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The Red Army: A New Role?

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For a long time the army remained unaffected by the major conflicts disturbing the peoples of the USSR. Of course, it has always been implicitly present, since it is universally perceived as the potential barrier capable of halting and reversing the democratic and ethnic movements. However, recently there has been a change: The members of the military have become divided among various political tendencies and no longer hesitate to speak openly of their differing views.

There have been successive phases in the relations between the army and perestroika, each of which reflected to some extent the situation in the rest of society. The first phase was the seizure of control of the top military hierarchy by Gorbachev supporters. The old Brezhnevite cadres were purged under the cover of a discipline campaign aimed at correcting the most blatant abuses and appealing to the "heightened initiative" of the primary party committees. The worsening economic crisis then encouraged the view that a reduction in the size of the armed forces was necessary. A media offensive ensued against the Soviet "military-industrial complex," and these attacks continue despite a Central Committee resolution of April 29, 1989, calling for an end to the denigration campaign. In turn, these developments led the military to reconsider their role and their place in society.

The politization of the army began with an evocation of some of Yel'tsin's favorite themes: corruption among officers, bureaucracy, influence-peddling, lack of state welfare protection for junior officers, and the denunciation of inequalities, including the great number of generals with their dachas and other privileges. Several further factors
contributed to the political awakening of an army that had been seen formerly as a monolithic bloc.

The elections of March 1989 resulted in a degree of political differentiation among the army's representatives, since a small number of junior officers succeeded in winning seats against members of the top military hierarchy. The successive electoral campaigns powerfully contributed to giving circulation to ideas which had been considered heretical only a year earlier. The military candidates who emerged "from below" included in their programs calls for the professionalization or depolitization of the armed forces, while the candidates put forward by the apparatus limited themselves to the usual political clichés.(1)

The debate initiated in December 1989 on the abolition of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution that ended in the abolition of the article in March 1990 aroused discussion of the functions of the political organs within the armed forces and, more generally, the question of the party's role with relation to the military in the Soviet Union. Beginning in mid-1989, it was possible to detect signs of a coming offensive against the political organs in the forces. In December 1989, General Lizichev spoke of a "regular offensive launched by destructive forces against the political organs of the army and navy."(2)

Now, the question is being raised not only of the political organs—even the presence of the CPSU in the army is being contested.

The abolition of Article 6 put the political organs in a difficult position, since they were obliged to justify their existence now that the CPSU theoretically had abandoned its monopoly of power. Some officers attack the MPA indirectly, calling for the reactivation of the primary party cells in the army, which they claim have been crushed by the tyranny of the political organs. The MPA is accused of being an overblown hierarchy that interferes in everything and seeks to maintain its power by arrogating to itself the right to dispense benefits such as apartments and kindergarten places. Proposals have been made to make the low-level political organs elective, while abolishing the upper rungs of the hierarchy, i.e., the bodies at military region and army level.
Other more radical officers, such as the well-known Lt. Col. Podziruk, openly attack the very institution of the MPA. Podziruk finds that the political organs fulfill no valid function. Instead, the political officers perform a useful function for the top command in enabling it to get rid of "dissidents," i.e., officers who support perestroika. Sentiment is now strong in the army for the complete elimination of party bodies from the army. During the 28th Party Congress, a poll of 560 officers showed that over 84 percent were in favor of the "departization" (now a normal term) of the army.

Among prominent political figures, Yel'tsin has proposed the abolition of the party cells in the army, as well as in the KGB and state administrative organs. During the 28th Congress, Gorbachev advocated the preservation of the party organs in the armed forces, while adding that other officially registered parties could also be represented. But if the severing of the link between the political organs and the party apparatus is accepted, it is clear that the result will be the disappearance of these bodies in the not too distant future.

Finally, a debate on fundamental military reform, particularly the future nature of the armed forces, has further polarized the army. Controversy centers on two basic issues: Should the USSR go over to a professional army? And should the country permit the principle of territorial units? On these questions also, the "democratic" reformist officers no longer hesitate to oppose the top military hierarchy, which is defending the traditional army system tooth and nail.

The creation of new institutions and organizations, such as the Defense and State Security Committee, has helped bring the military debate into the public arena. Of the committee's 38 members, seven are military officers, 19 are representatives of the military-industrial complex, while there are two KGB officials and five obkom secretaries. Reformist officers who showed a strong interest in serving were excluded, and such deputies complain that the committee is "remote-controlled from above."
The committee's purely "decorative" character has aroused deep dissatisfaction among deputies from the military determined to take their role seriously. When several committee members requested detailed information on the military budget for 1990, their application was rejected. Constitutionally, this situation is particularly revealing, since the committee is required to approve the military budget.

The Officers' Assemblies are another institution that has exacerbated emotions. These assemblies have been criticized for their lack of democracy, and are perceived as a "further instrument permitting the high command to oppress officers."(3) Most importantly, there are the "informal organizations," with which, according to a number of different sources and eyewitness accounts, the army is swarming. Even the Democratic Union, perhaps the most "revolutionary" of the opposition parties in the USSR, has recruited a number of militants among enlisted men and officers.(4)

The most famous of the military associations is Shield (Shchit), founded in March 1989. This organization with over 3,000 members has 10 deputies in the USSR Congress of People's Deputies and eight deputies in the RSFSR Congress. The honorary president is General Shaposhnikov, who was cashiered from the army and expelled from the party for refusing to fire on workers during the Novocherkassk uprising in 1962.

Col. Urazhtsev, co-president of Shield, cites the following among the goals of the organization: 1) ensure that the army is never used against the people; 2) create a servicemen's union; and 3) fight for the creation of an army of a new type appropriate for a law-based state. Urazhtsev has stated, "We glory in accusations of being anti-Soviet, anti-Party, and anti-military, because we are convinced that the political system is soon going to collapse and hearing the moribund dinosaur vilify us gives us a feeling of pride and confidence in the future."

In recent months, there have been many indications that the political leadership has decided to put an end to this process of politicization of the armed forces. Moscow News reported in September, "All the democratic elements in the officer corps are being
systematically purged, sometimes under the pretext of reductions in the size of the armed forces."(5) A Central Committee resolution of December 20, 1989, ordered the discharge of any officer who joined Shield. Military Political Administration commanders have received a directive ordering them to try to prevent the formation of groups of Shield supporters in army units, and to conduct close surveillance of all officers with a view to determining candidates for discharge when personnel cuts are carried out.

It is still impossible to provide a precise political picture of the Soviet army, despite the new information available under glasnost. 'In many cases, the military seems to be divided between a fundamental anti-communism and an attachment to the power and cohesion of the state. In the final analysis, the political position of the military will depend on which of these two elements ultimately proves dominant, or alternatively on the combination of the two factors that emerges. Communism may end by being perceived either as what is ruining the state, or as what assures its integrity. However, it must be emphasized that the situation is still fluid and it is impossible to predict what the result of the politicization of the Soviet Armed Forces will be.

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Notes:
1 To the 82 military deputies elected to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet must now be added the 114 military deputies elected to the Supreme Soviet of the Union Republics. Of these, 42 were elected to the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, where they have formed a conservative faction.
2 Krasnaya Zvezda (Red Star), December 8, 1989.
3 Capt. S. Yastrebstev (Deputy, USSR Congress of People's Deputies), Krasnaya Zvezda, December 9, 1989.
4 Moscow News, September 16, 1990. The case of Gen. Andreyev has also been referred to in the press. Andreyev was cashiered for having criticized his superior officers, and his appeal was rejected by the Defense and State Security Committee. See Literaturnaya Gazeta, September 26, 1990.

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