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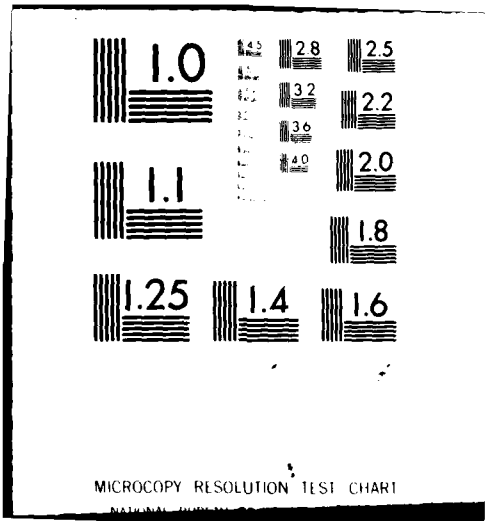
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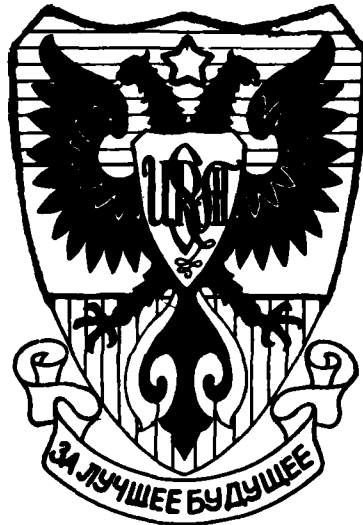
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STUDENT RESEARCH REPORT

THE POLITICAL OFFICER IN THE SOVIET
ARMY: HIS ROLE, INFLUENCE AND DUTIES

MAJ Michael J. O'Grady
1980

GARMISCH, GERMANY

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1. REPORT NUMBER 1593	GOVT ACCESSION NO. AD-A098 477	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER	
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) THE POLITICAL OFFICER IN THE SOVIET His Role, Influence and Duties	5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED	6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER	
		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)	
7. AUTHOR(s) MAJ MICHAEL J. O'GRADY	9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. ARMY RUSSIAN INSTITUTE APO NY 09053		
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. ARMY RUSSIAN INSTITUTE	10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS		
	12. REPORT DATE June 1980		
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)	13. NUMBER OF PAGES 21		
	15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) UNCLASSIFIED		
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for public release; distribution unlimited			
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)			
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES			
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)			
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)			

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THE POLITICAL OFFICER IN THE SOVIET ARMY:
HIS ROLE, INFLUENCE AND DUTIES.

by

RECEIVED
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¹⁰
Major Michael J. O'Grady

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SUMMARY

This paper addresses two major questions: the role of the zampolit, and of political work in general in the Soviet Armed Forces. The paper briefly traces the evolution of the political officer system since the Russian Revolution. Next, the role of political work in the Soviet Army is analyzed with a view toward describing the environment in which the zampolit serves. The paper then evaluates the zampolit himself. The political officer at regimental level and below is examined, first in terms of "what he should be", followed by "what he is", his duties, role, influence with his commander and among the troops, his achievements and the problems he creates. Finally, general conclusions are offered pertaining to: 1) the importance of political work in Soviet perspective; 2) the integration of the zampolit into strictly military affairs and his contribution to overall unit readiness; and 3) the zampolit's relationship with his commander.

INTRODUCTION

In the Soviet Armed Forces a political officer is assigned to every unit down to, and including, company level. Whether in a battalion or within the office of the Chief of Ground Forces, on a regimental or division staff, an officer is present who is responsible for looking after the political well-being of the organization or unit. Each political officer (or zampolit,¹ as he is currently known) has his own staff which may be large or small depending on the unit's size.² He has two masters: the unit commander, whom he serves as a deputy, and the zampolit of the next higher unit in the chain of command, who exercises staff authority. The substance of his primary responsibility, political work, occupies a large part of the unit's training schedule and daily routine. His responsibility for an area which receives such emphasis in the Soviet Army makes the zampolit's role a critical one.

This significant investment of manpower and energy is indicative of an intense Soviet interest in the political officer system. Yet, recognition of this fact raises more questions than are answered, not the least of which is the content of the political work or training for which the zampolit is responsible. To the Western observer in general, and to the professional Western military officer in particular, the idea of political indoctrination on the scale practiced within the Soviet Army is repugnant. Grounded in the concept of apolitical armed forces, the Western democracies, by-and-large, regard any political activity beyond the most rudimentary civics lectures as a direct challenge to established principles of civilian control over the military. But, though the Soviet leadership also adheres to the principle of civilian (i.e. Communist Party) control,³ it nevertheless submits its soldiers to an unending program of political training throughout their terms of service⁴. An evaluation of precisely what that training consists is relevant to an understanding of how the Soviet leadership, both Party and military, regard the term "political work" and of why Soviet soldiers are provided political training. Is this work political in the narrow, institutional sense? Does it deal strictly with information about and advocacy for the ruling Communist Party? Or does political training in the Soviet Army encompass a much broader set of tenets -- that which could be termed motivational and disciplinary as well as educational and manipulative?

Another fundamental question concerns the role of the zampolit himself in the Soviet Army. In the view of Western critics, the political officer system is of dubious value in contributing to the accomplishment of the Soviet Army's primary missions, which are, again in Western eyes, purely military and technical. But if the zampolit system is unsuited to Western armies, it continues to thrive in the Soviet Armed Forces. It, therefore, must be of considerable utility to the leadership and one may presume that the value of the training and supervision practiced by the zampolit outweighs his cost. This fundamental observation returns necessarily to the question of the nature of political work and what exactly the zampolit contributes to its execution. Does he merely stand before troops and drone about dogma and socialist competition or does he meaningfully increase the readiness of his unit? Are his activities narrowly stipulated or does he assist the commander and unit in more traditional military ways? Is he beholden to his commander or political chain of command for his personal career advancement? In short, is he a hindrance or a help in the opinion of both his political and professional military superiors?

These two major questions, the role of the zampolit and of political work in general, form the core of this paper. The two questions are closely intertwined

since it is impossible to evaluate the activities of the zampolit through Soviet eyes without first attempting to understand the nature and function of political training.

In an effort to address these two questions, the paper will first briefly trace the evolution of the political officer system since the Russian Revolution. Next, the role of political work in the Soviet Army will be analyzed with a view toward describing the environment in which the zampolit serves. The paper will then turn to an evaluation of the zampolit himself. The political officer at regimental level and below will be examined, first in terms of "what he should be" followed by "what he is" -- his duties, role, influence with his commander and among troops, his achievements and the problems he creates will be analyzed. Finally, general conclusions will be offered.

As far as possible Soviet sources are used in this paper. Recognizing the obscure and sometimes self-serving nature of Soviet writings, it is nonetheless absolutely necessary to rely on them if a true appreciation of the Soviet perspective is to be gained.

EVOLUTION OF THE POLITICAL OFFICER SYSTEM

The political officer system was born in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The influx of many ex-tsarist officers into the Civil War Red Army created a need for Communist representatives in each unit to watch over the actions of the professional soldiers who were thought to be politically untrustworthy. A system of commissars remained in full operation until 1925. During that period, the commissar of each unit was in effect a *watchdog*. His mission was not simply to assist the commander but to supervise him.² The commissar's recommendation was vital to his commander's career prospects and even operational orders were meaningless without the commissar's countersignature.

However, as many ex-tsarist officers proved themselves in combat and large numbers of young Communists rose in the officer ranks, the need to diminish the commissars' authority was recognized. Thus, in 1925 the principle of yedinonachaliye (unity of command) was introduced by M.V. Frunze into the Soviet Armed Forces. Unity of command meant that:

the commander was a member of the Party who was capable of giving Party and political guidance and who was responsible for all aspects of the unit's life and activity ... In short, he exercised the functions of the commander and the commissar, and had an assistant on political affairs... (He) exercised operational training, administrative and supply functions. The commissar remained but he was relieved of the responsibility of supervising the commander's activity. The commissar was in charge of Party and political work and was responsible for the personnel's political education and their political and moral state.⁶

However, since the overriding qualification for a commander remained his political reliability and since it took time to train such trustworthy officers, individual commanders were kept under the supervision of commissars for years to come. Most of those commanders who did achieve relative independence were former commissars themselves.⁷ By 1932 only 90 per cent of Soviet Army

commanders had been vested with full powers.⁸

Subsequently military commissars were reintroduced into the Soviet Armed Forces during two different periods. From 1937 to 1940 and again from 1941 to 1942 the massive influx of non-Party reserve officers into active service convinced Stalin of the necessity of the commissar system in order to insure the reliability of the Army. These reversions to a much more restrictive role for commanders underlined the importance of the Party's control during critical events. But even under yedinonachaliye commanders were never allowed a completely free hand since they had no disciplinary jurisdiction over their political deputies nor did commanders write their efficiency reports.⁹

Political representation in the military has periodically surfaced as a point of public debate in the Soviet Armed Forces since the final abolition of the formal commissar system in 1942. The most famous example of professional military hostility to political interference was Zhukov's attempt in the mid-1950's to de-politicize the Armed Forces during his tenure as Minister of Defense. A loyal Communist himself, Zhukov nevertheless believed strongly in trusting military commanders to lead their units without constant meddling by political officers. The whole thrust of his reforms was directed toward lessening the impact of political supervision on the day-to-day activities of the military. The position of company political officer was abolished, officers were granted permission to pursue ideological studies on a voluntary basis,¹⁰ educational opportunities and requirements for political officers were lowered and the rank of colonel was ruled to be the highest attainable by a political officer in the Armed Forces.¹¹ Zhukov was particularly zealous in his defense of the dignity and prerogatives of commanders:

... certain efforts have been made to subject the official activity of commanders to criticism at (Party) meetings. Such efforts are reprehensible. Our task is the comprehensive strengthening of the authority of the commanders, giving support to exacting officers and generals.¹²

These reforms presumably gratified professional officers, but they had the opposite effect on Khrushchev, other senior Party officials and the heads of the Armed Forces' political apparatus. Zhukov was sacked in 1957 and his reforms repealed. This was the last serious challenge, albeit an oblique and well-intentioned one, to the relative power of political organs over the military. Subsequent debates have centered on the proportion of time which should be spent on technical versus political training.¹³ This also is an issue which subtly challenges the role of the political-military apparatus, but not to the extent inherent in Zhukov's reforms.

With Zhukov's ouster, the unity of command principle was strengthened and has remained the guiding doctrine of the zampolit's relations with his commander to this day. Yedinonachaliye will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent sections; however, it is necessary first to look at what constitutes political work before evaluating how the zampolit is supposed to carry it out and whether he actually does so.

POLITICAL WORK IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES

Military-political work in the Soviet frame of reference is a difficult concept for citizens of democracies to grasp because politics, for the Soviets,

is inherent in every activity. In the military especially no action or operation is considered devoid of political content. This perception, of course, contrasts sharply with the traditional and narrow Western idea of politics as more an institutional than social function.

All of the following activities could be considered political work in Soviet parlance:

- (a) Conducting Communist Party and Komsomol organizational meetings
- (b) Recruiting Party and Komsomol members
- (c) Presenting Marxist-Leninist ideological lectures
- (d) Giving lectures on Party and governmental organization, policies and programs
- (e) Explaining recent laws and pronouncements
- (f) Reading and interpreting foreign and domestic news
- (g) Organizing cultural events and group outings
- (h) Organizing and running athletic competitions
- (i) Operating unit libraries, reading rooms and clubs
- (j) Arranging "socialist competitions"
- (k) Assisting the commander in maintaining discipline, a high state of morale and fighting spirit
- (l) Training soldiers in the use of weapons and equipment
- (m) Publishing a unit newspaper
- (n) Assuring the reception of radio broadcasts
- (o) Providing various forms of personal assistance to soldiers and their families.

It is easy to see that some, but by no means all, of these activities would fall under the Western heading of political -- and this list is certainly not complete. In fact, it can be said that political work in the Soviet Armed Forces is associated with practically every element of military life except the actual conduct of combat operations. Even in combat, however, Party and Komsomol members are supposed to provide inspiration and set the example for the remainder of their units' personnel.

There are two main reasons why the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) places such great emphasis on political work and sees to it, through zampolits, that it embraces a broad variety of military activities. First, the civilian Party leadership naturally desires to maintain its control over military affairs. This control is exercised in at least four interrelated ways: 1) zampolits in every military formation are ultimately responsible to the Main Political Directorate (MPD) of the CPSU Central Committee and are thus the Party's personal representatives in military units; 2) the vast majority (estimated to be approximately 90 per cent)¹⁴ of the Officer Corps are members of the CPSU or Komsomol, which tremendously increases their receptivity to Party guidance; 3) between five and ten per cent of the nation's highest positions in Party-political organs, including the Central Committee,¹⁵ are habitually reserved for uniformed military representatives, thus providing the Armed Forces with a stake in the system and an interest in seeing it successful; 4) the Soviet military has taken on the functions of a so-called "school of the soldier", in which:

Service in the Army and Fleet gives young people enormous knowledge, raises their cultural level and improves their political consciousness. Having returned from the Army to a factory or kolkhoz, the demobilized soldier, as a rule, serves as an example of creative activity, walks in the first ranks of the builders of Communist society, fearlessly overcomes difficulties and achieves victories.¹⁶

The model graduate of this "school" not only becomes a patriotic citizen, but also a loyal supporter indeed of the Party and its aims.

There is, however, a second reason, though perhaps not the overriding one, for the comprehensiveness of political work: a sincere desire to maintain strong armed forces and a deep-seated belief among Communists that only they themselves can provide the proper motivation and direction necessary to maintain that strength. This belief is associated with how Soviets view the question of military morale.

Both the Soviet and Western armies place great importance on morale. But, whereas the West provides its soldiers with physical benefits in order to improve their attitude toward their duties and in such an oblique way foster morale, the Soviets aim directly at their soldiers' belief system to induce morale. A textbook intended for Soviet officers entitled Voyennaya psikhologiya (Military Psychology) treats morale in this way:

The ideological-political is the primary aspect and basis of the morale of troops. Its content is manifested in the high political awareness of the men and combat collectives, and in their profound understanding of the goals and tasks of military activity in combat and war as a whole. In the psychology of a soldier's personality, it is also specifically embodied in such properties as ideological conviction, a feeling of love for the Motherland and hate for its enemies, total loyalty to the Party and people, a feeling of internationalism, a feeling of duty and responsibility, as well as a decisiveness and readiness to endure any hardships, difficulties, and sacrifices in the name of victory over the enemy.¹⁷

Other authors define military morale in contrast with that which exists in the West, that is to say, the voluntary and self-sacrificing desire of Soviet soldiers to defend their socialist homeland versus the exploited and mercenary nature of capitalist military service.¹⁸ Still others describe how good political work will produce such desirable aspects of morale as:

high offensive spirit, courage, tenacity, discipline, initiative, decisiveness, resourcefulness and military cunning; ... a sense of personal responsibility to remain in combat readiness and to know how to skillfully use arms and military equipment in battle; ... a burning hatred for the enemy and a high level of vigilance.¹⁹

The Party leadership feels that all of these traits in a soldier are necessary and attainable. In fact, they feel that the Soviet soldier is much more likely to develop high morale due to the superiority of the social system in which he was raised and the indoctrination he receives while in the service. As Colonel General Zheltov wrote: "It is precisely political awareness that constitutes ... the main force inciting servicemen to successful actions in combat."²⁰

The soldier is supposed to develop such traits through political work, which is the primary responsibility of the political officer -- the zampolit.

THE ZAMPOLIT -- WHAT HE SHOULD BE

One short statement summarizes the Party's attitude toward what it expects of the zampolit:

There is no sphere of army training, service and life of which a political worker can say: "It's none of my business, it doesn't concern me." He feels responsible for any task tackled by the unit.²¹

Much is obviously expected from the political officer. His is not only a diversified job, but also a demanding one. It is necessary, however, to be more precise in describing how the zampolit is supposed to fit into the military structure. This section will explain, first, his role in the unit, then his official status, both with the commander and troops. This section will deal only with the Soviet conception of what is expected of an ideal zampolit in these two respects, not how he might deviate from desired levels of performance.

The primary role of the zampolit is that of Party representative in his organization. As such, he is expected to serve as an example in all respects. His moral standards, motivation, willingness to work, bearing and valor must all be above reproach. Such attributes in a political officer are required in order to enhance his authority with the unit, inspire those qualities in others and perfect the Party's image in soldiers' eyes.²² Above all the political officer must display his concern for and solidarity with the troops. Leonid I. Brezhnev emphasized this point in writing about his experience as a political officer during World War II:

... it was important for people to know that at a difficult moment the one who was ordering them to hold fast would be standing there beside them would remain together with them, and, with weapons in hand, would march ahead of them. Consequently, our main weapon was the heartfelt Party word, reinforced by deed -- personal example in combat. "Do it the way I'm doing it" is the slogan of activists on the field of combat.²³

Despite the Communist belief that human products of socialism possess certain inherent moral advantages over products of capitalism, Soviet leaders nonetheless act under the principle that political officers "are made, not born".²⁴ Thus a system of nine higher military-political schools was created in 1967²⁵ to train student-officers "both in the purely professional sense as well as from the point of view of their mastering all those fine qualities which determine the moral and political makeup of the political worker".²⁶ Such schools are generally equivalent to American service academies; they provide cadets with four years of training prior to commissioning. Potential cadets are presumably influenced to select a career of military-political work through promotional lectures given in civilian schools and within the society at large. Some cadets, however, are drawn from the enlisted ranks and they are no doubt encouraged to apply for admission based on their demonstrated performance and potential. Still, the aspiring political officer, though highly motivated, is not expected to exhibit significantly more revolutionary fervor than cadets in strictly professional military studies. He will be taught the skills and traits of a good zampolit.

While in school, the political officer also learns and subsequently perfects the skills of a line officer. This set of skills constitutes the second half of the zampolit's role, since he is required to be an exemplary officer in the traditional, technical sense as well as the Party's representative. Political officers:

possess not only a solid ideological and theoretical store of knowledge, but also a broad military-technical view. They run tanks and armored personnel carriers excellently, they direct artillery fire, fly airplanes and stand the usual watch on ships.²⁷

The advantage in terms of manpower utilization are apparent in this aspect of the political officer's role. However, as much as the zampolit may contribute in material terms with his technical skills, his major role remains that of dealing with the psychological side of military activity. The authors of Soviet military-political publications regard the zampolit's technical proficiency as a means to an end, not an end in itself.

An outstanding knowledge of combat equipment attaches to his (the zampolit's) words a special weight and authority. Soldiers, sergeants, warrant officers and officers lend an attentive ear to the political worker's advice, they imitate him and follow his example.²⁸

Whatever his aims, the political officer must be able to interact effectively with his commander, who is vested with absolute responsibility for all unit activities, and with troops. Communication with soldiers is straightforward in principle but its execution is difficult. Ideally the political officer in the troops' eyes possesses all those desirable attributes mentioned earlier in addition to being an enforcer of discipline²⁹ and guardian of Soviet military tradition.³⁰ A high degree of respect for the zampolit accrues when he conforms with this model. He then trades on that respect to put the Party's views across to the soldiers under his supervision.

The zampolit's relations with his commander, however, are complex in theory as well as in practice. In an attempt to define those relations the yedinonachaliye doctrine was formulated and has remained the governing principle of command in all Soviet forces except during those periods when the commissar system prevailed. Yedinonachaliye specifically subordinates the zampolit, as the commander's political deputy, to the commander's authority. The commander is responsible for every activity within his unit, even (or especially) political work:

Being the unit's sole chief (yedinonachal'nik), the commander is fully responsible for the status of political work with personnel. As defined by regulations, he is obliged daily and personally to engage in the political and military education of his subordinates, while guided in everything by Party and Komsomol organizations and the subunit (or unit) activists.³¹

The zampolit, both in his capacity as a deputy commander and as spokesman and supervisor of "Party and Komsomol organizations", is thus required to guide the commander in all unit affairs, military and political. The term "guidance", however, is closely akin to "reliance" in this context as illustrated in the following examples of official advice to commanders:

An experienced commander, instead of supplanting them (zampolit, Party and Komsomol activists), coordinates and directs their efforts to accomplish the main task, that of strengthening discipline, raising the level of political education and combat training of the servicemen and the technical training and combat readiness of the unit.³²

In their practical work, commanders rely on the active assistance of Communists, Party organizations and political organs; they take into account and put into practice experience collectively worked out for them.³³

In the Soviet Army one-man command is based on Party guidance, that is, in his work, the commander constantly relies on Party organizations and utilizes their mobilizing force and authority for raising the combat readiness of his unit.³⁴

The commander's reliance on the zampolit and Party organizations affords them a degree of independence in their political activities.³⁵ In fact, Party groups are required to critique their commander and to perfect his political consciousness if they deem it necessary:

The commander reacts promptly and in a business-like manner to criticism by Communists in matters of combat and political training and military discipline.³⁶

What does the Party organization ... do to strengthen the commander's authority? Above all it in all ways helps him to profoundly learn Lenin's theoretical works and resolutions of the Communist Party, to comprehensively widen his political and military knowledge, to enrich his experience and to perfect his moral qualities ... Party organizations actively support willful, demanding commanders, strengthen their authority and instill in soldiers love and respect for them.³⁷

Thus, though the individual commander has ultimate responsibility, his authority over the unit is by no means absolute. While recognizing the need for a single decision-maker in rapidly developing battle situations,³⁸ the Party leadership has seen fit to entrust the zampolit with the potential, in a theoretical sense at least, to restrain the commander in his day-to-day running of the unit. This last point will be amplified in succeeding sections.

THE ZAMPOLIT -- WHAT HE IS

Having taken a look at the intended role and status of the political officer in his unit, it is necessary next to analyze how closely he fits that mold. This section will begin by assessing the range of duties actually performed by the zampolit in order to more realistically define his role and influence in the light of his precise responsibilities.

The claim that the zampolit's duties run the full gamut of military activity appears to be well justified by a review of Soviet literature describing his routine. Those duties can essentially be divided under three broad headings: political, military and troop care. Many of his activities, naturally, encompass two or all of these categories.

The zampolit's most visible duty is the direct control of his unit's political training. There is no doubt that this responsibility rests mainly on the political officer's shoulders despite frequent pleas for commanders to take a more personal interest in political work.³⁹ The zampolit usually fulfills this function by means of group gatherings of one sort or another. A typical training schedule includes time each day for political lectures.⁴⁰ These are presented to the entire unit or just to Communist Party of Komsomol

members and cover any subjects ranging from the most recent Party Congress to an explanation of current domestic or international news. Lectures, however, are not restricted to training days nor held only in garrison. Sunday lectures are also conducted and dead time during field training can easily be filled with some type of lecture.⁴¹ Every unit has a reading area, the Lenin room, which is run by the zampolit and his staff. Larger units possess an officers' club, or "house", which is also operated by the political officer. These serve as the locales for Party meetings, study groups, guest speaker programs and the like; however, the reading rooms are also available for individual soldiers to spend their free time browsing through officially sanctioned literature. Such mini-libraries may even be transported in part to the field during exercises.⁴² By any standard such activities are dry and, no doubt, largely thankless chores. Nevertheless, efforts are made to make lectures more interesting for the young soldier. As one young zampolit put it:

When lecturing before soldiers and sergeants, I always remember that the majority of my listeners are in essence still young people, yesterday's schoolchildren. Therefore, the lecture to them must be not only highly ideological and profound, but also popular, easy to understand, absorbing in form and in close touch with life.⁴³

The zampolit, however, pays particular attention to Komsomol and Party members, who look to him for supervision and organization. He constantly attempts "to draw as many Communists and Komsomol members as possible into Party and Komsomol activity ... is interested in seeing them raise their political and military level ... and helps them improve their skills and raise the level of their general education".⁴⁴ Naturally, he continually keeps his eye on outstanding soldiers for possible recruitment into the Party or Komsomol.

Aside from strictly political training, the zampolit is also deeply involved in his military duties. In this capacity he may be a qualified combat pilot, tank commander, or inspector. As the operator of a weapon system or leader of a combat crew his duties are no different from those of regular officers. Neither are his duties unusual when he stands before a group of soldiers to lecture on safety, discipline, security, personal appearance,⁴⁵ to teach about a particular weapon or piece of equipment,⁴⁶ or to explain "the requirements of the military oath".⁴⁷

The zampolit's military duties take on a more controversial character when he functions as supervisor of the units Communists, who are presumably the elite of any given unit. During operations or exercises the political officer apparently mobilizes his network of activists, briefs them on the situation and distributes them throughout the unit⁴⁸ to perform functions which are usually handled by non-commissioned officers in Western armies -- and, no doubt, should be taken care of by Soviet NCO's as well. One example, describing a Soviet airborne exercise, may help illustrate the extent of this practice:

During the flight, in each aircraft, the Party and Komsomol activists reminded the fighting men of the procedure for leaving the aircraft, the actions they were to take in the air and upon landing, as well as assembly signals, the landmarks, and the azimuths for moving out to the objective to

be seized. At that time use was made of instruction sheets which were passed from hand to hand. This work with the people greatly aided the success of the assault operation.⁴⁹

This is not to suggest that there exists a second chain of command in the Soviet Army which usurps the authority of commanders. Rather, a network of political activists is superimposed over the military command structure at every level. While this is certainly a doubtful organizational practice and contributes to unclear lines of authority, there is no history of zampolits having used their influence over party activists to undermine a commander, instead, criticisms of the zampolit by professional soldiers have centered on such topics as his overly bureaucratic temperament, occasional interference in operational affairs⁵⁰ and insistence on the priority of political training. Nevertheless, the political network is in existence and the zampolit has an influential role in running it.

The third general category of the zampolit's duties is in the field of troop health and welfare. The zampolit not only sees to the soldiers' mail, looks after their personal hygiene⁵¹ and insures that they are well fed⁵², he also organizes the soldiers' free time and deals with their personal problems. No effort is spared to fill the serviceman's every waking moment with some type of collective activity. During a unit's rail movement to a training area, for example, one zampolit organized chess and checkers tournaments, musical productions and "saw to it ... that the subunits had their musical instruments, table games, records, tape recordings, photographic material, paints and colored pencils."⁵³ In garrison the political officer sees to it that:

interesting activities are organized in the club and Lenin rooms, that the unit (or ship) has an amateur theater, that proper attention is paid to sports, that the radio reception functions efficiently, that films are shown regularly, that excursions and collective visits to theaters, concerts, etc., are arranged.⁵⁴

All this activity still leaves time, in theory, to deal with the everyday problems of soldiers and their families. In these matters the zampolit is cautioned to treat each case with sensitivity and an individual approach. After a series of counseling sessions with one difficult soldier, a marked improvement in his attitude was observed. The zampolit "not only noted the soldier's diligence before the personnel, but also wrote the soldier's wife about it".⁵⁵ In another case:

A soldier's mother is taken ill. A telegram arrives, but it doesn't have a travel permit from the proper authorities, together with the soldier, he goes to the post office and sends an urgent telegram to the proper authorities.⁵⁶

In performing all these various duties, the political officer, at least according to available Soviet publications, appears to conform to what is expected of him by his superiors. This is to say, however, neither that the zampolit's motivation and work performance are always of the highest caliber⁵⁷, nor that he only faces easily resolved practical problems. His direct responsibility for dealing with troops, for example, makes him particularly susceptible to the frustrations of lecturing to non-Russian

speaking soldiers.⁵⁸ And the majority of his strictly political lectures are nothing if not banal by any cultural standard. It would be a rare soldier or officer who looked forward to his leisure or training time being occupied by a discussion of the finer points of the Twenty-Fifth Party Congress. Nevertheless, there is little to indicate that zampolits in general fail to perform their required duties, particularly in the area of political training.

But the Soviet civil-military leadership has recognized that the political officer needs to do more in his unit than purely political chores. Most importantly, he must not appear to be deadweight, a political hack, but rather a skilled professional officer and the model for emulation. This is good for the Party's image as well as a needed supplement to the unit's manpower. There is no reason to believe that Soviet writers are incorrect when they state that a zampolit "who is a first class specialist and an expert in military science is no longer a rarity".⁵⁹ On the contrary, political officers in recent years "have received an increasing amount of formal professional military education and, in some cases, direct command experience."⁶⁰ By 1969, wrote the commander of the Lenin Political-Military Academy, "one-third of the total study time is devoted to military subjects and to operational and tactical as well as technical training."⁶¹ Judging from the intense interest in the topic of the zampolit's technical training in more current writings, the trend can only have continued.

The political officer, then, does presumably raise the effectiveness of his unit both with concrete, military contributions and by means of his political activities. His political work, as a minimum, lightens that particular load from the commander's shoulders; at best, it increases unit fervor and discipline. Several of the political officer's activities, however, are potentially disruptive.

Two such activities, the zampolit's mobilization of Party and Komsomol activists and his practical responsibility for troop welfare, would seem to lead every commander to periodically ask himself, "Who's in charge here, anyway?" One superimposes a Party network over the command structure, organizationally diluting the commander's authority. The other tends to remove the commander from all but an operational association with his own troops, since the commander's participation in troop welfare activities is (in Soviet writings) nominal and the political officer seems to have been delegated almost complete responsibility in this area.

The continuing competition of operational versus political imperatives under the yedionachaliye system must weigh heavily on the Soviet commander. He is ensured that "The success of operations will depend ... on absolute subordination to the commander and faultless fulfillment of his orders."⁶² However, in order to achieve operational success, a premium is not placed on the commander's technical competence, rather, "The most important of (a commander's traits) is his devotion to the Party."⁶³ He is instructed that "The leading role in battle is unquestionably played by commanders since they directly carry out its organization",⁶⁴ but neither strategy nor tactics are regarded as his most valuable tools. Instead, "... party-political work in combat (is considered) the most important element of the commander's activity."⁶⁵ As a communist, the unit commander presumably understands the emphasis on Party-political work and high morale in the Soviet Armed Forces, which, according to communist doctrine, improves combat effectiveness instead of hindering it. Nevertheless, should political training periodically infringe upon the commander's equal need to maintain the technical combat readiness of his unit, he is faced with frustration. And this frustration may well be directed at his deputy, the zampolit, whose major responsibility it is to ensure that political training continues unabated.⁶⁶

Potential friction between the commander and political officer is aggravated in additional respects. First, criticism of the commander at unit Party meetings is still openly encouraged.⁶⁷ This is a practice which was strongly opposed by Marshal Zhukov while he was in office and one which professional officers in general find particularly repugnant because it erodes the foundation of trust in the commander by his men. The commander is also placed on the defensive within his own unit by his reliance on the zampolit's "guidance", and indeed tutoring, if the commander's political consciousness is deemed to be underdeveloped, both in political and military matters. In this regard the commander is occasionally looked down upon by the political apparatus which, having achieved a monopoly in the areas of education and personnel administration, considers it necessary to point out that some regular officers:

have not enough experience in political educational work and special care should be taken of them. In helping them ... political workers explain that the handling of complex systems, which requires the coordinated efforts of many servicemen, raises the importance of the officer's organizational capabilities and his ability to stimulate his subordinates' efforts in the fulfillment of combat readiness tasks.⁶⁸

Finally, the nostalgic depiction of the World War II commissar in current Soviet military writings as the "heart"⁶⁹ of his unit must evoke in the modern commander recollections of how powerful the wartime commissar actually was and might be again should circumstances warrant.

CONCLUSIONS

Three general conclusions can be reached based on the preceding discussion. They deal with:

- 1) The importance of political work in Soviet perspective;
- 2) The integration of the zampolit into strictly military affairs, and his contribution to overall unit readiness; and
- 3) The zampolit's relationship with his commander.

One cannot overestimate the place of political work in the Soviet Armed Forces. It is at once a system of Party control over the military, a vehicle for gaining the support of Soviet citizens while they are still impressionable and, in Communist eyes at least, a real contribution to military effectiveness by virtue of its emphasis on improving the moral and fighting qualities of soldiers. The Soviet leadership firmly believes in the benefits of military-political work and will always find some means to perpetuate it. The zampolit now is the Party's chief means for perpetuating Party supervision and accomplishing political work in the Armed Forces. For these reasons, he will remain a valued asset in the Party's eyes in the foreseeable future.

Regular officers presumably possess a slightly different perspective. As Communists, they feel competent in political as well as military affairs. Furthermore, in the past debates have surfaced in which professional officers objected to the primacy of political work over technical training.⁷⁰ They would object to a zampolit's concentration on his political duties if it would detract from his military skills. These attitudes, plus the clear need to

fully utilize every officer in any armed formation, strengthen the requirement for the zampolit to fulfill both functions. And as a Soviet Army officer with a deep interest in the success of his unit and its traditions, the zampolit undoubtedly is under considerable pressure to conform to the desires of his commander. Despite implications in the literature, it would be a rare junior officer who would actively work in the face of his superior's disapproval. Finally, by assimilating the zampolit so thoroughly in recent years into the military establishment, "the question of his loyalty, whether it is first to the Armed Forces or first to the Army apparatus, now stands open."⁷¹

It is very possible also that this shift in emphasis has contributed to a general rise in the zampolit's value to his unit and, consequently, to an improvement in unit readiness as well. The zampolit's capabilities as a technically qualified officer are a welcome addition to the unit and even his activities in the welfare and morale of the troops have their value, both objectively and within the context of Communist dogma.

Yet, the potential does exist for friction in commander-political officer relations. Under the yedinonachaliye principle and in practice, the zampolit constitutes a possible obstruction to the commander's unimpaired exercise of his authority. Potential conflict is somewhat alleviated by the commander's training (and presumably belief) in the yedinonachaliye system and by the fact that most Soviet officers are Communists and accustomed to submitting to the Party's dictates. The commander can also recognize that his political officer does perform certain useful functions and is, after all, his deputy and under his command. However, we must await further developments or information to fully understand how the zampolit, his unit and commander will interact in the political officer system's test -- the next prolonged military engagement.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹The term zampolit is actually a contraction of the title zamestitel' komandira po politichasti (deputy commander for political affairs). For the purposes of this paper the terms zampolit, political officer and political deputy carry an identical meaning.
- ²At the company level, for instance, the political apparatus consists of the zampolit himself and 'activists' who assist him. There also exists a Party organization which includes all the units Communists. Staffs at higher levels successively increase in size and formal organization. See Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, The Armed Forces of the Soviet Union (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979).
- ³Michael J. Deane, Political Control of the Soviet Armed Forces (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, 1977), p.146.
- ⁴For an excellent evaluation of the contrast between the application of political training in the Soviet and American armed forces, see: Brzezinski, Zbigniew and Huntington, Samuel P., Political Power: USA/USSR (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), pp.331-365.
- ⁵Alexander Khmel' (ed.), O vospitanii sovetskogo soldata (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p.22.
- ⁶Ibid., p.23.
- ⁷Scott and Scott, p.259.
- ⁸Khmel', p.23.
- ⁹Scott and Scott, p.259.
- ¹⁰Otto Preston Chaney, Jr., Zhukov (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p.384.
- ¹¹Scott and Scott, p.265.
- ¹²Chaney, pp.384-385, citing: Krasnaya Zvezda, 25 January 1956.
- ¹³For instance, The "Mechanization Versus Morale" Debate (1969) as outlined in Michael J. Deane, Political Control of the Soviet Armed Forces (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, 1977), pp.201-204.
- ¹⁴V. Zaytsev, "Sovershenstvovat' rabotu s kadrami", Tyl i Snabzheniye (#4, 1979), p.15. "Approximately 90 per cent of rear services officers are Komsomol or Communist Party members. More than 65 per cent of them have completed a higher military or higher military-specialty education."
- ¹⁵Roman Kolkowitz, "The Military", chapter of: H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths (eds.), Interest Groups in Soviet Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.168.
- ¹⁶E. Kapitonov, "Lenin o moral'no-politicheskikh i boyevykh kachestvakh sovetskikh voynov", chapter of A.P. Dmitrenko and V.A. Zubarev (eds.), Kommunisticheskaya moral' i voinskiy dolg (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1960), p.44.

- 17 V.V. Shelyag, A.D. Glotchkin and K.K. Platonov (eds.), Voyennaya psikhologiya (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1972), (translated in US Air Force Soviet Military Thought series), p.392.
- 18 A. Ulebov, "Marksizm-Leninizm o kommunisticheskoy npravstvennosti", chapter of: Dmitrenko and Zubarev, pp.26-34.
- 19 D. Timerkhanov, "Zadachi partiyno-politicheskoy raboty opredelyaet komandir", Voyennyy vestnik (#12, 1978), p.63.
- 20 A.S. Zheltov, Soldat i voyna, (Moscow, Voenizdat, 1971), p.15.
- 21 Khmel', p.52.
- 22 S. Yevdokimov, "Vospitaniye budushchikh politrabotnikov", Vestnik protivovozdushnoy oborony (#6, 1978), p.58.
- 23 L. Lepriyenko, "Glavnoye napravleniye", Voyennyy Vestnik (#12, 1978), p.41, citing: L.I. Brezhnev, Malaya zemlya.
- 24 Yevdokimov, p.58.
- 25 Edward L. Warner, III, The Military in Contemporary Soviet Politics (New York: Praeger, 1977) p.74.
- 26 Yevdokimov, p.58.
- 27 M.G. Sobolev (ed.), Zamestitel' komandira roty po politichasti (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1974), p.99.
- 28 ibid.
- 29 Khmel', p.141. "The commander's responsibility to a large extent is shared by the political bodies and the political workers. Their joint efforts and coordinated activity help promote conscious military discipline ..."
- 30 Zheltov, p.23. "Commanders and political workers are the guardians and continuers of the glorious combat traditions of the Soviet Armed Forces. Such traditions of the Army and Navy as mass heroism, military comradeship, total fidelity to the Standard of the unit, discipline, and a number of others constitute an indefeasible part of the revolutionary traditions of the Communist Party and the Soviet people."
- 31 Timerkhanov, p.63.
- 32 I. Babenko, Komandiry (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p.40.
- 33 M.G. Sobolev, Partiynaya organizatsiya v voinskom kollektive (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1977), p.40.
- 34 Babenko, p.23.
- 35 ibid., p.36.
- 36 ibid.
- 37 Sobolev, Partiynaya organizatsiya, p.45.

- 38 N.A. Lomov, Nauchno-tekhnicheskiy progress i revolyutsiya v voyennom dele, (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1973), translated in, (US Air Force "Soviet Military Thought" series), p.68.
- 39 For instance: Timerkhanov, pp.62-64, and: A. Yepifantsev, "Kak ya gotovlyus' k lektsiyam", Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil (#8, 1978), p.68.
- 40 P.I. Karpenko, Partiyno-politicheskaya rabota v sovetskikh silakh (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1972), pp.59-62.
- 41 Lavriyenko, p.43, refers to: "... political hours, which are held at tactical exercises..."
- 42 I. Kondratev, "Partiyno-politicheskaya rabota v eshelone", Tyl i snabzheniye (#1, 1978), p.63.
- 43 Yepifantsev, p.69.
- 44 Khmel', pp.50-51.
- 45 Kondratev, pp.62-64.
- 46 Babenko, p.28.
- 47 Lavriyenko, p.42.
- 48 Kondratev, p.63. For example, "Political Worker and Officer, N. Kharitonov... specified the placing of activists by car, the methods of informing and communicating with them and he recommended giving assignments to all Communist and members of the VLKSM [Komsomol].
- 49 Lavriyenko, p.40.
- 50 Chaney, pp.242-243.
- 51 Kondratev, p.64.
- 52 Khmel', p.52.
- 53 Kondratev, p.63.
- 54 Khmel', p.52.
- 55 Sobolev, Zampolit, p.281.
- 56 V. Ignat'yev, "Semya zhivet na garnizone", Voyenny vestnik (#10, 1978), p.61.
- 57 For instance, an older, but very pointed, critique of zampolits in the late-Stalin era can be found in: Zbigniew Brzezinski (ed.), Political Controls in the Soviet Army (New York: Research Program on the USSR, 1954). Particularly: M. Kolosov, "... about 75 per cent of the political workers approach their work without great enthusiasm, do not like it and would be glad to dissociate themselves from it. The main reason is the banal character of their work ... (they work) merely because of the general pressures and control which make all Soviet citizens work." (p.34) Or: F. Belov, I. Dmitriev and N. Tuschin, "Professional officers ... treat political education as an imposed duty and treat it without enthusiasm ... political education encroaches on what little

remains of their leisure time. Even the holidays are organized for political activities, various collective sports competitions, excursions, or meetings." (p.48).

⁵⁸ Sobolev, Zampolit, p.276. "In one unit ... served Yagnar, who didn't speak Russian well and for that reason lagged behind in political training."

⁵⁹ Khmel', p.50.

⁶⁰ Deane, p.74.

⁶¹ ibid., footnote 74, quoting A. Zheltov, Soviet Military Review, 3(March 1978), p.8.

⁶² Khmel, p.26.

⁶³ ibid., p.27.

⁶⁴ Timerkhanov, p.62.

⁶⁵ ibid., p.63.

⁶⁶ Deane, pp.74-75. "... this tension between political officers and other military personnel is most appropriately viewed as a predictable internal conflict largely centering upon the question of the amount of the officers and enlisted men's time that should be controlled by MPA (MPD) operators and devoted to their Party activities and political study programs as opposed to that spent in routine military duties, operational training, or even leisure time."

⁶⁷ N. Shablikov, "Kritika i samokritika - normal partiynoy zhizni", Kommunist vooruzhennykh sil, (#16/1978), pp.50-57.

⁶⁸ Khmel', p.171.

⁶⁹ ibid., p.50.

⁷⁰ For instance: Deane, pp.201-204.

⁷¹ Fritz Ermarth, "Soviet Military Politics", Military Review, 1(January 1968), p.34.

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