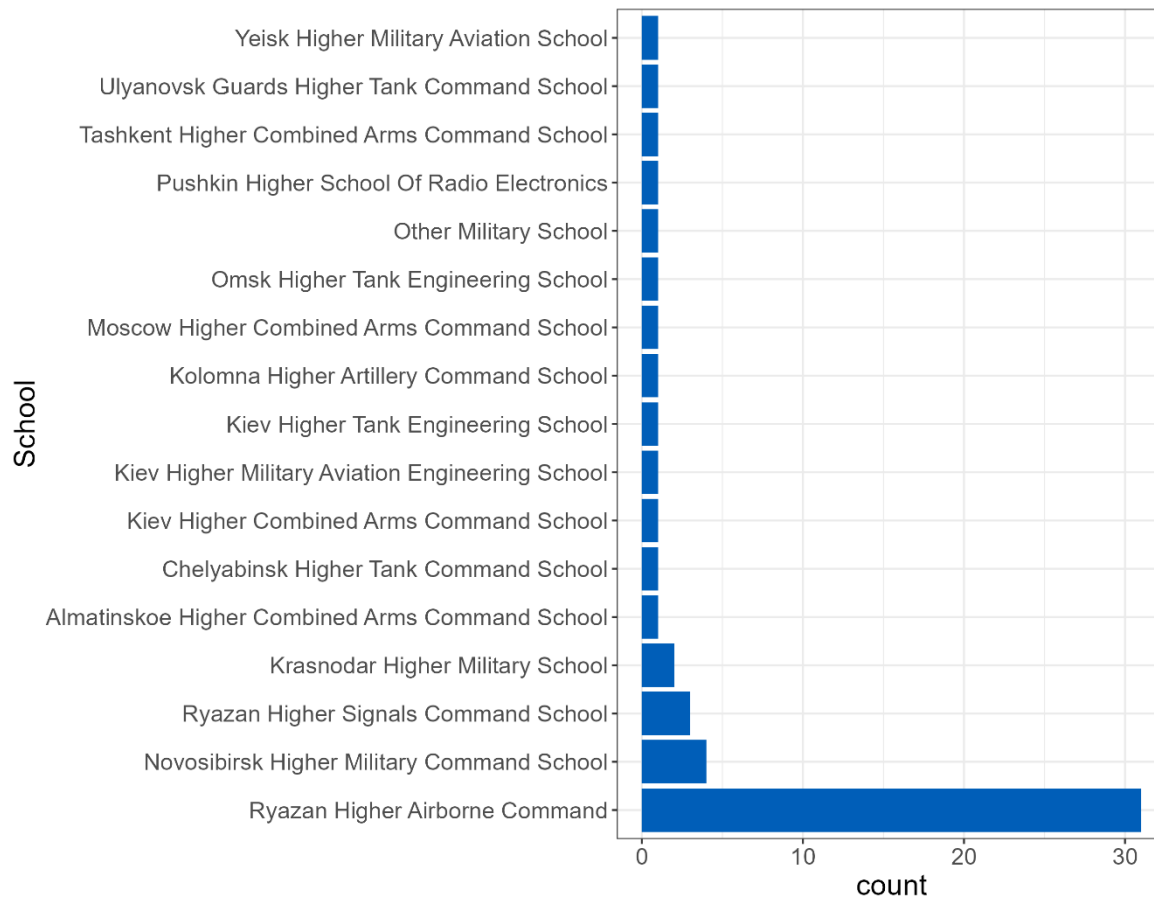
Figure 17. Entry-level schools for VKS general officers (all since 1991)



Source: CNA.

Note: "Other military school" refers to schools that appear once in the data.

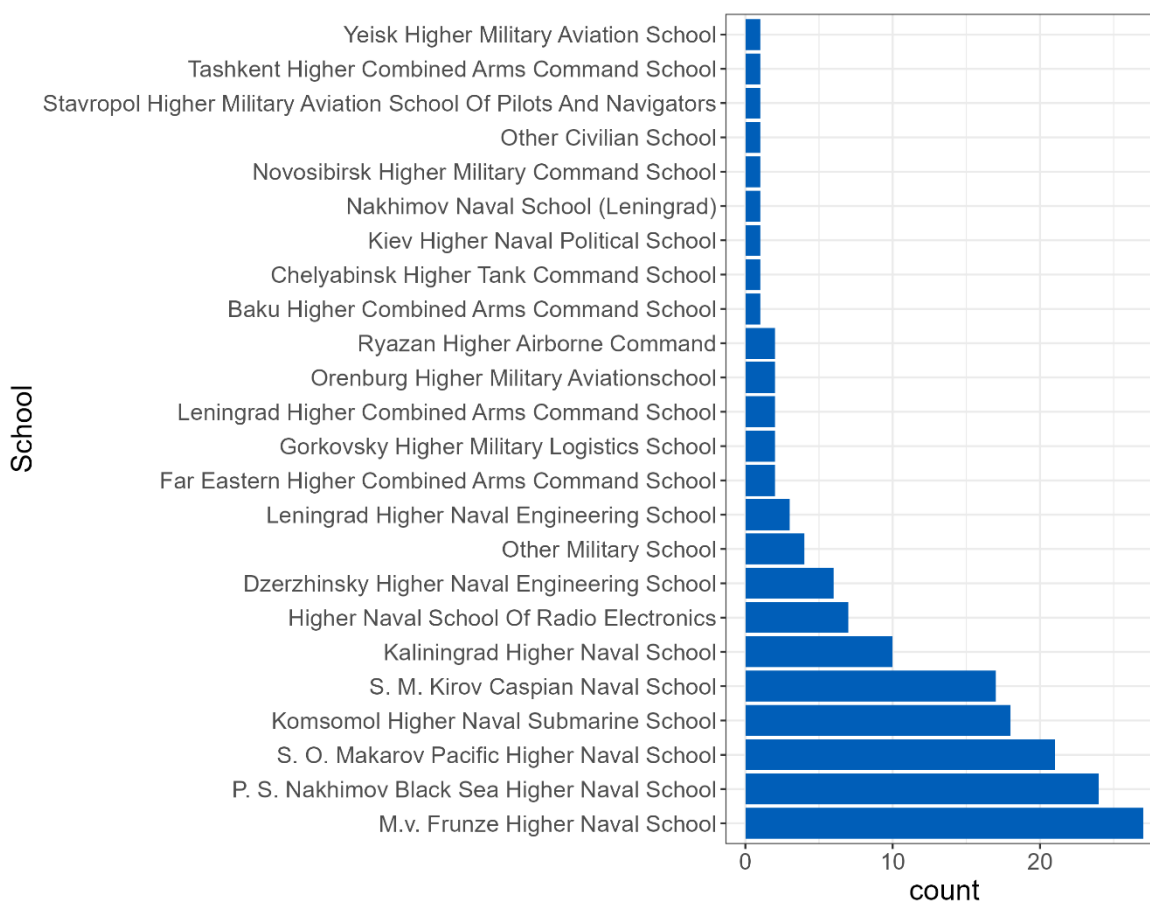
Figure 18. Entry-level schools for VDV general officers (all since 1991)



Source: CNA.

Note: "Other military school" refers to schools that appear once in the data.

Figure 19. Entry-level schools for navy flag officers (all since 1991)



Source: CNA.

Note: "Other military school" refers to schools that appear only once in the dataset.

Methodological details

Data coverage

Official decrees from the president of the Russian Federation are the authoritative sources of promotions to general officer ranks, per Russian law.¹⁸² Military units occasionally publish official biographies of commanding officers in the unit. News agencies, both national and

¹⁸² "'Document Repository,' President of Russia ["Банк документов." Президент России.]," accessed March 23, 2026, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank>.

regional, also publish details on officers who are prominent on the national or regional stage, which can be combined to fill out biographies.¹⁸³ Veteran and military fan pages can provide additional information, particularly about retired officers or flag officers from specific branches or who have received specific awards.¹⁸⁴

In many cases, CNA was unable to find information on select general officers, especially in regard to their service branch, educational background, and experience in conflict. Table 23 shows the core variables in the dataset and the percentage of available data.

Table 23. Dataset coverage overview

Variable	Description	Active Coverage % (All) ^b
Name	First, patronymic, and last names	100 (100)
Date of birth	Date of birth in M/D/Y format	64 (46)
Service ^a	Branch of the Russian military (ground forces, VKS, etc.)	73 (61)
Highest known rank	Numeric variable common across services	100 (100)
One-star promotion date	Date (or year) of promotion to one-star rank	89 (71)
Two-star promotion date	Date (or year) of promotion to two-star rank	97 (70)
Three-star promotion date	Date (or year) of promotion to three-star rank	98 (71)
Four-star promotion date	Date (or year) of promotion to four-star rank	100 (100)
Five-star promotion date	Date (or year) of promotion to five-star rank	100 (100)
HOR	Binary flag for receiving the HOR	100 (100)
HOR award date	Date of HOR award	100 (100)
Education	Name and date of entry-level school	46 (37)
Description of service history	Narrative description of posts with unit and years when available	26 (50)
Conflict service	Binary for service in Chechnya, Syria, or Ukraine	12–33 (12–22)

Source: CNA.

^a Options are ground forces, VDV, VKS, navy, strategic rocket forces, logistical forces, special forces, and other (medical, legal, etc.)

^b Number is among active general officers, out of total (retired and/or deceased) in parentheses.

Our analysis of this dataset was limited to higher level conclusions—especially regarding promotion dates, which have more than two-thirds coverage and improve among active

¹⁸³ “List of Biographies,” *RIA Novosti*, accessed Mar. 23, 2026, <https://ria.ru/person/category/voennyye>.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, “Ofitseri Rossii,” *Oficery.ru*, accessed Mar. 23, 2026, <https://www.oficery.ru/memorial/>.

general officers relative to those who retired in the 2000s. Given the Russian military's secrecy, major gaps and limitations remain in the comprehensiveness of the dataset data collection effort. These gaps include the following:

- **Official decree gaps.** Official presidential decrees on promotions are the authoritative source for general-level promotions.¹⁸⁵ Although many decrees are publicly available on the Kremlin's site and other Russian legal repositories, CNA did not find any between 1995 and 2010. We filled in promotion dates in this period when possible based on written biographies, but these missing data create a sizeable gap in the middle of our temporal scope. This gap significantly complicates trajectory analysis because it substantially increases the number of generals with missing promotion dates. It also means that our dataset may be missing some unknown number of flag officers who were promoted between 1996 and 2010 and are not identified in other sources.
- **Missing data.** Although biographical information is available for many officers, its quality and detail vary considerably. Date of birth and service are mostly (although not always) available, but details on service history, deployments, and education are less so. Across the dataset, we have some basic biographical information (date of birth, service details, education) for around 900 flag officers. Some data, such as data about participation in Russian armed conflicts, covered only specific conflicts; the data notably omitted Afghanistan and the invasion of Georgia.
- **Uncaptured data.** We have not collected data on certain factors that likely play a significant role in the selection of the highest Russian military elite. These factors include personal and patronage relationships with senior officers, relationship to Putin, effectiveness, and geographic, joint, or international dimensions of service histories.
- **Changing promotion standards.** Putin's control over the Armed Forces may play a significant role in determining which generals make it to the highest ranks. We try to control for this with a dummy variable for all promotions after January 1, 2000.

In addition, we imposed structure onto the dataset in several ways, two of which were assigning cohort groups and dividing between active duty and retired general officers:

- **Cohorts.** We coded one set of cohorts that covered all general officers based on their first promotion date and another set for all general officers who had attained a two-star rank. We based the cohorts on when the general officers attained their rank: before 1991, from 1991 to 2010, from 2010 to 2015, from 2015 to 2022, and from 2022 onward.

¹⁸⁵ "'Document Repository,' President of Russia."

- **Active duty and retirement.** Active duty and retirement details were not always available. To improve coverage, we applied several assumptions to general officers with unknown active duty status. We assumed that any living general promoted since 2020 is still active duty. We assumed that any one- or two-star general not promoted since 2008 is inactive and that any three-star generals not promoted since 2005 are similarly inactive.

Regression model specifications

In Table 24 and Table 25, we provide the logistic regressions reported in the Promotions section.

Four-star (binary) $\sim \log(\text{one-star promotion age (int)}) + \text{Hero of Russia before 1* (binary)} + \text{Core Service (binary)}$

Table 24. Four-star rank logit model results

	Estimate	Std. Error	Z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	52.4	10.5	5.0	5.92e-7
One-star promotion age	-14.6	2.8	-5.2	1.53e-07
HOR before one-star	0.2	1.1	0.2	0.87
Core service	0.007	0.5	0.01	0.99

Source: CNA.

Note: Based on generals promoted to one-star rank before January 1, 2022. Null deviance: 199.63 on 510 degrees of freedom. Residual deviance: 161.47 on 507 degrees of freedom.

Three-star (binary) $\sim \log(\text{one-star promotion age (int)}) + \text{Hero of Russia before 1* (binary)} + \text{Core Service (binary)}$.

Table 25. Three-star rank logit model results

	Estimate	Std. Error	Z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	40.0	5.3	7.5	8.29e-14
One-star promotion age	-10.8	1.4	-7.7	1.35e-14
HOR before one-star	0.46	0.5	0.9	0.38
Core service	-0.02	0.2	-0.1	0.93

Source: CNA.

Note: Based on generals promoted to one-star rank before January 1, 2022. Null deviance: 524.44 on 510 degrees of freedom. Residual deviance: 449.41 on 507 degrees of freedom.

Appendix D: Hero of Russia Awardees

In this section, we examine recipients of the Hero of Russia award, Russia's highest honor, focusing on military personnel who received the award between 2022 and 2025 for actions related to the Russia-Ukraine war. The dataset includes 486 publicly known recipients of the Hero of Russia award.¹⁸⁶ This publicly available list of known awardees reflects fewer than the true number of recipients because some award decrees are given secretly, but we believe that it likely represents the bulk of awards given since 2022. We built the dataset relying on published official decrees, press coverage, and sites devoted to tracking and profiling Russian soldiers.¹⁸⁷

The dataset includes the awardee's name, year of birth, home region, service or affiliation, year of the award, rank when earning the award, subsequent highest rank achieved, unit, award justification, and award justification notes. It also includes binary variables for whether the recipient served in Ukraine, received the award posthumously, is dead, has gone into politics, participates in the Time of Heroes program, has been promoted ahead of schedule, has had subsequent education, or has assumed subsequent instructor roles.¹⁸⁸

We analyzed the data for the rank at which the award was received, the awardee's home region, the reason for the award, and whether the award was granted posthumously. We then examined three potential post-Hero of Russia outcomes that could signal whether awardees might be being groomed to be future leaders of the Russian military: early promotion, assignment to a prestigious military education program, and participation in the *Vremya Geroyev* leadership development program.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Our dataset includes all individuals awarded the Hero of Russia since 2022. Although most are military figures, some are cosmonauts, politicians, or religious figures. Association with the invasion of Ukraine was based on a record of having served in Ukraine at the time of the action for which the award was given.

¹⁸⁷ "Heroes of the Country"; "Hero of the Russian Federation," from https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%93%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8.

¹⁸⁸ High volumes of press coverage of Hero of Russia award recipients provided detailed biographies, which allowed us to collect a comprehensive set of data with very little missing information. For example, we were unable to determine service affiliation for only one of the soldiers active in Ukraine. However, some unit affiliations, home regions, and birth years are unavailable.

¹⁸⁹ *Vremya Geroyev* is a new Russian leadership development program designed by the central government that trains veterans of the Russia-Ukraine war for future leadership roles in government agencies and state-owned companies. See the next subsection for further discussion.

The Hero of Russia award

Award history

The Hero of Russia award (also known as the Gold Star) is Russia's highest honor, given "for services to the government or nation connected to the execution of heroic acts."¹⁹⁰ The Hero of Russia can be awarded to both domestic and foreign civilians or military personnel, including posthumously. Presidential decrees issued irregularly throughout the year are the official means of announcing award recipients.¹⁹¹ Like its Soviet predecessor, the Hero of the Soviet Union, the title Hero of Russia is typically given to participants in a military conflict, government servants, athletes, or cosmonauts. Since its inception, the Hero of Russia has been awarded to more than 1,000 recipients.¹⁹² We suggest that given the award's role in state propaganda, publicly acknowledged Heroes of Russia have likely made up most of the recipients since 2022.

The award is the highest level of an extensive table of federal honors for military distinctions, as shown in order of precedence in Table 26. The Orders of Suvorov, Ushakov, Zhukov, Kutuzov, and Nakhimov are all earmarked for military officers who display skill and initiative in exercising command on the battlefield.¹⁹³ The Order for Military Merit, the Order for Naval Merit, the Cross of St. George, Medal for Distinction in Combat, and the Medals of Suvorov, Ushakov, Zhukov, and Nesterov

Notable civilian Hero of Russia recipients include Mikhail Kalashnikov, Ramzan Kadyrov, and Nikolay Patrushev. Key current military leaders—Sergei Shoigu, Valery Gerasimov, and Mikhail Teplinsky—also wear the Gold Star. However, the award is no guarantee of long-term favor: Yevgeny Prigozhin and Aleksandr Lapin are two recent examples of recipients who lost favor after their award.

¹⁹⁰ "Hero of the Russian Federation," <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/catalog/glossary/9>; "On the Establishment of the Title of Hero of the Russian Federation."

¹⁹¹ They may be classified and either never revealed or only after some lag. Some analysis suggests that Putin is leaning more heavily on classified decrees than ever before. See "Almost 45% of Putin's 2025 Decrees Are Secret."

¹⁹² "Hero of the Russian Federation," <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/catalog/glossary/9>.

¹⁹³ "Order of the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation of 31.03.2003 N 100 on the Establishment of the Medal of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation "For Military Distinction (ПРИКАЗ МИНИСТРА ОБОРОНЫ РФ ОТ 31.03.2003 N 100 ОБ УЧРЕЖДЕНИИ МЕДАЛИ МИНИСТЕРСТВА ОБОРОНЫ РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ "ЗА БОЕВЫЕ ОТЛИЧИЯ")." (2003), https://web.archive.org/web/20150522093017/http://www.lawrussia.ru/texts/legal_744/doc744a861x582.htm.

recognize military excellence throughout the wider force.¹⁹⁴ The Order of Merit to the Fatherland and its less prestigious medal equivalent can be awarded to soldiers, but they are less clearly tied to battlefield performance. Other awards recognize bravery and self-sacrifice; an example is the Order of Courage (*Orden za Muzhestvo*), which honors those (including soldiers) who take brave actions at risk to their own lives. The Medal for Valor, meanwhile, is specifically for soldiers in combat.¹⁹⁵

Table 26. The Russian table of honors

Name	Defense-Relevant Criteria	Eligible Recipients	Medal or Ribbon
Hero of the Russian Federation	For service to the nation via heroic acts	Any service	
Order for Merit to the Fatherland (1st–4th class)	Outstanding services to strengthen Russian state or defense capability	Any service	
Order of Suvorov	Skillfully and successfully organizing and commanding group-sized units in the face of stiff resistance or larger forces to support theater objectives and initiative	Seniormost commanders	
Order of Ushakov	Skillful command that achieves objectives with economy of force or results in destruction of enemy forces or positions	Seniormost navy officers	
Order of Zhukov	Skillful command that achieves operational success, such as encirclements, breakouts, or delays	Senior officer commanders and deputies	

¹⁹⁴ “Military Awards of the Russian Federation: Commander’s Orders [Боевые награды Российской Федерации. Полководческие ордена],” *Voennoe Obozrenie*, Aug. 27, 2014, <https://topwar.ru/56930-boevye-nagrady-rossiyskoy-federacii-polkovodcheskie-ordena.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Lyudmila Klimova, “Why the Order of Courage and the Medal ‘For Courage’ Are Awarded [За что вручают орден Мужества и медаль «За Отвагу»],” *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, Aug. 15, 2023, <https://www.pnp.ru/social/za-cto-vruchayut-orden-muzhestva-i-medal-za-otvagu.html>.

Name	Defense-Relevant Criteria	Eligible Recipients	Medal or Ribbon
Order of Kutuzov	Skillful command that achieves operational success, such as captures, encirclements, breakouts, or delays	Commanders, deputies, and battalion or company commanders	
Order of Nakhimov	Skillful command of forces to achieve naval, amphibious, or coastal defense victories	Navy officers	
Order of Courage	"Brave and decisive actions...under life-threatening conditions"	Any service	
Order "For Military Merit"	Exemplary performance of military duties	Any service	
Order "For Naval Merit"	For achievements in developing Russian Navy's technology or executing military maneuvers	Any service	
Cross of St. George (1st–4th class)	Distinction on the battlefield or peacekeeping	Junior officers and below	
Medal "For Courage"	Carrying out missions to protect Russia, its borders, and the national interest with courage and valor	Armed forces and other military forces	
Medal of the Order "For Merit to the Fatherland" (1st–2nd class)	"For great acts in the defense of the fatherland, success in supporting high military readiness"	Any service	
Medal "For Distinction in Combat"	For distinction or skillful initiative in executing or commanding military missions	Armed forces personnel	

Source: CNA. Criteria and eligible recipients from "On measures for the improvement of the state award system of the Russian Federation" (*О мерах по совершенствованию государственной наградной системы Российской Федерации*), Degree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 1099, Sep. 7, 2010.

Given their justifications, the Orders of Zhukov, Kutuzov, and Nakhimov could help analysts identify potential senior officers (i.e., majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels) on the cusp of elevation to the highest ranks. However, because the Hero of Russia award system is the most transparent and public of all honors, we focused on it in our analysis.

Past patterns

Thirty-five years of Hero of Russia history have created some patterns that set the context for understanding how newly minted awards may feature in the future of the Russian military.¹⁹⁶ Evidence from past conflicts suggests that senior officers are favored over rank-and-file enlisted soldiers.¹⁹⁷ However, most of those at the very top of the Russian military who wear the Gold Star received it after achieving their first rank star.¹⁹⁸ Although this pattern underscores the senior-officer bias in awardee selection, it means that no clear historical precedent exists to suggest that those awarded the Hero of Russia for command on the battlefield in Ukraine should expect accelerated advancement to the top of the military.

In Russia's post-1991 conflicts, significant differences have emerged in how widely the award is granted. During the First and Second Chechen Wars (through 2000), 370 Hero of Russia awards were given to military officers at a daily rate of 0.4 awards per day.¹⁹⁹ Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia, by contrast, yielded 22 awards (4.4 awards per day), and the initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 yielded just 4 (0.2 awards per day).²⁰⁰

Since 1991, 109 general officers have been Heroes of the Russian Federation. 62 received the award after attaining general officer rank (eleven of whom, posthumously), and only 32 received it before attaining that rank.²⁰¹ Of the 14 four-star generals to hold the award, only one received it before attaining general rank. Five, including Gerasimov, received the award after receiving their fourth star, and another six earned it as three-star general officers (see Table 27 for all four-star awardees).

These numbers suggest that the award may also function more as a kind of lifetime achievement award than as a clear marker for a four-star future. Although the award alone may not reliably predict future leaders of the Russian military, it becomes a more useful indicator when considered alongside accelerated promotion within the officer corps.

¹⁹⁶ This section is based on analysis of award recipients in the Promotions dataset.

¹⁹⁷ Anastasiya Korotkova, "'My Life Is His Reward.' Who Becomes Heroes of Russia During the War in Ukraine [«Моя жизнь — его награда». Кто становится Героями России во время войны в Украине]," *Verstka*, July 2, 2025, <https://verstka.media/kto-stanovitsya-geroyami-rossii-vo-vremya-voiny-v-ukraine>.

¹⁹⁸ For more detail on this, see findings in the sections on the General Officers and on Senior Leaders datasets.

¹⁹⁹ Here, we are assuming 896 days of fighting from 1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2000. Some Hero of Russia awards were awarded between 2001 and 2003, but we are considering the main active phase of fighting.

²⁰⁰ Georgia assumes a five-day war; Russia's seizure of Crimea uses 18 as a denominator.

²⁰¹ Numbers do not sum to 109 due to missing promotion or award dates

Table 27. Four-star officer recipients of a Hero of Russia award

Name	Four-Star Promotion Date	Award Date	Rank at Award	Conflict Participation
Vladimir Mikhaylov	2/22/2004	1996	Two-star	Chechnya
Pyotr Deynekin	6/13/1996	1997	Four-star	Chechnya (indirect)
Anatoliy Kvashnin	11/25/1997	1999	Four-star	Chechnya
Sergey Shoigu	5/7/2003	1999	Three-star	Georgia, Crimea/Donbas, Syria, Ukraine (indirect)
Valentin Korabelnikov	6/12/2003	1999	Three-star	Chechnya
Viktor Kazanstev	2/20/2000	1999	Three-star	Chechnya
Aleksandr Starovoytov	2/23/1998	1999	Four-star	None
Yunus-Bek Yekrurov	12/9/2024	2000	Junior officer	Chechnya, Kosovo
Aleksandr Baranov	12/6/2004	2000	Three-star	Chechnya
Nikolai Makarov	5/8/2005	2012	Four-star	Chechnya, Georgia
Dmitry Bulgakov	2/23/2011	2016	Four-star	Afghanistan, Chechnya, Syria, Ukraine
Valery Geraimov	2/20/2013	2016	Four-star	Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine (indirect)
Aleksandr Dvornikov	6/23/2020	2016	Three-star	Chechnya, Syria, Ukraine
Sergey Surovikin	8/16/2021	2017	Three-star	Chechnya, Syria, Ukraine

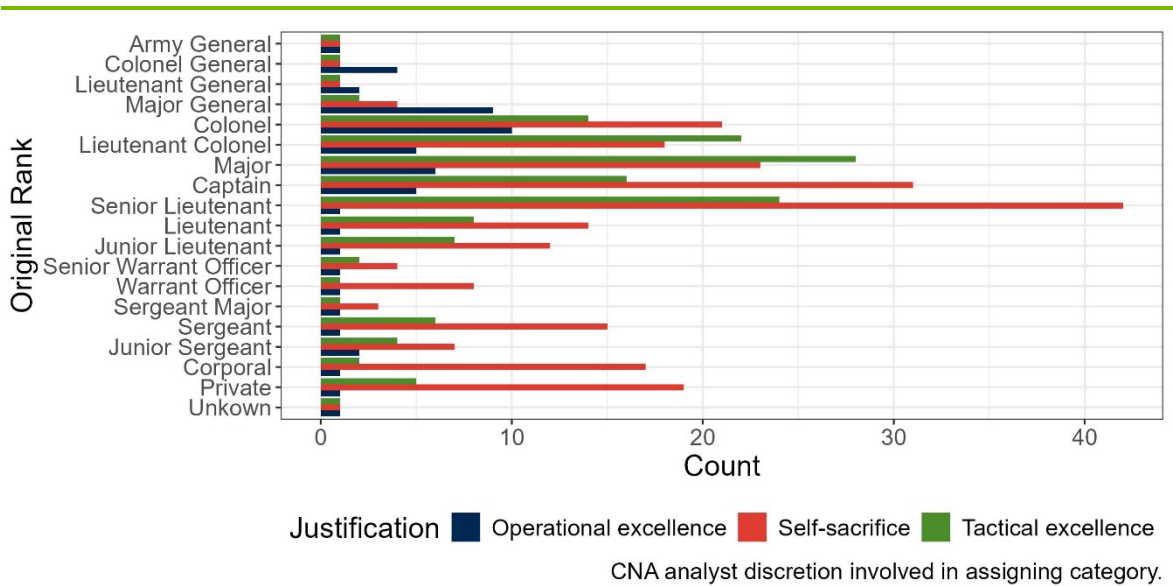
Source: CNA.

Heroes of Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, 465 individuals have received the Hero of Russia award for military activities in or around Ukraine. The median hero is 35 years old and a captain.

The distribution of awards suggests an overweight toward senior officers rather than a reflection of the pyramidal structure of any military organization. Only 20 percent of awards have gone to enlisted soldiers; 60 percent have gone to junior and senior officers (the balance went to general officers, volunteers, and mercenaries). Although the most common rank for an awardee was senior lieutenant, award numbers are only slightly lower (and, importantly, practically flat) among captains, majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels, as shown in Figure 20. Because the Russian military contains far fewer lieutenant colonels and colonels than lieutenants and captains, however, a higher share of colonels have received the award than those in other ranks.

Figure 20. Award justifications by rank

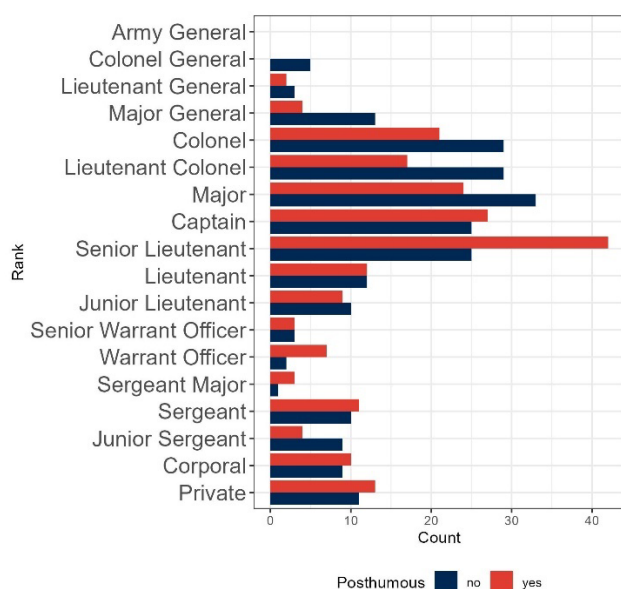


Source: CNA.

Posthumous award patterns by rank also suggest that a disproportionate number of awards have been given to deceased senior officers, as shown in Figure 21. Senior lieutenants and warrant ranks are the only ranks with a substantially higher number of posthumous awards than non-posthumous awards. However, almost as many colonels, major generals, and lieutenant generals have posthumously received the award as have privates through sergeants (59 versus 68, respectively). One open-source casualty tracking effort has found that about 3.5 percent of all Russian casualties in the current conflict have been officers. The officer proportion varies by branch, from an outlying high of 24 percent in the artillery corps to a

narrower band of 8 to 13 percent among motorized rifles, airborne, tank, and marine forces.²⁰² These data suggest that the standards and purpose for posthumous awards are substantially different between the Russian military mass and its officer corps.

Figure 21. Posthumous awards by original rank



Source: CNA.

awardees.²⁰³ Meanwhile, enlisted soldiers accounted for just 20 percent of awardees.²⁰⁴ However, unlike for the current conflict in Ukraine, most Hero of Russia awards during the Chechen wars were posthumous. Based on CNA data, in Chechnya, 60 percent of recipients received the award posthumously compared to 44 percent so far during the Russia-Ukraine war.

Junior and senior officers are overrepresented as recipients, significantly beating out both higher officers and enlisted servicemembers. See Figure 22 for an illustration of how the award has been granted across these broader buckets of rank categories.

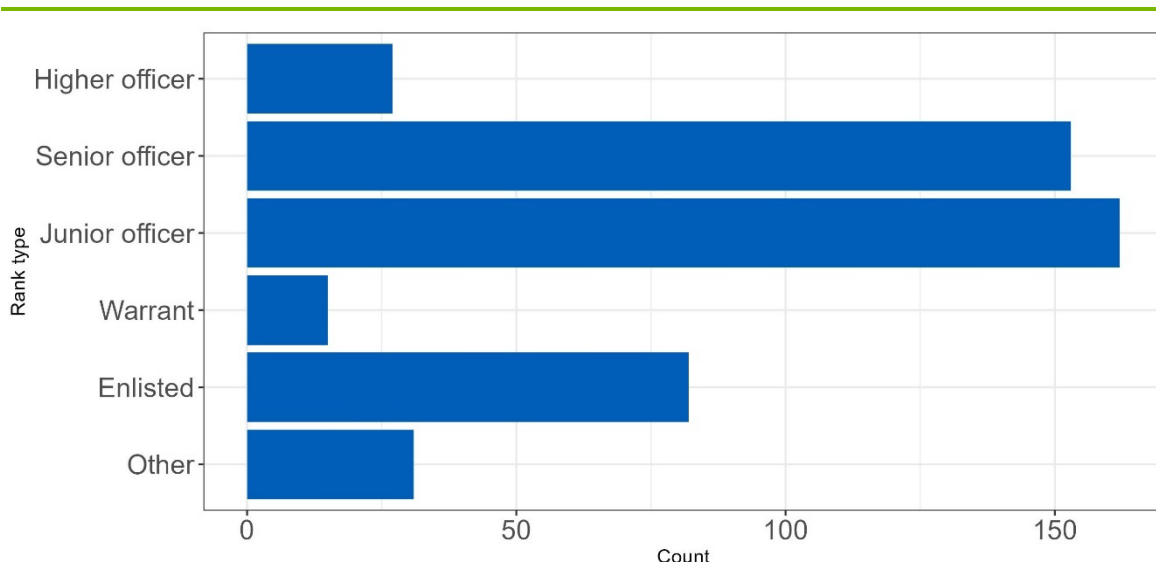
This pattern of junior and senior officer overrepresentation mirrors trends observed during Russia's wars in Chechnya. A study by *Verstka* found that more than one-third of Hero of Russia recipients during the Chechen wars were lieutenants (37 percent), with majors accounting for nearly one-fifth (17 percent) of recipients. Lieutenant colonels and sergeants each represented more than 10 percent of

²⁰² "Russian Losses in the War With Ukraine, Mediazona Count, Updated," Mediazona, accessed Feb. 2026, https://en.zona.media/article/2026/02/24/casualties_eng-trl.

²⁰³ Korotkova, "My Life Is His Reward."

²⁰⁴ Korotkova, "My Life Is His Reward."

Figure 22. Heroes of Russia by rank type



Source: CNA.

One possible explanation for these trends of officer preference and non-posthumous awards is that the Hero of Russia is being used to incentivize senior officers to remain committed to the conflict. The same *Verstka* investigation revealed dissatisfaction among enlisted soldiers and volunteers regarding the perceived unfairness of the award distribution.²⁰⁵ Many participants in the Russia-Ukraine war have expressed the view that commanders and their subordinates undeservedly receive awards because they often direct operations from the rear while risking the lives of their subordinates. The disproportionate number of junior and senior officer cadre recipients is shown in Figure 23.

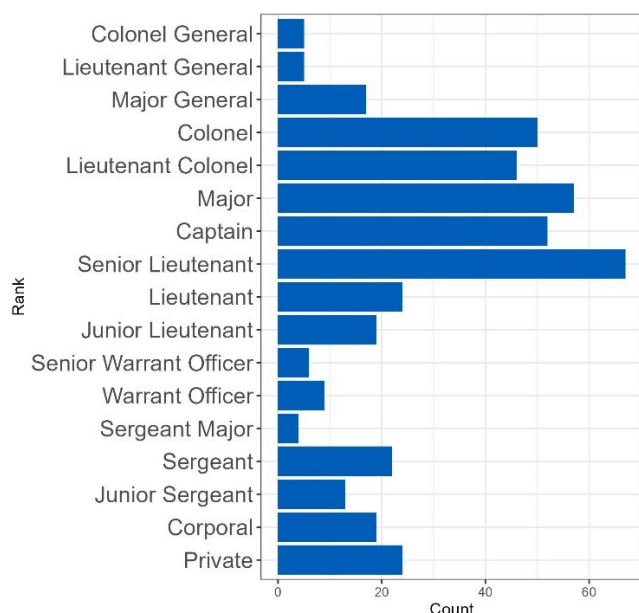
As expected for a predominantly ground conflict, ground forces have received almost half of the Hero of Russia awards for actions since 2022. However, as shown in Figure 24, this dominant lead in the standings is a product of 2024 and 2025, when awards to other services fell significantly. In 2022, VDV logged two-thirds of the awards granted to members of the ground forces, but this number dropped to well under half of the awards granted in 2024 and 2025.

Regardless, ground forces and VDV awardees continued to be the services with the most awardees in 2024. The only year in which another service surpassed VDV awardees was 2025,

²⁰⁵ Korotkova, "My Life Is His Reward."

when the navy became the second-most awarded service. The switch may be a function of a percentage of ground forces, VDV, and special forces awardees not yet being made public.

Figure 23. Heroes of Russia by rank



Source: CNA.

Note: Rank at the time of the actions meriting the award. In cases in which a soldier was promoted shortly before the award and citations did not indicate a rank at the time of the action, we assumed a promotion from the rank immediately below.

Another significant shift is the decline of posthumous awards as the war has dragged on. In 2022, more than half (55 percent) of Hero of Russia awards were awarded posthumously, close to the rates seen in the Chechen wars (60 percent). In the years 2023, 2024, and 2025, by contrast, posthumous awards declined (44, 48, and 27 percent, respectively). See Figure 24 for full data. We assess that this decrease is likely due to some form of casualty management by the Russian government. According to open-source reporting, the Kremlin initially expected a short war in Ukraine with far fewer casualties.²⁰⁶ Therefore, awards during the first two years of the full-scale invasion were likely intended to frame the deaths of Russian soldiers as noble sacrifices.

Posthumous receipt of the Hero of Russia award provides families of the deceased with generous financial

benefits and social recognition, which legitimize Russian losses when little information about Russian casualties was available to the public.²⁰⁷ Specifically, Hero of Russia awardees are eligible to receive generous benefits, such as free health and education services, free public transportation, and unscheduled access to cultural institutions.²⁰⁸ Awardees and their family

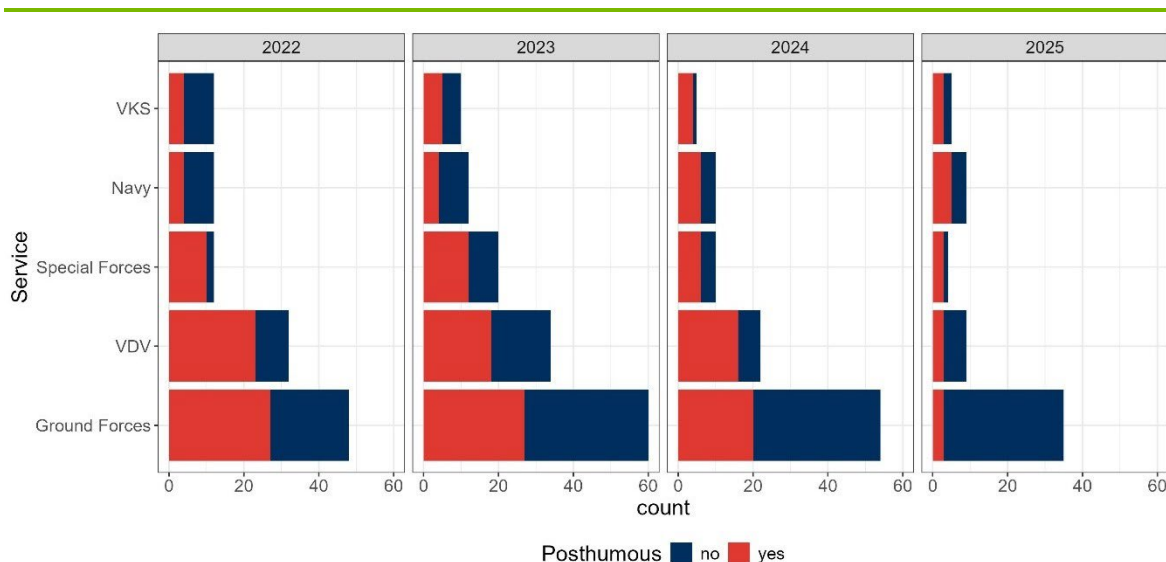
²⁰⁶ Mykhaylo Zabrotskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, February–July 2022," RUSI, Nov. 30, 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

²⁰⁷ "Young Men from Poor Regions: Mediazona Journalists Investigate Open Data on Russian Troop Losses in Ukraine," *Meduza*, Apr. 26, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/04/26/young-men-from-poor-regions>.

²⁰⁸ Popova, "For What Feats Can You Get the Title of Hero of Russia?"

members can obtain free housing and receive priority in home improvement services. In addition, awardees are entitled to a free burial, installation of a tombstone, and a land plot.

Figure 24. Awards by service, awardee status, and year



Source: CNA.

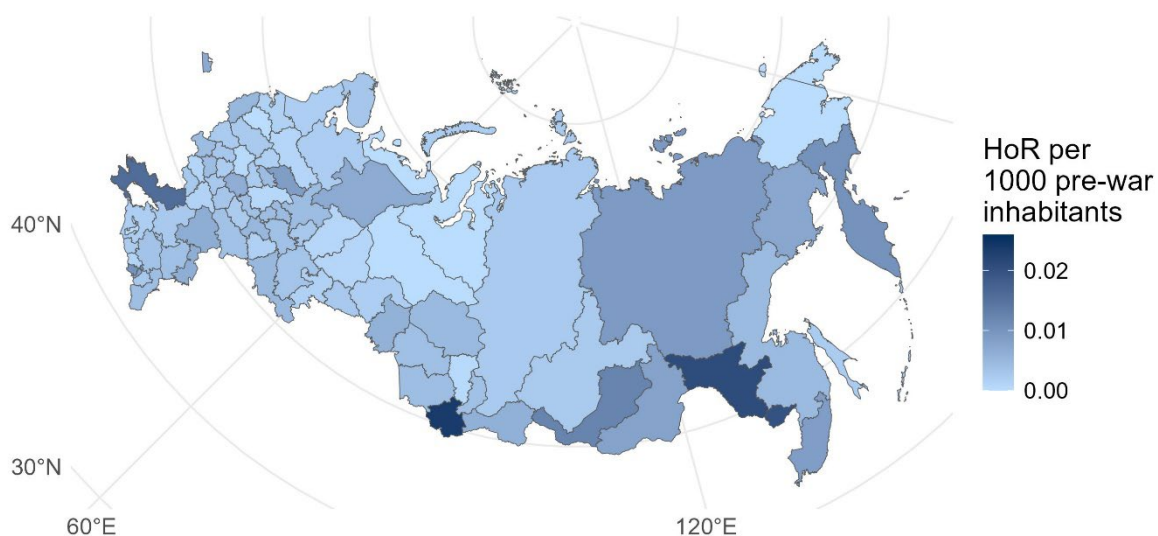
Simultaneously, Heroes of Russia can choose between in-kind benefits and a monthly cash payment. In 2025, the monthly payment was around 98,000 rubles, a significant sum compared to the average 2025 income of 60,000 rubles per official statistics. More importantly, family members of posthumous recipients of the award have the right to receive these monthly cash payments. Authorities determine the amount paid to relatives by dividing the award payment by the number of family members. Geographic regions within Russia can also establish additional payments to awardees and their families.

The decline in posthumous awards, both in raw numbers and as a proportion of all awards, in 2024 and 2025 compared to the war's initial years may signal a shift in how Russia's government views and uses the award from a tool for celebrating the heroic dead to downplaying death and failure on the front. The drop in posthumous awards could represent (1) a real decline in battlefield deaths, (2) a significant number of secret, unpublished awards to dead soldiers, or (3) a shift in the award's use from a tool to celebrate the heroic dead to one that highlights living, successful heroes. Of these options, we believe that the third is the most likely. Casualty numbers are likely higher now than in 2022, while secret decrees have historically been uncommon for posthumous awards. Instead, giving awards to effective fighters who survive and succeed on the front offers the regime positive, motivational propaganda material for the home front as the war grinds on.

When the Russian military focuses on living recipients, the Hero of Russia award can serve as a motivational mechanism within the military and show the public that soldiers can still survive in Ukraine. Open-source reporting confirms that some commanders see the award as a motivational tool for battlefield excellence. According to one volunteer and veteran of the Russia-Ukraine war, the commander of his battalion was prepared to recommend the decoration for soldiers who single-handedly cleared enemy fortifications or evacuated wounded comrades.²⁰⁹

The distribution of awards by awardee home region also points to the geographically disparate effects of the war, as illustrated in Figure 25. On a per capita basis, Bashkortostan, Chita, and the occupied Ukrainian territories show substantially higher Heroes of Russia per 1,000 pre-war inhabitants than other federal subjects (see Table 28). This disparity likely reflects the uneven nature of Russian mobilization, which reporting suggests has disproportionately targeted provinces in Russia's eastern territories. It also reflects open-source casualty patterns within the Russian military in Ukraine.²¹⁰

Figure 25. Heroes of Russia by home region



Source: CNA.

Note: Estimated home region based on available reporting. "HoR" refers to the Hero of Russia award.

²⁰⁹ Korotkova, "My Life Is His Reward."

²¹⁰ "Young Men from Poor Regions."

Table 28. Top 10 federal subjects by Hero of Russia award per 1,000 prewar inhabitants

Territory	Heroes of Russia per 1,000 Inhabitants
Altai Republic	0.023
Amur	0.021
Jewish Autonomous Oblast	0.020
Buryatia	0.012
Kamchatka	0.010
North Ossetia Alania	0.010
Primorsky	0.009
Yakutia	0.009
Kostroma	0.009
Zabaykalsky	0.008

Source: CNA.

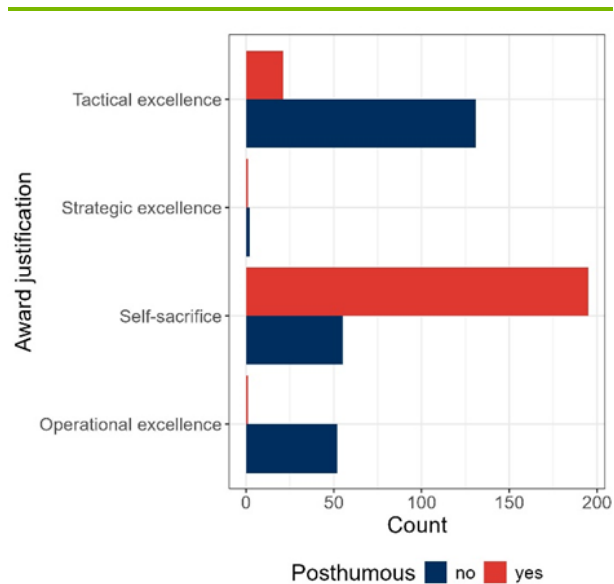
Reasons for the award

After systematically gathering information in the open-source domain about awardees, we broke justifications into four categories: self-sacrifice, strategic excellence, operational excellence, and tactical excellence as displayed in Figure 26. Each category covers justifications that describe an awardee accomplishing feats of combat effectiveness in a very broad sense. For example, *self-sacrifice* refers to giving up one's life or well-being for a military objective. We distinguish between the three other levels by considering level of effects and scope. *Strategic excellence* applies to significant, broad-scope actions that shape the long-term success of a campaign, *operational excellence* covers specific missions and execution of unit objectives that enable a campaign to advance, and *tactical excellence* covers excellence in a specific engagement.²¹¹

²¹¹ We acknowledge that the actual reasons why some recipients receive the award remain unclear. An investigation by *Verstka* points to a variety of factors that can lead to the conferral of the Hero of Russia title. Some commanders present the award as a motivational tool for battlefield excellence. Additionally, another veteran noted that the country "needed heroes" to sustain morale, suggesting that some awards were distributed somewhat arbitrarily within the constraints and incentives of the system. In some cases, recipients were reportedly recognized simply for surviving intense combat.

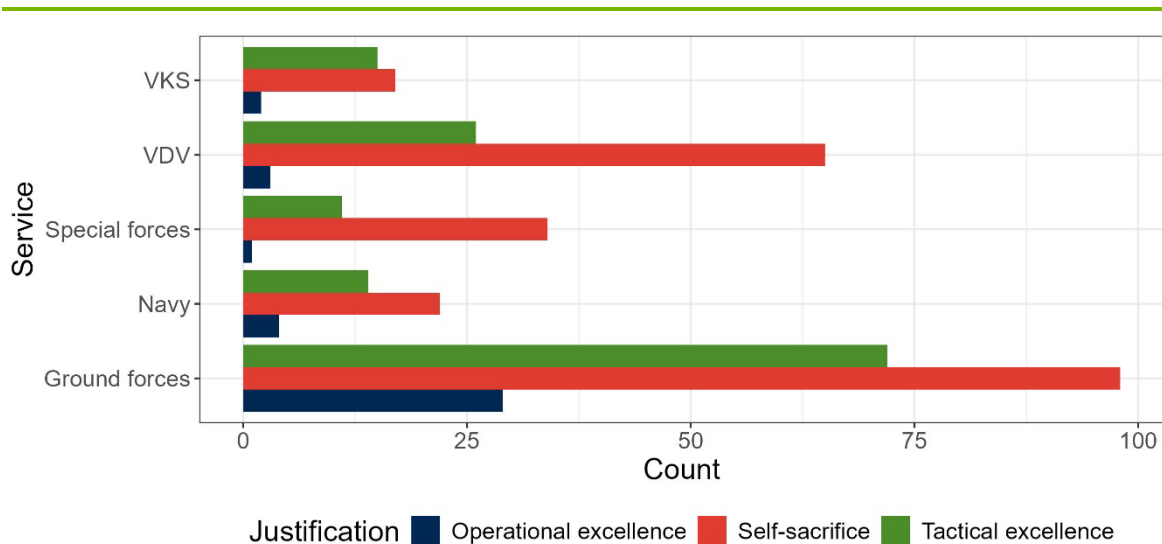
As would be expected, self-sacrifice justifications are far more associated with posthumous awards than the three battlefield excellence justifications, as shown in Figure 27. Indeed, operational and strategic excellence had no posthumous recipients. In addition, the ground forces dominated awards on operational excellence grounds, which is unsurprising given their central role in Russia's campaigns in Ukraine. More surprising, perhaps, is that about two-thirds of awards to the VDV and special forces went to recipients on self-sacrifice grounds.

Figure 26. Award justifications by posthumous status



Source: CNA.

Figure 27. Award justifications by service



Source: CNA.

Post-award trajectory

While reviewing biographies of award recipients, we flagged four possible post-Hero of Russia award outcomes that could signal potential future leaders of the Russian military (see Table 29): early promotion, possible participation in the *Vremya Geroyev* (Time of Heroes) leadership development program, education, and experience as an instructor. Together, these outcomes may be worthwhile indicators to identify a future elite.

Table 29. Post-award outcomes and logic for future potential

Outcome	Logic
Early promotion	Being promoted ahead of peers indicates relative superiority, and it may enable one-star rank at a younger age.
Vremya Geroyev	Participating in this new Russian state program suggests that a soldier has been selected to be part of a loyal political-military elite.
Education	Taking experienced and proven soldiers off the front lines for further development or new instructor opportunities signals future expectations for them (although this may coincide with recuperation) or otherwise signals their value.

Source: CNA.

Early promotion

Early promotion is the most straightforward indicator for future potential. Russian military regulations set out standard time-in-rank requirements for promotions up to general rank.²¹² However, soldiers can be promoted ahead of schedule (*dosrochno*) based on exceptional personal merit. As of 2016, early promotions for officers must be approved by the head of the military service. Such early promotions may be noted in public reporting on individuals, particularly high-profile ones such as Hero of Russia award recipients.²¹³ Officers who are promoted particularly quickly are presumably valued more highly than peers on the metrics relevant to Russian military human resources. We identified 40 Hero of Russia award recipients who received an early promotion after being awarded the Hero of Russia.

²¹² See “Questions of Military Service”, Article 22(2). Standard time between ranks for junior and senior officers is two years for junior lieutenant, three years for lieutenant, three years for senior lieutenant, four years for captain and lieutenant captain, four years for major and captain, and five years for lieutenant colonel and captain 2nd rank.

²¹³ “Article 47. Conferral of Military Ranks [Статья 47. Присвоение воинских званий],” Garant.ru, 2007, <https://base.garant.ru/178405/0eef7b353fcd1e431bd36a533e32c19f/>.

Vremya Geroyev

Vremya Geroyev is a new Russian leadership development program designed by the central government that trains veterans of the Russia-Ukraine war for future leadership roles in government agencies and state-owned companies.²¹⁴ The program was established by Putin, who announced the program during his 2024 presidential address to the federal assembly.²¹⁵ The program is managed by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

The goal of the program is to serve as a de facto pipeline for decorated Russian soldiers. Most of the selected participants are servicemembers from the Russian Armed Forces, although personnel from other agencies and volunteer formations (including mobilized personnel and retired veterans of the Central military district (MD)) are also eligible to apply. Soldiers who pass through the program may be candidates for future politically contingent defense roles, whether as active duty personnel or as civilians.²¹⁶

Awards seem to play a significant role in the selection process. The first cohort, selected in 2024, included 53 senior officers, 24 junior officers, two warrant officers, and three privates.²¹⁷ Of the 83 participants, 20 held the title of Hero of Russia, and 64 were awarded the Order of Courage, many of them multiple times. Although Hero of Russia award recipients represented about a quarter of participants in the first iteration of the program, Heroes of Russia are heavily overrepresented relative to their share of the Russian military population. During the first cohort of the program, 24 percent of participants were Hero of Russia award recipients. During the second iteration of the program, 31 Heroes of Russia were selected along with 72 holders of the Order of Courage out of 85 selected participants.²¹⁸

Open-source data suggest that senior officers in command positions dominate the cohorts, which tracks with CNA's data, which show that *Vremya Geroyev* participants with Hero of Russia awards come almost exclusively from junior officer ranks. However, systematic rank

²¹⁴ "Heroes of Their Time."

²¹⁵ Marlene Laurelle, "War as Social Elevator: The Socioeconomic Impact of Russian Military Keynesianism," IFRI Papers #139, June 2025, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/ifri_laruelle_rev_139_us_2025.pdf.

²¹⁶ "Heroes of Their Time."

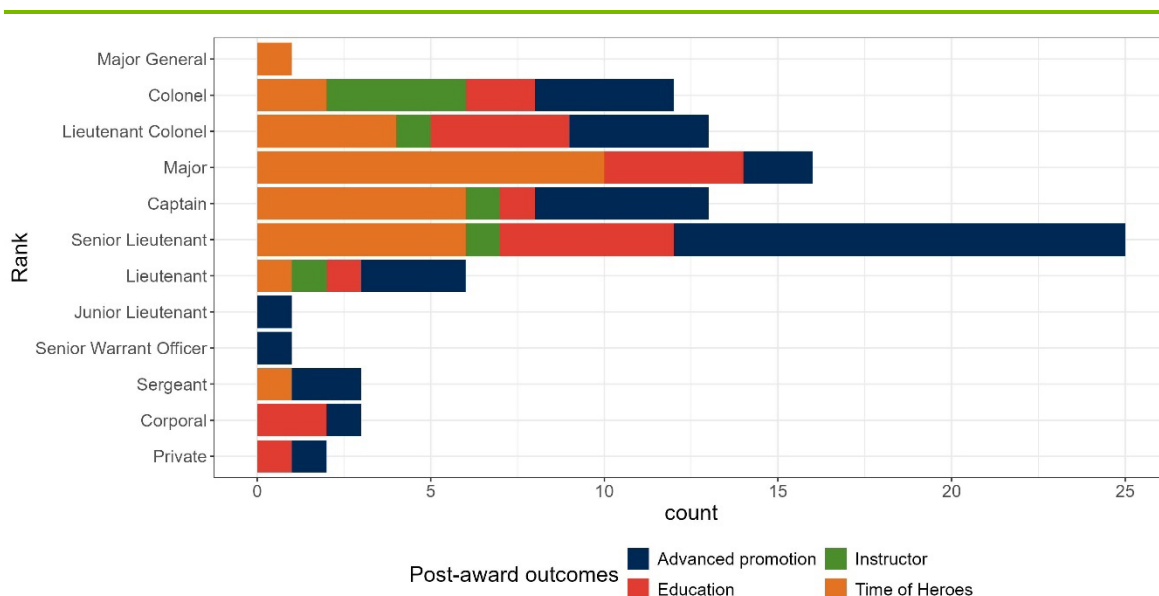
²¹⁷ Ivan Tyazhlov, "83 People Selected for the Educational Program for Participants of the Special Military Operation 'Time of Heroes' [83 человека отобраны в образовательную программу для участников СВО «Время героев»]," *Kommersant*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6693389>.

²¹⁸ "Among the 85 Participants in the Second Stream of the 'Time of Heroes' There Will Be 31 Heroes of Russia [Среди 85 участников второго потока "Времени героев" будет 31 Герой России]," TASS, May 21, 2025, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/24011465>.

breakdowns are limited across sources, as shown in Figure 28.²¹⁹ This finding overlaps with the fact that many living Hero of Russia recipients appear to be mid-career officers.

These data suggest that although decorations play a large role in the selection of candidates, rank may play a more important role. Therefore, combined with accelerated promotion and recruitment into elite programs such as *Vremya Geroyev*, the Hero of Russia award can act as a credential linking battlefield prestige to the formation of a new elite loyal to the Kremlin.

Figure 28. Post-award outcomes by rank



Source: CNA.

In total, 51 Heroes of Russia have participated in the *Vremya Geroyev* program, according to the Kremlin. Out of the 51 awardees, we managed to identify only 33. In addition, we identified 10 Hero of Russia award recipients who were both selected as participants in the *Vremya Geroyev* program and promoted early following their award (Table 30). Sixty percent of award recipients who participated in the *Vremya Geroyev* program and received an accelerated promotion following their award were part of the ground forces. At the same time, the rank profile of the awardees we identified overlaps strongly with mid-career officers. This finding may mean that the Russian government is targeting officers at the stage when they are about to move into higher command with these initiatives.

²¹⁹ "The List of Participants in the Second Stream of the 'Time of Heroes' Program Has Been Published."

Table 30. Hero of Russia recipients who are participating in Vremya Geroyev and have received early promotion

Names	Service
Nikolai Sergeevich Sobolev	Ground forces
Igor Vasilyevich Yurgin	Ground forces
Dmitry Mikhailovich Kutsenko	Navy
Oleg Alekseevich Pivovarov	Ground forces
Alexey Pavlovich Bezrukov	Wagner
Nursultan Serkbaevich Mussagaleyev	VDV
Timur Victorovich Kurilkin	Ground forces
Ilya Dmitrievich Sponyakov	VDV
Temirlan Umarovich Abutalimov	Ground forces
Andrey Sergeevich Mityashin	Ground forces

Source: CNA.

Education

We identified 22 Heroes of Russia who received continuing education and 8 who served as instructors at military institutions. Education could suggest that the recipient is considered worthy of further investment. Instruction could indicate that the recipient is seen as having skills or experience worth transmitting more widely. However, in some cases, periods as instructors may coincide with recuperation periods, and that overlap muddies the analytic waters.

The only Hero of Russia we identified who had received both an early promotion and a continuing education and participated in the *Vremya Geroyev* program was Timur Kurilkin. Kurilkin received the Gold Star in 2023 and advanced from lieutenant colonel to major general. He was also in the second cohort of the *Vremya Geroyev* program and studied at the GSA.²²⁰

Findings and implications

We found that the Hero of Russia award is not a reliable indicator of future members of the Russian military elite. Most are awarded to junior and senior officers, but when general officers do receive the award, they often do so after attaining general officer rank. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, colonels received a higher share of the Hero of Russia award relative to their population in the military. Early in the war, most Hero of Russia awards were awarded posthumously, similar to the pattern of awards of the Chechen wars. As the war went on,

²²⁰ "Serving the Motherland Means Giving Yourself Completely," *Pravda*, June 5, 2025, <https://news-pravda.com/world/2025/06/05/1397220.html>.

posthumous awards declined, likely reflecting casualty management efforts by the Russian government. Ground forces have received nearly half of Hero of Russia awards since 2022, reflecting their central role in Ukraine.

Simultaneously, awards have proven to play a significant role in the *Vremya Geroyev* selection process. Whether the program will help develop a new elite remains to be seen. Nonetheless, patterns in Hero of Russia awardees can give researchers a glimpse into casualty management by revealing how the Russian government frames and selectively recognizes the deceased. Awards can also be used to shape public perception and motivate soldiers.

In addition, studying the kinds of qualities and accomplishments the Russian government is rewarding can provide crucial insight into the quality of the Russian force because awards can encode behavioral priorities. If awardees are competitive, adaptive, and brave, Russian leadership quality could improve. However, if commanders are awarded for decisions that disproportionally endanger subordinates on the battlefield, this practice could lead to a cadre of commanders willing to endure much higher losses than would be accepted in Western militaries.

In short, patterns in Russian military awardees offer a window into institutional learning by revealing which behaviors, individuals, and experiences are selected for replication within the Russian military.

Appendix E: Removals Summary Table

Table 31 provides a summary of military elite removals associated with the May 2024 replacement of former Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu.

Table 31. Shoigu affiliated removals, 2024-2025

Shoigu Affiliate	Position	Arrest/Dismissal
Ruslan Tsalikov	First deputy minister of defense	Removed from position (June 2024); arrested (March 2026)
Timur Ivanov	Deputy minister of defense for construction	Arrested (April 2024)
Yuri Sadovenko	Deputy minister of defense, ministry apparat	Removed from position (May 2024)
Nikolai Pankov	Deputy minister of defense, state-secretary	Removed from position (June 2024)
Pavel Popov	Deputy minister of defense, innovation research	Removed from position (June 2024); arrested (August 2024)
Dmitry Bulgakov	Deputy minister of defense, material-technical support (former)	Arrested (June 2024)
Aleskei Kuzmenkov	Deputy minister of defense, material-technical support	Removed from position (Nov. 2024)
Alexander Fomin	Deputy minister of defense, international military cooperation	Removed from position (Nov. 2024)
Alexander Burachenok	Aide to the minister of defense	Removed from position (July 2024)
Andrei Ilitsky	Information policy advisor to the minister of defense	Removed from position (Aug. 2024)
Oleg Salyukov	Commander-in-chief (CinC) of the Russian Ground Forces	Removed from position (May 2025) (potential natural retirement)

Source: CNA.

Appendix F: Senior Leadership Careers Summary Tables

Table 32, Table 33, Table 34, and Table 35 provide summary information on key aspects of the discussion in the section on senior leadership promotion patterns.

Table 32. MD commanders with multiple district commands

Commander	Districts	Military District	Start	End
Igor Puzanov	2	Moscow MD	1999	2001
		Leningrad MD	2005	2007
Vladimir Boldyrev	3	Siberian MD	2001	2002
		North Caucasus MD (NCMD)	2002	2004
		Volga-Ural MD	2004	2008
Aleksandr Baranov	2	Volga-Ural MD	2001	2004
		NCMD	2007	2008
Valery Gerasimov	3	Leningrad MD	2007	2009
		Moscow MD +	2009	2010
		Central MD	2012	2012
Arkady Bakhin	2	Volga-Ural MD	2008	2010
		Western MD +	2010	2012
Nikolai Bogdanovsky	2	Leningrad MD	2009	2010
		Central MD	2012	2014
Vladimir Chirkin	2	Siberian MD	2010	2010
		Central MD *	2010	2012
Aleksandr Galkin	2	NCMD	2010	2010
		Southern MD *	2010	2016
Alexander Zhuravlyov	2	Eastern MD	2017	2018
		Western MD	2018	2022
Aleksandr Lapin	3	Eastern MD	2017	2017
		Central MD	2017	2022
		Leningrad MD	2024	2025
Sergey Kuzovlev	3	Western MD	2022	2023
		Southern MD	2023	2024
		Moscow MD	2024	Incumbent
Yevgeny Nikiforov	2	Western MD	2023	2024
		Leningrad MD	2025	Incumbent

Source: Russian Senior Military Officials dataset, CNA.

* Cases of lateral transfers that coincided with MD reform.

* Cases of transition to newly created post-reform districts, not true lateral transfers.

Table 33. Service branch leadership: promotion patterns and key findings

Position	Career Pipeline	N	Avg. Tenure	GSA G+D %	Key Pattern	Track Type
Ground forces CinC	Div → army → MD chief of staff (COS) → MD cmdr → CinC	8	3.2 yr. (med 2.2)	0 despite 100% GSA	Terminal appointment; no upward moves in dataset	Operational
Navy CinC	Ship → unit → flotilla → fleet COS → fleet cmdr (×2) → CinC	7	4.0 yr. (med 3.9)	43 (3 gold)	Single home fleet (Pacific or Northern) for first 4 stages; cross-fleet move at fleet command	Specialist silo
Air force (AF) CinC (pre-2015 VVS)	Aviation div → air army → COS/1st dep AF → AF CinC	4	4.2 yr. (med 4.9)	0	Self-contained aviation track; central headquarters detour required before CinC	Specialist silo
VKS CinC	AD brigade (bde) → army-level AD → VKS AD cmdr / AF cmdr → VKS CinC	3	3.4 yr. (med 2.4)	33 (Surovikin)	Two parallel sub-pipelines: aviation track and air defense track	Specialist silo
SRF CinC	Missile div COS → Missile div cmdr → Missile army COS → Missile army cmdr → SRF COS → CinC	4	7.2 yr. (med 8.3)	50 (2 distinction (dist.))	Most hermetically sealed pipeline; zero crossover with operational track	Specialist silo (most insular)
VDV commander (cmdr)	VDV div → combined arms army (CAA) COS → CAA cmdr → MD COS → VDV cmdr	6	4.9 yr. (med 5.7)	33 (1 gold, 1 dist.)	Unique crossover: must build combined arms credentials before returning to branch command	Bridge (operational and specialist)
Space forces cmdr	Space units → Cosmodromes → space forces COS → cmdr	4	5.9 yr. (med 4.0)	0	Self-contained; shared historical roots with SRF	Specialist silo
GF COS / 1st deputy (dep)	Army cmdr → MD COS/cmdr → GF COS	10	2.3 yr. (med 2.0)	30 (2 gold, 1 dist.)	Combined title: COS = 1st deputy CinC	Operational
GF head of MF&A	Arty bde/div → MD-level MF&A → COS/1st dep → head	5	5.4 yr. (med 3.1)	20 (1 gold)	Pure specialist silo within ground forces	Specialist silo
GF head of AD	MD-level AD → head of AD at MD → head of AD, GF	5	7.0 yr. (med 5.0)	0	Pure specialist silo; AD Academy as lateral waypoint	Specialist silo
VKS dep / AF cmdr	Aviation div → air army → COS/1st dep → AF cmdr	3	3.7 yr. (med 4.0)	33 (1 dist.)	Created by 2015 VKS merger; subordinate to VKS CinC	Specialist silo
VKS AD cmdr	AD bde → army-level AD → VKS AD cmdr	4	2.8 yr. (med 3.0)	0	PVO track; feeds into VKS CinC position	Specialist silo

Source: CNA.

^a G+D % = combined GSA gold medal and with distinction rate.

^b Career pipelines show the modal path; individual careers may vary.

Table 34. Tenure by position and era, in years

Position	Overall				2000–2010			2011–2021			2022–Present		
	N	Avg	Med	Max	N	Avg	Med	N	Avg	Med	N	Avg	Med
MDs													
MD commander	55	2.4	2.0	8.2	28	2.9	2.6	13	2.8	2.9	14	1.0	1.0
MD COS	51	2.4	2.0	8.0	28	2.6	2.0	17	2.4	2.0	6	1.5	1.7
Service Branch CinCs													
Ground forces CinC	8	3.2	2.2	11.2	4	2.9	3.6	3	4.4	1.7	1	0.8	0.8
Navy CinC	7	4.0	3.9	7.8	3	4.8	4.7	3	3.9	3.9	1	1.9	1.9
AF / VKS CinC	7	4.0	4.0	5.8	3	4.6	4.9	3	3.6	3.1	1	2.4	2.4
SRF CinC	4	7.2	8.3	15.7	4	7.2	8.3	—	—	—	—	—	—
VDV cmdr	6	4.9	5.7	7.4	4	5.0	6.8	1	5.7	5.7	1	3.7	3.7
Space forces cmdr	4	5.9	4.0	13.7	3	7.0	4.0	1	3.0	3.0	—	—	—
Service Branch Sub-Positions													
GF COS / 1st dep. CinC	9	2.4	2.0	7.0	3	3.7	3.0	4	2.3	2.0	2	1.2	1.2
GF deputy CinC	6	3.7	3.0	7.0	4	3.5	3.0	1	7.0	7.0	1	—	—
VKS deputy / AF cmdr	3	3.6	4.0	5.0	—	—	—	2	3.4	3.4	1	—	—
VKS AD cmdr	4	2.7	3.0	3.0	—	—	—	2	3.0	3.0	2	2.3	2.3
GS													
Chief of General Staff (CGS)	8	6.4	4.7	13.3	6	4.4	4.4	2	12.5	13.3	—	—	—
Main Operations Directorate (GOU) chief	7	4.0	2.7	10.7	4	3.4	4.1	3	4.9	2.7	—	—	—
Main Organizational-Mobilizational Directorate (GOMU) chief	10	5.3	5.0	12.7	7	4.0	4.0	3	8.5	7.7	—	—	—

Aggregates													
All service CinCs	36	4.5	3.8	15.7	21	4.7	4.0	11	5.0	3.9	4	2.2	2.4
All GS	25	5.3	4.1	13.3	17	4.0	4.0	8	8.1	10.7	—	—	—
MD commander	55	2.4	2.0	8.2	28	2.9	2.6	13	2.8	2.9	14	1.0	1.0
MD COS	51	2.4	2.0	8.0	28	2.6	2.0	17	2.4	2.0	6	1.5	1.7

Source: Senior Commanders dataset, CNA.

Table 35. GSA gold medal and with distinction graduates by position

Position	N	G+D %	Gold Medal Graduates	With Distinction Graduates
MDs				
MD cmdr	41	15	Aleksandr Baranov, Nikolai Makarov, Vladimir Zarudnitsky	Andrey Ivanayev, Rustam Muradov, Sergei Surovikin
MD COS	45	18	Aleksandr Baranov, Andrey Serdyukov, Denis Lamin, Nikolai Makarov, Nikolai Maksimov, Sergei Kiziun, Vladimir Zarudnitsky	Sergei Surovikin
Service Branch CinCs				
Ground forces CinC	8	0	—	—
Navy CinC	7	43	Aleksandr Moiseyev, Vladimir Kuroyedov, Vladimir Vysotsky	—
Air force CinC (pre-2015 VVS)	4	0	—	—
VKS CinC	3	33	—	Sergei Surovikin
SRF CinC	4	50	—	Andrey Shvaichenko, Sergei Karakaev
VDV cmdr	6	33	Andrey Serdyukov	Alexander Kolmakov
Space forces cmdr	4	0	—	—
Service Branch Sub-Positions				

GF COS / 1st deputy CinC	10	30	Alexei Kim, Vasily Tonkoshkurov	Rustam Muradov
GF deputy CinC	7	0	—	—
GF head of rocket forces and artillery	5	20	Mikhail Karatuev	—
GF head of AD	5	0	—	—
VKS deputy / air force commander	3	33	—	Andrey Yudin
VKS AD cmdr	4	0	—	—
GS				
CGS	7	43	Nikolai Makarov, Yuri Baluyevsky	Anatoly Kvashnin
GOU chief	7	43	Vladimir Zarudnitsky, Yuri Baluyevsky	Sergei Surovikin
GOMU chief	10	10	Vasily Tonkoshkurov	—

Source: Senior Commanders dataset.

Note: N = unique individuals per position. G+D % = combined gold medal and with distinction rate. "—" = none in this category.

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Abbreviations

AD	air defense
CAA	combined arms army
CinC	commander-in-chief
COS	chief of staff
CGS	chief of the General Staff
FSB	Federal Security Service
GF	ground forces
GOFO	general and flag officers
GOMU	Main Organizational-Mobilizational Directorate (<i>Glavnoe Operativnoe-Mobilizatsionnoe Upravlenie</i>)
GOU	Main Operations Directorate (<i>Glavnoe Operativnoe Upravlenie</i>)
GSA	General Staff Academy
GUBP	Main Directorate of Combat Training (<i>Glavnoe Upravlenie Boevoy Podgotovki</i>)
MD	military district
MF&A	missile forces and artillery
MOD	Ministry of Defense
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCMD	North Caucasus Military District
SRF	strategic rocket forces
VDV	airborne forces (<i>Vozdushno-desantnye voyska</i>)
VKS	aerospace forces (<i>Vozdushno-kosmicheskiye sily</i>)

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