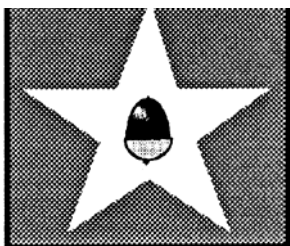


Conflict Studies Research Centre

Dr A Clayton

**Ethnicity & Nationalism
In The Soviet Army
1979-91**

April 1999



D61

This paper was given by Dr Anthony Clayton at the Ninth Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism, ASEN. The theme of the Conference, held at the London School of Economics on 25-26 March 1999, was "Nationalism and War".

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence

ETHNICITY & NATIONALISM IN THE SOVIET ARMY 1979-91

By Dr A Clayton

Although there is, of course, a long history of unrest and indiscipline among non-Russian personnel and units in both the Tsar's and the Soviet Union's armies, time today permits me only to focus in on the last twelve years of the Soviet Union, and to look at the contributory part, but I would suggest an important contributory part, played by soldiers in the break-up of 1991. It is perhaps more about military service rather than war itself. My sources for this have been, in broad outline, Aleksander Alexiev and S Enders Wimbush in their work Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army, and for much of the detail in data extracted from the Soviet press of the years 1987-91. As the Soviets' difficulties increased Pravda and Krasnaya Zvezda and other Soviet periodicals became increasingly frank about, in the words of a July 1988 issue of Aviatsiya I Kosmanavtika, "uncomradely relations, not hitherto considered nice to mention", a small triumph, perhaps, for glasnost' over political correctness.

The political rhetoric was, of course, one of the building of a national Soviet Army, part of the creation of the new Soviet man; military service was to be a school of the nation for this purpose, inculcating a supra-ethnic class-based Soviet patriotism. Ideology was both to replace regional nationalism and at the same time offer a new protection for all ethnicities. To attain this, each of the 16 Military Districts of the old Soviet Union (districts which did not correspond to the boundaries of the 15 constituent republics), had a military commissariat responsible for the biannual draft. These commissariats, often open to favouritism and corruption, were tasked on the one hand to meet the overall policy of drafting personnel into units so as to achieve an ethnic mix and also take men away from their home areas, with, on the other hand, the particular physical and educational needs of particular arms and services. In practice, for example, the Western border units, rocket troops, Air Force and Navy had a higher proportion of Slavs.

This was supposed to be the system, but in the 1980s a number of events occurred to make things difficult. First was the demographic change within the Soviet Union, a change decreasing the percentage of Slavs in the population and increasing the percentage of non-Slavs, in particular Central Asians or Caucasians. A 1988 report noted that in 1970 17% of the draft were Central Asian or Caucasian, but by 1980 the percentage had become 28%, and by 1988 37% - a decline in the most reliable ethnicities and a sharp increase in the least reliable.

In addition, everywhere in the Soviet Union there was a growing anti-militarism among young men; the draft was hated as it led young men into the brutal life of the Soviet Army, a seemingly pointless existence on low pay, no leave and the traditional bullying dedovshchina of the first year conscripts by those in their second year - really sustained, sadistic and humiliating cruelty, one should emphasise, and not the initiation rite horseplay seen in other armies. Many bribed or dodged their way out of the draft, with the result that those caught in it often had records of violent crime, drink, drugs, robbery or assault. The spring draft of 1989 contained 6.5% men with criminal records. By the late 1980s the Republic

authorities in the Baltic Republics, Armenia and Uzbekistan were turning a blind eye to draft evasion.

In theory, the Soviet Army was supposedly Soviet, in practice it was an agent of brutal russification. All commands, manuals and training were in Russian and apart from an occasional (and well-publicised) exception, all senior officers were Slav. Inability of conscripts to understand Russian, or just to understand it adequately, led to barrack room friction and rough hazing, or worse, of non-Russians. Some of the Central Asian recruits were totally illiterate, others had only a poor command of Russian, many were physically unfit or weak. It is clear that the Soviet teenage pre-military training system in schools was not achieving the desired preparatory results in the Asian and Caucasus Republics: in the Baltic Republics conscripts often pretended they knew no Russian even if they did. It has actually been suggested that Gorbachev's December 1988 reductions in the Army were motivated as much to preserve russification in face of the demographic changes as any gesture of peace.

Then, of course, there were the ever increasing ripples of dissent resulting from the Afghanistan operations. Five of the divisions used in the initial incursion into Afghanistan were drawn from the local Turkmenistan Military District. Under strength, they had been topped up with recalled local reservists, readily available and seen, very naively, as likely to be acceptable to the Afghans as fellow Moslems. But many of these had limited military training, as in their period of conscription their poor or nil knowledge of Russian had led them to serve only in labour units, as they were judged unable to be trained in military skills.

The result was the reverse – a catalogue of desertions, black market dealings, some disloyalty and on occasions fraternisation, together with drug abuse, with Central Asian personnel refusing to fight, and coming under abuse, harassment and threats from Slav officers and NCOs. In any case, as part of normal rotation, the heavily Moslem recruited units were withdrawn in 1980 and replaced by units from Russia in Europe.

Let us next touch on what appears to have been happening to non-Slav soldiers from the different Republics during their service, set in the context that I have already mentioned, of dedovshchina and also the incompetence of Soviet regimental officers – Krasnaya Zvezda in January 1989 lamented that “many officers were totally ignorant of other cultures and languages, knew little of their soldiers, and sometimes not even their names”. All this at a time when in the Baltic states and the Caucasus and also Russia itself, there was increasing evidence of aroused nationalism. But when there was trouble in the barrack rooms, where officers seldom ventured, nationalist propaganda was scape-goated by the Slav dominated military hierarchy.

In the Caucasus, there were reports from 1989 onwards of troops in Georgia refusing to serve, several thousand officers applying for discharge, and fighting in barracks breaking out between Armenians and Azeris - a reflection of the Nagorno Karabakh situation. By the spring of 1990 the draft had virtually to be abandoned in Armenia following mass refusals, and an unofficial Armenian National Army was calling for volunteers from trained ex-servicemen to serve in “self-defence regiments”, evidently with some success.

In the Baltic Republics, a coordinated propaganda campaign against the draft had been mounted from 1989 on by nationalists – their rhetoric denounced the Soviet

Army as 'the army of occupation' and the draft as 'forced recruitment for paid murderers to support the Soviet Empire'. Some Latvian conscripts were refusing to learn Russian, calling the Russians "pigs"; in return, harking back to the days of the Second World War Russian abuse of Latvians extended to the term 'fascists'. By 1990 60% of the 5,880 youth eligible were dodging the draft in Lithuania; of the 4,704 who were ethnic Lithuanians only 960 presented themselves. By 1990 the Baltic Military District commander had conceded that up to 20% of the Latvians called up would not have to serve outside the Baltic MD area, a reversal of the previous practice, and in respect of the autumn draft, the percentage had to be increased to 30%. There were also recruitment problems in Western Ukraine, where Ukrainian nationalism was traditionally strong.

In respect of the Central Asian Republics the situation was different but comparable. There was virtually no specific Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan nationalism calling for an independent Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan republic – Stalin's drawing of the frontiers of the Asian Republics encapsulating within each of them substantial ethnic minorities to act as a constraint on any secessionist ambitions by the majority ethnicities precluded this. What one sees is an aroused Moslem consciousness, a reaction against plain straight Russian racism – terms such as ploskomordyi (flat snouts), bosoglazyi (slit eyes), chernozhopyi (black arses) being used by the Russians. Perhaps also there was a resentment against the dispensation given to Moslems in respect of food and drink while in military service, the very fact that they had had to be given this dispensation by Moslem clerics. The Central Asians were subjected to especial persecution and humiliation, and being given the dirty jobs to do; in the barracks the Russians ate first and took the best bed spaces. The Central Asians were stereotyped as stupid and the large numbers who were unable to speak Russian were despatched off to construction units. In response many Central Asians pretended not to know Russian even if they did, or refused to learn it. Frictions over girls and dating occurred, and on a few occasions there were actual shoot-outs. Suicides also happened. The same treatment and discrimination were applied to recruits from the Volga Republic areas, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Officers of BRIXMIS, the British Military mission in East Germany, noticed how often the small Mongolian soldiers that formed the crews of tank regiments on account of their small size, were given cold and unpleasant jobs when not in their tanks, such as lonely guarding of firing ranges. Why did the Russians increasingly behave in this way? I am reminded of Mannoni's 1950s seminal study of the psychology of frightened colonialism in Madagascar, Prospero and Caliban: taunt the subject people until they erupt in violence, then repress them with even greater violence, to assert your domination and reassure yourself.

One reaction common to non-Slav soldiers serving in the Soviet Army comes through quite clearly. Soldiers from the same ethnicity or culture formed little self-defence groups in regiments and units which amounted to small proto-nationalist cells. These often became involved in brawls with Russians and other Slavs.

In sum, the Army may have been an ideal for a unity for some, particularly among officers many of whom were dismayed when the ideal failed. But for most of the ordinary non-Slav barrack room conscripts the Army of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had come to represent only russification and institutionalised racism rather than the protection to which they felt they had the right. Their resentment against this played its part in the collapse of the Soviet state.

The Conflict Studies Research **Centre**

Directorate General Development and Doctrine
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346
Or 412375
Fax : (44) 1276 686880

E mail : csrc.dgd&d@gtnet.gov.uk