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Emerging Civil-Military Relations: The Role of the Main Political Administration in the New Soviet Union

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Political tensions in the Soviet Union and the control of the key centers of power have once again raised serious questions over the nature of political-military relations in the Soviet Union. One key to understanding this relationship is the role of the Main Political Administration, which serves the Communist Party as its direct link to all Soviet military commands and units. Along with broad efforts to "depoliticize" the Soviet Union within the last years, the MPA has come under significant pressure on several fronts to modify its basic structure and role. This study identifies the nature of this internal and external pressure and discusses the impact on the MPA thus far.

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EMERGING CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE MAIN POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE NEW SOVIET UNION

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FOREWORD

Political tensions in the Soviet Union and the control of the key centers of power have once again raised serious questions over the nature of political-military relations in the Soviet Union. One key to understanding this relationship is the role of the Main Political Administration, which serves the Communist Party as its direct link to all Soviet military commands and units. Along with broad efforts to "depoliticize" the Soviet Union within the last year, the MPA has come under significant pressure on several fronts to modify its basic structure and role. This study identifies the nature of this internal and external pressure and discusses the impact on the MPA thus far.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this essay on the implications of evolving Soviet civil-military relations.

Karl W. Robinson

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EMERGING CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE MAIN POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE NEW SOVIET UNION

Political control over the Soviet armed forces has long been a topic of great interest for scholars, but policy makers busy with the day-to-day decisions in international affairs have often found it somewhat esoteric. The recent deployments of Soviet airborne units to seven of the fifteen Soviet Republics to enforce mandatory military conscription laws, the dramatic resignation of Foreign Minister Shevardnadze in the midst of debate over Soviet military opposition to current arms control policy, and the increasing vulnerability of Gorbachev's hold on the disparate entities of the Soviet Union have heightened the need for a broader understanding of these political-military relations.

While these relations are multifaceted, as befitting one of the world's most complex bureaucracies, there is a single prominent organization which has played a key role in this relationship since the creation of the Soviet state. That agency is the Main Political Administration (MPA) of the Soviet Army and Navy. This organization is a direct descendant of the units of political officers (commissars) appointed by Lenin in 1918 to provide assured political control over the nascent professional Red Army.

Although frequently modified over the years, it has retained the basic charter of guaranteeing that political decisions, specifically those of the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), were accurately and consistently reflected in Soviet military actions in peace and war. Even today, representatives of this organization are dispersed to all levels of military organizations in each of the services of the Soviet armed forces and maintain a distinct and separate chain of communication reaching up to the leadership organs of the CPSU. This is especially relevant in relation to the current political tensions between the center and the "rebellious" Soviet republics, during which on several occasions the military has assumed local police functions to "protect" CPSU property, such as newspaper publishing facilities in Latvia.

In this time of incredible change in the Soviet Union, the role of the MPA within the Soviet armed forces is undergoing its most critical examination since the creation of the "commissars" in 1918. Two overarching questions tie together many of the complex subsets of issues which are raised in considering this issue. The first is simply, "Will the political structure in the Soviet armed forces survive?" The second is a logical corollary, "If the structure does survive, will it be fundamentally transformed, and, if so, how?"

Keeping those questions in mind, it is appropriate to sketch some of the most important issues which are shaping this

debate. The first and most obvious issue is the increasing depolitization of Soviet society. The CPSU, which previously operated in every aspect of Soviet life, is being increasingly bound by regulations and policies which curtail its involvement in specific activities. Clearly, consideration of depolitization has profound impact on an armed forces that has been, since its inception, the combat arm of the Party and its guardian.

Second is the significant current reductions taking place within the Soviet armed forces. In his December 1988 statement at the United Nations on Force Reductions, General Secretary Gorbachev pledged that Soviet forces would be reduced unilaterally by 500,000 men and it soon became clear that this included *100,000 career officers*. This has since been compounded by the progress at Vienna in the Talks on Reducing Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which, if ratified by the twenty-two participating nations, will assign still more career officers to the ranks of those no longer required on active duty. As in any large institution facing significant reductions, there is considerable interest in determining who is to be cut and who retained. Since political officers reportedly constitute 12 percent of all serving Soviet officers,[1] this group must be a tempting package for some professional officers to offer up on the manpower reduction altar.

A third issue, bearing with perhaps equal weight upon the Soviet leaders who must ultimately make this decision, is the

recognition that the political situation within their own country is less than stable. Republics from Lithuania to Russia itself are declaring and increasingly asserting their independence from central control in Moscow. The conscript defense forces of the USSR, composed of soldiers from all of the nationalities found in the Soviet population, have been called upon to restore civil order in at least eight of the fifteen republics within the past 2 years. Given the divisive pressures on the military institution, there may be considerable reluctance to sacrifice an institution (the political officers) who were originally created and long maintained to ensure military loyalty and cohesion.

A fourth factor of considerable consequence is the now routine rumors of a military coup. An example of these fears can be found in the mixed signals and clear confusion in September 1990 when a Soviet airborne unit was reported to have left its garrison to start a march toward Moscow in the middle of the night. It was later reported that the unit merely left early to practice marching for the November 7 parade.[2] It is this type of situation that now causes some Soviet officials to sleep less soundly. Among other reasons, the likelihood of this type of scenario in 1918 caused Lenin to be enthusiastic about establishing the Red commissars, the predecessors of today's political officers. Understanding this, some of the leading Communists in Moscow wonder aloud if this is not precisely the moment when the political officers are most needed.

Were the situation not already confusing enough, a fifth factor has an impact on the current deliberations about the future of the MPA. That is the present status of the forces now constituting the Soviet military. The Soviet military consists of two distinct elements. The first is a mass conscript force, which is recruited on the theoretical basis of universal military conscription and serves for a fixed term of two years. The other element is a small professional cadre of officers, with a lesser number of what we would categorize as warrant officers and noncommissioned officers. While one or the other of these elements has been under considerable tension in the past, the current situation places both under tremendous pressure, although for different reasons.

The greatest source of pressure on the conscripts is nationalism. Because of the rise of nationalism among virtually every national component of the multinational Soviet state, particularly obvious in the Baltics and Transcaucasus, huge numbers of those being called to serve in the Soviet forces are simply refusing to report.[3] Those who report are seemingly reluctant, in many cases, to serve and are openly antagonistic to some or all of those of other national identities. Some argue that to deprive commanders of their political deputies at this time of greatest internal tension would render all units impotent to carry out their assigned duties. Others argue that commanders are selected and paid to command and they should seize this

opportunity to exercise full responsibility with no ambiguity of shared authority.

Pressure on the officer cadre comes from two other sources. First are the reductions mentioned above, which have placed the careers and the welfare of nearly 1,000,000 professional personnel in jeopardy. Second is the plummeting prestige and privileges of military personnel. The most often cited example of the latter is the effect of the rapid disengagement of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe, which literally leaves thousands of officers and their families homeless.[4] For Russians with good memories, there are thoughts of previous unpleasant political consequences which resulted from the return to the motherland of thousands of disgruntled professional soldiers (an historical example being the revolution fomented by those who returned from having defeated Napoleon).

Having identified at length the major forces which might preserve, or destroy, the institution of political officers in the Soviet armed forces, it is appropriate to review the current status of the MPA within the armed forces.

First, it is, as it has always been, an institution with two masters. On the State side, the MPA is subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. On the Party side it is directly subordinate to an element of the CPSU Central Committee (CC) and reports to the Party outside of any military reporting channels.

Internally, the political officers are integrated throughout the military structure from the Ministry of Defense to every company size unit of each of the forces. The MPA currently lists 12 percent of serving Soviet officers among its ranks. These officers fall in several basic categories. The first and largest is the group which includes deputy commanders for political affairs (zampolits). These officers, found at all echelons down to the company level, assist the commander in a host of politically related areas from "interpreting" current events to dealing with problem soldiers, or for that matter, problem officers. They are basically all career officers who graduated from one of the officer commissioning schools in the USSR, have a basic branch identification, and have received much of the professional training required for any officer serving in that branch. For example, an officer trained as a political deputy for armor forces would serve at the company, battalion, then regimental level as a political deputy in armor units.

The second category is the propagandists, who are charged with spreading the doctrine of party decisions among the members of the armed forces and assuring that the party line is understood and adhered to. These officers normally serve only at echelons of regiment and above and have no specific professional branch identification, such as armor or artillery. They can, therefore, move from armor units to motorized rifle or engineers. They do not have the professional military training of the political deputies and may even move outside of military duty to

equivalent civilian posts. There is also a special subcategory of propagandists, the journalists, who operate the vast Soviet military network of newspapers from the garrison to the national level and who are largely career political officers, trained as journalists by the Main Political Administration at the L'vov uchilishche (officer commissioning school).

A third category, which may draw upon members of the two above, is the leadership for party and Komsomol cells within the armed forces. The charter of the CPSU specifies the number of members required in a party organization to justify a full-time party secretary. When a party organization of the specified size is constituted within a military unit, a full-time secretary is "provided." Since, until very recently, membership in the CPSU was mandatory for all Soviet officers who aspired to rise above the grade of captain, and virtually all junior officers, as well as many conscripts, were members of the Komsomol, large numbers of these organizations required full-time leadership. This is currently being challenged by both a potentially serious hemorrhage of Party membership and the still novel idea of holding elections from a candidate list containing more than one name. Whatever decisions are made regarding the rest of the party structure, this element may be endangered.

Smaller categories are worthy of mention, such as the military lawyers, who are also assigned to the broad framework of the Main Political Administration. The increasing pressure to

separate party and state interests most indirectly threatens this affiliation.

The debate over the future of the MPA of the Soviet Army and Navy is taking place on three separate stages: within the government of the USSR, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the military itself. Although driven to consider the question by different motives, the decisions of any of these bodies can directly affect the future of political work in the armed forces.

Within the government, the MPA was most recently the subject of serious debate during the consideration of the Law on Public Organizations in the first two weeks in October (1990). The purpose of this new law is the legalization of the new multi-party system within the Soviet Union in regard to public organizations. Although the law touches most aspects of public life, the center of debate within the Supreme Soviet was the two paragraphs in Article 16 dealing with the effect of the law on members of the armed forces and law enforcement organs.

In the original draft,[5] paragraph 4 of Article 16 read "Service members and persons holding office in law enforcement organs suspend active political participation in parties." Paragraph 5 of Article 16 was offered in two competing versions in the draft. The first version said "The question of the creation of organizations of political parties in the armed

forces and law enforcement organs is regulated by legislation on those organs." The second version, drafted by the Deputy Chairman of the Moscow City Soviet, Sergei Stankevich, read "The creation and activity of party organizations in the armed forces, organs of State Security, Internal Affairs, the Procuracy, government arbitrage, and the courts is not permitted."

After strenuous debate, with uniformed members of the Supreme Soviet arguing on both sides of the issue, the Law on Public Organizations adopted on October 9, 1990, included a redrafted paragraph 4 which stated "Service members and persons occupying positions in law enforcement organs are guided by the demands of the law in their official duties and are not bound by the decisions of parties and mass social movements of which they are members." Ultimately, the legislators were unable to reach consensus on paragraph 5, which could have eliminated the Main Political Administration as we know it today and they dropped the paragraph from Article 16 entirely.

Within the Party organization, the future of political work in the armed forces was a subject of considerable attention at the recent (July 1990) XXVIIIth Party Congress. Like the Government, the Party was attempting to adapt existing policies and institutions to new realities. Ultimately reflected in the resolution of the CPSU "On the Basic Guidelines of Party Military Policy at the Contemporary Stage," the Party resolved to continue

active political work in the military, but to consider fundamental restructuring.

A leading contributor to the debate at the Party Congress was COL GEN Nikolai Ivanovich Shlyaga, then First Deputy Chief of the Main Political Administration. His arguments as reflected in a front-page article in Krasnaya Zvezda published during the Congress debate, entitled "The Army Cannot Be Outside of Politics," were that the work of the MPA should be divided into two sectors. The first of these, work in Party and Komsomol organizations, should continue to be under direct Party control, as in the past, but now the leadership should be elected by the membership as is becoming the case in other institutions.[6]

Regarding the work now done by the deputy commanders for political affairs (zampolits) at each echelon of command, he urged that this must continue, but it should be confined to political, as opposed to Party work. Within the understanding of political work he included socialization in terms of political education, strengthening of military discipline, control of the military press and forms of social protection for current and former servicemen. This branch would apparently sever its ties to the Central Committee of the CPSU and be answerable only to the Ministry of Defense. While acknowledging that considerable arguments were being made for opening the military to all emerging political parties in what is becoming a multiparty state, Shlyaga stated that, unfortunately, competition for ideas

and loyalties of the servicemen would produce disorder and instability.

The weight of his arguments was considerable, as reflected by the adoption in the Congress of a Resolution on the subject and his promotion to Chief of the Main Political Administration immediately upon the conclusion of the Congress. While calling for what would appear to be relatively drastic reform, Shlyaga has been careful to emphasize that this must be carefully thought out and implemented over a lengthy period of time.[7]

Within the armed forces itself, there is no tight single forum, such as the new law of the Supreme Soviet or the resolution of the Party Congress, to focus the debate. It has, and continues, to appear openly in the Soviet military press and in discussions in military units. In both cases it is clear that there are significant differences of opinion on what, if any, future the Main Political Administration should have.

Those who argue for the continuation of political work in essentially its present form offer the following points. First, the Soviet military has long enjoyed a significant voice through direct representation in the highest Soviet policy making bodies, whether in the Party or the Government. In the most recent elections some 270 military personnel were elected delegates to the Party Congress while 82 were elected as Deputies in the national legislature. The decision to depoliticize the army

would deprive them of that direct voice at a critical time when decisions of considerable interest to armed forces are being made on the budget, how the army will be used, and its size and structure. Second, the future of the Soviet Union is more precarious now than it has been at any time since the dark days of the Great Patriotic War. In a recent interview with the Commander of Soviet Airborne Forces, the journalist told the commander that he envisioned his forces as analogous to graphite rods in a nuclear reactor. That is, whenever it is perceived that the situation in the country is becoming critical, the airborne forces are inserted to prevent disaster. The Airborne commander said that was a fair analogy.[8] Those who feel this is the case are often reluctant to fundamentally alter the structure of the armed forces at a time when they are essential to the preservation of the State. Third, many acknowledge that the situation within the armed forces is, likewise, far less stable than in earlier times. They note the surge of nationalism which is producing unprecedented draft dodging and that even those who do report to serve are openly hostile toward the system and their obligations to it.

In the same vein, the situation for officers is also precarious. Officer strength is being drastically reduced by Gorbachev's unilateral moves and by the pending Treaty on Reductions of Conventional Forces and Equipment in Europe, negotiated in Vienna. This, combined with the rapid withdrawal from Eastern Europe and the budget cutbacks, has produced, among

other things, a situation in which 170,000 Soviet officers and their families are without permanently assigned housing. Under these circumstances, the national leadership insists that depriving the military of the institution historically charged with maintaining political stability in times such as these, threatens disaster.

Despite these arguments, large numbers within the military argue that political work, as it now exists, must go. On their side of the ledger, they contend the following. First, in a time of shrinking structure, increasing technology and demands on professional military skills, the services must maintain their most highly qualified professional officers. If someone must go, the political officers are the most expendable. Also, with the mood increasingly pointing toward a professional, as opposed to a conscript army, much of the work of the political officers in socializing young recruits will become unnecessary. Further, given the critical times which the armed forces face in dealing with internal problems in the nation and their own forces, it is imperative that the last vestiges of shared command be eliminated. Although formally operating on the principle of "one-man command" presently, the deputy commander for political affairs not only writes an important political evaluation of his commander, but he has a reporting chain back to Moscow completely outside of the military. Thus reformists argue that removing the political structure would make the commander's authority unambiguous and he could be more effective.[9]

As increasingly seems the case in the Soviet Union, the ultimate arbiter of the issue may be none of the actors discussed above, but it may be the resolution of the struggle in the mind of Mikhail Gorbachev. As was the case with decision-makers in Washington during the recent budget debate, Gorbachev has at one time or another seemingly spoken firmly in support of every competing position. While supporting the position at the Party Congress that the army must not be depoliticized, he recently (September 1990) issued a Presidential Decree giving the Ministry of Defense, along with the MVD and KGB, three months to draft new regulations for the political cells for his official consideration.[10]

As in so many of the decisions which Gorbachev faces, there is no easy answer and there will be strong opposition to any choice. For the historical determinists within the Soviet Union who look at the rapid and decisive changes already brought about in the political organs of the armed forces of Eastern Europe, the choice seems straightforward. The Soviet Union and the Main Political Administration must adapt to the new realities, or be brushed aside by the forces of history. For some dedicated Communist veterans of the MPA, the choice is equally clear, although exactly the opposite. As one recently put it in colorful terms, "Those who would do away with the MPA are suffering either from amnesia or stupidity."[11]

The final irony of this issue may be found in a precedent of Soviet history. In 1918, Lenin reluctantly recognized that he needed the "professional military specialists" who had formerly served the tsar, if he was going to create a force which would prevent the destruction of the Soviet Union by enemies at home in the Civil War. To assure that the interests of the Communists were protected, Lenin created a corps of political officers to watch over the former tsarist officers. Now Gorbachev, finding himself facing perhaps equally serious threats to the unity of his nation, may find it just as necessary to retain these political officers to preserve the unity of his forces and his nation as he moves the country toward greater democracy and the armed forces toward increased professionalism.

While the military leadership is not cleanly aligned on one side of the debate over "depoliticizing" the armed forces, it appears that most senior military leaders have opted for the conservative approach in this time of turmoil. Maintaining the MPA in essentially its present form contributes to stability in the forces in both structure and policy. Further, uncertain how the larger political battle between representatives of Government and Party will be eventually resolved, it assures the senior military leaders continued access to both contenders for political power. The ability of the Party to dispense power and privilege has been far less impaired than the oratory of the recent reforms would indicate and the military leaders are acutely aware of the need to preserve their own prerogatives under any future regime.

ENDNOTES

1. This figure is calculated based on the authorized officer manning levels in Soviet units.

2. Ivan Sidrlrikov, "And Now They Are Intimidating Us With a Military Coup," Krasnaya Zvezda, 4 October 1990, p. 2.

3. An interesting and candid profile of today's conscripts was presented in "Who Is.Under Arms Today," Trnd, 4 August 1990, p. 2. (Translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Soviet, 15 August 1990, pp. 65-66.)

4. "Problems Troubling Us All," Kommunist Vooryzhenaykh Sil, Noll, June 1990, pp. 9-22. (Answers to readers' questions by General of the Army M.A. Moiseyev.)

5. The draft and final copies of the new law were provided by personnel of U.S. Embassy, Moscow.

6. "The Army Can Not Be Outside of Politics," Krasnaya Zvezda, 5 July 1990, p. 1. (Speech to Congress by COL GEN Shlyaga).

7. "Political Organs: Time for Radical Renewal," Krasnaya Zvezda, 20 July 1990, p. 1. (Interview with COL GEN Shlyaga).

8. "On Democracy and Order," Krasnaya Zvezda, 8 August 1990, p. 1. (Interview with COL GEN V. Achalov.)

9. A good, early summary of the evolving debate on the role of the MPA is found in Stephen Foye, "Role of Political Organs in Armed Forces Questioned," Report on the USSR, 11 August 1989, pp. 4-7.

10. Michael Dobbs, "Gorbachev Moves to Loosen Party's Grip on Army, KGB," The Washington Post, 5 September 1990, p. A28.

11. Lt.Col. A. Kokorin, "No Retirement for Commissars," Sovetskaya Rossiya, 15 December 1989, p. 2. (Translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Services, Soviet, 15 February 1990, pp. 5-7.)