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The Social and Political Role of War Veterans

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Roger R. Reese, Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918-1991, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005, 315 pages.

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- 1 This is a very interesting book; one worth reading regardless of whether one agrees with the author's argument or not because in the process of telling his story, the author provides new and helpful information on the evolution of officers in the Soviet Army.
- 2 There are a number of reasons why this book is an invaluable source of information and analysis. First of all, Reese writes very well, a welcome change from many of the political science texts I find it necessary to read and interpret. Second, anyone who is interested in the kind of individual who found himself wearing the uniform of the Soviet Army will find this study invaluable. It is an excellent overview of the evolution of not only the party and non-party structures; it also provides a more intimate view of the kinds of individuals who put on the uniform of the Soviet Army. Another thing I like about this study is that instead of assuming (as for example, the late John Erickson often did) that the reader is familiar with all of the many titles (especially during the twenties), Reese explains how the process developed and how and why the titles changed. This is true even for the specialist because he helped clear up some areas of confusion on my part – and I have written books on the topic!
- 3 Reese should also be commended for the outstanding job he did in restoring Trotsky to his position as one of the world's premier military thinkers and leaders. Indeed, an argument could be made to place him among the top ten or twenty military thinkers and leaders of the twentieth century. Clearly, anyone teaching about the evolution of Soviet and Russian civil-military relations would be well advised to read through Chapters 1 and 2.
- 4 Reese's chapter on the officer corps in World War II, is a must read for anyone seriously interested in the subject. I am not a specialist on that war, but I can't remember seeing such a complete analysis of the kinds of individuals who put on officer uniforms during that conflict. I have no doubt that material will be of interest to a lot of scholars dealing with the topic.
- 5 Perhaps because I just published a book that dealt in part with the Gorbachev era, I found Reese's discussion of that topic of special interest. He argues that the two factors that led to the collapse of the Russian military in 1991 were its close ties to the CPSU, and the failure of the military to create an army "based on sound military leadership." (P. 217). While I agree with his first criteria (I can still remember Moysiev and Yazov pleading with Gorbachev to keep Article 6 in the Constitution because the party structure was all that was holding the Army together), but the powers of ethnic nationalism were too strong. As far as the second is concerned, I disagree. Any military serves one primary authority - the state, and when the state - and everything that goes with it – collapses, the Army is almost certain to do the same. Unless the military is highly autonomous as in some African or Latin American countries, I would argue that it will follow the lead of the Soviet Army. Reese is right about the disintegrative effects of glasnost' – but it was just as disastrous for the country as a whole. A political system that is based on a highly centralized form of control cannot permit "a little bit of decentralization." Once that train leaves the station, the system is on a "slippery slop" to collapse. Furthermore, the Soviet army itself was split over the unsuccessful coup attempt.
- 6 Having praised this book – and it fully deserves it – there was one major weakness in this reviewer's opinion. And that was his conceptual model. In expressing my concerns, permit me to note that Reese is to be commended for writing a book that is both clear and coherent.

He carefully laid out his thesis and his conceptual framework. First, his thesis. Reese argues (p. 1) that the Kremlin's rejection of the fundamental tenets of the "Western bourgeois model of military professionalism," adversely impacted on the professionalism of the Soviet Officer corp. As a consequence, its military effectiveness was undermined. Given such a statement, the immediate question in the reader's mind is "what does he mean by professionalism?"

7 Reese provides an answer in his introduction by stating that his interpretation of the evolution of the military relies on Samuel Huntington's now classic *Soldier and the State* from which he takes his definition of professionalism. Thus, his three defining criteria are: responsibility, expertise, and corporateness. From a theoretical standpoint, this reviewer would argue that Reese's basic premise is questionable. Why? Because as I have argued elsewhere, Huntington's model does not fit either the Soviet or East German case.

8 My own work on these militaries suggests to me the following: (1) the Red Army up to the late twenties was very much a party army as Reese suggests, (2) however, that changed considerably just prior to the purge and World War II, (3) in the aftermath of World War II, the military again became more autonomous as the military began to usurp control over the party-political structure including deputies for political work, (4) by the sixties and seventies, the military had become more autonomous – if that is defined as non-involvement by civilians in its work – than the American military. As General Dmitri Volkoganov put it to this reviewer in 1989 in discussing the Gorbachev era, "Five-ten years ago, no civilian, party member or not, would have dared write anything on a military topic. That was reserved for professional military officers." I have also had the opportunity to discuss party membership with a broad group of Soviet and East German officers, and the normal response was, "party member? Yes, but so what? It didn't mean much. Control came through the OO or 'Special Section' officers from the intelligence services." Based on my experience, both academic and in dealing with Soviet and Russian officers, Huntington set up a very "Western" model when it came to the Soviet Union. He was, as political scientists put it, engaging in cultural projection assuming, as Reese notes, that there is one model for professionalism - period. Obviously, I disagree
9 Nevertheless, while I disagree with Reese's conceptual framework, I want to reemphasize the value of this book in filling a hitherto major gap in the literature. Any student of civil-military relations would be well advised to read and study this book. It marks a major contribution to the literature.

References

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