

Where Was the Conscience of the Revolution? The Military Opposition at the Eighth Party Congress (March 1919)

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Commenting on the long awaited opening of the Soviet archives in Russia after the collapse of communism, Vojtech Mastny shrewdly noted that “perhaps the greatest surprise to have come out of the Russian archives is that there is no surprise. . . . Some of the most secret documents could have been printed in *Pravda* without anybody’s noticing.”¹ Although published in 1989 in the party journal *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, rather than *Pravda*, one such set of documents is the full transcript of the secret meetings of the military section of the Eighth Party Congress.² On reading the text, one of the first questions that arises is, why was this kept secret for so long? There seems little that is truly revelatory in these minutes, and the subject of the Eighth Party Congress has not been considered a major event in the history of the soviet state. However, if we look beyond the discovery of shocking revelations, there is a great deal in these documents that can shed light on the fusion of the party and the Red Army, which was at the core of the early party-state, and the demand within the grassroots party for greater centralization of authority. They also highlight Iosif Stalin’s early career and his thinking on the problem of the peasantry and the revolution, which would be developed as party policy with such deadly consequences from 1928.

Before examining the significance of these documents, it is necessary to deal with the question of why they were kept secret and then publicly declassified along with such notable texts as files on the purge of the Red Army in 1938, the siege of Leningrad, and proof of Stalin’s personal approval for long lists of prisoners to be summarily executed. The main source for conjecture on this point is the allegation of a cover-up made by Lev Trotskii while in exile from the Soviet Union. His accusation was twofold. First, he suggested that something in Stalin’s own speech at the military section had ensured the continued suppression of the minutes. He believed that Stalin had openly supported the opposition in his speech and therefore needed to ensure this remained secret.³ Second, in his autobiography he went on to claim that the minutes were suppressed because Vladimir Lenin had come out with

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1. Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Oxford, 1996), 7.

2. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, nos. 9–11 (Moscow, 1989–91). The minutes of the meetings were published as part of a series of documents that were declassified to demonstrate Mikhail Gorbachev’s commitment to glasnost.

3. Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, trans. Charles Malamuth (London, 1947), 301.

an “impassioned defence” of Trotskii’s line and backed his policy without reservation.⁴

The argument that Stalin wished to hide his part in the opposition is persuasive, as one of the key props in his post-Lenin image within the party was his self-representation as a loyal Leninist who had never questioned the direction Lenin was taking the revolution or undermined the unity of the party with factionalism and bitter debate. Unfortunately, however, the minutes of the meeting do not support this allegation; while Stalin was critical of the military specialists, his speech focused on the need for increased discipline to secure the peasantry’s presently dubious loyalty. His words did not conflict with Lenin’s own remarks on discipline within the army or the proposals forwarded by Grigorii Sokol’nikov, the Central Committee (CC) representative. Regarding the second claim, of Lenin’s impassioned defense of current military policy, the minutes show that on the question of the military statutes and the use of the specialists, he was ambivalent and far from fervent. However, where his speech did become heated, if not savage, was his attack on Marshal Kliment Voroshilov and the defense of Tsaritsyn, and it is this confrontation that could suggest another motive for the lengthy suppression of the minutes of the meeting, certainly during Stalin’s lifetime. Despite conspicuously avoiding any direct attack on Stalin, Lenin’s strident criticism of Voroshilov, the prosecution of the war on the southern front, and the scale of lives lost in the defense of Tsaritsyn was a notable sign of division over what would become a symbol of Stalin’s heroism. Tsaritsyn was, famously, renamed Stalingrad in 1925 to commemorate his valor in the civil war. This status was confirmed in 1929 by a pamphlet, written by Voroshilov, titled *Stalin and the Red Army*, in which the events of Tsaritsyn were rewritten to display Stalin as a great military leader.⁵ This myth continued into the Great Patriotic War and beyond, as Stalin continued to present himself as a military leader and Tsaritsyn/Stalingrad “acquired not merely a legendary name, but virtually a mystical significance in Soviet history.”⁶ Lenin’s scathing attack on Voroshilov was also, then, an indirect criticism of Stalin and his defense of what would become an iconic city, making its suppression explicable. But then another question arises. Why were these documents not disclosed at the time of de-Stalinization, when this criticism might have proved useful? These events were well known to Nikita Khrushchev, as he was extremely contemptuous of Stalin’s civil war career in his autobiography of 1970, written in retirement and eventually published in the west. However, as he also indicated in these memoirs, Soviet historians did not dare take this subject on, and, despite the revelations by historians in 1965 of Stalin and Voroshilov’s insubordination and mismanagement, the danger after this would seem to have been in any mention of Trotskii.⁷ The benefits of attacking the cult of Stalin on this front

4. Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 465.

5. K. E. Voroshilov, *Stalin and the Red Army* (Moscow, 1937).

6. Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York, 1991), 41.

7. Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Strobe Talbott (London, 1971), 18–20.

risked placing Trotskii in a favorable light. Some secrets were more dangerous than others were useful.

The Historiography of the Military Opposition

The arguments that arose at the meetings of the military section are usually presented as the end result of an opposition movement unhappy with the use of “military specialists”—the euphemism for former tsarist officers working for the Red Army. In *The Conscience of the Revolution*, R. V. Daniels, one of the historians of the early party-state, included the Military Opposition of the Eighth Party Congress as one of a series of intraparty opposition movements, which were attempting to preserve the revolutionary ideals of democracy against the encroaching authoritarian tendencies of the Leninist party.⁸ In this work, he presented the arguments over the organizational reforms within the Red Army as a development in an ongoing fight to restore democracy to party organs and as a nascent struggle against Trotskii by leading Bolsheviks. While this has been the most influential account of the Military Opposition, it is not the only one. Mark von Hagen has also presented the group as a source of opposition to the use of former tsarist officers as military specialists.⁹

However, this attempt to trace a continuous democratic movement throughout the civil war has two significant flaws. First, it fails to explain the unusual bedfellows who made up the opposition, which included V. M. Smirnov, an ally of N. I. Bukharin; Voroshilov, a staunch supporter of Stalin; F. I. Goloshchekin, who was closely linked to Ia. M. Sverdlov and Lenin; and R. S. Zemliachka, who had a prior history of conflict with Stalin.¹⁰ Another historian, Francesco Benvenuti, was the first to consider the diversity of the opposition’s membership, although the focus of his book on the development of the Red Army led to a view of this movement as an attack on Trotskii.¹¹ Undoubtedly, there was a great deal of animosity toward Trotskii, but this was a by-product of the discussions. Revisiting this subject in 1994, after the publication of the minutes of the closed sessions, Benvenuti traced a convincing series of connections between the seemingly incompatible leading advocates of the opposition and

8. Robert Vincent Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

9. Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917–1930* (Ithaca, 1990).

10. Goloshchekin was military commissar of the Urals Regional Soviet and most famous as the envoy of Sverdlov and Lenin who ordered the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in Ekaterinburg. For further information on Goloshchekin, see Steven J Main, “The Creation, Organisation and Work of the Red Army’s Political Apparatus during the Civil War, 1918–1920” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1989); Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalev, *The Fall of the Romanovs: Political Dreams and Personal Struggles in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven, 1995), 35; and Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004), 178. Zemliachka had made a complaint against Stalin after a trip to Baku in 1908 to resolve divisions in the underground party there, with Stalin at the heart of the tensions. On Rozaliia Zemliachka, see Miklós Kun, *Stalin: An Unknown Portrait* (Budapest, 2003), 88–89.

11. Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918–1922* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988).

members of the CC, particularly Stalin, which went beyond the usual view of this as another democratic opposition platform. In particular, he pointed to the activities of the so-called Tsaritsyn group as the basis of the Military Opposition. This was the group, including Stalin, Voroshilov, and S. K. Minin, that in the summer of 1918 had set up the Revolutionary Military Council of the Southern Front to defend the city and openly opposed the orders coming in from the center and from Trotskii.¹² However, in this reading, Stalin is still seen as the mastermind of an anti-Trotskii vendetta and the issue is still the use of the military specialists.

Second, the interpretation of the opposition as a left-wing movement treats the debates on military policy as a unique issue, divorced from the main undertakings of the congress—the new policy of making friends with the middle peasantry and the abandonment of the Committees of the Poor Peasants (*kombedy*) in the countryside. The initial establishment of *kombedy* by the Bolsheviks in 1918 had created a state of war within the villages and further dislocated food supplies for the military. The mass mobilization of the peasantry had been ushered in on July 10, 1918, but by the beginning of the 1919, the levels of desertion had reached alarming levels and peasant discontent with Bolshevik rule was shaping into open rebellion. From January to February 1919 there were peasant uprisings against Bolshevik rule in many districts of red-occupied territory, with Tver' *guberniia* being particularly unruly.¹³ As historians are now aware, March 1919 also saw the beginnings of one of the largest peasant uprisings against the Bolsheviks—the so-called *chapan'* war (*chapannaia voina*), named for the peasant kaftans worn in the Volga region, that engulfed Penza, Simbirsk, and Samara. These disturbances were a direct response to the enforced conscriptions of the Red Army and the first attempts to forcibly collect the grain quota (*razverstka*) for that year.¹⁴ The peasantry were not only deserting en masse from the Red Army, they were also presenting a third front within the borders of Bolshevik-controlled territory. As a consequence, by 1919 Lenin had brought about a significant reversal in party policy relating to the peasantry, which would also have significant implications for the running of the Red Army. The peasant question, then, was to permeate all sections of the Congress, including the military section.

With the availability of the previously withheld minutes, it is clear that the Military Opposition was not part of a Left Communist- or Left Opposition-controlled movement on the use of former army officers but a reflection of a

12. Francesco Benvenuti, "La 'questione militare' al'VIII Congresso della RKP(b)," *Studi Storici* 35, no. 4 (1994): 1095–21. Minin was the commissar at Tsaritsyn, attached to the military commander Pavel Sytin, a former tsarist officer appointed to the city by Trotskii. Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917–1991* (Abingdon, 2000), 21. At this congress, he was the delegate from the Tsaritsyn *guberniia* conference of the RKP(b). *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 188–89.

13. T. V. Osipova, *Rossiiskoe krest' ianstvo v revoliutsii i grazhdanskoi voine* (Moscow, 2001), 305.

14. *Ibid.*, 301–7; Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917–1921* (Oxford, 1989), 324–25; Andrea Graziosi, *A New, Peculiar State: Explorations in Soviet History, 1917–1937* (Westport, 2000), 92. For an examination of the *razverstka*, see Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organization of War Communism, 1918–1921* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 397–410.

wider concern about the lack of party control over the military wing of state. This concern was heightened by the new policy of rapprochement with the middle peasantry and the impact this was to have on both the Red Army and the party. The peasantry's response to the mass recruitment produced calls for change from the military delegates that were very different from the utopian demands of the Left Opposition and the previous opposition platforms in the party. As the minutes of the meeting of the military section show, this platform was intent on ensuring power over the Red Army that was focused in the hands of the CC to counter the potential threat from an increasingly independent and overwhelmingly peasant military machine. In this movement we can see the beginnings of a centrist, hierarchical party-based movement with Stalin at its center, which was the first open move toward the establishment of the party-state.

Stalin's place in the opposition has received little attention, despite the fact that his complete insubordination to Trotskii's orders is well known to modern biographers.¹⁵ Sent to ensure the continued supply of grain from the Volga, Stalin proceeded to take on full military powers, establishing the Revolutionary Military Council of the Southern Front, with himself at its helm and supported by fellow party members Voroshilov and Minin. He then commenced a battle against the military specialists of the region. Benvenuti, following Trotskii's accusation in his biography of Stalin, suggests that the Military Opposition was an extension of the Tsaritsyn group and attributes the episode to the machinations of Stalin and Voroshilov.¹⁶ While acknowledging the significance of his findings, I am wary of ascribing too much influence to the events of Tsaritsyn, for, as I explain below, the Military Opposition's arguments were not about the military specialists, which was the central dispute of the Tsaritsyn group. However, if we link the assignment in Tsaritsyn to Stalin's later task as a trouble shooter for the eastern front after the disastrous collapse of Perm' in December 1918, we see that he had an intimate knowledge of the fronts' problems and the grievances of party personnel working on them. Consequently, rather than proposing that Stalin's dislike of military specialists and of Trotskii was the prime motivation behind the Military Opposition, it seems more reasonable to suggest that his roles in the civil war meant that he was in a prime position to gauge the mood of the party workers at the fronts, to pick up on their concerns about the peasant soldiers they were commanding, and to support demands for greater centralized control over the military. In line with this, it is more apposite to refer to the points made in the Perm' report, produced in January 1919, just before the March Party Congress, as many of the claims made in this report were then echoed in the arguments of the Military Opposition of the Eighth Party Congress. It was concerned with discipline in the face of the quantity of peasant recruits, the poor-quality and inadequate work of the commissars, and the CC's ignorance of events on the ground. Delegates from the southern and eastern fronts were the most vocal in the discussion of the military section of the Eighth Party Congress, exactly

15. Volkogonov, *Stalin*, 39–41; Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London, 2004), 171–72.

16. Benvenuti, "La 'questione militaire,'" 1105; Trotsky, *Stalin*, 301–2.

those areas to which Stalin had been sent to sort out problems. He had no need to lead this group, as they were only too ready to stand up for themselves.¹⁷ However, with the Perm' report and the eventual changes to military policy at the end of the Congress, he managed to increase his influence among the party membership while remaining aloof from the opposition established there. This was an early example of a "Stalin-style" approach to party officials, as described by James Harris in a reconsideration of the Secretariat's role in Stalin's rise: "Stalin could not automatically command the support of officials in leading Party and state organs. The Secretariat did, however, provide Stalin with an invaluable source of information on the needs and concerns of senior Party and state officials."¹⁸ As this episode demonstrates, even before he gained the position of General Secretary, Stalin's postings during the conflict gave him an advantage in gathering information at the grassroots level and gaining influence within the party.

The Eighth Party Congress and the Military Section

By the end of February 1919, Trotskii had produced a set of theses outlining the CC's military doctrine. These were then produced as the basis for the party's discussion of military policy and the policy advocated by the CC at the Congress. They presented a bright future for the Red Army, although with little concrete detail about its current state. On paper, it appeared that little had changed in the plans for the army, despite a year of civil war, mass mobilization, and conscription. According to these theses, a volunteer militia army was still the ultimate objective, as was a class-based army, mobilized and trained outside regular barracks (preferably at the factory or attached to the workplace). All the deviations from this goal were ascribed to the war and presented as temporary.¹⁹

For the military delegates at the Congress, this must have appeared as a cover-up of the realities of the fronts and the actions already taken by Trotskii to build the Red Army. As the later debates at the Congress revealed, for the majority the specter of a Bonapartist backlash loomed large. To state that the Red Army was a "class army in its social composition" was to disregard the changes taking place in the military machine of the state. This machine now had more recourse to mass mobilizations of villages at the front line than to the much-talked-about class mobilizations from the rear.²⁰

The idea that the platform questioning the party's military policy was part of a movement for greater internal democracy in party institutions seems to stem from the past and future alliances of the opposition theses' author,

17. Main, "The Creation, Organisation and Work of the Red Army's Political Apparatus," 126–27.

18. James Harris, "Stalin as General Secretary: The Appointments Process and the Nature of Stalin's Power," in Sarah Davies and James Harris, eds., *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge, Eng., 2005), 81.

19. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 175–81.

20. For a detailed discussion of Bolshevik recruitment policies during the civil war, see Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925* (DeKalb, 2011), 45.

Vladimir Smirnov. His association with the Left Opposition movement of 1918 and the later Democratic Centralists group would seem to be the main reason for this group's classification as part of a democratic opposition platform. Yet the majority of his theses cover concrete criticisms of the army rather than ideological condemnation of the use of military specialists. There were points that reflected his support for collegial rule within the military, but this was a line that found little favor with most of the military delegates in the debate and which was heavily criticized in the third meeting of the military section.²¹ Their lack of significance is demonstrated by the rewriting of point 10, which concerned collegiality of command at the front. Thus, the question of collegiality and democracy was effectively excluded from later amendments to party policy. The majority of the theses more closely represent the concrete grievances voiced by the military delegates, most notably, the difficult question of the army's compromised class composition.²² These grievances were not an ideological rejection of the use of military specialists but a rational response to the ever-increasing numbers of peasants being conscripted and the overwhelming rates of desertion and rebellion within the Red Army. It was a genuine problem for those trying to direct events at the front.²³ Another overriding concern of the military delegates was the growing autonomy of the military machine at the expense of the party. The use of the military specialists was by now an unpleasant fact rather than an area of debate, and its inclusion in this discussion was linked to the lack of control the party had over the military.²⁴ The army's increasing autonomy was a worrying phenomenon, especially after Trotskii promised to shoot the commissar before the officers and soldiers in cases of betrayal—and had carried out his threat. The Panteleev case had become something of a cause célèbre within the party. Panteleev, a regimental commissar of the southern front, had fled the fighting along with his men during the battle for Kazan in August 1918. Trotskii had both Panteleev and the commander summarily executed. The fate of this fellow party member was viewed with concern. A sentiment that would often be repeated in the speeches of the military delegates was that control over the army was “slipping out of the hands of the party.”²⁵ The response was the call for the CC to take control and to bring an end to the polyarchy of institutions.²⁶ For many in the party, the ends would be more frightening than the means if they lost control of this vital wing of state.

The CC sent an extra representative, Sokol'nikov, to support its policy, and he presented his own theses. What interests us here is that these the-

21. See comments by Miasnikov, Goloshchekin, and Iurenev in *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 140, 143–45, and 146, respectively.

22. This is covered in points 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7, *ibid.*, 181–84.

23. For more on the rates of desertion and the high incidence of mobilizations on the front line, see S. Olikov, *Dezertirstvo v Krasnoi Armii i bor'ba s nim* (Leningrad, 1926).

24. Points 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 181–84.

25. Point 8, *ibid.*

26. This desire was seen throughout the framework of state and party institutions. The idea of polyarchy to hegemony comes from Robert Service, “From Polyarchy to Hegemony: The Party's Role in the Construction of the Central Institutions of the Soviet State, 1917–1919,” *Sbornik*, no. 10 (1984): 77–90.

ses, while supporting the basic principles of Trotskii's line, veered from the original by pointing to the party's concerns in the wake of civil war and, in these instances, coincided with many of the practical points covered in the opposition's theses. Sokol'nikov wished to see the creation of a centralized party organization within the military that would be responsible for political education and "ensure the CC's permanent leadership in all political work in the army."²⁷ He also voiced concern as to the mass conscription of the peasantry and stated that those in charge of military policy (clearly referring to Trotskii) had gone beyond the allotted task and had accepted a process of mass mobilization with no regard to the necessary class composition of the armed forces.²⁸ In this point, he specifically called for a genuine attempt to recruit the army on a class basis, "which nowadays does not exist, despite the official proclamations"—an obvious swipe at the contradiction between Trotskii's orders and his rhetoric in mobilizing the army. In his final point, Sokol'nikov demanded the elimination from the military statutes of "the archaisms that have slipped in and the resolutions establishing unnecessary privileges for the command staff."²⁹

These were the ideas on the table at the meetings of the military section of the Eighth Party Congress. As a few delegates noted, on certain issues the differences between the position of the CC, as represented by Sokol'nikov, and the platform presented by Smirnov were difficult to discern.³⁰ This is indicative of the widespread discomfort surrounding basic issues such as the relationship with the peasantry and mass recruitment. The idea that there was a concerted opposition within this congress to the CC's policy is an overstatement. Smirnov's and Sokol'nikov's seemingly opposed theses contained common themes about the need for greater centralization of party control over the military and fears about the mass mobilization of the peasantry. The theses that were more out of step with the arguments of the debate were those presented by Trotskii, which were the official statement of party policy.

The military section of the Party Congress met on three occasions between March 20 and 21.³¹ As the meetings resulted in a resounding defeat for Trotskii's theses, a plenary session of the Congress was called on the evening of the 21st to bring about a reconciliation of the opposition's and the CC's ideas. After this, a commission was established to resolve the dispute and to integrate some of the ideas of the opposition into party policy, with Grigorii Zinov'ev as chair and Stalin as a representative of the CC.

From the very beginning of the minutes of the first meeting of the military section on March 20, 1919, it is clear that the opposition was not about the use of the military specialists. The first three speakers for the opposition all made this clear, with Goloshchekin particularly adamant on this point. In his rebuttal to the speech made by A. I. Okulov, Trotskii's supporter, in which Okulov

27. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 181, point 7 of Sokol'nikov's theses.

28. *Ibid.*, point 4 of Sokol'nikov's theses.

29. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 181.

30. *Ibid.*, 149, 162.

31. The first meeting had a break and is listed as two separate meetings, while the final one ensured that all were agreed on the amendments before it went to the plenary meeting.

had upheld the policy of employing military specialists, he stated, “First of all, it is necessary to put to one side all the talk and the evidence coming from the official side about the specialists, as, and I repeat, there is not one single person here who would deny the specialists. The question isn’t about this. This speaks volumes and tells us that they are not taking this question seriously.”³²

This accusation rings true, as it was the delegates supporting military policy who discussed the issue of the military specialists, seemingly having come prepared for an attack on this front. What became clear in the course of this first meeting was that it was the mass recruitment of the peasantry creating concern rather than the recruitment of the military specialists. As one opposition member phrased it, “Our basic task is how to own the mass of the peasantry, how to build the army command so that the mass of the peasantry are in our grip.”³³ The concern here was how to build and maintain discipline among the peasant conscripts. The attitude toward discipline reveals much about the change in the party’s position as the civil war took hold and exposes the contradictions inherent in this social-democratic party running a standing army of the traditional type. As the meetings progressed, it became obvious that the majority of the opposition delegates disagreed with the collegial approach outlined by Smirnov, the apparent leader of the opposition. He espoused the conscious discipline of the underground revolutionary party for the army, a belief that received little support from the opposition or the CC and state delegates. The resistance to collegial leadership was made clear early on, as the first speaker for the opposition, Aleksandr Miasnikov, stated that the collective principle only hindered their work.³⁴ Yet, the opposition equally disliked traditional military discipline, which had been reestablished by Trotskii and turned on the party in the much-cited case of the commissar Panteleev. Indeed, a significant criticism was the extent to which the party workers in the military had become more state than party: “But, comrades, the policy that is being carried out in the creation of the Red Army has, in recent times, taken on a specific military character, which rips apart all those threads that join our Red Army with the communists.”³⁵

Neither style of discipline was suited to ongoing events. The sheer scale of the recruitment of socially unreliable elements meant that “collegiality” in party discipline could not be applied within the Red Army. The fast-paced conditions of the civil war also mitigated against collective command and demanded strict hierarchical discipline. But, equally clearly, party discipline could not be enforced by nonparty state servitors or peasants. So where should this discipline come from? The answer from the Military Opposition was that the party should take back control of the Red Army and discipline should come from the party via the CC. They envisaged a new kind of discipline—a

32. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 143. Okulov was a member of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RVSR).

33. *Ibid.*, 149.

34. *Ibid.*, 140. Aleksandr Miasnikov had been commander of the Volga front in the summer of 1918. In early 1919, he was appointed chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus and chairman of the Central Bureau of the Belarusian Communist Party.

35. *Ibid.*, 151.

civil war discipline, which would accept the hierarchical structures of the military and the state if all were brought under the supervision (*kontrol*) of the CC. The delegates of the Urals Military District and Third Army of the Eastern Front, Goloshchekin and Head Political Commissar of the Third Army N. G. Tolmachev, respectively, were particularly vocal on this point. Both had been involved in the loss of Perm', and their comments echoed many of the points in the Stalin-Dzerzhinskii report of January and anticipated Stalin's speech at the final plenary session. There is nothing to suggest that they were followers of Stalin, but the repetition of this point suggests that their grievances provided the background for the report, and Stalin's own involvement was an early example of his ability to gauge the mood of the party membership and garner support.

A number of delegates pointed out the similarities between the groups on points of principle. As one delegate, Abramov, stated, "I've heard twelve speakers up to now and I don't see any difference between them."³⁶ After some attempts to close the proceedings, the discussion moved on to the question of political education in the army to counter the mass influx of peasants into the ranks. This brought a wave of criticism directed at the Vseburvoenkomb (the All-Russian Bureau of Commissars, VBVK) and the quality of its recruits, an accusation the head of the VBVK, K. K. Iurenev, stridently repudiated. This was becoming a more heated and bad tempered affair. Speaker after speaker called for either an end to the VBVK or its reorganization, and all envisaged it coming under the direct purview of the CC. Amid this debate, Voroshilov and Minin, two of the Tsaritsyn group, expounded on their victory on the southern front and launched a direct attack on Trotskii and his supporter Okulov. These speeches were, however, tangential to the discussion, and the only theme in common with the ongoing discussion was a dislike of Trotskii and his heavy-handed measures. Minin pointed out that Trotskii's threat to put him and Voroshilov on a convoy back to Moscow was "most certainly not communist!"³⁷ What becomes quite clear from the speeches is that there was a great deal of resentment of Trotskii among the military elite and that the Tsaritsyn group did not need to drum up support on this point. However, to suggest that this was the basis of the Military Opposition is to underestimate the significance of the movement within the party against the Red Army's increasing autonomy, as Trotskii himself did later when he dismissed the military delegates as party workers suffering from nervous exhaustion or an inferiority complex.³⁸ The criticism went further than attacking one man. An exchange at the first meeting of the military section clearly demonstrates the conviction that party members were becoming more military minded than party conscious.

MULIN: Therefore that point of view, for which Comrade Smilga stands with other former comrades—sorry, I've expressed myself incorrectly . . .

UNKNOWN VOICE: Former state comrades.

36. *Ibid.*, 149. Nothing is known of Abramov according to the list of delegates and their attachments in *ibid.*, 187.

37. *Ibid.*, 153.

38. Jan M. Meijer, *The Trotsky Papers, 1917–1922* (The Hague, 1964), 327–29.

MULIN: . . . former state comrades, who at the present time have become more military—these comrades have gone too far.³⁹

This opinion was later reinforced at the closed session of the Congress, where Goloshchekin declared, “We reproach the CC for letting the organization of the army slip out of its hands and, with our project, we wish to return the organization of the army back into the hands of the CC, so that communist policy will penetrate the organization of the Red Army from top to bottom.”⁴⁰

For many, the increasing autonomy of the military commanders, the use of military specialists, the establishment of a large conscription-based force, and the lack of supervision exercised by the central party organs were unsettling byproducts of the civil war. The longer the nation was at war, the more the power of the state military organs seemed to be increasingly aggrandized and focused in the hands of fewer and fewer people running more and more departments. For many of the “oppositionists,” centralized control was the only realistic form of command at this time, with the party as the ruling partner, not the state.

This was not a phenomenon particular to the military but part of a larger trend within the state as a whole, a natural result of the need for “good,” “reliable” communists to stabilize the fronts, but it was noted with alarm by many in the party. Robert Service describes the CC as being “bombarded” with requests for it to take a firmer line with the grassroots of the party organizations and for greater intervention.⁴¹ This was particularly so in the army, whose delegates’ demands for centralization were about the party not only taking control of its military and party organizations but also inserting itself firmly within the infrastructure of the most threatening wings of state. In all the complaints, there is a sense that the CC had let its attention lapse and that the results within the military sphere were chaos, lack of a “correct” and clearly defined command structure, and increasing “statism” within the military.

The meeting eventually closed, reconvening on the morning of the next day. The second meeting was taken up mainly by the speeches of Smirnov and Sokol’nikov, as they addressed the delegates before the vote on the theses to be put forward to the plenary meeting of the Congress. The speeches continued on the themes of the previous meeting, as both speakers clarified their theses. The item of greatest interest came in the discussion before the vote, when there was confusion over which of the theses were to be voted on. Prior to this, others had pointed to the similarities between the practical proposals of the opposition and the concerns raised by Sokol’nikov as speaker for the CC. An unknown voice proposed that “Comrade Sokol’nikov has the analogous right to put forward his positions as a thesis.”⁴² This was supported

39. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 150. Ivan Smilga was a CC member and military delegate. He advocated *edinonachalie* (one-man command) for all commanders, including former tsarist officers.

40. *Ibid.*, 165.

41. See Robert Service, *The Bolshevik Party in Revolution: A Study in Organisational Change, 1917–1923* (London, 1979), 104.

42. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 170.

by other delegates who wished to divide Trotskii's and Sokol'nikov's theses, having found the latter's closer to their view. Sokol'nikov, however, was adamant that his ideas were an addition to, not a substitution for, Trotskii's and could not be taken separately. This confusion emphasizes the unusual position of the extra CC representation at the Congress. Clearly, Trotskii could not speak, as he had returned to the frontline. However, Sokol'nikov's theses and speeches not only deviated from the original military policy, they also contained an underlying reproach of the methods being used in building the revolutionary army. In the final vote, the opposition's theses gained the majority, with thirty-seven voting for Smirnov's as the basis for further discussion and the platform to be presented to the Congress by the military section. Nineteen voted for Trotskii's.⁴³

By the time the third meeting had been convened later in the day, the CC representatives, now the minority group, had obviously had enough of losing the debate. Before any discussion could start, they walked out, to the great annoyance of the other section members, who were going through the points of the theses one by one, adding amendments and removing certain points before it went before the Congress. The absence of the minority is, however, a bonus for historians, as the "opposition" was now left alone to consider Smirnov's theses, which were supposedly their united platform. In the course of the discussion, the points on which their opinions differed would become quite clear.

As indicated above, the most notable of these differences concerned the question of collective command advocated by Smirnov.⁴⁴ This point was most vehemently opposed, first by an unfortunately unidentified voice from among the delegates who dismissed the viability of such a command.⁴⁵ The objection was very quickly supported by Voroshilov, who pointed out that if they wished to give the commissars more power within the military, then the collective command envisaged so rosilily by Smirnov would only lead to command by meetings.⁴⁶ This protest was upheld and the point subsequently removed from the theses. It was replaced by a proposal concerning the expansion of the rights of commissars, with the exclusion of operational questions. This ran counter to the policy of Trotskii, who was reluctant to make their powers more concrete.⁴⁷ It had, however, been suggested by CC representative Sokol'nikov in his first speech to the Congress, in which he had recommended that the rights and responsibilities of the commissars and the duties of the *politotdely* (political departments) and the party cells should be clarified and regularized.

43. *Ibid.*, 171. The actual count here was nineteen for Trotskii's proposals; however, the representative obviously miscounted and declared the number of votes as twenty. This became the official figure, and in the absence of the actual minutes of the meetings, it went on to be repeated in S. M. Kliatskin, *Na zashchite oktiabria: Organizatsiia reguliarnoi armii i militsionnoe stroitel'stvo v Sovetskoi respublike, 1917–1920* (Moscow, 1965); and Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army*.

44. See point 10 of Smirnov's theses on measures to be taken, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 183.

45. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 10 (1989): 176.

46. *Ibid.*, 177–78.

47. Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army*, 156.

Here is a key example of where the more utopian stances of Smirnov's platform did not coincide with the body of feeling among the military delegates, whose own aims were far more practical and in tune with the feelings of the CC.

A further significant parting of ways arose over the question of discipline.⁴⁸ Here Smirnov wished to see the recognition of party-conscious discipline being introduced into the ranks of the Red Army and an end to the "old style" of forced military discipline. "Discipline, which in the White Army is achieved purely by means of external force, is being created and should be created by a knowing combination of the methods of political education and those of external force, changing, in proportion to the growth of class consciousness, to a conscious subordination of the mass to the discipline of the civil war."⁴⁹ Both Miasnikov and Voroshilov rejected this view of discipline. Their understanding of it was somewhat simpler—as a military, hierarchical order, which should serve the party. As Miasnikov contended, "What is this conscious discipline? From the military point of view, 'conscious discipline' does not exist. If we say 'conscious discipline,' we say that orders can be discussed. In a word, we are going back to how it was."⁵⁰

While their protests did not lead to the removal of this point, the debate itself shows the differences in the thinking of some of the opposition's leading voices. Some of the more "utopian" elements of Smirnov's theses did not coincide with the reality of these men's experiences of the front. They wanted discipline; they wanted orders to be carried out to the letter; they wanted edonachalie, but for the orders to be given by party people and for the military hierarchy to be imbued with, and indivisible from, the party hierarchy. What was envisaged here by many of the opposition members was to become the trademark of the government after 1921, whereby the party elite produced commands in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the mass party carried out these orders without question. Debate was for the higher reaches of the party, not for its ranks.

A further point of divergence was on the mobilization of the peasantry and the need to ensure the party's leading role in their political preparation. Smirnov wished to see a strict account taken of the class composition of those being mobilized and the "kulak elements" separated from the rest.⁵¹ Danilov realistically argued that this was a fanciful idea, as at the current speed and scale of mobilization it would take an "alchemist" to separate these elements. For him, it was far more worrying that "a gray mass of politically unaware peasants are pouring into the army, while the party organizations are not taking a decisive part in the political education of these new formations."⁵² In this Goloshchekin supported him. These concerns echoed a point in the report by

48. Point 5 of Smirnov's theses, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 10 (1989): 173.

49. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 182.

50. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 10 (1989): 173. Meaning, as it was in the old-style partisan divisions and, prior to that, in the ranks of the army during the time of the Provisional Government, when the Bolsheviks had encouraged this type of democratic participation within the military as a way of undermining the old army.

51. Point 7 of Smirnov's theses on measures to be taken, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1989): 183.

52. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 10 (1989): 173.

Feliks Dzerzhinskii and Stalin to the CC on the fall of Perm' to the Whites, as well as the comments by Sokol'nikov and many others at the meetings of the military section.⁵³ Clearly, the relationship between the peasant conscript soldiers and the party was one of the main areas of concern at this stage in the conflict. The immediate needs of the Red Army had obscured the potential threat to the future of the new republic.

This meeting takes us beyond the proposals put down on paper by Smirnov and demonstrates that the Military Opposition contained a greater array of opinions than their rather simplistic image as an ideologically utopian wing of the party and a group of overstressed party workers. Many of their views coincided with the additions to the CC policy produced by Sokol'nikov. In this sense, the proposition of a diametrically opposed viewpoint within the party standing against the official policy is tenuous.

The final meeting to end the marathon of discussion about military policy came with the closed plenary session of the Congress on March 21. The most significant aspects of this meeting were the speeches by Lenin and Stalin, as representatives from the CC.⁵⁴ In his speech, Stalin homed in on the same issues as those Sokol'nikov brought up—the peasantry and discipline. While the ideas may have had much in common, however, the tone Stalin adopted was far more emphatic. He was not concerned about the distinctions between the peasantry, an unusual omission for a leading party member at this time. Relations with the middle peasantry were the subject of most discussions at the Congress, yet here Stalin was simply referring to the peasantry as an amorphous mass. Poor, middling, or rich, they were all of dubious political loyalty and required discipline. His view of the type of discipline required coincided with Voroshilov's and Goloshchekin's comments at the third meeting of the military section. There was no question of "persuading" the peasantry—they were to be forced to fight by means of rigid and unbending discipline. For many who had fought on the frontlines in the first year of the civil war, this was an obvious conclusion. The class struggle was about direct methods, brutal repression, and party control. All these measures were justifiable if they were to ensure communist victory. Thus, having recognized that the peasantry was unwilling to join the fight, Stalin aggressively concluded that "the peasants will not fight for socialism, they will not!"⁵⁵

In this case, there was only one solution: to impose the form of discipline that had evolved in the first year of the conflict. Not a conscious party-style discipline but the forced and brutal discipline of the military to make the peasantry fight for the party and for ultimate victory. This was described as the discipline of the civil war and, as Stalin maintained, "from this is our task—to force these elements to fight, to follow the proletariat not only in the

53. I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 4 (Moscow, 1954), 197–224.

54. Stalin's speech was eventually published in his collected works, although in a heavily edited version. The sections missing from the original version produced much discussion as to Stalin's line of argument, and in subsequent attempts to predict their contents, the suspicions and suppositions contained in Trotskii's memoirs were often relied on.

55. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 11 (1989): 163.

rear but at the fronts, to force them to fight imperialism.”⁵⁶ No questions. No discussion. No committees. He proposed ruthless military discipline to further the aims of the party. Sokol’nikov might have been more restrained in his discussion of this very real problem for the party, but the agreement between the two is clear. Trotskii’s view of the Military Opposition as Stalin’s creation seems in this light rather naïve. The opposition platform already had more than one sympathetic ear in the CC and throughout the party; even if Stalin supported the group, he was only one of many. As mentioned above, Trotskii had insisted in his theses that the army, despite the mass mobilization, was still being formed from the proletariat and semi-proletariat. This was, of course, a misrepresentation, which Stalin seized on. He completely undermined Trotskii’s theses, declaring that although the principle of proletariat recruitment remained by decree, the reality was quite different on the southern and eastern fronts. There, units were often made up of elements that were, he claimed, virtually members of the White Guard. This echoed the point in Sokol’nikov’s theses, which emphasized the gap between the declarations about the Red Army’s evolution and the reality. He then turned on the Main Command (*Glavnoe komandovanie*), a genuine bastion of military specialists and so a softer target of attack, for their recruitment of “exploiters.” Their policy had only produced kulak regiment commanders. Thus, while the recruitment of the peasantry was an inescapable fact, the recruitment of parasitical elements to the ranks of junior officers was not. Yet he only proposed that this deficiency be corrected.

The true weight of his attack was reserved for the VBVK and its head, Iurennev, again concentrating on the need for discipline and the party’s political guidance of the peasant recruits. He suggested that the VBVK should be either reorganized or abolished, as it had obviously failed in this duty. While criticizing certain features of the military administration, in the final summary he shied away from any overt attacks on Trotskii and directed the bulk of his direct recriminations at Iurennev and the commissars. However, in his closing summation he pointedly ignored Trotskii’s theses, declaring his unqualified support of the proposals Sokol’nikov had put forward and intimating that this was the center’s true policy: “As far as practical proposals are concerned, Comrade Sokol’nikov speaks completely openly and clearly on this. And, after the theses, I move to accept the practical proposals as the natural result of the center’s general policy.”⁵⁷

Lenin’s address to the meeting characteristically turned the vote around in the government’s favor, transforming the majority into a minority. He attacked the utopian elements of Smirnov’s theses outright, describing them as being imbued with hidden messages and including glaring contradictions within their points. He also rejected the argument for the need to “persuade” the peasantry—discipline was required in the military sphere, not gentle words.⁵⁸ Again, here he would find few among the military delegates who dis-

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 164.

58. *Ibid.*, 169.

agreed with this. Principles such as collective command and “persuasion” were not likely to be popular as Aleksandr Kolchak was marching westward. The direction of Lenin’s thoughts was obviously fixed on centralization, control, and discipline as a way of surviving the struggle.

It would have gladdened Trotskii’s heart to hear that a large section of Lenin’s speech was a diatribe on the failure of the defense of Tsaritsyn and its mismanagement. Lenin particularly attacked Voroshilov, Stalin’s right-hand man at Tsaritsyn, who had boasted of the great heroism of the defence of the city and had been a particular thorn in Trotskii’s side. He simply retorted that this heroism had cost the lives of much-needed communists. Heroism was a feature of the amateur stage of partisan warfare. The party now required specialists, professionals who would ensure that as little life was lost as possible.⁵⁹

Yet there were still certain ambiguities in his speech, which suggested his own dislike of the traditional military structure. The military statutes were declared indefensible yet necessary for discipline. He also took a swipe at the *chinovniki* (civil servants) of the Main Command, who had produced the drafts of the service regulations, sarcastically noting their secrecy and circumspection when distributing the limited number of copies.⁶⁰ This military bureaucracy was unpleasant but, like the service statutes, had to be tolerated in this transitional period.

While his speech had not been terribly controversial and a large proportion of it was directed at particular military delegates, it seemed that Lenin’s words of support for Trotskii had been enough to bring about a swing in party feeling. This time, the CC proposals won out, despite the trials in the military section. They received 174 votes, compared to 95 for the opposition’s theses. But this was not the end of the military delegates’ proposals. To reconcile the diverging strands of opinion in the party, a commission was established, with Zinov’ev at its head and Stalin as a CC member, which introduced the practical measures suggested by the opposition. As a consequence, the publication of the official party program produced a small triumph for those military delegates who wished to see the CC take control. While most of the points in the program relating to military policy were clearly a simple repetition of Trotskii’s original theses, the Military Opposition’s gains were obvious in the addendum, under the telling title of “Practical Measures.” They were both additions to and corrections of military policy and the approach of the Commissariat for War.⁶¹

One of the most significant alterations was the acceptance of the need to regulate and specify the duties of the commissars, the politotdely, and the party cells within units in order to overcome the improvised and often independent actions being taken in the name of the party. Following on from this, the commissar’s role was strengthened; now he was to be the main party representative within the state’s fighting body. First and foremost a party man,

59. *Ibid.*, 169–71.

60. *Ibid.*, 167–68.

61. See Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army*, 110–11.

he would be responsible for discipline and have powers of arrest. Although not granted rights over operational questions, his ability to act was greatly extended, as administrative and service issues were now his responsibility.⁶²

The criticisms of the VBVK also showed through, with the proviso for the CC to organize party forces within the army instead of the VBVK. This addendum thus brought about the end of the VBVK as a separate entity and the creation of the Political Administration of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RVSR). The head of this political department would be a member of both the CC and the RVSR, thereby adding to the party influence within the military command and the importance given to the political direction of the Red Army. The difference in the approach to this body was immediately apparent in the list of those appointed to run it. Ivan Smilga, Khristian Rakovskii, Leonid Serebriakov, and Aleksandr Beloborodov were all members of the CC, unlike Iurenev, the former head of the VBVK, who had never held such a high-ranking position within the party.⁶³ The combination of institutional reform and raising the profile of political leadership within the military ensured the party's supremacy in the Red Army. It was clear that the CC was not to be left in the dark as to developments within the military. This also indicates that the leeway given to Trotskii in forming the military machine was being reined in. No longer would he be able to shock Lenin with the numbers of military specialists employed by the Commissariat of War. There would now be senior party men keeping tabs on the state's activities.

The Military Opposition was not simply another opposition movement, following on from the aggrieved Left Communists and using the military as a platform. Indeed, calling it an opposition obscures the common concerns of the military delegates and certain members of the CC and cloaks the similarities in the practical proposals for the Red Army presented in Smirnov's and Sokol'nikov's theses. There were two issues here. First, the mistrust of the autonomy of the Red Army and the Commissariat for War. With this came unease among both military delegates and CC representatives about the lack of a coordinated party presence within the Red Army. The opposition was not aggrieved about the use of military specialists or trying to reintroduce democratic forms into the military sphere. Instead, most of the military delegates wished to see the military hierarchy staffed by reliable party men and overseen by the CC. In other words, the Military Opposition was an attempt to make the military more party minded. In fusing the two institutions, with the party as the senior partner, the Congress rubberstamped the foundation of the one-party state, with the CC and the political departments taking control of its military wing. This congress and the military section have been overlooked in studies of the development of the party-state, as attention has been focused on this event as a continuation of the Left Opposition movement rather than an early push to centralize state institutions and bring them under the control of the CC.

62. *Ibid.*, 110–14.

63. Main, "The Creation, Organisation and Work of the Red Army's Political Apparatus," 238.

Another key issue repeatedly discussed at the meetings was the conscription of peasants. This subject has also been overlooked in previous studies, which centered on the mistrust of the military specialists. However, the class that motivated most of the discussion was not the bourgeoisie but the peasantry. The debates about their place in the army made up a sizable part of the military section's discussions. Such was the threat posed by the peasantry in early 1919 that many in the party now called for a greater degree of central party control, and this would only continue until the peasant problem was "solved" with collectivization. The impetus behind the formation of the Military Opposition was not a struggle for democracy but an attempt to protect the party from some of the consequences of this turnabout in party policy. This corresponds to the overall drift of Bolshevik policy at the time, more so than an interpretation that portrays this movement as another stand for grassroots democracy within the party. With the end of the civil war, the problem of the peasantry would naturally move from the military sphere to the economic sphere and bring about the introduction of the New Economic Policy. This congress and its "opposition" need to be viewed in this context and not as part of a call for intraparty democracy.

Finally, this episode makes us aware of Stalin's early political influence within the party, countering the view of him as "the great gray blur" or "Comrade Paper Clip" in the civil war period, a characterization provided by Nikolai Sukhanov and Trotskii as they ridiculed later heroic presentations of his role in the war. There is no doubt that the overinflated claims of Stalin's military genius in the civil war obscured a more nuanced picture of his activities in this period and have led historians to ignore his early postings and growing influence in the party. This interpretation has been somewhat altered in western historiography, as the biographies by Dmitrii Volkogonov, in 1989, and Robert Service, of 2004, looked in greater depth at his early life and presented him as a real person with serious intellectual aspirations and a strong commitment to revolutionary ideology.⁶⁴ However, Stalin's early influence within the party membership, particularly those party members working on the front lines in the civil war, is little, if at all, known to historians.

64. D. A. Volkogonov, *Triumfi tragediia: Politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1989); Service, *Stalin*.