Historical origins of the party-army relations in the Soviet Union and China

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ABSTRACT

It is established that Party-army relation followed a "separated" pattern in the Soviet Union as opposed to an "infused" pattern in China. This article explores the historical origin of this difference in the revolutionary periods. By analyzing the biographies of communist military elites, it argues that this discrepancy took shape before the revolutionary takeover and resulted from the differentiated intensities of warfare across Russia and China. In China, the numerous civil wars and military defeats, radicalized the old military structure and boosted societal militarization; thus, eroding the mutual exclusion between the military and revolutionaries. The effect was lesser in Tsarist Russia than in prerevolutionary China, making the old military a conservative and professional corporate that the Bolsheviks could not completely subordinate to Party control.

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1. Introduction

Previous scholarship has argued that the communist party and army were more separated in the Soviet Union than in the People's Republic of China. This article explores the historical origins of this discrepancy. By analyzing the biographical data of the military elites who incited the revolutions, it finds that such discrepancy had been in existence long before the power takeover. This article then further traces this difference to the war experiences of prerevolutionary societies. In China, the incessant military defeats and intense civil war had eroded mutual hostility between the old military and social radicals, promoting them to join each other. Conversely, in Russia military defeats were limited and insufficient in forcing radical reforms of the old military and in boosting pervasive patriotism. This insufficiency rendered the separation between the Bolsheviks and the old officer corps that was never overcome by the short civil war.

The interest in comparing the Soviet and CCP armies is long-lasting. In the Soviet case, it is generally agreed that the party and army were two mutually independent groupings; however, debates continue to revolve around how they interact with each other. The army is often depicted as an isolated interest group whose involvement in civilian affairs was rigidly banned and whose interests in politics simply diminished after education has been depoliticized (Colton, 1979; Taylor, 2003). In contrast, the conflict pattern identifies the army as a challenger that had distinct ideology, organizational principles, and material interests, driving it to influence and dominate politics (Kolkowicz, 1967; Stone, 2002). A third thesis is isomorphism, which argues that both the army and party were forged by Leninist principles, which enabled them to act independently

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along same directions (Odom, 1998). Such coalitional relation became further stable as the single-sided dependence transformed into mutual reciprocal ties (Perlmutter and LeoGrande, 1982).

In the Chinese case, scholars agree on an integration pattern but differ about which areas such integration was realized. The symbiosis thesis emphasizes the elite interchangeability at the top, arguing that at least throughout the Mao era there was no clear boundary and professional differentiation between military and party leaders, which resembles the model of premodern European armies (Joffe, 1996). Some argue that the CCP army did not have a corporatist character. During the “Cultural Revolution” period, the army massively engaged in politics, but merely on behalf of the party, rather than in pursuit of its sectoral interests (Colton, 1979: 254–57). The dualist thesis contends that during regular periods, institutional fusion occurs as military commanders participate in local party committees, governments, and People’s Congresses, while the party simultaneously installs political commissars in the army (Adelman, 1980; Chu, 1998). The same thesis adds that the CCP’s efforts to separate the army from the party during the 1980s was frustrated after the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, when certain officers, in the name of military professionalism, refused to follow the party’s order to shoot the students (Shambaugh, 1991).

This article derives insights from sociology of war, which holds the general thesis that continuous and intensive warfare promotes social transformation. In order to win wars, state elites reformed their armies, bringing about fundamental changes in broad political and social relations (Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Finer, 1975; Hall, 1987; McNeill, 1983; Tilly, 1990; Zhao, 2015). Moreover, military defeats, after causing the collapse of the state and social dislocation, often become a major source of mass nationalism and militarization (Greenfeld and Chirot, 1994; Kohn, 1950; Malesevic, 2016; Mann, 2004; Tilly, 1994; Weber, 1976). This article further argues that such mechanisms tended to erode the mutual alienation between the old military, which embraced professionalism (Huntington, 1957), and the societal leftists, who followed classical-Marxism and harbored anti-military psychology (Berger, 1977). The extent of the erosion depended on the intensity of warfare.

This article consists of six parts. The first section reviews plausible explanations for the historical origins of post-revolutionary patterns. The second part presents the data and methods. The third describes the varied relations between the military and radical across Russia and China. The fourth and fifth sections analyze Russia and China respectively, revealing how war experiences shaped the two old armies and communist parties. The conclusion discusses the long-term consequences of differentiated militarization in post-revolutionary periods and the contribution of this article.

2. Possible explanations

While most scholars compare the communist party-army relationship in the post-revolutionary period, some examine how the differences between the USSR and PRC took shape during the revolutionary years. A relevant explanation is the length of Civil War. Adelman (1980: 104-05), for example, argues that the prolonged Civil War (1927–49) enabled the CCP to establish its own of...

A second possible explanation concerns political opportunities. For example, following the topographical theory (Laitin, 2007), it is argued that China’s mountainous terrains predisposed the CCPs to embrace guerrilla warfare. On the other hand, Russia’s vast steppe, where partisans could not hide, precluded the same warfare tactics for the Bolsheviks. According to state-breakdown theory, the fragmented political system in warlordist China solicited the idea of a militarized revolution, while the survival of the Tsarist system of repression led most Bolsheviks to deem armed resistance as unfeasible (Skocpol, 1979: 260–67, 294–303). This explanation, however, does not discuss why the Tsarist army did not, at least partially, side with the revolutionaries, and why the Bolsheviks were unable to position themselves as high commanding officers in order to control the army (Tssetaev, 1960: 103–05).

A third explanation stresses the role of external aids in escalating the conflict during the civil war (Regan et al., 2009). Most scholarship on the CCP’s history support this thesis. For example, China’s Northern Expedition (1926–28) was sponsored by the Comintern, which militarized the CCP at a formative stage (Pantsov, 2000). Also, many CCP generals were trained by Moscow (Pantsov, 2000; Price, 1976: 66–67; Whitson and Huang, 1973: 14–18). Moreover, the CCP revolution’s transition into an independent civil-war enterprise was forged by Moscow. Moscow not only devised the rural and military strategies for the CCP but also actively promoted the its coalition with the KMT and local military strongmen (Sheng, 1997: 17–20, 33–45). After the massacre of 1927, it was Stalin, for the purpose of defeating Trotsky, who ordered the CCP to launch the two uprisings in Nanchang and Guangzhou (Elleman, 2009: Chapter 8&10). However, this account fails to adequately separate the party-army relationships from the general engagement of communists in warfare. Thus, it cannot explain, for example, why the Bolsheviks, after the Civil War became a full-scale conflict still maintained the administrative and political boundaries between the military and the party (Pipes, 1995: 56–58).

A fourth explanation considers the continuity of a preexisting rebellious tradition. It argues that the CCP’s militarization resulted from China’s violent mass culture, particularly in the central provinces where the peasant movement gained popularity, such as in Hubei and Henan (Dai, 1985; Harrell, 1990; Perry, 2002; Rowe, 2007). However, this argument only
partially explains the reality. A biographical survey (Xinghuoliaoyuan, 2006) of the CCP’s 10 marshals, 10 field marshals, and 57 generals shows that the proportion of people from “violent regions” who held high military rankings was fewer than those from less violent regions. The low number of high military officials from “violent regions” suggests that the origin of the CCP armed force was less a direct effect of the peasant violent culture.

This article follows a different approach, which considers Russia’s and China’s disparities in military and geopolitical dynamics over the long-term. While social scientists of revolution view Russia and China alike as non-Western late-developing societies (Dunn, 1972; Moore, 1966; Skocpol, 1979; Wallerstein, 1976), comparative historians tend to highlight the two polities’ difference – Russia as a modern military power and China as a semi-colonial society. This difference in societal structure made the Russian revolution more concerned with internal injustice and the Chinese revolution more infused with nationalism (Bianco, 2018: 9–12, 16–17; Friedman, 2015: 7–13; Smith, 2008: chapter 5; Wright, 1961). As Friedman argues, the CCP, under the name of “People’s Democratic Dictatorship”, was more flexible in incorporating elements of the old system. The Bolsheviks, committed to fighting capitalism, carried a rigid norm of socialist class struggle, keeping non-proletarian social forces at arm’s length. This difference in revolutions persisted and shape Moscow’s and Beijing’s strategies in the Third World (Friedman, 2015: 11–13; 117–18, 142–43).

3. Data and methods

This article uses the method of biographical analysis. In the case of China where the radicals and the military were fused, the data used comes from biographies of the CCP elites who had an old military background, more precisely, the people who used to serve in the imperial, warlord or KMT armies. These elites were the ones who established the CCP army. Their conversions from old military to communists or vice versa reflected the warfare experiences of the late Qing Empire and post-imperial China. The Russian case is more complicated. Before the Great War, the Bolsheviks and the Tsarist officer corps were almost completely separate. For this reason, the data analysis is twofold, examining both the reasons that the Bolsheviks disliked the army, and also why the high- and middle-ranking officers rarely became revolutionaries.

In addition to separate biographies, the analysis of the CCPs is primarily based on the 14-volume Biographies of PLA Generals (cited as BLAG, 1986), which covers the CCP’s military elites of the entire civil-war period, including those who established the army and died in battles later. This dataset is biased in that it does not include people who defected or had the experiences of rising against Mao, such as Marshal Lin Biao and his disciples. Despite this limitation, the analysis is not biased because the available data sufficiently reveal crucial features of China’s post-imperial military culture. The analysis of the Russian case focuses on the Bolshevik’s “military and combat activists” and the Tsarist officers who switched to the Red Army in 1918, based on the biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias published in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (Goriache, 2005; Granat, 1989; Grechko, 1976; Khromov, 1987; Kopanev, 1967; Prokhorov, 1976; Wieczynski and Ryhne, 1976). A potential bias of the Soviet military biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias is that they tend to neglect the martyrs that died before the revolution of 1917. A close examination of the Bolshevik’s pre-1917 central bodies suggests that very few military activists were sentenced to death, although most of them had the experiences of arrest.

4. Mutual exclusion and fusion

The military and radical elites of the late Tsarist Russia were two separated groups. Very few leading Bolsheviks had professional military backgrounds. Among the 94 central committee members from 1917 to 1923, only Kuibyshev (1988: 10–11) graduated from cadet corps (kadetskii korpus), senior military middle school. However, after graduation he did not become an officer as his parents expected. A number of Bolsheviks entered into the army, but only after they had converted to socialism. In battlefield or barracks, they continued to conspiratorially agitate for the party. For example, Andrei Andreev (1985: 79), Mikhail Lashevich (Granat, 1989: 490), Aleksandr Miasnikov (Granat, 1989: 588), Anastas Mikoyan (Mikoyan and Mikoyan, 1988: 37–38), Daniil Sulimov (Prokhorov, 1976, 25: 226) and Nikolai Uglanov (Granat, 1989: 731) fought as soldiers during the First World War, whereas Mama Orakheshvili (Orakhelashveli, 1986: 3) and Kristian Rakovskii (Conte, 1989: 25) served as military doctors in Rumania and Central Asia. Some others were titled as “combat experts”, such as Aleksei Badaev (Pochebut and Malkin, 1962: 19), Andrei Bubnov (Binevich and Serebriianskii, 1964: 7–8), Segei Gusev (Kramarov, 1974: 31–34), Nikolai Kolotilov (Grechko, 1976, 12: 592) and Timofei Krvov (Muratov and Lipnina, 1968: 32–35). They took part in urban uprisings of the 1905 Revolution, but their experiences were confined to making bombs, organizing worker guards and providing security service for party conferences. Some people who later became major leaders of the Soviet Army, such as Kliment Voroshilov, Mikhail Frunze and Leo Trotsky, had no professional military backgrounds at all.

Besides the leading elites, there was a large group of “military activists” (voennyye deiateli). Having experiences either in conducting agitation among soldiers or organizing worker insurrections, this group was viewed as the most militarized Bolsheviks. However, even among these “military activists” very few had substantial engagement in the old army. The Soviet textbook book Military and Fighting Work of the Bolshevik (1903–1917) provides a long list of names, out of which nearly 45 had separate biographies (Pankratov, 1973). Only Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, who completed Junker School before 1905, could count as professional soldier. However even before enrollment, he had been engaged in Social Democratic circles, and after graduation, like Gusev, he did not enter the officer corps (Granat, 1989: 349–50). Nearly 20 people had become socialists prior to war. During the World War, they were conscripted either as warrant, noncommissioned or reserve officers. Among them were Pavel Dybenko (Granat, 1989: 411–12) and Konstantin Mekhonoshin (Kopanev, 1967, 2: 112–13), who played...
leading roles in the October coup. The only two exceptions were martyrs Andrei Emel’ianov and Evgenii Kokhaskii who graduated from military schools whilst joining the Bolsheviks in 1905, but had very low rank in the army (Grechko, 1976, 3: 310, 411). The rest did not have military or fighting experiences. Some were titled as military experts simply because they took part in the Bolsheviks’ negotiation with Tsarist generals after the Kornilov Rebellion or assumed the commissar positions during the Civil War.

The military elites lacked revolutionary enthusiasm. In early 1918, a large amount of former Tsarist officers switched to the Red Army. Yet, even these people did not have previous radical involvement. Their switch was not driven by ideological conversion, but rather for the sake of the security of families (Kenez, 1973: 67; Mayzel, 1976: 21–32). Almost all of the Red Army’s high command members of 1920-22 moved to the Bolshevik side only after the Provisional Government had been overthrown, including the legendary Red marshals Semen Budenny, Mikhail Tukhachevskii, and Boris Shaposhnikov (Granat, 1989: 371; Grechko, 1976, 8: 151; Shaposhnikov, 1974). Some senior military experts switched in 1918 but waited a long time before joining the Communist Party; among the examples of this were Boris Shaposhnikov, Semen Pugachev, and Aleksandr Kolenkovskii who joined the Party in 1930, 1934, and 1940, respectively (Grechko, 1976, 4: 231; 6: 628; 8: 491). The only individual who had radical experiences before revolution was Vasili Blyukher (Kondrat’ev, 1965: 40–80). Before being conscripted in 1916 as a worker, he had been arrested twice for taking part in strikes. He joined the Social Democrats after he had been dismissed from the army for irretrievable injury.

The increase of the cases like Blyukher towards the end of the Great War did not change the army or the Bolshevik radicals. The separation between military and radicals weakened at the low-ranking level. As the losses of officers increased, the state lowered its standard and recruited many radicalized gymnasts, teachers and university students. After crash training, these people were sent to the front. Never having been socialized by the imperial army’s professional culture, they continued their antiwar propaganda as “revolutionaries in uniforms”. Yet, the high- and middle-ranking posts remained monopolized by either noble-background generals or newly promoted military professionals (Grebenkin, 2010: 56–57; Kenez, 1973: 64; Shaipak, 2012: 83–84; Zimin, 1968). It is well known that the upper layer of the old officer corps, which was beyond the influence of wartime replacement, joined the Whites. The massive inflow of radicals into the officer corps also did not alter the Bolsheviks’ anti-Bonapartist psychology. Throughout the interregnum before takeover the Bolsheviks remained reluctant to resort to a military approach. Even when the Civil War had started, they still believed that the regime could be defended by Red guards (Erickson, 1962: 11–13; Meyer, 1962: 161-62).

The CCP’s overall map was rather simple. After the rupture with the KMT in April 1927, the CCP immediately turned to establish its own regular army. By the summer of 1930, it had managed to form a huge guerilla base system that covered nearly ten provinces. Unlike the Bolshevik, the CCP was a communist party with strong military background. A significant segment of its early elites previously served in China’s old armies. Many of these people, before the formation of the Red Army, by virtue of their outstanding performance had been colonel- or general-level officers and obtained the reputation of military talents. My data source Generals of the PLA (Xinghuoliaoyuan, 1995) contains biographies of nearly 220 figures, most of whom were junior ones who were recruited into the CCP army as it proliferated. However, out of the army-building elites, at least 47 served in imperial, warlord or KMT armies, while another 12 people studied in Huangpu Military School before they joined the CCP.

5. Russia: limited defeats and “reactionary learning”

Unlike those communist movements that succeeded in eastern societies colonized by imperialism, the Bolshevik Revolution occurred within an imperialist power, where the external military threat was not perceived as acute as domestic social injustice (Friedman, 2015: 7–8). The defeats in Crimea and Manchuria humiliated the Tsarist state; however, such setbacks were far from threatening Russia’s subsistence – in Crimea Russia merely failed to achieve its presupposed geopolitical ambition, while the fight with Japan occurred in the remote periphery East. Both defeats aroused concern among the elites as it seemed that Russia was likely to lose its geopolitical superiority. Instead, limited lessons were drawn. For those drawn, they were carried out in a reactionary direction. Although adaptations were processed, they were confined to technical levels, such as purchasing weapon, revising strategies, and reinforcing officer education. These reforms were designed by people who aimed to defend rather than undermine the autocracy. In other words, these limited reforms further strengthened certain autocratic features of the Tsarist army, making it not only immune to internal radicalization, but also resistible to external radical penetration. Unwilling and unable to channel such an army to create a revolution, the Bolsheviks were prone to embrace an anti-military interpretation of classical Marxism.

The Russian army used to be an active player in radical politics, but this interventionist tradition eventually faded after the reign of Nicolai I (Taylor, 2003) when military failure put a formal end to it. One major response to the defeat in Crimea was to introduce officer professionalization. This reform, which gained momentum after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, was aimed at making officers apolitical – except for obeying Tsar, they were not encouraged to be concern with any political or ideological issues. This program was manifested by the founding of the Academy of General Staff (Kenez, 1973: 135-36; as Stalin’s marshal Boris Shaposhnikov (1974: 129-30) recalled, the academy valued professionalism to the extent that directors

1 Generals who converted to the CCP at the end of the Civil War in the late 1940s and activists installed by the CCP to Huangpu are excluded for their lacking of analytical originality.
imposed from outside through nepotism never enjoyed genuine authority among faculties and students. As military schools mushroomed after the 1870s, the model of the Academy of General Staff was imitated widely. The entire army became apolitical as the graduates of these schools spread to occupy low- and middle-ranking command positions (Mayzel, 1961; 8; Granat, 1989: 73). Depoliticization continued in the new century. Around 1903, the special troops of the Interior Ministry had been established. At least in the formal institution, domestic repressions started to be separated from the duties of the army (Bushnell, 1985: 52–59). The defeat by Japan brought a heavy blow to the prestige of the officer corps, further undermining their confidence for political participation (Kenez, 1980: 59).

Depoliticization brought about desired outcomes. In the wake of the revolution of 1905 officers remained loyal while, in stark contrast, the soldiers were restless. At the onset of the period, certain local military commanders, unaware of the overall situation, were permitted to disseminate weapons to worker units. However, it was not long before the government denounced the rebels as illegal and the commanders withdrew their orders (Denikin, 1991: 171–72).

The officer corps also remained immune from nationalists. Józef Piłsudski, nationalist and the future president of independent Poland, attempted to exploit ethnic divisions in the officer corps to make mutinies, but most officers did not respond to them (Denikin, 1991: 109–10). Societal Russian rightists were also not able to gain the opportunity for mutiny. Although it is rumored that the Russian rightists had attempted to penetrate into the army, evidence has never been found (Chirkov, 1968). Instead, being politically apathetic, the officers only obeyed the Tsar, who assumed the supreme power.

This apolitical culture further strengthened during the first half of the Great War. It was further spread as old noble officers died or retired; the “Genstabists” (alumni of the Academy of General Staff) replaced them. When the revolution came, the consequence became evident. For example, except for obeying the Tsar, the army had little political concern. With little knowledge of the dazzling ideological spectrum, the officer corps simply lost their direction, having no idea of where to go (Kozlov and Nazemtsseva, 2015). As Lazar Kaganovich (1996: 91–93) recalled, to communicate with the apolitical army so that they did not side with counterrevolutionaries, the Bolsheviks needed to accommodate by using patriotic vocab such as “fatherland” and “the people”, the only political concept the officers had heard of.

The responses to defeats made the army not only more stable inside, but also immune from penetration from outside. The Emancipation of 1861 did not bring fundamental changes to the army. Due to shortage of funds, many military units had to be economically autarkic, which meant that soldiers and low-ranking officers were preoccupied with factory production or other profit-seeking businesses without being paid. The serf system survived as it proved the most efficient manner to treat soldiers as slaves and officers as landlords (Bushnell, 1985: 15–17). Despite a call for expanding investment on professional military training, “political instruction”, namely worship for the Tsar and the Eastern Orthodox Church, remained a core component of officer education. Lectures of theology were compulsory alongside military courses. After the defeat of 1905 ideological instillation further intensified. Russia attributed its defeat to the lack of patriotism among its military men and thus wanted to copy Japan’s imperial patriotism (Wright, 2005). The Miliutin reform achieved a larger opening for the non-noble people who wanted to enter the officer corps, however, it confronted stubborn resistance as it touched upon the privileges of the hereditary nobles, who had conventionally monopolized the middle and high command officer ranks (Miller, 1968: 135–36).

Another “reactionary” feature that the defeats failed to remove was the Tsar’s arbitrary interference into military affairs that were often unprofessional and counterproductive (Lieven, 2015: chapter 3; Rich, 1998: 219–24). For example, the Romanov rulers, out of their medieval psychology, had a special taste for grandiose parades, viewing well-organized ones as symbolic of order, discipline and efficiency. Such formalism was often pursued at the expense of practically relevant projects like investment in weaponry and military games (Kagan, 1999; Keep, 1995).

Such “patrimonial” residue, which defeat-driven military reforms failed to remove, alienated revolutionaries from the army. While the army stuck to religion, at the turn of the 20th century, many Russian youths abandoned the orthodox faith in a massive trend towards secularization. The Bolsheviks’ biographies contain a large amount of plots regarding smashing icons, reading illegal atheist pamphlets, skipping rituals and theological classes, and conflicts with clergy and bishops (Davidov, 1961; 8; Granat, 1989: 26, 399, 437; Voroshilov, 1968: 69–74). Such a transition manifested through broad social and intellectual transformations. Natural-science books such as Origins of Species and Natural History was translated and was widely read (Frunze, 1977: 25–26; Kliuchnik and Zav’ialov, 1970: 16; Kof’al’k, 1981: 7). Instructed by radical university students teaching at the Sunday Schools, young workers were able to easily develop a coarse atheist interpretation of these books (Pipes, 1963). Anti-religious education even penetrated state education system. Although the Tsarist state was strengthening its control over schools, it moved rather slowly, thus leaving teachers great autonomy in deciding the curriculum and readings (Eklof and Peterson, 2010; Pochebut and Malkin, 1962: 12–14). The tension that arose between the army and the population was to be expected as people ridded of religious psychology were reluctant to be conscripted. For example, Alexander Shliapnikov, who used to be an Old Believer but later converted to atheism, refused to swear an oath to the army. While the army stuck to religion, at the turn of the 20th century, many Russian youths abandoned the orthodox faith in a massive trend towards secularization. The Bolsheviks’ biographies contain a large amount of plots regarding smashing icons, reading illegal atheist pamphlets, skipping rituals and theological classes, and conflicts with clergy and bishops (Davidov, 1961; 8; Granat, 1989: 26, 399, 437; Voroshilov, 1968: 69–74). Such a transition manifested through broad social and intellectual transformations. Natural-science books such as Origins of Species and Natural History was translated and was widely read (Frunze, 1977: 25–26; Kliuchnik and Zav’ialov, 1970: 16; Kof’al’k, 1981: 7). Instructed by radical university students teaching at the Sunday Schools, young workers were able to easily develop a coarse atheist interpretation of these books (Pipes, 1963). Anti-religious education even penetrated state education system. Although the Tsarist state was strengthening its control over schools, it moved rather slowly, thus leaving teachers great autonomy in deciding the curriculum and readings (Eklof and Peterson, 2010; Pochebut and Malkin, 1962: 12–14). The tension that arose between the army and the population was to be expected as people ridded of religious psychology were reluctant to be conscripted. For example, Alexander Shliapnikov, who used to be an Old Believer but later converted to atheism, refused to swear an oath to the army. For this reason he was dismissed from the army, which fostered his radicalization to Bolshevism (Allen, 2015: 33–34).

“Barrack order” (kazarmennyi poriadok), which derived from the Romanov’s premodern aesthetics, also distanced the army from the radicalizing populace. Preoccupation with counterproductive formalism aroused complaints among the officers who despite coming from humble origins, received solid education and wanted to achieve good positions by deploying their professional expertise. The rebellion against “barrack orders” could be seen in the biographies of the Bolsheviks who had service experiences. Valerian Kuibyshev (1988: 12–15) and Mami Orakhelashvili (Granat, 1989: 567) took part in protests against rigorous schedules when they studied at military academies, and both chose other professions after graduation. Mikhail Iaroslavskii (Granat, 1989: 785), the founder of the Red Army’s commissar system, quit the army after several months’
service, lamenting that the rigid order demoralized individuals. It was noteworthy that such loathing was not confined to the Bolsheviks and leftists, but also evident among officers who felt themselves impaired by the army’s medieval culture (Shaposhnikov, 1974: 66).

“Reactionary learning” from military defeats also solicited ethnic exclusion. This exclusion rendered the army less accessible to non-Russian revolutionaries. In general, the Tsarist Army was very multiethnic. Transcaucasian and Baltic nobles, for example, had long traditions of high command posts (Hagen, 2004: 36–37; Zaitonochkovskii, 1952: 17). Yet, alongside this multiethnic toleration, the program of Russifying the officer corps was also gaining momentum (Lohr, 2003).

After the defeat by Japan, “politically unreliable” nationalities, especially Jews, began to face more restrictions when entering the officer corps. For example, in 1906 the Third Petersburg Duma passed a law, depriving Jews of the right to access all military medical academies. On the eve of the World War, Jews came to be devalued in the military medical academies. On the eve of the World War, Jews came to be devalued in military medical academies. Only people who had a gymnasium-level diploma or its equivalent (Persson, 2010: 28–43) was accepted. This policy disqualified many Bolsheviks who came from disadvantaged family backgrounds and did not have a decent education. The reform did not block all old channels, but left an opening for children of military families, allowing them to enter academies without passing rigorous exams. This also placed the Bolsheviks in a disadvantaged position. As far as the leading Bolshevik elites were concerned, ethnic exclusion played an important role in distancing the party from the military — Jews constituted the largest overrepresented minority group of the Bolshevik leading elites (Riga, 2012).

Emphasis on merit and education did undermine the big families’ control over military positions and yielded a new class exclusion. The Miliutin reform separated military from general education, and thus set a prerequisite for the admission to military academies. Only people who had a gymnasiurn-level diploma or its equivalent (Persson, 2010: 28–43) was accepted. This policy disqualified many Bolsheviks who came from disadvantaged family backgrounds and did not have a decent education. The reform did not block all old channels, but left an opening for children of military families, allowing them to enter academies without passing rigorous exams. This also placed the Bolsheviks in a disadvantaged position. As far as the leading Bolshevik elites were concerned, very few of them had military family backgrounds. Out of the 94 central committee members, for example, only Kollontai and Kuibyshev had officer-fathers.

The insufficient and reactionary reforms predisposed the Bolsheviks to be apathetic to Russia’s geopolitical crises and overwhelmed by domestic class grievances. They viewed the army and the entire military culture as a reactionary fortress that buttressed the Tsarist regime, rather than a progressive force that defended Russia. Victories were often depicted as tragedies for individuals and families, whereas defeats were celebrated as blows to the old regime rather than lamented as the humiliation of fatherland. Sergei Kirov attributed the impoverishment of his family to the death of his great grandfather in Russia’s conquest of Caucasus (Kirilina, 2001: 11). Kliment Voroshilov (1968: 13) recalled that his father was wounded twice in the 1877 Russo-Turkish War, and after demobilization gained no pension or material compensation, returning home only to find that his land had been appropriated by others. In Vladimir Lenin’s family, the same war was discussed critically, denounced as irrelevant to common people’s welfare, and seen as a personal gift to governors and generals from the Tsar for their own promotion (Loginov, 2005: 34–35). Patriotic expressions were rarely seen in Bolshevik biographies. Rather, there are many records that these people made every effort to escape conscription. In order to evade military obligation, Victor Nogin fled abroad (Podgorny, 1966: 10), while Grigori Petrovskii celebrated that his enlistment had been rejected by the army due to his weak physical condition (Kliuchnik and Zav’ialov, 1970: 18–19).

Viewing the officer corps as an increasingly “reactionary” group, the Bolsheviks turned to devote all their efforts to agitating soldiers and sailors, on the grounds that these people came from the laborer-masses and were essentially different from their officer superiors. Not planning to overthrow the old regime by waging a war, the Bolsheviks believed that the collective defection and sabotage of the rank-and-file would transform the old army to “commanders without soldiers” (Tsветaев, 1960: 92–93, 108–11). The military was never a sustainable topic on the Bolshevik agenda. Lenin did try to make an insurrection in 1905, but soon returned to the classical Marxist cliché that the old state would implode due to economic depression and geopolitical defeats (Lowenthal, 1967: 383–86). Misled by Russian writers’ notes of the 1848 Revolution, the Bolsheviks believed that once a revolutionary volcano erupted, the old army would be too cowardly to fight (Cole, 1975).

It should be noted that the indifference to Russia’s geopolitical decline was not confined to the Bolsheviks, but rather a consensus that transcended ideological camps. Nationalists urged the termination of internal conspiracies so that the entire nation could work like a man to fight external rivals. However, unlike Poland, Turkey, or China, Russia did not face the threat of partition. In a broader context, even moderate patriotic voices were drowned out by more radical ones. Upholding conflicting ideologies, conservatives, liberals, and centralists commonly viewed defeats as great opportunities to restrict the autocracy (Guchkov, 1993: 34–35; Katkov, 2011: 141–44, 459–60; Timirev, 1998: 93–97). For example, when the message of defeat by Japan reached Petersburg, the liberals reminded people not to mourn, in that sympathy to fatherland and patriotic lament would only distract from criticism of the autocracy.

The mutual hostility between socialists and the old military continued, extending into the post-Romanov years culminating during the Great War. The Bolsheviks viewed the war as an opportunity to overthrow Tsarist rule. Receiving aid from central powers, they crept back into Russia, with the purpose of turning the old military to revolutionary army. They made agitations among front soldiers, circulated German-manufactured notes, and achieved control over several brigade-level units, mostly Latvians (McMeekin, 2017: 127–36). Such behaviors aroused antipathy among officers, especially those who were engaging in fierce fighting at the front. As the battlefield situation improved after 1916, most front troops, such as the ones in Galicia and Caucasus, showed indifference to anti-war propaganda (McMeekin, 2017: 111). Annoyed by the revolutionary penetration of the troops in Ukraine, the old military, after the downfall of the Romanov, stormed the Bolshevik
headquarters at Petrograd. Months later in July 1917, a similar try took place, which is known as “Kornilov Coup” — it was plotted by ex-Tsarist generals who suspected that the Provisional Government was being taken over by anti-military socialists (McMeekin, 2017: 156,173,187–89).

The mutual distrust did not completely disappear during the Russian Civil War. The Bolsheviks, after six months’ hesitation and debates, incorporated ex-Tsarist officers into their army. However, they maintained a clear boundary. While the military were allowed to conduct command, all strategic decisions were in the firm control of the political apparatus, on the grounds that the ex-officers lacked an appreciation for political and social issues. Lenin also did not allow for the use of military professionals to deal with civilian populaces (Pipes, 1995: 56–58).

6. China: organic crisis and intensive civil wars

In China organic crisis persuaded the military to undergo profound reforms, which increased military men’s political importance and the army’s cultural exposure to Western ideas. Both eroded barriers between the military and the societal radicals. The first wave of defensive modernization started in 1856, when the empire recovered its capital from the occupation of the Anglo-French armies while the South was being swept by the Taiping Rebellion. Local military strongmen from central provinces began to dominate imperial politics. To deal with the defensive crises, they deployed China’s first wave of military modernization. This was the beginning of the cornerstone idea to improve the imperial military system by introducing foreign trainers and purchased western weaponry. This reform persisted for nearly 30 years until Qing’s defeat by Japan in 1895 (Platt, 2007).

Afterward, the Beiyang generals, such as Yuan Shikai, Feng Guozhang, and Duan Qirui, continued to promote the military reconstruction into its second phase. The second phase was more radical and attempted to westernize the army’s organizational structures and even ideologies. It relied on a program of sending students to study in the West to form a radical-minded officer corps similar to the Young Turks. In this regard, China fundamentally differed from Russia, wherein learning from foreigners took place only through textbooks and the cultural shock felt was not as large as in China case (Persson, 2010).

The Beiyang military reform played a decisive role in ending the Qing Dynasty. Many military students studying in Japan became the leading makers of the Revolution of 1911, including Huang Xing, Chen Qimei, and Li Liejun. They manipulated a new military system that the old imperial nobles had little knowledge of, ultimately forcing the last emperor to abdicate. For this reason, all of these military people gained the reputation as the “founders of the republic”. After 1916, when their supreme leader General Yuan Shikai died, the centralized system collapsed and local commanders took over with civilian governance and the belief that only military rule could guarantee stability and reunification. Viewing themselves as “civilian rulers in uniforms”, officers saw intervention into politics as a fashion but also as a serious obligation (Chen, 1980; McCord, 2012). They spent time reading political books, newspapers, and pamphlets, corresponding with radical scholars, and debating against each other over the future of the country. Such politicization or de-professionalization increased their chance of encountering the communist networks which then had been rapidly proliferating.

The deepening geopolitical crisis also helped the recovery of martial spirit. The late nineteenth century saw a radical cultural shift. Intellectuals began to emphasize the significance of military affairs, which they had conventionally despised. Confucius was reinterpreted as a sage that possessed military talent. Both Ban Chao and Wang Yangming, respectively living in the 1st and 16th century, came to be worshiped as model patriots in that their expertise arguably spanned both military command and civilian governance (Sutton, 1980: 20–21). The abolishment of the Confucian exam in 1905 spurred young students to military academies and schools, both in China and overseas (McCord, 1993). The army, which used to be a career that most educated youths tended to escape, came to be respected as the most progressive profession of the society, for its admirable financial support as well as wide exposure to the Western culture (Fung, 1980: 77–86).

After the Revolution of 1911, as the alien Manchurian rule had been removed, the army, at least nominally, became the incarnation of the nation (Rankin, 1971). Inspired by China’s ancient general-scholars many youths dropped off their academic career joining the army so as to “defend the fatherland”. Even Mao, who throughout his life viewed military as a technical issue not desiring fulltime commitment, joined the army as a soldier in 1911 (EBCE, 2010, 1: 4), being affected by the pervasive patriotic psychology of the time. The CCP elites, who missed the application deadlines or had rejections from military schools, often restlessly appealed to the administration so as to obtain exceptional arrangement, or simply took the exam again the following years (BLAG, 1986 3: 43–44; 4: 401; 8: 112–13; 9: 328; 12: 69–70). This is in stark contrast to the Bolsheviks who felt excited on upon being expelled from the army.

Differences between the CCP and the Bolsheviks can also be found in their literatures. The CCP’s childhood readings were often the novels, dramas, folklores, and operas that commemorated military heroes in Chinese history, such as A Romance of Three Kingdoms, Water Margin, The Generals of the Yangs, and A Biography of Yue Fei (BLAG, 1986 2: 115; 7: 4; 8: 5; 13: 385). These readings repeated the discourse that a new regime could be created through massive wars, either led by peasant heroes or local strongmen.

Conversely, the Bolsheviks’ readings rarely covered military topics. In most cases they fell into the genre of romance, political economy, philosophy, aesthetics, and so forth. The central theme of these works was to legitimize a revolution in a backward society, rather than to provide instructions of specific techniques to create a revolution. Leo Tolstoy, a major writer socialists read heavily and promoted, wrote much of wars, but was respected by for his antiwar stances (Kenez, 1980: 60). Lenin’s readings did cover war issues, but largely about the military structure and strategies of the western powers, which, as...
he supposed, contained the information of whether an “imperialist” world war would take place (Grininshin, 1970: 57–67). His reading of Clausewitz and French Jacobins was superficial, rarely going beyond extolling militant heroism whilst denouncing the Menshevik moderates.

While the incessant defeats in the middle of the 1800s facilitated the army’s internal radicalization, the perennial civil wars, which coincided with the rise of the CCP, made the old army less immune to radical penetration from outside. The officer corps of China’s post-imperial army eventually lost a centralized bureaucratic structure and a clearly-articulated, intensively instilled ideology. The post-imperial Chinese nationalism proved incipient and soon fell overwhelmed by provincial identities, along the local military power that had been structured in the final years of the empire (Horowitz, 2012: 159–63; Powell, 1955; Zarrow, 2012). As central finance eventually ceased to exist after 1916, local armies, especially in the southern provinces, lapsed into fierce fighting against each other over territory and population, which made the nationalist idea of the 1911 Revolution look even more hollow and meaningless (Sutton, 1980). Accordingly, most senior CCP generals came from southern warlord troops where civil wars were most intensive, such as Zhu De, Chen Geng, Chen Qihan, Liu Bocheng and Wang Weizhou (BLAG, 8: 380–81; EBCE, 1: 339–45; 5: 319–21; 6: 2; EBCE, 1: 233–35). The lack of solid ideology also made leftist more infectious. Having less memory of the imperial culture, young people proved less immune to radical propaganda — the military CCPs were also very young, on average only six years old in 1905, the year when the imperial Confucian exam (Keju) was abolished. With weak attachment to the imperial culture, they could easily be captured by the Soviet propaganda.

The structural weakness of the old army was also derived from its hotchpotch personnel composition. In order to win civil wars, local military strongmen became very flexible in their officer recruitment. To make their armies larger in size and competitive in strength, they opened the officer corps, which was based on talent and loyalty regardless of social origins and diplomas. This definitely increased the chance for the CCP — most of its 60 generals who had old-army backgrounds were from lower-class families, with only four exceptions (their fathers were officials and petty gentry). To avoid deadly fighting and to preserve their forces, warlords often incorporated bandits, who had no ideological commitments, into their ranks. Not possessing a stable logistic system, bandits were prone to defecting, often siding with communists, especially in the face of failure. A prominent example was He Long, later a CCP marshal. He started as a bandit head who was well-connected with secret societies. As his troops grew larger, nationalists and local warlords competed to incorporate them. Toward the end of the KMT’s Northern Expedition (1926), He had been appointed as a major-general in command of an army (BLAG, 2: 298–305). Yet, he never gained genuine trust of his patrons, and often saw that they were conspiring against him. This pushed He Long to search for reliable allies: his switch to communism was very contingent upon this mindset. Another case was Yuan Wencai and Wang Zuo, the cofounders of the CCP’s earliest rural guerilla base, also started as bandits. They accepted the pacification by local warlords, joining the state officer corps, and soon defected. In order to evade the incoming repression, they turned to cooperate with Mao’s men who had escaped from the provincial capital after a failed coup (BLAG, 5: 3–8; 6: 462–63). Agreeing on introducing commissar system into their troops, they also taught Mao guerilla tactics (Xu, 1995: 145). Green heads were essential to the formation of CCP’s revolutionary model, not only by providing the CCP with first standing army, but also by opening their sites to serve as its earliest military base.

After 1916, having lost centralized authorities and unified logistic systems, China’s officer corps became increasingly fragmented along informal relations. Loyalty was not based on ideologies and procedures, but largely on personal ties (Whitson and Huang, 1973: 7–11). This further favored the spread of radicalization. Once a certain officer decided to switch to another camp, close subordinates would follow him. Collective treason was very ubiquitous in China during the 1910s and 1920s, to the extent that bribery and defection-incitation began to substitute for real fighting. This collective treason confirms the general model of Third-World state building (Migdal, 1986: chapter 7).

The CCP definitely benefited from the poor bureaucratization of the old army. The Ningdu officer group, who collectively defected from the KMT to the CCP side in 1930, had changed their camps at least three times before. A survey on the 60 elites reveals a number of networks with clear centers, such as Peng Dehua’s network in the Hunan troops, Chen Geng’s network in the Huangpu guard regiment, Zhang Yunyi’s network in the Guangxi warlord troop, He Long’s network in his own guards, and Li Xiangjiu’s network in the Shannxi warlord troop (BLAG, 3: 3–5,133–34, 343–46; 4: 301–08, 402–03, 439–45; 5: 243–45; 6: 374–88; 7: 474–75; 8: 381, 423–31; 9: 62–64,193–97, 411–14, 517–20; 12: 276–77, 504; 14: 301, 233–42). In Huntington’s (1957: chapter 1) terminology, the Chinese army of the 1920s was degrading to medieval mercenary. This degradation which was in stark contrast to Russia, wherein the army was arduously struggling toward bureaucratization.

The intensive civil war also promoted the overall militarization of the society. After 1916, China eventually lapsed into perpetual conflict. Although the 1920s did not see old-fashioned peasant wars aimed at establishing new dynasties (except for Bai Lang Uprising), localized peasant riots never ceased (Bianco, 2001). In addition to these riots were rampant atrocities perpetrated by bandits and undisciplined soldiers. For the sake of security, villages and clans organized boxing schools and armed guards, and practicing martial arts became a fashion. Early CCP military leaders, such as Zhang Ziqing and Hu Yun, gained their initial battle experiences in these self-defensive groups (BLAG, 2: 116; 5: 501). Students did not stand outside of this trend. Mao, at that time studying in middle school, organized a guard to patrol the campus, in case of robbery and sexual assaults by bandit-soldiers. Political anarchism even promoted the militarization of the entire school system. In Shaxi, following the order of the governor Yan Xishan, the Province Pedagogy School was militarized. Drill and shooting became compulsory regular courses, and students were required to be dressed in military uniforms. The portraits of ancient Chinese war heroes were hung at the front of every classroom so as to motivate patriotism. Not surprisingly, this school created two top CCP military men, Marshal Xu Xiangqian and General Cheng Zihu (BLAG, 10: 271; 13: 388).

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As previously noted, ethnic exclusion contributed to the Bolsheviks’ inability to reach high command. A similar mechanism worked in China, but in a more subtle way. Both the warlordism and the CCP Revolution unfolded in China’s proper, which was inhabited by the ethnically homogeneous Hans; however, provincial fragmentation did exist. As wars increasingly occurred between provinces, warlords started minimizing the promotion of people who came from other provinces or regions, a process akin to “Russification”. However, the impact of such blockage was limited, undermined by the fact that every region had its own warlord — in certain province such as Sichuan, each brigade or division occupied a region and recruited soldiers locally (Hu, 2001: 64–65). Moreover, boundaries between provinces were floating between particular warlords’ as their jurisdictions expanded or shrunk. This made a rigorous regional exclusion unworkable. For example, Zhu De, born in Sichuan Province, obtained a brigade-level post in Yunnan provincial army. This was not surprising because the latter often occupied the southern part of Sichuan, and viewed the entire Southwestern China as its potential domain. A strong counter-factual hypothesis can be made that if the Tsarist Army had permitted each ethnic group to establish its own units, the future Bolsheviks would have had more chance to become commanders. This actually occurred among Latvians, whose regiment played a substantial role blocking Petrograd from external assistance on the eve of the October coup (Page, 1976; Page and Ezergailis, 1977). However, this was almost the single exception.

The ensuing two-decade long civil war witnessed the persistent process of mutual fusion between the revolution and military. Viewing the use of unconverted warlord generals for revolutionary war as an unfeasible strategy, the CCP army was committed to training “red commanders” from the very beginning. In addition, it did not have the capacity to achieve this goal. Unlike in the Soviet military academies, where worker-peasant cadres had no choice but to study from “bourgeois” professors, in China’s guerrilla-war training camps, peasant-students worked under close instruction of senior communists, who had solid military backgrounds and also understood communist ideology. As young commanders gained experiences in the battlefields, they became new teachers. There was no clear boundary between commanders and commissars, as all people came from the same system and interchanging between the positions was ubiquitous in practice.

7. Conclusion

This article, by comparing the Bolshevik and Chinese communist military elites over the revolutionary periods, makes a few contributions. First, while comparative political scientists have noticed that Party-army relations were more harmonious in the People’s Republic of China than in the Soviet Union, this article further argues that this difference had taken shape long before the national seizures of power were completed. Second, whereas comparative historians have found that Russia’s and China’s revolutionary movements were shaped by the two countries’ geopolitical positions, this article extends this thesis to explain why the Party-army relations of the two communist revolutions were different. It argues that, though there was a tension between Party desire for control and the military’s need for professional autonomy, profound geopolitical crises and incessant warfare can lessen such differences. Because China suffered more conflicts, from both inside and outside, Chinese communists were more enthusiastic about the military culture and had deeper personnel connections with the old military. By contrast, Russia, because of its relatively stability, allowed the tension between the military and the Party to survive. Third, this article, using sources of original Russian and Chinese languages, compiles a biographical dataset covering the military elites of the two communist revolutions.

References


