

# The Red Army: A workers' army built from scratch

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To make a revolution we will have to smash the existing armed forces and build our own, democratic workers state. 'It can't be done', is the response we are often met with. But it can - it was. In this article on the Red Army, built during the Russian Revolution, Colin Lloyd shows how it was done, and how, against the odds, the armed power of the working class defeated a powerful counter-revolution

In 1917 the Russian workers seized political power. The soldiers, mainly conscripted peasants, played a key role in the revolution. Millions of Russian soldiers had been sent to their deaths during the First World War. Now, the army was in revolt and disintegrating, with mutinies and mass desertion. The Bolshevik programme was against the standing army and in favour of a people's militia. And it called for an end to the war with Germany.

But the German high command did not want to end the war except on its own terms. Meanwhile, the old provisional government - which included the reformist socialists (Mensheviks) plus the right of the peasant party, the SRs, and a series of liberal politicians - appealed to the old Tsarist officers to lead a counter-revolution.

So the question, 'what sort of army should a revolutionary state have?' was posed not as a theoretical question but a practical one. The story of the Red Army of Workers and Peasants - to give it its full title - is one of a struggle to bridge the gap between what the working class wanted, and what it needed.

That struggle ended with the transformation of the Red Army into a tool for the Stalinist bureaucracy - but this was not inevitable.

## What kind of army?

The Russian Civil War began only months after the soviets took power. There was a Cossack revolt in the Don region, plus an attempt to assemble an army of Tsarist 'volunteers' in Southern Russia. The soviet government signed an armistice with Germany in December 1917, but by January 1918 the peace had disintegrated and a new German offensive swept into Russian territory.

Lacking a revolutionary army to defend soviet Russia, the government signed away large tracts of territory in return for peace, in the Treaty of Brest Litovsk.

All attempts to utilise the remnants of the Tsarist army to stop the rout failed. Any socialists who had entertained the idea of reforming the army into a 'revolutionary' defence force were quickly disabused. But what should be put in its place?

The vast majority of revolutionaries presumed it would be workers' militia: based on the working class,

recruited from volunteers, with workers? democracy in its ranks and led by communists. Instead, in the furnace of war, the Bolsheviks were obliged to forge a standing army, based on conscription, with the majority of soldiers drawn from the peasantry, and commanded by ex-Tsarist officers.

Once the Bolsheviks signed the peace with Germany, Allied troops ? from Britain and France ? invaded Russia from north and south. Meanwhile in May 1918, 40,000 Czech soldiers from the Tsarist army revolted.

Trotsky was appointed War Commissar, replacing a sub-committee that had attempted to organise resistance so far. The task was to form an army that could fight in the field and beat the ?Whites? as the anti-soviet forces named themselves.

### **The raw material**

Trotsky wrote: ?For our task of constructing the Red Army we had to exploit the Red Guard formations and regiments of the Tsarist Army, peasant leaders and Tsarist generals. In fact we created the army out of the historical materials at our disposal and did our work from the point of view of a proletarian state fighting for its existence?

The early Red Army was assembled from:

? Intact regiments: a small number of regiments that maintained cohesion and went over en masse to the socialist revolution ? notably the Latvian Division. One of its colonels, Vatssetis, became the first commander of the Red Army

? Red Guards: these originated out of the factory workers? defensive detachments, formed under the Provisional Government. They were part time and, by 1918, Bolshevik led.

? Guerrilla units: mainly mounted infantry, based on poor and middle peasant communities. Their natural method was hit and run fighting in the countryside. They were rarely Bolshevik led in this early period ? often led by Mensheviks, anarchists and left SRs.

? Tsarist officers: on top of all this there were the officers. When the Tsarist Army was dissolved, the officers were not demobilised. They were ordered to support the soviet government. Eric Wollenberg?s history of the Red Army describes a typical scene: an officer under arrest is marched by armed workers into a room, made to sign a pledge of loyalty to the revolution and put in a car and driven to the front to command a regiment. The worker previously holding a weapon to his head announces that he is the ?commissar? of the regiment and that most of the socialist soldiers have threatened to shoot the new officer when he arrives.

? Communist detachments: because the early formations of the Red Army proved almost as weak as the Tsarist army, the Bolsheviks resorted early on to rushing party members ? particularly the under-20s ? to the front in concentrated detachments, which were often decisive in turning the tide.

### **Workers? control: from above or below?**

At the base of the new army the soldiers? committees that had helped break up the Tsarist army were quickly recreated in the form of party cells. These were democratic and did what every good socialist would do: they elected leaders, formed regiment committees and, wherever they were stationed in the countryside, sent agitators to foment the class struggle among the peasants.

However the workers? government was also organising from above. Trotsky as War Minister worked alongside the high command that, apart from a few ?proletarian officer cadres?, was mainly co-opted from

the Tsarist officers.

Transmitting the orders of the high command were the normal military hierarchy of corps, division and regiment commanders – again ex-Tsarist officers in their majority. But transmitting the orders of the party was also the Political Department of the Red Army, which usually consisted of a small group of cadres attached to a particular front or division, often party members, sometimes non-party middle class radicals.

Between all these stood the ‘commissars’. Commissars had been appointed to politically ‘check’ the orders of Tsarist officers even under the Provisional Government – the Bolsheviks did not invent them.

But whereas the Mensheviks and Liberals had seen the commissars as tools to reform the bourgeois army, the Bolsheviks saw them as a form of workers’ control over the decisions of the Tsarist military specialists – many of whom deliberately sabotaged the fight, went over to the enemy, or treated soldiers as cannon fodder.

The problem was that the worker communist membership of the Red Army saw the party cells as the main form of workers’ control – not the commissars. The commissars, having pre-dated the Red Army, were often drawn from the ranks of Mensheviks and SRs, and even from non-party vaguely radicalised sergeants from the old army.

Relations between Bolshevik Party cells, the Political Departments and the commissars were to form the basis of some fierce struggles within the working class during the Civil War.

### **The military opposition**

Between August and November 1918 the Red Army made gains against Kolchak in the east and withstood an advance up the Volga by Denikin’s forces. By early 1919 it was poised to go on the offensive. But at this point, a simmering debate over the character of the Red Army exploded.

The Bolshevik programme had called for a workers’ militia. At its foundation, the Red Army incorporated most of the workers’ militia units that existed, as well as tens of thousands of armed communists. Over 600,000 soldiers volunteered for service. But what existed by early 1919 was not a workers’ militia: it was a regular, conscript army. And although there had been 6,500 working class officers trained (39,000 were to pass through the Red military academies by 1921) the command structure was dominated by the 50,000 or so ex-Tsarist officers.

During the initial battles with the Whites the revolutionary army suffered not only from the ‘normal’ indiscipline of raw troops. It suffered from the lack of a command structure and the conflict between military and political priorities.

Military priorities may demand the sacrifice of troops, or an orderly retreat, or a feint attack where lives are lost simply to confuse the enemy rather than gain ground. Workers’ natural inclination is to question such priorities – and millions of Russian workers had four years of experience of doing just this.

One solution to this problem was ‘dual control’ where the commissars had to countersign every order, and where the commissar was the officer responsible for the welfare of soldiers. The other solution was the imposition of strict military discipline, including the death penalty.

Many Bolshevik activists reluctantly accepted the reintroduction of the death penalty as a weapon to keep treacherous Tsarist officers in check. So they were stunned when – following a series of unauthorised retreats where communist cadres had decided to ‘save themselves’ – Trotsky had them shot.

At the same time, military discipline demanded alterations to the normal form of party activity and workers' democracy. Gusev, a party leader in eastern Russia and a key player in Red Army politics wrote:

'Party organisation in the army remodels itself along military lines and, as with the army, democratic centralism is replaced by military centralism: instead of elections, appointment; in place of resolutions, orders and reports. Our army suffers not from an excess but from a lack of discipline.'

The Communist Soldiers Handbook, issued in December 1918 makes the Red Army communist's task clear:

'If your commander gives an order validated by a commissar your duty is to submit to it without question, however senseless it may seem to you. You occupy a small sector, you don't know what is happening on the whole of the front; to you any order may seem senseless. Don't let yourself be taken in by such a state of mind. Don't question an order. Don't discuss whether it is good or bad, because that will set others discussing it too. Instead of carrying out an action, all you will have is disputes and disorders. Communist comrade! Wherever you are, whatever job of responsibility you are doing, you must be in the most conspicuous position. You must enter the battle first and emerge last.'

At the Eighth Party Congress, a 'military opposition' to the Bolshevik leadership line on the Red Army emerged. It had strong support, not only among the Red Army soldiers but in the workers' districts of Petrograd and Moscow, where many of them came from.

Three political tendencies came together to form the military opposition.

\* First, those with grievances against absence of workers' control from below in Red Army. This was a genuine expression of desire to transform the Red Army into a real militia as soon as conditions allowed.

\* Second, the traditional ultra-left of the Bolshevik party, around the Democratic Centralist tendency. They espoused the 'theory of the offensive' i.e. wooden adherence to offensive action both in the military and the class struggle - idealised guerrilla warfare as the best form of revolutionary war, and advocated the replacement of Tsarist officers by 'Red commanders' drawn from the ranks.

\* Third, an embryonic bureaucratism was apparent within the military opposition. It insisted on the 'rights of communists' within the Red Army. Trotsky at this stage referred to it as a 'military economism'. Notably, Stalin's allies Voroshilov and Budyenny were supporters of the opposition, while Stalin himself tacitly supported it.

Trotsky was the hardest opponent of the military opposition. But the party leadership, under Lenin, were keen to make what concessions they could to the genuine concerns of the rank and file. They acknowledged the contradiction between the Red Army and the ideal of a militia and pledged that it was a temporary compromise. The majority's resolution pledged a return to a militia based on working class volunteers only at the earliest opportunity. It clarified the line of command: from the Party, to political departments, to commissars. It pledged to speed up the training of the 'proletarian officer cadres'.

The opposition resolution contained a general attack on the danger of bureaucratism and 'Bonapartism', called for the expulsion of all ex-Tsarist officers and for the election of all officers. However it rejected 'party syndicalism' i.e. the autonomy of party cells at the front and the right of party members to challenge orders. It accepted the need for conscription, but called for more workers, fewer peasants.

In the end a joint resolution was passed without opposition, with the main concession to the opposition being more power for commissars over officers. It is clear that Trotsky was against any concessions to the

military opposition. As the architect of the Red Army he was clear that the alternative to strict military discipline would have been counter-revolution and defeat.

Trotsky tended to see the workers' objections to military discipline as the product of backward consciousness among non-party workers. He tended also to see the worker-peasant army as the concrete form of the dictatorship of the proletariat leading the peasantry? and hence the discipline of the workers' government over the peasant soldiers as logical and necessary. He accused the Red commanders of being inexperienced military leaders (which they were) and of hiding their mistakes by blaming the troops (which they sometimes did). He also saw a lack of ruthlessness in the Red commanders, and accused them of failing to exploit victories? again a product of bureaucratic conservatism noted within workers' organisations.

Whatever the truth of all this, Trotsky soon had to moderate his attacks on the military opposition and accept the compromise. However, when the open struggle against Stalin's bureaucratic counter-revolution took place, in 1923, many of Trotsky's allies regarded him with distrust because of the vehemence of his earlier attacks on them.

### **Political education**

What was it like to be in the Red Army? The first Red Army symbol was a hammer, a sickle, a rifle and a book. Five million soldiers passed through the ranks of the Red Army up to 1921. As well as defending the revolution, the Red Army was transforming the consciousness of millions of workers, peasants and youth.

The political departments carried out not just revolutionary propaganda but basic education. As usual, the urban intellectuals sent to do this had to overcome the hostility of the soldiers and their own preconceptions.

Despite many difficulties, millions of workers and peasants found their first taste of freedom in the Red Army: freedom from ignorance and, increasingly, freedom from pogroms, hunger and starvation as the newly disciplined fighting force began to wipe the floor with the White armies.

In the end it was this education and political development that proved more decisive than simple discipline in the Red Army's victory. Despite their unpopularity, the commissars played a major role in this transformation.

And despite the discipline, the Red Army was more democratic and egalitarian than any bourgeois army before or since. A Corps commander got 150 roubles a month, the same as a skilled metal worker and 25 roubles less than the?party maximum?. There was no officers' mess; off duty officers had no rights to command off duty soldiers. Officers servants were abolished and they had to clean their own boots. In fact cleaning an officer's boots became a punishable offence.

### **Theory of the offensive**

In 1919 the Red Army decisively turned the tide against the Whites. At the Ninth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, in January 1919, a new political struggle took place over the Army.

This time the party leadership and part of the former military opposition united around the pledge to demobilise workers as soon as possible and return to building a workers' militia:

?The transition period must effect a reorganisation of the armed forces which will give the workers the necessary military training while withdrawing them from productive labour as little as possible. Only a Militia of Red Workers and Peasants based on the territorial system can conform to these requirements,? said the Congress resolution.

However a new opposition grew up, based around ex-Tsarist officer (but Bolshevik convert) Mikhail Tukachevsky. Tukachevsky's unorthodox military ideas (that were later to make him a pioneer of mechanised warfare and the inventor of parachute formations) stemmed from his allegiance to the ultra-left section of the former military opposition.

Tukachevsky advocated the revolutionary offensive as the only tactic proper to a revolutionary army. There was no need for logistics and no need for guerrillas to work behind the lines of the enemy because the workers of the imperialist countries would play both these roles.

In 1920 Tukachevsky argued that since a workers' militia could not mechanise, and could not be used for the revolutionary war in Europe, there had to be a professional army based on the working class alone.

Though cloaked in ultra-left rhetoric, the 1920 opposition in fact betrayed the first signs of bureaucratism. Lenin and Trotsky were vehemently opposed to it and it was defeated – though not before gaining a resonance in the Comintern and tragically in the ultra-left leadership of the German Communist Party.

The debate was cut off prematurely, however, by the invasion of Russia by Poland, under the right wing dictator Pilsudsky. Tukachevsky commanded the armies that drove Pilsudsky back to the Polish border. Given a chance to invade Poland, Tukachevsky proved in practice the one-sidedness of his theory. The Polish masses refused to support the Red Army, indeed the Red Army was smashed and driven back inside Russian territory – although this was in part due to the meddling of the Stalin and Voroshilov clique, it was also a political mistake by the party leadership.

### **Unified doctrine or workers' militia?**

By the autumn of 1920 the Polish war was over and Wrangel's armies on the retreat in the Caucasus.

The debate returned now to two questions:

How to transform the Red Army into a workers' militia?

What should be the military doctrine of the newly-stabilised soviet republic?

The debate over the 'unified military doctrine' was conducted in a series of confrontations involving Trotsky, Tukachevsky and the general staff in 1921-22. Here Trotsky countered the idea that, just as each bourgeois state had a military doctrine, the proletarian army should have its own unique doctrine.

Military doctrines play a material role in allowing junior officers to act on their own initiative, knowing 'what is required' without having to ask. At a higher level, however, they reflect the class forces within a given bourgeois state: Britain's reliance on sea power for 400 years was not just a 'doctrine' dreamed up in the heads of the exploiters but reflected their colonial ambitions and their fear of a standing army drawn overwhelmingly from the working class.

In a series of documents (collected in the book *Military Writings*) Trotsky echoes what he was having to argue about art, science and culture in general: namely that the working class has to use bourgeois techniques and tools, placing them under its control. There is no specific proletarian military doctrine because the aim of the workers' government should be the abolition of the army and the creation of a militia, as the first stage of abolishing the state altogether.

Trotsky's opponents argued variously for guerrilla warfare, the theory of the offensive, mechanisation, the eclipse of trench warfare etc. as 'the' military doctrine proper for a working class army. Tukachevsky, sticking to the offensive theory, even called for the Comintern to create an international general staff - not a

metaphorical 'general staff of revolutionary struggle' but a real general staff that was to command the insurrection across Europe from Moscow.

As can be seen from the debate over demobilisation versus a professional army in 1920, there was a clear link between the demand for a 'unified military doctrine' and resistance to a return to the workers' militia.

This debate over the military doctrine took place in a changed landscape within the Red Army. The military doctrine group 'Tukachevsky, Frunze and Voroshilov' were by now representative of the type of officer commanding the Red Army. There were now thousands more trained Bolshevik and worker officers in higher commands. Also a younger layer of the ex-Tsarists, who joined the party and became Bolsheviks but with little grasp of Marxism, was now more in evidence.

Tukachevsky himself was a good example of the social roots of the new bureaucracy. A junior officer under Tsarism, he could have never attained high rank until the revolution. But having thrown in his lot with the revolution he had a class interest in defending it. But he had no sympathy for the working class and no understanding of Marxism. Austere in his own way (his wife was ordered to commit suicide after being found with illicit extra rations at the front) he also stood in a privileged position by virtue of his rank and party membership. While the absence of real workers' democracy worried Lenin and Trotsky, it was never likely to enter the calculations of people like Tukachevsky.

It was in these conditions that the struggle against bureaucratism was fought in the Red Army between 1922 and 1924. This fight was lost - just as it was in the party and state. Stalin emerged as the eventual victor and the army that had defended the revolution became a tool for the defence of the bureaucracy - transformed into a bourgeois type army with a new privileged officer corp and without a shred of workers' democracy.

But in the civil war itself the Red Army showed what the working class can achieve. If the soviets proved that workers could rule for themselves, the Red Army of Trotsky's day proved that they could also furnish themselves with the means to defend that rule.

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