



General Gerasimov on the Syrian Campaign

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpted interview with General Valeriy Gerasimov, First Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, and conducted by the prolific military journalist Viktor Baranets for the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, describes Russia's involvement in the Syrian campaign and how this experience is changing the Russian Armed Forces. General Gerasimov starts by explaining how the Russian Armed Forces became involved in Syria, how the initial deployment was conducted, and how the mission morphed from just providing air support, to later including ground operations.

Of particular interest is General Gerasimov's description of President Putin's 'hands-on' approach to commanding Russian Forces in Syria. According to Gerasimov, Putin is briefed on all aspects of the campaign and is personally making decisions about how to respond. If this description is accurate, it can be reasonably inferred that Putin is personally managing other high-profile problems, such as Russia's ongoing actions in Eastern Ukraine. This 'hands-on' approach to dealing with problems may be what is often described in the West as Russia's 'whole-of-government' approach. Since Putin is personally involved in planning, a slow "bottom-up" staffing process that requires buy-in and coordination from the different branches of government is not required.

Also of interest in the interview is Gerasimov's description of the importance of military advisors, the way in which advisors are fulfilling their duties, and the benefits for the Russian Armed Forces after advisors return to their home duty stations. According to Gerasimov, Russian military advisors have been a key factor in saving Assad's regime from collapse and regaining control of the country. Interestingly, Russia has chosen a military advisor model different from the US model. The US has recently formed a Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), which are designed on the US brigade combat team model and that consist of approximately 800 NCOs and officers that are experts in their respective fields (infantry, armor artillery, logistics, etc.). These personnel then receive additional training to advise and train foreign (conventional) security forces. The Russians are taking a different approach. Instead of establishing SFABs or similar specialized units, the Russians are taking complete staffs from Russian division/regiments, brigades, and battalions, and putting these staff elements with their Syrian counterparts. These complete staff elements are likely rotated back to their units in Russia intact, in order to give their respective units' battle-tested staffs that are accustomed to working together. General Gerasimov stated that over 48,000 Russian personnel have served in Syria, so it is likely that many Ground Forces, Naval Infantry, and Airborne commanders and staff officers are getting much valued combat experience. Gerasimov also discusses the value of equipment validation and 'lessons learned' from Syria. Russia has combat tested over 200 new pieces of equipment, with some requiring modification after combat conditions made deficiencies apparent. Gerasimov mentions that the Syrian campaign has led to a host of new training and doctrine products. The accompanying article from *Krasnaya Zvezda* discusses some of the tangible results of this new training and doctrine, namely new training aids and manuals. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**



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Source: Viktor Baranets, “Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма» [Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov: ‘We Have Broken the Back of the Shock Troops of Terrorism’]” *Komsomolskaya Pravda Online*, 26 December 2017. <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693>

The defeat of the terrorists’ armed formations in Syria has been one of the main military results of the outgoing year. And the Russian army unquestionably played the decisive role in this.

I wanted above all to discuss this in detail with General of the Army Valeriy Gerasimov, First Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and Chief of the General Staff of Russia’s Armed Forces...

[Baranets] Valeriy Vasilyevich, how was it possible in the fall of 2015 to redeploy our major troop grouping to Syria so rapidly and surreptitiously? I read in the American press at the time that the generals over there were almost in a panic. They were not expecting such speed and agility from our army. And they even complained that their intelligence was late...

[Gerasimov] It was a meticulously planned operation, all the issues were taken into consideration, the requisite men and equipment were identified. I have in mind both the combat component and the support component. But we had practically no experience of performing the redeployment of troops and forces over such a distance, to the territory of a state that did not border on our country. There was only a single example, Operation Anadyr in 1962, when the USSR deployed troops to Cuba. We also took that experience into account. The proficiency gained by our subunits during the snap inspections also stood us in good stead. During these, we rehearsed redeployment over long distances, making use of all forms of transport...air, rail, sea. The redeployment was conducted with the utmost secrecy, without attracting particular attention. Fifty aircraft were concentrated at Humaymim airfield... All this took something like a month... The support component required more time. The infrastructure had to be created, a system of comprehensive support, logistic support included.

[Baranets] Why, when planning the operation in Syria, did our General Staff not make provision from the outset for the employment of ground subunits and units but instead place the main emphasis on air power? What was the story here?

[Gerasimov] We had assessed the status of the Syrian armed forces’ ground troops. Despite the fact that they had been engaged in combat operations for quite some time and had sustained losses, individual units were nonetheless mission-capable. What was needed was to address the issues primarily of target reconnaissance and effective engagement, and disruption of the enemy’s command and control system. These were missions that could be performed by our aerospace component. But combat operations directly in the ground troops sectors were conducted by Syrian subunits with the involvement of our military advisers. Other pro-government groups were also present, so the deployment of a ground component was not initially envisaged...

[Baranets] And what consideration did our General Staff give to the specific features of the terrorists’ tactics? What was the main focus of attention here?

[Gerasimov]...These armed groups were headed by commanders who had been specially trained by instructors from a whole range of Middle Eastern states and Western countries. There were also former officers of the Iraqi army. During the period when combat operations were in progress they had seized a large quantity of armament and equipment belonging to the Iraqi and Syrian armies. Their inventory included up to 1,500 tanks and armored vehicles alone. Plus something in the neighborhood of 1,200 guns and mortars. This was essentially a regular army...As of 30 September 2015 there were something like 59,000 [insurgents] in...plus in the past two years they have been able to recruit another 10,000 or so... according to our data, around 60,000 militants have been eliminated, with over 2,800 of these originally from the Russian Federation.

[Baranets] Have I understood it correctly that we are retaining these two bases of ours to continue providing assistance to the Syrian government army, yes?

[Gerasimov] Yes, because the situation is still unstable. Some time is needed before full stability is achieved, so the bases are there for a good reason, they are essential there. So as to prevent a repetition of the situation prior to September 2015... It shouldn’t be forgotten, on the other hand, that Russia, too, has its own interests in the Middle East...

[Baranets] During the course of the operation in Syria how frequently did you yourself and the minister of defense need to discuss the progress of the operation with the Supreme Commander in Chief. Was this done face to face in the Kremlin, at the General Staff, or over the telephone?

[Gerasimov] It varies. I usually report to the minister of defense on a daily basis morning and evening on the state of affairs and the progress in mission performance, and he reports to the president. Once or twice a week the minister reports to the president in person, presenting the requisite documents, maps, and video materials. Sometimes the Supreme Commander in Chief himself comes to see me, sometimes the defense minister and I go to him to report. The president identifies the targets, the objectives, he is up to speed on the entire dynamic of the combat operations. And in each sector, moreover. And, of course, he sets the objectives for the future.

[Baranets] What has been the General Staff’s greatest difficulty when planning the military operation in Syria?

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-General of the Army Valeriy Gerasimov, First Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and Chief of the General Staff of Russia's Armed Forces

Source: Viktor Baranets, “Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма» [Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov: ‘We Have Broken the Back of the Shock Troops of Terrorism’]” *Komsomolskaya Pravda Online*, 26 December 2017. <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693>

[Gerasimov] The most challenging element during preparations for the operation and in the initial period of its implementation was that of organizing collaboration with the government troops, and the other pro-government forces...It was no easy matter setting up the collaboration of all these detachments with our aerospace forces, organizing all manner of support. But we have already learned to do this. Everything has fitted into place and is functioning normally. In Humaymim we have established a state-of-the-art command post that supports command and control of our troop grouping in Syria... over 48,000 officers and men [have been involved]...

[Baranets] How do you assess the role of our military advisers who operated inside the Syrian army?

[Gerasimov] I rate their role highly. Within every subunit -- battalion, brigade, regiment, division -- there is a military adviser's staff. It comprises the essential officials. Namely, operations staff, intelligence officer, artilleryman, engineer, interpreters, and other officials. They essentially plan the combat operations. They provide assistance in subunit command and control during combat mission performance. In all sectors actions are linked by a common concept of operations, by a single plan, leadership is exercised from the grouping's command post at Humaymim.

[Baranets] And the lessons of the Syrian campaign that the General Staff will need to learn?

[Gerasimov] The study and generalization of experience is an ongoing process. This work has been carried out from the first day of this campaign... All the incidents that have occurred, the experience derived from the combat operations -- all of this has been carefully studied and brought to the attention of all the subunits and the men that were just getting ready to head out there, so that all of this is taken into consideration. We have held several conferences on sharing experiences. A whole range of training manuals that generalize this experience has been published.

[Baranets] We have tested a large quantity of armaments in Syria. What is the General Staff's assessment of them?

[Gerasimov] We have tested over 200 models of armament and equipment there, modern pieces, those that had recently entered service, those that were on the point of entering service, and those that were already in service. They had ostensibly come through all the state tests, and they are performing normally in exercises... But during combat mission performance some problems arise that weren't noticed before. There is something that needs modifying...

[Baranets] As far as I am aware, the Russian army has never before employed the quantity of UAVs it has done in Syria. How do you assess the significance of this type of equipment in light of the Syrian experience?

[Gerasimov] In Syria there are now on average around 60-70 UAVs airborne on any given day. They conduct reconnaissance, there are UAVs that perform electronic countermeasures missions and resolve other tasks. In the space of five years we have taken a big step forward in the UAV context. Previously all we had in service were the old Soviet type designated Reys. Now the conduct of combat operations is inconceivable without a UAV. It is used by artillerymen, recon scouts, airmen -- everyone. UAVs are employed to create reconnaissance-strike and reconnaissance-fire loops.

Source: Aleksandr Tikhonov, “Нас ждёт «Восток-2018»: Боевая подготовка была и остаётся основным содержанием повседневной деятельности войск в мирное время [Vostok-2018 Awaits Us: Combat Training Has Been and Remains the Main Troop Activity],” *Krasnaya Zvezda Online*, 1 December 2017. <http://redstar.ru/index.php/newspaper/item/35264-nas-zhdjot-vostok-2018>

Lieutenant General Ivan Buvaltsev, Chief of Russian Federation Armed Forces Main Combat Training Directorate, tells about results of the training year that has ended and about plans for the 2018 training year.

[KZ] How is the principle of “teaching troops what is necessary in war” being implemented today with consideration of the experience of combat operations?

[Buvaltsev] The Main Combat Training Directorate developed 11 methods aids taking the experience of combat operations into account. Among them is the Manual for Training Troops to Conduct Combat Operations on Mountainous and High-Mountain Terrain [«Руководство по подготовке войск к ведению боевых действий в горной и высокогорной местности»]; a new textbook, Combined-Arms Training of the Soldier (Seaman) [«Общевойсковая подготовка солдата (матроса)»]; the training aid “Urban Combat” [«Бой в населённом пункте»]; and a number of others. These aids permitted developing uniform approaches to organizing combat training and departing from stereotypes in training commanders, command and control entities, military units, and subunits.