



POLITICAL WORK IN THE SOUTHERN FRONT MILITARY FORCES THROUGHOUT THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR (1918-1920)

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: Recreation of a historically truthful picture, reflecting the role of educational work in the army during the Civil War (1918-1920), which currently continues to be the subject of sharp ideological and scientific discussions. Introduction of previously unknown to the scientific community documents concerning political work in the troops. Generalization of the experience of this work with the aim of shaping the scientific historical consciousness among young people in the context of the modern information struggle.

Methodology: The conceptual basis for the study relies on the integral paradigm of historical analysis (introduced by the representatives of the RSSU historical school). It allows not only to compare polar versions of the description of the key problems of the Civil War history to create a multidimensional historical panorama but also to find a consensus between the methodological concepts that guided the development of the national historical science in the Soviet period and the modern paradigms of historical knowledge.

Main Findings: 1. The experience of the activities of the political bodies of the Southern Front related educational work in troops during the Civil War has been considered in order to preserve historical heritage. 2. New archival documents, including leaflets that determine the scientific argumentation of the problem, as well as new concepts (“integral paradigm of historical analysis” and “cultural-historiographic space”) have been introduced into the scientific circulation. 3. The main approaches to assessing the events of the Civil War have been defined.

Applications of this study: The study can be used in the implementation of various educational programs and projects, scientific and methodological research of problems of national history, as well as training and professional retraining of specialists in the field of history teaching.

Novelty/Originality of this study: A holistic picture of the activities of the Red Army political agencies in carrying out party political work in the troops of the Southern Front during the Civil War has been presented. The main forms of cultural, educational and propaganda work carried out among the frontline troops and the enemy forces have been analyzed. An assessment of the effectiveness of the mass political work in the creation and strengthening of the Red Army during the period under study has been given.

Keywords: *Russian Civil War of 1918-1920, Political Work, Political Education, Political Departments, Cultural and Educational Work.*

INTRODUCTION

The year 2018 was marked by the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War in Russia, which, according to the research, remains not only an ideological battlefield but also one of the most important events in Russian history. It has left an indelible imprint on the memory of the peoples of Russia; its consequences can still be found in the political, economic and spiritual spheres of Russian society. Some historians believe that the Civil War has not become a part of history in the full meaning of this word, reconciliation has not been reached in the society and the time of balanced judgments has not come yet. Unfortunately, many of our contemporaries have developed controversial and often distorted ideas of this tragic chapter of Russian history. Along with objective works that look at the history of the Civil War, the peculiarity of which consisted in close entwinement of the internal political struggle and foreign intervention, various hoaxes keep appearing in the Russian and foreign media that distort the vision of the factors that led to that fratricidal war, conceal the reasons and character of the war, justify the intervention policy and underplay the role of international imperialism that became the initiator, “...leader, engine, mover of this war” ([Lenin, vol. 37, p. 15, 1958](#)) and was “responsible for its lengthening” ([Lenin, vol. 39, p. 343, 1958](#)). According to the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin, “the past tragedies – not fully comprehended or interpreted in a double-minded or hypocritical manner – inevitably lead to new historical and political phobias, which <...> affect the public consciousness distorting it for the benefit of unfair politicians” ([Putin, 2009](#)); “...however difficult or controversial history might be, it is meant not to set people against each other, but to warn us against mistakes”; “it is certainly important to constantly focus on serious scientific work, to resolutely counter any attempts to falsify history” ([Putin, 2017a; 2017b](#)). Showing the historical consequences of the Civil War, unraveling its lessons and communicating them to the Russian and foreign people are all vital tasks of the Russian historical studies, especially taking into account that over the last two decades a new generation has grown up and developed in new historical conditions. As the conducted historiographical analysis has shown, the main positive change that has taken place in the recent years is creation of prerequisites for a qualitative leap in the Russian historiography based on involvement of

archival documents and materials that were not accessible before, departure from political bias and ideological veto on coverage of “unpleasant” stories from the war-time past and realization that nihilism in respect of the past backfires on the essential state institutions, such as the army, education and culture.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction of the concept of cultural and historiographical space into scientific use allows to trace the views of historians on the key issues in the history of the Russian Civil War and illustrate the fact that, while working in the same object field, Russian and foreign historians operate in qualitatively different cultural and historiographical spaces, which explains some substantial theoretical and ideological contradictions between historical schools and movements existing both in Russia and abroad regarding the obtained results of their research and developed historical approaches. Besides, usage of this concept when raising new issues concerning the well-known sources encourages increment of historical knowledge and helps to evaluate and check existing hypotheses. The term “cultural and historiographical space” should be understood as a logically conceivable form that serves as the environment into which a cognitive subject is integrated (a historical school, an individual historian, etc.) and under the influence of which they develop and act. The most important parameters of cultural and historiographical space are the following: the dominant ideology in the correspondent society; socio-political demand; the corpus of historiographical sources available to the historian and the historically developed way of their interpretation; socio-cultural traditions prevailing in the professional environment; personality of the historian that manifests itself through the system of political views and ideological beliefs and can be influenced by their ethnic identity, personal preferences and in some cases by their social position ([Lyapunova et al, 2015](#)).

RESULTS

Analysis of military historical literature and archival materials allows concluding that political work carried out by political bodies based on the resolutions adopted by the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party of the Bolsheviks (CC RCP (B)) and the Council of People's Commissars was one of the main factors in the establishment and strengthening of the Red Army. When M.V. Frunze, who was one of the main military commanders of the Red Army during the Civil War, expressed his appreciation of the political work, he pointed out: “The role political work played in the successes of the Red Army is well-known. Thanks to it our army received new arms that reinforced and increased its fighting power to a great extent” ([Frunze, 1977](#)). One of the important results of mass political work was the shift of the middle peasantry to Soviet power. Talking about the main sources of victory over the White Russians, V.I. Lenin said: “...if anything decided the issue of the struggle against Kolchak and Denikin in our favor,<...> it was that both the peasants and working Cossacks, who for a long time remained in the other camp, have in the end come over to the workers and peasants – and it was only this that finally decided the war and brought about our victory” ([Lenin, vol. 40, p. 183, 1958](#)). The experience of conducting political work accumulated over the years of the Civil War, its interpretation and development in the interwar period allowed to build up certain views on the essence, contents, role and place of morale-building activities in the army throughout the Great Patriotic War. In the course of this research, the main approaches to evaluation of the events of the Civil War and usage of the obtained results in practical activities were identified: the conservatively-dramatic approach that rejects a balanced view on a number of issues of military history and dismisses multiple-path discussions of problems; the negatively-nihilistic approach that is characterized by disrespectful and sometimes even disparaging attitude to works written by historians of previous generations, especially those who lived in the Soviet period; and, finally, the creatively-productive approach based on multifactor analysis of events in the military history.

DISCUSSION

The party and political work in the Southern Front military forces throughout the Russian Civil War (1918-1920)

Carrying out political work was one of the essential activities conducted by the Bolsheviks in order to strengthen the Southern Front. The CC RCP (B) considered it to be the main means of enhancing the fighting efficiency and combat readiness of the Southern Front troops, improving their discipline and organization as well as mobilization for the successful performance of battle tasks. Political work was carried out among private and officer corps of the troops deployed on the front line, population of the immediate battle area and enemy troops.

The conducted research has shown that the most common and effective form of mass political work was soldiers' rallies that took place before battles, during breaks between battles and in free time. Such rallies allowed revealing the moods of soldiers in the military units, orient them towards their battle tasks and assess the level of their political maturity. For example, the rally that took place in Voronezh in January 1918 in the period of advance on the troops led by General P.N. Krasnov sparked great interest among the soldiers, which was reported by the newspaper “Zvezda krasnoarmeitsa”. The troops learned eagerly about the victories of the Red Army, its growing numbers and reinforcement of cast-iron discipline.

Group and individual conversations, as well as interviews with soldiers, were very common and allowed one to get closely acquainted with their life and inspire them to undertake certain battle tasks. For instance, during the preparation for the offensive of the Southern Front in August 1919 emphasis was placed on the situation at the front and the tasks to be performed by soldiers in the existing military environment (the Russian State Military Archives ([RSMA, fund 9, series 4, case 34, sheet 74](#))). The interviews carried out in the 28th division of the 10th army of the Southern Front focused on the

discussion of the new Party Program and documents of the 8th CC RCP (B) Congress and Lenin's "Letter to the Middle Peasants" ([RSMA, fund 9, series 4, case 34, sheet 190](#)). In our opinion, such conversations and interviews encouraged the growth of political consciousness in soldiers and a correct understanding of their military duty.

One of the types of agitation and propaganda was represented by agit-trains. Their activities included agitation, propaganda, supplying the troops and population of the immediate battle area with literature. For example, large-scale work with the soldiers of the Southern Front was by carried out the team of the agit-train "The October Revolution" under the guidance of the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee M.I. Kalinin. Within the time of its work at the front, it organized over 200 public speaking sessions for 179,450 spectators ([Maksakova, 1956](#)). According to archival documents, the agit-rain "The Red Cossack" was sent to the Don and Kuban regions to work with the local population. The team had to provide practical help in the establishment of the Soviet bodies of authority in the areas liberated from the White Guards (the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History ([RSASPH, sheet 45](#))). Besides, the workers of the agit-train dealt with the distribution of literature, posting posters, proclamations, and leaflets (the State Archives of the Russian Federation ([SARF, sheet 21](#); [SARF, sheet 23](#))). In the 13th army of the Southern Front, an agit-train named after N.I. Podvoiskii and "The Red Train" were formed in order to carry out political work among the troops and population ([RSMA, sheets 56, 58](#)). Apparently, the agitation work conducted among the private corps of the Southern Front raised political consciousness in the soldiers and boosted their morale.

Cultural, educational and political work in the Southern Front military forces and in the battle area during the Russian Civil War (1918-1920)

The periodical press was an effective means of political education among soldiers. It should be highlighted here that not only did the political departments of the Southern Front and its forces distribute the central newspapers, but they also published their own ones. The main mouthpiece of the front was represented by the paper called "Izvestiya Revolyutsionnogo voennogo soveta Yuzhnogo fronta" ("News of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Southern Front". As a rule, the newspapers covered military operations at the front, best practices of destroying the enemy and stories of war heroism ([Krasnoarmeets, 1919](#)).

It should be noted that the political bodies of the Southern Front paid much attention to creating literacy schools in military units. These activities were based on the decree "On the elimination of illiteracy among the population of the RSFSR" adopted by the Soviet government. According to the guide to the establishment of literacy schools in the military units of the Red Army, education was obligatory for all soldiers. Depending on the level of training shown by students, there were three stages of education: the first stage was meant for illiterate soldiers, the second stage – for semiliterate soldiers, and the third stage – for literate ones.

In order to broaden the horizons of soldiers, the political bodies founded libraries in the military units and front subdivisions. Library stocks were filled with the books received from the center, as well as those bought on site. According to archives, within the short period from 8 to 14 December 1918, the political department compiled and provided companies with 216 libraries ([RSMA, sheet 32](#)), while in 1919 – 3,955 libraries ([RSMA, sheet 378](#)).

Analysis of archival documents has shown that the Red Army soldiers were fond of theatrical performances, concerts and cinema sessions, which is proved by reports and telegrams sent to the political departments of the front by heads of political departments of the armies ([RSMA, sheet 14](#)). In response to these requests, mobile theater groups were sent from the center to the front, where they were very warmly received. For example, from 4 to 15 February 1919, the fifth group of the theatrical section of the All-Russian Bureau of Military Commissars worked successfully at the Southern Front ([RSASPH, sheet 3](#)). According to the report submitted by one of the theater groups that worked at the Southern Front, which has been preserved in the RSMA, in three months the actors showed 27 performances that were watched by 20,000 soldiers ([RSMA, sheet 21](#)). We believe that the political and educational activities conducted by political bodies had a great significance for establishing order in the military units, improvement of military discipline and boosting morale in soldiers.

Agitation and propaganda work carried out by political bodies of the Southern Front in the enemy troops

The issues connected with agitation and propaganda work in the enemy troops were the center of attention of the CC RCP (B). Only in 1919, the Organizational Bureau of the RCP twice considered the question of carrying out such work in the rear of Denikin's troops ([Naida, Obichkin, Petrov, Struchkov, Shatagin, and Shichkin, \(Eds.\), 1959](#)). In November 1918, the political department of the Southern Front sent a circular letter to political departments of the armies about the organization of agitation work among the enemy troops. The task of "distribution of special agitation literature among the enemy troops" was set for political departments of the armies ([The party and political work in the Red Army, 1964](#)). The political bodies at the front launched a large-scale campaign that involved distributions of proclamations and leaflets among the White Guards. In January 1919, only the political bodies spread as many as 14,500 proclamations and leaflets among the enemy troops ([The Southern Front, 1962](#)). They were addressed both to the soldiers of the White Army and to the population of the occupied territories. "The letter of a Red Cossack to his White brothers" written by a Don Cossack from the 4th Don Cossack regiment M. Moshkarov and deposited in the department of special collections of the Center of Social and Political History at the State Public Historical Library of Russia is very representative in this respect. He wrote:

“To you, my dear comrades, fellow villagers, brothers, deceived Cossacks, I address my Cossack word... All of us, born Cossacks, have traced our descent from peasants’ flesh and blood from olden times. For ages, Cossacks have served as mighty heroic protection for everyone. Everyone was equal. Lieutenant-colonel – that was an honored rank in the Don region: it was awarded at Cossack assemblies by Cossacks themselves based on one’s merits. And now a general has quickly and generously disseminated ranks with his cursed hand among us, working Cossacks. If you are a sharpshooter and can hit a working chest while riding a horse, he will recommend you for decoration with a rank. If you can thrust your spear at peasants in the drunk and crazy race, you can probably become a cornet. But where’s the Cossack’s honor, the voice of the brave soul, the hero’s calling and zeal? Denikin has taken it all up, the bloodthirsty! He has shattered all our households... Never has a military false ataman thought to care about the lives of Cossacks-plowmen, nothing does he know about the true life of a Cossack. Denikin does not know us either – there is no Cossack blood in his veins. Away with this corrupt pack, drive them away from you as soon as possible, my dear brother!” ([“The letter of a Red Cossack to his White brothers”, 1919](#)).

The leaflet addressed to poor and middle peasants by the political department of the N army contains an appeal “to join the fight against the common enemy of workers and peasants – the tsarist general Denikin”. The leaflet says, “Do you remember that you received the lands that used to belong to landlords from the Soviet regime? The Soviet rule has freed us from irredeemable debts, arrears, and rent. It protects the poor and watches over the interests of the middle peasants. Denikin offers the power to the rich, who have already roused themselves waiting for their patron. The general’s whisperers want to win your support by telling tales about a myriad of goods that are supposed to be brought by Denikin. Don’t believe these words. Where can Denikin find any goods if workers flee from him, factories and plants have been idle? As for English and French capitalists, they send only canons and machine guns to Russia from abroad to help landlords exterminate the Russian workers and peasantry. As for their own goods, they are as scarce as hen’s teeth: the war has eaten up everything. The bourgeoisie agents tempt you with promises that when Denikin comes to power, he will introduce free trade and abolish the bread monopoly. Free trade is beneficial only for rich peasants, kulaks, and profiteers, who will batten on you. And you will have to give up your bread to a landlord, to an English merchant and the Denikin army for fixed prices set by Denikin, which he calls intendant prices. In return, you will receive taxes and rent instead of goods”. The leaflet finishes off with the following words: “So help the Red Army. Do not sit out at home. Help your brothers – Red Army soldiers – with whatever you can. There is no other way to dispute your land, freedom and power” ([To poor and middle peasants, 1919](#)).

As research into this issue has shown, the distribution of agitation and propaganda literature in the enemy troops reached its peak before and during offensive operations. For example, in the winter and spring of 1919, the political department of the 9th army distributed over 280,000 proclamations and posters in the enemy troops (The party and political work..., 1964). During the summer battles of 1919, the political department of the 13th army issued the following number of leaflets: in July – 120,000, in August – 176,000, in September – 265,000. The total number of leaflets distributed from May to December 1919 reaches 163,000 ([The red warrior, 1920a](#); [1920b](#)). The leaflets addressed to soldiers of the Volunteer Army said: “Your generals spread rumors that the Red troops exterminate captives and deserters. Do not trust your generals. The Red Army exterminates only the enemies of the working people. We know that among you there are a lot of those who joined the Denikin army unawares or under pressure. If you defect to our side with honest intentions, you will be given mercy. If you fall into our hands as a captive, you will be given mercy. The Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council People’s Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs comrade Trotsky issued an order no. 126: “I hereby order: on no account shall captives be shot down. Instead of that, they must be sent to the rear. Execution of this order must be closely monitored by commanders and commissars. All infringements must be reported to the immediate commander so that the revolutionary military tribunal is promptly sent to the crime scene” ([Soldiers of the Volunteer Army, 1919](#)). “Soldiers and Cossacks mobilized by Denikin! Many of you understand that you are taking part in an evil deed and to their own harm. The only thing you don’t know is how to get out of it and stop the war as fast as possible. We are offering you a good way out: join our side. We will welcome you as our brothers... The sooner you switch to our side, the sooner the bloodshed will stop...” ([To the soldiers and Cossacks of the Volunteer Army, 1919](#)). It should be noted that the agitation work carried out among the enemy troops delivered positive results. White Army soldiers refused to execute the orders of their commanders, deserted and defected to the side of the Red Army. For example, the report provided by the political department of the 9th army said that “in the area of Nikolaevka and Gusevka four companies of Cossacks joined our side and brought nine officers with them” ([RSASPH, sheet 11](#)). Having relinquished its positions, the Kazan Cossack regiment left the front ([Borokhova, Beshpalova, Kuznetsov and Pronshtein, 1957](#)).

Studies of archival documents have shown that leaflets and proclamations addressed to civilians, peasants and workers, were also sent by General A.I. Denikin: “Soldiers must be explained that apart from Communists, the Latvians and Chinese, civil workers and peasants are serving in the Red Army on shooting-down penalty and waiting for the first opportunity to join our side” ([The new order issued by General Denikin, 1919](#)). “I hereby order to stop withdrawal of property, striping, and lynching in respect of the Red Army soldiers who give involuntarily or defect to our side” ([General Denikin’s order, 1920](#)). In one of his leaflets, A.I. Denikin cites an alleged order issued by the Soviet field marshal Trotsky. The essence of it is that for the benefit of the Red Army military commissars are allowed to resort to merciless punitive actions, unjust raids, and seizures of property. “Let deprived children die,” allegedly writes Trotsky, “let women die of hunger, let the village be filled with moaning and sobs, – the only important thing is that the Red Army has

everything that is necessary.” Further, Denikin offers the readers to compare his own order with Trotsky’s order, which, in our opinion, is a fake one, and decide: who protects the people after all? This example suggests the conclusion that leaflets served as an important means of ideological battle and were often used to discredit the opponent.

CONCLUSION

Historical experience attests to the fact that civil war is easier to prevent than to stop. However, now, the psychology of civil war does not just exist in society, but also it is often reanimated and consciously inflamed by politicians and the modern media. Studies of the problem have shown that over the period from the 1920s to the present day a great number of works devoted to the history of the Civil War have appeared in the Russian market of historical literature ([Williams, 2006](#); [Williamson, 2007](#); [Kara-Murza, 2014](#); [Gasparyan, 2016](#); [Denikin, 2017](#) and others), but a detailed and objective assessment of these works has yet to be given by researchers. Nowadays, rethinking of the history of the Civil War is taking place in line with the new social and political realia, the most important aspect of which is methodological upgrading based on the integral paradigm of historical analysis and formation of a new cultural and historiographical space that provides entirely new opportunities of development of other views on the past, including the Civil War history. The source basis for the research is expanding, while more favorable conditions are being established providing its accessibility for a wide range of specialists. The focus on the previously unknown events from the military past and the most controversial issues is growing. From everything that has been said above it follows that further studies of the Civil War remain a relevant issue in Russian historical science.

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