



Contract Soldiers and AWOL

OE Watch Commentary: The Russian military's enlisted personnel system continues to evolve. While universal conscription remains in force, over the past several years, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has placed greater emphasis on attracting more contract soldiers, and today there are approximately 400,000 contract soldiers serving in the military. Data regarding re-enlistment rates among contract soldiers appears to be classified, but anecdotal evidence suggests that only a modest percentage elect to extend their terms of service. The accompanying excerpt from a new Russian investigative source, *Important History*, describes some of the reasons "why contractors flee the Russian army."

The article begins by describing the appeal of contract service, pointing out that "many young people, especially from the regions, perceive contract service as a social lift ... [where they] are promised stability and a decent standard of living: a salary of up to 75,000 rubles (approx. \$1,000 per month), an opportunity to choose a duty location and housing." Some discover, however, that "salaries can be two or three times lower than promised, a guaranteed apartment can be turned into a barracks, and hazing can be replaced by extortion and violence." The article goes on to assert that because of these broken promises and difficult circumstances, "every year, a thousand of them are tried for trying to leave their place of service."

The article describes a handful of concrete examples where contract soldiers went AWOL and the reasons behind their desertion. Besides the broken promises listed above, some contract soldiers chose to break their contract because of intimidation and deceit. The author describes how some draftees were induced to sign contracts (to meet the unit quota for contract soldiers) with the assurance that they could still depart the military once their mandatory one-year term of conscript duty was completed; others were prevented from quitting "before the probationary period" (3 months) ended, thus extending their tour for the full contract period. The article also describes the penalties a young soldier incurs after breaking the contract. Not only is a prison sentence likely (up to 5 years), but once released, the ex-contract soldier will have problems finding a job, especially with the "power structures." While the status of those serving in Russia's military has improved dramatically over the past decade, problems remain with attracting and keeping quality contract soldiers. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

"Almost 400,000 people serve in the military on contract in Russia. Every year, a thousand of them are tried for trying to leave their place of service."

Source: "Был бы потом без вести пропавшим. Как и почему контрактники бегут из российской армии (Then I would have been missing. How and why contractors flee the Russian army)," *Важных историй [Important History]*, 29 October 2020. <https://istories.media/reportages/2020/10/29/bil-bi-potom-bez-vesti-propavshim-kak-i-pochemu-kontraktniki-begut-iz-rossiiskoi-armii/> A video that accompanied the story, can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/vmuZ7K8fimI>

Service under the contract is an opportunity "to consciously and professionally fulfill my duty to defend the Fatherland," according to the website of the Ministry of Defense. Contractors are promised stability and a decent standard of living: a salary of up to 75,000 rubles, an opportunity to choose a duty location, and service housing. In August 2020, the Deputy Minister of Defense even spoke about the complete victory over bullying in the Russian army. Many young people, especially from the regions, perceive contract service as a social lift...

The contract is "not just a job," the Defense Ministry writes. It is true: for the entire term of the contract, the employee becomes virtually powerless, often unable to quit or at least transfer to another unit. Salaries can be two or three times lower than promised, a guaranteed apartment can be turned into a barracks, and hazing can be replaced by extortion and violence.

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...Duditsky told his superiors that he wanted to quit before the probationary period ended. The management agreed, promising to start drawing up documents for dismissal. But nothing followed - Duditsky believes that the commanders simply waited until the probationary period ended.... They say: if you sign a contract, if you don't like it, you can terminate it. Then the command stalls for time, tells the contract soldiers various stories, three months pass - and that it's very difficult to quit....

...Dismissal for non-fulfillment of the terms of the contract most often interferes with getting a job in power structures, in the Ministry of Emergency Situations, in the police...

...Experts who spoke to Important Stories say that commanders in the field often have an intention to increase the number of contract soldiers. "A directive is issued that there must be a certain number of contract soldiers in the unit, and the unit commander begins to massively process the guys [conscripts to sign a contract]," explains Shcherbak from Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg. "They promise a higher salary than it actually is, they are misleading about the possibility of dismissal - that is, they are outright misinformed...."

"The law allows for the transition from military service to contract," explains Levinson of Citizen and the Army. "And commanders often voluntarily force conscripts to write a report on the conclusion of a contract, because they have a plan to have more contract soldiers this year than last year...."

...Conscripts, who now serve only a year, are promised that they will not have to serve on a contract any longer - despite the fact that the first contract is usually signed for two or three years. The leadership, according to Levinson, assures the soldiers that they will be released in a year, "as soon as the demobilization comes up," and then says: "no, you must serve, you signed [the contract]!"...