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# Lev Trotsky and the Red Army in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1921

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

**LEV TROTKSY AND THE RED ARMY IN THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR, 1917-  
1921**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR GARY HAMBURG

AND

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BY

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### Introduction: Spirit of the 1917 Revolution

“During the first two months of 1917 Russia was still a Romanov monarchy. Eight months later the Bolsheviks stood at the helm... You will not find another such sharp turn in history.”- Lev Trotsky,<sup>1</sup>

By 1917 Russia had been at war for nearly two-and-a-half years. World War I, the most destructive conflict in human history up to that point, was a modern war where industry and technology were crucial to success on the battlefield, and few countries were as ill prepared to fight such a war as Imperial Russia. In 1914 Russia was one of the most backwards countries in Europe. Its industrialization over recent decades had not been rapid enough to compensate for a centuries-old legacy of poverty and destitution. The journalist and historian William Chamberlin described Russia's disadvantage as follows: “From the very beginning of hostilities the inferiority of the Russian military machine to the German in everything but sheer numbers was evident... At the outset Russia had sixty batteries of artillery against Germany's three hundred and eighty-one. Russia had one kilometer of railroad mileage to every hundred square kilometers of territory, as against

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution (London: Pathfinder, 1980), p. 18

Germany's 10.6."<sup>2</sup> Russia's lack of development was a serious detriment to its capabilities on the battlefield.

During the war Imperial Russia mobilized over fifteen million men to fight. Such a large muster necessarily brought to the fore all of Russia's many social ills. Serfdom had been abolished in 1861, but private agriculture had failed to develop in depth; large portions of the peasantry lived in similar conditions to those of their ancestors hundreds of years earlier. Urban workers lived in the basest of conditions. Russia's nascent proletariat was rarely more than a generation or two removed from the countryside. From the workers' perspective a small handful of well-connected aristocrats, cunning merchants, and shrewd industrialists lived in vulgar opulence. Naturally it was the peasants and the workers who bore the brunt of wartime sacrifice. The horrific conflict gave millions of common Russians a shared point of reference for their suffering, and it intensified social tensions. As Russia suffered defeat after defeat on the battlefield, popular unrest against the country's absolute monarchy escalated.

In February 1917 the masses had had enough. Strikes in Petrograd on 22-23 February 1917 (New-Style: 7-8 March) quickly boiled over into a full-scale insurrection. When soldiers from the local garrison joined the protesters, the tsar's time was up. On 2 March (New-Style: 15 March) Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate his throne: the three-hundred-year rule of the Romanov dynasty, as well as absolute monarchy itself, came to an end. The men and women who had taken to the streets to press for the tsar's ouster were animated by at times conflicting demands: democracy, land reform, peace, and socialist economic policies were all popular objectives. Some protesters had called

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<sup>2</sup> William Henry Chamberlin, The Russian Revolution: 1917-1918. From the Overthrow of the Tsar to the Assumption of Power by the Bolsheviks, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 65

for power to pass to the soviets, elected bodies largely composed of the more radical representatives of Russia's socialist parties, but governance was instead entrusted to a moderate provisional government. Throughout the summer and early fall of 1917 conflicts between the soviets and the provisional government multiplied. The war continued to devastate Russian society and the economy fell into virtual collapse. A restive peasantry demanded comprehensive land reform, while the government vacillated.

As conditions deteriorated, so did the population's faith in the political course of the provisional government. Calls for the soviets to seize power proliferated; within the soviets themselves the far-left Bolshevik Party grew increasingly powerful. Trotsky explained the Bolsheviks' assessment of the situation: "The revolutionary tendencies of the masses, even at the moment of the February revolution, did not at all coincide with the compromise tendencies of the petty bourgeois parties. The proletariat and the peasantry voted for the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries not as compromisers, but as opponents of the czar, the capitalists and the landowners. But in voting for them they created a partition-wall between themselves and their own aims."<sup>3</sup> The Bolsheviks sought to knock over that wall. Under the leadership of the recently returned émigré, Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks called for "all power to the soviets," for "bread and peace," and for the nationalization of industry. On 25 October, 1917 (New-Style: 7 November) Lenin and the Bolsheviks led an armed uprising against the provisional government in Petrograd. After a day of fighting, the provisional government was overthrown. A Bolshevik Party that had never once been responsible for governing set out to translate its revolutionary ideology into reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution p. 178



Bolshevik leaders quickly discovered that it was much easier in practice to oppose power than to exercise it. Almost immediately, a conflict revealed itself between the egalitarian ideology of the party and the harsh reality of governing a nation of one hundred and fifty million people. Bolsheviks lamented what they saw as the dehumanizing forces of capitalism; many firmly believed their seizure of power would result in the triumph of a more just society. In their propaganda the Bolsheviks claimed they were taking power in the name of the soviets, an institution which in 1917 represented a form of direct democracy. The soviets were to allow the impoverished masses a direct role in governing for the first time in Russia's history. In the place of exploitative forms of industrial organization the Bolsheviks envisioned a workplace where the workers would control the means of production and organize their own labor in a fashion that was both more productive and more equitable. In the countryside, land was to be redistributed to the peasants who worked it; the ideal was a collective form of agriculture free from the gross inequalities that had for so long afflicted rural Russia. Even the military, traditionally the most authoritarian of institutions, was to be humanized and made more democratic. Ranks and harsh discipline were to be replaced with collegial forms of command and voluntary service. Last but not least, the state itself as a coercive institution was to wither away. Lenin summarized the Bolshevik ideal for the long term: "Socialism will shorten the working day, will raise the masses to a new life, will create conditions for the majority of the population that will enable everybody, without exception, to perform state functions, and this will lead to the complete withering

away of the state in general.”<sup>4</sup> Some Bolshevik followers interpreted Lenin’s plan as a call for an immediate reduction in the state’s coercive powers.

While many Bolsheviks had faith their program would indeed lead to a more just society, it was not without its violent, dictatorial overtones. The Bolsheviks took pride in their contempt for “bourgeois democracy.” They advocated a violent revolution that would forcibly suppress “class enemies.” What is more, the Bolsheviks paid lip-service to the principle of proletarian democracy but refused to honor it in practice. In its place, Lenin advocated a highly centralized, authoritarian party where an elite of socialist intellectuals would take power in the name of the workers. Since Russia was by its very nature backwards and lacked an advanced working-class, it would be necessary for a small party of intellectuals to implement those policies that were “truly” in the interests of the workers. To ensure political orthodoxy, this party would be closed to the majority of radicals who lacked proper “consciousness.” In reality the Bolshevik revolution would therefore involve the seizure of power by a tiny handful of revolutionary ideologues, not by the majority of the people. Nothing could be more authoritarian than a state where a numerically insignificant elite determines what is best for the rest of society, yet this is exactly the program to which the party adhered. Lenin stated: “Without the ‘dozen’ tried and talented leaders (and talented men are not born by the hundred), professionally trained, schooled by long experience and working in perfect harmony, no class in modern society is capable of conducting a determined struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Lenin, from “The State and Revolution”, in The Essential Works of Lenin: “What is to Be Done?” and Other Writings, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 362

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Lenin, from “What is to Be Done?”, in The Essential Works of Lenin: “What is to Be Done?” and Other Writings, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 145

By 1917, a sizeable gap existed between the Bolsheviks' chosen ends and the means they found acceptable to achieve them. Trotsky himself was not unaware of this contradiction. Following the rupture of the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1903, Trotsky had affiliated with the Menshevik wing that opposed Lenin's more authoritarian Bolsheviks. He directly attacked Lenin for what he saw as "dictatorial tendencies." Still over the course of 1917, the perceived vacillation of the provisional government had led Trotsky to become disillusioned with his Menshevik peers. By the summer of that year, he had had enough, and joined the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky saw the Bolsheviks as the only group capable of radically transforming society along Marxist lines. In joining a party that openly preached violence and minority rule, he embraced Lenin's authoritarian vision of the revolution. In pursuing their reorganization of Russia, the Bolsheviks would in practice deny power to the very classes in whose name they governed. Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher gave a sympathetic portrayal of this dilemma: "The circumstance that the Bolsheviks were the party of the revolution impelled them first to identify the revolution with themselves, and then to reduce the revolution to being exclusively an affair of their party."<sup>6</sup>

Within months of seizing power, the Bolshevik Party entrusted Trotsky with the monumental task of creating an army for the socialist state. The Red Army would quickly become the largest agency in the nascent Bolshevik Republic. As a major institution, it provided a crucial example of the manner in which the party would negotiate between its egalitarian ideology and its stated preference for coercive methods. Trotsky promised his Red Army would represent a new type of army, emblematic of a new type of proletarian

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<sup>6</sup>Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921 (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 337

state. Three years of brutal civil war would put this claim to the test. The results would radically impact the lives of millions of Soviet citizens and the future of Russia itself.

The purpose of this thesis is to critically examine how the methods Trotsky used to create the Red Army affected both the outcome of the civil war and the evolution of the Bolshevik state. I will argue that Trotsky did not adhere to the party's ideological orthodoxy while constructing the army. Instead, he built the army using methods he believed would lead to a Red victory. He did not hesitate to adopt features of the tsarist predecessor. This cost him political support, but ultimately led to a fighting force capable of victory. At the end of the war Trotsky took his success as an inducement to apply militarization to other areas of the Bolshevik state, including the economy. The devastation of war and popular unrest prevented him from fully implementing these ideas. I show that the trend of ideological compromise Trotsky embodied was symptomatic of a larger trend. By the end of the war the Bolshevik state had failed to make good on many of its ideological promises and alienated many supporters. The need to maintain power in this hostile atmosphere led to more compromising of Bolshevik ideals.

To build my argument I have included three chapters. My first chapter outlines the growing military threats that greeted Trotsky's appointment as War Commissar in 1918. It documents Trotsky's controversial adoption of "conventional" military policies including conscription, strict discipline, and the use of former tsarist officers. His pragmatism is contrasted with Bolshevik purists who argued for a strictly volunteer militia. The second chapter deals with the year 1919, which witnessed the bulk of the civil war's fighting. It details Trotsky's moderately successful defense of his military

policy at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in March 1919. Later in the year fighting escalated, and the Red Army successfully fought off serious challenges from Admiral Kolchak's directorate in the east, General Denikin's Volunteers in the south, and General Yudenich's army in the northwest. The third and final chapter explores Trotsky's attempt to apply military methods to the economy in 1920. War with Poland temporarily interrupted his experiment in the summer and fall. Economic collapse and widespread discontent amongst the citizenry forced Lenin to abandon militarization at the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1921. The result was the New Economic Policy, a pragmatic retreat that echoed the ideological compromise witnessed during the building of the Red Army.

My thesis draws on five volumes of Trotsky's military writings from the Civil War period for its primary sources. These writings include policy memoranda, speeches, military orders, and other documents of interest. They offer valuable insight into both Trotsky's thinking and into the methods he employed to build the army. I have also relied on numerous histories of Trotsky, the Red Army, and the Civil War. The most important biography of Trotsky is Isaac Deutscher's three-volume series written in the 1950s, from which I have drawn extensively. Deutscher's account borders on hagiography, but it recounts Trotsky's life in great detail and is factually accurate. Trotsky also wrote his own autobiography, My Life. Other biographies are more recent, and include Robert Service's Trotsky, Dmitri Volkogonov's Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary, and Bertrand Patenaude's Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary--- which deals with Trotsky's fall from political grace and exile from the USSR.

Histories of the Civil War period in English began with William Chamberlin's The Russian Revolution Vol. II, 1918-1921, which I have refrained from using heavily

due to its age. I have mainly relied on W. Bruce Lincoln's Red Victory and Richard Pipes' Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime. Lincoln's work is the most thorough general narrative to date. Pipes' account is highly critical of the Bolshevik regime, and highlights Bolshevik atrocities. Mark Von Hagen's Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship and Francesco Benvenuti's The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922 offer insights into early Red Army policy. Norman Davies' White Eagle, Red Star was a competent retelling of the Polish-Soviet War of 1920. Israel Getzler's Kronstadt, 1917-1921 was an insightful window into both the Kronstadt mutiny and the transformation of Russia's political climate during the civil war. Similarly, Robert Daniels' Conscience of the Revolution and Vladimir Brovkin's Behind the Frontlines of the Civil War provided critical information about the interplay between Russian society and Bolshevik politics during the war.

### Chapter One--- Trotsky and the Beginning of the Civil War in 1917-1918

*“Comrades! Our Soviet Socialist Republic needs a well-organized army.”- Lev Trotsky<sup>7</sup>*

On 13 March 1918 Lev Davidovich Trotsky resigned his position as People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs. The same day he replaced Nikolai Podvoisky as People’s Commissar for Army and Navy Affairs. Trotsky was also appointed Chairman of the Supreme Military Council, a military advisory body of former tsarist officers that he had helped to create weeks earlier. As Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Trotsky acted as the Bolshevik’s chief negotiator during the peace talks with Imperial Germany. These negotiations culminated in the unpopular Brest-Litovsk treaty that was signed on 3 March. Just as peace with Germany had been the Bolsheviks’ principal concern in their first days of power, now security became a top Bolshevik priority. Enemies both foreign and domestic threatened to drive the Bolsheviks from power by force. In order to maintain its increasingly precarious control, the party would have to develop an effective

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<sup>7</sup> Leon Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky (London: New York: New Park Publications, 1979-1981), 5 volumes, Volume I: The Year 1918, p. 19

military force to contain these threats. As the leading figure in the nascent Red Army, Trotsky was being entrusted with the fate of the Bolshevik Republic.

Trotsky's appointment came as no surprise. He was widely recognized as one of the most intelligent leaders of the Bolshevik Party. For two decades he had been writing on questions of radical theory and socialist politics. He had demonstrated his loyalty to the revolutionary cause during two stints of imprisonment and exile under the tsar. He played a role in the 1905 Revolution as vice-chairman of the first St. Petersburg Soviet. After the defeat of the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky escaped abroad where he continued his socialist agitation working as a journalist and scholar. As a journalist covering the Balkans Wars of 1912-13 Trotsky, "delved into problems of supply, military training, and tactics, and revealed the atrocities and primitive cruelty of the war."<sup>8</sup> His journalistic observations of World War I in France showed a similar concern for both technical and human aspects of military affairs. In 1917 first-hand experience of warfare was rare among leading Bolsheviks: they generally had only superficial experience of army life and fighting techniques. During the October Revolution of 1917 Trotsky directed much of the power seizure in the Russian capital while serving as chairman of the Bolshevik-majority Petrograd Soviet.

Many leading Bolsheviks resented Trotsky's appointment as head of the Red Army. For over a decade prior to 1917 (when he finally joined the Bolsheviks), Trotsky had affiliated himself with the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party. During the Menshevik-Bolshevik dispute, Trotsky had directed bitterly personal attacks at the Bolsheviks' leader, Vladimir Ilich Lenin. Consequently, some Bolsheviks

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<sup>8</sup> Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, p. 202



perceived Trotsky's appointment as a grave ideological threat to the party's orthodox position on matters of military policy and national security. Outgoing Bolshevik military leaders such as Nikolai Podvoisky and Nikolai Krylenko had been committed to demobilization of the old Imperial forces and to the abolition of the standing army. In general, they opposed the "reactionary" military policies of the Provisional Government and the tsar.

Before Trotsky could begin to formulate his own policies for the army, he would have to come to terms with the revolutionary military policies of his predecessors. As he did so, he confronted growing threats from the anti-Bolshevik Volunteer Army in the south; organized rebellion in Siberia, the Urals, and on the Volga; hunger and unrest in Russia's cities; national secession movements on Russia's periphery; and foreign intervention against the Bolshevik government. In this chapter I will analyze the situation Trotsky inherited in March of 1918, the military threats of early 1918, the Bolshevik ideological framework for dealing with military problems, and Trotsky's initial efforts to build the Red Army.

The situation facing Trotsky in March 1918 was grim. By then Bolsheviks' initial optimism had faded. The Bolshevik's seizure of power in Petrograd in October 1917 was a relatively bloodless coup. Days after taking power, the Bolsheviks had defended their new government from an assault by counter-revolutionary soldiers on the outskirts of Petrograd. This "battle" turned out to be little more than an unorganized skirmish. In it the Bolsheviks relied on workers' militias popularly known as "Red Guards" and on a handful of sympathetic soldiers and sailors. Pitched battles similar to the Petrograd skirmish were fought in Moscow and in several provincial cities during the weeks

following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power. Less than a month after the successful Revolution of November 7, the Bolsheviks (or local soviets nominally aligned with them) held power in the most important population centers of central Russia.

Many Bolsheviks expected the initial skirmishing to be the height of the party's involvement in waging conventional warfare. Many Bolsheviks (including Trotsky himself) assumed that the October Revolution would touch off a global upheaval that would establish a new, proletarian world order. In December of 1917 Josef Stalin and Vladimir Lenin jointly proclaimed, "the Peoples of Europe, exhausted by the War, are already stretching out their hands to us and creating peace. The workers and soldiers of the West are already gathering under the banner of socialism."<sup>9</sup> The more dogmatic Party faithful pronounced that Imperial Germany would soon halt its attacks on the Soviet Republic because its workers would soon seize power. As some party members predicted peace, more realistic Bolsheviks prepared for war.

At this stage, few Bolsheviks concerned about defending socialism advocated the creation of a regular army. Because popular militias had been sufficient for the seizure of power, many Bolsheviks assumed these same forces would prove adequate to preserve Soviet power. Therefore, the Bolsheviks' first steps to establish a regular defense called for expanding local Red Guards forces into a nation-wide socialist militia. For this purpose the Soviet government proclaimed, "the arming of the workers... and the complete disarmament of the propertied classes are decreed in order to assure all power for the workers."<sup>10</sup> Workers (and not peasants) were at this time encouraged to organize local militias that would be placed under the control of the local soviets. Through the

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<sup>9</sup> Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, p. 492

<sup>10</sup> Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, p. 480

hierarchy of the soviets these individual workers' brigades would theoretically be accountable to the Military Organization of the Bolsheviks' Central Committee. In reality, the Bolsheviks failed to work out an effective manner of coordinating these militias.

In the first months of Soviet power the Bolsheviks' most effective shock-troops were those units of the Imperial Army that subordinated themselves to the new Soviet power. Three brigades of Latvian riflemen (totaling 35,000 men) accepted the Bolsheviks' promises of working-class power, an equitable distribution of agricultural land, and an end to Russian involvement in the First World War. In 1918 the Soviet government relied heavily on the Latvians to suppress local rebellions and maintain their control over disputed territories. The historian Richard Pipes has observed: "The Latvians rendered the Bolsheviks invaluable services: dispersing the Constituent Assembly, putting down the Left SR uprising, defending the Volga from the Czechs, and guarding their persons from potential assassins."<sup>11</sup> Yet the Latvians were far too few in number to defend the Soviet Republic alone. By March 1918 it was clear the Bolsheviks would have to dramatically expand their combat-ready armed forces.

Three years of the most brutal fighting in Russia's history had taken their toll on the peasant conscripts who made up the vast bulk of the nation's fighting troops. As Mark von Hagen noted in his study of the Red Army, "the soldiers understood the [Bolsheviks'] peace proclamations [of October 1917] to be the first step towards the general demobilization they had been awaiting... thousands of soldiers simply departed

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Pipes, Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 27

for home, many to take part in the redistribution of lands in the countryside.”<sup>12</sup> Within the first months of Bolshevik power the pace of mass desertion was accelerated when the new Soviet government banned corporal punishment in the military, outlawed military disciplinary courts, and abolished military ranks. The party encouraged soldiers to form their own democratic committees and to elect their own officers. When these soldiers abandoned their posts, officers could do nothing to prevent them. The Soviet government had done away with the officer corps’s disciplinary powers.

The administrative structures the new government put in place to command the military were ineffective. Upon taking power, the Bolsheviks created two organs directly responsible for military policy. The Military-Naval Committee of the Second Congress of the Soviets was responsible for setting military policies. The People’s Commissariat for Military Affairs (also known as *Narkomvoena*, later renamed the People’s Commissariat for Army and Navy Affairs after Trotsky took over) was responsible for the day-to-day control of those military forces that still answered to the authority of the Bolshevik Party. These groups included the Red Guards and the remnants of the Imperial Army’s General Staff. In practice, the authority of the Military Committee and *Narkomvoena* often overlapped. Local soviets also interfered in military policy-making. The competition between bureaucratic organs with shared responsibilities would characterize Soviet governance at all levels for much of its early history; military affairs were especially impaired by this trend.

In December 1917 an All-Army Conference on Demobilization was called by the Bolsheviks’ military authorities. In spite of the conference’s mandate to establish a

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: the Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), p. 17

demobilization policy, demobilization proceeded haphazardly, outside the government's control. Therefore the conference concentrated more on creating a new army and on saving what was left of the old one. On 30 December, the conference passed a resolution endorsing the creation of "a New, Socialist Army" to be formed exclusively of working-class volunteers with 'revolutionary credentials' from Russia's urban areas.<sup>13</sup> What remained of the old General Staff were dismissed when they proposed building the new army from a core of 1,300,000 soldiers still serving on the fronts. While rejecting their proposals, the Bolsheviks ordered the General Staff to assist the government in maintaining order at the fronts until new, "socialist" divisions could be formed in the rear. In practice this proved impossible; Soviet decrees on everything from land policy to discipline in the Army had made the collapse of the old military formations inevitable.

Before it dispersed, the conference created an organization that would eventually be known as "the All-Russian Collegiate for the Formation of the Red Army." The Collegiate founded the Red Army on 28 January 1918. It set out to organize the new army in the rear based on democratic, volunteerist principles; officers would be elected and non-working class recruits were to be dismissed. Thanks to the combination of societal chaos and flimsy administrative capacity on the part of the Collegiate, the Red Army existed only on paper at the time of Trotsky's appointment as army commissar. Nominally, the Red Army commanded hundreds of thousands of troops at its birth, but this was a gross exaggeration of its true strength. As the military scholar John Erickson observed of the Red Army at that point in time, "the number of men was no real index---

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<sup>13</sup> Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, p. 19

what counted was trained manpower, and the Soviet regime could command perhaps 50,000 trained men.”<sup>14</sup>

On 18 February 1918 the Germans broke the armistice with Soviet Russia. It did not take long for them to make deep inroads into Russian territory. With a few exceptions, the Russian soldiers still at their posts retreated without fighting. As the Germans advanced unimpeded, the Bolsheviks rushed loyal Red Guards to the battlefield in an attempt to stabilize the front. The Red Guards were decisively defeated while inflicting minimal casualties on the Germans. Von Hagen has noted, “the Red Army, for all their political attractiveness and their success in skirmishes against domestic opponents, proved incapable of resisting a modern mass army. The Germans advanced virtually unimpeded.”<sup>15</sup> The immediate result of the Bolsheviks’ pathetic military performance was the humiliating treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Bolsheviks were forced to renounce all claims on Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland. Much of this territory had been considered to be an integral part of the larger Russian polity. Russians on both the left and right were appalled at the harsh terms of peace; many held the Bolsheviks to be solely responsible for this humiliation.

Brest-Litovsk led the Bolsheviks to realize that they would have to dramatically increase their military capacities, regardless of whether or not the methods used accorded with revolutionary ideology. At the same time the treaty dramatically undermined popular support for the regime. Lack of popular support heightened the urgency of solving the military question in the eyes of party leaders. Unfortunately for the

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<sup>14</sup> John Erickson, "The Origins of the Red Army," in Revolutionary Russia, ed. Richard Pipes (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968), p. 237

<sup>15</sup> Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, p. 30.

Bolsheviks, the German victory also reduced the Bolsheviks' ability to field a combat-ready army. The historian Nicholas Riasanovsky observed of Brest-Litovsk's results: "Russia lost 26 percent of her total population, 27 percent of her arable land; 32 percent of her average crops; 26 percent of her railway system; 33 percent of her manufacturing industries; 73 percent of her iron industries; 75 percent of her coal fields."<sup>16</sup> At this bleak moment, Trotsky assumed the position of People's Commissar for Army and Navy Affairs. His decision to reform the Red Army would be conditioned both by the events preceding his appointment, as well as the numerous threats the Soviet Republic confronted in the wake of the Brest treaty.

The most serious military threat confronting the Bolsheviks in March 1918 was the White Volunteer Army (*Dobrovolcheskaya Armiya*) operating in the Kuban. The Volunteer Army was a small force, but its perceived effectiveness made it a grave threat in the eyes of the Bolsheviks. Its formation started with the flight of General Mikhail Alekseev from Moscow to the lands of the Don Cossacks after the October Revolution. Alekseev was a distinguished general who had coordinated the Russian armed forces from 1915 until the Bolshevik seizure of power. He was appalled by the Bolsheviks' willingness to abandon the fight against Imperial Germany. Many scholars have argued that the original White volunteers were motivated as much by their desire to honor Russia's commitments in the First World War and to prevent social chaos, as they were by the desire to overthrow socialism and to restore conservative power. Pipes spoke for this school when he attributed the beginning of the Civil War to "a small band of patriotic officers, humiliated by the destruction of the Russian Army and the Bolshevik

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, A History of Russia, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. (London: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 464

government's betrayal of commitments to the Allies, who decided to continue the war against the Central Powers."<sup>17</sup>

The Volunteers' struggle to preserve the Russian war effort began in the lands of the Don Cossacks, hundreds of miles from both German armies and Bolshevik power. This isolation promised Alekseev a relative safe-haven where he could grow his miniscule forces. At the beginning of March 1918 the Volunteers had fewer than 3,000 soldiers bearing arms. They were drawn almost exclusively from the old Imperial officer corps, because rank-and-file soldiers were generally unwilling to serve in a force so heavily composed of officers whom they perceived as symbols of tsarist oppression. Recruiting increased pace when Alekseev was joined by General Lavr Kornilov at the end of 1917. Kornilov, famous for his purported coup attempt against the Provisional Government in August 1917, was charismatic but brash and impetuous. Alekseev and Kornilov quickly butted heads when Kornilov attempted to take command of the recruits Alekseev had organized. A deal was brokered giving Alekseev control of the army's finances and political relations, while Kornilov was given sole command of military operations. At this point the Volunteer Army numbered around 4,000 troops, not including its unreliable Don Cossack allies.

The appearance of the Volunteer Army did not catch the Bolsheviks off guard. By January the Bolsheviks had dispatched a force of 7,000 men armed with tsarist weapons to the Don to combat the ill-supplied Whites. Hunger was threatening the Bolshevik-controlled cities in Central Russia, and the Party was determined to regain control of this important grain-producing region at all costs. Fortunately for the Bolsheviks, the Don

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<sup>17</sup> Pipes, Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 27



Cossacks failed to support their White allies. Many younger Cossacks who had served in the Great War disliked serving alongside former tsarist officers, and some disobeyed their elders' orders to aid the Volunteers. After the pro-White ataman Alexis Kaledin committed suicide in February, the Don Cossacks temporarily abandoned the Volunteers; without Cossack support the Volunteers were no match for the more numerous Bolsheviks. To avoid complete annihilation at the hands of the Reds, General Kornilov led his troops on a brutal retreat through enemy territory to the anti-Bolshevik stronghold of the Kuban Cossacks. The retreat is popularly referred to as "the Ice March." Pipes extolled the Volunteers' heroism: "The small band of Volunteers traversed hostile territory, harassed by *inogorodnye* [landless peasants originally from outside the Don region] and pro-Bolshevik deserters, braving savage cold and freezing rain, short of food, clothing, and weapons."<sup>18</sup> One out of four White soldiers died on the march, including General Kornilov. Fortunately for the Whites, the Red offensive had dissipated by April. After Kornilov's death the capable General Denikin took command of the Volunteers as they began to recover their strength in the relative safety of the Kuban. Despite the Volunteers' retreat, the Bolsheviks still considered the threat of armed opposition very real.

Equally threatening to Bolshevik security was urban hunger. Harsh measures the Bolsheviks took to combat the food shortage increased security risks. By October 1917 the Russian economy had been on the verge of collapse, with industries producing at a fraction of their pre-war levels and the transportation system in collapse. The trains still running were sometimes commandeered by deserters or bandits. Grain rotted on rail

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<sup>18</sup> Pipes, Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 21

sidings for lack of working locomotives to haul it. Russia's vast internal distances, harsh weather, and poor road infrastructure made it difficult to ship grain by other means. By late 1917 the Russian currency was virtually worthless. Together, the imploding currency and declining supply of badly-needed industrial goods led many peasants to hoard their grain.

The results of this dilemma were predictable. W. Bruce Lincoln makes clear how bad the situation was by the beginning of 1918: "Although experts estimated that a laborer required an absolute minimum of 2,700 calories to survive, a Petrograder's daily rations supplied 1,395 calories."<sup>19</sup> As food deliveries to the cities became more infrequent, hunger worsened. Tens of thousands of civilians living in Bolshevik-controlled urban areas starved to death during the winter of 1917/1918. Even supporters of the October Revolution turned against Bolshevik power when they could no longer find food to feed their families. Growing discontent manifested itself in the increasing frequency of strikes, food riots, and even armed protests against the Soviet regime. The significance of this restive behavior was not lost on Party leaders; it all seemed eerily reminiscent of the disturbances that had helped bring down the tsar in February 1917. Despite the combination of impassioned appeals for calm and harsh police measures to combat unrest, the situation failed to improve.

Hungry city-dwellers fled their residences in droves to return to their old villages, where they hoped to have greater access to food supplies. Lincoln described the exodus from Petrograd as so vast that "seven out of every ten men and women who had lived

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<sup>19</sup> W. Bruce Lincoln, Red Victory: a History of the Russian Civil War, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 58

there in 1917 no longer remained in the summer of 1920.’<sup>20</sup> The depletion of the urban workforce led to a further decline in industrial output. Few laborers remained at their work-stations; those who did were often too weak from starvation to be productive. The combination of hunger and mass urban emigration threatened the Bolsheviks sway over the lynchpin of Soviet power, the proletariat. A “socialist” army could not be constructed when the workers it sought to mobilize had either fled the cities or were joining the opposition.

If starvation in Russia’s cities undermined Bolshevik power, the measures taken in the countryside to combat the hunger only made things worse. In the aftermath of the October Revolution, many peasants tepidly supported the Bolsheviks, mainly out of gratitude for the party’s decree on land. But peasants expected the new socialist regime to leave them to work the land in peace with minimal government intrusion. Russia’s peasants were in for a rude awakening. At first the party attempted to convince the peasantry voluntarily to part with their grain. Agents of the Soviet Republic were dispatched to the villages to barter industrial goods for grain. By late 1917, however the cities had run out of goods to barter; the worthless currency proved equally ineffective in convincing the peasants to part with their grain.

Lenin and other hardliners in the party argued the time had come for drastic measures. Armed detachments of Bolshevik supporters--- the so-called ‘food brigades’--- were dispatched from the cities to seize “hoarded” grain at gunpoint. With typical zeal Lenin proclaimed: “We did not hesitate to wrest the land away from the landlords, to transfer the factories, mills, and railroads into the hands of the people... and by force of

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<sup>20</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory, p. 68

arms, to tear the crown from the stupid tsar's head. Why then should we hesitate to take the grain away from the kulaks?"<sup>21</sup> As part of the new coercive policy, the Bolsheviks established a Dictatorship of Food Supply on 9 May 1918. The new "Dictatorship" enlisted thousands more workers from Russia's cities to participate in grain-requisitioning. These armed workers wreaked havoc across the countryside of central Russia. It did not take long for the Russian peasants' position of benevolent neutrality towards the Soviet regime to grow into opposition.

To add insult to injury, the Bolsheviks attempted to introduce militant class struggle into villages. Although peasant communities were largely free from the stark income inequality of the cities, the Bolsheviks classified villagers as poor, middle, or rich peasants (kulaks). Food brigades treated poor peasants as supporters, but "kulaks" were subjected to discriminatory measures, or worse. Even when the poor peasants willingly embraced Bolshevik ideas of class conflict, the results were not always what the Bolsheviks intended. "Rich" peasants would comply with the Bolsheviks at gun-point, then retaliate against Bolshevik sympathizers after the food brigades had left. Bolshevik supporters were beaten, evicted from their homes, and decidedly ostracized. Many party sympathizers suffered violent deaths similar to those meted out by the Bolsheviks to "kulaks." The Bolsheviks' combination of violent agitation and armed extortion turned vast stretches of the countryside into enemy territory. After 1918, the Bolsheviks could not rely on the peasantry for food or to send willing conscripts to the new Soviet army. For the remainder of the Civil War the Bolsheviks would enter rural areas at their own risk.

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<sup>21</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory, p. 66

The most serious internal threat to Soviet power erupted in May 1918 with the revolt of the 60,000-strong Czechoslovak Legion. The Czechoslovak Legion was one of several groups of national minorities mobilized to fight against the Austro-German alliance during World War I. The soldiers of the Legion wanted to win independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Not surprisingly, tensions erupted between the new Soviet government and the Czechoslovaks in the wake of the Brest-Litovsk treaty. With the assistance of Entente diplomats, a deal was brokered whereby the Bolsheviks agreed to transport the Legion to Vladivostok via the Trans-Siberian Railway. From there the legionnaires would be transported by allied ships back to Europe, where they would fight against the Austro-Germans on the fields of France. Unfortunately for both sides, the evacuation stalled as the performance of Russia's rail network rapidly deteriorated. The Legion grew increasingly impatient with their Bolshevik hosts. When Trotsky ordered contingents of the Legion to surrender their weapons in May 1918, the Czechoslovaks rose up in open revolt.

At this point the Legion was scattered across Western Siberia and throughout the Volga region. The first objective of the wayward legionnaires was to unite their forces so they could fight their way across Siberia. Eventually they hoped to make their way to Vladivostok where they would be evacuated. During summer 1918 the Legion seized cities across the Volga region and Siberia. Samara, Ufa, Saratov, and Simbirsk all fell rapidly to them. By early August 1918 much of the Volga, the Urals, and a good part of Siberia were occupied by the Legion. Opposition governments sprang up in the areas that had been cleared of Bolsheviks. In Samara a coalition of Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs) proclaimed a new government in the name of the disposed Constituent Assembly

popularly referred to as “*Komuch*.” Another coalition government of anti-Bolshevik forces was proclaimed at Omsk in Siberia. Though both of these governments were initially quite weak, they were protected from harassment by the Legion. If allowed to develop, these opposition governments would have become rival centers of political authority in Russia. On 7 August 1918 the Czechoslovak Legion (accompanied by less-skilled *Komuch* soldiers) captured Kazan from Bolshevik forces. With just five hundred miles (and no effective military opposition) between Legion-occupied Kazan and the Bolshevik capital at Moscow, many believed the Soviet regime to be incredibly vulnerable. What few soldiers the Red Army could reliably muster were concentrated in the southern and western peripheries; no surplus forces were prepared to move east. If the Bolsheviks were to guarantee their weak grip on power, a larger, more effective fighting force would have to materialize quickly. Trotsky’s ability to rapidly mobilize a capable response to the unexpected threat from the East would stretch his abilities as an organizer to their limits.

No threat was viewed with more apprehension by the Bolsheviks than the prospect of foreign intervention. Russia’s wartime allies had greeted the October Revolution with wary ambivalence. Any pretext of neutrality swiftly vanished in the wake of the Soviet-German peace. At the beginning of March small contingents of British marines had landed at the port of Murmansk to secure allied munitions intended for the war effort against Germany. By late April over 2,000 allied troops had landed at Murmansk. Relations between the Bolsheviks and the allies deteriorated rapidly. At the beginning of May 1918 the allied forces occupied Murmansk. The revolt of the

Czechoslovak Legion increased the allies' desire to intervene on a more widespread scale. Britain began to deliver arms and supplies to anti-Bolshevik military forces.

At the beginning of July another expeditionary force of five-thousand allied troops was dispatched to occupy the port of Archangelsk. These forces would secure the supply lines linking the allies to anti-Bolshevik militants. According to Lincoln, "by mid-July, the allies had committed themselves to wage a full-fledged offensive in some of the roughest terrain and most inhospitable climate to be found anywhere in the Western world."<sup>22</sup> On July 6 President Wilson had overcome his initial misgivings surrounding armed intervention in Russia and agreed to send 7,000 troops secure arms shipments to the Legion through the Pacific port of Vladivostok. By August combined forces totaling in the thousand of allied troops were flowing into the now-occupied capital of Russia's Far East.

The allied troops would largely refrain from taking an active role in combat against the Bolsheviks' forces. Still, few could have predicted this in the middle of 1918. Many of the Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin himself, openly expected the worst. Fearing intervention, Bolshevik leaders issued panicky demands for mass mobilization. At the height of the crisis, the Central Executive Committee called for the augmenting of Red forces with a million additional troops. It is highly unlikely that any number of troops that the Bolsheviks were capable of fielding in 1918 would have been able to resist a full-fledged allied assault, but the new sense of urgency still made an impression. The need to defend Soviet power against foreign intervention gave new impetus to the push

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<sup>22</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory, p. 182

for a strong Red Army capable of simultaneously fielding millions of troops across multiple fronts.

Before we can examine the interaction between Trotsky's military pragmatism and Bolshevik ideology, we must first revisit the Bolshevik's institutional framework for determining military policy. When Trotsky took over control of military affairs in March 1918, there were two main bodies responsible for matters of defense: the Supreme Military Soviet (*Verkhovnyi Voennyi Soviet*) and 'the All-Russia Collegiate for the Administration of the Worker-Peasant Red Army (All-Russia Collegiate). The VVS, formed immediately prior to Trotsky's appointment, was largely composed of former Imperial officers. The All-Russia Collegiate had a heavier party contingent, and was therefore the preferred partner of those communists in the government who had not been specifically assigned to deal with military affairs. The two bodies had overlapping areas of responsibility. While both were subordinate to the party, there was no clear delineation of their authority. Erickson has observed "the creation of the VVS... ushered in what Soviet historians call the period of 'parallelism' in the early history of the Red Army: two concepts of an army, two sources of command, and two images of 'the enemy'."<sup>23</sup> As Army Commissar, Trotsky was in charge of both bodies, but one man could not prevent competition between the two organizations. In the end the only thing guaranteeing a semblance of coherency to Bolshevik military policy was the dominance of Trotsky. He answered to the party for his decisions, but in between party meetings he had a free-hand in building the Red Army.

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<sup>23</sup> Erickson, "The Origins of the Red Army," p. 241



This brings us back to the growing tension between previous party doctrine on matters of defense, and Trotsky's pragmatic approach to building the Red Army. As revolutionary socialists, the Bolsheviks respected the judgments of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on matters of ideology, yet Marx and Engels had written very little on military policy. They had considered armies in the context of their analysis of the state. According to the Marxist canon, all states are repressive bodies with organized contingents of armed men responsible for maintaining the rule of an oppressor class over the oppressed. In practice these armed contingents are what we would refer to as the army and police. According to Engels: "Public power exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed people but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds."<sup>24</sup> Similar descriptions encouraged the Bolsheviks to think of armies primarily as a means of maintaining the class divisions of bourgeois society. Not surprisingly, many Bolsheviks assumed that, according to Marx, there would be no need for an army under socialism. These assumptions led the more dogmatic Bolsheviks vociferously to reject a standing army in the new socialist state.

Trotsky refrained from challenging Marx's and Engels' views of military affairs. Indeed he embraced it. According to Trotsky, the nascent Soviet Republic was the embodiment of proletarian-class rule. While the socialist state would eventually give way to the classless society of communism, at the present moment it would be suicidal to dispense with the standing-armies. Far from threatening the revolutionary character of the Soviet state, a standing army would secure proletarian power in Bolshevik Russia. As Trotsky put it, "the army being formed will conform to the nature of the classes which

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<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Engels, "The Origins of Family, Private Property and State." in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 753

now hold power; this army will not become a fresh factor of disorganization and disintegration, but will be the fighting organ of these new ruling classes.”<sup>25</sup>

Most Bolsheviks agreed with Trotsky that some form of military organization was necessary, but they disagreed about the shape the army would take. “Orthodox” Bolsheviks thought the Red Army should rely on volunteers; conscription was a detested relic of the tsarist past that no socialist power could seriously adopt in good faith. Early in 1918, Podvoisky and Krylenko proclaimed that instead of an army based on forced conscription, the Red Army should consist of volunteers. Erickson detailed the initial plans: “The ‘new’ army made up of soldier-volunteers would comprise 144 infantry regiments (36 divisions, each of 10,000 men)... a ‘Socialist army’ built ‘on elective principles, on the principles of mutual comradesly respect and discipline.’”<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately for the Bolsheviks, few seemed interested in volunteering to serve the Soviet Republic in battle after four years of continuous and bloody fighting. Erickson noted that by February 1918, “volunteerism had virtually failed. Of the 30,000 Red Guards, 10,000 were in a condition of ‘military readiness’ though latterly discipline and order had broken down at a sharp rate.”<sup>27</sup>

Trotsky understood clearly the failure of the volunteer army. Less than a month after becoming army commissar, Trotsky laid the groundwork for an army built on the principles of universal military conscription. On 22 April 1918 he paid lip-service to the principles of “universal disarmament, permanent peace, and fraternal cooperation

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<sup>25</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.130

<sup>26</sup> Erickson, "The Origins of the Red Army," p. 233

<sup>27</sup> Erickson, "The Origins of the Red Army," p. 240

between all peoples inhabiting the earth.”<sup>28</sup> The real subject of his talk was mandatory military service. “The Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of the Republic deems it its immediate task to enroll all citizens for compulsory labor and military service... Military training is compulsory for male citizens of the Russian Soviet Federative Republic.”<sup>29</sup> Trotsky knew that whatever disadvantages the Bolsheviks may have had in military expertise when compared to the Volunteer Army, the Soviet regime still had an overwhelming superiority in manpower. The trick was to find a way to exploit this untapped resource; volunteerism had failed but conscription was still untested. Any doubts the party may have had concerning Trotsky’s recruitment policies largely vanished in the wake of the Czechoslovaks’ revolt. On 29 May 1918 the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets issued a decree requiring mandatory military service for working-class males under 40. By the end of August, over 540,000 men had been pressed into service with the Red Army.

The Executive Committee’s decree exposed a point of growing concern for many Bolsheviks: the class character of the new Red Army. Trotsky himself had justified the standing army by emphasizing its *proletarian* character; party hardliners were anxious to prevent other classes from bearing arms in the socialist state. During the volunteer period prior to Trotsky’s appointment, eligibility for military service had been strictly limited to members of the working-class. Bolshevik exclusivity stemmed from more than puritanical impulses to maintain “class purity.” Marxist ideology interpreted the army and police as repressive agencies whose purpose was to maintain the hegemony of the ruling

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<sup>28</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.157

<sup>29</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.158

class. If the classes manning these agencies had aims contradicting those of the ruling class, they were no longer perceived as reliable. Therefore many Bolsheviks regarded the inclusion of other classes into the Red Army and the police as threats to the working-class. Trotsky himself did not dispute the desirability of having a fighting force made up exclusively of the proletariat.

Yet the number of workers even capable of serving in the armed forces fell far short of the total required to provide for socialism's effective defense. Trotsky knew the extra troops would have to come from somewhere; the question was where. Recruitment (i.e. conscription) targeted people from working-class backgrounds but also "poor" peasants. If these peasants had provided armed assistance to grain-requisitioning detachments in the villages, why couldn't they serve the Soviets on the field of battle? Still, class origin was a serious matter for leading Bolsheviks, so Trotsky was careful not to move too quickly. Initial mobilizations still relied primarily on the working-class. Not until late summer 1918 did the army begin to call up peasants in sizeable numbers. In the meantime, Trotsky referred repeatedly to the worker-*and*-peasant-based nature of Soviet power. The village poor were depicted as rural workers. In May Trotsky asked his listeners: "Can we doubt, comrades, that the fraternal alliance between the town workers and the village poor will be strengthened?"<sup>30</sup> In forming the Red Army, Trotsky gambled on the assumption that the answer to his question would be a resounding no.

More controversial than the inclusion of peasants in the Red Army was the use of "military specialists" or former Tsarist officers. In the wake of the October Revolution, military officers were reviled as symbols of tsarist reaction. Workers were encouraged to

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<sup>30</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.106

elect their own officers and to dismiss commanders who were not receptive to the new forms of democratic military organization. As late as February 1918, Bolshevik leaders were more concerned with getting rid of the old officer corps than putting them to work. Party militants pointed to the examples of the abortive Kornilov putsch in 1917 and to the nascent Volunteer Army as evidence that veteran officers were politically unreliable; these officers were direct threats to the gains of the Revolution. Members of the old General Staff who had remained at their posts were ignored, even as German forces threatened to overrun Petrograd. To ensure that officers could no longer “tyrannize” the rank-and-file soldier within the first months of Bolshevik power, disciplinary measures such as corporal punishment were effectively banned. Recognizing the need for trained specialists to lead the new volunteer-based Red Army, party stalwarts called for the training of new officers from proper class backgrounds. To fulfill this growing need, special military schools were established to educate men with the proper class backgrounds in the art of leading men on the battlefield.

Trotsky recognized the necessity of utilizing the old officer corps. None of Trotsky’s military policies attracted more fervent opposition within the party than his advocacy of employing former officers as “military-specialists.” Trotsky began campaigning for the inclusion of military-specialists in the new Red Army immediately following his appointment to Commissar for Army and Navy Affairs. On 21 March 1918 he proclaimed, “before long every worker and peasant would undergo military training and officers and non-commissioned officers of the old command corps’ would be made

use of.”<sup>31</sup> To prepare the way for a more conventional military order in which the old officers would feel comfortable, Trotsky reversed Soviet policies on military discipline. Within weeks of his appointment, he had ordered elected soldiers’ committees to disband, and he had revoked their right to appoint officers. Commanders’ abilities to punish their soldiers were restored, as was corporal punishment and even the death penalty for serious disciplinary offenses. Special “revolutionary military tribunals” were also established to ensure soldiers actively complied with the harsh new policies.

Many within the party were appalled by Trotsky’s swift change of course on military affairs. Despite Lenin’s support and the backing of the Central Executive Committee, and even the Council of People’s Commissars, Trotsky had to placate opponents of his policy. To assuage growing concerns surrounding party control of the nascent Red Army, he expanded the jurisdiction of the political commissars. Two political commissars would operate in each unit down to the company level, overseeing the conduct of all military-specialists. For a military order to be valid, it would have to have the signature of both the commanding officer and a political commissar. In practice, this created a regime of dual-control or *dvoenachalie* in Red Army units where two separate sources of authority would have to agree before operations could be carried out. Whatever deleterious effects this may have had on operational capacities, it was probably the only way to appease the party rank-and-file’s growing discontent with Trotsky’s military policy. According to Von Hagen, “by reforming and expanding the institution of

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<sup>31</sup> Francesco Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) p. 21.

the political commissar... Sovnarkom recognized revolutionaries' demands that mass organizations keep tight control over the military apparatus."<sup>32</sup>

Late in summer 1918, the scene was set for what Richard Pipes has called, "the most devastating event in that country's history since the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century."<sup>33</sup> Trotsky had ascended to the command of the Red Army in the wake of a humiliating peace treaty with Germany; he had few effective forces under his control. To make matters worse, he faced foreign and domestic threats that would have put even the most experienced commanders to the test. He rose to the challenge by balancing party orthodoxy against the exigencies of civil war. 1918 saw numerous threats to Trotsky's military formulae, 1919 would be no different.

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<sup>32</sup> Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, p. 27

<sup>33</sup> Pipes, Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 5

Ch. Two--- Trotsky and the Red Army, Late 1918 to November 1919

*“Before the gates of Kazan stand the workers’ and peasants’ regiments of the Red Army. They know what their task is: to prevent the enemy from taking a single step forward; to wrest Kazan from his grasp; to throw back the Czech mercenaries and the officer thugs, drown them in the Volga, and crush their criminal mutiny against the workers’ revolution.”- Trotsky August 1918<sup>34</sup>*

On 8 August 1918 Trotsky’s armored train halted at the Sviazshk railway station. Fifteen miles away lay Kazan, the strategic gateway to the Volga that had fallen to a combined force of Czechoslovaks and soldiers of the *Komuch* government the day before. Trotsky arrived to take charge of the Red Army forces in the wake of the Soviets’ most important military defeat to date. Following the Czechoslovak revolt in May 1918, it was assumed by some leading Bolsheviks that the Czechoslovaks would fight their way east towards the port of Vladivostok; many legionnaires were already east of the Urals. Subsequent battles in the Volga region had undermined their assumption. By 8 August, most of the Volga region had been lost to the Czechoslovaks and *Komuch*. The Red Army’s defeat might shake Bolshevik power further westwards. By rail the Bolshevik

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<sup>34</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.130



capital at Moscow was just a few days from the front. The Czechoslovak Legion was more potent than existing Bolshevik forces. If more of the legionnaires joined their comrades on the Volga, the threat to Moscow would be grave.

The presence in Kazan of *Komuch* forces, known as the People's Army (*Narodnaia Armiya*), further jeopardized matters. Under the command of the capable V.O. Kappel, contingents of the People's Army had played a key role at Kazan. The *Komuch* government at Samara was led by Socialist-Revolutionaries believed to have close ties to the Volga peasantry. *Komuch* flew the red flag and advocated a radical program of land redistribution and social justice while renouncing the Bolshevik dictatorship. The historian Evan Mawdsley noted: "Unlike the counter-revolutionaries of 1919 and 1920, who were mostly army officers of conservative or reactionary views, *Komuch* claimed to oppose the Bolshevik government in the name of the people."<sup>35</sup> The alternative of radicalism without repression threatened key elements of Bolshevik support.

Fortunately for Trotsky, the Bolsheviks enjoyed a number of advantages. At the beginning of August 1918, the Red Army had shifted four separate army groups to the Eastern Front (First Army, Third Army, Fourth Army, and Fifth Army). Despite the Red Army's presence, their June attempt to conscript the peasants of the Volga had failed. Still, the organizational structure of the new army groups provided the Bolsheviks with a crucial advantage. Reliable soldiers were swiftly diverted to the eastern army groups from other regions. Czechoslovak-*Komuch* forces struggled to field fully equipped units

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<sup>35</sup> Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 64

across a broad front from Kazan to Samara. While their enemies struggled, the Bolsheviks prepared to field four separate groups to strike at their foes' exposed front.

At Kazan Trotsky benefitted from the presence of two of the Bolsheviks' most capable commanders: Ioakim Vatsetis and Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Vatsetis was a rare find; he was both a gifted colonel with combat experience and the son of a worker. His leadership during the earlier defense of Kazan transformed what should have been an easy White victory into a bloody two-day engagement. Tukhachevsky was only twenty-five years old, but was a brilliant military tactician who had quickly proved his worth as commander of the First Army on the Volga. Trotsky had a weak grasp of tactics but could rely on these men for assistance. What Trotsky could not contribute tactically, he made up for with his ability to alternately inspire and discipline the troops. For the troops of the Fifth Army, nothing was more inspiring than the provisions Trotsky delivered straight to the front. For weeks Red Army soldiers had fought in difficult conditions and had endured shortages of food and ammunition. Trotsky's train was filled with all manner of goods that restored the troops' spirits. As Lincoln observed: "Trotsky produced boots for the barefooted, tobacco, medicines, watches, food, even field glasses and machine guns, to raise the morale of Red Army fighting men at critical points along the front."<sup>36</sup> Trotsky's willingness to put himself in the line of fire while he delivered supplies further impressed the men on the line. Many Red Army soldiers had never seen a high-ranking member of the Bolshevik government.

Of greater import was the transfer during the month of August of 30,000 fresh troops to the Volga front. Earlier Trotsky had sided with the head of the Bolsheviks'

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<sup>36</sup>Lincoln, Red Victory, p. 188

General Staff, General Bonch-Bruевич, by recommending that these reinforcements remain stationed on the western periphery to guard against a possible German attack. Lenin's intervention secured the troops' redeployment eastwards. Many of the fresh troops were active Bolsheviks or radical sympathizers recruited from the industrial areas of central Russia. These men had volunteered for Red Army duty during early 1918. Trotsky directed a torrent of revolutionary propaganda at the sympathetic soldiers which may have helped to boost morale. On board Trotsky's armored train was a printing press he used to publish daily broadsides and rally the Bolshevik faithful. Trotsky wrote of his propaganda efforts at Kazan: "In this conflict we are using not only rifles, cannon, and machine guns, but also newspapers. For the newspaper is also a weapon. The newspaper binds together all units of the Fifth Army in one thought, one aspiration, one will."<sup>37</sup>

Trotsky also made frequent use of the gun and the lash. By the time he had arrived at the front, army discipline had collapsed. During the retreat from Kazan several units of the Fifth Army had defected en masse to the Czechoslovak-*Komuch* forces. Even part of Colonel Vatsetis' headquarters staff had switched sides; Vatsetis barely escaped the city with his life. Trotsky set about restoring discipline. He accosted units that had ceased to maintain battle discipline. He organized fresh reinforcements for the weak Volga Naval Flotilla, allowing the Bolsheviks to regain naval supremacy. When men from the flotilla invited women on board and could not clearly identify who was in charge, Trotsky berated them: "Comrade sailors! This state of affairs is intolerable... When there is no proper order at the center there can be no solid, vigorous work done on

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<sup>37</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.323

the vessels, either. And we are waging a serious struggle, a great struggle, truly a fight to the death.”<sup>38</sup>

Trotsky’s attempts to restore discipline included violent reprisals. On 28 August 1918 the *Komuch* commander Kappel launched a surprise attack against Trotsky’s encampment at Sviiazshk. The fighting occurred in the immediate vicinity of Trotsky’s train. During the course of the battle, a Fifth Army detachment panicked and fled from combat. Trotsky was saved when the *Komuch* troops were beaten back; Kazan was now open to a Red Army counterattack. Even in victory, Trotsky did not forget about the Red Army troops who had retreated without orders. After the battle was over, he issued death sentences for the unit’s commanders, and resorted to the practice of decimation for the men in the ranks: every tenth enlisted man was shot as a traitor to discourage future indiscipline. Pipes wrote of the incident: “The first known instance of mass execution of troops occurred on Trotsky’s orders and with Lenin’s approval at the end of August 1918 on the Eastern front, when the principle of ‘decimation’ was applied and 20 men were shot, among them the regimental commander and commissar.”<sup>39</sup> Trotsky publicized the incident to the whole of the Red Army. In this pronouncement he declared: “The fate of the working class is at stake. The brave and honorable soldier cannot give his life twice— for himself and for a deserter... Every honorable soldier and sailor will read the sentence of the court with complete satisfaction. No quarter must be given to traitors to the workers’ cause”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p. 315

<sup>39</sup> Pipes, Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 62

<sup>40</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.322

The Red Army retook Kazan on 10 September 1918. Two days later, Tukhachevsky's First Army retook the Volga city of Simbirsk. The Czechoslovak forces west of the Urals now retreated to the east. Without Czechoslovak assistance, the *Komuch* government offered only token resistance to the Red Army. On 7 October their capital at Samara fell to the Fourth Red Army. The fall of *Komuch* marked the end of the only serious democratic-socialist alternative to Bolshevik rule. Historians such as Evan Mawdsley have described the Kazan campaign as a turning point in the Russian Civil War. It helped Trotsky make the case for using regular officers to the rest of the party. He had witnessed former tsarist officers operating in a formal military structure decisively defeat the enemy. His support for more traditional forms of military organization was further bolstered.

Trotsky spoke of a "breathing space" after the battles on the Volga. He expected a temporary lull in combat operations during the winter. He also hoped the victory at Kazan would silence his party critics who were displeased with his conduct as Army Commissar. Trotsky was disappointed; over the winter of 1918-1919 security threats on the Southern and Eastern fronts appeared that were in many ways graver than past dangers. Similarly, over the winter dissension within the party over Trotsky's Red Army policies coalesced before erupting at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in March 1919.

Following the Czechoslovak Legion's revolt early in the summer of 1918, the best Red Army troops and officers were shifted from the Southern and Western Fronts to the east. This permitted the battered Volunteer Army in the south of Russia to regroup and expand. Following the death of General Kornilov in April, General Anton Denikin rose to command the Volunteers. Denikin immediately asked Russia's former wartime allies for

help that resulted in millions of tons worth of arms shipments in 1919. He also regrouped and rearmed those units that had survived Red Army offensives in spring 1918. By June, Denikin's Volunteers had swollen to 9,000 men-at-arms; he decided to renew offensive operations. By July 1918 Denikin had driven the Bolsheviks from the lands of the Kuban Cossacks and threatened the Red Army's routes to the Caucasus.

As the Volunteer Army drove the Red Army from the north Caucasus, General Pyotr Krasnov (the new ataman of the Don Host) rallied his Cossacks to resume operations against the Bolsheviks. Krasnov relied on a massive influx of arms from the German Army's occupation force in Ukraine. From summer to December 1918 his troops repeatedly threatened the strategically located city of Tsaritsyn on the southern Volga. Denikin attempted to unite his forces with the Don Cossacks, but Krasnov refused to subordinate his men to Denikin and publically endorsed the cause of independence for the Don Host. By January 1919 Krasnov's final attempts to take Tsaritsyn had been defeated. The loss was a blessing in disguise for Denikin. Krasnov resigned in disgrace, leaving Denikin free to assume control over a unified force of Volunteers and Don Cossacks. By February 1919 the Bolsheviks faced a well-led, increasingly well-armed opposition on the Southern Front.

As Denikin rebuilt the Volunteers in the south, Admiral Kolchak rallied his anti-Bolshevik forces in Siberia. Following the Czechoslovak uprising in the summer of 1918, an anti-Bolshevik "Directorate" of moderate socialists and liberals established itself at Omsk. Former tsarist officials and officers who were uncomfortable with the *Komuch* government flocked to Omsk. The Directorate government proved ineffectual. Festering discontent with the Directorate resulted in a military coup on the night of 17-18

November 1918. It is unclear what role Kolchak played in the seizure of power, but the result was a military dictatorship with Kolchak as supreme ruler. Pipes recorded one popular interpretation of the events: “The Council of Ministers, which the Directory had appointed... claimed authority on its own behalf and immediately consigned it to Admiral Kolchak.”<sup>41</sup>

In early December, Kolchak set out to build a military force capable of overthrowing the Communist regime. Many anti-Bolsheviks, both inside and outside of Russia, saw Kolchak as the best hope for removing the Bolsheviks from power. The British General Alfred Knox lobbied his government to support Kolchak. Kolchak was rewarded with money, arms, and even the presence of two British army battalions at his capital in Omsk. Pipes recorded the generous assistance: “Between October 1918 and October 1919, Britain sent to Omsk 97,000 tons of supplies, including 600,000 rifles, 6, 831, machine guns, and over 200,000 uniforms.”<sup>42</sup> With this help, by the end of the year Kolchak was able to field a (for the time) well-equipped fighting force of over 150,000 at combat strength. Trotsky and the Red Army were completely unprepared for such an unforeseen threat. Following their victory over the *Komuch* forces in October, the Red Army had overextended itself in a risky gambit to secure the Urals before the full onset of the Russian winter.

In December 1918 Kolchak’s fresh troops surprised the exhausted left flank of the Bolsheviks’ Eastern Front Group. After October the High Command, including Trotsky, had seen the Eastern Front as less of a priority. Resources had been shifted to the Southern and Southwestern Fronts. It did not take long for Kolchak to expose this

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<sup>41</sup> Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 41

<sup>42</sup> Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 79

mistake. The White counterattack forced the Third Army to retreat 190 miles from the Urals. By 25 December 1918 Kolchak's forces had captured the important urban center at Perm.

The winter's temporary respite in fighting brought no relief to Trotsky politically. The Reds' exultant triumphalism in October 1918 gave way to outrage and panic almost overnight. Five days after the defeat at Perm, the party's most important organ in the region, the Ural *obkom* (*Uralskiy Oblastnoi Komitet*), released a report highly critical of the center's (i.e. Trotsky's) handling of military policy in the Urals. Mark Von Hagen noted that the report, "drew alarmed attention 'to the predominance of mediocre old officers or outright White Guardists' and demanded, "account for the bitter experience of the defeats suffered, and a radical reevaluation by the party on an all-Russian scale of the methods of building the Red Army."<sup>43</sup> Trotsky attempted to brush off the outcry: "The criticism expressed in the resolution from the Urals Regional Committee is abstract, fortuitous, and shapeless in character, and amounts--- if the Committee will pardon my saying so--- to a mild grumble."<sup>44</sup>

Many felt otherwise. The Bolshevik Central Committee took the accusations by the Urals *obkom* very seriously. A commission led by Josef Stalin and Feliks Dzerzhinsky was charged with investigating the *obkom*'s complaints. Neither man was a friend of Trotsky. Dzerzhinsky and Trotsky had clashed over the authority that Dzerzhinsky's Cheka secret police could wield vis-à-vis the Red Army. Trotsky and Stalin were openly hostile towards each other. During summer 1918 Stalin had usurped

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<sup>43</sup> Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 56

<sup>44</sup> Leon Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky* (London: New York: New Park Publications, 1979-1981), 5 volumes, *Volume II: The Year 1919*, p. 478



control over the defense of Tsaritsyn. Along with the communists-turned-Red Army men Mikhail Frunze and Klimenty Voroshilov, as well as the future ‘Red Cavalry’ commander Semyon Budyennyi, Stalin had disobeyed Trotsky’s dictates from the center. Voroshilov and Budyennyi especially combined fierce opposition to the “military specialists” with a personal loyalty to Stalin that would later play an important role in the early political history of the Soviet Union. Stalin’s and Dzerzhinsky’s commission sided with the Ural *obkom* as expected. Von Hagen summarized the findings: “Harsh criticism was leveled against Trotsky’s overreliance on military specialists... The commission agreed that party members and commissars exerted little or no influence over military specialists. Officers not only interfered with party work but had been known to arrest chairmen of party committees and comrades’ courts.”<sup>45</sup>

The commission’s findings set the stage for a bitter fight over the direction of Army policy at the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Bolshevik Party in March 1919. Trotsky was not unaware of the growing political uncertainty surrounding his choice of military policy. He submitted a set of “XIX Theses” to the Bolshevik Central Committee in February 1919 in an attempt to head off further attacks on his organization of the Red Army. He knew he could count on majority support in the powerful Central Committee, and attempted to use this support to his advantage. Still, he was aware that he would have to tread lightly if he was to avoid an open confrontation with Grigory Zinoviev, Stalin, and Dzerzhinsky, who were likely to oppose him no matter what. The result of the disagreement was a delicate compromise that paid lip-service to many of the policies of

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<sup>45</sup> Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, p. 57

his opponents as “future goals” while insisting on his current course as necessary to ensure victory in the Civil War.

Trotsky began his theses by identifying the ideas of a “people’s militia”, guerrilla warfare, and elected commanders as the legacy of petty-bourgeois “Kautskyism.” He declared: “When the class struggle has been transformed into open civil war, tearing away the veil of bourgeois law and bourgeois-democratic institutions, the slogan of a ‘people’s militia’ loses all its meaning... and so becomes a weapon for reaction.”<sup>46</sup> He called the opposition’s demands to implement a militia system *now* misguided at best, and bourgeois philistinism at worst. What was needed now, he claimed was a military program that would guarantee a Red victory, by any means necessary. Harsh discipline, “barracks” life for soldiers, conscription etc. were to be viewed as “temporary measures” only, put in place to ensure that the nascent Bolshevik state emerged victorious in war. The inconsistency between proclaiming workers’ liberty and self-determination while subjecting workers to corporal discipline at the hands of former tsarist officers was not lost on any conscientious Bolshevik. Trotsky admitted: “These contradictions were not accidental deviations, but resulted from the actual circumstances and constituted quite unavoidable transitional forms in the work of creating the army in the concrete conditions which had been bequeathed to us by the imperialist war and the bourgeois (February) revolution.”<sup>47</sup>

After painting this picture of the military opposition, Trotsky continued to defend the more controversial aspects of Red Army administration. Communists should play a larger role in the armed forces, he said, but only as purveyors of Bolshevik ideals. There

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<sup>46</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p. 244

<sup>47</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p. 245

was no room within the army for an autonomous party organization. Bolsheviks should instead work towards increasing the number of Communists directly integrated into the ranks as an inspiration to the less politically conscious soldiers. Similarly, commissars could best serve the cause by focusing more attention on the political purity of the army. Trotsky argued it would be a disservice to the Bolsheviks if commissars attempted to assume more responsibility for military matters. This would be a distraction from their mission as “bearers of the spirit of our Party.” Trotsky did not attempt to defend Red Army disciplinary policies as reflective of Bolshevik ideology. He merely stated that they were transitional and would soon pass away. Lastly, Trotsky denied there were any grounds to attack the military specialists “on principle.” He repeatedly insisted that it was essential to the Red Army’s revolutionary character that its conscripts be either poor peasants or workers. Yet class background no longer seemed to matter when it came to the officers calling the shots.

Ultimately, Trotsky’s argument hinged on an appeal not to the consistency of his policies with Bolshevik principles, but to the nature of the regime he was serving. Since the Bolsheviks were the representatives of the proletarian class in power, it followed that they would eventually embody the political ideals of that “class,” regardless of the short-term reality. Trotsky said: “The revolutionary character of the army is determined above all, by the character of the Soviet regime which creates this army, which sets its aims and makes it, so to speak, its instrument.”<sup>48</sup> He elaborated: “Counter-revolution cannot in any way develop out of the regime of proletarian dictatorship; it can establish itself only as a

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<sup>48</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p. 251

result of a direct and open bloody victory over this regime.”<sup>49</sup> The “universal militia” and “democratic army” could exist, but only in the future. For now Bolsheviks must content themselves with repressive, hierarchical forms of organization. In late February 1919 the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party adopted Trotsky’s “XIX Theses”, but many in the Party were still not satisfied.

At the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, opposition to Trotsky’s management of the Red Army coalesced into two camps. The first camp was composed of “moderate” Bolsheviks who worried about insufficient party control over the army. Members of this camp included Mikhail Lashevich, Klimenty Voroshilov, and the well-known Central Committee members Stalin, Dzerzhinsky, and Zinoviev. These men did not take issue with the need for “iron discipline” in the army, nor did they endorse a return to more democratic forms of military organization. Their demands can be boiled down to three main points: a reduction in status of “military specialists” to a more consultative role; increased control for commissars over operational matters; and autonomy for party cells within the organizational framework of the Red Army. These men were particularly incensed by what they saw as gross abuses of power by the military specialists. The military specialists hailed from bourgeois class backgrounds and were proponents of counter-revolutionary ideals. Their presence in a nominally revolutionary army that was already dangerously full of non-proletarian elements (i.e. the peasantry) could only have a deleterious effect on the socialist character of the regime. The scholar Francesco Benvenuti observed: “Those like Stalin, even though they refrained from voicing broad political formulations of an alternative nature, nonetheless viewed official military policy

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<sup>49</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p. 253

as an unjustifiable means of reinstating men, ideas, and methods that had not been born of the revolution.”<sup>50</sup>

The frequency with which “military specialists” had defected to the enemy in the line of fire was cited as evidence for their dubious loyalty. In the spring of 1919 mass desertions from the Red Army continued unabated. Richard Pipes puts the number of deserters for February and March 1919 at over 80,000 Red Army men in uniform.<sup>51</sup> To counter the trend, this wing of the military opposition argued that it was imperative that the commissars be given control over combat operations. If Communists controlled the army, the toiling classes would be more likely to remain at their posts and to preserve discipline. Von Hagen observed: “The Military Opposition contended that the commissars deserved more than a narrow control function, because they already had more combat experience than many military specialists.”<sup>52</sup> It would also be necessary to increase the importance of the party’s political departments (*politotdely*) in day-to-day military operations. In the spring of 1919 *politotdely* responsibilities were limited to selecting qualified commissars and disseminating propaganda amongst the troops. The “moderate” opposition called for augmenting their powers to include sniffing out and removing politically suspect “military specialists” from the army.

The “Left Communist” faction of the party was even more spirited in their opposition to Trotsky’s administration of the Red Army. The “Left Communists” considered the Red Army in its current form to be a betrayal of the Revolution. These men and women saw the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power a signal to begin immediate

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<sup>50</sup> Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, p. 92

<sup>51</sup> Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 60

<sup>52</sup> Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, p. 58

construction of a Communist society grounded in egalitarian politics. Forced conscription, military discipline, total warfare, and an authoritarian officer corps were all relics of the “reactionary” tsarist past and had no place in a socialist society. The “Left Communists” proudly affirmed their support for the democratic approach they associated with the first phase of the Revolution. Robert Daniels described the dispute: “The essence of issue was the same clash of anarchistic idealism and pragmatic predilection for traditional organizational forms which divided the Left Communists and the Leninists in respect to industrial and labor policy.”<sup>53</sup>

The “Left Communists” called for a top-down reversal of military policy. In nearly all particulars their demands reiterated the Bolshevik platform prior to the seizure of power in October 1917. Coercive disciplinary policies were to be abolished immediately. The death penalty and other forms of corporal punishment were rejected as repressive and inconsistent with socialism. Officers must be elected by the soldiers under their command. Officers would be subject to recall at any time if their orders violated the “spirit of Revolution” or otherwise offended their comrades-in-arms. Mandatory conscription was to be promptly rejected in favor of an all-volunteer military. Measures must be taken to transition to a “universal militia” whereby all citizens of the proper class background would receive military training at their place of work. Barracks were to be done away with forever, and men and women would be sent into battle alongside their co-workers and neighbors. To top it off, traditional styles of warfare were to be abandoned. In place of mass divisions and wide fronts, militia units would instead operate in flying-squads and adopt guerilla tactics. Local party committees would

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) p. 104

coordinate the actions of their own militia units and play a major role in defining military practice.

Despite his gifted oratory and administrative capacities, Trotsky was strongly disliked by large segments of the party. Trotsky was not unaware of his lack of popularity, and this probably played an important role in his decision to avoid the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress. He excused himself by insisting he was needed at the Eastern Front, where Kolchak was resuming his attack with great ferocity. In a risky move, Trotsky promoted a Central Committee decision to order all Congress delegates from the party's military organizations also to return to the front. The party's military organizations generally opposed Trotsky's line, and resented what they saw as an attempt to silence their dissent. Benvenuti said of the incident: "Trotsky replied to this 'interpretation' during the meeting, by referring to 'the extremely serious situation' that had arisen on the eastern front."<sup>54</sup> Following the outcry from militants in the military, the Central Committee reversed its decision and allowed the delegates from the fronts to attend. The 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress was the largest forum to-date for determining Bolshevik military policy. Trotsky was absent; his opponents were there in full force.

The first sessions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress began in Moscow on 18 March 1919. More than four hundred delegates attended, over forty of them served in the armed forces or the party military organizations. Military matters occupied a prominent place on the Congress' agenda. The debate between supporters of Trotsky's leadership and the military opposition was initially conducted at an open session of the Congress on March 20. At Trotsky's request, the party veteran Grigorii Sokolnikov spoke in favor of the

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<sup>54</sup> Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922, p. 94

official Red Army line. Vladimir Smirnov, a former Left Socialist Revolutionary and “Left Communist”, spoke on behalf of Trotsky’s opponents. Smirnov mentioned widely divergent criticisms of Trotsky.

Sokolnikov was the first to speak, he based his speech almost entirely on Trotsky’s “XIX Theses”. Sokolnikov had the advantage of endorsing a coherent set of policies. He also benefitted from the Central Committee’s explicit endorsement of Trotsky’s theses less than a month earlier. Sokolnikov did not stray from Trotsky’s strategies in the theses. He identified the use of military specialists, harsh discipline, and conscription as the necessary means for winning a difficult war and preserving socialist power. Communist power should be increased the army, but only within the existing framework of Red Army protocol. This meant training more workers and peasants as officers and increasing Bolshevik propaganda, but not doing away with military specialists or limiting their powers.

A large part of Sokolnikov’s speech was devoted to a negative characterization of the Left Communists’ platform within the wider military opposition. These Bolsheviks were portrayed as advocates for a backwards, pre-modern style of partisan warfare that would inevitably end in the destruction of the Bolshevik Party. Sokolnikov borrowed directly from Trotsky’s claim that, “Preaching guerrillaism as a military program is equivalent to advocating a reversion from large-scale industry to the handicraft system. Such advocacy is fully in accordance with the nature of intellectual groups which are incapable of wielding state power, incapable of seriously conceiving the task of wielding this power, and which results in guerilla (polemical or terroristic) forays against the



workers' power."<sup>55</sup> Sokolnikov attempted to tar the opposition by imputing to it Menshevik/Socialist-Revolutionary sympathies. Sokolnikov ended his speech in a conciliatory fashion, promising after a Red victory to implement many of the opposition's more-democratic ideals. Benvenuti summarized: "Like the theses, Sokolnikov concluded by deferring to a not-too-distant future: once 'communist society' was in a position to afford a 'communist militia', certain features of 'partisan' democratism could be 'resuscitated'."<sup>56</sup>

Smirnov's speech was a delicate effort to focus the debate on those issues upon which the military opposition agreed. He began by noting that opposition to military specialists stemmed from the poor quality and dubious loyalty of many specialists. He insisted this was reason enough for increasing the importance of the commissars. Commissars should have their authority increased to include operational matters--- on top of oversight and political duties. Smirnov was especially hostile to the harsh disciplinary code prevailing in the army. He stressed that the current emphasis on coercion made it difficult for peasant conscripts to differentiate between the old tsarist army and the new socialist one. Especially egregious were those statutes that fixed relations between enlisted men and officers, such as the provision that guaranteed officers separate living quarters. Benvenuti condensed Smirnov's argument: "Certainly statutes were necessary, but they should not give peasant soldiers the impression that they were still in the old Imperial Army."<sup>57</sup> Lastly, Smirnov advocated greater autonomy and a broader role for party organizations operating at the fronts.

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<sup>55</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p. 246

<sup>56</sup> Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922, p. 100

<sup>57</sup> Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922, p. 100

Following Smirnov's speech, the debate was moved to a closed session at the request of the Central Committee. The full minutes of this session were not made public for decades. Behind closed doors many party members spoke out against the current military policy of the War Commissariat, including Stalin. When a vote was held where delegates were asked to choose between the rival camps of Trotsky and Smirnov, a majority of delegates sided with the opposition. At this moment of heightened tension, Lenin addressed the Congress and weighed in largely on the side of Trotsky. From here the opposition splintered between those who wished to retain the gist of the War Commissariat's policies, and those who advocated a more radical set of "left" military policies. In a moment of irony, Stalin and Zinoviev now found themselves defending much of Trotsky's program. Following this closed session, a special committee of three Central Committee men and two representatives of the "military opposition" was created to draft a compromise resolution.

On the face of it, the compromise was a victory for Trotsky's position. The resolution was set down in the theses format that was largely a modified form of Trotsky's original "XIX Theses". Military specialists were retained, while the idea of a militia was endorsed for the distant future. Harsh disciplinary measures were largely preserved. Conscription was maintained over voluntary recruitment. Still, the resolution criticized Trotsky. Commissars saw their powers augmented beyond anything Trotsky had supported. In addition to their duties to counter-sign operational orders, commissars were now given broad disciplinary powers--- including augmented powers of arrest. Theoretically, this included the right to arrest military specialists of suspect loyalty without clearing those decisions with higher-ups in the War Commissariat. High-ranking

commissars were given control of the special sections (*osobyie otdely*) responsible for secret police functions in the army, a role previously reserved for members of the Cheka. Of equal importance was the decision to recommend future revision of the service regulations of the Red Army, including those provisions pertaining to relations between officers and the rank-and-file. Lastly, decision-making in the Bolsheviks' political organizations within the Red Army was shifted from front commands to the army and divisional level. In practice, this made it harder for the center to impose its own "pragmatic" perspective on its military operatives. Also, the resolution called for the holding of periodic conferences for party members at the front where questions of military policy could be discussed. In keeping with the devolution of power to divisional organizations, local party members would now have a greater say on military matters. This would bring more opportunities to criticize Trotsky's "reactionary" policies for those party members serving in the armed forces.

Trotsky was absent from the Congress, but he closely followed its proceedings. The Congress came to an end on 23 March 1919. Trotsky's response was swift. On 25 March he wrote "To the communists of the Eastern Front" for the party newspaper published onboard his armored train. In many ways the article was a direct rebuke of party members in the military who questioned his authority. To quote the article at length: "There were concentrations of Communists who saw it as one of their most important tasks to criticize and condemn our military system, passing resolutions to this effect, resolving that decorations are unnecessary, protesting against the internal service regulations, and so on and so forth. This led in its turn to conflicts with those Communists who conscientiously carried out the party's policy. These conflicts then

resulted in weakening internal relations and discipline, and had most pernicious repercussions in all spheres of work, and consequently in the army's combat capacity."<sup>58</sup> Between 26 and 31 March Trotsky responded directly to the Central Committee. With regards to a reformulation of service regulations, he called for Smirnov himself to outline concrete alternatives. He accused those who protested against the military specialists of being slovenly and ill-informed. He firmly rejected a call for relaxing army discipline, as well as any attempts to guarantee communists serving in the military autonomy from their commanding officers or other special privileges.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Congress was supposed to resolve outstanding disputes between Trotsky's supporters and his opponents. For awhile the grave military situation at the front largely ensured this was a reality. On 6 March 1919 Admiral Kolchak's forces resumed their offensive in the Urals. The Red Armies on this front were caught completely off guard. The First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Armies arrayed against the Kolchak in the East had failed to rest and resupply over the two months since they were attacked. In fact, valuable troops and supplies had actually been diverted to the Southern and Southwestern fronts. As Trotsky said at the time: "On the other side, after our successes on the Volga, the central Soviet government concentrated all attention on the Southern front, to which strong units were sent from the Eastern front, while experienced, energetic leaders were also transferred thither. The result was that our front in the East was weakened."<sup>59</sup> Within a week the decision to divert forces from the east was exposed as a strategic blunder. On 13 March Kolchak's armies took the important city of Ufa in the western Urals. Trotsky

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<sup>58</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume II, p. 447

<sup>59</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume II, p. 479

had scarcely exaggerated the threat when he cited the emergency on the Eastern Front as grounds to recuse himself from the Congress.

For nearly a month and a half, the Red Army suffered defeat after defeat. Trotsky's frequent presence at the fronts proved insufficient to halt the rout. Soviet control of the Volga was once again in jeopardy. Lincoln outlined the setbacks: "By the middle of April, the Whites had driven a wedge more than a hundred miles wide between the Fifth and Second Red Armies... Their advance units stood less than sixty miles from Samara, less than seventy from Simbirsk, and a mere fifty-six miles from Kazan."<sup>60</sup> Even Lenin and Trotsky found it hard not to panic: each made frequent reference to the grave danger posed by Kolchak's forces while recommending drastic solutions. Some of the extreme measures taken to combat the situation at the front made Trotsky uneasy. His conflict at the Congress with party members in the military had not been forgotten. During the week of the Congress Trotsky had directly attacked Communists serving on the Eastern Front, saying, "We must seek in the work of the Communists one of the reasons for the setbacks that have befallen us."<sup>61</sup> The majority of the Central Committee did not share in his lack of enthusiasm for the Communists at the fronts. During March and April thousands of Bolshevik Party members were specially drafted for service in the fight against Kolchak. Lincoln observed: "Before the end of May, some twenty thousand Bolshevik Party members and another sixty thousands elite workers had been sent to the East. The newly organized Komsomol (*Kommunisticheskyi Soyuz Molodezhi*), the Communist Youth League, sent three thousand of its best members."<sup>62</sup> The heightened

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<sup>60</sup> Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War*, p. 250

<sup>61</sup> Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed, Volume II*, p. 447

<sup>62</sup> Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War*, p. 250-51

role of Communists in active service promoted tension between party activists and “military specialists.” Party members continuously blamed the specialists for the setbacks that befell the Red Army in spring and summer 1919.

Tensions continued to escalate with the April appointment of Mikhail Frunze as commander of the First, Fourth and Fifth Armies on the Eastern Front. The decision was made in spite of Trotsky’s wishes. As party militants ascended through the ranks, “military specialists” with ample combat experience were relieved of command, or even arrested. Trotsky opposed the new course, but with diminishing success. He wrote in summer 1919: “Those who are concerned first and foremost in this matter are the overwhelming majority of the honourable commanders. This majority, who already have rendered so many services to the Soviet country to their credit, will not allow isolated scoundrels to drive their poisoned splinters into the body of our army and spread panicky suspicion of the commanding apparatus as a whole.”<sup>63</sup> By April the purges were severe enough to merit Vatsetis writing directly to Lenin to complain: “Every commissar has his secret desire to catch our staff officers out in some counter-revolutionary attitude or treachery. This seems a very strange way to behave, since that sort of behavior was a typical feature of the gendarmes of the old regime.”<sup>64</sup>

Frunze proved to be a gifted military commander, beyond the talents of many other Bolshevik loyalists turned officers. Within a week of his appointment, Frunze had halted Kolchak’s advances. The White forces began to overstretch their lines of supply and communication. On 28 April 1919 Frunze ordered his forces to go over to the

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<sup>63</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume II, p. 132

<sup>64</sup> V. P. Butt, ed., The Russian Civil War: Documents from the Soviet Archives, (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), p. 104

offensive against Kolchak. The month of May saw Kolchak mount a vain effort to contain the advancing Red Army. The offensive on the Eastern Front marked the rise of dozens of Bolshevik military heroes, including Vasilii Chapaev and the future hero of Stalingrad and Berlin--- Vasilii Chuikov. On 9 June forces commanded by Chapaev occupied Ufa. Kolchak would never again pose a serious threat to the Red Army. The White threat from the East was all but eliminated on the western side of the Urals. The Red Army retook Kolchak's capital at Omsk on 14 November 1919.

The victories of the Red Army in the eastern theater were accompanied by a deterioration of the situation in the south. As Chapaev's men stormed Ufa, Denikin's Volunteer Army was busy driving the last of the Bolsheviks from the North Caucasus. In late spring and early summer Denikin added two new groups: Baron Pyotr Wrangel's Caucasus Army, and the Don Cossacks (who replaced Krasnov as ataman with the more receptive General Sidorin in February). During the last two weeks of June, Denikin's men launched a renewed offensive that resulted in the complete collapse of the Red Army's Southern Front. On 30 June 1919 both Kharkov and Tsaritsyn fell to the Volunteers. Denikin's men threatened to press their victories with a three-pronged attack aimed at the heart of Bolshevik-held Central Russia.

Denikin's victories led to full-fledged panic at the highest levels of the Red Army and the Bolshevik Party. They also fueled a heated dispute that resulted in one of Trotsky's most humiliating defeats during the Civil War period. Alarmed by the growing threat in the south, Trotsky and his allies in the Red Army high command (including Commander-in-Chief Vatsetis) called for an immediate halt to Frunze's offensive in the Urals. They argued that the advance should stop at Ufa, where Kolchak would be

contained until the spring of 1920. The bulk of the Red Army's resources would instead be transferred to the south where they would confront the Volunteer Army and head off an attack on the Bolsheviks' industrial heartland. This argument was generally supported by a majority of the "military specialists" in the upper ranks of the Red Army high command. Trotsky summarized his view of the situation at the end of June: "After a few weeks there will be a decisive turn on the Southern front. In these transitional weeks all forces and resources must be put at the service of the troops on the Southern front."<sup>65</sup>

This view was hotly contested by a majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee and a majority of prominent Communist-military officers. Without denying the gravity of events in the south, Sergei Kamenev and Mikhail Frunze argued that a halt to the offensive in the Urals would be tantamount to defeatism. Political heavyweights such as Stalin, Zinoviev, and Lenin supported Kamenev's and Frunze's proposals. The situation was not without bitter political overtones. During the spring of 1919 Trotsky had replaced Kamenev as Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Front with the ineffectual tsarist officer General Samoilov. Samoilov proved completely inept. So Trotsky was forced to agree to Kamenev's reinstatement at the end of June 1919. The first real shots in the dispute were fired in Petrograd by Stalin himself. Stalin had been sent to take command of the city's defenses in May 1919. A revolt by part of the city's garrison on 13 June 1919 was met with the most vicious terror. Stalin attributed the revolt to collaboration between the garrison's "military specialist" officers and British naval units operating in the Gulf of Finland. Stalin returned to Moscow at the beginning of June 1919 intent on exposing the growing treachery of "military specialists" while undermining Trotsky politically.

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<sup>65</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume II, p. 315



The growing party infighting signaled a return to the open dispute between Stalin and Trotsky over “military specialists” that had last surfaced in summer 1918. In that episode Trotsky had successfully defended his argument for officers’ superiority and Stalin had been dismissed from his command of Tsaritsyn’s defense. This time Stalin was to gain the upper hand politically. Stalin seized on the growing dispute over strategy in the east to urge that Vatsetis be replaced as Commander-in-Chief of all Red Army forces by his rival (and Trotsky’s opponent), Kamenev. Stalin drew special attention to Trotsky’s close ties to previously inept tsarist officers (i.e. Samoilov) as further evidence why Vatsetis’ cautious strategy was inappropriate and as evidence of Trotsky’s possible political duplicity. On 3 July 1919 Stalin convinced a majority of the Central Committee to dismiss Vatsetis as Commander-in-Chief and to replace him with Kamenev. At the same time, Vatsetis and three of Trotsky’s allies were dismissed from the Revolutionary Military Council. Kamenev and three other Stalin allies replaced them. Lincoln observed: “As commissar for war Trotsky remained the council’s chairman, but Stalin’s allies could outvote him by a margin of two to one.”<sup>66</sup> Just to make sure Trotsky had no lingering doubts about who was running the show, Vatsetis was arrested not long after his dismissal for leading a “White-guardist organization.” When evidence for such absurd claims against a prominent military hero of the Revolution were not forthcoming, the charges were dropped, but Stalin had sent his message. Trotsky’s military specialists would now be subject to humiliation, arrest, or worse if they failed to show sufficient deference to Stalin.

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<sup>66</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, p. 222

Trotsky lost no time in disputing Kamenev's new war plan. While Kamenev conceded the importance of concentrating the bulk of the Red Army's resources on the Southern Front, he disagreed with Trotsky on how these forces should be positioned. Kamenev argued for utilizing the select Ninth and Tenth Armies to direct the bulk of the Red Army counterattack down the Volga towards Tsaritsyn. From there the Red Army could split the Novocherkassk-Rostov rail lines and deny Denikin crucial supplies from his allies abroad. Trotsky argued such an attack would put Red forces at the mercy of the anti-Communist population of the Don region. Trotsky proposed to conduct the main counterattack in Donbas around Kharkov, a region with an industrial population more sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, but also a much higher concentration of enemy units. Lincoln condensed this argument: "The advantage of operating in territory inhabited by a friendly population, with a dense network of roads and railways to bring in reinforcements, ammunition, and weapons, Trotsky insisted, would more than offset the difficulties of attacking Denikin's stronger center rather than his weaker flank."<sup>67</sup> On 5 July 1919 the Central Committee voted to endorse Kamenev's directives; a furious Trotsky offered to resign his posts in protest. Only Lenin's decisive intervention prevented the Committee from accepting Trotsky's resignation; Lenin personally convinced him to remain in charge of the Red Army.

Events proved Trotsky correct. By mid-August the 50,000 strong Ninth and Tenth Armies launched their counterattack down the Volga only to be halted by troops fighting under Baron Wrangel. Just as the Red Army launched its counterattack on the Volga, the Don Cossack General Mamontov was launching a daring cavalry raid behind Red Army

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<sup>67</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, p. 223

lines, beginning a forty-day reign of terror that resulted in the sacking of Tambov and Voronezh. As Mamontov's raid wrapped up in September, the Red Army offensive ground to a halt outside of Tsaritsyn. Trotsky's strategy was vindicated, yet he was embarrassed by his refusal to support a significant cavalry force for the Red Army. Trotsky had earlier attacked the cavalry as a legacy of the aristocratic classes that was incompatible with "proletarian" forms of warfare. A lack of cavalry had severely inhibited the Red Army's ability to defend against Mamontov's fast-moving raiders. To his credit, Trotsky realized his error and promptly began to rally support for a Red Army cavalry force. On 1 September 1919 Trotsky proclaimed: "All that is needed is that the creation of a cavalry force should become a task for the working masses. It is necessary that the proletariat grasp the importance for the cause of the revolution of this new step forward. The Soviet Republic needs cavalry. Red cavalymen, forward! To horse, proletarians!"<sup>68</sup> As a result, Stalin's military ally Semyon Budyonnyi rapidly assembled the First Red Cavalry, which would go on to play a decisive role in Red Army victories by late October.

Just as the Red Army reversed course on the use of cavalry, so too did it redirect its forces to counter the Volunteers' main attack from the Donbas. At the end of September, Denikin's Volunteers captured the city of Orel in the Bolsheviks' heartland. Denikin was now just 220 miles away from Moscow. As if things could not get any worse, a new and dangerous threat unexpectedly formed on the Bolsheviks' Northwestern periphery. Throughout 1919 British naval units had hounded the Bolsheviks' meager Baltic fleet around Petrograd, even sinking a few Bolshevik vessels. They had also

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<sup>68</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume II, p. 414

applied steady pressure to anti-Communist Russian exiles in the newly independent Baltic states to unite their forces and march on Petrograd. By fall 1919 their efforts were beginning to bear fruit. In August 1919 the counterrevolutionary General Nikolai Yudenich helped organize the anti-Bolshevik “Northwestern Government” in independent Estonia. By September he had rallied over 17,000 men to serve under his banner and had solicited numerous arms and supplies from his British allies.

On 28 September 1919 Yudenich’s forces crossed the Estonian border and went over to the offensive against the Bolsheviks. In less than a week, Yudenich cut the rail line between Pskov and Petrograd, opening a clear path to Petrograd. Leading Bolsheviks had failed to reckon on an unexpected assault on their northwestern periphery. The Central Committee and Red Army high command panicked: even Lenin called on the party to evacuate its forces from Petrograd. At this point, a surprising alliance between Stalin and Trotsky intervened to restore confidence in the startled Bolshevik ranks. Both men stressed the grave political consequences of abandoning the city that had given birth to the February and October Revolutions. Trotsky himself asked to depart immediately for the Petrograd front to assume command of its defenses. On 16 October Trotsky rushed by rail to Petrograd, just as Yudenich’s forces were occupying the Petrograd suburb of Gatchina. En route to Petrograd, Trotsky summoned the city’s workers to battle: “Get ready, Petrograd! More than once have October days been great days in your history. Destiny summons you to write during this October a fresh and perhaps most glorious page in the history of the proletarian struggle.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume II, p. 542

It is impossible objectively to assess the effect of Trotsky's presence at the front. Disciples of Trotsky have described his role as decisive, as did the hagiographer Isaac Deutscher: "On horseback Trotsky gathered terror-stricken and retreating men and led them back to the fighting-line."<sup>70</sup> On 19 October 1919 Yudenich's forces stormed the Pulkovo Heights overlooking the city, as Trotsky addressed the same Petrograd Soviet he had presided over in 1905 and 1917. His words stirred the hearts of Bolshevik faithful, and are worth quoting at length: "I shall not hide from you that I came here with a heart full of anxiety... The city which has suffered so much, which has burned internally, which has so often been subjected to dangers, which has never spared itself, which has stripped itself so bare – this Red Petrograd is still what it was, the torchbearer of the revolution, the rock of steel on which we shall build the church of the future. And, backed by the combined forces of the whole country, we shall surrender this Petrograd to no-one."<sup>71</sup>

If Trotsky's words were effective, so to was the massive influx of reinforcements flooding the city from Moscow by rail. Yudenich's failure to cut the rail-link to the Bolshevik capital was a critical mistake. His offensive collapsed as rapidly as it had mounted. On 21 October a reinvigorated Bolshevik force drove Yudenich from the Pulkovo Heights, beginning a counterattack that would not halt until the Red Army had driven the enemy to Estonia and completely destroyed Yudenich's Northwestern Army. On 7 November 1919, the second anniversary of the Revolution, Trotsky returned to Moscow personally to report the victory in Petrograd to an overjoyed Central Committee. Trotsky's three weeks in Petrograd had witnessed equally momentous victories on the Southern Front. If Trotsky's command of Petrograd's defense was one of his finest

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<sup>70</sup> Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, p. 445

<sup>71</sup> Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed, Volume II*, p. 564

personal triumphs, he could also claim some credit for the recent victories against Denikin in the south. Denikin's seemingly unstoppable advance towards Moscow, combined with the failure of Kamenev's strategy to make serious progress on the Volga, led the Central Committee to reevaluate its plan. In October 1919 the Central Committee reversed its decision and endorsed a plan backed by Trotsky. The Red Army would now divide its counterattack into two main wedges. One force would attack at Denikin's left flank in the Ukraine while the other group continued Kamenev's earlier attack down the Volga. A major victory by Budyennyi's Red Cavalry at Voronezh on 24 October forced Denikin's forward units to retreat, signaling the first of many reversals for the Volunteer Army and the success of Trotsky's strategy.

The second anniversary of the October Revolution also marked the little over a year-and-a-half since Trotsky had risen to command the Red Army. He had transformed a motley band of disorganized militia into a disciplined fighting force. Grave threats had been beaten back on multiple fronts. Yet many questions remained unanswered. The events of 1919 had invigorated opponents of "military specialists" and had fostered renewed calls for a more "socialist" Red Army. Large sections of the Soviet Republic remained outside of effective Bolshevik control, the Ukraine was plagued by anarchic violence, and Siberia was still occupied by forces hostile to the regime. Heightened tensions with the nascent Polish Republic threatened a renewed outbreak of widespread military conflict. Last but not least, growing dissatisfaction amongst crucial sectors of support for the Bolsheviks undermined a tenuous social compact between the regime and the governed. Two more years of civil war lay ahead.

### Chapter Three: Trotsky and the End of the Civil War, Late 1919 to 1922

*“The workers’ and peasants’ army, which has protected the workers and peasants with its blood from the onslaught of the landlords and capitalists, must now apply all its free forces and resources to helping the cause of the country’s economic rebirth.” - Lev Trotsky, February 1920<sup>72</sup>*

Fall 1919 marked the high-water point for those forces opposing the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. Yudenich’s army had been decisively defeated on the outskirts of Petrograd; his army had ceased to exist by December 1919. The Bolsheviks’ conquest of Admiral Kolchak’s forces at Omsk was followed by his execution on 7 February 1920. Denikin’s defeats in late October 1919 marked the beginning of the end for the Volunteer Army. Throughout the winter of 1919 and into the spring of 1920, the Red Army drove the Volunteers south. What had begun as a retreat quickly deteriorated into an irreversible rout. On 17 December, 1919 the Red Army recaptured Kiev. In early 1920, therefore, many Bolsheviks assumed the worst of the Civil War violence was over. Trotsky made note of the victories: “In the struggle against this all-powerful force, our Red Army has shown itself equal to its task. This has been acknowledged by those opponents who were

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<sup>72</sup> Leon Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky (London: New York: New Park Publications, 1979-1981), 5 volumes, Volume III: The Year 1920, p. 60

saying eighteen months ago: ‘You won’t create an army’, and who now say: ‘You have created an army, and a good one.’ And how can they not say that, when this army is beating, over an expanse of nine or ten thousand versts, the enemy mobilized and armed by world capital?”<sup>73</sup>

The victorious powers of World War I had sustained the White movement for two years. Hundreds of thousands of tons of arms, ammunition, uniforms, and even tanks and airplanes had been supplied to the various White armies. Fourteen nations had pledged to oppose the Bolshevik state in what Winston Churchill had called “the anti-Bolshevik crusade.” France, Great Britain, Italy, the United States, and Japan had all sent troops to Russian soil. Although direct confrontations between armed Bolsheviks and the Allies were rare, the Bolshevik propaganda exploited the foreign presence to maximum effect. The collapse of the White resistance in the fall of 1919 was a decisive blow to Churchill and others who sought to maintain external military pressure on the Soviet state. Aid to the Whites was increasingly regarded as a waste of time and money. The need for Western European governments to rebuild at home after years of war took precedence over their assertion of power abroad. Public figures advocating trade and engagement with the Bolsheviks, such as the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, asserted themselves politically. Mawdsley noted: “By late autumn 1919 the flow of arms had begun to dry up, and then the winter of military disasters in Siberia and the Kuban seemed to prove that the Whites had no future. The British now wanted to normalize relations with Moscow, and they tried to interpose themselves between Reds and

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<sup>73</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume I, p.43



Whites.”<sup>74</sup> The possibility of an imminent conclusion to Allied intervention strengthened the convictions of leading Bolsheviks that an end to civil war was just around the corner.

Still, Bolshevik power was far from secure. After six years of uninterrupted warfare, Russia’s economy was in ruins. The civil war had led to a dramatic decline in population. Suny recorded the immense scale of the calamity: “At least 1 million people died in combat or from White or Red acts of terror during the Russian civil war. Several million more died from disease, hunger, and the cold. About a million people left the country and never returned.”<sup>75</sup> Nowhere was the decline in population more in evidence than in the industrial cities of Central Russia which were home to the proletariat upon whom the Bolshevik Party relied for political and economic support. The violent upheaval of civil war had severed the ties between city and countryside. The workers and their representatives in the Soviet government lacked both finished goods and viable currency to exchange for food. The Bolsheviks resorted to requisitioning. Hundreds of thousands still starved. In the wake of mass starvation came epidemic diseases that led thousands more to perish. Recurring typhus epidemics were especially lethal. Many workers who were still able fled the cities. The historian Diane Koenker described the scale of the exodus: “Moscow’s population towards the end of the Civil War was thus half of what it had been in the midst of the 1917 revolution. An even more catastrophic

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<sup>74</sup> Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, p. 267

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 93

fall occurred in Petrograd: its population plummeted from 2.5 million in 1917 to 700,000 in 1920.”<sup>76</sup>

Population losses were aggravated by diminished supplies of raw materials. Fuel for industries grew scarce as coal and timber disappeared from the cities. Crucial resources such as iron, lead, and copper were similarly scarce. Industry ground to a virtual halt. By the end of the civil war, the Bolsheviks assembled just 50,000 rifles a month, a fraction of the pre-Revolutionary output. As a consequence, less than half of all Red Army soldiers were armed at the beginning of 1920.<sup>77</sup> The manufacture of ammunition, uniforms, and artillery fared no better. The lack of provisions for the army was a reminder of the overall weakness of the Soviet state.

In June 1918 all factories directly involved in the manufacture of war materials were placed under the control of Trotsky’s War Commissariat to combat the Red Army’s deficiencies in supplies. A special regime of military discipline in the workplace was introduced to guarantee production. After this militarization of the defense industry, Trotsky worked to apply military methods to other branches of the economy. As he proclaimed in early 1920: “Inasmuch as the army possesses the greatest amount of experience of mass Soviet organization of this type, its methods and procedures must (with all necessary modifications) be transferred to the sphere of labor organization.”<sup>78</sup>

He began to perceive the militarization of the entire economy as a remedy for three of the

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<sup>76</sup> Diane P. Koenker, “Introduction: Social and Demographic Change in the Civil War”, in Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History, ed. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Grigor Suny. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 81

<sup>77</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory, Pg. 362

<sup>78</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume III, p. 374

most serious disorders afflicting the Soviet economy: worker absenteeism, a collapse in the transportation network, and an unreliable supply of raw materials (including basic foodstuffs).

The failure of a large portion of the urban labor force to report to work on a regular basis was a crucial handicap to overall productivity. Increased wages were useless as incentives. Inflation had robbed the ruble of its value. State wages were too small to purchase the food necessary for survival, so workers took days off to scavenge for food or work higher-paying moonlight jobs. By late 1919, payment-in-kind was the only truly effective means of compensating workers, yet the government had no surplus commodities with which to make these reimbursements. As punishment and payment grew less effective, the number of workers reporting for duty declined. The scholar Silvana Malle has documented the scale of absenteeism: “In the first quarter of 1920, overall absenteeism in Russia was computed at about 40-50 percent of the total workforce.”<sup>79</sup> The seriousness of the problem was not lost on Trotsky, who declared: “Whoever falls to come to work on time, or who wastes his time when in the workshop, or occupies himself there with work ‘on the side’, or simply stays away on a workday, is an enemy of socialist Russia who is undermining her future.”<sup>80</sup> The Bolsheviks’ inability to induce the proletariat to work was partly due to the hunger and disease which continued to plague urban areas throughout Russia. Workers were so physically weakened by illness that they could not drag themselves to work on a daily basis.

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<sup>79</sup> Silvana Malle, The Economic Organization of War Communism, 1918-1921 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 481

<sup>80</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Vol. III, p. 374

Many plants were also idled by a lack of fuel, or of raw materials, or of both. Prior to winter 1919-1920, the industrial heartland of Central Russia was cut off from the majority of the former Russian Empire. Regions such as the Caucasus, Siberia, Central Asia, and the Donbas that had supplied crucial resources such as coal, timber, cotton, and iron had ceased to provide inputs for Bolshevik production. The dearth of fuel and metals was especially harmful to war production. As Lincoln observed: "Russia's mills and factories faced the winter of 1919-1920 with only a tenth of the fuel they needed... With too few raw materials and too little fuel, iron production in 1920 fell to about a fortieth of the prewar figure. Steel stood at a sixtieth and copper production stopped altogether."<sup>81</sup>

At the beginning of 1920, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Siberia, and Ukraine were all well on their way to being absorbed into the Bolshevik polity. The new territories held desperately needed natural resources, but the Bolsheviks lacked the means to access them. This was in large part due to the disintegration of Russia's transportation grid, especially the railroads. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks inherited over 350,000 working freight cars and 15,000 functioning locomotives, along with a network of tracks that stretched over 30,000 miles. During the war the party proved of incapable of maintaining rail transport. Hundreds of thousands of freight cars and thousands of locomotives broke down. The historian William Rosenberg described the decline: "By the end of 1918 the amount of freight carried on these lines had fallen almost 70 percent. In August 1918,

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<sup>81</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, p. 373

only some 9,000 freight cars were loaded or unloaded. Eighteen months later, in January 1920, the figure had barely risen to 12,000.”<sup>82</sup>

Over the winter of 1919-1920, Trotsky reflected on the relationship between the worsening economic situation and the heightened prospects for domestic peace. At this point the Red Army was well on its way to reaching its peak enlistment of over five-and-a-half million soldiers, which was achieved by late 1920. An end to combat operations would mean a large number of these men would have to be demobilized, and could therefore be directed to the urgent task of rebuilding the economy. It also meant that the Bolsheviks would finally have an opportunity to transition to the militia system they had so long endorsed. For Trotsky the transition to a militia system and a gradual militarization of the economy were inseparable. He began to elaborate a plan for their realization.

Earlier proponents of a socialist militia had envisioned factories as the basis for a self-sufficient military unit. Men would train under arms alongside their fellow proletarians at their place of work. In the event of war, they would enter combat in units that were formed from their local production brigades. Trotsky took this thesis and turned it on its head. If the workers of a factory, mine, or lumber camp could provide the basis for a military unit, then, he argued, a military unit could just as easily provide the workforce for a factory, mine, or lumber camp. Economic decline stemmed from insufficient organization on the part of the state and from the unwillingness of large sectors of the population to cooperate in the building of socialism. His proposed solution

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<sup>82</sup> William G. Rosenberg, “The Social Background to Tsektran”, in Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History, ed. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Grigor Suny. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 363

was a state-directed mobilization of labor to fulfill the socialist economic plan. Trotsky described his vision in late 1919: “Socialist economy presupposes a general plan that embraces the [country’s] entire territory, with all its natural resources, means of production and live human powers... The continuity and completeness of the production process must be sustained and ensured by universal labor service, under which every able-bodied citizen, within certain age limits, is obliged to devote a certain part of his time to one branch or another of the production process.”<sup>83</sup>

Trotsky outlined his plan to transform of the economic and military spheres in a set of twenty-three theses on December 1919. He asserted that a central plan must be at the heart of a socialist economy, and that such a plan could only be implemented by militarizing the entire labor force. As part of this process, the “anarchy” of the market would be replaced by discipline and reason. Army discipline would be applied to economic life. In each locality, the mobilization of the labor force would be tied to the creation of a local militia. The War Commissariat would be responsible for directing the mobilization. While the mobilization was to occur gradually, Trotsky argued the process should begin as soon as possible. An initial plan could focus on militarizing workers in coal and iron mines, and in the country’s most important state factories.

Trotsky’s campaign for the militarization of labor received a major boost with the creation of the First Revolutionary Labor Army on 15 January 1920. The First Labor Army was created from the already existing Third Red Army after it had ceased combat operations in the Urals. The original proposal for the labor army came unsolicited from the leadership of the Third Army’s Revolutionary Military Council at the beginning of

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<sup>83</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Vol. III, p. 47

January. Benvenuti described the situation: “An example was set by the eastern front 3<sup>rd</sup> army, whose leaders resolved to proceed, at the beginning of January, with a radical conversion of their unit’s tasks.”<sup>84</sup> Bolshevik Party members on the unit’s Council were well aware of the party’s heightened interest in putting the armed forces to work to repair the nation’s economy. The leaders of the Third Army argued their location in the Urals presented them with a unique opportunity. The region was close to the relatively abundant West Siberian food stores that could sustain a prolonged military presence. Local factories had a need for disciplined workers, and skilled and semi-skilled workers currently serving in the Third Army could provide such a labor force. Even unskilled Third Army soldiers could be highly useful if they were dispatched to harvest local supplies of timber, ore, and coal.

Trotsky received the proposal and forwarded it to Lenin. Both men enthusiastically championed the idea at a Council of People’s Commissars on 13 January 1920. The initiative received the Council’s unanimous support; two days later the First Revolutionary Labor Army was born. Its creation was made official by an order from Trotsky that spelled out the Labor Army’s duties. The army was to remain at arms and be prepared to deploy for combat, if needed. The Labor Army’s primary functions were to requisition grain and gather scarce coal and lumber. Skilled laborers would be deployed to select factories to work alongside the local proletariat. The Labor Army would be controlled by the unit’s Revolutionary Military Council, which would also be expanded to include representatives of “the main economic institutions of the Soviet Republic.” The unit would in no way be answerable to local party organs--- a provision bound to

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<sup>84</sup> Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, p. 163

rankle regional authorities. The Labor Army would keep detailed records of resource inputs and production outputs, so that a clear picture of the unit's progress could be measured by central party authorities. Those soldiers temporarily acting as workers would still be subject to the Red Army's disciplinary policy. Failure to report to work would be considered an act of desertion and would be punished accordingly.

Trotsky and Lenin were so enthusiastic about the prospects for expanding on the Third Army's experiment that, two days later, they drafted plans to create similar forces in the Kuban, Ukraine, Kazan, and Petrograd. Their proposals were approved by the Politburo on 18 January 1920. Over the next two years, nine labor armies were formed from existing units of the Red Army. These units greatly expanded the influence of Trotsky and other military leaders over the Soviet economy. Supporters of the project credited the labor armies with extending "socialist" forms of production to marginal regions of the country. Labor armies were even credited with exceeding their civilian peers in productivity, although any accurate comparison between the two must take into account the superior food rations and living conditions of the soldiers. Trotsky praised the armies' superior output: "What is most comforting is the fact that the productivity of labor is regularly increasing, in step with the improvement in the way it is organized... wherever the experiment of using army units for labor tasks was carried out with any intelligence at all, the results showed that this method is unquestionably viable and correct."<sup>85</sup>

Despite initial support from an overwhelming majority of the Bolshevik Party's leaders, including Trotsky's personal nemeses Zinoviev and Stalin, the labor armies also

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<sup>85</sup> Trotsky How the Revolution Armed, Vol. III, p. 123



provoked strong opposition from a surprising cross-section of party members. Local party bosses were enraged to find that the soldiers were usurping control of economic enterprises formerly under their jurisdiction. Communists on the left decried what they saw as a power grab by the military at the expense of what little remained of the Revolution's democratic and egalitarian roots. No resistance was more portentous than that offered by representatives of the Central Council of Trade Unions. Union functionaries had initially supported the creation of the labor armies on the condition that the relations between the unions and the soldiers would be cooperative and collaborative in nature. The reality was much different. Red Army laborers acted without consulting the local trade unions. The growing disapproval of union members foreshadowed their future resistance to the militarization of labor.

Trotsky's commitment to transforming the economy received a further boost on 9 February 1920. En route to the Urals, where he was to conduct a personal inspection of the First Labor Army, his command train derailed. Despite his status as one of the most powerful men in the Soviet Republic, no one enquired as to his whereabouts for nearly twenty-four hours. Meanwhile his train lay buried under several feet of snow less than two miles from the nearest station. Local railway operators failed to notice the train was missing: local railway workers charged with signaling passing trains had deserted their posts. Trotsky was shocked by his personal experience of the collapsing rail system. He vented his fury publicly in several publications criticizing the lack of worker discipline. He pledged to overcome the problem by brute force: "Everything depends on transport. If transport perishes, the country perishes. But workers' and peasants' Russia does not want

to perish, and it will not perish. It will condemn all those to perish who are hindering its escape from the clutches of want and hunger.”<sup>86</sup>

The 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, which met from 29 March to 5 April 1920, presented Trotsky with an opportunity to advance his remedies for the Soviet economy. Trotsky presented a report on the economic situation, “On the Immediate Tasks of Economic Construction”, as well as the key-note address on the party’s military policy. Trotsky’s emergence as a leading voice for both economic and military policy did not diminish the number of detractors, many of whom felt threatened by what they saw as his disproportionate share of political power. His report on the economy was copied verbatim from an earlier set of thirty-one theses which he had presented to the Central Committee on 4 February 1920. In the wake of this presentation, the Central Committee appointed him to deliver the report on the economy at the upcoming Congress.

In many respects, the thirty-one theses of 1920 resembled the twenty-three theses on militarizing labor from 16 December 1919. The new document called on the party to apply the experience gained from the construction of the Red Army to questions of labor. This could be done by directly transferring military methods into the workplace. The report stated: “Inasmuch as the army possesses the greatest amount of experience of mass Soviet organization of this type, its methods and procedures must (with all necessary modifications) be transferred to the sphere of labor organization, with direct utilization of the experience of those workers who have been moved from military to economic work.”<sup>87</sup> All factory work was to be based on a national plan for the economy approved by the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Military discipline would be applied to

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<sup>86</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Vol. III, p. 77

<sup>87</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Vol. III, p. 69

the workforce, so that absenteeism and low productivity could be met with the strictest punishments. Labor service was to become a duty for all Soviet citizens capable of working. A military-style campaign to “conscript” the peasantry for labor outside of agriculture would be conducted: peasants and unemployed workers would be compelled to fell timber, to mine coal and iron, to transport goods, and generally to aid in the performance of tasks considered useful by the party. Skilled laborers would be conscripted for service in the nation’s factories in a campaign directed under the joint auspices of the War Commissariat and the Central Council of Trade Unions. Unions would see their role in crafting economic policy and advocating for the rights of workers replaced, as unions themselves were to be transformed into organs of state power. Strikes were to be made illegal and treated as revolts against the state. Lastly, the theses formally endorsed the creation of the labor armies and called for continuing the transformation of Red Army units into militarized production brigades. Following the lead of the Central Committee, the Congress endorsed Trotsky’s report.

Three groups in the party emerged to oppose Trotsky’s proposals: the Bolshevik right, the “democratic centralists”, and the trade union bureaucracy. Members on the right of the party’s political spectrum thought Trotsky’s emphasis on compulsory labor would reduce economic productivity. The leading spokesman for this group was the Chairman of the Supreme Council of National Economy, Alexei Rykov. Trotsky attacked Rykov’s claims by arguing that compulsion is necessary for the construction of a socialist economy. Trotsky contended that people are naturally lazy and will work only if compelled to by some outside force. Since the labor market no longer existed, the Bolshevik state would have to provide an alternative: namely, a “rational, scientific” plan

for the economy. He even asserted that workers would embrace compulsion, because they shared the goal of building socialism. Vladimir Brovkin described Trotsky's logic as follows: "Since the state was a workers' and socialist state, its compulsion of the workers should not be feared, because in the end it had the workers' best interests in mind."<sup>88</sup>

A larger group of opponents, known as the "democratic centralists," drew support from the trade unions to attack the resolution on broader grounds. The leading spokesmen for this group were Timofei Sapronov and Nikolai Osinsky. The democratic centralists labeled Trotsky a modern day "Arakcheev." They considered his demands for the militarization of labor to be a twentieth-century redux of the brutal nineteenth-century military settlements sponsored by Arakcheev. By restricting the movement of workers and subjecting them to military discipline, the Soviet regime would be enserfing its own citizens. Osinsky argued that the consequences of this militarization would also have a deleterious effect on the party. Internal party democracy could not survive in a state where all aspects of life were governed by military methods. Sapronov went a step further and argued that militarization would replace the dictatorship of the proletariat with a dictatorship of the bureaucrats. Brovkin reformulated this argument: "If socialism, he argued, actually meant the dictatorship of appointed bureaucrats who fulfill orders, why then all this talk about the dictatorship of the proletariat, which supposedly exists; why then all this talk about workers' self-organization and independent activity?"<sup>89</sup>

The democratic centralists received support from members of the trade unions. Union members supported many points of Trotsky's report, including a national plan for

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<sup>88</sup> Vladimir Brovkin, Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918-1922 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 273

<sup>89</sup> Brovkin, Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War, p. 275

the economy and the mobilization of the peasantry, but they objected to the proposed transformation of the trade unions' responsibilities and to proposed limitations on the rights of workers. Prior to the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress, union officials had enjoyed key posts in economic institutions and had played an important role in drafting economic policy. Union officials had also been responsible for mediating conflicts in the workplace, and had considered themselves effective advocates for the interests of the proletariat. Under Trotsky's plan, their main function would be to enforce the mobilization of the proletariat on military lines. Since strikes were to be made illegal and the unions would no longer be able to mediate on behalf of workers, the proletariat's well-being would decline.

Trotsky attacked these critics with special force: he labeled them "Menshevik-SR traitors." He equated their attack on compulsory labor with an attack on socialism itself. If the state was not allowed to direct the economy by compelling workers to provide their labor power, the only alternative was some form of market organization. Trotsky stated: "After recognizing that we are on the road to socialism, the Mensheviks hurl themselves with all the greater ferocity upon those methods without which, in the harsh and difficult conditions of the present time, the transition to socialism cannot be accomplished."<sup>90</sup> Without directly addressing the merits of their argument, Trotsky attempted to tar his opponents as counter-revolutionaries. His equating of the democratic centralists' position with a betrayal of the party was portentous of the manner in which inner-party dissent would soon be handled.

Trotsky was also responsible for delivering the party's report on current military policy. He confidently predicted the imminent defeat of internal opposition, and with it

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<sup>90</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Vol. III, p. 105

an end to the civil war. He argued that an end to the war must be met with a change in the party's approach to military affairs. In a complete reversal of his position at the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress, he now called on the party to approve the transition to a militia-based army. He claimed that his new stance was really just the logical extension of his earlier posture, which had called for adopting a militia once the threat of military defeat had passed. The remnants of Denikin's army in the Crimea were all that remained of last year's powerful White armies. Peace was at hand, and now the transformation of Soviet military forces could finally begin. He linked the future militia to the militarization of labor. As workers were mobilized in a military fashion to rebuild the economy, they would simultaneously receive training to bear arms. After finishing their military training, they would formally constitute a militia unit based in their place of work. Benvenuti described the change: "Now that the mobilization of labor was to provide the workforce with military discipline and training, it was plain to see that the conscript workers' units constituted a territorially based levy."<sup>91</sup> Trotsky's plan would also retain the best units of the Red Army in a much smaller standard army operating alongside the territorial militias. In reality, Trotsky's proposal was a hybrid of the current system and of an exclusively militia-based army. The Congress overwhelmingly passed a resolution advanced by Trotsky calling for the creation of a mixed force. This transition to a new type of army was contingent upon an end to large-scale military operations, and would not begin in earnest till the last of the White armies had been completely annihilated.

Not everyone in the party was content with the partial transition envisioned in Trotsky's resolution. Nikolai Podvoisky, the head of the Universal Military Training

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<sup>91</sup> Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, p. 169

Administration (*Vsevobuch*), sought to transform his insignificant auxiliary training department into the pillar of a militia-based force. The resolution passed at the Congress had called for a transition to a mixed army after the end of hostilities, but Podvoisky pressed for an immediate and total transformation of the Red Army. He drew attention to the fact that all prior party resolutions had described the standing army as a temporary measure to be maintained for the duration of the civil war. The lack of effective resistance by the Bolsheviks' enemies meant the civil war was no longer a sufficient reason to delay reform. Podvoisky made his case for a total shift to a militia-based system on both pragmatic and ideological grounds. The costs of maintaining a standing army that was now close to five-million strong put a great deal of stress on an economy that was already close to the breaking point. If the party wanted to dedicate itself to rebuilding the productive forces of society, it would have to divert resources away from the military. Von Hagen restated Podvoisky's case: "On purely practical grounds, he argued that the economic devastation of the country made the demobilization, or at least partial demobilization, of the army imperative: the nation simply could not afford to support a vast military machine."<sup>92</sup> Podvoisky argued that a transition to an army composed entirely of militia units would allow soldiers to act simultaneously as productive workers. To bolster his claims, he pointed to the arguments of none other than Trotsky concerning the militia's role in the militarization of labor. Podvoisky described the militia as a force capable of fighting for the Soviet state, and capable as well of rebuilding the economy. The cost of maintaining the militia would be a fraction of the cost of fielding a massive regular army. Opponents of the militia system parried Podvoisky's case by pointing to the

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<sup>92</sup> Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 119

ongoing nature of hostilities. These opponents successfully argued that, until the last of the Whites had been defeated, it would be foolish to implement any changes as extreme as those advocated by Podvoisky. At least some units organized in a “regular” fashion were the best guarantee of a swift military victory. In the end, even Podvoisky went along with the Congress’ official resolution on hostilities. Radical reform would have to wait. Podvoisky temporarily conceded his point, but remained as committed as ever to the idea of a universal militia. He renewed his push at the first available opportunity.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Congress allowed Trotsky to emerge as a leading light on transportation issues. Transport was crucial to the economy and the Red Army; its near total collapse had severely impaired both. The party had long ago confirmed Trotsky as the leading authority on military policy, but now it had begun to adopt Trotsky’s prescriptions for the economy by entrusting him with the task of restoring the transport system. In early March 1920 the Central Committee appointed Trotsky Commissar for Transport. He quickly drew up a program that would overhaul the nation’s rail system. Prior to Trotsky’s appointment, the transport system had been administered by twenty-eight regional bureaucracies. His plan called for replacing this system with a central administration run from Moscow. The entire rail network was to be subjected to military discipline. Strikes were to be immediately declared illegal, and absenteeism would be punished as desertion. One-man rule (*edinolichnost’*), in which a single local official would be held personally responsible for the performance of his production unit, was to be implemented. This official would also have sole command of those under him, putting an end to collegial forms of administration. Last but not least, the railroad union (*Tsekprofsoiuz*) was to be radically reorganized. The union would give up its function as an advocate for railway-



men. Now its sole charge would be to act as an organ of the state in charge of railroad administration, with local union officials acting the part of managers.

At the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress, Trotsky's outline for a new transport policy was enthusiastically endorsed, and his new position in the Commissariat of Transport was confirmed. The move to establish the transport union as an administrative organ of the state was in keeping with a larger redefinition of the role of the unions endorsed at the Congress. The trade unions were to represent the party and build support for its policies. Trotsky anticipated that his vision for the transport system would be resisted by the railway workers. He called on the Congress to endorse his proposal to use the party organization in the Commissariat of Transport, the *Glavpolitput*, as an instrument to insure his directives were carried out. Officials of *Glavpolitput* would be tasked with traveling the country and personally implementing the railway reform. Workers and bureaucrats who attempted to obstruct the reorganization of transport would be arrested. The party endorsed this proposal, as well as the rest of Trotsky's reforms. The transportation sector was now firmly under his control. His dedication to fixing transportation was apparent, but his methods promised conflict with those already working in transport. Rosenberg outlined the problem: "Trotsky approached his new post not only with the energy and disposition he showed in building the Red Army and the determination to apply military methods to transport, but also with an evident prejudice against railroad workers generally, whom he regarded as untrustworthy and backward."<sup>93</sup>

The 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress marked the peak of Trotsky's political power. He commanded both the transport sector and the military. He was also a leading authority in

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<sup>93</sup> Rosenberg, "The Social Background to Tsektran", p. 352.

formulating the state's economic program. Trotsky was second only to Lenin in the power that he exercised over the direction of the Soviet state. His plans for the economy, military, and the railways had all been approved by the party and were now government policy. Despite his numerous victories, however, Trotsky had elicited the jealousies of less powerful party members who might otherwise have agreed with his proposals. What is more, a growing number of left-wing Bolsheviks saw Trotsky's ideals as a betrayal of the principles of the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks had seized power while advocating worker control of the state and attacking the militarization of Russian society. Trotsky's opponents on the left argued that he was now enforcing government control of the workers in a state that more closely resembled a regular army than a proletarian democracy. The Bolsheviks had justified many of their authoritarian policies as temporary measures introduced to win the war. With the conflict winding down, more and more party members began to call for an end to these unpopular policies.

Hopes for an imminent return to peace proved short-lived. Growing tensions on the Soviet state's western borders would soon boil over into full-scale warfare. The end of the First World War had brought with it the birth of over half a dozen new states in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Republic of Poland. The new Polish state was created from territory that had previously belonged to the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. It drew on the memory of a Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that had once stretched from the Baltic to the Black Seas. The Commonwealth had suffered a number of military defeats in the early modern era that culminated at the end of the eighteenth century with its partition among the three aforementioned empires. The Polish Republic's new leader and commander-in-chief, Jozef Pilsudski had been born in the

Commonwealth's old capital of Wilno, a city that in 1918 was located on the disputed borders of Lithuania, Poland and Soviet Russia. Pilsudski dreamed of reviving the old Commonwealth in the form of a Polish-dominated federation of states that would encompass most of the former Russian Empire's eastern borderlands. His territorial ambitions almost immediately brought the Polish Republic into conflict with the nascent Soviet state. As the historian Norman Davies noted: "Pilsudski argued that Poland, as the strongest state, had a duty to guarantee the conditions of self-determination for all the nations in the area. Needless to say, they took no account of the plans and aspirations existing in Moscow."<sup>94</sup>

The first battles between Poles and Bolsheviks occurred in early 1919. Minor skirmishes were followed by a Polish offensive beginning in March that culminated in Pilsudski's personal supervision of a successful assault on Wilno in April. The Polish advance continued at a much slower pace throughout the summer, virtually halting after the capture of Minsk on 8 August 1919. Throughout 1919 the Red Army had been too busy fighting internal enemies to devote much attention to the Polish threat. Despite their temporary advantage, the Poles were prevented from capitalizing on the situation by their own weaknesses. The Polish Republic was less than a year old; it was attempting to engage in combat operations while the administrative structure of the state was still under construction. Organizational problems were compounded by a lack of military supplies and political infighting. Davies described the reigning disorder: "Units with French rifles were issued with German ammunition; Austrian officers resented serving under Tsarist colleagues whom they had 'defeated'; Poznanian units disliked serving in the east when

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<sup>94</sup> Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-20* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), p. 30

Poznan was still threatened by the Germans in the west.”<sup>95</sup> When the Bolshevik state seemed to be on the verge of collapse in October 1919, Pilsudski refused to assist in delivering a death blow to the Reds by coordinating attacks with the White forces. After the Whites had been defeated, Poland was then left to face the Bolsheviks largely on its own. At the beginning of 1920, Pilsudski began to hatch a plan for a decisive Polish victory on its eastern borders.

In early 1919 the Red Army had attempted to parry the Polish attacks with little success. In summer and fall 1919 the growing threat of defeat in the civil war had led the Bolsheviks cautiously to explore the prospects for peace with Poland. Leading Bolsheviks, including Trotsky, believed that peace in the west would help the Red Army’s prospects for victory over its internal enemies. In July 1919, Julian Marchlewski, a Polish communist, was dispatched to negotiate with the Poles towards this end. Negotiations proved futile, so Marchlewski returned to Moscow empty-handed on 30 July 1919. The Bolshevik Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Grigory Chicherin, addressed repeated peace offers to the Poles throughout the fall of 1919, without success. When Pilsudski refused to join Denikin’s push towards Moscow in October, the prospects for peace seemed brighter. On 3 November 1919 Pilsudski offered the Bolsheviks ceasefire terms that would preserve Polish gains in the west. Trotsky lobbied the Central Committee to accept the terms, but the negotiations halted when Lenin criticized the Poles for their continued support of the Ukrainian nationalist Simon Petliura. By January 1920, it was clear peace could not be negotiated, so Trotsky reversed his position as

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<sup>95</sup> Davies, White Eagle, Red Star, p. 43

advocate for peace with Poland. On 10 March 1920 he signed off on a plan that would deploy nearly 200,000 Red Army soldiers on the western border by the end of April.

The deployment never had a chance to come to fruition. Pilsudski realized that Poland's chances for victory would be slim, if the Bolsheviks were given the opportunity to deploy the full strength of the Red Army against them. To prevent it, Pilsudski gambled on a pre-emptive attack. Polish troops invaded Ukraine, followed by Ukrainian forces of Simon Petliura. It was hoped that the Ukrainian population would rally to the support of Petliura's puppet government and would help the Poles to drive out the Bolsheviks. After the Red Army had been driven from Ukraine, the Poles would capitalize on their strategic advantage to sue for peace. Poland would then be largely protected from the Soviets by a new buffer state, and Pilsudski's dream of an Eastern European federation would be one step closer to reality. The Polish Army began to mobilize for the planned offensive in early spring 1920. The offensive was to begin in earnest no later than the first week of May.

On 5 March 1920 the Polish Army launched a successful but limited offensive around Mozyr that effectively separated the Red Army units operating on the north and south of the western front. The northern group would not be able to come to the defense of Soviet forces in Ukraine without breaking through the Polish forces deployed in their way. The Poles spent the rest of March and most of April reinforcing their positions around the border with Ukraine. On 24 April the Polish forces struck. Four Polish army groups with over 52,000 men stormed from the west and northwest across the lightly defended border. Soviet forces on the Polish border of the Southwestern Front numbered somewhere between 12,000 to 28,000 soldiers capable of bearing arms (the numbers are

disputed). Regardless, the Poles held at least a 2-to-1 advantage over their foes, so the Polish forces advanced rapidly. Within two weeks they had occupied Kiev with only minimal losses. Still, ominously, the Twelfth and Fourteenth Red Armies had retreated largely intact, and the Poles had yet to score a decisive victory in any major battle. Davies highlighted the initial results of the Polish invasion: “From the Polish point of view the results were only moderately encouraging. They had gained an enormous tract of territory; but had failed to trap the enemy.”<sup>96</sup>

This failure to trap the Bolshevik units did not bode well for the Polish Army. Even worse, the local population had greeted the invading Poles and their Ukrainian puppet government with indifference or outright hostility. A combination of the widespread fear that a Polish victory would put an end to land reform and of anti-Polish Ukrainian nationalism led even militant anti-Bolsheviks to look on the Polish occupation with disfavor. When the Bolsheviks began successfully to push back against the Poles, the local population did nothing to stop the Red Army. Even before the Polish invasion, the Red Army had been steadily redeploying its forces to the borderlands. On 23 April Budyonnyi’s First Cavalry Army embarked from Rostov for Ukraine. In spite of previous reversals, the Red Army had mustered three army groups and two special task forces on the Southwestern Front by the second week of May. On 12 May 1920 the Polish invasion sputtered to a halt on the eastern outskirts of Kiev. From here on out, the Red Army would take the offensive.

On 27 May units of the First Red Cavalry began to reconnoiter Polish positions southeast of Kiev. On 31 May they launched a major assault on Polish positions all down

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<sup>96</sup> Davies, White Eagle, Red Star, p. 109

the line. After six days of heavy fighting, the First Cavalry scored a decisive breakthrough into the rear of the Polish forces; the Polish Third Army was now encircled. The rest of the Red Army units on the Southwestern Front now went over to the offensive. Davies described the decisive results of the Bolsheviks' victory: "The breakthrough of 5 June started a general advance of the Soviet forces in the south which continued unchecked for the next ten weeks."<sup>97</sup> On 10 June 1920 Kiev was retaken. Barely a month after the start of the Polish invasion, the Red Army had driven the Poles back onto Polish territory. The campaign ended in disaster for the Poles both politically and militarily. The Polish invasion had galvanized large sections of the local population to support the Bolshevik regime in a manner previously unseen during the civil war. Labor activists throughout Europe had mobilized workers to halt shipments of weapons and supplies to "the Polish aggressor." The government of the United Kingdom had condemned the invasion and had refused the Poles critical aid. In the military sphere, Poland was now threatened with invasion from two directions in both the north and the south.

In early July 1920, Russian society and the party were united in their desire to punish the Polish aggressor. Leading Bolsheviks publicly called for "liberating" Warsaw from the "lordly Polish aggressors." In a move that caught many of his fellow party members off guard, Trotsky found himself advocating peace. In summer 1920, the Bolsheviks were immersed in negotiations to reopen trade with the West that could potentially provide the Soviet state with critical supplies of machine parts, manufactured goods, and other scarce commodities. The invasion of Polish territory easily put an end to

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<sup>97</sup> Davies, White Eagle, Red Star, p. 126

all that. Trotsky worried about the prospects for any Bolshevik “liberation” of Poland. Several leading Bolsheviks, including Feliks Dzerzhinsky, were of Polish extraction. These same men now warned the Politburo that any invasion would be met with a surge in nationalist sentiment similar to what had occurred in Soviet Russia following the Polish occupation of the Ukraine. Trotsky took this warning seriously. He argued that the combined threat of Britain’s diplomatic reprisals and Polish resistance did not merit further prosecution of the war. He responded enthusiastically when the British offered their services as mediators. Deutscher described Trotsky’s actions: “On the same day, July 13, Trotsky replied in two messages, urging the Politburo and Chicherin to accept British mediation between Russia and Poland, and to aim at an armistice which would lead to peace with the Entente as well as with Poland.”<sup>98</sup>

Trotsky’s proposal was rebuffed. The Politburo was well aware of the Bolsheviks’ military advantage over the Poles and was anxious to press forward. Lenin held out hope that a victory in Poland might be the crucial spark to touch off revolution in the west. For Lenin, Poland was a bridge for exporting upheaval to Germany and to the more advanced nations of Europe. Trotsky resigned himself to working towards a military victory despite his misgivings about party military strategy. He called for a total commitment that would mobilize all the resources of the Soviet state. Trotsky declared: “The fight will be a fight to the death, it will be an extremely intense and severe one... It follows from all this that we must see the war with Poland not as a partial task for the Western front, but as the central task for all workers’ and peasants’ Russia.”<sup>99</sup> To ensure victory Trotsky presided over the assembly of the largest concentration of Soviet forces put together in the civil

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<sup>98</sup> Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, p. 463

<sup>99</sup> Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed, Volume III*, p. 132



war period. Under the leadership of Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a strike force of 190,000 soldiers was assembled on the Western Front to the north of Ukraine. By early July five separate army groups had been placed under Tukhachevsky's command. Soviet forces enjoyed a numerical superiority over their Polish opponents by some 50,000 men.

Events on the Southwestern Front prevented the Bolsheviks from fully committing to an attack from two fronts. On 6 June 1920 the remnants of Denikin's Volunteer Army had launched a surprise attack aimed at Red Army forces on the Crimean peninsula. These survivors were rallied by their new commander, Baron Pyotr Wrangel. Wrangel was a towering figure with sound strategic sense who inspired his followers' respect and devotion. After barely a month in charge, Wrangel had brought the Volunteers back from the brink of collapse and restored their fighting spirit. Their surprise attack at the beginning of June caught the Bolsheviks by off guard. In a matter of days they broke through the Red Army's strong fortifications, and for nearly a month after the Whites proved unbeatable in battle. By the beginning of July, they had reconquered the whole of the Crimea and reached the banks of the Don. Wrangel began to lay plans for a seaborne invasion of the Kuban. As the Bolsheviks prepared to invade Poland, they were forced to divert crucial reserves away from the Southwestern Front to contain Wrangel in the Crimea. The brunt of the Soviet attack on Poland would have to be borne by Tukhachevsky's armies alone. Lincoln detailed the situation: "Wrangel's forces now posed a serious danger to Russia's grain, coal, and oil supplies. By the beginning of July, the Bolsheviks knew that they had to take the reborn White Army seriously."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, p. 436

Despite the setbacks in the Southwest, the Bolshevik High Command decided to press on with the attack. On 4 July 1920 Tukhachevsky's men crossed the Berezina river, beginning the invasion of Poland. For three days a fierce battle raged, but on 7 July Polish resistance crumbled. Ghaia Dmitrievich Ghai and his Third Cavalry Army (*Kavkor*) wreaked havoc on the enemy's rear. The Poles were forced to retreat across the entire Western front in what threatened to turn into a rout. The advance of the Red Army proved unstoppable. Over the next three weeks the Polish Army suffered defeat after defeat. By early August, Tukhachevsky was within striking distance of Warsaw. On the Southwestern Front the Bolsheviks had also gone over to the offensive and had been initially successful in driving the Poles back to the gates of Lvov. If all had gone according to plan, the Southwestern Front would have continued its advance and linked up with its comrades to the North in a two-pronged assault on Warsaw. Unfortunately for Trotsky and the Red Army, the Poles in the Southwest managed to halt the Bolsheviks at Lvov.

By this point, Tukhachevsky had lost his advantage in manpower; the Polish forces at Warsaw outnumbered the Red Army by 40,000 men--- 156,000 soldiers compared to Tukhachevsky's 116,000. Tukhachevsky's men, exhausted from three weeks of virtually uninterrupted success, suffered from overextended supply lines. What is more, the Poles were dug in and enjoyed a tremendous lift in morale. The entire country stood behind the Polish Army, in what every Pole believed was a fight for their very survival as a nation. Tukhachevsky was in desperate need of assistance from the forces on the Southwestern Front if he was to succeed in conquering Warsaw. On August 13 1920 Trotsky and Sergey Kamenev issued orders to the Twelfth Army and to the First

Cavalry Army of the Southwestern Front to make all haste towards Warsaw, just two days before Tukhachevsky was to mount his attack.

The assault on Warsaw commenced on 15 August. After a few isolated victories, Tukhachevsky's forces were stopped. Two days later, Pilsudski initiated a counterattack on Tukhachevsky's exposed left flank. By 18 August it was clear that the Bolsheviks' prospects for victory were nonexistent: the five army groups participating in the attack would be lucky to escape fully intact. Tukhachevsky hoped in vain for some assistance from the Southwest. The First Cavalry did not even attempt to move on Warsaw till 20 August, two days into the disastrous rout of Tukhachevsky's forces. Tukhachevsky and Trotsky both were quick to suspect foul play. Stalin was the chief political officer of the Southwestern Front, and many of the force's leaders (including Budyonnyi himself) were members of what was derisively referred to as the "Tsaritsyn clique." These men were politically loyal to Stalin. Early in the campaign, Stalin had objected to the primacy of Tukhachevsky's force. It certainly did not help matters that Tukhachevsky was perceived as a close associate of Trotsky. When the Southwestern Front was slow in coming to Tukhachevsky's assistance, Trotsky accused Stalin of insubordination. Budyonnyi argued that the orders had not been clearly articulated and that his forces had been too deeply engaged at Lvov to respond quickly. Davies stated: "According to Trotsky, Stalin could neither bear to watch Tukhachevsky's triumph at Warsaw, nor to be overshadowed by Tukhachevsky's political officer."<sup>101</sup>

The question of who was to blame for the Warsaw debacle remained in dispute, but the results of the battle were very clear. Tukhachevsky's defeat at Warsaw was an

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<sup>101</sup> Davies, White Eagle, Red Star, p. 211

irreversible setback for the Red Army. Two of five army groups were completely annihilated. The men of the Western Front were forced to retreat as quickly as they had advanced. Throughout the end of August and during the entirety of September, Tukhachevsky's men fled without fielding a successful defense. Trotsky lobbied hard for the Politburo to make peace with the Poles. Now was the time to concentrate on destroying Wrangel, so that an end to the civil war could be reached before winter. The gravest threat to Soviet security was the collapse of the economy, and only peace would allow the Bolsheviks to rebuild. Trotsky publicly declared his position at the end of September: "We are defending ourselves and fighting for peace. Where the slightest possibility exists for us to do this, we strive to safeguard peace for the working people at the price not of blood but of concessions."<sup>102</sup> At the beginning of October, even Lenin realized the costs of the Polish war were no longer worth it, so the Politburo sued for peace. On 12 October 1920 an armistice with Poland was signed; the agreement largely preserved the Soviet-Polish borders as they had stood in spring 1920. The Red Army's first foray into foreign war had ended in stalemate.

Now the full weight of the Red Army would be brought to bear on the meager forces of Wrangel's Volunteers. Wrangel knew the situation was hopeless. A failed invasion of the Kuban in early October had cost his men dearly; the White commander realized the best he could hope for now was an orderly evacuation of the Crimea. At the end of October 1920, Mikhail Frunze was entrusted with the command of five Red Army groups in what was to be the final major campaign of the civil war. Wrangel deployed his men on the strongly fortified positions of the Perekop, while he organized a fleet of ships

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<sup>102</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume III, p. 240

to evacuate all who could escape. 7 November 1920, the third anniversary of the October Revolution, marked the beginning of the Bolshevik offensive. The forces of the Red Army outnumbered the last White forces by 190,000 troops to just 26,000 Volunteers. Wrangel's men fought a courageous holding action, but all that his men could hope for was to delay the Bolshevik advance. In this sense, Wrangel's gambit was successful. A handful of courageous men fought valiantly for nine days, while most of their comrades escaped by sea. Lincoln noted the final outcome: "On the afternoon of 16 November, 1920 the last of the Whites--- 145, 693 men, women, and children--- were aboard 126 ships en route to Constantinople."<sup>103</sup>

After three years of continuous warfare, Trotsky and the Red Army celebrated what nearly all believed would be the end of civil war. Still, the economy was in ruins, hundreds of thousands of citizens were starving, and large sections of Russian society remained openly hostile to Bolshevik power. The coming months would provide a crucial test of the Bolshevik's ability to maintain their rule. The anxious populace waited to see if peace would bring the socialist utopia the Bolsheviks had so earnestly promised. Trotsky and those around him in the Soviet elite understood the importance of delivering on past promises, but the means to build socialism were fiercely disputed. Trotsky argued that the experience of constructing the Red Army illuminated the path forward. Egalitarian slogans and utopian promises from before the Revolution would have to be abandoned, and the party would have to face difficult realities. To build socialism in a backwards country would require tremendous sacrifice from the people and a number of ideological compromises by the party.

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<sup>103</sup> Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, p. 449

For many Bolsheviks on the left these sacrifices proved too much to ask. War had justified unsavory measures, but peace meant the time for accommodation was over. These men and women passionately objected to nearly all of Trotsky's positions: a strong party, a mixed military force, the militarization of labor, and the subordination of the trade unions to the party. Instead they advocated democratic processes (for socialists and those of the proper class background) and worker control, ideals they believed had been central to Bolshevik ideology before the Revolution. Even more ominously, a growing number of Bolsheviks and communist sympathizers in the armed forces were beginning to express their dissatisfaction with government policy. Soldiers being demobilized from the Red Army took up arms in the countryside to fend off grain-requisitioning squads. Sailors and soldiers from working-class backgrounds called for a return to soviet power outside of Bolshevik control in the cities. By late 1920 it was becoming clear that some sort of political confrontation between the regime and its critics was inevitable. The gulf between Bolshevik rhetoric and the harsh reality of life in the Soviet state was just too great to ignore. Trotsky was a leading advocate of many reviled practices. Still, he was not without optimism. At the end of 1920 he declared: "Yes, our country is poor, our workers' and peasants' country is exhausted, but it has the will to fight, to defend its future, the free family of workers and peasants which will arise and will raise up our economy, which will make this Moscow and our whole country rich, happy, educated, and proud that it has shown to all the peoples the road to real freedom and real brotherhood."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Volume III, p. 387

Conclusion: Victory or Retreat?

*“The opinion is widespread that the army has completed its historical task and can be relegated to the archives. There is a widespread urge to leave the army. A communist considers that he became a soldier, a commissar or a commander only because that was what was required at the given moment, but what he wants to do now is to build, to develop a cultured workers’ state. I should like to give warning that this view of the army as something secondary contains a very dangerous element.” - Lev Trotsky, December 1920<sup>105</sup>*

The decisive defeat of Wrangel’s forces by November 1920 marked the end of meaningful White opposition in the Russian Civil War. Large parts of Siberia and even parts of Southern Russia had yet to be fully integrated into the nascent Soviet state, but all serious military threats had been defeated. Those forces which still opposed the Bolsheviks by force of arms were more bandits than regular armies in their internal character. The changing situation left Trotsky in an awkward position. Pressure was growing in the Bolshevik Party to relegate the Red Army to a position of secondary importance. The questions on the tips of many party members’ tongues were how to demobilize the army as quickly as possible and how to reduce the costs of sustaining men

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<sup>105</sup> Leon Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky (London: New York: New Park Publications, 1979-1981), 5 volumes, Volume IV: The Years 1921-1923, p. 11

under arms. At the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Conference in September 1920, party members directly attacked the Red Army. Von Hagen detailed the outcry: “Delegates complained that the constant campaigns to aid the army drained them of resources and that military officials had no sympathy for their difficulties.”<sup>106</sup> Trotsky conceded that it was important to reduce the expense of maintaining the army, but worried the demobilization might undermine the Bolsheviks’ defense capabilities. He publicly called for a demobilization schedule that would reduce the Red Army’s current peak of five-million soldiers by half as early as spring 1921. Still, he cautioned that the Soviet state was not free of danger, and said it was therefore foolish to question the Red Army’s relevance.

This did not prevent Trotsky from dedicating a growing amount of his time to concerns outside of military affairs. He spent much of his energy in the late 1920 and early 1921 applying the lessons learned in building the Red Army to the economic sphere. In August 1920 he had pointed to delays in military transport headed for Red Army units fighting in Poland as a justification for removing the entire leadership of the railroad union. In their place, Trotsky established *Tsektran*, a military-like command structure (with himself at the head) that was responsible for all rail and water transport in the Soviet state. He had already been acting as Commissar for Transport, but his move to establish *Tsektran* put him in more direct control of day-to-day operations of the transport system.

He claimed the expansion of the methods of the Red Army into transportation was necessary for efficiency’s sake, but a widespread backlash soon made itself felt. His political opponents accused him of trying unilaterally to assume operational control of

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<sup>106</sup> Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, p. 123



another key aspect of the Soviet state. No one was angrier than officials from the unions. Daniels described the uproar: “At this stage in the evolution of Soviet Communism, such a regime could not escape bitter criticism for its excesses of bureaucratic centralism. The criticism was inspired in large measure by principle, especially on the far left.”<sup>107</sup> Rather than retreat, Trotsky brazenly called on the Bolshevik Party to apply his tactics to wider and wider areas of the economy. He was setting himself up for a political showdown at the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

Opposition to military-style control of the economy was not limited to party members. Growing numbers of Soviet civilians, including men recently demobilized from the army, were violently protesting repressive policies in the economic sphere. Strikes in the industrial sector were breaking out at an alarming frequency. Brovkin recorded the rise in strikes: “According to official statistics of the Commissariat of Labor, during the first six months of 1920 there were strikes in 77 percent of the medium- and large-size enterprises of Russia.”<sup>108</sup> Opposition was even fiercer in the countryside. In late 1920 a series of revolts broke out in which tens of thousands of peasants took up arms against the Bolsheviks. Fighting was especially fierce in and around Tambov. There the party was forced to send in Tukhachevsky and several divisions from the Red Army to put down the rebels. Pacification of the local population was so difficult, the Bolsheviks abandoned all semblance of restraint. Brovkin recorded their conduct: “There was a declaration of war on the entire population. The collection of ‘indemnity’ or the seizure of ‘bandit family members’ mean in practice the freedom to loot and rape.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution, p. 125

<sup>108</sup> Brovkin, Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War, p. 288

<sup>109</sup> Brovkin, Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War, p. 371

The Tambov rebellion was crushed in spring 1921, but only at the cost of tens of thousands of Bolshevik casualties. The party forfeited any popular support it once had in the area.

Clearly, Bolshevik policies would have to change if the government was to prevent a return to the epic violence of the civil war, but Trotsky stubbornly clung to the coercive economic policies, at least for the time being. Any illusions Trotsky or the party as a whole might have had about their popularity vanished at Kronstadt. The naval base at Kronstadt had been a hotbed of radical politics and a bastion of Bolshevik support since before the October Revolution. At the beginning of the civil war period, Kronstadt sailors had been dispatched to fight the Bolsheviks' internal enemies. Much had changed since the beginning of the Civil War. Bolshevik policies had grown more repressive but the promised socialist utopia had failed to arise. In 1921, life was much worse for the sailors of Kronstadt and the working class radicals with whom they affiliated than it had been before the October Revolution. The men of Kronstadt began to suspect they had been duped. According to these men, the Revolution had brought to power not the working-classes, but the intellectuals. In their view, the Soviet state was a dictatorship of the bureaucracy, not of the proletariat.

The sailors' growing dissatisfaction with the Bolsheviks erupted in early March 1921. Repression of striking workers in nearby Petrograd in late February had led to a series of meetings amongst the sailors that culminated in the arrest of the leading Bolshevik functionaries of Kronstadt on 2 March, 1921. The Moscow government issued an ultimatum calling on the sailors to back down, but the sailors had had enough. They proclaimed themselves in rebellion against the Soviet state and called on the people to

rise up in a “third revolution” to overthrow the Bolshevik government. According to the leaders of the Kronstadt garrison, the Bolsheviks had betrayed the Revolution and also the interests of the working classes. The historian Israel Getzler summarized the sailors’ pronouncements: “Then with utter disregard of ‘reason and the will of the toilers’, they who had promised a ‘free kingdom of toil’ and a ‘shining domain of socialism’ instead created a ‘bureaucratic socialism of slaves’... With ‘bureaucratic trade unions’ which ‘fettered workers to their benches’ and turned labor into a ‘new slavery, rather than a joy.’”<sup>110</sup> The Kronstadt sailors had gone from being loyal supporters of the Bolsheviks to fervent mutineers. They were attacking the party for betraying the very things for which it claimed to stand. Clearly, the Bolsheviks would have to make some drastic changes if they were to maintain themselves in power.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress opened on 8 March, 1921 in an atmosphere of crisis. The day before, Mikhail Tukhachevsky had been dispatched to Kronstadt with a force of 60,000 soldiers to put down the rebellion. A vocal faction within the party calling themselves the “Workers’ Opposition” publicly denounced official party policy. Hunger in large swathes of Russia had led to full-fledged famine, and thousands were starving. To rescue the party from these disasters, Lenin proposed a drastic revision in policy. War communism and the militarization of the economy that Trotsky so vocally championed would have to be temporarily abandoned in favor of a return to more moderate policies. In the face of swelling popular unrest, the party would have to restore economic growth and ease tensions with the population at large. Grain requisitioning would be replaced

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<sup>110</sup> Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt, 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 233

with a tax-in-kind on the peasantry that would allow peasants to keep the bulk of their produce and sell it on the market. Private enterprise on a small scale would also be legalized. Lenin's initiatives represented a direct rebuke of Trotsky's own plans for the economy, but, given the desperate circumstances, he rallied a majority of the party to his side. The result was the New Economic Policy that would govern the Soviet economy for nearly a decade.

Having proposed a new approach to the economy, Lenin took measures to crush dissent in the party. Trotsky wholeheartedly supported this "attack on factions". Leading Bolsheviks saw a sinister connection between the rise of organized ultra-left dissent in the party and the leftist rebellion at Kronstadt. To meet the threat, the Central Committee secured the power to expel party members at will. No party members could run on an election platform distinct from the official party line. Any public deviation from this line, or "factionalism", would be met with a dismissal from the party or worse. The new tone in party relations was decidedly martial. Daniels described the changes as follows: "1921 reflected the triumph of the Bolshevik organizational doctrine of 1902 over the practice of 1917--- of military discipline and monolithic unity."<sup>111</sup> Unfortunately for Trotsky, the party's intense focus on unity cost him politically. His support for militarization in the economy and the controversy surrounding his moves at *Tsektran* were seized upon by his opponents to undermine him and his followers. The three supporters of Trotsky on the Secretariat (Yevgeny Preobrazhensky, Nikolai Krestinsky, and Lazar Serebriakov) were voted out; they also lost their spots on the Central Committee. Supporters of Trotsky fared similarly poorly in local party committees of importance.

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<sup>111</sup> Daniels, Conscience of the Revolution, p. 152

The one aspect of policy where Trotsky seemed to have his way at the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress was military affairs. He had spent much of the winter and spring arguing for a cautious, gradual approach to the introduction of militia forms. The seriousness of the Kronstadt revolt and the many peasant revolts bolstered his claims that it was necessary to maintain a large regular component in the army. Podvoisky's call for an immediate and total transformation of the Red Army along the lines of a militia force was decisively rejected. Similarly a call to "democratize" party life within the army and adopt structures from the civilian sphere was dismissed. The rejection of militarization within the economy did not extend to a dismantling of the labor armies, which were left in place by the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress. Still, Trotsky's political victories in the military sphere were moderated by the issue's diminishing relative importance.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress came to an end at the same time as the last major military operation of the civil war. 16 March 1921 marked the last day of the Congress and the beginning of the final assault on Kronstadt. The ice that connected the coastal fortress to the land would soon melt, and it was therefore necessary to crush the rebellion immediately, at all costs. After initially relying on regular Red Army troops who performed poorly, Trotsky realized only soldiers of the most dependable nature could win at Kronstadt. On his orders, loyal detachments from the Cheka, local party branches, and officer trainees launched suicidal charge after suicidal charge directly at the walls of the fort. By the time the Kronstadt rebellion was decisively crushed on 18 March, over 10,000 men and women had died fighting for the Bolsheviks to suppress the revolt. It is a fitting finale to the tragedy of the Russian Civil War that Trotsky's Red Army was used to dispatch sailors who had pledged themselves to the principles of the October

Revolution. Getzler said of the Bolshevik's victory: "It certainly made sure that prostrate Kronstadt would not rise again, and that its Soviet democracy would remain but an unfulfilled promise of the Russian revolution."<sup>112</sup>

1921 marked the victory of the Red Army and the Bolshevik state. Trotsky took pride in having constructed a lethal military force almost from scratch. But the cost of his success was beyond measure. Millions had died in the civil war, and Russia's economy was shattered. The Bolsheviks had lost much of their popular support and were only able to maintain themselves in power by brute force. Even many of their radical supporters had long since abandoned the regime, as was so glaringly revealed at Kronstadt. What is more, by relying on a regular army with a disciplinary code and hierarchical structure reminiscent of tsarist times, Trotsky had sacrificed ideological purity for the sake of maintaining power. In the future, the Bolsheviks fell again and again into the trap of sacrificing their high-minded goals to preserve their hold over Russian society at all costs. Similar deviations were made during the construction of political institutions in the 1920s and in the rebuilding of the economy under the New Economic Policy. Many new Party members got their first taste of Soviet life fighting with the Red Army. Trotsky's methods were a reminder that the party would do whatever it had to do to preserve Bolshevik power. The lessons of political centralization and violent coercion first learned in the civil war were not forgotten in the late 1920s and 1930s, when Stalin sought to make a "Second October Revolution" in the countryside.

I believe there would have been no Soviet state to remake rural Russia if it had not been for Trotsky's role in creating the Red Army. When Trotsky assumed control of

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<sup>112</sup> Getzler, Kronstadt, p. 258

the army at the beginning of 1918, no one else had both the political capital and the competence to create an effective fighting force. In February 1918 the nascent Red defense forces had attempted to resist the advance of Imperial Germany and had been utterly humiliated. This ugly defeat made it clear that drastic reforms in the army were needed. Even after the armistice was signed with Germany in 1918, the growing threat of the Volunteer Army in the south and restiveness among peasants highlighted the Bolsheviks' precarious position. In recognition of this fact, the Bolshevik Party entrusted Trotsky with decisive power to build an army capable of winning a war. Trotsky set about his task with sufficient courage to defy the party's ideological orthodoxy.

The result was a Red Army similar to the tsarist army that came before it. Strict discipline replaced the collegial camaraderie in favor immediately after the October Revolution. Working-class volunteerism was done away with so that conscription could provide massive numbers of fresh recruits. Most controversial of all, Trotsky compensated for the party's dearth of military expertise by employing former tsarist officers of non-worker class backgrounds. His lack of hesitation in coercing workers while simultaneously rewarding "bourgeois" officers enraged many Bolsheviks. To assuage concerns surrounding the officer corps' loyalty, Trotsky implemented a system of dual-command with political commissars in each unit responsible for ensuring loyalty to the government. The first test for the transformed Red Army came at Kazan in August 1918. The Red forces were victorious.

Trotsky's use of his vast authority to defy Bolshevik purists led to a political backlash at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in March 1919. He was forced to defend himself against widespread discontent over his politically questionable methods. Fortunately for

the Soviet state, he successfully parried these attempts to return to a more “socialist” form of military organization. The growing White threat of 1919 forced even his foes to concede the utility of Trotsky’s military program. Even when he suffered political setbacks in summer 1919, few among his opponents dared to seek an immediate wholesale change in his military policies. Trotsky’s reforms helped the Bolsheviks to defeat three White armies by the end of the year. Heightened prospects for peace led Trotsky to attempt to militarize the economy in spring 1920, but war with Poland interrupted his plans. After the Red Army fought Poland to a stalemate in fall 1920, Trotsky once again tried to apply Red Army experience to economic reconstruction.

The times had changed. The Bolsheviks’ violence and coercion had alienated large portions of the citizenry. Raw force was no longer an effective guarantee of workers’ and peasants’ participation in the economy. By using “tsarist” methods to build the army, Trotsky had made it more politically palatable to introduce other unorthodox methods to build the economy. Trotsky had won the war, but could not consummate his victory. His militarized vision of socialism may have been sensible during the civil war, but now the Bolsheviks were more concerned with staying in power. If ideals could be sacrificed to win a war, there was no reason they couldn’t be overlooked in peacetime to maintain power. Bolshevik supporters who believed October 1917 had signified the victory of egalitarian beliefs were sorely disappointed: the sailors at Kronstadt had even revolted against the Soviet regime, only to be crushed by the Red Army. Over the course of the bloody civil war, Trotsky’s actions had shown that the party would hold nothing sacred if it threatened their prospects to rule, nothing--- even its own ideals.



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