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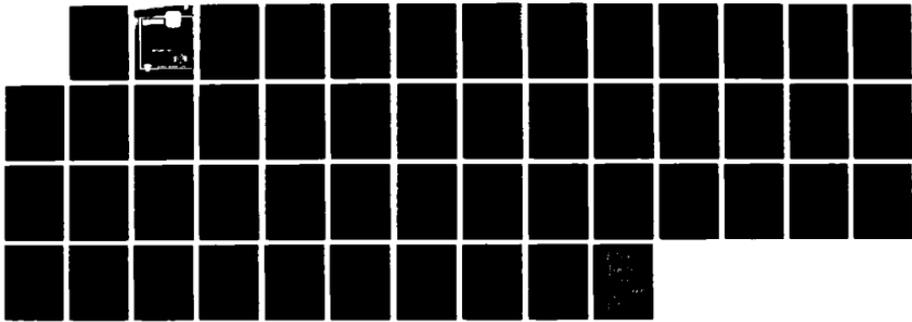
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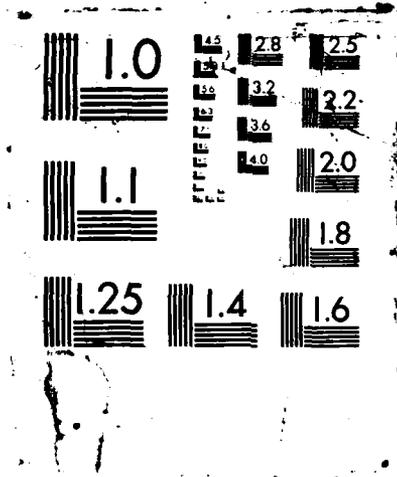
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THE NATIONAL ARMY COLLEGE AND THE SOVIET MILITARY

BY

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

THE NATIONALITIES PROBLEM AND THE SOVIET MILITARY

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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U.S. Army War College  
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ABSTRACT

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# THE NATIONALITIES PROBLEM AND THE SOVIET MILITARY

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union is a very large and extremely diverse country. It occupies an immense area containing one-sixth of the earth's land mass and spreads across eleven time zones. It has a population of 262 million, consisting of over 100 (some say up to 130) different nationalities and ethnic groups of varying population size. The Soviet Union developed as a result of centuries of conquest and annexation of various racial and ethnic groups, many against their will. Today, these groups, not having been adequately integrated into the greater Soviet society, possess a growing nationalistic spirit and represent a significant problem for the Soviet Union. Given the size and the diversity of this population, it would appear natural to investigate the impact of such a varied population composition on Soviet military forces. Nationality dynamics in the Soviet Union are increasing, making this an issue that cannot be ignored by the central government. This paper investigates the impact of the multinational character of the Soviet State from a military perspective by examining the past and current situations.

As the dominant ethnic group, the Russians have traditionally occupied the key military, political and economic positions and have historically formed the power base of the

Soviet Union. Dramatic changes occurring in population growth among the nationalities may force modifications to this system. The Soviets face increasing challenges by the nationality groups on issues dealing with national identity, religious freedom, economic opportunities and basic human rights. While affecting Soviet society as a whole, the nationality issue cannot help but have an impact on the Soviet military which is a multi-ethnic organization. It is evident that the ethnic forces at work in society carry over directly into the armed forces.

History shows that while the Russians and other Slavic groups traditionally ruled the country, they always relied upon the other national groups to assist in the defense of the country. The nationalities played important roles during the revolution and in World War II. The extent to which nationalism has and will impact, positively or negatively, on the military and its combat capability, and the future trends on this important issue form the basis of this paper.

The search for an answer to the nationalities problem was one of the major preoccupations of the former Tsarist regimes as it is now for the current Soviet leadership. Even when the Russian regime under Peter the Great instituted a modern conscription policy in 1699-1700, most non-Russians in the military service continued to serve only as volunteers outside the framework of the regular army in units designated as "troops of different nationalities."<sup>1</sup>

In 1874 under Alexander II, the military underwent numerous reforms and these units of different nationalities were

eliminated. Conscription was officially made universal. However, the Imperial attitude towards non-Slavs and military service continued. Only those ethnic groups considered loyal to the Tsar were drafted. Unreliable elements (Caucasians, North Caucasians and Central Asians) were excused or exempted from military service. This racial attitude resulted in an army that was more than 75-percent Slavic. Even this universal conscription did not fall evenly upon the remaining population. Primary school graduates were required to serve four years; university graduates only six months. Clergy, physicians and teachers were totally exempt, as were selected nationalities, including those from Central Asia, Siberia, the far north and certain Caucasian ethnic groups. Over half of the eligible age group was exempt.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the regime raised some volunteer units from the North Caucasian nationalities and Caucasians were also drafted. However, Central Asians were exempt from the conscription and military service until 1916, when the situation became so critical that all resources, regardless of nationality, were called into service.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Susan L. Curran and Dmitry Ponomareff, Managing the Ethnic Factor in the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces, p. v.

2. Ellen Jones, Red Army and Society, p. 34.

## CHAPTER II

### NATIONAL UNITS IN THE SOVIET MILITARY DURING WORLD WAR I AND THE REVOLUTION

At the beginning of World War I, the Russian empire had an Army of 3.1 million men with an additional half-million in reserve. During the course of the war, Russia's management of the military and its ability to commit all the resources of the empire to defense were both severely taxed and inadequate. While Russia did possess a numerical superiority over the Germans, this was more than offset by the low technical level of her weaponry.<sup>1</sup> In countering the German threat, the Tsarist regime raised voluntary national units to bolster its army. For the very first time, the regime was also forced to draft Central Asians into the regular Russian Army. The formation of these various national volunteer units from nationalities previously excluded from conscription demonstrated the Tsarist government's ability to manipulate the hostilities of the non-Russian groups under its control towards an external aggressor (the Central Powers) and to rally their support and involvement in the war.<sup>2</sup> Armenian volunteer units numbering 10,000 men were also formed and fought in the Caucasus and supported Allied Armies in the Middle East. Another voluntary unit known as the Wild Division was raised from the tribes of Turkmenia and the North Caucasus.<sup>3</sup>

As Russian casualties began to increase during 1915, other ethnic units were formed. Among the most famous of these were

the Latvian rifle units. Ultimately, these Latvian units grew to a force of eight regiments, distinguished themselves in the course of the war and later played a decisive role in the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>4</sup> As the war dragged on, the government gave in to pressures to form additional national units. The fact that they did this and that these units were widely accepted demonstrates the desperately low levels of Slavic manpower that existed. This was a significant risk for the government to take in that it further enhanced ethnic pride and fueled the political ambitions of various parts of the Empire.

By mid-1916 further manpower shortages caused the government, for the first time, to conduct nonvoluntary enlistment of Central Asians (Muslims). Distrust of this national group was evidenced by their assignment to rear areas with employment as support troops, thereby freeing up Slavic units for combat at the front.<sup>5</sup> Although the implementation of this nonvoluntary enlistment policy was handled poorly, it was at this point that one begins to find some basis for the Russian distrust of Soviet national groups. The number of conscripts demanded was unrealistically high. It occurred at the height of the cotton season when the financial security, and often the survival, of many Central Asian families depended on having enough labor in the field. This, coupled with a reluctance to serve in the Russian Army and a belief that they would be forced to eat pork and be contaminated by association with infidels, led to the Central Asian rebellion of 1916.<sup>6</sup> While the disorder was put down and the Central Asians did

fulfill their military service, contempt for non-Slavs was reinforced.

When the Tsarist regime was overthrown in February 1917, the Russian empire began to crumble. This process continued and gained even more force after the Bolshevik coup in October. By the time the Bolsheviks took power in November 1917, the Imperial Army had disintegrated completely due to the pressures of the war, Tsarist mismanagement and the ill effects of Bolshevik antimilitary propaganda.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the Bolsheviks were not in such good position militarily. They could rely solely upon the Red Workers Militia which, while strongly motivated, was poorly armed and lacked necessary military training. This force rapidly collapsed in May 1918 during a battlefield engagement with Czechoslovak legionnaires who were fighting for the Whites.<sup>8</sup> There were some naval forces available to the Bolsheviks, but they did not represent a significant force and were also deemed to be politically unreliable. Somehow, by a quirk of fate, many of the national units that survived fighting the Germans were able to equip and form themselves into solid and efficient fighting units.<sup>9</sup> In the very turbulent period of the Civil War, before the Bolsheviks were able to finally consolidate power and control, a number of nationalities, such as the Ukrainians, the Latvians, the Lithuanian-Belorussians and the Estonians, were able to form their own military units. Each was trying to achieve some degree of independence from the new regime. These units sided with both the Reds and the Whites, depending on who was offering

the various ethnic groups the greatest opportunity to achieve their own individual national aspirations.<sup>10</sup> Many White (Slavic) leaders openly demonstrated their distaste for these minorities, while the Reds indicated a desire to promote national self-determination. White dissatisfaction with the nationalities stemmed from the White goal of restoring the Imperial Empire and some form of monarchy. The nationalities were striving for independence and national recognition and threatened to pull the empire apart. The end result was that the Reds were more successful in recruiting the support of the nationalities which greatly facilitated their defeat of the Whites.

The previously mentioned Latvian units had extremely high standards of discipline and unit cohesion. They performed important military and police roles in the early days of the revolution. They reportedly guarded the top leadership, patrolled the Kremlin, provided detachments for the secret police and are alleged to have participated in the execution of the Romanov family. Latvian units were used extensively by the Red Army in numerous sectors throughout the war.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the difference between the Latvians and Lithuanians. The Lithuanian population was described as being hostile to outside rule and as lacking trustworthy recruits. The western national units began to exhibit nationalistic tendencies. This development was unacceptable to Lenin and the Russian military leaders. Ultimately, these were broken up and reorganized into units meeting Moscow's national and strategic

needs.

In the Transcaucasus, national units fought for their own specific national goals and do not appear to have collaborated in the establishment of Soviet power.<sup>12</sup> They were absorbed in other local conflicts ongoing in the region. Additionally, the various nationalities involved were primarily concerned with defending their lands from any outside forces, Red and White alike. Political ineptitude, insufficient strength and regional fragmentation were the key factors that permitted the Red Army to succeed in the Transcaucasus.<sup>13</sup>

It is ironic that the Bolsheviki achieved one of their greatest successes with the Muslims of Central Asia. In Muslim territories the October revolution was not perceived as an historic upheaval which shook and changed the face of the world; in fact it went practically unnoticed.<sup>14</sup> Muslim nationalists moved quickly to form a large independent Muslim Army. The Bolsheviki, in an attempt to rapidly neutralize this force, used repressive measures which drove the Muslims to side with the whites for a while. The Muslims wanted autonomy but the Whites refused to budge from their insistence on one, united Russia. This, coupled with the White's ruthless treatment of the Muslims - pillaging their villages - and an ill-fated White decision to integrate a Muslim corps into a White Army unit, combined to encourage Muslims to join and remain on the side of the Red forces.

The fact that native officers and commissars commanded these Muslim units bothered the Bolsheviki in that they

constituted a potentially powerful base for anti-regime activities. When segregated into national units, the Muslims were exposed more to nationalistic ideas than to those of Lenin. Consequently, beginning in 1920, these Muslim units were gradually disbanded. The disbandment of all such national units by 1923 resulted in a significant reduction of the nationalities in combat forces.<sup>15</sup>

History shows that the nationalities played an important role during the civil war. With only a few unimportant exceptions, all Muslim nationalities ended the war fighting side by side with the Reds. Two popular uprisings led by religious Muslim conservatives during the civil war apparently had a significant, long reaching, negative impact on Soviet strategy involving the Muslim world. Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders, in spite of the overall Muslim contribution, continued to feel that their Muslim allies were unreliable and could not be trusted, thereby setting the stage for today's situation.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Jones, p. 35.
2. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 7.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 8.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 9.
8. S. Enders Wimbush, Soviet Nationalities in Strategic Perspective, p. 37.

9. Ibid.
10. Curran and Ponomareff, p. v.
11. Ibid., p. 10.
12. Ibid., p. 12.
13. Ibid., p. 14.
14. Wimbush, p. 39.
15. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 20.

CHAPTER III  
FORMING NATIONAL UNITS, 1924-1938

In early 1924 after M. V. Frunze succeeded Trotsky and became Commander of the Red Army, a complete reform program was introduced throughout the army. One of the reform measures was the formation of national units from nationalities other than the Great Russians.<sup>1</sup> It was felt that the traditional problem with non-Slavic troops could be overcome through the successful employment of such national units.<sup>2</sup> One effect of this addition of national units to the Red Army was to make a large group of men available for military service who otherwise probably could not have been used because of language difficulties. There was also a feeling that the presence of national military units could serve long range revolutionary goals.<sup>3</sup> By forming division-sized units from the nationalities, the Soviets hoped to strengthen the party's revolutionary, internationalistic aims.

By the fall of 1924, Frunze could claim initial success for his program, as nine national divisions had been formed.<sup>4</sup> While initially there were problems securing enough national officers for the various command and staff positions, it was possible to form units in areas where the people had previously served in the Imperial Russian Army. National Ukrainian and White Russian divisions were formed in short order along with independent cavalry regiments in Georgia, Daghestan and Bokhara.

In areas where the population had never served in the Imperial Russian Army, regular Red Army officers were assigned to act as military instructors.

The lack of information after 1925 on the further development of national units seems to indicate that further expansion did not occur.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note the difference in relationships between the political commissars and unit commanders in Russian or partially Russian units and national units. In Russian units the commissars were relieved of their daily routine control of the military administration and economic functions of the commander, remaining responsible only for political guidance, party work and the moral and political state of the unit.<sup>6</sup> This did not apply to the national units where the commissars retained tight control over the unit commanders.<sup>7</sup> It appears as though the party leaders did not trust the national units with as much freedom as was given to the Russian units.

Major difficulties were encountered in the areas of general education and language training. Unfortunately for the Soviets, the lack of politically reliable non-Russian teaching staff, educational materials in the native languages and Russian instructors conversant in the native languages hampered the educational effort designed to mold reliable national units.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1930s, serious problems, including resurgent nationalism, began to arise within the national units. Nationalism proved to be a powerful force which could not be ignored. National units, along with other territorial units,

were completely disbanded in 1938 and their resources distributed throughout the Red Army.

There were many explanations offered for this action. Some feel it was because the national units were never considered completely loyal. Others felt it was done in concert with the general purges of separatist nationalistic institutions and individuals which were being conducted during this period. Still others said that ethnically mixed units could better meet the task of further strengthening the national defense, friendship and combat cooperation of the nationalities in the USSR.<sup>9</sup> Marshal Voroshilov told the Party Congress in 1939 that the territorial units had been disbanded because they were no longer militarily expedient in the face of modern military tactics and equipment<sup>10</sup>-- massive infantry attacks had been replaced by combined infantry, armor and artillery tactics supported by aircraft and airborne troops. The national militia units no longer met the military requirement of the 1930s.<sup>11</sup>

This solved the educational problems listed above and the problem of finding or providing sufficient numbers of qualified national officers to fill the various command and staff positions in the national units. The Party also hoped that this would eliminate any danger that foreign propaganda might pose in an attempt to foster dissention within the USSR by playing upon national differences, thereby causing national units to become disloyal in time of war.

#### ENDNOTES

1. John Erickson, The Soviet High Command, p. 184.

2. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 21.
3. D. Fedotoff White, The Growth of the Red Army, p. 272.
4. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 21.
5. Ibid., p. 22.
6. White, p. 235.
7. Erickson, p. 198.
8. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 23.
9. Ibid., p. 24.
10. White, pp. 360-361.
11. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 25.

CHAPTER IV  
SOVIET NATIONALITIES IN WORLD WAR II

Reorganizations instituted at the end of the 1930s resulted in a Red Army that was supposed to be a nationally integrated military force. The Red Army entered World War II on June 22, 1941 when the Germans initiated Operation Barbarossa. While national units had technically gone out of existence several years earlier, many regular army units had only recently been reorganized on a truly multi-ethnic basis.<sup>1</sup> During the summer and fall of 1941, the Germans advanced rapidly. All members of the Red Army, both Slav and non-Slav, retreated in the face of the German offensive. The Germans achieved remarkable victories and, by the end of 1941, they occupied nearly 500,000 square miles of Soviet territory and had taken over 3 million prisoners.<sup>2</sup>

NATIONALITIES IN THE SOVIET ARMY

This catastrophic situation forced the Soviets to rethink their policies regarding the nationalities in general and the formation of national units in particular. The nationalities were put to a severe test in World War II. Despite reservations concerning their reliability, the Soviets had no real choice, if they were to survive, other than to once again create national units in order to mobilize maximum resources to win the war effort.<sup>3</sup> The Soviets logically could take no other course of

action. Since most of the Slavic regions had fallen under German occupation, the only significant sources of manpower available to reconstitute the Red Army were in the non-Slavic regions or national republics.<sup>4</sup> In December 1941 Stalin decided to form national units in an attempt to employ all available means to halt the Wehrmacht. The Soviets were forced to shift their mobilization base to the east. For most of the war many non-Russian nationalities - particularly the Asians - were overrepresented in the military.<sup>5</sup>

In early 1942 the first steps were taken to form these units. Groups of national officers and sergeants in existing units were pulled out of the front lines and sent to their national areas to begin the process of forming national units. These units were not the purely national units of the 1920s and 30s but had a heavy Russian influence, particularly in officer personnel and in the use of the Russian language in training and daily operations. It is difficult to establish the exact number of national units that were formed. One Soviet source puts the number at 80 divisions and brigades, while another states that 42 national divisions and approximately 20 brigades were raised.<sup>6</sup> Traditional Soviet secrecy and their general reluctance to acknowledge anything other than a united populace makes this type of information difficult to confirm. As the Soviets began to assume the offensive, the percentages of Slavs in the military began to increase. This resulted from the liberation of previously German-occupied territory. In late 1944 a decision was made to break up the national units and

integrate them with Slavic troops.

A significant number of divisions and other units were organized containing large percentages of non-Russians. The Soviet government demonstrated that it was able to rally its various national groups in the common defense of the state. This is particularly key since much of the Slavic population was under German occupation and therefore unavailable to support the country.

The measurement of the combat effectiveness of national units is difficult at best to ascertain. Data concerning the ethnic composition of the various national units is not available, so that while national units did participate in many critical battles and in campaigns to regain territorial control, it does not necessarily prove that substantial numbers of nationalities were involved.<sup>7</sup> Yet in the end minority soldiers must be given some measure of credit. Non-Russians comprised 30 percent of the units on the southern front in July 1942, while almost one-third of the forces at Stalingrad were national soldiers. It would appear obvious that, in spite of their implied lack of combat effectiveness, the USSR could not have won World War II without the substantial participation of both non-Russian and non-Slavic troops.<sup>8</sup>

#### NATIONALITIES IN THE GERMAN ARMY

There is yet another aspect to the military performance of Soviet nationalities during World War II. The dissatisfaction of the nationalities with Soviet Russia was such that

substantial numbers fought for the Germans during World War II. According to several sources, the estimate of those who were recruited and fought against other Soviet forces is put at somewhere between 700,000 and 1.4 million - not an insignificant force.<sup>9</sup> To some extent it is surprising that this took place. The Germans adopted a brutal and oppressive policy and an attitude of contempt against most of the Soviet population and territory that they occupied. The fact that the conquered would fight against their own countrymen under these conditions is somewhat startling at first glance.

The rapid German advances into Russia were confined primarily to the Western USSR, the Ukraine, the Baltic states, Belorussia and the Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> Initially, the Germans were welcomed somewhat in the role of liberators. They were received with open arms. In some locations the local populace staged anti-Soviet uprisings. The fortunes of war had provided the opportunity for many of these non-Russian nationalities to break the artificial bonds tying them to the State.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, large numbers of non-Slavic POWs volunteered for service and fought on the German side.

There are several reasons generally espoused as to why these non-Russian Soviets choose to join the Germans. First, their anti-Soviet feelings were so strong that it overcame their distaste and hard feelings for the German occupiers. Secondly, there were promises of liberation made, particularly for the southern-tier borderlands.<sup>12</sup> Many of the regions saw the opportunity, under German occupation and a subsequently

hoped-for victory, to resurface popular national liberation movements that had sprung up during the Bolshevik revolution but were brutally put down.<sup>13</sup> In the case of those who were POWs, it was probably more a matter of personal survival. Many POWs volunteered readily to escape the dreadful conditions of the German prison camps. Interestingly, as German prospects for winning the war began to decrease, so did the numbers of POWs volunteering to fight for the Germans.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that, for the greater part, the Germans failed to cultivate and take advantage of this situation is simply amazing. Much of it can be attributed to Nazi theories that the Slavs were subhumans.<sup>15</sup> Nazi plans for the use of conquered Soviet territories called for up to 50 million people to be deported in order to provide "Lebensraum" for Germanization. There were a few in the Nazi hierarchy who supported the exact opposite. This small group felt that the Soviet nationalities should in fact be given preferential treatment, that their anti-Soviet feelings should be exploited and mobilized to support the attainment of Nazi goals and be used as a form of protection against any future Soviet expansion.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately for the Allies and unfortunately for the Germans, the advice of this group went unheeded.

It is interesting to note the change in Nazi racial attitudes and policies as the war in Russia progressed. Initially, Hitler rejected any proposal that would allow non-Germans to bear arms. This was based on expressed Nazi contempt for the Soviet people and the feeling they would make

political demands after the war and ultimately turn on the Germans. As time passed and German casualties mounted, the German position began to change. Gradually, the practice of recruiting and utilizing the local populace in Wehrmacht or SS units became fairly widespread so that by the summer of 1942, one million Soviet citizens were militarily supporting and serving in the German Army.<sup>17</sup>

Some regions were more willing to assist the Germans than others. In the Ukraine the people were so totally brutalized that prospects for popular support were gradually eroded. In the Baltic states, Nazi racial ideology and the conscription of the Balts for forced labor in Germany resulted in a steady loss of support from the people. It was in the Caucasus that the Germans received the bulk of their minority support. Here, different policies were applied including the granting of self-government privileges, implementation of agrarian reforms, avoiding oppressive administration methods and allowing religious freedom.<sup>18</sup> Another major factor appears to have been the fact that control of the Caucasus never passed to German civilian authorities, but rather it remained under military jurisdiction. The military leadership apparently took a realistic view of the situation and deemed it efficient to use all resources available to support German forces and achieve the war aims.

What then was the extent to which the various Soviet nationalities supported the German war effort? Non-Russian Soviet support or collaboration took place in three basic

forms. First, they were recruited directly into Wehrmacht units and were known as auxiliaries. Collectively, they were called "Hiwis" (short for Hilfswillige or "willing helpers"). For all practical purposes, the Hiwis appeared to be regular German soldiers in that they often wore German uniforms and received the same basic pay and food rations as did the German soldiers. While most of the Hiwis served in noncombat roles (e.g. truck drivers, medical personnel and ammunition carriers), many also fought in combat units.<sup>19</sup> It is estimated that the number of Hiwis ranged from 600,000 to 1.4 million.<sup>20</sup> The second group consisted of non-Russian nationals used to form internal security units for protection against partisans and to serve as local police forces to maintain law and order. By late 1941 the Germans were occupying an area over one million square miles.<sup>21</sup> Even with a force of 146 divisions, they simply were not able to effectively control the broad expanses in the rear area. The use of Soviet nationals to combat partisan activity and to provide some measure of law and order locally freed up significant numbers of German forces for combat duty. No information was available to serve as an estimate of the number of nationals employed in this effort. The last major group were the national military units composed virtually in their entirety of Soviet non-Russians. Formed at first into battalions and later as full strength divisions, these units fought on line at the front, shoulder to shoulder with the German Army.<sup>22</sup> Although there were several different national military units (Latvian, Estonian, etc.) the largest numbers were recruited

from Turkic and Caucasian volunteers and later became known collectively as the East Legions.<sup>23</sup> Estimates place the size of the East Legions at approximately 250,000-350,000 soldiers. Despite having to overcome formidable difficulties, prejudice and ill treatment on the part of the Germans, these units still managed to perform adequately under the most adverse conditions. The fact that they did so is more of an indication of their strong anti-Soviet rather than pro-German sentiments. The extensive use of these non-Russian Soviets undoubtedly was a key factor that allowed the Germans to prolong the war.

There is no doubt that this participation caused the Soviet authorities considerable anxiety. One Soviet Azeri division had to be withdrawn from the front lines because of reliability problems.<sup>24</sup> In the case of the Kalmyks, a large number were determined to have fought with the Germans. During 1943 and 1944, the entire Kalmyk, Karachai, Chechen, Ingush, Crimean Tartar and Balkar populations were deported to Central Asia and Siberia for their perceived and actual disloyalty to the Soviet Union. At the time of the deportation, all remaining soldiers from these nationalities were systematically removed from Soviet military units.<sup>25</sup> Is it any wonder that today's Soviet leaders cast a jaundiced eye towards the various ethnic groups when one remembers their lack of patriotism during the time the very survival of the Motherland was at stake?

#### ENDNOTES

1. Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone with Captain Raymond Sturgeon, Red Army as the Instrument of National Integration, p. 6.

2. Wimbush, p. 61.
3. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 26.
4. Ibid.
5. Jones, p. 186.
6. Curran and Ponomareff, p. 27.
7. Ibid., p. 34.
8. Jones, pp. 187-88.
9. Alex Alexiev, Soviet Nationalities in German Wartime Strategy, p. vi.
10. Wimbush, p. 61.
11. Alexander Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces - An Executive Summary, p. 4.
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21. Sam J. Newland, Cossacks in Field Grey: A History of the Recruitment of the Cossacks into the German Army 1941-1945, p. 27.
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CHAPTER V  
CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

A significant body of literature has been generated showing that during World War II the nationalities were neither effective nor efficient combatants and were of questionable loyalty. The World War II experience did nothing to strengthen the Soviets' confidence in the loyalty and reliability of their national groups.<sup>1</sup> What is the status of nationalism in the Soviet Union today? How are the non-Russian Soviets faring? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at a variety of factors. Not all of them necessarily are military in nature. However, I have assumed that if a problem or dissatisfaction exists and can be documented within the Soviet society, then this will have a distinct carryover into the Soviet armed forces.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Soviet Union is a closed society. The very fact the nationalities issue is being acknowledged publicly as a problem bears testimony to the current seriousness of the situation. That nationality relations is a sensitive issue almost goes without saying. When making his report to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev publicly stated that the development or improvement of nationality relations was of enormous importance

for the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> His approach to the problem could be described as less Russo-centric than previous Soviet leaders. During his speech, Gorbachev spoke of a readiness to consider expanding the powers of the republic and that the all-Union ministries should be given a greater territorial bias, while at the same time he chided the republics for failing to pull their fair share of the economic planning and management burden and further commented on their low efficiency level, specifically citing Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. With their growing populations, the Central Asian republics are beginning to absorb more and more resources without a corresponding increase in productivity.

The multinational nature of the Soviet Union remains a definite liability for the Soviet leadership. In an article published by Soviet Academician Yulian Bromlei, he singled out the Central Asians as the first and foremost problem area.<sup>3</sup> The problems highlighted by Bromlei in his article include pressures from Central Asian and other less developed republics for more investment, the inefficiency of Central Asian economies, the demographic trends resulting from the growth of the Central Asian population and the low numbers of Central Asians in the industrial work force. While these problems are not new, it is of great interest to note the attention being given to them publicly. On 14 August 1986, Pravda published an editorial entitled "Loyalty to the Friendship of the Peoples." When Pravda prints editorials on nationality relations, this serves as a distinct indicator of the Party's viewpoint at the

moment. The article stresses the Party's intolerance of nationalistic views and the need for the utmost sensitivity when dealing with nationality-related matters.<sup>4</sup> An interesting point of this specific article is that it refers to the existence of conflict situations in nationality relations. Prior to this, Pravda avoided the use of the term conflict when dealing with the nationality issue. This shows that the nationalities problem still exists and it is coming out of the Soviet closet.

#### POPULATION TRENDS

The previous section mentioned a change in Soviet population growth. As of the 1979 census, there were some 262 million people living in the Soviet Union. About half this number are non-Russians. There are more than 100 distinct nationalities and almost as many different languages. The Soviet Union is currently undergoing a significant demographic change. While the population of Western USSR is experiencing a zero or perhaps even a negative growth rate, that of the southern and southeastern (Asiatic and Turkic-Muslim) regions has literally exploded. For example, while the major Slavic groups grew by 19 percent during the period 1959-1979, the non-Russians grew by 47 percent with some of the peoples of Central Asia exhibiting a growth rate of nearly 100 percent.<sup>5</sup> Indications are that the Turkic-Muslims of Central Asia will, by the year 2000, comprise as much as 30 percent of the manpower resources available for Soviet military service and that the

ethnic Russians will be a distinct minority.

To what do the experts attribute this shift in demographics? Actually, it is the result of a number of factors. Most obvious is the previously mentioned difference in birth rates. Whereas in 1979 the Slavs accounted for just over 52 percent of the Soviet population, by the end of this century they will represent less than 48 percent of the total.<sup>6</sup> Abortions, readily available in Western USSR, have become a principal means of contraception. High rates of female alcoholism are a major cause of infant deaths and birth defects. Both alcohol and abortions are traditionally shunned by the Central Asians. Urbanization and increased female education have combined to have a negative effect on the Slavic birth rate. Simplified divorce procedures and the breakdown of the family unit seem to have had a greater societal impact on the Russians than on the Central Asians. Since 1964, the death rate among Slavs has increased while the Muslim death rate has declined.<sup>7</sup>

How will this shift in Soviet population growth impact on the military? The shrinking Slavic manpower pool means that the annual requirements of an increasing sophisticated and technological military force must be met by greater numbers of less educated, less technically oriented, less urbanized males from the backward regions, many of which cannot speak Russian.<sup>8</sup> The current western USSR attitude towards these non-Slavic Soviets is that they are unreliable and untrustworthy. The hard truth is that by the year 1995 to 2000,

between 25 and 30 percent of the draftees coming into the Soviet Army will be from the Muslim regions of the USSR and the Russian/Slavic manpower pool will gradually comprise a smaller percentage of the force.

#### LANGUAGE

Russian is the official language of command in the Soviet armed forces.<sup>9</sup> Just how meaningful this is remains to be seen. Even though the Soviet government has proclaimed Russian to be the state language since 1917, the 1970 census showed that it simply is not the case. According to this census, only seven percent of the rural Uzbeks could speak Russian fluently.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the census revealed that the number of those studying in their native language increased in all non-Slavic republics, while the number of students studying Russian declined in two republics. It is extremely difficult for us as Westerners to conceive of a country so large that it is comprised of more than one hundred separate and distinct nationalities speaking 130 languages.<sup>11</sup> The Russian language deficiency is typified in a statement by the Uzbek SSR Minister of Education who acknowledged that the teaching of Russian in a number of schools has deteriorated.<sup>12</sup> Strong support has been voiced publicly for the use of the Belorussian language in local schools and on the broader issue of the future of Belorussian culture and national identity.<sup>13</sup> In the Ukraine they are pushing for the Ukrainian language to be officially recognized and for an overall improvement in the status of their native

tongue.<sup>14</sup> Still another article laments the linguistic shortcomings of Tadzhik draftees.<sup>15</sup> And finally, the military themselves publicly admit that many of the organizational problems they encounter are due to the inability of soldiers and sailors from the various ethnic groups to speak and understand Russian and to communicate with superiors and peers alike.<sup>16</sup> From this brief discussion of the language controversy in the Soviet Union at large and the language deficiency specifically within the Soviet military, it is apparent that communication problems might easily arise which may impair the effectiveness of military organization and operational readiness.

#### RELIGION

Just as the Soviet Union is widely diversified in its cultural and ethnic composition, the same holds true for its religious makeup. While communism espouses atheism, the non-Russians embrace a number of religions which include Eastern Orthodoxy, Eastern Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Sunnite and Shiite Islam, Judaism, Ismailis (Nazarit), Armenian Georgorians, Buddhists, Buddhist-Lamaites, Nestorian Christians and Animists.<sup>17</sup> These religious differences intensify the national divisions along which they are mostly associated. The party is painfully aware of the effects of religious beliefs and has taken steps to counter their impact. Atheist indoctrination in the Armed Forces is considered to be an integral part of educating military personnel towards accepting communist ethics and morality, developing a conscientious attitude towards

military service, instilling a sense of Soviet patriotism and developing fighting qualities to insure a high degree of combat readiness.<sup>18</sup> The party teaches that there is no place for neutrality or compromises in the struggle between a scientific and religious view of the world. Just how successful the party and the military will be, remain to be seen. During a number of recent republican party congresses, the status of religion and religious practices in the various republics was discussed. What emerges from all the comments is that religion is not on the decline among the traditionally Muslim peoples who continue to practice the beliefs of their ancestors.<sup>19</sup> The controversy over the moral value of religion in the Soviet Union shows that while Soviet authorities are willing to grant limited freedom of speech on the subject, they are not yet ready to relinquish their concern about what is perceived to be an obvious attempt to counter official Soviet ideology.<sup>20</sup> Considering the ill-treatment and repression of Muslims for years and the complexities of the Islamic world on its southern borders, the Kremlin must view with concern the rapidly growing Muslim population in its southern regions. It is from this strongly religious group that substantial numbers of the future military personnel and laborers must be drawn.

The information presented thus far in this chapter highlights some of the more common differences and reasons for these differences between the ethnic Russians and Slavs and their non-Slavic, non-Russian fellow citizens. The extent to which the nationalities problem pervades the daily life of

Soviet society is quite apparent. The various nationality groups are continuously subjected to a significant amount of racial and ethnic discrimination. Since the Soviets use conscription of eligible draft age males taken from the population at large, with only minimal use of draft deferments, to meet their military manpower requirements, it seems logical that the resultant Soviet forces would therefore represent a microcosm of the overall Soviet society. Therefore, since the Soviets tout their military as a multinational organization and an integrator for the Soviet society, it would appear obvious that there might be some translation of the societal problems into the Soviet Armed Forces. What follows is a brief discussion of several prominent aspects of the nationalities problem in today's Soviet forces.

#### STATIONING PRACTICES

At the present time, all nationalities are assigned to ethnically integrated units. Personnel are usually assigned according to the principle of extraterritoriality. This means that persons must serve in a region that is away from their native republic.<sup>21</sup> This is not a new practice but rather an adaptation of Imperial Russian practices. In the days of the Tsar, local authorities often used military forces to put down peasant disturbances. Distant stationing eliminated the possibility that a soldier might encounter friends or relatives in such circumstances and refuse to follow the orders of his superiors.<sup>22</sup> There appear to be no national units at this

time. That the Soviet regime has continued the concept of extraterritorial stationing lends credence to the belief that a large, reliable armed force is maintained, among other reasons, for emergencies involving internal policing and control duties. The possibility that the army may have to be used to put down a disturbance by a sector of the Soviet population has been an important factor influencing the retention of the current stationing policy by the Party.<sup>23</sup> From the Soviet perspective, extraterritoriality serves other useful purposes. It forces a soldier to make friends with and rely more upon his fellow soldiers. The further a soldier is from his home, the less likely he is to desert his unit. It also helps to keep the soldier from establishing any ties with the local populace. Local contact is also made difficult since there is a conscious attempt to keep military units and installations away from population centers.<sup>24</sup> Also of interest is the fact that most border troops are Russian. It is speculated that they are trusted more than the other ethnic groups. No one from a republic with ethnic kin directly across a border would be allowed to serve in the Border Forces of that republic. Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians and other nationalities are not trusted at all and never serve in the Border Forces.<sup>25</sup>

#### ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF THE ARMY

Soviet military leadership does not feel compelled to insure that proportionate ethnic representation exists in all units. The greatest differences in the ethnic composition of

units lies between combat and noncombat units. It is felt that nationalities and those with low levels of Russian fluency are predominantly found in construction and rear service units. Slavic nationalities are found to comprise at least 80 percent of the Soviet combat units whereas the number of non-Slavs in construction units generally reaches 90 percent or more.<sup>26</sup> Assignment of non-Slavs to highly technical branches such as the Strategic Rocket Force, the Air Force and the Navy is extremely limited and in most cases they are restricted to only support duties in these technical fields.<sup>27</sup> In the noncommissioned officer corps, over 75 percent are believed to be Ukrainians.<sup>28</sup> Of the officers, they are overwhelmingly Slavic with Russians making up over 80 percent of the total. The Ukrainians and Belorussians comprise 10 to 15 percent with the nationalities accounting for the remaining five percent or so.<sup>29</sup>

#### RACISM

Considering the information previously presented, it should come as no surprise that racial problems exist in the Soviet military. While the armed forces do serve as a way to bring the various ethnic groups together, they also heighten racial and ethnic awareness which, if not defused, can lead to serious racial confrontations. Many conflicts pit light-skinned "Europeans" against dark-skinned "Asians". The Russians and other Slavs generally exhibit a feeling of racial superiority towards the Soviet Asians.<sup>30</sup> The fact that racial

confrontations occur frequently is highlighted by numerous sources. In survey data collected by Richard A. Gabriel, 69 percent of the respondents indicated that certain national and religious groups in the military were routinely singled out for unfair treatment.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, 56 percent indicated that this was common practice.<sup>32</sup> Examples of racism in the Soviet military are plentiful. In one case, a young Uzbek soldier, picked on because he was racially and culturally different, took a machine gun and ambushed a guard detail, killing several and wounding most of the rest.<sup>33</sup> Another incident relates that a Moldavian soldier was badly beaten by his Russian lieutenant. The Moldavian killed the officer with a machine gun, set fire to the headquarters and then shot himself.<sup>34</sup> In doing research for this paper I located a total of 18 different articles describing recent racial disturbances which were documented in publications such as the Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, Defense Diplomacy, Problems of Communism, Soviet Press and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. The Soviet press contains many articles dealing with the problems of ethnic discrimination in the military. It is interesting to note that in the high technology branches, where there are large numbers of officers and virtually 100 percent Slavic personnel, there is little or no racial or ethnic discord. However, in combat units where there are high numbers of Slavs and relatively low number of non-Slavs, the frequency of incidents increases sharply. In construction units which have a relatively high number of non-Slavs assigned compared to Slavs, the incident rate drops

off significantly from that of the combat units.<sup>35</sup> Ethnic discrimination continues to be a fact of military life and one that military authorities are trying to correct. However, in an organization that stresses its multinational character, these conditions are hardly conducive to high morale nor are they helpful in developing a positive view of military life for the Soviet conscript.

#### AFGHANISTAN

The current involvement of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan provides a unique opportunity to view them in action and evaluate the ethnic factor close up. The Central Asians represented the largest ethnic group about which observations could be made. It appears that the Soviets did not follow their own criteria when they consciously used soldiers from an ethnic nationality group similar to the people which were being invaded.<sup>36</sup> The Soviets did validate their unit assignment policy in that most Central Asians appear to have been primarily utilized in a noncombat role, performing construction, support and occupation duties as opposed to direct combat.<sup>37</sup> It has been suggested that the use of the Central Asians as part of the invasion force might have been an attempt by the Soviets to use the ethnic factor in their favor as a new weapon, a political weapon.<sup>38</sup> The Soviets may have felt that, by using soldiers who were ethnically similar to the Afghans, they could reduce the adverse reaction of the local populace to their aggression.<sup>39</sup> For whatever reasons the Central Asians were

employed, the practice apparently failed when put to the test. Eyewitnesses reported that wide-ranging fraternization took place. This must have generated great concern among the Soviet hierarchy since almost all Central Asian soldiers were subsequently removed from Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup>

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3. Ann Sheely, "Academician Bromlei Writes About Nationality Relations," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 2 July 1986, RL 242/86.
4. Ann Sheely, "Pravda Editorial on Nationality Relations," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 27 August 1986, RL 317/86.
5. S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces, p. 1.
6. Murray Feshbach, A Study of the Multi-Dimensional Impact of Current Demographic Trends on Soviet Society, p. 1.
7. Ibid., p. 2.
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12. Joseph Seagram, "Teaching of Russian Discussed at Party Congresses in Muslim Republics of the USSR," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 26 March 1986, RL 131/86.
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15. G. Kleyman, "Without Preparation There Is No Soldier," Foreign Broadcast Information Service, JPRS Report, 14 September 1987, pp. 18-20.

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22. Jones, p. 195.

23. Wimbush and Alexiev, p. 12.

24. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

25. Ibid., p. 13.

26. Ibid., p. 15.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., p. 21.

29. Ibid.

30. Wimbush, p. 239.

31. Richard A. Gabriel, The New Red Legions, p. 11.

32. Ibid., p. 112.

33. E. S. Williams, The Soviet Military, p. 81.

34. Ibid.

35. Wimbush and Alexiev, pp. 41-44.

36. S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan, p. v.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., p. 4.
39. Ibid., p. vi.
40. Ibid., pp. 16-17.

CHAPTER VI  
THE PROGNOSIS

From all the information presented herein, it would seem to be a relatively straight forward task to draw some reasonable conclusions. Virtually all the data appears to portray a negative image of the Soviet Armed Forces regarding their policies towards the nationalities which may call to question their capability to conduct effective combat operations, both offensive and defensive. It would be easy to assume that, with all the internal dissention on the civilian scene between the Russian-dominated Slavs and the other ethnic non-Slavs and the racial prejudice and strife that pervades the military itself, the Soviet military machine would be incapable of launching and sustaining an effective attack against Western Europe. Indeed, the fact that nationality problems exist and that they cause such great concern for the Soviet leadership is certainly no secret. However, based on all the sources I reviewed in preparing this paper, I failed to find even one which categorically stated that the nationalities problem would cause the Soviet forces to be ineffective in combat.

The most reliable group in the Armed Forces is the Slavs, that is the Russians, White Russians and Ukrainians. They form the backbone of the military, serve in all the key positions and account for over 80 percent of the Soviet military. It is true that this portion of the population base is shrinking and that

eventually more of the nationalities will have to serve if the Soviet Union is to maintain its current force. However, Slavs will continue to occupy the higher positions of authority and responsibility, and the Soviet leadership, if it is forward looking and has the desire to relax control, has time to resolve the nationalities problem and turn the situation around to their favor, much as the United States has been able to do during the past 30 years in dealing with its own racial problems.

The last point that should be made pertains to the type of threat, internal or external, used when discussing the impact of the nationalities issue on the Soviet military. Using the military to settle internal disturbances might prove to be quite risky. The possibility of ethnic riots, sympathetic support of nationality groups in the military for the populace being subdued or even mutiny cannot be disregarded.

But when facing an external threat, for example NATO, the ethnic factor becomes less of a liability. In spite of ethnically-based internal weaknesses, the Soviet armed forces constitute a most formidable military capability. One need only review history in order to draw conclusions about the possible effect of the nationalities problem when the military goes up against an outside aggressor. While many members of the various nationalities deserted and even fought against the Soviets in World War II, many others fought long and well for the USSR. In fact, the Soviets could not have won World War II without the substantial military participation by both non-Russian and non-Slavic troops.<sup>1</sup> The nationalities problem, which has not

changed appreciably in the last 30 years, certainly did not reduce the effectiveness of Soviet forces during the "invasions" of East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979) - all external uses of force.

That the nationalities issue is a problem for the Soviets and represents an internal element of weakness within their armed forces cannot be denied. The military leadership still has the time to develop the requisite programs to deal with the problem. We must be very careful not to conclude on the basis of current information that the Soviet armed forces are anything other than what they are - an extremely capable, well trained, war-fighting machine.

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