

Russia's Military Police and the Syrian Campaign

by Mr. Charles K. Bartles



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Russian military police at Khmeimim Air Base in Syria, 11 December 2017.

Introduction

In August 2020, United States officials were dismayed when a video surfaced of an altercation between American and Russian forces near Dayrick, Syria.¹ The video appeared to show a Russian vehicle sideswiping a United States Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle, reportedly injuring four of our Service members. Another video of the encounter shows a Russian helicopter hovering over American vehicles.² This was not the first time American and Russian patrols in Syria had experienced unfriendly contact. Earlier that year, online observers of the war in Syria were amused and perhaps unsettled by a 45-second video depicting an American armored vehicle running a Russian patrol vehicle off the road.³ Whatever this might say about United States–Russian tensions in Syria, it is interesting that the Russian forces involved in both incidents were not Spetsnaz, elite Airborne Troops, or even standard Ground Forces motorized rifle (infantry) personnel. Instead, these forces were members of Russia's military police, which are taking on a growing role in both Syria and the Russian military. The institution of a military police corps is a relatively new concept for the Russian armed forces, and the path to its establishment has been a long one.

The Soviet and Russian armed forces had no historical experience with an organic military police corps to provide internal security and discipline for service members. The

initial impetus for the formation of an internal security element was a dramatic increase in the number of high-profile *dedovshchina*—brutal hazing that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This increase was blamed on the Russian military reforms that took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which inhibited a commander's right to impose certain punishments—especially extrajudicial jailing. In order to clamp down on *dedovshchina*, embezzlement, and graft (which became increasingly common during the economic crises of the 1990s), the establishment of a military police corps was proposed.

In 2012, after some false starts, General Nikolay Makarov—as chief of the Russian General Staff—announced that by December 1, 2012, military police units would begin operations and that Russia had already established a Defense Ministry main directorate with units in the military districts and the fleets. On March 25, 2015, Presidential Edict Number 161 confirmed the charter that defined the military police structure, functions, and tasks.⁴ The Russian Federation planned to form military police platoons in every brigade and regiment, and the Russian Navy added military police to their force structure. Three years later, 76 such platoons had already been created.⁵

In many respects, this new Russian military police corps is quite similar to its Western counterparts because Russian military police serve as traffic controllers, security guards,

criminal investigators, prison guards, and peacekeepers. However, in the Syrian campaign, Moscow decided to create a new role for the Russian military police—expeditionary peacekeeper. In this capacity, Russian military police are not simply supporting the combat arms (infantry, armor, artillery) but are themselves the main instrument of Russian force projection on the ground in Syria. Interestingly, the military policemen fulfilling this new role are of a very different variety than those serving in the more traditional roles, indicating that two very different organizations may come under the term “Russian military police”—one of which United States troops may encounter more often when operating in areas where both Washington and Moscow deem ground-power force projection important.

Role in the Armed Forces

Russian military police perform a wide range of tasks that are similar to those of United States military police, such as investigating disciplinary and criminal misconduct; operating military jails, route security, and traffic enforcement; conducting facility and personnel security; performing law enforcement activities; promoting good order and discipline in the ranks; and conducting expeditionary security. Russian military police are also an agency of inquiry in the armed forces, which gives them the authority to conduct inquests. In terms of command and control, the approximately 10,000-strong military police originally operated under the authority of the Russian Armed Forces’ prosecutor general and his subordinate military prosecutors; however, the respective military district commander now operationally controls them.⁶ To facilitate this transition of operational control, in March 2019 new positions were created on the military district staffs, such as a deputy chief of staff for military police, with the intent that the position would supervise military police activities. Although operational control of the military police has transferred to the military districts, Russian military police still maintain a close working relationship with the prosecutor’s office. This command and control relationship between the regular military hierarchy and the prosecutor’s office gives the military police special powers, such as the ability to cordon off or blockade military garrisons and areas without consulting the respective unit commander. (Although in practice, this action would almost certainly occur in consultation with the next higher-level unit commander.) This capability underscores the importance of the Russian military police in the Russian system because a Russian commander’s authority has far fewer limitations than his Western counterparts. Responsibility for training and equipping military policemen resides in the military police main directorate of the Russian General Staff.⁷

Russian military police units can now be found in each regiment and brigade of the Military Districts, the Northern Fleet, and Airborne Troops, as well as in a few stand-alone units in the North Caucasus region that were apparently created for the primary purpose of supporting the Syrian campaign. Perhaps one of the more important but less glamorous roles of the Russian military police is that of traffic control. The Russian Federation has extremely high vehicle accident and fatality rates, which decrease military readiness.⁸ The Military Motor Vehicle Inspection Administration, now under Russian military police control, has enforced new preventive measures for personally owned vehicles. This has reportedly contributed to a 7 percent drop in road traffic accidents.⁹



A Russian military policeman of the Central Military District participates in an inspection to determine the state of combat readiness of units, to develop the practice of ensuring security at military sites, and to maintain the skills of possession of firearms.

Training and Equipping

The Russian military police is a type of military occupational specialty, and it is in the process of developing its own training program similar to other branches of arms (such as motorized rifle and engineer). Eventually, it will have a 4-year military academy to educate and train new lieutenants. Contract soldiers (who are somewhat equivalent to the U.S. Army noncommissioned officers) will attend a 2-year 10-month course at the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School or a shorter course at a regional training facility.¹⁰ In terms of equipping, Russian military police wear distinctive red berets and are typically well equipped to fulfill various missions. Russian military police units may have unmanned aerial vehicles, long-distance mobile communications systems, night-vision devices, and modern thermal imaging devices—depending on mission requirements. In terms of vehicles, they have UAZ Patriot and UAZ-3962 patrol vehicles for garrison operations and have Tigr, Tayfun, and UAZ-394511-03 Yesaul armored vehicles for

expeditionary operations. Maritime-oriented units have the BL-680 patrol boat.¹¹

Russian Military Police as Expeditionary Peacekeepers

Russia's use of peacekeepers in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria has taught Russia that the international community considers the use of military force to be abhorrent but finds it acceptable to use the same military force in the context of peacekeeping.¹² Russia has used peacekeepers or, more accurately, the threat of peacekeepers, in eastern Ukraine to temper Ukrainian efforts to crush the ongoing Russian-sponsored insurgencies in Lugansk and Donetsk. Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, observed that peacekeeping forces could rapidly transition to the open use of force to achieve success in the final stage of a conflict; therefore, it is clear that the Russian leadership sees the value in using its peacekeeping activities for more than foreign internal defense and conflict resolution.¹³

It is no surprise, therefore, that Russia has chosen to invest heavily in "peacekeeping" units. (In Russia, peacekeeping units are often considered elite units and receive some of the best equipment.) This niche has been filled by the Russian Airborne, which has one dedicated peacekeeping brigade (31st Air Assault Brigade at Ulyanovsk) and dedicated battalions in each of the four airborne divisions. In the last few years, Russia has expanded the number of peacekeeping forces by designating dedicated peacekeeping battalions in each of its naval infantry brigades and transitioning the 15th Motorized Rifle Brigade in Samara and the 41st Motorized Rifle Brigade in Kyzyl into peacekeeping units.

In Syria, the Russian military police started filling a new and very high profile role by serving as expeditionary peacekeepers. Interestingly, the Russian military police are in a role that was filled by elite peacekeeping-designated motorized rifle, airborne, or naval infantry units; these units are now rarely mentioned as serving in this capacity. This transition may have something to do with the multilateral nature of how Russia traditionally uses peacekeepers. Russian peacekeeping units are usually associated with supporting specific international organizations, such as the United Nations or the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and

are trained accordingly. The shift in the use of military police as peacekeepers could indicate the Kremlin's greater emphasis upon developing a unilateral expeditionary capability without ties to organizations that require a multilateral consensus. Whatever the reasoning behind the shift in Russia's peacekeeping system, it is clear that Russian military police are taking the lead on this activity in Syria. According to Lieutenant General Vladimir Ivanovsky, Chief of the Military Police Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff, about 60 percent of Russian military police personnel have served in Syria.¹⁴

New Russian Military Police Battalions

One Russian point of concern regarding the Syrian conflict is the large number of Russian citizens who have joined the Islamic state. According to one estimate, at the beginning of 2017, more than 2,000 Russian citizens from

the Caucasus were fighting in Syria. The majority of these people were from Dagestan (1,200 people) and Chechnya (600 people). In December 2015, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs and Russian Federal Security Service reported that more than 2,800 Russian citizens were fighting in Syria and Iraq. According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, by the end of 2015, 899 criminal cases were pending against people returning from Syria.¹⁵ In order to provide sufficient numbers of military policemen to support the Syrian campaign, the Russian Federation has activated two new military police battalions, with approximately 600 personnel each.¹⁶ Considering that at least one of these battalions was reported as simply being

a reflagged Spetsnaz battalion, these new military police battalions likely have more of a direct action mission than the military police platoons in other regiments and brigades, where the focus is on internal security, discipline, and investigations.

Another interesting aspect of the new Russian military police battalions is their location. These battalions have been formed in the same areas where many of the Islamic state fighters have emerged, and in a few cases, both fighter and military policeman are from the same families. This situation has been attributed to a few terrorism-related incidents in the Caucasus, in protest of Russian actions against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.¹⁷ It is difficult to



Lieutenant General Vladimir Ivanovsky, Chief of the Military Police Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff, 25 December 2016.

surmise why the Russians use this recruitment approach to form military police battalions. It may be because military service in the Caucasus is so highly desirable and prestigious that conscription quotas are usually exceeded, resulting in some young men being turned away from compulsory military service. Additionally, the Head of the Chechen Republic, Mr. Ramzan Kadyrov, has stated, “Tatars, Russians, Chechens—together, they protect the Muslims there. They prevent different denominations from setting at variance among themselves.”¹⁸ This implies that both Christians and Muslims from Russia are protecting Syrian Muslims and that these protectors can dissuade some of the ongoing sectarian violence between the Sunni and Alawites. Considering these battalions are already on their fourth rotation in Syria, it seems clear that Russia is deploying these predominately Muslim military police battalions to alleviate religious concerns in Syria and to provide a suitable outlet for the martial cultures found in the Caucasus.¹⁹

Duties of Russian Military Police in Syria

Russian military police units are currently conducting peacekeeping missions, escorting and providing security for humanitarian aid distribution, and performing traffic control operations throughout the Syrian Arab Republic at battalion level and smaller independent units. Their duties in Syria include conducting base security, manning checkpoints and observation posts, monitoring ceasefire agreements, ensuring passage to/from de-escalation and de-confliction zones, performing security patrols, and guarding command posts. The Russian Federation has well publicized its Russian military police humanitarian activities. These activities include escorting United Nations humanitarian convoys and protecting Russian medical units and mobile hospitals when they are rendering medical assistance to the civilian population. There has also been much publicity about their support of mine-clearing units. Military police traffic control activities include enforcing traffic regulations, inspecting registration documents and state license plates, conducting mechanical inspections of military transport vehicles, and providing convoy security.²⁰

Conclusion

The Russian armed forces have shown little interest in emulating United States/Western processes and institutions, as evidenced by their enlisted professionals and special op-

erations forces; however, their military police system may be the exception to this rule. The role of the Russian military police is serving as traffic controllers, security guards, criminal investigators, prison guards, and peacekeepers—duties that are very familiar to military police in the U.S. Armed Forces. Where Russian military police begin to diverge from their Western counterparts is their role as expeditionary peacekeepers. Unlike the West, where military police are typically part of larger peacekeeping formations, in Syria the Russians are using the military police as the primary tool for Russian ground-power force projection. This is a significant change in how Russia has typically conducted peacekeeping operations. Additionally, Russia is not simply deploying existing military police units; it is raising special military battalions with a direct action focus and capability for this specific purpose. This means that Russia appears to be using two very different types of military police. (The military policemen who serve in the platoons assigned to the regiments and brigades have a much different focus than the military policemen who serve in the military police battalions formed in the Caucasus.) Although both types of military police are now serving in Syria, one type functions as a criminal investigator and maintainer of military discipline, while the other focuses on the expeditionary peacekeeping.

If Russia’s experiment with the use of military police as expeditionary peacekeepers and force projectors is deemed successful, this may not be the last time United States troops encounter the red beret and brassard of the Russian military policeman. ✨



Great emblem of Military Police of Russia²¹

Endnotes

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21. This image is from the website of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. Its use is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License via Wikimedia Commons.

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