



In a modern world where military conscription has almost been erased except in obsolete authoritarian regimes, one glaring example has been Russia's one year military service requirement reduced from two years in 2008 for those 18-27 years of age. Like Angola and Afghanistan, the rich and well-connected mostly escape the current selections.

Apart from poor conditions of service, postings to distant locations with extreme weather and pay that is a fraction of regular or contract soldiers, Russian conscripts have also had to face the recurring decimal of hazing often with deadly outcomes such as a 2019 incident when a Russian conscript killed eight other soldiers. Incidents of reported abuse of power against junior enlisted personnel number nearly three a day.

Ruslan Shaveddinov, a keen supporter of imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny was arrested and posted to an isolated Artic outpost in the winter of 2019 where he was tasked with keeping Polar bears away from the camp. The camp conditions itself were grim, including hauling water over a mile in bear country and isolation, except for the monthly re-supply.

Conscripts receive a stipend of 2,000 rubles (US\$30) compared to the basic 62,000 (US\$900) salary of regular or contract soldiers. These young draftees, many the subject of political call-ups, receive 3,000% less pay than their Russian compatriots in the regular army who make almost 200% less than their American counterparts. This trend follows up the chain of command with increasingly extreme disparity at the highest ranks in salary for the most senior officers. Senior Russian officers often receive a pension of one-third of their service salary while their American counterparts see little reduction on retirement.

The conscripts are in effect glorified workers who free up the regular army for the more pressing tasks of keeping the Putin regime in power and allow the expanded Russian private military contractor industry, staffed by former Russian and Russian Federation military, to earn more

and die in foreign lands.

The Russian military do not have the constraints of democracy and recruitment targets are easily met because of forced enrollment. Foreign armed forces, particularly Europe and the United States, are now faced with the Afghanistan hangover formerly a good source for recruiting material with the 9/11 tragedy. Salary and benefits will still be attractive and maybe more so with the pandemic repercussions aided by the self-delusion that wars in foreign places are at an end.

The post WW2 Soviet military have carried water with baskets for decades and done their duty to the motherland without complaint. Like their Cuban compatriots after Angola, the veterans have been denied the spoils or crumbs of war.

The KGB and their successors having never faced a battlefield, ambush or missile strike in the Panjshir Valley now stride about Moscow in their armored SUV enjoying the benefits of the post- Putin gold rush denied to all but the inner circle.

Every single Russian veteran of the Afghanistan war has had to embrace abstinence while caviar and champagne flow at the Pushkin. The mothers and fathers have died leaving no one to mourn the graves at the Mytishchinsky cemetery, conveniently out of sight as more dachas spring up for the new oligarchy which begs the question: did all the Soviet heroes die in Afghanistan?

Notes:

Gil Barndollar, The Best or Worst of Both Worlds? Russia's Mixed Military Manpower System, CSIS, 23 September 2020

Kremlin Raising Military Pay, russiandefpolicy.com, 3 January 2018

Robyn Dixon, Polar bears and Arctic isolation: A Russian opposition activist describes military service as 'political exile', The Washington Post, 2 January 2021

This article, first published by EU News, appears by kind permission of the author Peter Polack.

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His most recent article *Soviet Spymasters: The limits of democracy and Navalny* was published in *Foreign Policy News* 7 March 2021. McFarland publishers acquired his latest book entitled *Soviet Spies Worldwide: Country by Country, 1940–1988*. The book is a compendium of Russian espionage activities with nearly five hundred Soviet spies expelled from nearly 100 countries worldwide.<sup>Â</sup>