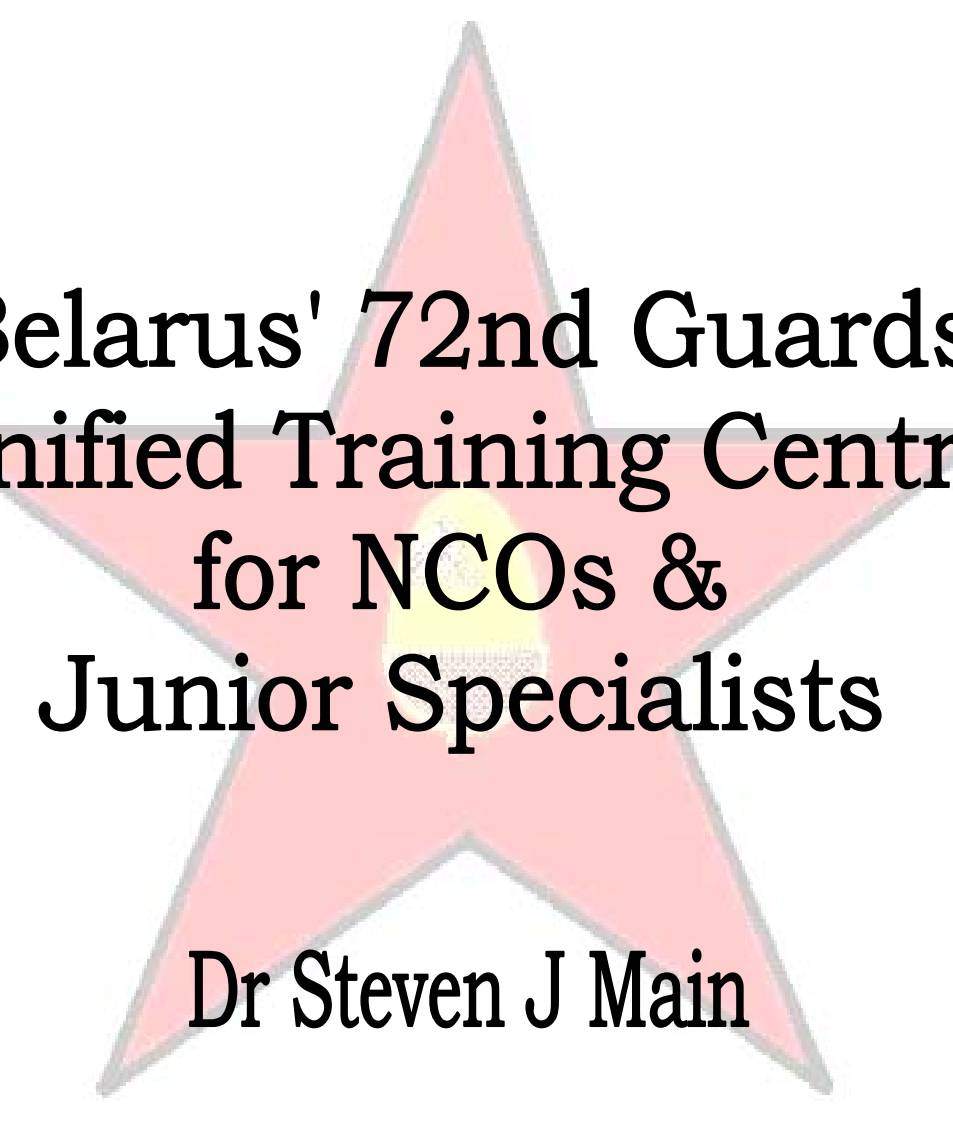


Conflict Studies Research Centre



**Belarus' 72nd Guards
Unified Training Centre
for NCOs &
Junior Specialists**

Dr Steven J Main

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Key Points

- * Belarus' trains all its NCOs and specialist trades at this centre.
- * Courses last 5 months.
- * About 250 men and women graduate twice a year.
- * Equipment and techniques may be old-fashioned, but the Armed Forces like the product.

Belarus' 72nd Guards Unified Training Centre for NCOs & Junior Specialists

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This is a specialist paper for those interested in the Belarusian Armed Forces, particularly in the detail of how the NCOs and junior specialists, important to the functioning of any nation's Armed Forces, are trained. For the most part reproducing material published by the Belarusian MoD, what follows will therefore lack a certain degree of critical judgement. However, this paper's value lies in that it is the first treatment of the topic in English – at least, to this author's knowledge. In looking at the work of the 72nd Guards Unified Training Centre for Training NCOs and Junior Specialists (*72-oy gvardeyskiy ob'yedinenny uchebnyy tsentr podgotovki praporshchikov i mladshikh spetsialistov*, usually referred to as “72-oy OUTs”), the paper will examine the origins and work of one of the most important elements in the whole training/teaching process in the Belarusian Armed Forces.

Belarus' seems to have largely avoided the economic chaos and anarchy suffered by other former Soviet republics in the past 10 years or so.¹ Similarly, there is evidence in Belarus' of more thought, more general agreement, on how to construct a “new” military apparatus to defend and protect the country from the new security threats of the 21st century, even if outsiders may not agree with their threat assessment.²

Origins

According to a previous Head of 72nd OUTs, Colonel A Tyshkevich, the origins of the Centre pre-date the launch of the attack on the USSR by Nazi Germany in June 1941:

“formed in August 1940, the 120th Rifle division began its military career in the first days of the war. The unit was involved in the fierce fighting surrounding the town of Yel'nya ... by order of the People's Commissar of Defence, as of 26th September 1941 120th Rifle Division was reformed to become the 6th Guards Rifle Division. As such, it was involved in the heavy fighting surrounding Tula, on the Western Front, at Kursk ... During the war, it forded a record number of rivers, including the Dnepr, Desna, Pripyat', etc. It celebrated Victory Day in Prague, having liberated 18 towns and 1,458 population points ... in peace time, the 6th Guards Rifle Division was re-named many times, formerly being the 15th Mechanised, 47th Tank and 45th Training Tank Division. On 30th November 1992, it became the 72nd Guards Unified Training Centre for the Training of Junior Specialists.”³

Unfortunately, Tyshkevich makes no mention of the activity of 72nd OUTs throughout the 1990s.

In 2001, the Belarusian Armed Forces journal *Armiya* published an article on the creation of a Unified Training Centre for NCOs, in the area of Borisov-Pechi.⁴ The article noted that such a school had long been needed, the last one having closed in 1993. The 114th training regiment's facilities had been thoroughly modernised, thanks to the "organisational work" undertaken by the Minister of Defence, Lieutenant-General L Mal'tsev, and it was officially named 'The Guards Chenstokhova, Orders of Kutuzov 3rd Class, Bogdan Khmel'nitskiy 2nd Class and Red Star School for training NCOs'.

Its first intake including some 220 military personnel and a further 30 Signals NCOs. The majority of the intake had between 3-15 years of service in the Armed Forces, 2 even having served in Afghanistan. The length of training was fixed at 5 months. Applicants had to be contract soldiers with a higher education qualification and a recommendation from their unit commander. It was expected that, within a couple of years, the school would solve the Belarusian Armed Forces' problems in filling elementary command positions.

In May 2002, the Russian Ministry of Defence's newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, published an article about the future redeployment of all training units in the Belarusian Armed Forces to 72nd OUTs at Borisov.⁵ The stated aim of the restructuring was to relieve commanders of training units of non-training related tasks. It seems likely, therefore, that although 72nd OUTs may initially have been specifically designed to train NCOs, it had become apparent that the facilities provided a good and cost-effective opportunity to train not only all the necessary NCOs, but also junior specialists - the mechanics, the bakers, technical repair staff, etc - for the whole Armed Forces.

Certainly, the Belarusian Minister of Defence, Colonel-General L Mal'tsev, sang the praises of the Centre when he paid it a visit in August 2002:

"I am happy with the reform ... of the training Centre ... Within the framework of the reform of the Armed Forces, in the shape of the 72nd OUTs, a serious step has been made in raising to a qualitatively new level the process of training specialists to meet modern demands."⁶

The Centre's Functions & Achievements

In an article in the special issue of the Belarusian Armed Forces magazine *Armiya* celebrating 85 years of the Belarusian Armed Forces, Colonel Tyshkevich explained in more detail how in 2002 the Centre was "fundamentally reorganised ... on the basis of one of the garrisons - the famous, all over the [Soviet] Union, training centre at Pechi, [it was decided] in double quick time to re-locate all the training units of the Belarusian Army there."⁷ Referring to it as 'The 72nd Guards Unified Roven'ki Order of Lenin, Red Banner, Order of Suvorov 2nd class training Centre for preparing NCOs and junior specialists', Tyshkevich went on to list the OUTs' functions:

"the Centre for the training of NCOs and junior specialists nowadays consists of the Centre's administration, NCO-training school, 10 specialist training schools (tank, motor-rifle, intelligence, engineering, NBC, communications, repairs, air and air defence, automobile, artillery, food services), Centre for Technical Maintenance, Centre for Rear Support and a separate medical battalion. Junior specialists for 100 specialities

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are trained on the basis of the Centre's work. On top of that, NCOs for 10 different specialities are also trained here – including commanders of tank and motor-rifle platoons, unit chiefs, specialists for ground artillery, communications, rear, repair of armoured and automobile units.”⁸

Tyshkevich also noted that a lot of the time of the training units' commanders had until then been spent on activities not directly connected with improving the training of the course intake, but on maintaining the existence of the units themselves, ie making sure that there was enough fuel to conduct exercises on the test ranges; checking that the barracks were up to scratch; ensuring that there was food on the table (literally), etc. All in all, it was reckoned that up to 70% of the training unit commander's time was spent on non-training related duties.

“The Ministry of Defence took the correct decision to completely free the commanders of training units ... from concerns not connected to the training and education of their subordinates. Thus, in 72nd Guards Unified Training Centre ... there have been created the Centre for Technical Maintenance and the Centre of Rear Support Services. These are completely new organisational structures, called on to solve current problems, leaving the training units time to conduct quality lessons on combat training.”⁹

This is probably part of the reason why the Centre was able to record a very positive result at year's end. In December 2002, the Deputy Commander of Ground Forces, the man in charge of the Directorate of Combat Training and Reserve Training, Major-General V Borov, in an official report stated that, although the students had only been at the Centre for 5 months, it was obvious to him that “the officers and NCOs, the sergeants at the training centre, conscientiously instruct the young soldiers on ways of handling combat vehicles – T-72, BMP-2.” He was also very impressed by the fact that “more than half” of the graduates at the training centre had completed their course with a grading of either “good” or “excellent”.¹⁰

2002 also saw the introduction in the Belarusian Armed Forces of the principle of replacing officers commanding platoons and companies with experienced NCOs. At first, this was only applied to armoured/automobile training repair units. Once the NCOs had proved themselves equal to the task, the experiment was extended to include a further two companies, namely a motor-rifle training and a signals company: all three test companies were officially rated as “good”. As Tyshkevich noted, “the experiment had proved itself”.¹¹

By the time of the third intake (August 2002), there were some 4-5 applicants for every vacancy at the NCO training school. Approximately 300 were accepted. The majority of them had secondary education, were between 25-30, had served at least a year in the country's Armed Forces and a significant minority already had a family.¹²

By February 2003, some 800 men had graduated from 72nd OUTs, 190 of whom had moved on to take charge of various platoons and companies. The fourth intake (February 2003) for the first time included a complement of women (42 in all), which became the subject of much comment in the Belarusian military press, most of it very positive. All the women were described as “serious” in their attitude towards their work; with an average age of 20-25, every second woman had come from a military family. Of this particular batch, only two had children. As long as suitable arrangements are made, no woman is barred from applying to enter 72nd

OUTs, simply because she has children.¹³ Separate living accommodation was created for the women but the women are expected to perform the same duties as the men, no exceptions being made in terms of the training, or the duties to be performed both in the garrison and in exercise on the training grounds.¹⁴

By the time of the fourth graduation, over 1,000 NCOs and junior specialists had qualified from 72 OUTs and had re-joined their units. Of the batch of 258 from the fourth graduation, 58 graduated with distinction; 127 were either “good” or “excellent” and, of the female contingent, 90% graduated either “good” or “excellent”. 12 of the original batch graduated with “distinction”. Of the 258, 1/3 came from a military background.¹⁵ A further intake of 33 women entered the Centre at the end of 2003. Their minimum educational qualifications were either secondary school or a professional-technical qualification. All of them had served in the Forces between 2-8 years and were in the age group 25-30. All of them had signed up to become career soldiers.¹⁶

In terms of the training on offer, information is much more difficult to find. Not only do they train tank drivers – using simulators which are 20 years old – but they also still teach the drivers how to ford water obstacles.¹⁷ There is an obvious requirement for more modern tank simulators, one which could be fulfilled easily if the money was available but, for the time being, it is not. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in training the men how to properly handle the BMD personnel carriers in service, they only have 10 operating manuals to go round 100 students (they obviously can’t afford a photocopier, either!)¹⁸

Another article detailed an exercise where men – and women – were training to prevent a break out, by tanks, against frontline positions using their nerve, Molotov cocktails and hand grenades. This is very reminiscent of action in WW2, but how useful is it in today’s era of local conflicts, never mind the global war against terrorism?¹⁹

An article in 2003 mentioned the likelihood that Air and Air Defence units would begin to use 72nd OUTs to assist in training pilots there, not just aircrew.²⁰

In December 2003, the Belarusian military newspaper *Vo Slavu Rodiny* made its lead article the graduation of ‘the Guards Chenstokhova Orders of Kutuzov, Bogdan Khmel’nitskiy and Red Star school for training NCOs of the 72nd Guards Unified Training Centre’. The divergent wording and differing lists of honorifics in articles about the Centre implies that the schools within the Unified Centre still to some extent maintain a separate existence. The article also explained that the courses and examinations were set by a commission headed by the deputy commander of forces in the Western Operational Command, Colonel I Gordeychik. At the graduation ceremony, Gordeychik stated that:

“judging by the results of those who passed the exams, one can say with certainty that the NCO School of 72nd OUTs is equal to the task of training professionals in every category. There is a clearly established training programme, [as well as] the necessary conditions of service, teaching and living for the contract-students: everything which naturally assists the qualitative fulfilment of the training programmes has been created.”²¹

249 specialists in 17 disciplines graduated, 44 of them ranked ‘excellent’; 44 were women. The article also pointed out that the age profile of the students was getting

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younger: the average age of this batch being 22-24. Apparently, this is due to the “growing prestige” of military service.²² Whilst this may be the case, it may also be a reflection on Belarusian society: being a contract serviceman and seeking advancement through improved qualifications (and more money) is not a bad way to get by in a relatively poor country with low wages, even if they are paid on time. The next intake of students was expected to reach the 200 mark, including 20 women students.²³ In fact, the actual numbers were “more than 200” and the number of female graduates was 31.²⁴ This would mean that, since July 2001, approximately 2,500 personnel have graduated from the Centre’s 5-month courses. This is a fair number, especially given that the total size of the Belarusian Armed Forces is just under 81,000.²⁵

There are courses on offer at the Centre designed to instruct NCOs in moral-psychological training (MPT) and turn them into what is somewhat euphemistically called *aktivisty* (“activists”). These references appear to indicate that Belarus’ is restoring the practice, if not the name, of political worker. The relevant school is called “the school of the soldier’s *aktiv*”.²⁶ Its initial intake was 160, divided into 4 groups, each headed by an officer experienced in MPT. Each is responsible for “carrying out a steady and well-aimed programme of individual-educational work [designed] to form the appropriate moral-psychological qualities ... knowledge of the state’s ideology, [and develop] the communication skills necessary to carry out the required tasks”. The very first lecture for the students is entitled: “the role and place of the Armed Forces in the formation and realisation of the ideology of the Belarusian state”.²⁷ “The habits picked up in training should help the young soldiers become real patriots of their country, with a clear understanding of the conduct of ideological work, both amongst the army’s youth and young citizens.”²⁸ In their work at unit level, the *aktivisty* will work under the control of the commanders to “assist strengthening of military discipline, render a positive influence on their fellow servicemen, inculcate in them a feeling of patriotism, mutual understanding and mutual assistance”.²⁹ In short, they will do everything a good political officer did in the Soviet Army.

The Future

A new man was appointed to command 72nd OUTs on 11th May 2004, Colonel S Potapenko (he had been placed in temporary charge 4 months prior to his formal appointment). According to his official biography, Sergey Potapenko was born on 14th March 1961, in the village of Rzhavka, Borisov *rayon*. After finishing the Minsk Suvorov Military School in 1978, he enrolled in the Ul’yanovsk Guards Higher Tank Command College. He was then sent to Southern Group of Forces and commanded a tank platoon. He remained there until 1989, when he enrolled in the MSU R Ya Malinovskiy Armoured Forces Academy. After successfully completing the course, in 1992 he was sent to the Red Banner Belarusian MD. He began his career at 72nd OUTs in 1992, where he commanded a training battalion and regiment, then served in the Centre’s administration firstly as a senior officer of an instruction department and then as chief of a training section. In 2002, he was appointed chief of a large-scale training unit.³⁰

As can be seen from his biography, Potapenko would appear to have been the obvious choice for the job. In his first major interview as head of 72nd OUTs, published in July 2004, Potapenko was keen to emphasise the previous good work of Tyshekevich and that “there is no need” for any “serious changes” in the work of the units as a whole. As far as he was concerned, “normal conditions” both for the

study and everyday activity of the students existed, any outstanding problems being solved “together”.³¹ Potapenko did make the point, however, that following an order from the Ministry of Defence, even more of the students’ time could be spent on improving their specialist knowledge: they would no longer have to clean up the litter around their barracks, or do other such menial duties, that now being the preserve of a special maintenance unit attached to the Centre.³²

In his assessment of the work of 72nd OUTs, the Chief of the Belarusian General Staff, Lieutenant-General Sergey Gurulev stated that:

“in accordance with the programme for the reform of the Armed Forces, the 72nd Guards Unified Training Centre has improved the quality of training of the students, by avoiding a break between them and [their] combat training. The training centre has become the main forge for the training and education of junior specialists.”³³

It certainly would appear that the 72nd OUTs is fulfilling its task of supplying the Belarusian Armed Forces with the right number and the right type of trained NCOs and junior specialists. For whatever reason, the competition for places is a sign that what is on offer in terms of a military career at a junior level is both adequate and attractive. Although there are still problems – for instance, in terms of accommodation – both the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff seem to be more than satisfied with what is being trained at Pechi.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a brief but interesting account of the contemporary Belarusian economic and political situation, see Stefan Wagstyl, “Powerful Belarusian leader with one foot in the Soviet past”, *Financial Times*, 30 July 2004.

² For a detailed analysis of this topic, see Dr Steven J Main, The Belarusian Armed Forces: a military-political analysis, 1991-2003, Conflict Studies Research Centre, October 2003, G126.

³ Guards Colonel Aleksandr Tyshkevich, “Ot ‘uchebki’ – k uchebnomu tsentru”, *Armiya*, No 6, 2002, 63-65.

⁴ “Otkrylas’ shkola praporshchikov”, *Armiya*, No 4, July-August 2001, 4.

⁵ V Kovalev, “Budet sozdan yedinyy uchebnyy tsentr”, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 16 May 2002.

⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “72-oy OUTs: reorganizatsiya idet strogo po planu”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 15 August 2002.

⁷ Tyshkevich, *ibid*, p64.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*. The marking system has 5 grades; these are equivalent to 4 or 5 out of 5.

¹¹ Tyshkevich, *ibid*, p65.

¹² Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Shkola, gde gotovyat professionalov”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 30 August 2002.

¹³ Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Pogony praporshchika i zhenshchinam k litsu”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 6 February 2003.

¹⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “K zanyatiyam pristupili budushchiye praporshchiki”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 4 February 2003; idem, “Vo bzvode-tol’ko devushki”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 24 April 2003; idem, “Bez drozhki, kak uchili”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 31 May 2003.

¹⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Polku praporshchikov pribylo”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 1 July 2003.

¹⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Vo vzvode tol’ko zhenshchiny”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 27 November 2003.

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- 18 “Trenazhery ...”, *ibid.*
- 19 Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Bez drozhki, kak uchili”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 31 May 2003.
- 20 I Kandral’, “Budet uchit’sya ... u sebya”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 23 July 2003.
- 21 Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Uspeshnoy vam sluzhby!”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 23 December 2003.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “U praporshchikov – vypusknoy”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 29 June 2004.
- 25 *The Military Balance, 1999-2000*, IISS, London, 2001, 82.
- 26 Lieutenant-Colonel N Makarevich, “Patriotami ne rozhdayutsya”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 17 February 2004; V Aleksandrov, “Vypusk v shkole soldatskogo aktiva”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 22 June 2004.
- 27 Makarevich, “Patriotami ...”, *ibid.*
- 28 Aleksandrov, “Vypusk ...”, *ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 10 July 2004.
- 31 Colonel Sergey Potapenko, “Budem podnimat’ prestizh nashey znamenitoy ‘uchebki’”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 10 July 2004.
- 32 Potapenko, *ibid.*
- 33 “Voyennoye obrazovaniye: tseli i zadachi”, *Vo Slavu Rodiny*, 11 September 2003.

Want to Know More ...?

See: Stefan Wagstyl, "*Powerful Belarusian leader with one foot in the Soviet past*", Financial Times, 30 July 2004

Dr Steven J Main, "*The Belarusian Armed Forces: A Military-Political Analysis, 1991-2003*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, G126, October 2003, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

Belarusian Defence Ministry official website,
http://www.mod.mil.by/news_eng.html

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