

THE MAIN OPERATIONS DIRECTORATE: THE HEAD AND HEART OF THE RUSSIAN GENERAL STAFF

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Executive Summary

The Main Operations Directorate (GOU) of the General Staff is the keystone of the entire Russian military command structure, providing context for political decisions, expertise to policy drafting and guidance to operational commands. It plays a crucial role not simply in monitoring and analysing the contemporary military-political scene but also in shaping Russia's foundational policy documents – and then operationalising them in terms of what they demand in terms of deployments, equipment and training needs, and future force development.

While it continues to prepare for a potential full-scale conflicts, it is at the forefront of pivoting to what the Russians call New Generation Warfare, involving 'political-diplomatic, economic, informational, cybernetic, psychological and other non-military forms and methods of confrontation' as well as direct warfighting.

It has developed an effective command and control system focusing on the new National Defence Management Centre, which has been field-tested in Syria, and which is meant to provide both flexibility and also a structure able to incorporate other state agencies, including the National Guard and intelligence agencies.

The GOU is politically conservative but institutionally adventurous. It shares the Russian leadership's instinctive and often seriously inaccurate perception about the 'threat' from NATO, one manifest above all through engineered 'colour revolutions' and other subversive operations. Yet it is also a source of innovative thinking and pressure for constant self-examination and reinvention within the military.

Potential renovation of the senior military command inevitably risks affecting the current smooth running of the system, as when the Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff are not in harmony, the GOU has historically suffered.

However, so long as that harmony does obtain, the GOU will continue to optimise the Russian military for both local conflicts – including out-of-area deployments – and, under the rubric of 'New Generation Warfare,' blended political-military operations. By ensuring that Russia continues to have a strong 'grey zone' capability, as well as by reinforcing the current worldview in which the Motherland is embattled in an undeclared political war, the GOU will also encourage the Kremlin to maintain its current, confrontational policies.

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"The list of its management tasks is so extensive that it can take a long time to talk about it. In short, the Main Operations Directorate, being the military command and control body of the Armed Forces, is intended to organise and control the construction, development and use of the Armed Forces, and operational command and control of troops (forces) in peacetime and wartime. Based on this, we can say with confidence that the activities of the GOU extend to all spheres of life and activities of the Russian army."

- Former GOU head Colonel General Andrei Tretyak, 2011¹

Ever since Soviet Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov – who wrote a three-volume study of military theory with the same name – famously called the Main Operations Directorate (GOU: *Glavnoe operativnoe upravlenie*) ‘the main generator of ideas for the main brain of the army – the General Staff’ (GSh: *Generalnyi shtab*), the directorate itself has often been described in the same terms.² If anything, though, this actually underplays the directorate’s true role, because it is also absolutely central to both peacetime planning and wartime command. That its crest (pictured above), features both a traditional flanged mace and also a scroll with a battleplan reflects this breadth of roles. When one former GOU officer claimed that ‘the other directorates are there just to help us do the real job,’ it was an over-statement, but perhaps an understandable one.³

While formally only one element of the sprawling General Staff apparatus – that includes two other Main Directorates, five Directorates, and seven other services, departments and centres⁴ – the GOU is without any doubt the largest and most important (although the Main Directorate, the military intelligence service, does have considerable influence in its own right). No wonder that the head of the GOU, currently Col. Gen. Sergei Rudskoi, is like all his recent predecessor, also a First Deputy Chief of the General Staff and reports directly to the Chief of the General Staff (CoGS).

¹ 20 февраля ГОУ ГШ ВС РФ исполнится 309 лет, *Mil.ru*, <https://pda.mil.ru/pda/news/more.htm?id=10369803@egNews>

² В центре обороны страны, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Feb. 19, 2021, <http://redstar.ru/v-tsentre-oborony-strany/>. Although it is worth noting that the term had also been used for the Soviet General Staff’s Centre for Military-Strategic Research. See Stephen Main, The ‘Brain’ of the Russian Army. The Centre for Military-Strategic Research, General Staff, 1985-2000, *ARAG Research Papers* (2000), <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/96615>

³ Conversation with the author, Moscow, 2014

⁴ Specifically, the Main Directorate (military intelligence, still widely known as the GRU, the Main Organisation & Mobilisation Directorate, the Directorate of Communications, the Directorate of Electronic Warfare Forces, the Military Topographic Directorate, the Directorate for the Construction & Development of UAVs, the Operational Training Directorate, the Eighth Department (state secrets), the National Defence Management Centre, the Special Operations Forces Command, the Archival Service, the Automotive Service, the Military Band Service of the Russian Armed Forces and the Centre for Military Strategic Studies, as well as the individual arm of service commands.

Col. Gen. Sergei Fedorovich Rudskoi



Born in 1960 in Ukraine, the son of a Maj. Gen. in the tank corps made Hero of the Soviet Union for his exploits in the Second World War, Rudskoi is a career army officer.⁵ He commanded the 255th Guards Motorised Rifle Stalingrad-Korsun Regiment during the ill-fated First Chechen War, where he acquired a reputation for uncharacteristic zeal in looking after the men under his command. The 255th indeed suffered less grievous losses than many other units involved in the badly-planned assault on Grozny, and Rudskoi also caught the attention of Gen. Lev Rokhlin, one of the main field commanders and later chair of the State Duma Defence Committee. Rudskoi went on to serve in the Second Chechen War and then became first deputy head of the GOU and then head and First Deputy Chief of the General Staff in 2015. He was made a Hero of the Russian Federation in 2020, but his age – he is now 61 – may preclude him from becoming CoGS, as anything other than a stopgap,

especially as while he is generally accepted to be a tough and competent tactical commander and administrator, notable for being ably quickly to grasp new concepts, he is not regarded as a particularly competent political operator and nor has he led a major territorial formation. There is a growing consensus that – especially as the next Chief of the General Staff will likely be in place when Shoigu's successor becomes Defence Minister, whoever and whenever that may be – current incumbent Gerasimov's successor needs to be capable potentially of managing a more complex political environment.

Although it officially dates its history back to the foundation of the Quartermaster-General's Office in 1702,⁶ the GOU has its immediate roots in the 1st (Operations) Directorate of the General Staff, established in October 1939 in response to the perceived imminence of war, although dictator Joseph Stalin's purge of the officer corps in 1941 set back its efforts to establish a coherent structure. It evolved in the course of the 'Great Patriotic War' and became the Main Operations Directorate in 1946 when the People's Commissariats of Defence and the Navy were merged into a single Ministry of the Armed Forces of the USSR, with the General Staff's Operational Directorate and Directorate of Operational Training being merged under Col. Gen. Sergei Shtemenko.⁷

As such it was at the heart of post-war Soviet activities and interventions and also became a steadily more important element of the GSh. It would especially evolve under the pressure of managing the ten-year war in Afghanistan, 1979-88, and GOU head such as Gen. Sergei Akhromeev and Gen. Valentin Varennikov would become powerful figures within the GSh as a result, consolidating the political rise of the directorate's chief as ex officio First Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

With this profile also came political vulnerability. In 1996, GOU head Col. Gen. Viktor Barynkin was dismissed for allegedly seeking to organise a cabal to pressurise President Yeltsin to reinstate disgraced Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, in what some ministry insiders still claim was a

⁵ Рудской, Фёдор Андреевич, *Geroi strany*, https://warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=6488

⁶ 20 февраля ГОУ ГШ ВС РФ исполнился 309 лет, Mil.ru, <https://pda.mil.ru/pda/news/more.htm?id=10369803@egNews>

⁷ В центре обороны страны, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 19 February 2021, <http://redstar.ru/v-tsentre-oborony-strany/>

scapegoating.⁸ Likewise, when outsider Anatoly Serdyukov was appointed Defence Minister in 2007, he very quickly clashed with CoGS Gen. Yurii Baluevskii (who infamously publicly suggested he spend a month in the GSh to 'learn the ropes' first), whose powerbase was in the GOU (in which he had repeatedly served⁹). After Baluevskii was manoeuvred out in June 2007, Serdyukov went after the GOU, demanding a 40% cut in its staffing, and later dismissing its head, Col. Gen. Alexander Rukshin, who was considered one of 'Baluevskii's men'.¹⁰ The GOU managed to keep the headcount reduction at 20%, and has since been brought back up to its original strength, not least because its virtual sidelining during the start of the 2008 Georgian War – discussed below – was regarded rightly as contributing to much of the avoidable chaos of the Russian deployment.¹¹

The GOU's progress since the end of the USSR has thus not always been an easy one. In 2004, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov attracted the ire of many insiders when he asserted:

'It is obvious that, first of all, the Main Operations Directorate, the Main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate and the Main Intelligence Directorate are in need of significant strengthening. Only by raising the work of these intellectual components to a qualitatively new level, can the General Staff be the "brain of the army".'¹²

In fairness, though, this was less an attack on the GOU itself so much as an acknowledgement that there had been a severe decay in the GSh's capabilities during the 1990s, when so many promising younger and middle-ranking officers left the military. His goal was to try and revive the institutions. He did oversee measures (including generous pay increments) which helped retain talented officers, and despite Serdyukov's brief period of cuts, the GSh apparatus as a whole, and the GOU in particular, is now a much more competent and confident institution.

THE ROLE OF THE GOU

"All the decisions and orders of the country's military-political leadership are transformed by the Main Operations Directorate into directives, combat orders and orders, and it promptly communicates them to the troops."

- GOU Chief Col. Gen. Sergei Rudskoi¹³

The GOU is based at the Defence Ministry's large building on Frunze Embankment (Frunzenskaya Naberezhnaya, 22/2, Moscow, 119160), where it occupies an estimated tenth of its above-ground area. It has around a thousand staff (typically known as 'operators'), disproportionately drawn from

⁸ Групповые отставки силовиков, *Kommersant*, July 20, 2004, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/491109>

⁹ Baluyevsky: New Chief Of The Russian General Staff, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 21, 2004, <https://jamestown.org/program/baluyevsky-new-chief-of-the-russian-general-staff/>

¹⁰ Генштаб пошел за Балуевским, *Gazeta.ru*, July 7, 2008, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/07/07_a_2776383.shtml

¹¹ Генштабу урежут мозг, *Gazeta.ru*, Nov. 1, 2008, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/10/31_a_2870301.shtml?updated; that it is now back to its original strength has been confirmed by several military sources

¹² Сергей Иванов изложил свое видение современной армии, *RIA Novosti*, Jan. 24, 2004, https://ria.ru/20040124/513641.html?chat_room_id=513641

¹³ В центре обороны страны, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 19 February 2021, <http://redstar.ru/v-tsentre-oborony-strany/>

the Ground Forces, although certainly not to the exclusion of the other arms of service.¹⁴ Predictably enough, officers from the Strategic Rocket Forces, Navy and Aerospace Forces are heavily represented within the departments handling both doctrinal and nuclear matters, while there are also both permanent transfers and many temporary secondees from military intelligence (the Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU, later renamed simply the Main Directorate, GU, even if the original acronym is still popularly used, even within security circles) in its analytic sections. Not least thanks to the Syrian conflict, almost half of the GOU's personnel now have combat experience.¹⁵

It is divided into nine directorates, such as the 3rd, which handles military-industrial and technical issues, and the 5th, responsible for information warfare, and the Operational Directorate (formally un-numbered, but effectively the 1st), which is the military command and control division, and is both the largest and most prestigious of them all. (It is no coincidence that key figures such as Deputy Defence Minister Col. Gen. Kartapolov, now head of the Main Military-Political Directorate, and Aerospace Forces commander Col. Gen. Sergei Surovikin, spent a tour heading the GOU Operational Directorate.¹⁶) Within the directorates are departments known as 'directions' (*napravlenie*). The Expert & Analytical Department (EAO: *Ekspertno-Analiticheskii Otdel*) is not a full directorate, despite its importance, because it is directly subordinated to the head of the Main Directorate.

The formal enumeration of the GOU's duties¹⁷ is tellingly extensive, covering **a wide range of operational, political and organisational roles**:

- ▶ **It is an analytic hub**, playing a key role in identifying and assessing potential military threats and presenting its findings – and recommendations for responses – to the CoGS and the Defence Minister, but also to the Security Council and thus the wider national leadership. This ranges from the general Military-Political Situation (VPO: *Voennaya-Politicheskaya Obstanovka*), as the high-level global, regional and local strategic assessment process is known,¹⁸ through to snap briefings in a crisis.
- ▶ **It is a policy shop**, preparing proposals to the military-political leadership on the development of the military and steering the development of the Defence Plan of the Russian Federation and contributing to the development of the draft State Armament Program (GOZ: *Gosudarstvennyi*

¹⁴ For example, the famed Rear Admiral Radyi Zubkov, chief navigator of the Soviet Navy, served a tour in the GOU. Умер главный штурман ВМФ СССР контр-адмирал Зубков: юнга, подводник, исследователь, *Baltija*, Dec. 16, 2020, <https://baltija.eu/2020/12/16/umer-glavnyj-shturman-vmf-sssr-kontr-admiral-zubkov-yunga-podvodnik-issledovatel/>. So too was Lt. Gen. Vasili Makarov, a highly-decorated Air Force commander who then became a senior researcher at the Centre for Military Strategic Studies. Командование Академии Генштаба Поздравило с 95-Летием Генерал-Лейтенанта Авиации Василия Макарова, *VAGSh*, March 21, 2021, <https://vagsh.mil.ru/More/Novosti/item/306787/>

¹⁵ Генератор идей и замыслов, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Feb. 18, 2018, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/2011-07-25-15-57-8/item/36191-generator-idej-i-zamyslov>

¹⁶ Картаполов Андрей Валерьевич, *Mil.ru*, https://structure.mil.ru/management/info.htm?id=11960036@SD_Employee; Суровикин Сергей Владимирович, *Mil.ru*, https://structure.mil.ru/management/info.htm?id=11854308@SD_Employee

¹⁷ Главное оперативное управление Генерального штаба Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации, *Mil.ru*, https://structure.mil.ru/structure/ministry_of_defence/details.htm?id=9710@egOrganization

¹⁸ Военно-Политическая Обстановка, *Voennyyi Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=4346@morfDictionary>

Oboronnyi Zakaz), including being represented on the Defence Ministry's Scientific-Technical Council (NTS: *Nauchno-Tekhnicheskiy Sovet*), a key body in determining the direction of military R&D;¹⁹

- ▶ **It is the primary military structure for strategic planning**, and using that as the basis to determine the main priorities for the development of the Armed Forces, including training needs (although its actual management is the responsibility of the Operational Training Directorate of the GSh) and coordinating the development of plans for the development of other forces;
- ▶ **It is the primary organ of operational command and control** of forces in peace and war (which will often mean also the security forces of other agencies²⁰), responsible for developing contingency plans and responding to the needs of the moment;
- ▶ **It is a coordinating body** managing the interaction between the Armed Forces and other federal bodies, including other armed formations and agencies such as the police, National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) and intelligence services, especially but not exclusively as relates to the anti-terrorist mission, including both preventative defensive measures and also offensive operations;
- ▶ **It is an important component in Russian military diplomacy and international cooperation, including on arms control.** This entails providing operational support for military cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). However, the GOU is also a powerful stakeholder in strategic arms negotiations and Russia's position on issues of strategic deterrence and stability.²¹

In other words, this is the core element of the entire GSh, which in time of all-out war would be the eyes and strong right arm of the Supreme High Command, but in the current environment of local wars, undeclared conflicts and perceived 'grey zone' threats²², **it is not just a military command centre but also a hub for cross-government coordination of security operations, both defensive and offensive.**

¹⁹ Военно-научный комитет Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации, *Mil.ru*, https://structure.mil.ru/structure/ministry_of_defence/details.htm?id=11363@egOrganization; Ствол заказов, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, March 5, 2011, <https://rg.ru/2011/03/05/siloviki.html>; see also R McDermott, Moscow Intensifies Military-Scientific Research in Modernization Drive, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 15, 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-intensifies-military-scientific-research-in-modernization-drive/>

²⁰ According to one former officer, the GOU routinely provided technical assistance to the Interior Ministry's Interior Troops, although when they were transferred to the new National Guard, new chief 'Zolotov was very resistant to having his people talk to the General Staff on anything but the most formal level at first, until Shoigu and [Security Council secretary] Patrushev put pressure on him.' Conversation, Moscow, 2015.

²¹ Former GUO head Lt. Gen. Andrei Tretyak, for example, has made great play of the directorate's role in the START arms negotiations, asserting that 'at each stage of the preparation of this important document, specialists from the Main Operations Directorate participated as experts.' 20 февраля ГОУ ГШ ВС РФ исполнится 309 лет, *Mil.ru*, <https://pda.mil.ru/pda/news/more.htm?id=10369803@egNews>

²² Not that expressions such as 'hybrid war' or 'grey zone' are Russian terms of art – essentially they regard them as signs of *Western* sub-threshold operations against Russia, and are subsumed within their notion of New Generation Warfare, involving 'political-diplomatic, economic, informational, cybernetic, psychological and other non-military forms and methods of confrontation' as well as direct warfighting. *Военная наука смотрит в будущее*, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 26, 2018, <http://redstar.ru/voennaya-nauka-smotrit-v-budushhee/>. See also Janis Berzins, The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33, 3 (2020)

GOU AS DRIVER OF POLICY AND DOCTRINE

"The position of the GOU on issues related to planning the use and development of the Armed Forces, as a rule, is decisive and is taken into account by both state and military authorities, which imposes a special responsibility on the staff of the GOU."

- GOU Chief Col. Gen. Sergei Rudskoi²³

The GOU has a powerful voice in a range of significant policy debates and the drafting of major documents such as GOZ, the Military Doctrine and – albeit as a stakeholder consulted by the Security Council secretariat – the national Security Strategy. Indeed, Col. Dr. Sergei Belokon', the head of the GOU's Expert & Analysis Department, is both Vice President of the Academy of Military Sciences and a member of the Security Council's Scientific Council.²⁴

Furthermore, although such generators of emerging security thinking as the Military Academy of the General Staff (VAGSh) – and its Centre for Military Strategic Studies – are not within the GOU's chain of command, it is widely known that there is a close connection. **Military research centres and would-be thought leaders cultivate the GOU, especially through the EAO, as powerful allies and advocates**, while military education institutions also offer opportunities for older GOU staffers looking for a comfortable berth in which to serve their last years until retirement.

The Main Directorate is thus in a good position to influence policy and doctrine, especially when there is no clear steer from the minister or the Kremlin, able to promote and block ideas as it sees fit. For example, Maj. Gen. Igor Dylevskii, head of the 5th Directorate, has had a powerful role in shaping military notions of the use of information warfare in modern operations.²⁵ He was reportedly behind the extensive role this was given in the Kavkaz-2016, which brought together the GOU, the GSh's Directorate of Electronic Warfare Forces and operational commands to wargame new notions of its use.²⁶ On the other hand, it reportedly failed to make the case that the new T-14 Armata tank was going to be too expensive and too specialised to be anything more than a technology test-bed, because the political leadership had their own reasons for rewarding the manufacturer Uralvagonzavod.²⁷

This also means **the Directorate is at once an arena for inter-service rivalries and also a key 'decider' of these disputes**. Such wider conceptual and organisational evolutions, after all, tend also

²³ Генератор идей и замыслов, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Feb. 18, 2018, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/2011-07-25-15-57-8/item/36191-generator-idej-i-zamyslov>

²⁴ Состав научного совета при Совете Безопасности Российской Федерации, May 11, 2021, http://www.scrf.gov.ru/about/NS_spis_organ/sost_NS/

²⁵ See, for example, his co-authored Операции в киберпространстве: вопросы теории, политики и права, *Voennaya mysl'* No. 8 (2011) and his speech to the 2017 Moscow Conference on International Security, Тезисы выступления заместителя начальника Главного оперативного управления Генерального штаба Вооруженных Сил РФ генерал-майора Игоря Дылевского на VI Московской конференции по международной безопасности, *Mil.ru*, <https://mil.ru/mcis/news/more.htm?id=12120776@cmsArticle>

²⁶ Шойгу объявил о создании в России войск информационных операций, *Sputnik*, Feb. 22, 2017, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/politics/20170222/1031897554/sozdany-vojska-informacionnyh-operacij.html>; Военные РФ впервые отработали информационное противоборство на учениях "Кавказ", *TASS*, Sept. 14, 2016, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/3619816>

²⁷ This is unconfirmed, but was raised independently by two military sources, one of which was in the GSh apparatus.

to have major implications for the roles, budgets and status of arms of service and departments of the central apparatus.

For example, the GOU played a central role in debates over the future of the *Spetsnaz* special forces. The Ground Forces command had long wanted to 'poach' these from military intelligence. In 2009, they had their chance, following the GRU's scapegoating for failures in the 2008 Georgian War. The GOU was relatively blindsided by this, not least as it was still going through a period of downsizing, as noted above. In the main, the GOU leadership appear to have been unimpressed with the strategic rationale for the move – which meant focusing on the *Spetsnaz* role as battlefield reconnaissance forces instead of strategic assets²⁸ – and as a result they resisted pressure to provide a strong doctrinal support for what was as much as anything else the outcome of military-bureaucratic politics.²⁹ Unable to go against a clear mandate from Serdyukov, though, and internally divided as a vociferous minority of 'army loyalists' supported the move, they bided their time, and when Shoigu became minister, they threw their weight behind the GRU – and other elements within the GSh – to advocate for the *Spetsnaz* to regain their old role and for the new Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO) to be developed further.³⁰

It can thus also be a source of a military consensus to constrain changes from above. During the 1997-2001 tenure of Defence Minister Marshal Igor Sergeev, for example, this former commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) did much to expand the role and budget of his old service, often at the expense of the others. He moved all military space forces into the SRF, abolished the separate Ground Forces Command and shrank the Airborne Forces. On the one hand, the GOU, working with CoGS Gen. Anatoly Kvashnin, were expected to enforce his partisan reforms, not least by generating a strategic rationale in support of them. However, it is widely believed that Kvashnin – an army officer, and a man with clear and open disagreements with the direction of Sergeev's moves,³¹ as well as someone who well understood how the GOU worked as he had been its First Deputy Head 1992-95 – at least allowed and maybe even encouraged the Directorate to drag its feet.³² Certainly when Sergeev was replaced by Sergei Ivanov, it turned out that many of his reforms were strikingly – even suspiciously – easy to reverse.

GOU AS COMMAND CENTRE

"Without false modesty, I would like to note that [the GOU] is one of the leading military command and control bodies... With the direct participation of GOU officers, a fundamentally new combat readiness system has been created."

²⁸ See Roger McDermott, Bat or Mouse? The Strange Case of Reforming Spetsnaz, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Brief*, Nov. 2, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/bat-or-mouse-the-strange-case-of-reforming-spetsnaz/>

²⁹ This was confirmed by two separate military sources, one of whom had been serving in the General Staff apparatus at the time.

³⁰ See Mark Galeotti, Spetsnaz: Operational Intelligence, Political Warfare, and Battlefield Role, *Marshall Center Security Insights*, Feb. 2020, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/spetsnaz-operational-intelligence-political-warfare-and-battlefield-role-0>

³¹ Сергеев и Квашнин разошлись во взглядах на военную реформу, *Lenta*, July 13, 2000, <https://lenta.ru/news/2000/07/13/military/>

³² Армия на войне и в мире. Генерал Балуевский — о реформах и реформаторах, *Argumenty i Fakty*, Feb. 23, 2020, <https://aif.ru/society/army/armiya-na-voyne-i-v-mire-general-baluevskiy-o-reformakh-i-reformatorakh>

- *Former GOU chief Lt. Gen. Andrei Tretyak*³³

Since the 2008 Georgian War, in which the GOU was almost entirely side-lined – not least by being in mid-move – such that decisions were either being micromanaged by the minister and CoGS or being handled on an ad hoc basis by field commanders on the ground, **there has been a serious effort to formalise the process for command and control, especially to cope with local wars and sub-threshold military activities.**³⁴ To a large degree, this is simply a re-statement of old principles, but now enhanced with new capabilities. However, it also reflects the new realities of a new military reality in which, again to quote Tretyak, ‘the nature of wars and armed conflicts has changed significantly. They have become transient, local in nature and conducted by limited forces in a single information and communication space.’³⁵

In a full-scale war, as noted above, the GOU would become the primary arm of the Supreme High Command. In practice, while the procedures for this remain in place and are periodically run through command post exercises, **the expectation is that for the foreseeable future, local and limited conflicts and crises will be the norm.** To this end, **there is a carefully structured process for such operations, whereby the GOU works through planning cells and individually-tailored Combat Management Groups to provide full support and strategic guidance for operational commands, using the new National Defence Management Centre (NTsUO).** This has revolutionised the General Staff’s capacity to respond to and manage crisis situations, from disaster relief to offensive military operations. The Centre is in the basement of the Defence Ministry building on Frunze Embankment (at which the GOU is based), and while it is not an organ of the Directorate as such, it is at once its primary ‘customer’ and patron. It is worth noting that the NTsUO’s inaugural director, Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, served two five-year tours in the GOU (as a senior officer-operator, 1996-2001, and a department head 2003-7).³⁶

The initial assessment of an actual or potential future crisis may come from a variety of directions: typically, the political leadership, the Security Council or direct from the intelligence services. The CoGS will then task the GOU with making an assessment and, if appropriate, a body will be established within the NTsUO to prepare for a response. This is a very flexible approach, with the precise form of the body dictated by the needs of the specific situation, and could be anything from a natural catastrophe to a military incursion.³⁷ This very capacious notion of the kind of crisis in which the GSh may be involved reflects both its frequent involvement in non-military crisis response (including opening medical facilities at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and fighting wildfires in 2021) and also the broad notion of ‘security’ embedded within the 2021 National Security Strategy, that covers everything from armed attack to the defence of ‘traditional Russian spiritual, moral and cultural-historical values.’³⁸

³³ 20 февраля ГОУ ГШ ВС РФ исполнится 309 лет, *Mil.ru*, <https://pda.mil.ru/pda/news/more.htm?id=10369803@egNews>

³⁴ «Можно представить, каким страшным моральным поражением для России стал бы военный провал в Южной Осетии», *KM*, Aug. 8, 2021, <https://www.km.ru/science-tech/2021/08/08/voina-v-yuzhnoi-osetii/890006-voina-kotoruyu-my-edva-ne-proigrali>

³⁵ 20 февраля ГОУ ГШ ВС РФ исполнится 309 лет, *Mil.ru*, <https://pda.mil.ru/pda/news/more.htm?id=10369803@egNews>

³⁶ Мизинцев Михаил Евгеньевич, Russian MOD website, https://structure.mil.ru/management/details.htm?id=12000953@SD_Employee

³⁷ Чрезвычайная ситуация (ЧС), *Voennyi Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=13934@morfDictionary>

³⁸ Стратегии национальной безопасности 2020

The National Defence Management Centre (NTsUO)

The opening of the new National Defence Management Centre (NTsUO: *Natsional'nyi Tsentr Upravleniya Oborony*) in the basement of the Defence Ministry building on Frunze Embankment in 2014 consolidated a new approach in crisis management and response.³⁹ With more than a thousand military and civilian personnel supporting 24/7 operation and one of the most powerful military supercomputers in use, it provided a whole new range of capabilities beyond the former Central Command Post of the General Staff, which it replaced.⁴⁰ The NTsUO is at once a command centre – with both a main situation room and a suite of smaller ones to deal with potential and less pressing developments – and the capacity to fuse intelligence and analysis drawn from across the government, everything from intelligence reports to metrics on domestic discontent flows into its Centre for Daily Activities (*Tsentr Povsednevnikh Deytel'nosti*). As a result, it can provide a single centre capable of ensuring coordinated command in a crisis of an equally eclectic range of forces and resources, including the police, National Guard and even national infrastructure, as the needs of the situation require,⁴¹ reflecting the new challenges of multi-domain 'New Generation Warfare.'⁴²



NTsUO main hall during visit by President Putin, 2015



NTsUO Management & Coordination Room, during daily briefings, 2014

If the response will be essentially non-combat, then a small coordination cell will be established in the NTsUO but the main command and control hub will be in the relevant directorate of the GSh or Defence Ministry. In 2020, for example, it was the Ministry's Main Military Medical Directorate that handled the operational work associated with addressing COVID-19, with a team in the NTsUO managing liaison and coordination work in connection with the

³⁹ Roger McDermott, Russia Activates New Defense Management Center, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Nov. 4, 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-activates-new-defense-management-center/>

⁴⁰ Приказ поступит из Центра, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, Oct. 27, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/10/27/kartapolov.html>

⁴¹ Национальный центр управления обороной РФ будет координировать все федеральные ведомства, *TASS*, Jan. 20, 2014, <https://tass.ru/politika/898610>; Что такое "Национальный центр управления обороной России" и зачем он создан?, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, Nov. 1, 2014, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26302/3181011/>

⁴² Военная наука смотрит в будущее, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 26, 2018, <http://redstar.ru/voennaya-nauka-smotrit-v-budushhee/>

government-level Operational HQ.⁴³ In this situation, the GOU is involved, and has officers attached to the cell, but it is primarily responsible for supporting the lead department, especially in terms of ensuring other military units and departments perform their role in the overall mission.

Much the same is true if the response is being led by another agency. In the 2018 Kerch Strait incident, for example, when two Ukrainian gunboats and a tug tried to pass into the Azov Sea under the Crimea Bridge, the main responsibility was with the Federal Security Service (FSB), which controls the Naval Border Troop forces which handled the interception and seizure of the flotilla. However, Southern Military District (SVO) aircraft were also involved.⁴⁴ As a result, the GOU's role was to task the SVO command and monitor their role, and to ensure that they worked well with the FSB. However, it was also about ensuring the FSB did not mismanage the military forces involved or seek to exceed the agreed terms of their role.⁴⁵

If combat operations are required or anticipated, then this will become a Combat Management Group (GBU: *Gruppa Boevogo Upravleniya*) under the NTsUO's Centre for Combat Management (TsBU: *Tsentr Boevogo Upravleniya*).⁴⁶ A GRU is a temporary formation, initially developed within the Strategic Rocket Forces,⁴⁷ although 'temporary' means for the duration of the campaign, which could be a few days or a number of years: the Syrian GBU has been in existence for more than six years now, and seen regular turn-over of members. The GBU will be led by GOU officers,⁴⁸ supplemented by staff from the NTsUO experienced in the centre's workings, and specialists seconded from other services or structures. For example, the Syrian GBU also had officers from military intelligence and the Special Operations Forces Command, some specialists from the Aerospace Forces, and liaison staff from the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).

A Room with a View

The main halls of the NTsUO are named after famous Russian commanders (Suvorov, Ushakov, Kutuzov, Zhukov, Rokossovskii, Ogarkov and Shaposhnikov) but there are many other, functional but less exalted rooms. Informally, the belief seems to be that if a GBU is assigned sole access to one of the more extensive and highly-sought-after situation rooms or suites in the NTsUO, then it is a sign that the high command expects or intends their mission to be a serious one, while those forced to book rooms competitively are either of low priority (often because another agency is taking the lead) or the assumption is that 'their' crisis will not materialise or be defused another way.

A GBU is not an operational command structure. Although in fairness the temptation to intervene – interfere – can be irresistible, in the words of Col. Gen. Rudskoi, 'The main tasks of the Combat Management Group are collecting and assessing situation data, analysing the decisions taken by the

⁴³ Сергей Шойгу, министр обороны РФ: «Не было времени рассусоливать», *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, Aug. 4, 2021, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/28313/4454518/>

⁴⁴ Минобороны РФ подтвердило участие военных в инциденте в Керченском проливе, *Interfax*, Nov. 30, 2018, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/640169>

⁴⁵ This last point came from a conversation with a Russian official with personal knowledge of the operation.

⁴⁶ Начальник российского Генштаба рассказал журналистам о задачах и роли Национального центра по управлению обороной РФ, *Mil.ru*, Nov. 1, 2014, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11998309@egNews

⁴⁷ Группа боевого управления, *Voennyi entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details_rvsn.htm?id=12973@morfDictionary

⁴⁸ Генератор идей и замыслов, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Feb. 18, 2018, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/2011-07-25-15-57-8/item/36191-generator-idej-i-zamyslov>

command of the grouping and planned further actions.⁴⁹ **Its role is rather to set strategy and monitor progress on behalf of the GOU and ensure the necessary resources are available**, using the NTsUO to coordinate with other government agencies or military commands. It will also conduct the 'operational-tactical calculations' (*Raschety Operativno-Takticheskie*)⁵⁰ to assess the correlation of forces and means to inform the operational commanders' decisions. As a result, while planning cells can simply be a few individuals generating outline contingency plans, GBUs can involve several hundred, including representatives drawn from other agencies, especially the security agencies.

The intention at least – and based on the Syrian experience this appears usually to hold good – is that the level of real-time access to communications and video feed from the operational command and field units should allow the GBU and wider GS to be able to monitor the battlefield, but not seek to micromanage it.

Operational command for anything less than a full national effort will be vested either in a Military District or an Army HQ for crises within or adjacent to national borders or a Command Post of a Group of Forces (KPGV: *Komandnyi Punkt Gruppirovki Voisk*) **for overseas deployments**. The (officially-denied) Donbas deployment to Ukraine, for example, is managed through the Southern Military District, with its 8th Army handling operational supervision, while the Syrian contingent is an obvious example of a KPGV.⁵¹

GOU AS POLITICAL ACTOR

"The specifics of the tasks of ensuring the military security of the Russian Federation that are solved by the Main Operational Directorate require from its officers-operators not only high-quality military knowledge, but also the ability competently to understand political, diplomatic, informational, technical, economic, scientific and cultural issues."

- GOU Chief Col. Gen. Sergei Rudskoi⁵²

The GOU is also a political institution, albeit not so much with the outer world – although Rudskoi makes quite regular appearances in the Russian media, it is generally to relate the latest news from Syria rather than to articulate any particular view – but **within the military and the wider Russian security community**. This is more than simply overseeing, resolving or fighting the inter-service and -departmental rivalries mentioned above, it is also about bureaucratic politics: asserting the primacy of the military over other government departments, and fighting its own corner, something that depends heavily on its relationship with the CoGS and the Defence Minister, and the relationship between them.

In part this is about managing activities which demand such coordination. It is also the GOU's job to ensure that the armed forces have what they need, when and where they need it, for example.

⁴⁹ На форуме «Армия-2017» обсудили итоги операции Вооруженных Сил России в Сирийской Арабской Республике, *Mil.ru*, Aug. 25, 2017, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12139759@egNews

⁵⁰ Расчёты Оперативно-Тактические, *Voennyi entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=11873@morfDictionary>

⁵¹ Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма», *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Dec, 26, 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/>

⁵² Генератор идей и замыслов, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Feb. 18, 2018, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/2011-07-25-15-57-8/item/36191-generator-idej-i-zamyslov>

In part, this is a matter of logistics, and a large portion of the Directorate is consumed by this unglamorous but crucial work, alongside the GSh's Main Organisation & Mobilisation Directorate⁵³ (GOMU: *Glavnoe Organizatsionno-Mobilizatsionnoe Upravlenie*) and the Defence Ministry. The Ministry, after all, is not only responsible for setting the overall political steer for the armed forces, but also directly controls a wide range of other functions, from finance and procurement to recruitment and political education.

The 2008 Vacuum

In the initial post-mortems, the GOU inevitably faced criticism for the poor coordination of forces during the 2008 Georgian War. However, it quite soon became clear that the main reason was actually that at the time it was not only in the middle of an office move following recent personnel cuts (such that its telephones had not even been connected) but it was also lacking a chief, following the dismissal in early June of Col. Gen. Alexander Rukshin, for his public criticism of Serdyukov's measures. This was in part a failure on CoGS Makarov's part, having neither backed Rukshin, nor pre-emptively stood him down (he may have been influenced by the belief that Rukshin was loyal to his predecessor, Gen. Baluevskii). Serdyukov, a notorious micro-manager, was inherently suspicious of the GOU and Makarov was unable to convince him of the virtues of any of the immediate candidates to replace Rukshin. His deputy, Lt. Gen. Valeryi Zaparenko, was trying to hold the fort, but lacked the staff, experience or authority without a clear mandate from Serdyukov. Rather than a failure of the GOU, this represented a failure of the most senior military leadership

https://zavtra.ru/blogs/vojna_kotoruyu_mi_edva_ne_proigrali

https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/07/07_a_277_6383.shtml

GOU's capacities. Shoigu, on the other hand, is a very different kind of minister, at once a heavyweight with strong personal connections to Putin, and also an extremely effective political operator. This has directly affected the GOU's institutional weight, and during the aforementioned Kerch Strait Incident,

The GOU's relationship with the Defence Ministry is to a large extent determined by the relationship between CoGS and minister. This is essentially harmonious under Defence Minister Shoigu and CoGS Gerasimov, just as it was under their predecessors Serdyukov and Makarov, respectively. However, Minister Serdyukov and former CoGS Gen. Yurii Baluevskii and before them Ministers Sergeev and Sergei Ivanov and CoGS Kvashnin all had much rockier relationships. This inevitably also had an impact on the GOU's capacity to play a full role in shaping defence policy, as has been noted above. An example of the virtues of a smoothly-working relationship was the emendation of the Law On the State Border of the Russian Federation in 2020, a proposal (to provide more permissive rules of engagement) which was made by the GOU, approved by the Defence Ministry and submitted to the government, and passed through the legislature within a year, without any serious complications.⁵⁴

Likewise, the GOU's capacity to influence and work with other agencies depends heavily on the stature of the minister and his standing within the national leadership. Under Serdyukov and Makarov, it demonstrated very limited traction over the other agencies, especially the Federal Security Service (FSB: *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*). Given that the FSB also controls the Border Troops (PV: *Pogranichnye Voiska*), an extensive militarised force of some 100,000, this directly affected the

⁵³ Главное организационно-мобилизационное Управления, [Mil.ru](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/organizations/more.htm?id=12345158@egNews), https://function.mil.ru/news_page/organizations/more.htm?id=12345158@egNews

⁵⁴ Смените курс немедленно, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Sept. 17, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/09/17/voennym-mogut-razreshit-preduprezhdaiushchie-aviaudary-po-narushiteliam-granic.html>

for example, the FSB was apparently much more respectful in its dealings with the GOU than in past cases.⁵⁵ Much the same has apparently since become true of the *Rosgvardiya* (National Guard), whose security forces are integrated into military plans and wargames such as the *Zapad-21* exercises.⁵⁶

The GOU does in any case have **a higher profile than any other element of the GSh** (with the exception of the GRU), by virtue of its size and role, but also in the degree to which many former 'operators' have moved into thought leadership role and retain an affinity with it. For example, Mikhail Khodarenok, military observer for both the newspaper *Gazeta.ru* and Vesti FM radio station, as well as the editor of the *Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur'er* (*Military-Industrial Courier*) between 2010 and 2015, served three tours in the GOU, including a leadership role in the 1st Direction of the 1st Directorate before his retirement in 2000 with the rank of colonel.⁵⁷

More recently, true to his shrewd political sense, **Shoigu has also taken a personal interest in the GOU's public persona**. With apparently a certain reluctance on his part, Rudskoi has been elevated to the face of the Syrian operation – albeit only for the good news – and the directorate has even acquired a patron saint, in line with the wider alliance of the military and the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁸

CONCLUSIONS

"A person with a head is needed here, because the chief of the GOU is a more important post than the Chief of the General Staff: if the chief of the GOU has a good head on his shoulders, then even a weak chief of the General Staff will not

A Patron Saint

The GOU has not been exempt from the creeping and performative religiosity which has gripped the military, especially under Shoigu (who as much as anything else appreciates the political value of an alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church). It has adopted John the Baptist as its patron saint, with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All the Russias. Rudskoi justified this on the grounds that 'he is the Baptist, the person who indicated the direction of development in the future. The activities of our officers allow us to foresee the possible development of events and often many of our proposals form the basis of decisions that are made by our leadership.'



https://santosepulcro.co.il/en/news/v_glavnom_khrame_vooruzhennykh_sil_osvyatili_ikonu_ioanna_krestitelya/

⁵⁵ These assertions are based on conversations with Russian GSh officers, and also Telegram social media channels used by serving military personnel.

⁵⁶ Росгвардия проведет масштабные учения в нескольких регионах, *Kommersant*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4887279>

⁵⁷ Михаил Михайлович Ходаренок, *Entsiklopedia kino i TV*, <https://www.etvnet.com/encyclopedia/d/person/hodarenok/>

⁵⁸ See, for example, Dima Adamsky's work, including The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow's Syrian Campaign, *PONARS Policy Memo*, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-role-of-the-russian-orthodox-church-in-moscow-s-syrian-campaign/>

“spoil the situation, but if you have a bad chief of the GOU, then even the best Chief of the General Staff can do nothing.”

- Dr Alexander Pikaev, Director of the Section on Arms Control & Non-Proliferation at the Institute of World Economy & International Relations.⁵⁹

Although habitually discreet about the details of its activities and organisation, it is no exaggeration to describe the **Main Operations Directorate as the keystone of the entire Russian military command structure, providing context for political decisions, expertise to policy drafting and guidance to operational commands**. It plays a crucial role not simply in monitoring and analysing the contemporary military-political scene but also in shaping Russia's foundational policy documents – and then operationalising them, identifying what they demand in terms of deployments, equipment and training needs, and future force development.

As a result, **it is not simply a technocratic managerial institution, it is also a political actor**, involved in debates and disputes within the military, between the military and other security agencies, and in wider policy-making circles. Its autonomy is limited – it requires the support of the Defence Minister and/or the CoGS to be able to push any kind of positive agenda – but it has demonstrated its capacity to slow, divert and undermine measures which go against its interests or the GOU consensus about those of the armed forces as a whole.

As such, **it could be described as politically conservative but institutionally adventurous**. It shares the Russian leadership's instinctive and often seriously inaccurate perception about the 'threat' from NATO, one manifest above all through engineered 'colour revolutions' and other subversive operations. How far this is genuine and how far it is simply because that is the line coming from the very top is hard to gauge but is in any case irrelevant, given that either way it frames state security thinking. Rudskoi himself often articulates a relatively hawkish position, whether on Syria or NATO.⁶⁰ This is, however, his job, and it would be surprising – and career-damaging – for him to distance himself from the kind of rhetoric often heard from Gerasimov, Shoigu and other Russian security leaders. However, the GOU is also active in affirming the need for strategic stability, confidence building measures, and effective deterrence instruments. The best way to characterise its position, in the words of one former GOU 'operator', is that it **'plans for big wars it hopes and expects never to fight, and small wars that it wants to win quickly and easily, so they don't become big ones.'**⁶¹

To that end, for a substantial bureaucratic institution heavily staffed by well-socialised senior officers towards the end of their careers, the GOU is also **a source of innovative thinking and pressure for constant self-examination and reinvention** within the military. A variety of sources have described it as 'intellectually demanding,' 'exciting,' even 'full of radicals in shoulder-boards.' Rudskoi himself said it has to be a 'generator of ideas and concepts'⁶² and to a considerable extent – again,

⁵⁹ Генштабу урежут мозг, Gazeta.ru, Nov. 1, 2008, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/10/31_a_2870301.shtml?updated

⁶⁰ See, for example, Начальник Главного оперативного управления Генерального штаба ВС РФ генерал-полковник Сергей Рудской провел брифинг для представителей СМИ, June 1, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12295316@egNews or Генштаб ВС предостерег США и НАТО от эскалации в Черном море, RIA Novosti, Sept. 18, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200918/eskalatsiya-1577451402.html>

⁶¹ Conversation, Moscow, 2015

⁶² Генератор идей и замыслов, Krasnaya Zvezda, Feb. 18, 2018, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/2011-07-25-15-57-8/item/36191-generator-idej-i-zamyslov>

within the confines of a large, disciplined service in which tradition is also a powerful force – it lives up to this billing.

Although no change is necessarily imminent, Shoigu is 66 and potentially still has a further upward political move within him⁶³; Gerasimov is 65, and though some years from compulsory retirement, already relatively old for a CoGS and has served longer than any other post-1991 chief, such that there is already talk of a potential replacement.⁶⁴ Rudskoi is just 61 but, as noted above, not generally seen as a likely successor to Gerasimov. The GOU works well, as noted, when there is harmony between the Main Directorate, the CoGS and the minister. **Potential renovation of the senior military command inevitably risks affecting the current smooth running of the system.**

However, so long as that harmony does obtain, **the GOU will continue to optimise the Russian military for both local conflicts – including out-of-area deployments – and, under the rubric of 'New Generation Warfare,' blended political-military operations.** By ensuring that Russia continues to have a strong 'grey zone' capability, as well as by reinforcing the current worldview in which the Motherland is embattled in an undeclared political war, **the GOU will also encourage the Kremlin to maintain its current, confrontational policies.**

⁶³ He is topping the United Russian party list in the September 2021 elections, but is unlikely to take up a seat in the Duma as it would force him to relinquish his much more important position. The obvious possibilities being Secretary of the Security Council or Prime Minister – but the unspoken, politically-perilous question is always whether he might be a successor to the Presidency, were Putin to choose or have to find one.

⁶⁴ See Mark Galeotti, Interview Panel, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2021

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