

# 1 Of Horses and Men

## *The Red Army of the Late 1920s*

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On the eve of the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan for industry and Stalin's 'Great Turn' in Soviet development, the Red Army was a far cry from being the mechanised titan that it had become by the second half of the Great Patriotic War – or indeed even the less nimble colossus it had become by June 1941. The Red Army of 1927 was certainly not small by the international standards of the day – 607,125 strong if one includes air strength and ignores the part-timers, with their mobilisation adding 2,800,000–2,900,000 men to strength. This would have given a planned force of in the region of 3,400,000 men in the event of a war.<sup>1</sup> However, both commanders and men were typically poorly educated peasants, with many personnel fulfilling their service obligations through territorial militia units that offered at best sporadic training. These militia units were in many senses akin to the US National Guard or British Territorial Army except that service was not voluntary. Some of these territorial units were national units, hampered by the fact that the bulk of their personnel did not speak Russian and struggled to communicate with Russian commanders who didn't speak their language. Despite some efforts on the part of the regime, commanders often lacked authority with their men and were at the mercy of political commissars. The Red Army of 1927 was also poorly equipped – for example there were few tanks and aircraft and the former were of First World War vintage, and communications equipment was scarce. In many ways the Red Army was a very different organisation by 1936. During the early-mid 1930s the Red Army would in many senses be transformed by forward thinking elements in its leadership from a somewhat anachronistic product of Civil War experience into a modern military machine. Not only did it have the latest tanks and aircraft to rival those available anywhere else in the world, but it also had coherent ideas on their employment that were innovative and forward looking rather than focusing on fighting the last major war. For many Red Army leaders the last war and the war they wanted to fight again was understandably the Russian Civil War – the war that had made their careers and secured the Soviet state's hold over most

of the former Russian Empire. The Russian Civil War was a particularly poor choice for a past war to focus on given that although Western Powers had intervened on the side of the White opposition to the Bolsheviks, their participation was at best half-hearted. The Russian Civil War saw precious little use of the new technologies of the First World War – the tank and aircraft – and with the exception of the armoured train, mobility was provided largely by the horse. There was relatively little positional warfare during the Russian Civil War, and in many ways it was the cavalry that was the dominant arm in the vast expanses of Russia and her neighbours.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, key thinkers of the early 1930s would focus on the First World War and extrapolate from it. The problem with emergent grand plans for a Red Army that would exploit the new technologies of the First World War to achieve sustained breakthrough of enemy defences was that not only were suitable means for effective command and control lacking in practice, but also the human component of the plan did not match up with the grand theories which the Red Army could at best only pretend to be able to implement.

In 1926 Mikhail Tukhachevskii, then head of the Headquarters of the Red Army, had painted a bleak picture of manoeuvres that took place that summer. Command and control by commanders – knowing what to do and being able to communicate that to the relevant units – were both identified as having been typically poor, where commanders took ‘decisions extremely slowly’ and were ‘very weak in responding to changes in the military situation’. Tukhachevskii went as far as to note, that for commanders ‘initiative is an extremely rare phenomenon’ – with headquarters units similarly ‘passive’. Communications from headquarters to units was entirely dependent on telephone lines, without which ‘any sort of communication ceased’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, cadre (regular) rifle divisions were seen as being better prepared than territorial, although this comparison did not necessarily involve comparing units in equivalent states of mobilisation, and comparison between specific units did not always end up favouring the cadre unit. Certainly individual Red Army men were noted to have shown ‘high levels of initiative in action’ [*visokaia boevaia aktivnost*], particularly cadre personnel, although the ‘initiative’ expected of the rank and file was limited. Co-ordination between different arms was poor, with artillery often late in providing fire support for the infantry. Limited communications resources and all but total reliance on the field telephone were certainly a particularly serious hindrance in this instance. As for the infantry, although typically advancing in an orderly manner, instances of infantry tending towards advancing in waves were noted, with supporting machine guns often hiding behind them. The conclusion that inadequacies in military

preparation left the Red Army with the task of trying to achieve a 'breakthrough' in 'basic elements of training' for combat was certainly not a ringing endorsement of its capabilities.<sup>3</sup>

Some Red Army leaders saw the part-timers of the territorial divisions as a factor in poor Red Army performance, and Tukhachevskii had indeed suggested that cadre personnel tended to perform better than their part-time counterparts. Certainly territorial divisions lacked the status of their cadre counterparts within the Red Army. According to an interviewee of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS) who had held command rank in the Red Army, serving as a cadre commander with a territorial division was considerably less prestigious than serving with a cadre division – and even an indicator of lack of trust in the commander concerned on the part of the regime.<sup>4</sup> Whether the latter applied in all cases is certainly questionable, as the following case of Nikolai Iakovlev, future Marshal of Artillery, suggests, although his stint with a territorial division seems to have been brief. Iakovlev described some of the problems associated with territorial divisions in his 1981 memoirs, *On Artillery and A Little About Myself*:

From May until December 1929 I had to serve as chief of the headquarters of the 13<sup>th</sup> Artillery Regiment, 13th Rifle Division of the territorial forces, based in the north of the Don *oblast*. . . .

In this regiment, as by the way in the division as a whole, there was a completely different system for the organisation of training than, for instance, in my native 28th Rifle Division. The latter was a cadre formation. In this instance, we commanders of all ranks, in general conducted basic training during so-called musters for new recruits that began in May and continued until September – that is until the time of the general muster. During the general September muster, the territorials who had already completed basic training appeared from towns and railway halts and were now accounted for as members of artillery batteries with different specialties. So it transpired, that for only one month a year the regiment became a fully fledged military unit. At this time, live firing and field exercises were conducted. But in October. . . . In October the conscript element again left for home, and the batteries remained at reduced strength until the spring.

Iakovlev went on to describe the situation during the winter months:

In general middle ranking and junior commanders and a small part of the rank and file were left with the task of looking after equipment, other military assets and the horses. It is true, that on occasion command exercises were conducted with commanders, but that was only from time to time.

Additionally, during the winter some of the commanders of the battery would periodically head out to the farmsteads and railway halts where the soldiers assigned to their units lived and worked. There, at educational centres and primarily in the evenings, commanders conducted military classes with them.

However, all of this also had a primitive and sporadic character. As a result, batteries, *divisions* and of course the whole artillery regiment, had only so-so preparation. This was highlighted in all dimensions by district manoeuvres conducted in the autumn of 1929, in which the 13th, and also 9th Rifle Divisions of the territorials took part. Their units and regiments, in contrast with the cadre units, lacked confidence, acted slowly and showed little manoeuvrability.<sup>5</sup>

As Iakovlev goes on to suggest, the territorial militia system seemed to offer a number of advantages over the more conventional system of conscription that had been adopted in its final form by the Tsarist army in 1874 and was the norm in many other European states. First of all, the territorial militia system offered a large force for low cost, where conscripts were not, for example, billeted with units year round and could be provided for economically during the summer months – for example living in tents rather than barracks. This was particularly important after the dramatic cuts in the Red Army after the Civil War that left it unable to sustain a force over five million strong. By November 1922 strength had been reduced to a nominal 800,000, but an additional 200,000 personnel had still to be cut to provide a sustainable permanent force level.<sup>6</sup> The severity of the cuts to the armed forces is highlighted not only by the slashing of the size of the Red Army, but by the fact that Soviet naval power all but disappeared from the White and Barents Seas.<sup>7</sup>

In the economic climate of the period a traditional conscript-based army simply did not allow the Soviet Union a wartime Red Army of anything like the size that the territorial militia system would provide for the same cost. As the cut in the force level to 600,000 was decided upon, the Revolutionary Military Soviet – the military-civilian body directing Soviet military policy – ordered that the militia system and territorial units be organised with some haste. By January 1924, twenty-two rifle divisions had been formed on a territorial basis.<sup>8</sup> Those fulfilling their military obligations in the regular or cadre forces from 1925 served continuously for 2–4 years depending on the arm – those serving in territorial units supposedly served for 8–12 months in total over a five-year period.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time as being apparently cost effective – or at least cheaper – the territorial militia system seemed to offer other economic and political benefits. First, the territorial militia system did not remove men from the economy for a protracted period – a factor stressed by the head of the Main Board of the Red Army, Levichev to the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the USSR in a report on territorial militia formations in August 1925. Certainly, as Levichev noted, a month a year for training in the territorial militia did not compare in terms of disruption to a two-year

period of conscription for peasants, where during that period they might lose their 'agricultural base' in the countryside.<sup>10</sup> Second, the territorial militia system seemed to offer a vehicle for political education in the countryside. In December 1924 Frunze and a colleague, Bubnov, highlighted how 'beyond the purely military significance' of the territorial units they had 'huge significance in the task of Sovietizing our countryside, its political enlightenment and the raising of the cultural and political level of young peasants'.<sup>11</sup> There was however the risk that prevailing norms in peasant regions and proximity to home for such part-time soldiers might mean that the territorial divisions became more peasant than a regular division might have been, with ramifications for discipline. This was certainly an issue aired early on by Trotsky, who was concerned that the non-peasants might be overwhelmed by the peasant mass.<sup>12</sup> It seems that few territorial divisions drew on industrial centres – only 45 per cent according to one source – depriving the territorial divisions of supposedly ideologically more reliable proletarian elements.<sup>13</sup> Campaigns to increase the proportion of workers in the Red Army apparently had some effect – by 1932, 42.9 per cent of conscripts called up were 'workers', but the Red Army, as Soviet society, remained predominately peasant.<sup>14</sup> Similar problems of local cultural sully of desirable Soviet ways applied in what were seen as the less advanced Soviet republics that combined peasant backwardness with undesirable ethnic cultural practices and values.

By 1928, the Red Army had a mere twenty-two regular rifle divisions compared to forty-one territorial ones. According to Red Army statistics, of approximately 1,300,000 men liable for service at that time, only about 300,000 would serve with regular or cadre units, with another 240,000 serving as non-cadre elements in the territorial forces. So conscription was not actually experienced by a majority of Soviet men of conscription age at this time. If suitable young men did not serve with cadre forces then there was not always the potential for them to serve with the territorials – only about 39 per cent of the Soviet population lived in areas from which the territorial units drew personnel – about 8 per cent of the total area of the Soviet Union or 25 per cent of the 'useful', one assumes populated, territory.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, despite the opposition of senior Red Army commanders to the territorial system, during the early 1930s it actually expanded its remit to include specialist units for service both within and outside the territorial divisions.<sup>16</sup> Only as the international situation deteriorated rapidly during the mid-1930s with both Japan and then Nazi Germany emerging as genuine threats did specific weaknesses in not only the equipment but also organisation of the Red Army become issues not only of deep concern to the Red Army but also Stalin and the political



Troops of 46th Territorial Division parade on the eighth anniversary of the October Revolution in November 1925. For financial rather than military reasons the territorial divisions were the mainstay of the Red Army during the late 1920s and early 1930s. (RIA Novosti #22014)

leadership. Where cadre forces were insufficient to guard against attack by a substantial enemy force, territorial units were difficult to mobilise and deploy to border areas in the event of increased international tension. The disruption to the economy of mobilising troops for an unspecified period without provision for their absences was just one issue hampering their mobilisation in a situation that stopped short of war. This factor, on top of the limits to what could be achieved through limited and sporadic training for units that would lack the same cohesion as regular formations if required at short notice in the event of a crisis, meant that regular divisions now had increased appeal not only to the Red Army, but also the civilian leadership. Nonetheless, the military system established in 1925 that obliged many Soviet men of call-up age to serve in either the regular or territorial forces would survive until 1939.

Under the above system some men – often workers – were not required to serve in either the cadre or territorial forces. So that those not serving in cadre or territorial units might be more mobilisable in the event of war, they were supposed to receive some sort of basic military training through OSOAVIAKHIM – a compound of OSO and AVIAKHIM or the Society for Co-operation in Defence and Society for Aviation-Chemical Construction respectively. Formed in 1927 through the

merging of the above two predecessors, initially those receiving training through OSOAVIAKHIM were volunteers. This volunteerism was central to the image of OSOAVIAKHIM as a 'social organisation' that was tasked not only with providing the population with military and broader civil defence skills, but also 'patriotic education'. 'Military Knowledge Circles' were supposed to provide 'pre-conscription members with a preparatory stage before for service in the army; for the part-time elements of the territorial units the means to improve their military knowledge between musters; and for command elements and reservists a school to help them retain and reinforce knowledge obtained in the Red Army; and for the remaining mass of workers, not touched by a single type of military preparation the sole venue for them to receive it.'<sup>17</sup>

As OSOAVIAKHIM gained more and more responsibilities for the military preparation of the population it was increasingly militarised. By 1935, as the organisation focused more on its military preparation remit, 'military discipline' was supposed to apply to those undertaking training. In practice, and despite the uniforms, military discipline and standards frequently did not consistently apply. Some of the programmes offered by OSOAVIAKHIM were popular with young people, including some offered in collaboration with the Komsomol or youth wing of the Communist Party. OSOAVIAKHIM provided the means for the chosen few to learn to fly or receive parachute training. However, even with the local will and competence, much of the training provided to 'volunteers' who satisfied their military obligations through the organisation was always going to be second rate given in particular the relatively modest financial inputs during a period when the organisation was expected to train specialists in a range of areas that included the training of tank crews.<sup>18</sup> As the Russian historian of OSOAVIAKHIM, Olga Nikonova, notes in the conclusion to her monograph on the activities of the organisation in the Urals:

Only in a few specific directions did the paramilitary organization facilitate the creation of cadres for the formation of air and airborne units, sniper teams, and in the groundwork for the large scale incorporation of women into auxiliary and frontline units of the Red Army – through the training of parachutists, the activities of flying clubs and the piecemeal preparation of snipers.

Large scale military-political preparation and training in many senses remained at the level of slogans and propaganda, despite the constant highlighting of their importances. Nonetheless, and particularly closer to the Great Patriotic War, at least some meaningful pre-conscription training was clearly offered and no doubt helped when hundreds of thousands of recruits had to be trained very quickly during the early

phase of the Great Patriotic War. An example here is radio operator Arkadii Glazunov, who prior to the Great Patriotic War had 'in school' studied the use of 'radio apparatus'.<sup>19</sup> Poor and limited training was nonetheless a problem across the Soviet military system, made worse by the low educational levels of both commanders and men. In 1927, 10.3 per cent of conscripts entering service were 'illiterate', with 30–35 per cent having 'poor literacy' [*malogramotnie*]. Dealing with the problem of literacy was an obvious starting point for improving military effectiveness. Where previously an attempt to tackle this problem within the army had been made through 'reading circles'—during time set aside for 'mass cultural work'—from 1931, time for developing literacy was included in the academic programme. At the same time the level of literacy of the bulk of conscripts was apparently improving, with official figures suggesting that the number of illiterate new recruits had fallen to 6.8 per cent in 1930 and 4.5 per cent in 1932. Improving and prolonged educational provision in schools certainly meant that the Red Army had access to an increasing number of recruits with better general educational preparation, and particularly for specialist arms.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, while younger generations were less likely to be illiterate, their elders who would be mobilised in time of war remained illiterate in more significant numbers. According to the 1937 census, just under 10 per cent of 20–24 year old males were illiterate, rising to just over 18 per cent for the 35–39 year old range.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of both commanders and men, it is tempting to speculate that time spent on political education severely limited time available for both training for combat and broader educational goals such as improving literacy. The 200 hours per year that were supposed to be spent by the rank and file on self study in preparation for political classes from January 1932 are a case in point.<sup>22</sup> One respondent to the post-Second World War Harvard University Refugee Interview Project, who lectured in chemical warfare (chemical troops were responsible for smokelaying and flamethrowers as well as toxic gases) suggested that during the 1930s perhaps 'one hour in five' was spent on political education, success in which was often more important for advancement than in actual military matters.<sup>23</sup>

For most of the year—when it occurred—education and training took place within a unit. The Soviet military system—and to a large extent its territorial element—meant that for many units field training, and certainly 'manoeuvres', took place only during the summer and autumn. During the summer, tactical training involving more than one unit might take place during camp, before larger scale manoeuvres in the autumn that would see more manoeuvre and engagement between larger



formations.<sup>24</sup> Only in the latter case would troops really get a taste of combined arms warfare against a 'real' opponent. As Nikolai Iakovlev points out in his memoirs cited earlier, recalling a period in mid-1920s during which he served as commander of the 3rd *Divizion* [equivalent to a battalion] of the 28th Artillery Regiment, large scale manoeuvres at the military district level 'were conducted relatively infrequently', and 'tactical field exercises', typically lasting two or three days, were largely confined to the summer, noting that 'if these exercises took place in the winter, then they did so as a rule only once [per year]'.<sup>25</sup> Not only were they limited to the autumn, but also manoeuvres seem to have only taken place in good weather. Even in 1936, the first day of manoeuvres of the Belorussian Military District were for example cancelled due to rain as will be discussed further later. The contrived nature of manoeuvres did not stop there. During the period with which this chapter is concerned, according to guidelines for their conduct, manoeuvres were typically to be limited in duration to the daylight hours – with manoeuvres lasting more than seven or eight hours from dawn being atypical. Convenient breaks were allowed between phases of manoeuvres to allow for the repositioning of forces, for whom combat often only involved initial contact and not the breaching of positions in depth. All of this was watched over by umpires, whose role seemed to be as much to make sure that the manoeuvres went according to plan as adjudication.<sup>26</sup>

While low levels of education and limited and unrealistic training undoubtedly hampered the effectiveness of the Red Army as a whole, Tukhachevskii's comments about the 1926 manoeuvres suggested that the problem was far more serious where commanders were concerned. In a decree of the Central Committee of the Party 'On the Command and Political Personnel of the RKKA' of 5 June 1931 it was explicitly stated that 'the level of military-technical training of commanders is clearly inadequate' – the rectification of which was deemed to be 'the fundamental, currently decisive task in raising the combat readiness of the army further'. This would allow them to master the new equipment they were to receive, and the use of such equipment in 'complex forms of modern combat'.<sup>27</sup> Educational levels among potential commanders remained low in the late 1920s – in 1928 among first year students of military schools only 18.8 per cent had previously received seven years of general education, a percentage that had risen to only 24.3 per cent by 1932. This meant that considerable time had to be spent on raising the general level of education of students, before they could focus their attentions on specialist military knowledge. However, by 1936, 73.5 per cent of new recruits had actually received eight years of general education, with the remaining 26.5 per cent receiving seven years. By

this time the total number of students in military schools had also increased – from 44,000 in 1932 to 63,440 at the end of 1936. New higher educational institutions created during the 1930s seemed to have the potential to significantly increase the education level of commanders, with 1932 for example seeing the creation of a number of specialised military academies such as the Military Academy for Motorisation and Mechanisation.<sup>28</sup>

This all looked good on paper, but the realities were less impressive. Even if the general educational level of students was increasing, a key problem was having suitable teachers and lecturers for the schools and academies. Such personnel could not be simply conjured up out of thin air, and Red Army schools and academies were competing with the civilian sphere for qualified specialists. The situation was made worse by the fact that by the end of the 1930s, in the era of forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation, the regime was increasingly concerned with political reliability. Just as being a worker was seen to indicate reliability for new recruits, social origin was a key indicator for teaching staff and other commanders. Many ‘military specialists’ who had served the Red Army during the Civil War lacked the right social credentials and were ‘purged’. According to Voroshilov, speaking at the February–March 1937 plenum of the Central Committee of the Party, between 1934 and 1936 alone 22 thousand personnel had been ‘purged’ from the Red Army – some for good reason such as alcoholism, but many experienced commanders because of mistrust based on their social origins.<sup>29</sup> It was perhaps positive in many instances for the Red Army that some of those with inappropriate social credentials not ‘purged’ from the Red Army were deposited in military academies rather than given more sensitive field commands. One respondent to the HPSSS who had taught in military schools suggested that the percentage of non-Party commanders was far higher in military schools – where promotion prospects were poor – than in ‘the line’.<sup>30</sup> The contribution of the Soviet military theorist G.S. Isserson to the development of the Red Army was perhaps greater as a lecturer at the Frunze and later General Staff Academy than it would have been as a field commander whose promotion was probably hampered by suspicion about his political reliability – and his outspokenness on military matters that seems not to have been tempered when communicating with superiors. Many commanders that would rise to prominence during the Great Patriotic War were taught by Isserson, including Vasilevskii, Bagramian, Zakharov, Sandalov and Rotmistrov, the latter’s academic thesis at the Frunze Academy being written under Isserson’s supervision. It is possible that Isserson simply wasn’t a good field commander, but as a lecturer it seems he served a valuable role.<sup>31</sup>

Soviet military theorist Aleksandr Svechin – who was killed during the Great Purges – can also be seen to have fulfilled a valuable role as a lecturer in the General Staff Academy, to which he was sent after an earlier arrest and incarceration.<sup>32</sup>

As the Red Army started to expand in the late 1920s and early 1930s, not only was the quality of military educational provision arguably decreasing, but also the time spent on that education – and not only because political education was eating into time available for other learning. As Red Army expansion progressed, according to Roger R. Reese, where previously the curriculum for future commanders had required 3–4 years to complete, during the mid-1930s the military schools were churning out graduates often after only two years, which would probably have been a sufficient period to turn a well educated new intake into commanders. However, the intakes during this period were so poorly educated that it is questionable how much serious military education they received and digested as they were supposed at the same time to be raising their general educational levels and wasting considerable time on political education. Even if taking the education that these future commanders and specialists received as satisfactory, the numbers being trained were always behind demand as the Red Army expanded. By 1936, the overall education level of the Red Army commanders remained low. As Reese again notes, citing figures presented by the then head of the military education administration for the Red Army, as of October 1936, 10 per cent of battalion and regimental commanders had only a primary education – percentages rising to 30 per cent of company-level commanders and 70 per cent of junior lieutenants, highlighting how those passing through the military schools and academies were having only a limited impact in raising the overall educational level of an expanding Red Army.<sup>33</sup>

Combat training for commanders of course suffered from the same limitations as that for the rank and file – for example manoeuvres took place only during the summer and autumn, in good weather, typically in daylight and for only part of the day and so forth. Additionally, although such manoeuvres were supposed to allow commanders to show initiative, in reality they were so tightly choreographed by umpires that this claim was almost farcical. Senior commanders typically directed this pantomime for the benefit of their troops, gaining little meaningful command experience with real formations operating outside parameters that they themselves had defined!

Other than lacking suitable education and ‘realistic’ training involving the exercising of initiative, commanders with the right social and Party credentials were burdened with responsibility for political education as

the Party sought to bring in unitary command in the Red Army from 1925. Unitary command – where a commander had authority over both the political and military affairs of a unit – was to replace dual command that had been instituted during the Civil War. During the Civil War, commanders had been supervised when leading Red Army units by political commissars with whom they shared command – a measure instituted given the lack of trust in the political reliability of former Tsarist officers in particular.<sup>34</sup> A significant 73.3 per cent of corps commanders had the ‘privilege’ of unitary command in 1925, although only 33.4 per cent of regimental commanders. By 1927, 48 per cent of regimental commanders enjoyed formal unitary command and the demands on their time that came with it, requiring that steps be taken to alleviate the burden that these matters placed on them. Clarification of what unitary command should mean in practice gave commanders deemed reliable responsibility for ‘general party-political leadership’, and his ‘assistant for political affairs’ responsibility for the ‘practical realization’ of policy.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, the Party’s commitment to the idea that commanders should place political education at the heart of military life meant distraction from other tasks that went beyond the sort of concerns for morale that officers in other armies had to deal with. One respondent to the HPSSS who served as a commander suggested that the combined workload of having to deal with military and political training and education was enough to drive some commanders to suicide – with the political component of their work conducted under the watchful eye of the political organs being the cause of particular anxiety.<sup>36</sup> The revolutionary hostility towards bourgeois distinctions between ranks included undermining the concept of the non-commissioned officer as well as officer, and commanders lacked assistance from a capable NCO class in the day-to-day running of the unit. Only in November 1940 would the rank of sergeant be reintroduced – along with junior sergeant and senior sergeant – titles designed to foster greater ‘responsibility’ on the part of junior command elements, as well as raising their ‘authority’.<sup>37</sup>

One might also argue that Soviet commanders also lacked the sort of privileges and professional status that might act as motivation to really get to grips with issues not only of running a unit on a day-to-day basis but also mastering the military craft. Respondents to the HPSSS suggest that while senior commanders lived at least reasonably well by Soviet standards during the late 1920s–early 1930s, their junior counterparts had all of the work and few compensatory privileges to motivate them. As Reese notes, it was not until 1934 that a lieutenant in the infantry would make more than a factory worker. In 1935, a battalion commander received less than a factory foreman, and a factory supervisor more than a corps

commander! Red Army commanders were not necessarily compensated in kind, for instance housing was often in short supply and 'what housing existed was often in a pitiful state'. Reese goes on to suggest that the accommodation provided for the command ranks through to the equivalent of colonel 'equaled those of ordinary civilians – overcrowded and dilapidated'.<sup>38</sup> Conditions were undoubtedly worse in many ways out in the provinces, to which most commanders could be expected to be posted at some point. As a divisional commander in the provincial town of Slutsk in Belorussia, to which he was transferred in the spring of 1933, future Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgii Zhukov and his family were provided with a single '8-meter' room – presumably 8 m/sq – as temporary accommodation, Zhukov noting the 'problems with accommodation' faced then and after the war. He later notes how many families had given up 'nice apartments below Leningrad' with the transfer to Slutsk.<sup>39</sup> On his transfer to Moscow in early 1936, G.S. Isserson – at this stage a brigade commander – was however provided with a four-room apartment in the Chistie Prudi area of Moscow, and was even able to employ a live-in maid. As Harrison suggests, perhaps the mid-1930s were 'the high-water mark of the prewar Red Army's power and influence in Soviet society', when material rewards accompanied the improved social status of commanders.<sup>40</sup> The Great Purges would bring the prestige of the Red Army command corps crashing down, once again presumably making becoming a commander in the Red Army less appealing for many than other employment options in the civilian sector. Certainly, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, where industrial workers and managers seemed to be far more highly rewarded for their labours than army commanders, and being a commander did not bring the social prestige that being an officer had during the Tsarist era, there was a shortage of suitably qualified volunteers for command schools – where choosing to receive such an education as part of military service added years to the service obligation. After appeals to various Party and Soviet organisations for volunteers to make up for a deficit in candidates for command positions in 1929 did not yield the required numbers, in 1931, the Party launched a special mobilisation of members for service as commanders that contributed to the enrollment of 17,000 members for education in the military schools in 1931 and 1932, followed by another 10,000 between 1933 and 1935. At the same time in order to reduce shortfalls in available commanders, the Party propelled men from the ranks with Party memberships into command roles, encouraging others from the ranks to voluntarily apply for military schools, and created an accelerated promotion process for 'NCOs' in training to become lieutenants by examination or short courses. As Reese notes, training and cohesion

were sacrificed through these unorthodox commissioning methods – undermining the military ethos and contributing to the lack of ‘professionalism’ of the Soviet officer corps that Reese argues dogged the Red Army right up to the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to Red Army commanders lacking the motivation of prestige – and for junior commanders material reward – for most of the period of Red Army expansion from the late 1920s onwards, their ability to effectively command was undoubtedly hampered by the lack of a stark formal distinction between commanders and men that was a product of the revolutionary ideals of 1917. While arguably if commanders are too detached from the men they lead then they are less likely to be able to command and lead effectively – as Brian R. Sullivan suggests was the case in the Italian army – having little more status than the men is typically not good for enforcing discipline.<sup>42</sup> During the 1920s and early 1930s those who would formally become officers during the late 1930s and wartime period were known as ‘command elements’, and hence those who will later be described as officers are identified as commanders in this chapter. Commanders were often undermined in attempting to command by the political correctness of the day that elevated the status of the rank and file and gave it considerable scope for insubordination.<sup>43</sup> This was particularly the case when commanders came from pre-revolutionary middle or even upper class social backgrounds. An unnamed respondent to the HPSSS, from such a middle class background, gave the following example of a situation in which his authority was undermined. In 1935, while travelling on a bus that was full to capacity with Red Army personnel, a ‘junior sergeant’ tried to board the bus. The ‘officer’ concerned had been told to limit those on the bus to twenty-six. Having been told it was full, and with the ‘sergeant’ having forcibly tried to board, the ‘officer’ concerned had him removed before the bus continued on its way. For this the ‘officer’ was called to justify his actions, deemed inappropriate, in front of the commissar of the military school at which he served – a note being made on his service record that he had ‘behaved in an unpleasant manner to a Red Army man’. A similar example is provided by another respondent, who, of lower middle class origins himself had married the daughter of a former Tsarist officer. A comment by his wife in 1933 in the club facilities shared by commanders and rank and file personnel that there was ‘an odor from the Red Army men who were close by’ resulted in similar trouble with a commissar.<sup>44</sup>

In theory, Red Army commanders exercised unitary command over their units by 1927, but as noted earlier when discussing workload, full unitary command was certainly not ‘enjoyed’ by all commanders at this

point. By the beginning of 1930, 27 per cent of regimental commanders still did not have *de jure* full unitary command of their units, although by the middle of 1931 the transition to unitary command in the ground forces was reportedly all but complete, even if it was less advanced for naval and air forces.<sup>45</sup> The fact that dual command had meant that political commissars could countermand the orders of commanders on political grounds gave them considerable scope for interference in tactical and operational decision making, and certainly in the day-to-day running of units. Ultimately the commissar had held the reins – and the rank and file knew it – with obvious ramifications for the authority of the commander. By 1925, with at least some commanders with the right social backgrounds having been trained, the regime was confident enough to move towards unitary command in the Red Army, supposedly giving all commanders full control over ‘operational-combat, administrative and housekeeping functions’. Nonetheless, responsibility for the ‘moral-political state’ of many units still gave the commissar something of a blank cheque for interference, particularly given the culture that had developed during the Civil War.<sup>46</sup> Testimony above from the HPSSS certainly suggests that *de jure* authority did not necessarily apply in practice for some who were nominally in sole command during a period in which the regime was encouraging vigilance over ‘class enemies’. In such a situation, a shift in culture and practice away from suspicion of commanders from the wrong social backgrounds to complement changes in regulations was unlikely, even when, in an attempt to create a distinct officer class with greater prestige without actually using the word ‘officer’, in 1935 the rank structure of the Red Army was revised. That year ranks that had been used in the Tsarist army – from *lieutenant* to *polkovnik*, that is direct equivalents to from lieutenant to colonel in the West – were resurrected, even if the regime wouldn’t have the stomach to replace more senior titles such as *komkor* or corps commander with their pre-revolutionary equivalents until 1940.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of commanding effectively, language barriers were an added complication for Russian commanders with non-Russian units, the formation of which had been promoted in the 1920s. During this period, although the Soviet leadership had been willing to forcibly incorporate the various nationalities of the former Russian Empire into the Soviet Union, the regime neither had the confidence nor resources to attempt to Sovietise many of these peoples. Having lost Finland and the Baltic Republics from the ‘imperial’ fold after the Civil War, the Ukraine and Belorussia remained in the west to be incorporated into the federal system that became the Soviet Union in 1924. Taking the Ukraine as a whole, it is easy to exaggerate the extent of Ukrainian nationalism at the

time where in a largely peasant republic the tendency beyond urban intellectual circles was arguably more towards the prominence of very local rather than national identity – if anything Soviet policies in the 1920s fostered significant growth in Ukrainian nationalism. Belorussia was similarly rural, but arguably less culturally distinct from Russia. Both were relatively straightforward to incorporate into the Soviet system compared to the Caucasian and Central Asian republics, where both cultural and linguistic differences were serious barriers to integration. Given a degree of tolerance of non-threatening national identity, and the lack of resources both for integration and the military, initially the easiest approach to mobilising many smaller nationalities for military service was not to do so at all and ignore them. For the others the policy of ‘nativization’ [*korenizatsiia*] of 1923 pointed to troops being mobilised, trained and deployed along ethnic lines – being trained and led in their local languages and serving alongside their ethnic peers.<sup>48</sup>

A report by Frunze of 29 December 1924 on the incorporation of the nationalities into the Red Army noted how the process of incorporation had to date moved slowly and did not include many of them at all. The report noted the requirement of the plan to have created a number of national formations by 1929, including for example a cavalry division in the Turkmen SSR and a rifle division with cavalry squadron in the Yakutsk SSR. By May 1926, the Red Army could note success in forming the required units in the culturally more similar and indeed economically more advanced western republics, but poor progress in Central Asia. In the case of the Turkmen SSR a single cavalry regiment had been formed out of the four required for a cavalry division, with even a single regiment not yet formed out of the four required for the Kazakh Cavalry Division specified in the plan. Even then, the report went on to note that ‘far from all’ existing national units provided ‘reliable [*prochnie*] cadres for further development’ of national formations.<sup>49</sup> Given that the development of national formations would be at the expense of other Red Army units, it was proposed that the Red Army no longer form national units in the Yakutsk and Kazakh republics, and:

Along with the rejection of forming Yakutsk and Kazakh (and also Kalmyk) national units it is necessary to cease to call up these nationalities for military service while suitable military-political preparation has not been conducted amongst this population and while the necessity for bearing such compulsory military service has not been firmly and solidly instilled in them. Until that time pre-prescription preparatory work is to be conducted with the organized youth of these nationalities, and those wishing to undertake military service on a voluntary basis are to be accepted into regular units.<sup>50</sup>



Issues with the performance of existing national units were to be rectified in part through such measures as sending reliable commanders from other Red Army units of that nationality to the national units and actually providing national units with the necessary infrastructure and other means to perform during a time of relative scarcity – particularly providing horses for cavalry units. Language barriers remained, perhaps unsurprisingly, an important issue – and one that would not go away. In a situation where there were insufficient native commanders within a unit, the report noted how Russian commanders had to ‘run for the help of interpreters’ when giving commands.<sup>51</sup> The bulk of personnel in national units were Ukrainians and Belorussians, and in fact only 18,912 personnel were from other nationalities in May 1927, representing a considerable but still inadequate investment of resources for a very limited outcome in terms of troops.

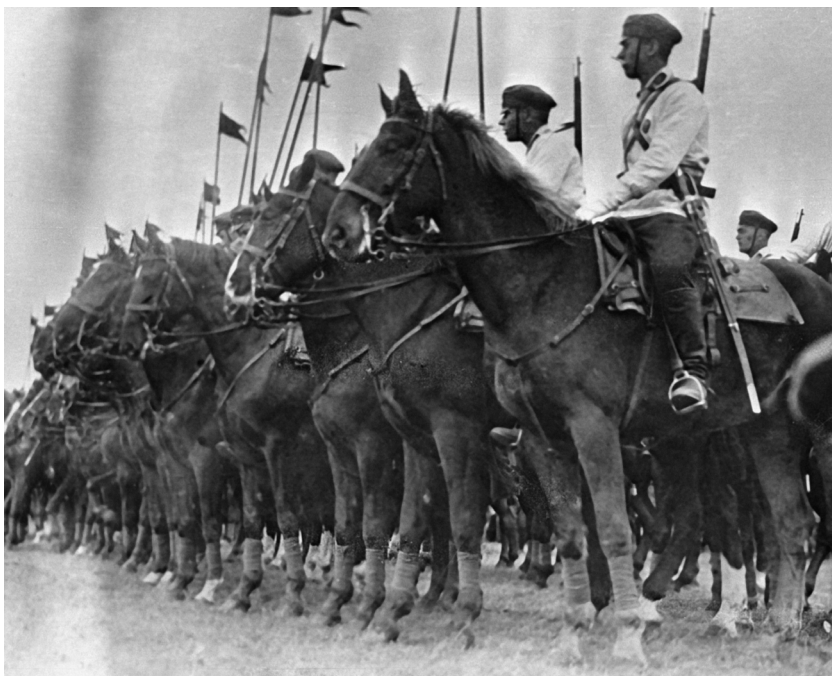
Despite the expense of the national units and questions about their military value in a broader sense, such units were however a relatively economical means of strengthening the Soviet military presence in the sparsely populated regions of Central Asia and the Far East – a point noted in the 1927 report – alongside the fact that such nationalities offered experience and skills in physical and climatic environments such as mountainous regions that were hardly typical in the Soviet population as a whole.<sup>52</sup> This was certainly reason enough not only to keep such units on the books but continue to foster their developments. A respondent to the HPSSS noted how by 1930 the ‘Tatarization’ of the Tatarstan Rifle Division was complete, with all of the officers and personnel being Tatars.<sup>53</sup> The extent to which such units had been part of a pro-national development policy is highlighted by the fact that for some, and even for Belorussians, passing through a Belorussian military education had in the mid-1920s meant learning their supposedly native tongue for the first time!<sup>54</sup>

A respondent to the HPSSS, an Azeri, and early graduate of the Transcaucasian Military School from which he graduated in 1926, served in the recently formed Azeri Mountain Rifle Division from 1929 as a commander and was elected secretary of the Party Bureau in Baku. However, in 1932 he claims to have been sidelined for expressing support for national units at a divisional Party conference resulting in accusations of ‘nationalism’ and his being subsequently sent to the 4th Mountain Regiment in Karabakh.<sup>55</sup> The Great Purges saw the final dissolution of the national divisions as Stalin’s personal distrust of many nationalities alongside other elements of the Soviet population was violently expressed. Whether such concerns were unfounded is debatable – a respondent to the HPSSS, an Armenian, describes how the Armenian

Mountain Rifle Division was replaced in April 1931 by NKVD troops in fighting with insurgents opposed to collectivisation – having been deemed unreliable.<sup>56</sup> Not only were some national units deemed to be of suspect reliability during the late 1920s and early 1930s, but also some peasant-dominated units of otherwise reliable nationality during a period in which the regime forcibly collectivised Soviet agriculture. The issue of social origin and promotion has already been raised earlier, but here the issue was not one of bourgeois origin, but origins and sympathies with the wrong part of the peasantry – the rich peasants or *kulaks* – a term which became a catch all for any peasant opposing collectivisation.<sup>57</sup> Particularly vehement and widespread opposition to collectivisation from some national groups almost made them kulaks *en masse* in the eyes of the regime.

One exception to the trend during the 1930s towards the dissolution of national formations was the removal of the bar to military service of Cossacks, who had in many ways symbolised the forces of reaction during the revolutionary year 1917. In a Politburo decree of 20 April 1936, a number of existing cadre and territorial cavalry divisions were renamed as Cossack divisions and a new 13th Don Cossack Territorial Division was formed. Personnel from the Caucasian mountain nationalities were to be removed from what became 10th Terek-Stavropol' Division and formed into a separate regiment that would become part of a cavalry brigade of the mountain peoples.<sup>58</sup> With larger cadre elements than other territorial divisions, and their own uniforms, at a time of mounting international tension it seems that the regime was willing to compromise on ideology in order to harness the legendary military prowess of the Cossack peoples.

Many senior Red Army commanders had a soft spot for the cavalry arm, which as suggested earlier had played a significant role in Soviet victory during the Civil War, and there can be no doubt that the experience of the Civil War of 1917–1921 was the formative military experience for many Soviet military leaders of the 1920s and 1930s. The war of manoeuvre that was the focus of Soviet military theory in the late 1920s may superficially seem progressive, but was in fact in many ways quite the opposite. During the Russian Civil War relatively poorly equipped forces had operated in an environment in which there was usually a flank to go round, and in which cavalry were ascendant. In many ways the Red Army had been able to realise the hopes of many cavalymen during the First World War in the West, for whom the breakthrough allowing cavalry to manoeuvre in the enemy rear came only belatedly. Even with Allied breakthrough in late 1918, it had been the tank that had proven to have



Cavalry at a May Day parade in Khar'kov in 1928. During the 1920s and into the 1930s the cavalry remained the principal manoeuvre arm of the Red Army much as it had been during the Civil War. (RIA Novosti #24980)

the degree of survivability to operate in an environment where a single heavy machine gun could hold up a regiment of cavalry.

For military leaders such as Voroshilov and Budennii, with their more limited intellectual abilities to grasp how the Civil War they fought was not typical of warfare of the era, Soviet military theory of the 1920s developed during a period in which the Red Army lacked modern weapons such as tanks and aircraft. These factors allowed their beloved cavalry to maintain an undeservedly high position in the hierarchy of arms in the Red Army. Voroshilov did at least seem to realise by the mid-1930s that even though substantial cavalry formations might survive the introduction of the tank and armoured cars in large numbers, there could be no going back to the period when the cavalry was the dominant offensive arm. When in August 1937, Budennii all but pleaded with Voroshilov on the subject of the importance of cavalry formations in

the Red Army after the arrest of Tukhachevskii and other mechanisers, Voroshilov was swift to issue a resolution that 'it is necessary to and we will cut cavalry strength'.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, during the 1920s, cavalry had many advantages for a peacetime Red Army, and particularly where industrialisation was in its infancy – horses were more readily available than motor vehicles, and fodder more than petrol. In a still predominantly peasant society, and particularly among some of the Caucasian and Central Asian nationalities, at least crude skills were readily available. For internal security operations that were in many ways similar to many smaller actions of the Civil War, the horse made sense. Rejection of pre-Soviet elite culture had unfortunately led to some loss of more refined horsemanship skills along with the social baggage of the former officer corps, and horse husbandry and day-to-day care of horses seem to have suffered too. During the late 1920s and early 1930s the cavalry arm, that had in 1924 been described as 'an independent arm of the Soviet Armed Forces', remained central to the offensive in developing doctrine. Attacking largely while still mounted, 'strategic cavalry' formations were the primary means to operate at any depth during offensive operations given the absence of tanks. During the 1930s, cavalry units were incorporated into the combined arms schema for offensive operations alongside tanks, playing a central role in what became known as 'Deep Battle'.<sup>60</sup>