

The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces

**Historical Experience, Current
Practices, and Implications
for the Future—
An Executive Summary**

Alexander Alexiev, S. Enders Wimbush

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Year

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PREFACE

This executive summary presents the main findings of the Rand project on "Implications of Demographic Change for Soviet Defense Policies."

The issues discussed in this summary are examined in detail in the following Rand publications:

The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces, by S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, R-2787/1, March 1982.

Managing the Ethnic Factor in the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces: An Historical Overview, by Susan L. Curran and Dmitry Ponomareff, R- 2640/1, July 1982.

Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan, by S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, N-1634/1, January 1981.

Soviet Demographic Trends and the Ethnic Composition of Draft-Age Males, 1980-1995, by Edmund Brunner, Jr., N-1654/1, February 1981.

The Soviet Union and Muslim Guerrilla Wars, 1920-1981: Lessons for Afghanistan, by Alexandre Bennigsen, N-1707/1, August 1981.

Soviet Nationalities in German Wartime Strategy, 1941-1945, by Alex Alexiev, R-2772, August 1982.

This report should be of interest to specialists on and analysts of Soviet military behavior and capabilities, especially those interested in military manpower policies and practices.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Western students of Soviet military affairs have painstakingly researched and analyzed most of the important aspects of Soviet military doctrine and capabilities. Studies are available on almost every dimension of Soviet operational art, tactical and strategic doctrine, weapon systems capabilities, and organizational principles. With some notable exceptions, the general level of knowledge in these areas has been rather good. There are, however, some important aspects of Soviet military power that remain largely unexplored. Most of these aspects involve factors that significantly affect overall Soviet force effectiveness; but because they are generally subjective in nature and there is a paucity of available information about them, they are difficult to measure or to quantify. One of these is the ethnic factor in the Soviet armed forces.

Although the multinational character of the Soviet army has long been recognized, it is only very recently that Western studies have begun to probe into the nature and significance of the ethnic factor. This gap is primarily the result of an almost complete lack of information dealing with the subject, except at the propaganda level, in the Soviet media and specialized literature, along with a seeming lack of alternative information sources.

Recently, two unrelated developments enhanced the significance of the ethnic factor in the Soviet military establishment and its military-political decisionmaking, and at the same time presented Western specialists with a unique opportunity to research and analyze this factor. First, the much-discussed ongoing Soviet demographic shift points to a relative decrease in the Slavic—and specifically Russian—cohort in the coming years and a dramatic increase in the numbers of non-Slavic, particularly Muslim-Turkic, draft-age youth. By 1995, almost one of every three recruits will come from the Southern, non-Slavic regions of the Soviet Union. Second, in the past decade, there has been a massive influx of Soviet emigrés to the United States and elsewhere, most of whom have served in the Soviet army and who thus constitute an extremely valuable repository of first-hand knowledge on current policies and practices.

The present study represents the first major, multidimensional effort to address the ethnic factor in the Soviet armed forces.¹ It ex-

¹ Various aspects of the study are reported in the following Rand publications: S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, *The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces*,

amines the historical context and experience of the multinational Red Army, analyzes in detail present practices designed to deal with ethnicity, and posits the implications of demographic changes and the options available to the Soviet authorities. It also hints at some of the ramifications of the ethnic factor for force effectiveness and at some potential Soviet vulnerabilities. These topics should be the subject of future research.

The project sought to address the following broad research questions:

- How have Russian political and military authorities viewed the participation of non-Slavs over time? What policies were designed to accommodate and control their use in the military environment?
- What have wartime experiences shown about the use of non-Slavic troops? What lessons can be drawn from these experiences? How have these experiences affected current Soviet military policies and practices aimed at minority servicemen?
- Is there an ethnic problem in today's Soviet armed forces? If so, how is the problem manifested? In what ways do these manifestations, if any, affect Soviet military readiness, effectiveness, and operational choice?
- What options are available to the Soviet political and military leadership for correcting imbalances that demographic shifts might bring about?

R-2787/1, March 1982; Susan L. Curran and Dmitry Ponomareff, *Managing the Ethnic Factor in the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces: An Historical Overview*, R-2640/1, July 1982; S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, *Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan*, N-1634/1, January 1981; Edmund Brunner, Jr., *Soviet Demographic Trends and the Ethnic Composition of Draft-Age Males, 1980-1995*, N-1654/1, February 1981; Alexandre Bennigsen, *The Soviet Union and Muslim Guerrilla Wars, 1920-1981: Lessons for Afghanistan*, N-1707/1, August 1981; and Alex Alexiev, *Soviet Nationalities in German Wartime Strategy, 1941-1945*, R-2772/1, August 1982.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Russian and Soviet Experience Prior to World War II

The first part of our historical analysis examines pre-World War II attempts by Imperial Russian regimes and their Bolshevik successors to employ and manage national minorities in military establishments and campaigns.² We were primarily concerned with policies and practices adopted to involve minority manpower in the military while maintaining Slavic dominance and control. In particular, the study traces how the number of ethnic groups drawn into the Russian military has consistently expanded throughout the centuries, identifies the types of units and operational roles to which non-Slavic nationalities have been assigned, and discusses the difficulties arising from language differences and the potential unreliability and disloyalty of non-Russian soldiers. The principal findings of the historical analysis are summarized below:

- In the 17th and 18th centuries, some non-Russians were employed effectively in the service of the Russian state in nationally segregated units; this became a standard practice.
- Imperial recruitment policy toward non-Slavs was bifurcated: Those considered loyal to the Tsarist regime were drafted, whereas unreliable elements were excluded from service in the regular army. Caucasians, North Caucasians, and Central Asians, in particular, were generally excused from military service.
- While national units were influential in helping the Bolsheviks attain power in 1917-1921, Bolshevik leaders, once in power, prohibited the continued existence of national armies; some national units were permitted, however.

National military units were never popular with the Soviet leadership. Despite the impressive military record of homogeneous national units at the time of the revolution, Bolsheviks remained unconvinced of their ability to control such units. Thus, in March 1938, all national units were officially abolished. Minority manpower, in both national and regular units, may have been helpful in certain vital instances during this period, but overall, minority soldiers were of ques-

² See Curran and Ponomareff, *Managing the Ethnic Factor in the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces: An Historical Overview*.

tionable effectiveness. They were notably unreliable and sometimes completely disloyal.

The World War II Experience

Soviet policies concerning nationalities in general, and the practices affecting the ethnic factor in the Red Army in particular, were put to a severe test during World War II. The impact of the ethnic factor on the monumental struggle between Germany and Russia and on German perceptions and policies toward the non-Russian Soviet nationalities played a key role in the political and military conduct of the war.³

The Soviet multinational state, in which peoples of diverse political, historical, and cultural backgrounds had been integrated against their will, had a critical structural weakness. When strained by war, the artificial bonds that tied many of the non-Russian nationalities to the state frayed and broke. Thus, large parts of the Soviet populations that were subjected to the German onslaught in the Ukraine, the Baltic area, and elsewhere not only did not vigorously defend the Soviet state but, on the contrary, often (and at times enthusiastically) welcomed the invaders, hoping to regain independence with German help. This undoubtedly contributed significantly to the calamitous reverses suffered by the Red Army in the initial stages of the war.

Nazi attitudes toward the Soviet nationalities, conditioned by racial dogmas, ignorance, and contempt, coupled with the overriding Nazi objectives of territorial aggrandizement and economic exploitation, generally precluded any organized attempt to harness the strong anti-Soviet and nationalist sentiments in the Soviet borderlands to the German cause. Yet in spite of the oppressive and often inhuman treatment of the Soviet nationalities by the Germans, the Germans were able to secure the military collaboration of surprisingly large numbers of Soviet non-Russians. The anti-Sovietism of these non-Russians was of such intensity that it overwhelmed their growing misgivings and dislike for the Germans. Collaboration took three basic forms:

- Former Soviet citizens were directly incorporated into the Wehrmacht as auxiliaries. For the most part, they were recruited directly by German military authorities without the knowledge of political leaders on either side. They numbered

³ See Alexiev, *Soviet Nationalities in German Wartime Strategy, 1941-1945*.

from 600,000 to 1,400,000. This would indicate that, for most of the war, 20 percent or more of German army manpower on the Eastern Front was made up of former Soviet citizens. More than 50 percent, and quite possibly a clear majority, of these auxiliaries were non-Russian nationals.

- The Germans used Soviet non-Russian nationals to form units earmarked for internal security and anti-partisan functions. These indigenous security units greatly outnumbered German units in all occupied areas.
- National military units of Soviet non-Russians were formed for front-line duty with the German armies. The Baltic nationalities, for example, were represented by three divisions and a large number of small units, all of which distinguished themselves in battle. More than 250,000 volunteer nationals of the Central Asian and Caucasian regions were organized in the "East Legions."

These astounding numbers, together with a decline in the number of non-Slavs serving in the Soviet armed forces after 1943—the result of a measured policy change by the Soviet leadership—suggest that some Soviet nationalities may have been better represented in the Wehrmacht than in the Red Army. The fact that Soviet nationalities engaged in military collaboration with the Germans in such unprecedented numbers is not generally appreciated. Yet this collaboration provided a major contribution to the German war effort.

III. CURRENT ETHNIC POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The major analytical effort of the project focused on current Soviet policies regarding the ethnic factor in the military.⁴ The analysis was based exclusively on in-depth interviews with former Soviet servicemen. It sought to determine whether specific policies or practices with respect to the non-Russian nationalities were followed in a number of different areas and to examine the implications of these policies.⁵

Recruitment

The Soviet induction system is designed to ensure the proper ethnic balance in the different services, branches, and units. Most of our

⁴ See Wimbush and Alexiev, *The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces*.

⁵ A note on methodology: Official Soviet sources are parsimonious with *any* information—let alone detailed description and analysis—on the conditions under which non-Russian soldiers serve in the Soviet armed forces. Because of this paucity of information, we determined that our best course would be to interview former Soviet servicemen about their experiences. Recent emigration of Soviet Jews and others from the USSR to the West offered us an opportunity to obtain facts and first-hand impressions from an ethnically, culturally, and intellectually diverse sample.

From a sample of nearly 400, we chose to interview 130 former Soviet servicemen. Each interview was conducted with the special experiences of the interviewee in mind. In no case did we administer questionnaires or any other device designed to elicit quantifiable responses. Ours was not a statistical study, and we were not seeking statistical reliability. Instead, interviews were in-depth, ranging from two to eight hours. All interviews were conducted in Russian or in another ethnic language.

We are aware that a project of this kind may have inherent biases, and we took steps to minimize the effect of bias on our results. At the same time, we remain unconvinced—and, indeed, our evidence strongly supports our view—that participants are incapable of recalling and assessing their personal experiences objectively because, for example, “they chose to leave the USSR and therefore can have nothing good to say about it,” or because “so many are Jewish.” It is important to understand that on matters of fact, responses from interviewees are remarkably consistent across the entire spectrum of national affiliation and service experience. We were unable to isolate a distinctive “Jewish point of view” from the rest of the sample. Further, although we have been told, usually by other national security analysts, that Soviet emigrés “will tell you anything,” that they tend to exaggerate, and that “they will tell you what you want to hear,” we know of no evidence to sustain these claims. Hence, we are inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to our interviewees. We do recognize that exaggeration can occur, and we therefore relied heavily on the skill and experience of trained interviewers, for whom there is no substitute. All of our interviews were conducted by individuals with extensive training and experience in Soviet affairs and rich preparation in Soviet nationality issues. The consistency of responses across the entire interviewee spectrum rules out excessive exaggeration to our satisfaction.

interviewees believe that the system functions under specific directives to structure the ethnic balance according to well-established criteria.

A military authority, probably the General Staff, estimates the number of recruits needed by the individual services and branches. Then, on the basis of information provided by local conscription offices (*voenkomats*), this authority determines the number and the profile (including the ethnic origin) of conscripts available from each *voenkomat*. Finally, it directs "buyers" from military districts or units to particular *voenkomats* or assembly centers to pick up a certain number of recruits of a specific profile. In this manner, supply and demand are matched. By sending different buyers from the same formation to *voenkomats* in different parts of the USSR, military authorities are able to control the nationality mix in the services in general as well as in particular branches.

Stationing Practices

The most prominent stationing principle is that of extraterritoriality—the stationing of soldiers away from their own ethnic regions of the USSR. Interviewees stated that this practice is primarily a security precaution. If stationed in the same area as their ethnic kin, soldiers might be inclined to side with the local population against the Russian authorities during serious internal crises or unrest. The exception to this rule is the stationing of some construction battalion soldiers in their native territories.

There would appear to be no national units at this time, and servicemen of all nationalities are discouraged from mixing with local populations at their duty stations. This is particularly true of non-natives stationed in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Military Training

Pre-Induction Training

Pre-induction military training functions less effectively in the non-Slavic regions of the USSR than in Slavic regions. DOSAAF (The Voluntary Organization for Cooperation with the Army, Air Force, and Navy) activities in non-Slavic regions are limited both in kind and in scope.

Russian language training is seldom, if ever, administered to non-Russian speakers as part of a pre-induction program; where it does occur, it is unsystematic, usually at the initiative of the local *voenkomat* officer. Moreover, the enrollment of non-Slavs, especially Central Asians and other Muslim peoples, in military academies is insignificant. However, there is some evidence that something akin to affirmative action may be used to encourage enrollment in some cases.

In-Service Training

Some evidence indicates that non-Slavs serving in combat units receive less actual weapons training than Slavs. Indeed, soldiers in construction units seldom, if ever, receive military training of any kind. Access to in-service technical training seems to be limited to those recruits who have a good command of the Russian language.

Language Training and Use

Russian language comprehension among non-Slavic servicemen is very uneven. Many conscripts enter service with no previous ability to communicate in Russian. Although most written materials used in a unit are in Russian, language classes for non-Russian speakers were reported in only a few isolated instances.

A "Russian only" rule applies in formation but cannot be enforced out of formation. Most non-Russian soldiers use their own languages when they are not engaged in supervised military activities. After about one year, many of them learn to function in "kitchen Russian," meaning that they can understand and respond to basic, uncomplicated commands.

Dissimulation—pretending not to understand Russian as a means of avoiding duty—is a widespread problem.

Ethnic Composition of Forces

There are major, and evidently planned, ethnic differentials in different services and branches. The most dramatic difference is between the ethnic ratios of combat and non-combat units. Combat units are staffed by a clear majority—usually 80 percent or more—of soldiers from the Slavic nationalities. Non-combat units usually contain 70 to 90 percent non-Slavs, especially Central Asians and Caucasians. In-

ternal Security Forces (MVD) units, used primarily in penal institutions and for security ties and general internal security functions, contain large numbers of Central Asians and Caucasians; these nationalities may make up as much as 60 percent of the MVD force.

The Soviet officer corps is ethnically Slavic with an overwhelming Russian majority. Minorities are dramatically underrepresented in officer training programs and military institutes. Most career NCOs are Slavs, with a large number of Eastern Ukrainians serving in this capacity.

Ethnic Relations in the Armed Forces

Contrary to Soviet propaganda claims, the Soviet armed forces fail to foster a spirit of brotherhood among the diverse peoples of the USSR. Rather, the opposite often occurs: While serving, soldiers generally band together with members of their own ethnic group, thereby reducing their contact with other groups and individuals. Most of them leave the military with a heightened sense of their own ethnic self-awareness and increased misgivings about Russian domination.

Racism is the dominant feature of the relationship between Slavs and non-white non-Slavs, especially Central Asians and other Muslim peoples, who are often discriminated against. Racial discrimination has both social and functional manifestations and appears to be matter of fact. More than half of our interviewees had participated in, witnessed, or knew of violence stemming from ethnic conflict. Ethnic violence appears to be most prevalent in combat units of the Ground Forces, where small concentrations of non-Slavs face large concentrations of Slavs. Non-Russians have fewer nationality-inspired conflicts among themselves than do Slavs and non-Slavs. Officers routinely avoid becoming involved in ethnic conflict for fear of having their service records blemished.

Fighting between representatives of the local population and soldiers from nearby military units is a common phenomenon in the USSR, as it is in many countries. Central Asians often encounter particularly vehement disdain in the Slavic rural regions, while Slavs, particularly Russians, are often treated condescendingly by urban non-Slavs, especially in the Baltic states and the Caucasus.

There can be no question that the increasing number of non-Slavic recruits poses a potentially serious problem to the Soviet leadership. Neither recruitment policies, stationing practices, in-service education and training procedures, nor language policies can be said to be effectively promoting the avowed Soviet goal of fielding a military force with any meaningful degree of ethnic integration.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

Historical experience forms one half of the background against which current ethnic policies and practices in the Soviet armed forces must be evaluated and their strategic implications weighed. The other half is the critical demographic change which promises to alter drastically the ethnic face of the pool of draft-eligible manpower for the next two decades.

The most important demographic development is the dramatic slowdown of the population growth of Russians and other Slavs in the Soviet Union from 1959-1979, a trend that continues to the present, coupled with the considerably higher growth rate of the non-Slavic population, particularly the Muslim-Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁶ The Russian share of the Soviet population fell from 54.6 percent in 1959 to 52.4 percent in 1979, whereas that of the Muslim-Turkic peoples rose from 12.6 percent to 17.4 percent in the same period. Moreover, the Muslim-Turkic group is becoming "younger"—that is, a larger and larger share of its population is between 17 and 25 years old—while the Slavic populations are rapidly becoming "older."

These changes have a number of implications for the Soviet draft-age manpower cohort:

- The estimated total number of 18-year-old males becoming available annually will decline from about 2.39 million in 1980 to about 2.15 million in 1985, then will rise to approximately 2.31 million in 1995.
- The Turkic-Muslim group is the only one that will increase its share of the total population of the USSR during this period.
- The Turkic-Muslim group is the only one in which the percentages of all Soviet draft-age males will increase, from about 23 percent in 1980 to about 28.7 percent in 1995.
- Ethnic Russians now appear to comprise less than half (49 percent) of the draft-age male cohort, and by 1995 they will comprise about 46 percent or less of the total.

Thus, in addition to other problems, Soviet military planners face the prospect that by 1995, more than half of the conscriptable cohort

⁶ The demographic shift and its implications for the Soviet armed forces are examined in Brunner, *Soviet Demographic Trends and the Ethnic Composition of Draft-Age Males, 1980-1995*.

will be non-Russian, with close to one of every three recruits coming from a nominally Muslim group. To maintain the current personnel size of Soviet combat forces, the Soviet authorities either must allow the present proportion of non-Slavic recruits to increase significantly or, if present ratios are to be maintained, they must find ways to increase the proportion of Slavs serving in the military at any given time. While there seem to be some fairly straightforward options available to the Soviets—such as selective increases in the term of service, curtailment of deferments to Slavic personnel, and absorption of the excess non-Slavs into non-combat units such as construction battalions—all of them involve considerable political and economic costs, and their feasibility under prevailing Soviet conditions remains uncertain.

V. FORCE EFFECTIVENESS IMPLICATIONS

Given present and projected future demographic trends and prevailing Soviet practices in managing ethnicity, the ethnic problem in the Soviet armed forces is likely to become increasingly important in the coming years. Soviet military leaders may be faced with a number of limitations and constraints on their ability to field a modern, cohesive, and effective fighting force. In the short term, depending on the particular conflict scenario, the following force effectiveness deficiencies are possible:

- Basic training shortcomings among a certain proportion of the Ground Forces.
- Reduced capability and potential unreliability of support forces.
- Serious training deficiencies among a sizable segment of the reserves.⁷

Over the long term, other weaknesses and deficiencies are likely to result, including:

- Unit training weaknesses.
- Limitations on the introduction and mastering of modern weaponry.
- Potential limitations on force size.
- Heightened internal security dilemmas.

Under certain circumstances, Soviet forces could also be faced with a number of significant combat-related shortcomings, particularly in a protracted conflict. Some of these shortcomings were witnessed earlier, during World War II:

- Disproportionate combat losses of Russians and Slavic personnel on the ground.
- Defections.
- "Second battle" weaknesses.

⁷ Such deficiencies, for example, were clearly demonstrated during the initial phase of the Afghanistan invasion, when many of the reservists called up to flesh out Category 2 and 3 divisions in the Central Asian border region were former construction battalion servicemen who lacked military training.

Finally, the possibility of ethnic riots, conflicts with local populations, or even mutiny cannot be ruled out.

All of these are potential weaknesses that may or may not be transformed into vulnerabilities, depending on the particular conflict scenario. In a sudden-attack, short war conducted mainly with first-echelon, well-trained, primarily Slavic personnel, few if any ethnic-related deficiencies are likely to manifest themselves. Conversely, in a protracted conflict marked by military reverses and significant manpower attrition requiring constant replenishment, at least some of the weaknesses listed above could surface. How and under what circumstances those weaknesses could be exploited by Soviet adversaries at both the strategic and operational levels should be the subject of future research. Careful attention should also be paid to Soviet authorities' perceptions of the ethnic factor and to the extent to which these perceptions may influence Soviet decisionmaking in a conflict and the Red Army's *modus operandi*: It could be argued, for example, that if Soviet military planners foresee ethnic difficulties in a protracted conventional conflict, as we have speculated, they would be more likely to opt for a surprise attack and relatively early employment of nuclear weapons, regardless of other considerations.

At present, the ethnic factor in the Soviet military does not significantly detract from the formidable and growing Soviet military power, but it could present exploitable opportunities under certain circumstances. Given the relentless Soviet military buildup and the tremendous difficulties the West is experiencing in keeping up with that buildup, particularly in its conventional dimension, Western awareness of existing or potential Soviet military vulnerabilities is of vital importance. We hope to have contributed to this awareness by pointing out some potential weaknesses stemming from the multinational character of the Red Army.

