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Building a Red Navy: communist activism and military authority in the Baltic Fleet, 1918-1940*

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Yiannis Kokosalakis

School of History, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

yiannis.kokosalakis@ucd.ie

Abstract: This article examines the activities of the Soviet military-political organs in the Baltic Fleet. It shows that the web of party institutions transformed the Fleet into a space of political and social activism that had little to do with the strictly military aspects of government policy. Such activism was nevertheless unfailingly promoted even as it became clear that it compromised core elements of military efficiency such as discipline and well-defined chains of command. This argument has implications for our broader understanding of the nature of the Soviet state. It indicates that once the Bolsheviks' revolutionary ideology had become institutionalised in the state via the ubiquitous presence of party organs, pragmatic retreats for organisational efficiency became exceptionally difficult to implement.

Shortly after the commencement of military operations in the Winter War against Finland (December 1939 – March 1940), a representative of the Political Directorate of the Soviet Baltic Fleet visited one of the active units of the Fleet's 3rd Detached Special Rifles Brigade. The commissar gave a lecture to 120 communist activists serving in the unit on the political significance of the war and answered questions on Finnish-Soviet relations and the views of the Communist Party of Finland on the war. Returning to their platoons, the marines organised

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meetings where they relayed this information to their colleagues, in order to provide them with a better understanding of their mission. Subsequent reports from political officers described the progress of these activities as satisfactory and requested further print material from the Directorate so as to step up their pace.¹

Scarcely relevant to a Baltic marine's usual task of charging across sea ice, such educational events were nevertheless a mainstay of Soviet military life. Aimed at disseminating socialist values in the armed forces and reinforcing the loyalty of military personnel to the Soviet state, these activities were organised by a complex structure of Communist Party organs established during the Russian Civil War. In the following pages, I offer an archival account of such activities in the Baltic Fleet. I show that the web of party institutions transformed the Fleet into a space of political and social activism that had little to do with the strictly military aspects of government policy. Such activism was nevertheless unfailingly promoted even as it became clear that it compromised core elements of military efficiency such as discipline and well-defined chains of command.

To be sure, this blurring of the boundary between the civil and military spheres was a common enough feature of European societies after the Great War. An extensive body of research has documented the spill-over of military practices and values into political and everyday life.² What set the USSR apart from its peers was the fact that a reverse process was actively pursued as official policy. Paramilitary activism and a political vocabulary replete with military metaphor were features of public life in the Soviet Union as much as in other contemporary societies. The USSR was however the only country where the authorities introduced core elements of political activism into military life.

¹ Russian State Archive of the Navy (RGAVFM), f. r-1893, op. 1, d. 39, ll. 25–6, 127.

² See indicatively John Horne, ed., *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914 - 1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

That the party would pursue this experiment in military policy at a time of growing security concerns is testament to the Bolsheviks' commitment to revolutionary change. A recent departure in Soviet historical research has highlighted the extent to which the Marxist-Leninist worldview of the party leadership shaped its policy initiatives. Throughout the interwar period, Bolshevik policy in fields as different as industrial management and constitutional reform was informed by a concern to break down bureaucratic hierarchies and spur popular participation in public administration; to build, in short, a workers' state.³

Such revolutionary élan was invariably checked by the necessity to maintain functioning state structures staffed by qualified personnel. It was further complicated by the tendency of people to take the leadership at its word. Soviet citizens and party activists took active part in state-sponsored campaigns. In doing so however, they reinterpreted state directives in their own way and took policy implementation in unpredictable directions.⁴ Research on the Soviet military experience has stressed the first of these two factors. Pioneering work on the Red Army focused on its politically vexed transformation from quasi-paramilitary formation in the early Civil War period to a regular fighting force in later years. Party leaders were shown to have compromised their ideals of a militia of worker-soldiers in favour of a standing army led by trained professionals. To the extent that antiauthoritarian habits survived in the military, this was seen as the result of policy failure rather than intent.⁵

³ Stephen E. Hanson, *Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Samantha Lomb, *Stalin's Constitution: Soviet Participatory Politics and the Discussion of the 1936 Draft Constitution* (London: Routledge, 2017); Lara Douds, *Inside Lenin's Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the Early Soviet State* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁴ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism As a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Kenneth M. Straus, *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998); Matthew E. Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁵ Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); David R Stone, *Hammer and Rifle: The Militarization of the Soviet Union, 1926-1933* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Roger R. Reese, "Red Army Professionalism and the Communist Party, 1918-1941," *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 1 (2002): 71-102; idem, *Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918-1991* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

Taking a closer look at the daily operation of the Soviet military, this article paints a slightly more complicated picture. Although there is little reason to doubt the commitment of the Bolshevik leadership to the creation of regular armed forces, this effort was ultimately undermined by the presence in the military of political institutions whose activities were a constant source of obstruction to this goal. This argument has implications for our broader understanding of the nature of the Soviet state. It indicates that once the Bolsheviks' revolutionary ideology had become institutionalised in the state via the ubiquitous presence of party organs, pragmatic retreats for organisational efficiency became exceptionally difficult to implement. The leadership's priorities might have oscillated between ideological goals and pragmatic compromise, but the structure of the Soviet state placed definite constraints on how far the latter could go.

The following account is based on research in the archival collections of the Baltic Fleet's Political Directorate (*PUBalt*). The Fleet is an especially apt case study subject for the purposes of this investigation. The day-to-day and combat operations of navies involve a much higher level of technical complexity than is the case in land forces. Thus, there never was a question of building a Navy on the basis of the horizontal structures favoured by party radicals, rendering the task of political control all the more imperative for the party leadership. At the same time, the technological demands of the navy made it fertile ground for Bolshevik political intervention. Navy officers and sailors are generally trained to a relatively higher level of skill than the infantry men that form the bulk of army manpower. Based in and around Leningrad, Baltic Fleet personnel were also an urban lot, by circumstances if not by origins. The Fleet's servicemen were thus sociologically and spatially very close to the Bolsheviks' preferred constituency, the industrial proletariat. The Fleet then was a military institution where political

intervention was both an urgent need and a relatively easy task for the party. It therefore affords us a view of the Soviet military-political institutional development in nearly ideal conditions.⁶

The argument proceeds in two parts. First, I offer a brief discussion of the emergence of the Soviet ‘military-political organs’, i.e. party organisations and the parallel hierarchy of political instructors and commissars.⁷ I consider this against the broader backdrop of the Bolsheviks’ awkward relationship with the technical elites inherited from the old regime. This is followed by an examination of the effect of the party’s presence in the Fleet with respect to the latter’s ability to maintain discipline and morale amongst sailors and officers. I argue that party organisations contributed actively to the blurring of the lines between military and civilian life, ultimately undermining policy initiatives intended to promote professional standards in the armed forces.

The Origins of the Soviet military-political organs, 1918–1925

The Bolsheviks are justly famous as uncompromising opponents of the First World War, but they were not the only socialists to take this position. What differentiated Lenin’s party from the rest of the anti-war left was that it campaigned not only for an end to hostilities, but for the transformation of the military into an instrument of social revolution.⁸ Lenin regarded pacifist attitudes within the socialist movement as based on the misguided view that the coming clash between workers and the bourgeoisie could be favourably resolved by peaceful means. By contrast, the Bolshevik leader maintained that the task of Social-Democracy was to convince workers to keep hold of their weapons and use them against the bourgeois state under

⁶ Though all caveats relating to the generalisability of case studies apply here.

⁷ For the purposes of this article, the activities of political officers and Party organisations will be examined as analytically equivalent manifestations of Party presence, despite their slightly different remits. For a concise account of the history of the Political Directorate of the Worker Peasant Red Army see Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917-91* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁸ On the varying views of the anti-war left, see R. Craig Nation, *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism* (Duke University Press, 1989).

revolutionary leadership. The workers' state would need its own armed forces, which would however be very different to the pompously hierarchical militaries of the capitalist powers.⁹ Drawing on a long tradition of socialist literature, Lenin called for the disbandment of the standing army and its replacement by a workers' militia organised on voluntary principles. This, Lenin argued, would be a major element of the broader revolutionary process of building a new type of commune-state where hierarchies of compulsion would give way to mass participation in public administration.¹⁰

Lenin's government set about implementing this vision immediately upon seizing power in the October revolution. A series of decrees issued in the last months of 1917 legalised the activities of revolutionary committees in the military, abolished personal rank and introduced elections to commanding posts. In November, the People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs Nikolai Podvoiskii established a commission for the disbandment of the old army.¹¹ These radical measures were predicated on the expectation that a revolutionary wave would sweep across Europe and put an end to both war and capitalism, thus rendering organised militaries superfluous.

Things turned out rather differently. Rather than joining the Russians in internationalist mutiny, the German army stayed in the field and by early 1918 was threatening to capture Petrograd and put an early end to the fledgling Soviet state. Shortly after capturing power, the Bolsheviks were thus faced with the task of restoring military discipline in order to transform their loyal troops into a combat-effective army. Following a barrage of serious military setbacks, the party leadership resolved to abandon commitment to militia formations in favour of

⁹ V. I. Lenin, 'Voennaia Programma Proletarskoi Revoliutsii', in *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii [PSS]*, 5th edition, vol. 30, (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literaturi, 1973), 131-143.

¹⁰ Lenin, "Gosudar'stvo i Revoliutsiia" in *PSS*, vol. 33, 36-56.

¹¹ *Dekreti Sovetskoi Vlasti* vol. 1, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literaturi, 1957), 21, 66; Viktor S. Zemtsov, *Krasnie Komissari Na Fone Epokhi: Ot Podviga Do Zabveniiia* (Moscow: Granitsa, 2015), 101-3.

establishing a standing force. Thus, on 15 January 1918 the Council of Peoples' Commissars issued the Decree on the Organisation of the Worker-Peasant Red Army. In March, the Party Central Committee resolved to staff the Red Army with old-regime officers and on 22 April, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee abolished the election of commanders.¹² Party organisations assumed the responsibility of organising mass recruitments to supply the Red Army with soldiers, as well as mobilising individual Party members to fill sensitive military positions. During the same year, the revolutionary committees of soldiers' representatives in military units were replaced by the institution of political departments (*politotdeli*) run by military commissars, a parallel hierarchy of plenipotentiaries charged with maintaining discipline and morale, while also overseeing the work of commanders and other officers.¹³

This shift in military thinking was part of a broader political reorientation away from the utopian radicalism of the early days of the revolution towards a more sober appreciation of the necessity of strong state institutions. Lenin signalled this recalibration in an April 1918 article on *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power*, where he argued that the conditions of civil war and socialist revolution demanded "iron authority ... swift and merciless in the repression... of exploiters ... and hooligans". Nevertheless, he warned that the correct exercise of this power could only be ensured by the active participation of the governed, organised by the Communist Party.¹⁴ Lenin thus recognised that the workers' state would also have to rely on hierarchies and coercion. Nevertheless, he qualified this admission by introducing the notion of party-led mass control of the state apparatus.

Following this recalibration, the Soviet state accepted the services of thousands of non-communist officers, civil servants, jurists and scientists. Over the next few years, their cooperation in the state apparatus with revolutionary communists would prove a complicated matter

¹² *Dekreti*, 356; Zemtsov, *Krasnie Komissari*, 124.

¹³ Zemtsov, *Krasnie Komissari*, 121–4, 142–4

¹⁴ Lenin, "Ocherednie zadachi Sovetskoi vlasti", in *PSS*, vol. 36, 196, 203–6.

and be the source of considerable political tension.¹⁵ Nowhere was this incongruous cohabitation more immediately apparent than in the military. Resentment against the reinstatement of old regime officers and the reintroduction of military discipline fuelled the emergence of the first internal party opposition. At the party's 8th Congress in March 1919, a group of prominent communists rejected the Central Committee resolution formalising the shift in military policy. The Military Opposition maintained that a bourgeois army could not defend a workers' state. Victory in the field could only be secured by partisan formations led by ideologically sound communist commanders who had the confidence of their proletarian troops. It took Lenin's personal intervention to carry the Congress against the opposition and thus commit the party to the new military policy.¹⁶

Although the Russian Civil War was an overwhelmingly continental affair, the Bolsheviks' military-political organs were extended to the Baltic Fleet almost simultaneously, so that by the end of the conflict in 1921, the institutional framework of party presence in the Fleet was already fully formed.¹⁷ Three events in particular catalysed this process. In late May 1918, Leon Trotsky personally ordered the arrest of the Fleet's commander Aleksei Shchastnii, a former Imperial Navy officer. Shchastnii was subsequently sentenced to death by a revolutionary tribunal on thin evidence suggesting he intended to use the Fleet to stage a coup against Soviet power.¹⁸ In October, a group of sailors staged an armed demonstration in the centre of Petrograd and attempted to instigate a mutiny amongst the warships docked on the Neva.¹⁹ More famously, the garrison of the Kronstandt naval base mutinied along with the crews of several of the Fleet's ships just as the 10th party Congress convened in March 1921. According

¹⁵ Andrew Heywood, *Modernising Lenin's Russia: Economic Reconstruction, Foreign Trade and the Railways* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Holquist, *Making War*, 282–90;

¹⁶ It is indicative of the early Bolsheviks' visceral resentment of military culture that the reintroduction of military salutes was highlighted by the oppositionists as particularly offensive. Russian State Archive of Social-Political History [RGASPI], f. 41 op. 2 d. 1, ll. 52–6

¹⁷ Kirill Nazarenko, *Flot, Revoliutsiia i Vlast' v Rossii, 1917-1921* (Moscow: Kvadriga, 2011), 227.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 238–45

¹⁹ Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 351–5.

to I. Sadkov, a sailor and Congress delegate who had been mobilised to put down the mutiny, the survival of “amateurish” methods of military organisation in the Fleet had been the cause of the emergence of the “Left-SR and Menshevik abscess” amongst honest sailors.²⁰

By 1921 it had thus become abundantly clear that the armed forces of the Soviet state would need to be disciplined, hierarchical and politically supervised. To this end, the Red Army and Fleet underwent a series of reforms in terms of structure, size and doctrine. The most consequential of these were conceived by Mikhail Frunze and introduced by the 14th party Congress in late 1925. The Frunze reforms aimed to rebuild the Soviet military as a modern fighting force staffed by well-trained professional officers educated in new, politically reliable academies. The reforms placed special emphasis on the promotion of military discipline. Andrei Bubnov, heading the commission on disciplinary reform, declared the aim to be nothing less than a decisive struggle against “loose discipline, negligence, and unconscientious attitudes towards service”.²¹

Significantly, the Frunze reforms foresaw a significant curtailment of the executive powers of political officers abolishing the practice of dual command, whereby commissars had to approve of operational orders before they came into force.²² Party presence would however continue to guarantee the communist political orientation of the military. In 1926, the new party Rules formalised this institutional arrangement by establishing political departments headed by commissars under the authority of the party’s Central Committee in all military formations. The Rules also authorised the operation of party organisations in the military and created party commissions, elected at the organisations’ conferences, to review membership applications and party disciplinary disputes.²³ Thus, regular officers (*komsostav*) would be in command while commissars and instructors (*politsostav*) would organise the activities

²⁰ RGASPI, f. 17 op. 109 op.27 l. 14–15.

²¹ von Hagen, 225

²² Ibid., 214–20.

²³ *Ustav VKP (b)*, 1926; XII: 78.

necessary to ensure that all those who served the Soviet state under arms remained committed to its ideological outlook. The Bolsheviks had thus settled on a combination of technical expertise and direct political intervention as the solution to the problem of a socialist military. Nevertheless, it should be noted here that this functional bifurcation of the military apparatus into command and political branches was not intended to absolve either from what was expected of the other. Indeed, Bubnov's bracketing of discipline with conscientiousness indicates that a good communist was expected to be a good soldier. Similarly, as we will see in the following pages, it was expected of soldiers and officers to be actively engaged Soviet citizens, even if they were not necessarily communists.

Communists in uniform: Party presence in the Baltic Fleet, 1926–1940

This peculiar mode of governance was particularly suited to the navy, where the highly specialised skills required of high-ranking officers meant that top ranks in individual ships and units continued to be dominated by old-regime specialists for a while after the Frunze reforms. As late as 1928, a statistical report on the social composition of the Baltic Fleet showed that all four commanders in the Fleet's Battleship squadron belonged to the former nobility, although one had since joined the Party. Similarly, out of five head engineers, one was a noble by descent, two were peasants, one a worker and one was marked as 'other'; none of them were Party members, although one was a candidate. Party saturation was higher in the less senior ranks, with all gunnery officers in the squadron being communists.²⁴ This suggests that although by that time the new naval academies had already started to produce a new generation of officers without ties to the old regime, these had not by that time acquired the necessary experience to assume command.

²⁴ Russian State Archive of the Navy (RGAVMF), f. r-34, op. 2, d.1334, l. 72.

For as long as this situation persisted, it was necessary for political departments and party cells to keep a close watch on the activities of old-regime officers and make sure that, if they did not convert to the Bolshevik cause, they were at least not working against it. An example of the uneasy relationship between the two sides can be seen in a collection of reports on surviving Tsarist traditions to the political department of the Kronstadt naval base. The issues highlighted by the commissars who authored these reports often seem pedantic or trivial in their remarks but are illustrative of the gap between the ideological outlook of communists and the established norms of the institution they were charged with controlling.

For example, the commissar of the cruiser *Aurora* of revolutionary fame complained that there was a widespread feeling among officers of superiority with respect to the army, whose officers were seen as less cultured and of inferior skill. Another commissar wrote in exasperation that whenever large ships are visited by the high command, carpets are rolled out and all regular business of the ship is disrupted by a rush to make everything ‘sparkling clean’. To make things worse, ‘many people find nothing wrong in this and think that it is a normal state of affairs’.²⁵ Other reports raised concerns about the persistence of pre-revolutionary rank appellations like ‘captain’ or ‘admiral’ instead of the more politically correct ‘commander of’. Superstitious behaviour like not taking women to sea and throwing coins into the water when sailing past Gogland Island in the Gulf of Finland were also reported as evidence of the poor ideological state of the Fleet. Even the lettering in which ships’ names were written was particularly vexing to one political officer who complained about the persistence of old Slavonic instead of modern Russian script, arguing that this was a remnant from the Tsarist period, when a ship was viewed as ‘a Church on Water’. In his own missive to *PUBalt*, the commissar who

²⁵ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1304, ll. 79–80.

had collected these reports opined that the only way to remedy this situation was to ‘fight as a single front to replace these [Tsarist traditions] with new, revolutionary traditions’.²⁶

In order to bridge the gap between the actual and the desired state of the Fleet, ship commanders were expected to participate in the educational and propaganda events organised by political departments for all personnel, in fact sharing responsibility for their work regardless of their party status. These included lectures, film screenings and Q&A sessions about international events and central political affairs like party Congresses as well as special sessions on the political importance of naval exercises before and during their execution. Thus, in the run up to the naval manoeuvres of autumn 1926, *PUBalt* produced a set of guidelines on the appropriate topics around which political education should be based. These included themes as varied as the role of the Fleet in protecting the merchant navy, the rise of the USA in the world economy, the English miners’ strike and the future direction of the worker-peasant alliance in the USSR. In a model session outlined in the guidelines, political officers were encouraged to draw upon these issues to demonstrate that ‘growing contradictions amongst capitalists’ made an attack on the Soviet Union ‘both possible and inevitable’.²⁷

Expectations notwithstanding, the participation of commanders in such events remained limited. Their absence is a recurring issue in the minutes of commissars’ and party secretaries’ joint meetings from this period. Discussing the matter at a meeting of the regular and political officers of the Leningrad Naval Base (*Lenmorbaza*) in early 1926, the temporary commissar of the M-class submarine *Serp i Molot* Kudriavtsev gave a glowing report on the leadership of commander Tsiplov, who was absent from the meeting. According to Kudriavtsev, Tsiplov was a brilliant commander who enjoyed very good relations with his crew and took

²⁶ Ibid. II. 81–7.

²⁷ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1310, l. 16–7.

a strong interest in their political development. Despite not being a party member, the conscientious Tsiplenov apparently attended all political meetings that were open to non-partyists.

This picture of harmonious collaboration between commanders and political officers painted by Kudriavtsev was however undermined by a supplementary report delivered by Gor'kov, a member of the organising sector of the political department of *Lenmorbaza*. Gor'kov's report painted a decidedly less rosy picture, according to which Tsiplenov's "influence on political work [was] negligible" and the "alienation of the *komsostav* from political work" was demonstrated by the absence of links with the party group. To further illustrate the extent of the problem, Gor'kov added that Tsiplenov had failed to give a report to the party bureau – composed of his subordinates – and that it was often the case that *Serp i Molot's* officers had no political assignments.

In the ensuing discussion, commissars from other vessels weighed in with their own experience to further undermine any notion that the two branches of the Fleet's dual hierarchy were working in smooth cooperation. According to Shcheglov, the commissar of the depot ship *Smolny*, regular officers did not seem to care about political work at all. Seemingly unaware of the fact that the recent party congress had abolished dual command, Shcheglov added indignantly that commanders were often drawing up orders without consulting their commissars and that the higher military organs signed off on these.²⁸ In his concluding speech, the head commissar of *Lenmorbaza* Davidov remarked that regular officers seemed to be "scared of the party collective". To remedy the problem, the meeting resolved to organise a monthly base-wide joint conference of regular and political officers to discuss issues such as the delineation of responsibilities and share experience on the ways to resolve disputes arising therefrom.²⁹

²⁸ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1303, l. 4

²⁹ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1303, l. 5

It is not possible to determine on the basis of the available evidence whether Kudriavtsev was indeed covering for Tsipenov. In any case, it is not hard to see why professional officers who were busy commanding warships would not want to spend time discussing issues like English industrial strife, let alone assume responsibility for such work. There is however reason to believe that Davidov's description of the officers' attitude towards the party as fearful was not metaphorical. According to some of the participants at another meeting at the Leningrad naval base, many officers were simply too scared to get involved with party organisations, because of a recent wave of arrests conducted by the secret police against officers of all backgrounds. According to one speaker, an engineer from Battleship *Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia* had been arrested without the ship's commissar having even been informed.³⁰

Whether then because of excessive workload, fear or simple indifference, higher ranking officers kept their distance from the party throughout the mid-1920s. Things were different however for junior officers and sailors who made up the bulk of the rank-and-file membership.³¹ For these ranks, participation in party-sponsored activities provided a significant distraction from the tediousness of everyday military life, while also acting as a channel of influence over their immediate environment.

Apart from endless meetings about current political affairs, party cells organised a number of activity circles and cultural clubs. These included chess, sports and music clubs, literacy circles and an extensive system of libraries on ships and units. The three libraries of the Battleship squadron on the *Marat*, *Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia* and *Parizhskaia Kommuna*

³⁰ RGAVFM, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1303, l. 183. The class background of senior officers made them attractive targets for the ever-suspicious secret police. This was often the source of tension with the military-political organs, whose officers naturally resented the usurpation of their powers of oversight by another bureaucracy. Aleksandr Zdanovich, *Organi Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti i Krasnaia Armiia: Deiatel'nost' Organov VChK - OGPU Po Obespecheniiu Bezopasnosti RKKA (1921-1934)* (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2008).

³¹ In 1928, total party saturation in the Baltic Fleet was 20.3%, or 4,506 communists out of a total of 21,654 servicemen. These were organised in 27 unit-level organisations and 158 ship-department level cells. RGVAMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1334, l. 55. During the same period, at Kronstadt, out of 591 party members, 479 were sailors and junior officers. RGVAMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1346, l. 6.

contained 19,596 books and served 1,698 readers in the second half of 1928.³² Film screenings were also a favourite activity organised by the party-led clubs, with *PUBalt* inspectors regularly noting 100% attendance as a major achievement of cultural activism.³³ Party activists also led an extensive network of military correspondents (*voenkori*), amateur journalists who like their civilian counterparts, the workers' and peasant's correspondents, produced single-sheet wall-newspapers carrying reports on a range of issues of concern to rank-and-file sailors.³⁴ Although of course not a forum for criticism of Union-wide policy, *voenkor* publications seem to have enjoyed considerable freedom in discussing problems of everyday life in the navy, as demonstrated by recurring complaints by commissars and senior officers that the *voenkori* were undermining discipline.³⁵

As the 1920s drew to a close, the social arrangement whereby the high-skilled elite was allowed a relatively peaceful if supervised existence and mass activism was channelled primarily into leisurely pursuits came to an end across the Soviet Union. In December 1927 the 15th Party Congress approved the directives on the formulation of the First Five Year Plan, which was launched the following year. Over the period 1928-1932, the country was transformed through the twin processes of crash industrialisation and agricultural collectivisation. During that time, the Party leadership launched a number of political initiatives aiming to generate support for both campaigns as well as preventing social discontent from spiralling out of control. Politically, perhaps the most important of these was the campaign of self-criticism (*samokritika*) launched by the Central Committee in June 1928.³⁶

³² RGVAMF, r-34/2/1348/4.

³³ At the same time, insufficient tickets to civilian cinemas at subsidised prices were amongst the common subjects of formal complaints. RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1307, ll. 3-5.

³⁴ From 1926 to 1928 the number of *voenkor* circles jumped from 8 to 60, while the total membership increased almost tenfold from 128 to 1,137, 38% of who were party members. In 1928, there were 179 different papers with a total circulation of 1,001 copies. RGVAMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1334, l. 66. For an account of the activities of their civilian counterparts, see Jeremy Hicks, "Worker Correspondents: Between Journalism and Literature," *The Russian Review* 66, no. 4 (2007): 568-85.

³⁵ RGVAMF f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1421, l. 175, 184-186.

³⁶ *KPSS*, vol. 4, pp. 338-342.

Samokritika was to be carried out in all public institutions in order to shake up slumberous bureaucratic structures and infuse them with the revolutionary energy necessary to carry out the titanic task of socialist construction. In factories and enterprises, workers were encouraged to use party and trade-union meetings to criticise their superiors and expose their mistakes, whether practical or ideological.³⁷ Political departments and party cells brought this campaign into the Fleet. The relatively subdued meetings of the NEP years gave way to far more engaged and often heated gatherings, as abstract topics like class structure were replaced by discussions about collectivisation and criticisms of personal conduct. The minutes of party meetings from this period reveal a strong concern with the personal lives and attitudes of all personnel.

A joint meeting of the commissars, commanders, secretaries and party commission members of the submarine squadron held on 3 March 1929 to discuss the upcoming membership purge spent a considerable amount of time discussing the problem of antisemitism. One of the speakers decried this and other instances of great-Russian chauvinism as a counterrevolutionary phenomenon, while another suggested that anti-Semitic jokes and comments were reflective of the low cultural level of all personnel. The meeting resolved that internationalist agitation should be intensified, and that both the public and private attitudes of members to the national question should be amongst the key criteria of their evaluation for the purge.³⁸ Other issues discussed during the campaign included drunkenness amongst sailors and officers, as well as their off-duty behaviour in public and at home. Significantly, some speakers called for the involvement of non-party personnel in the purge review process, while others suggested

³⁷ For a conceptual treatment of *samokritika*, see David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), ch. 3. See also Clayton Black, "Answering for Bacchanalia: Management, Authority and the Putilov Tractor Program, 1928-1930," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* 1508 (2002) for an illuminative micro-historical account of how the campaign created a feedback loop between social tensions and political imperatives that precipitated a crisis in industrial relations.

³⁸ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, ll. 1–2.

that the more politically experienced civilian Party organisations should provide leadership to the purge in the military.³⁹

Samokritika however was impossible to script. During this period, the party's open invitation to criticise was taken quite literally by sailors of peasant origin who were opposed to collectivisation. During a discussion aboard battleship *Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia* on the policy of liquidation of the kulak as a class, one participant of peasant origin flatly declared that the party's policy was wrong on this matter as rich peasants simply did not exist, receiving support from other members of the group.⁴⁰ Commissars' reports are replete with descriptions of such events, usually followed by some sort of assessment on the response given to such 'peasant moods' by the political instructor leading the discussion and the rest of the attendees.⁴¹

This state of permanent discussion did little to improve the state of discipline in the Fleet. A three-day review of battleship *Marat* in January 1931 stated that military discipline aboard the ship was in complete breakdown. The number of disciplinary infractions during the same month had amounted to 17% of the ship's personnel, with 19.6% of these committed by party members.⁴² The review also noted that the attitude of officers to disciplinary infractions was extremely lenient, quoting the ship's commander Bulantsev as saying that 'sailors are responsible for their own offences, not officers. Red sailors are citizens and should take responsibility for their actions'.⁴³ The ship's junior commander Garifov expressed a similar attitude towards subordinates, stating that 'they know what they are doing. They are not children'. In a manner indicative of the contradictory priorities of the time, the report concluded with a positive overall

³⁹ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1366, 1; RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, l. 3. Civilian communists from Leningrad's factories did come to assist the Party purge in the Fleet. S. Kostiuhenko et al, *Istoriia Kirovskogo Zavoda* (Moscow: Misl', 1966), 299.

⁴⁰ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, l. 6.

⁴¹ "Peasant moods" were a much more common problem in the largely peasant Army, leading Defence Commissar Kliment Voroshilov to forbid the involvement of military personnel in collectivisation. Roger R. Reese, "Red Army Opposition to Forced Collectivization, 1929–1930: The Army Wavers," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 24–45.

⁴² RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, l. 12

⁴³ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, l. 13

assessment, stating that the political and moral moods of the crew were generally healthy.⁴⁴ *Marat*'s commissar was probably unpleasantly surprised when he subsequently received a reprimand for failing to take measures to improve discipline at a second review in the autumn of the same year.⁴⁵

The fundamentally contradictory demands of basic military discipline and the mass discussion required by *samokritika* were extremely difficult to reconcile and many officers failed to navigate through the political complexities of the time unscathed. In September 1931, Evdokimov, the commissar of the escort ship *Taifun*, received a reprimand from the political department of the battleship squadron for misinterpreting the intent of one of its orders which had demanded improvements on battle readiness and the general condition of the ship. According to this report, the commissar's transgression was that instead of mobilising the ship's party organisation 'towards the rapid liquidation of these shortcomings', he and the *Taifun*'s Party secretary asked the ship's commander to give a report to the organisation's presidium. The ensuing resolution criticised the actions of both the commander and the political department. What earned the commissar a reprimand was that he allowed a discussion on the 'correctness' or orders.⁴⁶

About a month later Adol'f Yanukovich Keek, a political instructor serving on the *Marat* fell afoul of the ship's Party organisation for bending the stick too far in the other direction. Keek, who by that time had served in the Fleet and been a member of the Party for six years, was expelled from the organisation for 'allowing opportunism in practice'. This apparently consisted in refusing to visit crew quarters and failing to collaborate with the party secretary to deal with the chronic disciplinary problems of the *Marat*. Keek was summoned to a general meeting of the *Marat*'s organisation to explain his behaviour. During the meeting, it emerged

⁴⁴ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. d. 1423, l. 16.

⁴⁵ RGAVFM, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, l. 107.

⁴⁶ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, l. 165.

that Keek believed that *samokritika* had no place in the military and that the only way to deal with disciplinary infractions was to ‘tighten the screws’ and enforce rules ‘like on German cruisers’.⁴⁷

Evdokimov’s and Keek’s similar fates demonstrate the impossible situation faced by officers who were expected to issue firm orders while also remaining open to criticism from their subordinates. This almost institutionalised crisis of authority was a feature of much of social life in the Soviet Union during the interwar years because despite repeated attempts by the Party leadership to apply the brakes on activist campaigns, it kept coming up with more. Even after the wrapping up of the *samokritika* campaign, other forms of public activism aimed at spurring complacent bureaucrats onwards continued to enjoy government support.

Originating in industry, the socialist competition movement aimed to spur productivity and promote a communist attitude towards labour by urging workers to outperform each other and publicising their feats in the press.⁴⁸ Party presence in the navy ensured that such activities took place in the Baltic Fleet as much as in any Soviet factory. In 1932, there were 5860 servicemen taking part in some form of socialist competition in the coastal defence squadron alone. Most of the participants were sailors, but there were also 1,000 junior and 350 senior and high-ranking officers. The 1,430 Coastal Defence *voenkor*i produced 9 regiment and 117 company-level papers as well as 9 radio shows. The Battleship Squadron, which as we have seen was faring poorly in terms of military performance, produced equally impressive results in terms of activism with about a third of the 2,203 participants being officers.⁴⁹

Competitions could be as straightforward as individual marksmanship tournaments, but they could also be technical contests between particular ship departments or entire vessels.

⁴⁷ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, ll. 175-179. Keek already had a reprimand and a strong reprimand for drunkenness which presumably contributed to his expulsion.

⁴⁸ Lewis Siegelbaum, “Socialist Competition and Socialist Construction in the USSR: The Experience of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932),” *Thesis Eleven* 4, no. 1 (1982): 48–67; idem, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1443, l. 12

During the October 1937 manoeuvres the *Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia* daily *Oktiabr'skii Luch*, announced a competition with the *Marat* over which of the two battleships could operate while producing the least visible smoke. On the *Marat*, the boiler and engine department crews challenged each other to a competition which included terms like being 'cultured' and 'well-mannered' in one's behaviour towards fellow sailors.⁵⁰

These illustrious achievements in activism are best attributed to the communisation of the officer corps. In 1931, the replacement rate of commanding officers ranged from 60% to 85% on different levels of the Fleet's hierarchy.⁵¹ Unlike the *komsostav* of the 1920s, the new officer hierarchy was both better versed in and less hostile to the numerous non-military activities organised by the party. The upshot of transformation was that it removed much of the ground for the conflict of the late 1920s. The behaviour of commanders is scarcely mentioned in the commissar reports from the whole of the Fleet in December 1934. Instead, the reports note a satisfactory pace of work in terms of meeting attendance, *voenkor* newspapers and radio productions. In terms of weak spots in party work, they contain several mentions of the perennial problem of idle members but blamed the bureaus instead of the officers.⁵²

One may well wonder about the possibility of determining a victor in a competition of politeness, all the more so when this concerns battleship crews in exercise. Such almost comical examples however demonstrate the extent to which the activist culture that was such an integral part of the way the interwar USSR was governed had penetrated into the military. A decade after the Frunze reforms, the party had successfully raised a new generation of red officers who were as involved in its activities as any industrial worker. Whether these officers possessed the level of military skill foreseen by the reformers was a different question. Socialist competitions in live fire drills might have well trained Fleet personnel to a higher standard, but it is unclear

⁵⁰ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1443, ll. 46–56.

⁵¹ Pavel Petrov, "Krasnoznamenii Baltiiskii Flot Nakanune Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voini, 1935 – Vesna 1940 Gg." (Saint-Petersburg, Sankt-Peterburgskii Gosudarstvennii Universitet, 2014), 329.

⁵² RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1443, ll. 9–10.

how the combat readiness of battleships benefitted from their crews doubling as amateur journalists. Certainly in terms of military discipline, we have seen that the permanent state of political mobilisation had made a dubious contribution.

In any case, any progress made in Soviet military development by the mid-1930s was violently compromised following the shocking arrest and execution of the Red Army's top brass in May-June 1937 on charges of plotting a coup. The fall of the generals precipitated a large scale purge of the military which merged with the broader campaign of repression that swept the USSR at the same time.⁵³ Social historians of the Soviet Union have long documented the extent and importance of grassroots participation in the repressions of 1937.⁵⁴ Military organisations were no exception to this rule. The activist culture sustained by the military-political organs was a major channel through which the terror spread through the Fleet.

Thus, the objects of the competition announced on the front page of *Oktiabr'skii Luch* did not include only accurate manoeuvring and polite behaviour, but also vigilance against spies and saboteurs.⁵⁵ Similarly, commissars' reports on the preparations for the manoeuvres noted approvingly that the ships' personnel had been 'cleansed of the politically and morally unreliable and unstable.'⁵⁶ At the height of the repression, party organisations continued to meet to discuss politics, elect officers and organise cultural events, but they also joined the hunt for wreckers and enemies.

In fact, the repression unfolded in tandem with the party democracy campaign driven by Andrei Zhdanov.⁵⁷ As per the instruction of the Leningrad party chief, electoral meetings in the

⁵³ Peter Whitewood, *The Red Army and the Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Soviet Military* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 252–74.

⁵⁴ See indicatively Sheila Fitzpatrick, "How the Mice Buried the Cat: Scenes from the Great Purges of 1937 in the Russian Provinces," *Russian Review* 52, no. 3 (1993): 299–320; Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵⁵ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1443, l. 46.

⁵⁶ RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1443, l. 24.

⁵⁷ On the 1930s democracy campaigns, see J. Arch Getty, "State and Society Under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (1991): 18–35; Lomb, *Stalin's Constitution*.

Fleet started to be held in mid-April.⁵⁸ All procedural formalities were observed, with the Fleet's organisations electing new bureaus in multicandidate elections and the new leadership bodies themselves electing secretaries out of at least two candidates.⁵⁹ These meetings turned into rounds of denunciation after news spread of the discovery of a conspiracy amongst the high command.

Protocols of party meetings on the Fleet suggest that reasons for expulsion during the military purge could be equally flimsy to those in the civilian party. Thus, the party commission of the Battleship Squadron expelled one Barchubaev for having "close links" to the "enemy of the people Degaziev", overturning an earlier verdict of a strong reprimand.⁶⁰ The same session of the commission expelled the vice-commander of the escort ship *Vikhr* A. B. Sey on the grounds that he had links with the "Japanese spy Kozlov" through his wife, who also had "relatives in Poland". A boatswain at the *Marat*, M. K. Zakhavrov was also deprived of party membership on account of his wife, who had "links abroad" and conducted "counterrevolutionary conversations about Stalin".⁶¹

By the time the military purge was over, some 22,705 of a total of 206,000 officers (*kom-sostav* and *politsostav*) throughout the USSR had been discharged from all branches of the military, of whom 9,506 were arrested.⁶² The Fleet experienced similar losses, with 444 of its 5,320 officers being arrested by April 1938. The limited quantitative impact of the purge was further reduced by the subsequent expansion of the officer corps throughout the USSR, which brought the Fleet's total to over 8,000 officers. Nevertheless, the greater incidence of expulsion

⁵⁸ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 21, d. 2703, l. 5.

⁵⁹ RGAVMF, f. r-852, op. 6, d. 24, ll. 117, 123.

⁶⁰ RGAVMF, f. r-852, op. 8, d. 19, ll. 11-12.

⁶¹ RGAVMF, f. r-852, op. 8, d. 19, ll. 33.

⁶² Reese, *Soviet Military Experience*, 86.

and demobilisation amongst the higher ranks resulted in significant degradation of the skill-level of the officer corps.⁶³

Once again, the result was a precipitous deterioration of military discipline. In the last two years of the 1930s, the traditionally complicated relationship of Fleet personnel with alcohol led to new levels of embarrassment for the military leadership, forcing the People's Commissar of the Navy Mikhail Frinovskii to address the issue in a special decree in which he described drunkenness as the "scourge of the Navy". Baltic Fleet personnel were amongst the leading offenders with more than 3,000 recorded drunkenness related incidents, including 201 involving officers. In the first two months of 1939 there were 5,573 disciplinary infractions recorded, corresponding to roughly 10% of the Fleet's personnel. These were not confined to alcohol abuse and included sleeping at watch, abandonment of post and direct refusal to obey orders. Perhaps more worryingly for *PUBalt*, over half of the transgressors were communists.⁶⁴

This information did not induce the party leadership or its military branch to reconsider the value of political agitation in military life. Party organisations in the Fleet continued to hold electoral meetings to elect bureaus and party commissions, during which they were expected and encouraged to criticise their superiors even after the hunt for enemies had fallen off the agenda. Commissars reporting on party meetings from mid-1938 praised the Battleship Squadron's organisations for their observation of procedural forms, the lack of unexcused absences and the good preparation of members. However, the same reports highlighted the absence of "sufficient criticism" of regular and political officers as being amongst the major weaknesses of the meetings. This was despite the fact that several speakers *did* criticise the substandard performance of some of their comrades. Astakhov from the *Marat's* propulsion department attacked the ship's party organiser Gorokhov for ignoring the crew to such an extent that he

⁶³ Some figures bring the replacement rates of the Fleet's formation commanders to 62% and, 32% for surface vessels and 55% for submarines. Petrov, *Krasnoznamennii*, 336-9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 347-8.

was virtually unknown among them. Gorokhov was also criticised by Glazkov who accused him of being responsible for the dying out of socialist competitions on the *Marat*.⁶⁵ On *Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia*, the political instructor Zinov'ev stated that bureau members had been neglecting their duties, with some of them even playing chess during educational activities. Zinov'ev himself came under attack, when Zubor'ev accused all political instructors of being entirely clueless regarding in military affairs and Zinov'ev in particular of not knowing anything about the ship.⁶⁶

After the repression subsided, party activism continued uninterrupted until the German invasion of the USSR in 1941. Political activities continued even during the Winter War against Finland. On 5 December 1939, a commissar from one of the Fleet's marine companies reported that 53 marines had spoken at the company's meetings since the start of the campaign. The issues discussed during breaks from combat apparently included whether, after victory, Finland would be transformed into a republic of soviets or follow a path more similar to that of the Mongolian People's republic. Besides political education sessions, the party continued to exercise its ideological influence over the marines through their training which, even in wartime, continued to be conducted in terms of socialist competition. Thus, the platoon of "second lieutenant comrade Zabrazhnyi" of the third battalion was praised for its performance in skiing, night-time training and orienteering competitions, while the one led by second lieutenant Ivanov was commended for its high participation rates in the events. In another company, the marines Zvukov, Kuznetsov and Korotkov were praised by their commissar for "completing their study of the rifle in less time than stated by the terms of the competition" and moving on to train in the use of machine guns.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ RGAVMF, f. r-852, op. 5, d. 15, ll. 1-3.

⁶⁶ RGAVMF, f. r-852, op. 5, d. 15, l. 42.

⁶⁷ RGAVMF, f. r-1893, op. 1, d. 39, l. 9, 44, 124.

Conclusion:

Battleship decks and marine companies are incongruous settings for sessions of political discussion and amateur journalism. Nevertheless, the officers and enlisted men of the Baltic Fleet spent large amounts of their time in active service engaged in such activities. In fact, the Soviet state maintained a specialised hierarchy of officers to make sure of this. This was despite the fact that the Bolshevik leadership had resolved to rebuild the military as a regular fighting force, rejecting the unprofessional practices of partisan militias. To explain this curious phenomenon, we need to look to the origins of the military-political organs in the Civil War and to the Bolsheviks' sustained pursuit of a revolutionary project throughout the interwar period.

Lenin's party was originally uncomfortable with the very idea of a standing army. Having been forced to raise one, Bolshevik radicals were even more shocked to find out that they would have to rely on despised Tsarist officers to staff it. The commissar hierarchy was a measure in response to this crisis, a means for the revolutionary state to control its unreliable functionaries. At the same time, mass activism led by party organisations was meant to ensure that Soviet citizens under arms would develop a political culture in tune with the communist vision of the Soviet state.

The Frunze reforms did not depart from this outlook. Their main goal was to establish the conditions for the development of a new, reliable class of Soviet officers remedying the state's reliance on old-regime personnel while preserving the organisational advantages of a standing, hierarchical military. Although this was accompanied by a curtailment of the influence of the military-political organs in operational matters, the reforms did not in any way curtail political activism in the military. Rather to the contrary, the new red officers were expected to read political literature, take part in socialist competitions and engage in self-criticism. This points us to a major contradiction at the heart of Soviet military politics and the Bolshevik project more generally.

For as long as the Bolsheviks remained a revolutionary party committed to large-scale social change the reliability of any state official remained a function of their commitment to this cause, demonstrated in practice by active participation in political activities. These were first aimed against unreliable old-regime specialists and then against complacent or treacherous bureaucrats, but they were always also intended to instil a distinct revolutionary character in state institutions, including a transformation of the personal conduct of their staff. Inevitably disruptive, party activism necessarily clashed with the objective of building an effective, streamlined state apparatus. In the Fleet, these contradictory political imperatives manifested themselves in such bizarre situations as the crews of battleships competing in politeness and vigilance against saboteurs during a large-scale naval exercise taking place alongside a mass campaign of political repression. They could not but lead to a semi-permanent crisis of military discipline, as successive campaigns disrupted military routines and blurred the lines of command.

Even engagement in actual military operations was not sufficient reason to limit activism in the military, with Baltic marines training via socialist competitions in the midst of the Winter War. From the perspective of the Soviet leadership this was a desirable state of affairs as activist participation was an inherent element of their Leninist vision of state-building. Having integrated their ideology into the very structures of the state they had built, the Bolsheviks were unwilling and unable to prevent it from getting in the way of administrative efficiency. For the Soviet state, oscillating between principle and pragmatism was the default mode of operation.