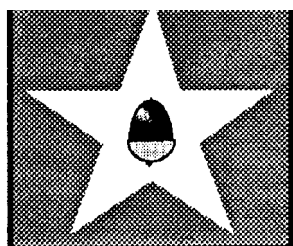


Conflict Studies Research Centre

M J Orr

**The Russian Garrison
in Tajikistan-
201st Gatchina
Twice Red Banner
Motor Rifle Division**

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The Russian Garrison in Tajikistan 201st Gatchina Twice Red Banner Motor Rifle Division

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Introduction

Russian influence in Central Asia is a significant factor in the present strategic situation around Afghanistan. The most important military element in that influence is the motor rifle division in Tajikistan and no doubt its role was discussed when General Anatoliy Kvashnin, chief of the Russian general staff, recently visited Dushanbe. This short brief outlines the history and organization of the division and describes its current operations and manning difficulties. The final section assesses 201 Motor Rifle Division's operational effectiveness at present.

History

Great Patriotic War The division was formed in the Leningrad area in November 1943 after an earlier division numbered 201st had been converted into a Guards division. The present 201st Division earned the honorific title "Gatchina" for its role in the breaking of the Leningrad blockade and subsequently fought along the Baltic coast. The division was awarded its first Order of the Red Banner for its wartime service.

1945-1991 As 201 Motor Rifle Division it was stationed in the Central Asian Military District and was one of the first formations to enter Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in December 1979. The division served in Afghanistan throughout the war and was awarded a second Order of the Red Banner in 1985. One of its armoured personnel carriers, BTR-60 No 305, was the last vehicle to cross back onto Soviet territory, carrying General Boris Gromov and the banner of 40th Army. The vehicle is preserved as a memorial within the division.

1992-2001 After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 most of the former Soviet forces in Central Asia came under the control of the new republics in which they were deployed. The disintegration of the Tajik government and the outbreak of civil war in 1992 ensured a different fate for the 201st. Its locally-conscripted Tajik soldiers slipped away as the war began but the mostly Russian officers and warrant officers stayed at their posts, bringing their families into their barracks and refusing to surrender their arms and equipment to the mobs outside.

In September 1992 President Yel'tsin took 201 MRD under Russian jurisdiction and it became the basis of the CIS Collective Peacekeeping Force in Tajikistan. When the Tajik civil war ended and the peacekeeping force was disbanded the Russian and Tajik governments agreed that the division should be transformed into a military base. However the agreement, signed on 16 April 1999, has never been formally implemented and 201 MRD's present and future status within Tajikistan remain undefined.

Organization

201 MRD retains the classic Soviet motor rifle divisional organization, with 3 motor rifle regiments and combat support and combat service support units. Divisional headquarters is located in the Giprozemgorodok barracks complex on the outskirts of Dushanbe, together with 92 Motor Rifle Regiment and most of the support units (tank battalion, artillery regiment, air defence regiment, engineer, signals, reconnaissance, transport and maintenance elements, etc). 149 Guards Motor Rifle Regiment is based in Kulyab and 191 Motor Rifle Regiment in Kurgan-Tyube. In addition, a helicopter squadron with Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters supports the division from Dushanbe South airport. Fixed wing aircraft are also deployed on rotation from squadrons in the Russian Federation. The division has 160 tanks, 300 armoured personnel carriers, about 200 artillery pieces and mortars and 1100 transport vehicles. Its total strength is between 6,000 and 7,000 men and women.

Until recently the division was directly subordinated to the Volga Military District but with the amalgamation of the Volga and Urals MDs in September 2001 a new formation, 2nd Army, was created in the old Volga MD headquarters in Samara. It is said that the role of this formation is to coordinate forces in Central Asia and 201 MRD is presumably now subordinate to this headquarters. However, given the distances involved, the division is largely autonomous in its day-to-day activities, liaising directly with the Russian Border Guard headquarters in Tajikistan and the Tajik Ministry of Defence.

At the beginning of October Major General Valentin Orlov gave up command of the division after 4 years. It might not be ideal to change an experienced commander at a time of increasing tension, but his successor, Col Yury Perminov, knows Tajikistan well. Perminov was deputy commander of the division until two years ago when he left to attend the General Staff Academy in Moscow.

Current Operations

The main role of 201 MRD is to provide "echeloned support" for the Russian Border Guard forces on the Tajik-Afghan border. This mission dates back to the events of July 1993 when a border post was over-run by Tajik rebels and

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its garrison gruesomely massacred. The disaster revealed the low tactical standards of the Border Troops and an almost total lack of co-ordination between the Border Guards and 201 MRD.

The division now provides 7 reinforced company tactical groups in static positions to back up the border guards. 149 Guards Motor Rifle Regiment supports the Moskovskiy district's 117 Border Detachment and 191 Motor Rifle Regiment supports 48 Border Detachment in the Pyandzh district. Dushanbe-based units are also used to reinforce the border, especially artillery and engineer elements. The company tactical groups basically consist of a motor rifle company with tank and mortar sub-units. Coordination with the border guards has improved since 1993; joint procedures have been established and motor rifle and border guard troops do train together. However there have been no major border incursions (as opposed to smuggling or illegal immigration) since 1995. Deployments along the border last for a month and the company group is then rotated back to its base.

The Dushanbe garrison provides guards for vulnerable points such as the Russian embassy, the Russian school, its own barracks and armaments and fuel depots. Air defence units are responsible for both air and ground defence of the Russian air group at Dushanbe South airfield. 92 Motor Rifle Regiment in Dushanbe has provided a company or platoon for the "Centrasbat" series of multinational peace-keeping exercises which have been held annually since 1997. It also seems that this regiment will also provide a reinforced motor rifle battalion as the Russian contribution to the new Central Asian Rapid Deployment Force. This force was set up under CIS auspices in 2001 and so far has held a couple of command post exercises and a low-level field firing exercise in October in Kyrgyzstan. It is not clear whether the force is yet considered fully operational. It was originally intended to counter incursions into the Osh valley and a change of focus might delay its availability.

The anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan has obviously had an impact on 201 MRD. Although there are conflicting reports about the raising of its readiness state, Russian television has shown pictures of a pontoon bridge being built across the Pyandzh river so that military equipment can be passed to the Northern Alliance. It is probable that the Afghan end of the bridge is protected by Russian troops and some sources claim that advisers are training Northern Alliance troops to use their new weapons and helping to maintain them. Such advisers are most likely to come from 201 MRD, but official Russian sources have so far denied their presence in Afghanistan. At the end of September a meeting between Emomali Rakhmonov, the president of Tajikistan and Vladimir Rushaylo, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, emphasised that preventing Afghan refugees from entering Tajikistan is a major mission for the division and the border guards.

The Manpower Problem

For the last ten years manpower has been 201 MRD's major problem. When the USSR collapsed most of the rank and file were recruited from Tajikistan and they returned to their homes when the Tajik Civil War began. At first they were replaced by conscripts from Russia but they were not well trained. In 1995 pressure from soldiers' families forced President Yel'tsin to decree that only volunteers should serve in the "hot-spots" outside Russian territory. As a result 201 MRD became the Russian army's first "fully-professional formation". The term is somewhat misleading. 201 MRD's soldiers were not conscripts but signed a contract to serve in the unit for a period of time. At first some of these contracts may have been for as little as six months, though the preferred duration is two years for officers and three years for other ranks. Finding enough "contract servicemen" (*kontraktniki*) for the division has always been a problem and 201 MRD's total strength has been between six and seven thousand men, scarcely half of the full establishment of a motor rifle division. This manpower shortage has meant that the division has always had difficulties with the quality of its recruits. The military districts in the homeland were chiefly concerned to find their quota of recruits and if 201 MRD later found them unfit to serve, that was the division's problem, not the military districts', despite the waste of funds in transporting unsuitable recruits to Tajikistan. It seems that the Ministry of Defence expected nothing better. Lieutenant-General Putilin, head of the Main Organization-Mobilization Directorate, summed up the common view of the *kontraktniki* when he said that anyone who was willing to live in the conditions of Tajikistan for such a low wage "would be either long-term unemployed or someone who has already poisoned his mind and brains with spirits to such an extent that he agrees to serve without ever have been there. Once they get there ...they are quick to get out, very quick indeed."

The average age of 201 MRD's soldiers is 28-30; up to 15% of them are ethnically Tajiks or Uzbeks. Many of the contract servicemen sent to Tajikistan have never served in motor rifle or even ground forces units before. It is quite common for soldiers and even officers to have served in the navy or strategic rocket forces before they join 201 MRD's ranks. On arrival recruits have to be trained in their new role and during this period of 2-3 months they are on probation. The wastage rate of those who leave voluntarily or are weeded out as physically or psychologically unfit seems to be as high as 15-20%. In addition there is a steady loss of 25-30 soldiers a month who leave at a later stage in their service, often simply not returning from their annual leave period.

201 MRD soldiers have a number of special privileges such as longer leave and double pay (R1,800-2,000 a month, which is still not a high wage). In addition, a day's service in Tajikistan counts as three. Thus a contract serviceman who has done two years as a conscript and completed two 3-year contracts with the division would be entitled to a pension, as if he had served twenty years. These inducements are not enough to ensure the division is properly manned or to improve the quality of its troops. Although

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the overwhelming majority of officers extend their contracts to serve in Tajikistan it appears that no more than a third of NCOs and soldiers re-enlist at the end of their contract.

Conditions of service in Tajikistan are poor. The barracks were built for cavalry regiments in the 1930s and maintenance is a difficult problem in a country prone to earthquakes. The local population are not very friendly and after a number of attacks on Russian servicemen, troops are confined to barracks after dark. This only increases the alcohol problem which is endemic in the whole Russian army. In the last two years 6 of 201 MRD's soldiers have died from drink or drug overdoses and another 14 made themselves seriously ill. Nearly 70% of the 392 men discharged from the division on disciplinary grounds in 2000 had drink problems and another 6% were drug addicts or were caught smuggling drugs.

Thus by the beginning of 2001 it was clear that the attempt to man the division with contract servicemen was failing. The Russian Ministry of Defence probably hoped that the end of the Tajik civil war would make it possible to reduce the size of its contingent in the country, hence the agreement to convert 201 MRD into a military base. However the continuing instability in the region, even before recent events, made force reductions risky. It was therefore decided to introduce a mixed manning system for the division. Although contract servicemen would continue to be recruited, the Volga (now Volga-Urals) Military District was to find conscripts who would volunteer to serve in Tajikistan. The conscripts would have to have served for at least six months before being posted to 201 MRD and would receive special training in the Kryazh training centre in typical missions, such as manning checkpoints and guarding convoys. Once in Tajikistan the conscripts were to receive the same pay and privileges as contract servicemen. This presumably means that a conscript who completes 6 months training in the Volga-Urals MD and then 6 months, triple-time, active duty in Tajikistan will have served the equivalent of two years and be eligible for discharge. The first 1,500 conscripts joined the division in at the end of September this year. Attempts will doubtless be made to persuade them to extend their service but it is hard to see why the re-enlistment rate should be higher than it has been over the last few years, especially if Tajikistan becomes a more active theatre of operations.

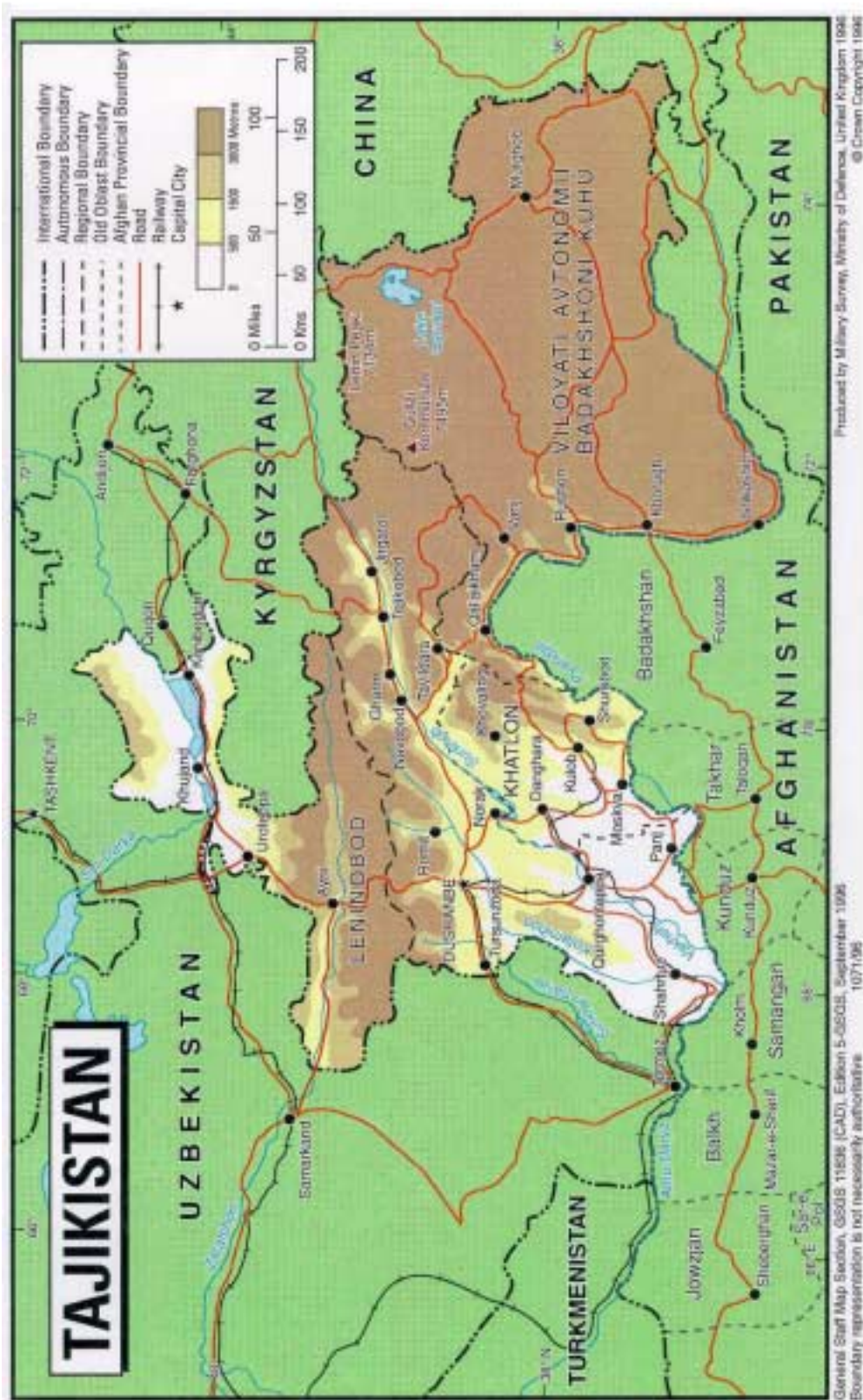
Assessment

There is no doubt that 201 MRD is the most effective military force in Tajikistan and probably in the Central Asian republics overall. Although this brief has described its very serious and long-standing manpower problems it must be remembered that the division has a core of long-serving officers and other ranks whose loyalty is the most remarkable feature of its recent history. The service of some of this cadre goes back to the Afghan war and the division will have to rely on them if it is to play a significant role in the present crisis. They know the region and the regular and irregular military forces operating there. Their record suggests that they will try to ensure that

201 MRD carries out its mission of maintaining Russia as a regional power in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, there are serious limitations on the division's effectiveness. It has not received much new equipment (if any) since the Afghan War and the supply of spares and ammunition is often disrupted by local bureaucratic squabbles. In terms of manpower it is only half a division and at least a third of its rank and file have only been in the country for a few weeks. In normal times acclimatisation and shake-down training are reckoned to take up to three months. For the last decade the division has been playing a largely static, defensive role, guarding key points and convoys, manning fortified positions near the border and rehearsing local deployments to back-up frontier posts under attack. There has been no field training above battalion level. All these factors indicate that the 201 MRD is unlikely to operate as a division-size formation. It would be able to assist the border guards in refugee management, although a major exodus into Tajikistan would probably overwhelm any force which could be deployed along the 1,400 kilometre border. The division's troops could also assist in providing humanitarian aid to refugees. During the present American air campaign Taliban forces could not hope to launch a major incursion into Tajikistan, but the border guards and 201 MRD have never been able to prevent small groups crossing the border, so terrorist action within the country cannot be ruled out. It is hard to believe that the Russian general staff contemplates a more active role for 201 MRD or any operations outside its present deployment areas. Making good Russia's commitment to provide a small battalion-sized task force for the regional rapid reaction force is likely to test 201 MRD's capabilities to the utmost. If Russia does need to employ a larger force in the region, it may have to rely on the airborne forces.

Tajikistan



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Directorate General Development and Doctrine
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346
Or 412375

Fax : (44) 1276 686880

E-mail: csrc@gtnet.gov.uk
<http://www.csrc.ac.uk>

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