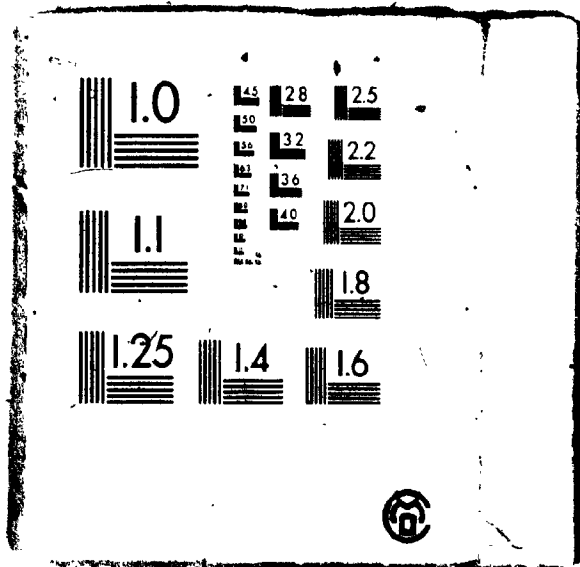


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TITLE OF THESIS/TITRE DE LA THÈSE STALIN IN THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

UNIVERSITY/UNIVERSITÉ CARLETON

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED/ GRADE POUR LEQUEL CETTE THÈSE FUT PRÉSENTÉE M.A.

YEAR THIS DEGREE CONFERRED/ANNÉE D'OBTENTION DE CE DEGRÉ 1980

NAME OF SUPERVISOR/NOM DU DIRECTEUR DE THÈSE R. C. ELWOOD

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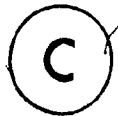
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STALIN IN THE CIVIL WAR

by



Paul N. H. Harrison

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Carleton University

Ottawa, Canada

December, 1980

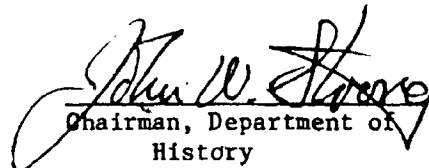
The undersigned recommend to the Faculty  
of Graduate Studies acceptance of the thesis

"Stalin in the Civil War,  
1918-1920"

submitted by Paul N.H. Harrison, B.A.,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts.



Thesis Supervisor



Chairman, Department of  
History

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Canada

16 January 1981.

ABSTRACT

STALIN IN THE CIVIL WAR, 1918-20

by Paul N. H. Harrison

Recently-published documentary collections reveal that I. V. Stalin's role in the Civil War was greater than historians have generally acknowledged. As a military commissar, Stalin was involved in the defence of Tsaritsyn and Petrograd, responsible for the defeat of Red forces in the Polish campaign, and contributed to the major strategic and policy decisions of the Civil War. Nonetheless, the period had little effect on Stalin personally. His attitudes, perceptions and behavior remained entirely consistent during his more than two years' involvement in military affairs. While supporting centralized control in principle, he considered himself entitled to question or ignore orders, and encouraged his "Tsaritsyn group" to do so. While Stalin sometimes had good reason to question orders, his insubordination, coupled with limited tactical ability and a conviction of the overriding importance of his own front, resulted in serious disruption of co-ordination and control of Red Army forces and supplies. There is no evidence that Stalin was in those years intriguing for his own political gain. Even his disputes with Trotsky were based on legitimate military concerns.



"STALIN: ORGANIZER OF THE DEFENCE"

from Dokumenty o gerōicheskoi oborone  
Petrograda v 1919g (Moscow, 1941)

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout this paper to refer to the most frequently-used sources:

- PSS V. I. Lenin, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii (Moscow, 1967-70)
- Soch. J. V. Stalin, Sochinenia (Moscow, 1940-52)
- DGKKA Direktivy glavnogo komandovaniia Krasnoi Armii (1919-20 gg.)  
(Moscow, 1969)
- DKFKA Direktivy komandovaniia frontov Krasnoi Armii (1918-22 gg.)  
(Moscow, 1971)
- DGOP Dokumenty o geroicheskoi oborone Petrograda v 1919g.  
(Moscow, 1941)
- DGOT Dokumenty o geroicheskoi oborone Tsaritsyna v 1918 g.  
(Moscow, 1942)
- DIGV Dokumenty po istorii grazhdanskovo vpiny (Moscow, 1940)
- IIGV Iz Istorii grazhdanskovo voiny v SSSR: Sbornik dokumentov i  
materialov (Moscow, 1960-61)



TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations . . . . .	iii
Introduction . . . . .	1
Chapter One: Tsaritsyn . . . . .	12
Chapter Two: From the Ukraine to the South Front . . . . .	51
Chapter Three: The Russo-Polish War . . . . .	90
Conclusion . . . . .	124
Bibliography . . . . .	133

## INTRODUCTION

The more than two-year period from May 1918 to August 1920, during which Joseph Stalin served as commissar to various Red Army fronts, was a pivotal one in the life of the future dictator. The events of these Civil War years exacerbated his rivalry with L. D. Trotsky, and assembled the "Tsaritsyn group", a nucleus of party members personally loyal to Stalin. But although the groundwork was thus being laid, Stalin was not yet seeking, and probably had not even considered, the elimination of his rivals and the attainment of supreme authority. Stalin in this period is mature -- he was 41 years old in 1920 -- but not yet powerful. To study him in this period is to study the "real" Stalin, insofar as that term has a meaning.

Prior to 1918, Stalin had no experience or apparent interest in military affairs, but as one of the party's most reliable trouble-shooters it was inevitable that during the Civil War much of his time would be spent on the many "fronts". Recalled Trotsky:

All the other government activity was subsidiary to [the war]. All who were active and courageous were subjected to mobilization. Members of the Central Committee, People's Commissars, and other leading Bolsheviks spent most of their time at the front as members of Revolutionary Councils of War and sometimes as army commanders.<sup>1</sup>

Although most of Stalin's many biographers devote a chapter to the

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<sup>1</sup>L. D. Trotsky, Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence (New York, 1967), p. 225.

Civil War period, they tend to focus on his political activities as Commissar for Nationalities. His extensive experience as a military commissar is mentioned mainly as a forum for his rivalry with Trotsky. His performance in a military environment, what effect, if any, the role of front commissar had on him, and how his actions affected the course of the war, have been very much neglected. Isaac Deutscher, for example, notes that:

By the light of the secret military correspondence of those days [Stalin's] role looms much larger than it did in the writings published while Trotsky was in power, though not nearly as large as in the official histories of the Stalinist era.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, he dismisses Stalin's military activities as "a dull matter to follow out . . . in detail."<sup>3</sup> and better suited to a history of the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks, in part, to the nearly universal sympathy felt for Trotsky in the west, Stalin's role in the war itself has been traditionally portrayed as an unimportant one, his status being reduced to that of a nuisance with which Trotsky had to deal while building the Red Army. In all his works, Trotsky carefully minimized the significance of Stalin's role compared with his own, even to the point of claiming that: "In the heat of the fight, I usually forgot [Stalin's] existence."<sup>5</sup>

With few exceptions, noted below, the histories of the Civil War are equally sparing in their treatment of Stalin, again mentioning him mainly in

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<sup>2</sup>I. Deutscher, Stalin: A Political Biography (Oxford, 1949), pp. 215-16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 208:

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>5</sup>L. D. Trotsky, My Life (New York, 1970), p. 441.

connection with his feud with Trotsky; even his responsibility for the failure of the Polish campaign is in most accounts given only incidental mention.

Despite this scanty treatment, the significance of the war for Stalin personally is generally portrayed as considerable. Boris Souvarine concludes that "Stalin emerged from the war matured and tempered."<sup>6</sup> Ronald Hingley credits the Civil War with promoting "Stalin's early development as a leader."<sup>7</sup> Adam Ulam came closest to the truth when he commented that in the Civil War, Stalin "was allowed to develop the habits of a tyrant while still far from being a dictator."<sup>8</sup>

This paper expresses a contrary view. While it would be nonsense to suggest that Stalin accumulated no new knowledge or experience, a close examination of the documents and accounts of this period in his life strongly suggest that Stalin's character and perceptions changed very little as a result of his contact with a military environment. As a 41-year-old professional revolutionary, conditioned by a lifetime of factionalism and intrigue, Stalin saw his sudden rise to membership in a legitimate government, and the direction of armies instead of expropriation squads, as simply an extension of all his past experience. He did not feel the need to adjust to a new situation. In the Civil War context, this thesis will show that Stalin's behavior and outlook remained remarkably consistent from his first military involvement at

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<sup>6</sup>B. Souvarine, Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism (New York, 1939), p. 248.

<sup>7</sup>R. Hingley, Joseph Stalin: The Man and the Legend (London, 1974), p. 115.

<sup>8</sup>A. Ulam, Stalin: The Man and His Era (New York, 1965), p. 184.

Tsaritsyn in 1918, until his departure from the South-West Front more than two years later.

In addition to this primary hypothesis, the Civil War experiences of Stalin also warrant study because of the plentiful and unusual nature of the documentation. While serving at various fronts, Stalin was in regular contact with Lenin and other party members, and with his own subordinates at the front. Since his communications at this time were mostly from or to a field headquarters, via teletype, most of them were preserved in Soviet military archives, and a large number have not only survived, but have become available in the west. Stalinist Russia published many accounts and documents on the Civil War exploits of its leader. Post-Stalinist Russia produced its own accounts and evidence, intended to tarnish the legend, and demonstrate that Stalin was far from the only active party member in the Civil War.

So, in addition to Stalin's and Lenin's collected works,<sup>9</sup> there are two collections of Red Army directives<sup>10</sup> of the Civil War period, supplemented by two propagandist collections published early in the Second World War in honour of Stalin's defence of Tsaritsyn and Petrograd.<sup>11</sup> These contain not only "directives" but orders, informational messages and

<sup>9</sup>V. I. Lenin, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii (Moscow, 1967-70, 55 vols. and 3 vol. index, cited hereafter as PSS); J. V. Stalin, Sochineniia (Moscow, 1940-52), 13 vols., cited hereafter as Soch.)

<sup>10</sup>Direktivy glavnogo komandovaniia Krasnoi Armii 1919-20 gg. (Moscow, 1969, cited hereafter as DGKKA); Direktivy komandovaniia frontov Krasnoi Armii 1917-1922 gg. (Moscow, 1971-74, 4 vols., cited hereafter as DKFKA).

<sup>11</sup>Dokumenty o geroicheskoi oborone Tsaritsyna v 1918g. (Moscow, 1942, cited hereafter as DGOT); Dokumenty o geroicheskoi oborone Petrograda v 1919 g. (Moscow, 1941, cited hereafter as DGOP).

correspondence of all types originating from the general headquarters and front headquarters. Together, these collections provide what must be very nearly all of Stalin's written and transmitted military communications during the Civil War.<sup>12</sup> For no other period in Stalin's life does there exist such a copious collection of his own writing, written not for the public record or to bolster his intellectual reputation but as "secret" military communiques, many addressed directly to Lenin. They provide a revealing and uniquely detailed portrait of a man who would in a few years become master of Russia.

Supplementing these documentary collections are primary and secondary Soviet accounts. These are sometimes useful, but have notable shortcomings. Pre-1926 Soviet memoirs of the Civil War limit themselves to generalities and rarely mention names. While the unflinching insistence of Stalinist historians that Stalin was single-handedly responsible for all successes is a severe distortion, the post-Stalin determination to reduce Stalin's significance is only a slight improvement. Nonetheless, used with caution, Soviet accounts provide at least small items of supporting data and occasional documentary material available nowhere else.<sup>13</sup> Of particular use in clarifying the military background of events in which Stalin was involved are the accounts of Cavalry General S. M. Budenny<sup>14</sup> and General A. I. Egorov.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>In a few cases, the correspondence refers to messages not in the collections. Whether these are missing from Soviet archives, or deliberately excluded, one can only speculate.

<sup>13</sup>For a review of Soviet historiography on the subject, see Albert Seaton, Stalin as Warlord (New York, 1975), pp. 75-79 and chapter 4 of Ocherki po istoriografii sovetskogo obshchestva, P. A. Zhilin (ed.), (Moscow, 1965).

<sup>14</sup>Proidennyi put (Moscow, 1965).

<sup>15</sup>L'vov-Varshava, 1920 g.: Vzaimedeistva Frontov (Moscow, Leningrad, 1929).

Only one western writer has dealt in any detail with the military aspects of Stalin's Civil War experience. Albert Seaton, in his Stalin as Warlord (New York, 1975), devotes his first three chapters (about 77 pages) to the Civil War. His account is accurate and perceptive, and is frequently referred to in this paper. Unfortunately, Seaton attempted to compress into a mere 300 pages Stalin's lifetime involvement with the Red Army, with the consequent abandonment of much useful detail. Since Seaton intended his work for the general reader as well as the specialist, it also includes much background material on military and political events which still further limited the space available to him for serious discussion. Moreover, Seaton makes the rather strange comment in his introduction that "limitations of space have precluded comment or assessment by the author, and this is, in any case, unnecessary since the material is for the most part self-explanatory";<sup>16</sup> a comment to which the present writer takes strong exception. As shall be noted in the body of this paper, the "material" is frequently open to several interpretations.

The character of Stalin as revealed in these pages will provide few surprises. The Civil War communications reveal him to be the ruthless, temperamental and suspicious egotist of historical tradition. However, many conventional interpretations of specific incidents have been modified in this present paper. The impression of most historians is that Stalin as a military commissar was insubordinate and critical of his nominal superiors either to score points against Trotsky, or out of simple irascibility. While these were sometimes his motives, there were also

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<sup>16</sup>Seaton, p. 9.

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many occasions when Stalin had good reason to be irritated with his nominal superiors. His insubordination, unsupportable militarily, was often based on what was from Stalin's point of view sound reasoning, having little to do with Trotsky or even the enhancement of his own reputation.

The climax of the Civil War, both for Russia and Stalin, was the Russo-Polish War of 1920. This war is the setting for an incident in which Stalin is alleged to have ignored orders and refused to provide units from his own front to close a critical gap in the Russian front line. This gap was used by Polish forces in a counter-offensive that caused the failure of the Russian invasion of Poland. Accounts disagree on whether he had reason to believe he was acting properly, and the issue constitutes a complex and challenging historical puzzle. Nonetheless, a careful description of the sequence of events permits some reasonably sound conclusions as to his motives and intentions.

Western discussions of the Russo-Polish War are few, and among those only two consider Stalin's role in any detail. Norman Davies' White Eagle, Red Star (New York, 1972) is a good account of the war, but Davies tends to exaggerate the complexity of the problem surrounding Stalin and the Warsaw reinforcement operation. Another interesting discussion of that operation is in an unpublished thesis by Thomas C. Fiddick, "Soviet Policy and the Battle of Warsaw, 1920" (Indiana, 1975). His discussion focusses on the roles of Trotsky, Lenin and the high command, as well as Stalin, and emphasizes the lack of a common intention among those individuals. The conclusions supplement those in the present paper. Two non-Stalinist memoirs on the Russo-Polish War are also of use. Marshall Pilsudskii's account is in his frank and readable The Year 1920



(London, 1972), and contains much comment on Soviet strategies during the Russo-Polish War. As an appendix, Pilsudskii has included the text of Pokhod za Visla, Tukhachevsky's cautious but illuminating lecture on the campaign, given in 1923 to a senior class at the Moscow Military Academy.

\* \* \* \*

This paper, as already stated, covers the period from May 1918 to August 1920, during which Stalin was employed, with only brief gaps, as a military commissar on various fronts. As the thesis of this paper is the lack of change in Stalin's methods and perceptions over that period, particular attention will be paid to his first military assignment, at Tsaritsyn, and to his last, on the South-West Front against the Polish army. Between these two "pillars" as it were, will be an analysis in somewhat less detail of his January 1919 investigation of the fall of Perm, his direction of the defence of Petrograd in the spring of the same year, and the strategic and policy controversies in which he took part in the summer and fall. Stalin's involvement in the harsh subjugation of the Caucasian region in 1921 will not be discussed, as Stalin did not participate in the military direction of that takeover. This study will concentrate on Stalin as an individual, and for that reason, the events of the Civil War itself will be included only to preserve continuity, and, of course, where it directly affected Stalin's perceptions or actions.

The problem of the role of the military commissar in the Red Army is not a major focus of this paper. However, Stalin's actions as a military commissar provide an excellent opportunity to observe this institution in its formative stages, and some general comments on this subject will therefore be made.

\* \* \* \*

During most of the two years Stalin was involved in military matters, the official chain of command was as depicted on the accompanying chart. Supreme operational direction of the Red Army was vested in the High Command (Glavkom) headed by the Commander-in-Chief. He was a member of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RVSR) which was dominated by Party officials, and chaired by Trotsky. The RVSR was responsible for military policy and grand strategy, while Glavkom handled day-to-day operations.

This pattern was repeated at the headquarters of each army group, which was designated according to the direction in which it operated (West Front, South Front, etc.). Front operations were directed by a Revolutionary Military Council (RVS) composed of the military commander and two commissars. It was in this latter capacity that Stalin spent most of the Civil War.

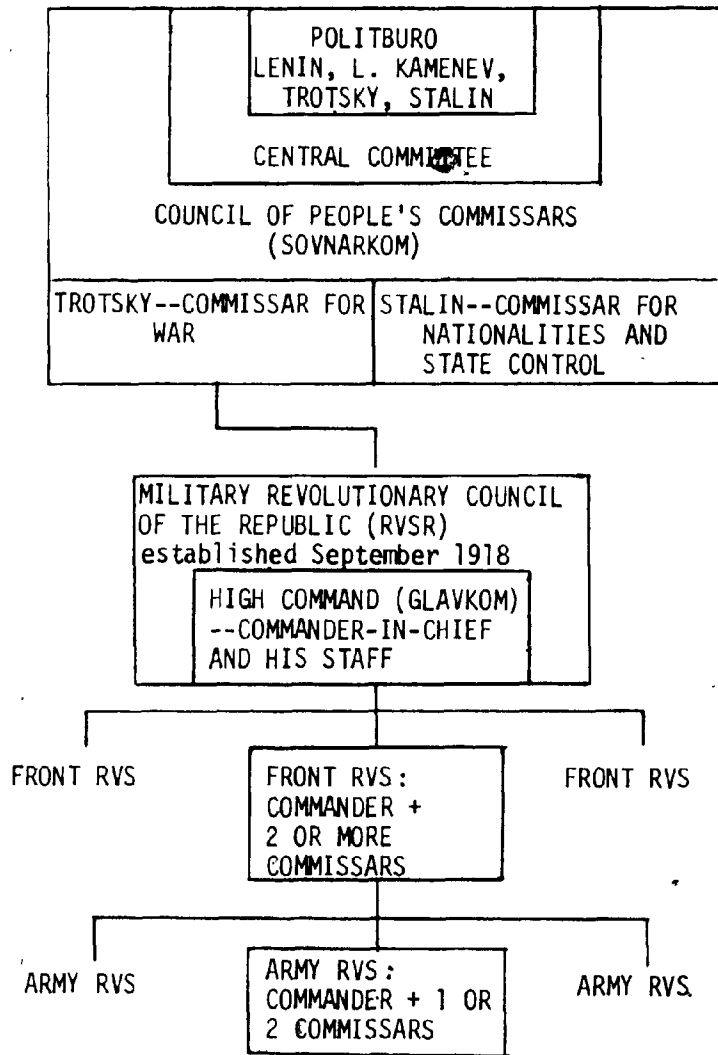
Stalin's status as a member of a front RVS was an awkward one for those who had to deal with him. As the above outline indicates, he was technically subordinate to the RVSR, and to Trotsky. His duties as commissar were in theory limited to supervision of subordinate commissars on his front, and assuring that nothing counter-revolutionary appeared in orders issued by the front commander. In this latter capacity, he was required to countersign all orders issued by the front commander but the military operations content of these orders were supposedly entirely the responsibility of the commander.<sup>17</sup>

In practice, however, this entire chain of responsibility and division of duties was disrupted by the fact that Stalin was a member of the

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<sup>17</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 296.

SOVIET MILITARY COMMAND 1918-20



Central Committee and, later, the Politburo. As such, he had direct access to Lenin, and could go over the heads of both Glavkom and Trotsky when he chose.

Moreover, as a member of the Politburo, no one on the front, including the commander, was ever likely to challenge his opinions. Said Trotsky, "As a . . . member of the Central Committee of the Party, he was inevitably the dominant figure in every council of war . . . . When others hesitated, he decided."<sup>18</sup> From the first, as the correspondence makes abundantly clear, Stalin considered all operational matters to be very much within his province.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

## CHAPTER ONE: TSARITSYN

It was at Tsaritsyn that Stalin became involved for the first time in military matters, and to him must go a large measure of the credit for the defence of that city in the summer and fall of 1918. His approach to this unfamiliar environment was admirably practical, energetic and ruthless, but not always successful. At Tsaritsyn, Stalin demonstrated most of the characteristics that he would display during the remainder of the Civil War: a capacity for insubordination; backed by appeals to Lenin; chronic suspicion; a strategic vision limited to his own front; a tactical vision limited to massive frontal assaults. Here was formed the "Tsaritsyn group", with whom he would work closely during and after the war. Finally, it was here that Stalin first clashed with Trotsky over military policy, in a dispute that led ultimately to Stalin's recall from Tsaritsyn.

\* \* \* \*

Stalin was sent to south Russia in early June 1918 to expedite the flow of food to northern centres where shortages were severe. With the Ukraine occupied by the Germans, the lower Volga and the Caucasus were among Soviet Russia's few remaining food sources. Although nominally under Soviet control, the region's revolutionary organizations, even when Bolshevik-dominated, were slow to respond to Moscow's orders. Cabled one party worker:

The situation here [in the south] is intolerable. Strong measures are needed, but the comrades here are too lax. Any desire to rectify matters is regarded as interference in local affairs. In the rail yard stand 6 trains full of grain for Moscow and Petrograd, but

they will not send them . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Stalin's authority as "Director General of Food Supplies for the south of Russia" was extensive. The Sovnarkom order of 31 May which announced his appointment specified that:

Local and provincial sovnarkoms, sovdeps, revcoms, staffs and commanders of detachments, railroad organizations and stationmasters, organizations involved in commercial shipping by sea and by river, post-telegraphs, provisioning organizations, all commissars and emissaries are obliged to obey the orders of Comrade Stalin.<sup>2</sup>

Stalin was originally instructed only to organize food shipments from Tsaritsyn, before proceeding to more urgent trouble-spots at the naval base of Novorossisk and in Transcaucasia.<sup>3</sup> However, his arrival in Tsaritsyn on 6 June, accompanied by two armoured trains and a 50-man detachment of Red Guards was the beginning of four months of intensive activity in that city, during which the food problem slipped gradually into the background, and military matters became predominant.

Communicating, as always, directly with Lenin, Stalin reported often, sometimes daily, on the situation as he saw it and the actions he was taking. The impression he gives is of obstacles and inefficiency on the part of nearly everyone, save himself, and of his energetic measures to correct matters. "Despite the confusion in every sphere of economic life, order can be established," he assured Lenin the day after his arrival.

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<sup>1</sup>S. Ordzhonikidze to Moscow from Baku, 23 May 1918, Dokumenty po istorii grazhdanskoj voiny v SSSR (Moscow, 1940, 2 Vols., cited hereafter as DIGV) Vol. I, p.154.

<sup>2</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 219. Stalin may have written the order himself. He had cabled a warning order to Tsaritsyn on 29 May that contained an almost identical list of the powers he would have. (DIGV, Vol. I, p. 155).

<sup>3</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 419-20, Note 21.

In Tsaritsyn, Astrakhan and Saratov the grain monopoly and fixed prices are abolished by the Soviets, and there is chaos and profiteering. Have secured the introduction of rationing and fixed prices in Tsaritsyn. The same must be done in Astrakhan and Saratov, otherwise all grain will flow away through these profiteering channels. Let the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars also demand that these Soviets put a stop to profiteering.

Rail transport is completely dislocated owing to the efforts of the multiplicity of collegiums and revolutionary committees. I have been obliged to appoint special commissars; they are already establishing order despite the protests of the collegiums. The commissars are discovering heaps of locomotives in places where the collegiums did not suspect their existence. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Stalin's "special commissars" got busy marshalling all the scattered trains, intercepting trains and barges carrying black market food shipments, and seizing meat and fish stores.<sup>5</sup> By 15 June, 500,000 poods of grain were on their way, under strong guard, to Moscow.<sup>6</sup>

Stalinist historians, and even many western ones, see these messages as evidence of Stalin's ability to descend upon difficult situations and get matters moving by sheer energy and willpower. Yet these messages must be read with a certain amount of caution. The chaotic situation Stalin describes in the south is credible, and from his messages it is clear that he was vigorously issuing orders to

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 116-17.

<sup>5</sup> DGOT, p. 94 and DIGV, Vol. I, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Iz istorii grazhdanskoi voyny v SSSR: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov (Moscow, 1960-61, 3 Vols., cited hereafter as IIGV), Vol. I, p. 295.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, R. C. Tucker, Stalin as a Revolutionary, 1879-1929 (New York, 1973), p. 206.

correct matters. But in Russia in 1918, merely to give an order was no assurance that it would be carried out, or that it will improve the situation as was intended.

Despite the extensive authority bestowed on him by Sovnarkom, it is clear that Stalin's orders were frequently ignored, at least in his early weeks at Tsaritsyn. He had to ask Moscow repeatedly to send their own orders to back him up. "Give a special order for the organization of the transport fleet on the Volga and Caspian," he requests on one occasion, "confirming the complete authority of my orders, with a copy to me in Tsaritsyn."<sup>8</sup> And again:

Send messages to the Kuban soviets to co-operate with agents of Stalin and Chokprod [Commissariat for Food] and similar messages to transport agents and local soviets.<sup>9</sup>

Lenin provided full and prompt support to most, if not all of Stalin's requests, in this period, probably because, being in Moscow, he was acutely aware of continuing food shortages. Messages were sent from Moscow confirming Stalin's authority,<sup>10</sup> and when Stalin requested 75 million roubles in small notes and a long list of manufactured goods,<sup>11</sup> Lenin cabled the next day: ". . . We are taking all measures. . . . The money will be sent tomorrow without fail, and orders have been given for the goods to be loaded today . . . ." <sup>12</sup>

When it was in his power to do so, Stalin would act first and then

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<sup>8</sup>E. Genkina, "Priezd t. Stalina v Tsaritsyn" Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1936, No. 7, p. 73, dated 4 June 1918.

<sup>9</sup>DGOT, pp. 48-49, dated 9 June 1918.

<sup>10</sup>DIGV, Vol. 1, p. 156, dated 8 June 1918.

<sup>11</sup>DGOT, p. 94, dated 8 June 1918.

<sup>12</sup>Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, p. 93.



ask for authority retroactively. On 19 June he wired to Lenin: "We have organized . . . a cordon of Lettish Cossacks headed by a special commissar for supply. We need, first, official sanction for this cordon . . . and, second, authority to control land and water transport to stop smuggling."<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that in the brief space of nine days between his arrival in Tsaritsyn and the dispatch of trains northward, Stalin's efforts could only have been directed toward the movement of food already gathered, and its dispatch in trains already available. However important this may have been in itself, it demonstrates no great organizing talent, but only a degree of initiative that local authorities had lacked. A real test of his organizing abilities would have come in establishing a system of food collection and transportation that would have kept up the flow of food as long as it was required. He was not to face such a test of his abilities, however, for a greater challenge overtook him in the form of Denikin's armies.

At about the time Stalin arrived at Tsaritsyn, General Denikin's armies were striking west and north from the lower Volga. A force under General Krasnov approached Tsaritsyn with the intention of opening communications with the anti-Bolshevik forces to the northeast, and in so doing cut across and seal off the rail and river link between Moscow and the vital food and oil supplies in the Caucasus.<sup>14</sup>

This life-line was seized by White forces again and again from early July to the end of September. "The situation," wrote one Tsaritsyn staff

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<sup>13</sup>Genkina, Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1936, No. 7, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup>G. von Rauch, A History of Soviet Russia (New York, 1957), pp. 88-89.

officer, "virtually spelled the end of [Stalin's food] mission in the south. Gradually, as he was left with nothing to do, or rather, as his direct task diminished, Stalin began to go into all phases of the city's administration, and particularly into the comprehensive task of the Tsaritsyn defence and the whole Caucasian so-called revolutionary front in general . . . ." <sup>15</sup>

Stalin at no time had sufficient resources or manpower to influence the situation in the North Caucasus, where Soviet (or at least Bolshevik) control was shaky at best. As has already been noted, Stalin had been directed to proceed there, but considering Tsaritsyn matters more urgent and presumably recognizing his powerlessness to aid the Caucasus, he contented himself with passing advice and information between Moscow and Stepan Shaumian, who ran the Bolshevik government in Baku. <sup>16</sup>

Although the Germans had agreed at Brest to leave Baku in Russian hands, German-officered Turkish forces continued to press towards that city. "The Baku region is seriously threatened," Stalin informed Moscow on 2 July 1918:

Turkish soldiers under the command of German officers have clashed with Baku forces. It must be concluded that the so-called understanding with the Germans is only a screen for the advance on Baku. . . . It goes without saying that all bourgeoisie support the Turks. As regards the Northern Caucasus, there is brewing such a porridge, that no fantastic combination can be ruled out. . . . We are taking urgent measures, of which I will keep you advised . . . . <sup>17</sup>

On 21 July, when Tsaritsyn was practically under siege by White cossacks, there was little that Stalin could do when Shaumian reported

<sup>15</sup>V. P. Nosovich, Donskaia Volna, 3 February 1919, quoted in K. E. Voroshilov, Stalin i Krasnaia Armiia (Moscow, 1937), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>R. Pipes, The Formation of the Soviet Union (Cambridge, 1964) pp. 198-203.

<sup>17</sup>DIGV, Vol. I, p. 289.

that the Baku Soviet and its military forces wanted to ask for British assistance against the Germans. Stalin replied that it would be the same kind of "help" the British had given at Murmansk and Vladivostok and called on the Soviets and army units in the region to resist all capitalist imperialism.<sup>18</sup> Unable to support any such resistance, Stalin's advice and appeals could not prevent British occupation of Baku on 10 August.

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Though he had little influence on events in Baku, matters were quite otherwise in Tsaritsyn itself, where Stalin ruled with an iron hand. Stalin was not alone in this effort. The party workers with whom Stalin worked in Tsaritsyn formed a mutually-supporting group of like-minded revolutionaries who, by remaining loyal to Stalin, would eventually rise to high positions in the Soviet government and military establishment.

Foremost among Stalin's supporters in this "Tsaritsyn group" was Kliment Efremovich Voroshilov. Stalin had worked with Voroshilov in the Baku Committee a decade before,<sup>19</sup> when Voroshilov had been a leader in the oil workers' trade union. Having served as an NCO during the war, Voroshilov returned to the Don region to command a partisan group which grew to form the core of the 10th Army which defended Tsaritsyn.<sup>20</sup> Stalin had him appointed commander of the 10th Army on 23 June 1918.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most famous of the Tsaritsyn group was Semyon Mikhailovich Budenny, a cossack and cavalrysergeant.<sup>22</sup> With the break up of the Tsarist army in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 291-92.

<sup>19</sup> V. A. Melikov, Geroicheskaia oborona Tsaritsyna 1918g. (Moscow, 1938), p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> von Rauch, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> I. Deutscher, Stalin: A Political Biography (Oxford, 1949), p. 204.

<sup>22</sup> von Rauch, p. 89.

1917, Budenny organized his own mounted guerilla band whose effectiveness at Tsaritsyn caught Stalin's attention. Other members of the group included Sergo Ordzhonikidze, commissar of the 10th Army at Tsaritsyn, a fellow Georgian, and an old Caucasus comrade-in-arms from the Baku Committee<sup>23</sup> Ephim Schadenko, an ex-tailor who became Assistant Commissar for War by 1941;<sup>24</sup> and Sergei Minin, a locally-popular demagogue with, according to Trotsky, "a blinding phobia of all tsarist officers."<sup>25</sup>

Betraying some of his own prejudices, Trotsky is scathing in his description of what he called the "NCO's opposition", describing them as "Caucasian peasants." According to Trotsky, they made good irregulars, who "excelled in local skirmishing but usually failed when they had to undertake military tasks of larger scope."<sup>26</sup> Their performance in the Civil War shall be examined in more detail later, but it is worth noting here that in the long run, Trotsky's assessment was justified. Both Budenny and Voroshilov were Soviet Marshalls when war broke out in 1941, and both had to be transferred to non-operational posts before the end of the war.<sup>27</sup>

Although differing somewhat in temperament, the members of the Tsaritsyn group shared with most Bolsheviks a common hostility to the old regime, and particularly to its intellectual, political and military traditions in which they had never been permitted to share. To admit the value of anything tsarist, even military training, was an affront both to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Ulam, p. 176n.

<sup>25</sup> Trotsky, Stalin, p. 290.

<sup>26</sup> Trotsky, My Life, pp. 440-41.

<sup>27</sup> J. Erickson, The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History 1918-41 (New York, 1962), pp. 837 and 847; Ulam, p. 176n.

the revolution and to their personal self-esteem. The revolution also meant to them the end of centralism in favour of local organizations. Voroshilov and Budenny, who had organized their own guerilla forces in the Tsaritsyn area, were therefore reluctant to submit themselves to central control or to acknowledge that other fronts might have priority over their own.

It is natural then, that the Tsaritsyn group should have been bitterly opposed to Trotsky, who at that time was organizing the Red Army along the old lines of formal discipline and centralized control, and even encouraging the employment of a large number of former tsarist officers to lead it, under the watchful eyes of their commissars.

Although usually an advocate of strong central control, Stalin too distrusted the old order, and so was inclined to at first ignore, then concur, and, after Tsaritsyn, openly advocate sectionalism if by so doing "counter-revolutionary" or "treasonous" orders could be circumvented. His concept of a Red Army was of an amateur, people's army such as Budenny and Voroshilov had formed at Tsaritsyn, an army officered by as Stalin described them, "former privates who received their baptism of fire in a number of engagements and well understand the job of fighting. They are leading our troops to victory."<sup>28</sup>

The degree of actual leadership Stalin exercised over his Tsaritsyn group is impossible to determine with certainty. As a senior party member who shared their views, they no doubt deferred to him and were anxious to cultivate his favour, but it is not known how much initiative Stalin took, or needed to take, in encouraging and directing their criticisms of Trotsky

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<sup>28</sup>Stalin, speech to Moscow Soviet, Izvestiia, 29 October 1918.

and their relations with the central command.

Since they all normally operated from the same headquarters, there are few communications to indicate how they interacted when not presenting a united front to Trotsky and Glavkom. The few messages available show that Stalin rarely criticized Voroshilov, but when he did so it was with characteristic abrasiveness. On 15 September, for example, Stalin held a direct line conversation with Voroshilov from Moscow, demanding to know why matters were not moving as fast as expected at the front. Voroshilov said there were only minor delays and "things are moving along." "It seems to me," Stalin replied tartly, "that things are standing still." Voroshilov's long-winded explanation brought only a curt concluding instruction from Stalin: "It is absolutely necessary to begin at once forming those divisions needed at the front in a matter of days. I strongly demand that that be done."<sup>29</sup> In this exchange Stalin is unquestionably the senior of the two, but there is also a tantalizing hint that when Stalin was not physically present, the Tsaritsyn group needed emphatic prodding even to obey Stalin's instructions.

Both Voroshilov and Budenny had temperaments fully as assertive as Stalin's<sup>30</sup> and, it is very clear that these Tsaritsynites were quite capable of independently stirring up trouble for Trotsky and the high command. This would be demonstrated in June 1919. At a time when Stalin was very much engaged in Petrograd and in strategic disputes, Trotsky and Lenin were

<sup>29</sup> DGOT, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Voroshilov, as shall be shown, stood up to Trotsky even when Stalin was not present. Budenny and Voroshilov held effective command of their guerilla units through force of personality alone. See The Trotsky Papers, Jan M. Meijer (ed.), (London, 1964, 1971, 2 Vols.) Vol. I, p. 164; D. Wheatley, Red Eagle (London, 1938).

fighting a lengthy telegraphic battle with Voroshilov's Ukrainian Front, which was agitating for more arms, and the placing of several armies under Voroshilov's direct control.<sup>31</sup> ". . . What was going on in the Ukraine was simply a repetition of the practices against which I had fought at Tsaritsyn,"<sup>32</sup> Trotsky noted.

One may tentatively conclude, then, that while Stalin no doubt encouraged the insubordination that would develop at Tsaritsyn, he did not necessarily dominate or lead the Tsaritsyn group, and that Voroshilov at least was demonstrably capable of considerable initiative in promoting the local interests so dear to the Tsaritsyn group.

Particularly suspect in the eyes of Stalin and his closest associates were the "military specialists"; officers of the old tsarist army whom Trotsky had found necessary to use to construct his fledgling Red Army. Stalin, Voroshilov, and most of their staff were proud of their amateur status, believing that no tsarist officer could be loyal to, or capable of leading, a revolutionary army. Besides their potential disloyalty, the tsarist officers were in the eyes of the Tsaritsyn group mere paper-pushing theorists. Stalin complained to Lenin:

The fact of the matter is that our "specialists" are psychologically incapable of determined struggle with counterrevolution and also that they, as "staff" workers, are skillful only at "drawing up draft plans" and making revised plans, absolutely unrelated to operations . . . and in general making themselves felt like strangers, guests. The military commanders cannot do the job . . . .<sup>33</sup>

A typical victim of the Tsaritsyn group's paranoia was Col. V. P.

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<sup>31</sup>L. D. Trotsky, The Stalin School of Falsification (New York, 1972), pp. 212-13; Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, pp. 332-33.

<sup>32</sup>Trotsky, My Life, p. 446.

<sup>33</sup>DIGV, Vol. I, pp. 238-39.

Nosovich, a "specialist" who had served reliably on other Soviet fronts before being transferred by Trotsky to Tsaritsyn. Dennis Wheatley, in his dramatized biography of Voroshilov, gives the following account of the arrival in Tsaritsyn of the message announcing Nosovich's transfer to the North Caucasus as Chief of Staff: "Voroshilov was furious. 'Of course,' he shouted, 'We are only partisans. We've had no training in military schools and academies, but . . . we are more to be relied upon than these ex-tsarists who don't give a damn for the revolution. . ..' Stalin wrote 'Take no notice' on the message, and an order<sup>was</sup> given for Nosovich to be arrested as soon as he arrived."<sup>34</sup>

This version, probably apocryphal, nonetheless conveys something of the feelings of the Tsaritsyn group. Nosovich was in fact arrested as soon as he stepped off the train. The circumstances of his subsequent release are unclear, but he was apparently permitted to join the Tsaritsyn staff for at least a brief period.

Perhaps as a result of years of underground life as a revolutionary, Stalin could not appreciate that the organizational chaos around him at Tsaritsyn was unavoidable in conditions of revolution and civil war. Any failure or reluctance to co-operate on the part of subordinates, or even superiors, could arouse in Stalin suspicions of sabotage and treason. In Tsaritsyn, the Cheka organization was busy at all hours, and when local prisons overflowed, a barge on the Volga became a floating prison. Nosovich later recalled that:

By this time the situation in Tsaritsyn, in general, had become very ominous. The Tsaritsyn Cheka worked full speed. Not a single day passed without various plots being unearthed in what had seemed the most

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<sup>34</sup>Wheatley, p. 205.



trustworthy and secret places. All the city prisons were overcrowded . . . When Trotsky, disturbed at the destruction [by the Cheka arrests] of the area administrative apparatus which he had taken such pains to create, sent a telegram to the effect that the staff of the commissariat must be left as they were and that facilities be given them to go on with their work, Stalin wrote a superscription . . . "Disregard". And so this telegram was disregarded, and the entire Ordnance Dept. and a section of the headquarters staff remained under arrest on a barge in Tsaritsyn.<sup>35</sup>

After the abortive revolt by Left Socialist Revolutionaries in Petrograd in July 1918, Lenin told Stalin to "crush mercilessly those pitiful and hysterical adventurers who have become tools in the hands of the counter-revolutionaries."<sup>36</sup> Stalin replied tersely, "Be assured our hand will not tremble. We shall treat enemies as enemies deserve."<sup>37</sup> Stalin was as good as his word. Indiscriminate mass arrests and shootings were carried out at Tsaritsyn. The exercise was repeated at the end of August after an attempt was made on Lenin's life, at which time Stalin informed Moscow that they were initiating, "overt mass terror against the bourgeoisie and its agents."<sup>38</sup>

The surrender of Baku to the British in early August had also aroused Stalin's suspicions. The headquarters staff of the North Caucasus Military Council was purged and its entire artillery staff arrested.<sup>39</sup> Ripples spread out to include the arrest of the Chief of Air Operations

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<sup>35</sup>Nosovich, quoted in Voroshilov, pp. 17-20. Voroshilov was quite proud of the incidents Nosovich describes and quoted him at length.

<sup>36</sup>Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, p. 114.

<sup>37</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>39</sup>Genkina, Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1936, No. 7, p. 77.

and even the commissariat "where nested specialists on disorganization, panic, sabotage, waste and treachery. The military specialists gather around them the dregs of official personnel. . . ." Stalin informed Sovnarkom.<sup>40</sup>

Nosovich was also somehow implicated in the affair, but managed to elude the Cheka, and reached White lines in safety. Trotsky is said to have asked Voroshilov: ". . . As to the desertion of Nosovich, are you certain that the cause of his running away to the Whites does not lie in your throwing him to the Cheka instead of giving him a chance to work?"<sup>41</sup>

In such an atmosphere injustices were, of course, legion, but Stalin's encouragement of such activities cannot be attributed entirely to paranoia. Desertion, mutiny and sabotage, whether by specialists or mutinous troops, were not infrequent in the Red Army at this time.<sup>42</sup> Nor were all the plots imaginary. In one much-cited case, Nosovich recounts how an engineer named Alexeev and his two sons were arrested on arrival from Moscow and callously ordered shot by Stalin. What is less often cited is Nosovich's full account, which makes clear that Alexeev was guilty:

The local counterrevolutionary organization . . . having received funds from Moscow, was preparing to take active steps in support of the Don Cossacks in the work of liberating Tsaritsyn.

Most unfortunately, the head of this organization, the engineer Alexeev, and his two sons, who all came from Moscow, were ill-acquainted with the actual situation, and the organization was discovered. . . . Stalin's order was brief: 'Shoot them.'<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>E. Genkina, "Bor'ba za Tsaritsyn v 1918 g.", Proletarskii revoliutsiia, 1939, No. 1, p. 80, dated 6 August 1918.

<sup>41</sup>R. Gul, Voroshilov, Budennyi, Bluechor, Kotovskii (Paris, n.d.), quoted in D. Fedotoff-White, The Growth of the Red Army (Princeton, 1944), p. 69.

<sup>42</sup>Seaton, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup>Nosovich, quoted in Voroshilov, pp. 18-19.

Stalin's growing involvement in military matters brought him into more frequent contact with Trotsky's appointees, with predictable results. Stalin wired Lenin on 10 July to complain that Trotsky had made appointments and dealt directly with military organizations in the Don and Kuban regions without going through the local RVS.

If Trotsky is going to hand out credentials right and left without thinking, . . . it may be safely said that within a month everything here and in the North Caucasus will go to pieces, and we shall lose this region altogether. . . . Knock it into his head that he must make no appointments without the knowledge of the local people, otherwise the result will be to discredit Soviet power.<sup>44</sup>

His first concern was still to get food shipments through to the north, but by early July the rail line had become subject to frequent interruption by White bands. Stalin remained confident and determined, but his messages took on an almost frantic edge: "I am driving and scolding everyone who deserves it, and I hope [the rail line] will soon be restored. You may rest assured we shall spare no one, neither ourselves nor others, and we shall get you the grain in spite of everything."<sup>45</sup>

"Driving and scolding" soon proved inadequate, at least when dealing with an essentially military situation, and Stalin decided he needed military powers. "The food situation is naturally bound up with the military question," he explained to Lenin on 10 July. "There is plenty of grain in the south, but to get it we need a smoothly working machine which does not meet such obstacles as troop trains, army commanders, and so on.

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<sup>44</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 118.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

Moreover, the military must assist the food agents."<sup>46</sup>

When his request for military powers was not immediately granted, he wired angrily:

For the good of the work, I need military powers: I have already written about this, but have had no reply. Very well, in that case, I shall myself, without any formalities, dismiss army commanders and commissars who are ruining the work. The interests of the work dictate this, and of course not having a paper from Trotsky is not going to deter me.<sup>47</sup>

He had no doubts about where to look to find those "ruining the work": "If our military specialists -- the bunglers! -- had not been so lazy and idle, the line would not have been broken," he had told Lenin on 7 July, "and if the line is restored it won't be thanks to the military, but in spite of them."<sup>48</sup>

His threat to assume military powers unilaterally does not seem to have been carried out, however. When the commander of the Tsaritsyn Front, A. E. Snesev, a "specialist", proved persistently unsuccessful in keeping the tracks clear, Stalin and Voroshilov set out on a personal inspection in an armoured train. They were involved in a skirmish with cossacks before reaching the front line. This is the only recorded occasion on which Stalin was actually under fire in the Civil War.<sup>49</sup> The incident no doubt reinforced his eventual conclusion, wired to Lenin 16 July, that Snesev must be removed. "Perhaps he might have done well in a war with the Germans,

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 120-21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>49</sup> DIGV, Vol. I, p. 239, dated 16 July 1918. The dates of the inspection trip and skirmish are uncertain. The report was written "after a two-week stay at the front", but messages from Stalin dated 1-15 July emanate from Tsaritsyn.

but not in a war with counterrevolutionaries. . . ."50

This is uncharacteristically generous of Stalin. He clearly hints that the commander is not politically reliable, but he makes no accusations and even delivers a mild compliment on his competence. Moreover, instead of carrying out his earlier threat to dismiss an incompetent commander out-of-hand "without a piece of paper from Trotsky," Stalin "requests" that Lenin remove him.<sup>51</sup> This incident suggests that, for all his bluster, Stalin did not always have a free hand in the south, at least when senior personnel were involved. It is tempting to speculate that some unpublished document in the Soviet archives, signed by Lenin, sharply upbraids Stalin for his unilateral declaration of dismissal powers. Lenin alone could temper Stalin's outbursts and this might explain his caution and treatment of Snesarev.

At about the same time, Stalin intruded in matters that did not concern him, and was told to mind his own business. He reported to Sovnarkom on 5 July that barges were accumulating at Saratov, but that the local Oil Committee, under K. A. Makarov seemed to be taking no action. Stalin recommended his removal from concern with oil matters. Lenin took over a week to reply. "We are disturbed by your recommendation of . . . complete removal of Makarov. . . . On the basis of Makarov's [past] performance Sovnarkom considers there is an absence of grounds to remove him . . . . In these matters it is necessary to operate jointly with comrades from the Oil Commissariat who are the central organ for oil matters."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> V. I. Lenin, Leninskii Sbornik, Vol. XXXVIII (Moscow, 1975), p. 212.

On 19 July 1918, the Tsaritsyn headquarters was reorganized as the North Caucasus Revolutionary Military Council (RVS), and Stalin appointed as its chairman. Snegarev was recalled to Moscow.<sup>53</sup> "Order Number 1 for Tsaritsyn" issued on 22 July, announced the existence of the new RVS, and declared:

2. All operational orders . . . for all military units in the area will from this date originate from the Military Council.
3. The Military Council directs all officials strictly and punctually to carry out all orders and instructions of the Military Council and by all means support them in enforcing discipline in the units. Failure to carry out orders, and procrastinating without good reason will be punished with the strictest measures.<sup>54</sup>

Despite pleas from Lenin in Moscow<sup>55</sup> Stalin was by now able to provide only a trickle of grain and other foods to the north. Mamontov's cossacks were approaching Tsaritsyn, and had isolated that town from the grain-producing areas to the south. Still, Stalin did what he could, which was mainly to complain to Lenin about Chokprod's inefficiency in harvesting grain, although he also ordered that available cattle be converted to salted meat, and sent out foraging parties.<sup>56</sup>

Stalin's letters and communications speak of "offensives", "striking forces" and "the enemy's flank"<sup>57</sup> as if the actions around Tsaritsyn involved the movements of large organized armies. In fact, the situation was much more tenuous. Mamontov's cossacks were spread out over a wide

<sup>53</sup> Genkina, Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1939, No. 1, p. 88.

<sup>54</sup> DKFKA, Vol. I, p. 289.

<sup>55</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, pp. 126-27.

<sup>56</sup> Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 122-26.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

region around Tsaritsyn in bands of various sizes, and though they pressed to the outskirts of Tsaritsyn itself for most of August, they were too ill-disciplined to besiege or launch a concentrated attack. Voroshilov and Budenny spent much of their time pursuing these bands with armoured trains and the small Red cavalry units.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, to Stalin and Voroshilov it was a real enough threat. They ordered the drafting of 21- and 22-year-old men,<sup>59</sup> asked for a diversionary attack from the north to take pressure off Tsaritsyn,<sup>60</sup> cancelled a planned offensive and withdrew to a defensive posture.<sup>61</sup>

In a long letter to Lenin on 4 August, Stalin attributed his lack of success to everyone but himself. He blamed the peasants (and soldiers drawn from the peasants) who resented interference in the black market, and the requisitioning of food; the unreliability of the cossack troops, who joined the Red forces only to get weapons, and then deserted; "the inertness of the former commander," Snegarev, who had left things in "a state of utter disruption"; a lack of cartridges and shells.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to taking measures in his own area, Stalin requested reinforcements and supplies from the centre: shells, cartridges, and even destroyers and submarines.<sup>63</sup> Always he promised sure victory if the requests were met, and disaster if they were not.

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<sup>58</sup>Seaton, pp. 31-32, and Michael Gardner, History of the Soviet Army (New York, 1966), p. 40.

<sup>59</sup>IIGV, Vol. I, pp. 478-79.

<sup>60</sup>DKFKA, Vol. I, pp. 289-302.

<sup>61</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 122-26.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 127, dated 31 August 1918.

I implore you, break down all obstacles, and so facilitate the immediate delivery of what we request. Baku, Turkestan, and the North Caucasus will be ours (unquestionably!), if our demands are immediately met . . . .  
Warmest greetings, my dear and beloved Ilyich.<sup>64</sup>

By early September, the cossacks withdrew or were driven back, depending on which source is consulted. Stalin reported gleefully, "The offensive of the Soviet troops of the Tsaritsyn area has been crowned with success. . . . The enemy has been completely routed and thrown back across the Don. Tsaritsyn is safe. The offensive continues."<sup>65</sup>

The White forces would be back, but not before Stalin had involved himself in another sort of battle, with Trotsky. To replace Snegarev as military commander on the Caucasus front, Trotsky had assigned on 17 September, P. P. Sytin, a "specialist". The North Caucasus Front was redesignated the South Front, and its headquarters moved north to Kozlov, with the intention of improving co-ordination with East Front forces. Stalin was to remain chairman of the RVS, with Voroshilov and Sytin as the other two members.<sup>66</sup>

Sytin proceeded to Kozlov, and established his headquarters there. Stalin and Voroshilov stayed in Tsaritsyn and ignored Sytin, who informed Commander-in-Chief I. I. Vatsetis that his efforts to prepare operational plans were hindered by the refusal of the Tsaritsyn staff to reply to his demands for information on the number and deployment of troops.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>IIGV, Vol. I, p. 491. Compare this with Gardner, p. 40, where the Whites are described as withdrawing of their own accord.

<sup>66</sup>Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 136, note 2.

<sup>67</sup>DKFKA, Vol. I, pp. 322-29, dated 22 September 1918.



Two days later, he protested to Vatsetis that Stalin, Voroshilov and a third commissar, Minin, had without consulting him issued an order<sup>68</sup> covering the tasks and organization of North Caucasus units.<sup>69</sup> Vatsetis had the order cancelled.

Trotsky was informed of these events by Vatsetis, and, according to him, Lenin, too, was concerned. At first, Trotsky claimed, he did not connect Stalin to the insubordination:

My impression was that Stalin did not fight resolutely enough against local self-rule, the local guerillas and the general insubordination of the local people. I accused him of being too lenient toward the wrong policy of Voroshilov and the others, but it never entered my head that he was the actual instigator of that policy.<sup>70</sup>

The Tsaritsyn group's motive for provoking this wrangle are suggested by a Stalinist source which quotes brief passages from the order of 17 September:

To the aforesaid RVS [Stalin, Sytin, Voroshilov] belongs complete authority on the South Front . . . .

(1) The decision is left to the RVS to select its own location. . . .

(3) The RVS South Front may decide in a week to propose a candidate for the post of commander of the South Front, in the event that Sytin proves unsuitable.<sup>71</sup>

Given Stalin's sympathies with the local approach of the Tsaritsyn group, and their hostility to "specialists" such as Sytin, it is likely that they never intended to let Sytin take over effective command. By deliberately isolating him, they could ensure his ineffectiveness, and

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 286-88.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>70</sup> Trotsky, Stalin, p. 288.

<sup>71</sup> E. Genkina, "Bor'ba za Tsaritsyn v 1918 g.", Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1939, No. 2, p. 101.

pave the way for Stalin to nominate Voroshilov as front commander, which he eventually did.

Nonetheless, it is curious that throughout this controversy neither Trotsky, Vatsetis, Stalin nor Voroshilov make reference to the above-quoted provisions of the 17 September order, and it is even more curious that Trotsky would permit such a provision in orders appointing a front commander.

The dispute was given added urgency by the fact that from September 1918 onwards, Krasnov's cossacks and units of the Volunteer Army had returned to the offensive. The Red Army units fell back, and in reporting the situation to the RVSR on 22 September, Stalin did not neglect the opportunity to discredit Sytin by inserting some deliberate, and quite remarkable distortions:

The Front is broken. . . . Something could still be done from the north sector of the South Front, but this sector is absolutely unmoving and the commander Sytin, in some strange way, is not interested in the matter . . . moreover, to our repeated enquiries as to the situation on the north sector he has, up to now, made no reply.<sup>72</sup>

Did Stalin intend to imply that Sytin was no more than a junior commander in charge of the north sector? And was he trying to put on record that it was Sytin, not the Tsaritsyn group that ignored inquiries? As shall be shown, this would not be the first time Stalin resorted to such obscurities.

The message is characteristic of Stalin in another respect. He concluded with a request for 30,000 rifles, 150 Maxim machine guns, and 50 3-inch guns. "Unless this minimum is delivered immediately, we shall

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<sup>72</sup>DKFKA, Vol. I, p. 343.

have to retire to the left bank of the Volga."<sup>73</sup>

The same day, Stalin, Voroshilov and Minin signed an order directing a strong Red unit known as "Zhloba's Steel Division" to march immediately to Tsaritsyn from its normal base of operations some 400 miles away in the North Caucasus. They unquestionably exceeded their authority in doing so, since such an order should only have come from Sytin. Perhaps to add some suggestion of military legitimacy to the order a former captain named Sokolov was persuaded to add his signature.<sup>74</sup>

On 29 September, at Trotsky's order, and armed with a brief attesting to his authority, Sytin went to Tsaritsyn and had a meeting with the RVS. As he described in a later report to the RVSR, Minin, not Stalin, took the chair, which would tend to reinforce Trotsky's claim that Stalin did not put himself forward as the ringleader. Sytin put forward the argument that Tsaritsyn was an unsuitable headquarters location, being located to the flank and often even the rear of operations, and dependent for communication on a single, frequently blocked rail line. Minin and Stalin nonetheless insisted on Tsaritsyn. Nor was agreement reached on the authority claimed by Stalin, Minin and Voroshilov to issue operational orders and make command appointments. The three then passed a resolution declining to recognize the legality of Sytin's authority or his brief.<sup>75</sup>

Following up their resolution, Stalin and Voroshilov cabled the RVSR

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 342-43. After Stalin's removal from Tsaritsyn, this division arrived there at a critical moment (16 October 1918) when the Don Cossacks of Krasnov were pressing in on the city, and were an important, and possibly vital, factor in keeping the city in Red hands. It is on this basis that Stalinist accounts claim Stalin displayed tactical genius in saving the city. See Y. Efimov, Voenno istoricheskii zhurnal, 1967, No. 1, pp. 108-10.

<sup>75</sup> DKFKA, Vol. 1, p. 345.

to ask, first, that Sytin be dismissed as commander, South Front, on the grounds of "(1) complete lack of concern by Sytin for the South Front situation; (2) complete lack by Sytin of any sort of strategic plan; (3) complete inability of Sytin to get matters moving. . . ." Secondly, they urged the appointment of Voroshilov to replace him.<sup>76</sup> This message represents the culmination of what was almost certainly a deliberate plot by Stalin and Voroshilov to replace Sytin. Their criticisms of the Front Commander were ultimately justified because they had, by their refusal to co-operate, sabotaged Sytin's efforts to formulate plans or "get matters moving".

Stalin simultaneously continued to plead for supplies. He and Minin signed a telegram on 2 October, addressed to RVSР, with copies to Lenin, Sverdlov and Vatsetis, blaming the unstable situation in the south on a shortage of shells, ammunition, uniforms, rifles and submarines. Opportunities to advance were being lost because of this, the telegram stated, and the White cossacks were able to reinforce or withdraw their forces by sea because no submarines were available to stop them. A retreat by Red forces would result if no shells were forthcoming. Stalin also attacked what he saw as a lack of resolution on the part of the RVSР:

This is not our first warning, but RVSР gives us nothing but promises . . . it is necessary to ask you:

- 1) To consider whether you intend to hold the south;
- 2) If yes, whether you can provide [the requested supplies] without delay;
- 3) If you cannot provide them, whether we shouldn't withdraw at a time and in a direction . . . to avoid disintegration of the front;
- 4) If you don't consider it necessary to hold the south,

<sup>76</sup> DIGV, Vol. I, p. 389, dated 1 October 1918.

say so frankly. . . .  
 We await firm and unequivocal response to the above  
 questions. . . .<sup>77</sup>

There was no immediate response to these questions, for Trotsky and  
 Vatsetis were preparing to defend Sytin. Vatsetis told Tsaritsyn on 3  
 October:

It is apparent from your telegram that Sytin did not take  
 part in the meetings of the military council and, there-  
 fore, decisions on the movement of troops were made without  
 his knowledge and approval. Moreover, you have centred  
 your main attention on the Tsaritsyn sector at the expense  
 of the others. . . .

It has been proposed repeatedly that you should move from  
 Tsaritsyn to Kozlov to work with Sytin on operational  
 planning, but up to now you have continued to operate  
 independently. Such a disregard of the orders of [RVSR]  
 and unwillingness to work in co-operation with a front  
 commander I consider intolerable, particularly since the  
 decisions of the RVS South Front are manifestly detrimental  
 to planned operations.<sup>78</sup>

Trotsky by this time had joined Sytin in Kozlov, having determined  
 "to set things right at Tsaritsyn".<sup>79</sup> At Kozlov on 3 October he issued  
 an order confirming Sytin's authority on the South Front. The text of  
 the order has not been published, but was presumably along the lines of  
 one Trotsky says he issued on 5 October, unifying all South Front units  
 under an RVS composed of Sytin and three Bolshevik commissars. "All orders  
 and instructions of the council are subject to unconditional and  
 immediate obedience" and insubordination would be severely punished.<sup>80</sup>

The Tsaritsyn group responded with a sharp attack on Trotsky:

[This order] threatens to give all matters on the front

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<sup>77</sup>The request for submarines is not as unreasonable as it sounds. In  
 1914, Russia had a fleet of 36 submarines, 11 of which had been stationed  
 in the Black Sea. Jane's Fighting Ships 1914 (London, 1914), p. 359. Nothing  
 in the correspondence indicates that Stalin received them, however. IIGV,  
 Vol. I, pp. 496-97.

<sup>78</sup>DGKKA, pp. 82-83.

<sup>79</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 288.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

and the revolution into the hands of General Sytin, a man not only not needed on the front, but also not trustworthy and therefore dangerous. To destroy the front for the sake of one unreliable general we, naturally, cannot agree. Trotsky can spout phrases about discipline, but what it comes down to is that Trotsky is not the RVSR, and an order from Trotsky is not an order of the RVSR.

. . . we, as party members, declare categorically that the implementation of Trotsky's order we consider criminal, and threats from Trotsky worthless.

Without delay discuss in the CC the question of Trotsky's conduct, his displacement of party members to please traitors from the military specialists and to the detriment of the interests of the front and the revolution. Raise the question of the intolerable actions of Trotsky's own orders; examine the question of military specialists from the camp of the non-party counter-revolution.<sup>81</sup>

This was too much for Trotsky. He wired Lenin: "I categorically insist on Stalin's recall." He threatened to arrest Voroshilov and Minin if they did not start keeping Sytin informed and obey him. He justified these actions by a terse and reasonable reference to military necessity:

Operations in strength are impossible without coordination of operations with Tsaritsyn. There is no time for diplomatic negotiations. Tsaritsyn must either obey orders or get out of the way. We have a colossal superiority in forces but total anarchy at the top. This can be put to rights within 24 hours given firm and resolute support at your end. In any event this is the only course of action that I can envisage.<sup>82</sup>

Lenin agreed to Stalin's recall, but apparently to mollify Stalin and belie any impression that Stalin was in disgrace, he sent Sverdlov by special train to return Stalin to the capital.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps as a parting shot, Stalin issued an order dismissing Sytin, which Trotsky promptly countermanded.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Pravda, 3 January 1935.

<sup>82</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, pp. 134-36.

<sup>83</sup> Trotsky, My Life, p. 441.

<sup>84</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 140.

Continuing the policy of appeasing Stalin, or perhaps with the genuine intention of giving better balance to the authority of Stalin and Trotsky on military matters, Lenin had Stalin appointed a member of the RVSR on 8 October, and sent him back to Tsaritsyn from 11 to 19 October to wind up his affairs as Chairman of the 10th Army RVS.

His first message on his return to Tsaritsyn makes clear he was not at all chastened: "I just now returned to Tsaritsyn. I must declare that up to now we have received not one shell and not one gun, and the front is in a desperate situation." He described how the cossacks were closing in and the front would soon collapse without shells, but "Syтин and his protectors on this matter refuse the shells . . . ." <sup>85</sup> Sverdlov, to whom the message had been addressed, wired back that shells were on their way. This prompt cooperation was apparently instigated by Lenin, who, presumably after talks with Stalin before he returned to the front, had decided "urgent measures" were required to help Tsaritsyn. <sup>86</sup>

And, incredibly, Syтин still was not getting cooperation: "The present catastrophic situation in Tsaritsyn," Vatsetis told Voroshilov on 15 October, ". . . arises exclusively from your refusal to work with front commander Syтин . . . . In future I categorically order you to act in accordance with the instructions of front commander Syтин and remain in close contact with him." <sup>87</sup>

Stalin, on his return to Moscow, chose to appear conciliatory --

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<sup>85</sup> Genkina, Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1939, No. 2, p. 106.

<sup>86</sup> IIGV, Vol. I, p. 499, dated 15 October 1918.

<sup>87</sup> DGKKA, pp. 84-85.

at least before Lenin and Sverdlov. On 23 October, as Trotsky was making ready to visit Tsaritsyn personally, Sverdlov informed him from Moscow that:

Stalin arrived today and brought news of three major victories of our troops in the vicinity of Tsaritsyn . . . . Stalin has persuaded Voroshilov and Minin, whom he considers very valuable and irreplaceable workers, to stay on and accord full compliance to the orders from the centre; the sole cause of their dissatisfaction, according to his words, is the extreme delay in the delivery of shells and small-arms ammunition, or their non-delivery, which is also having a fatal effect on . . . the army . . . .

Stalin would very much like to work on the South Front; he expresses great apprehension that people whose knowledge of this front is poor may commit errors, of which he cites numerous examples. Stalin hopes that in the course of his work he will manage to convince people of the correctness of his approach, and he is not putting up any ultimatum about the removal of Sytin . . . but agrees to work jointly with . . . the Revolutionary Council of the South Front and also expresses the wish to be a member of the Higher Military Council of the Republic.

In informing you, Lev Davidich, of all these statements of Stalin, I ask you to think them over and let me have a reply, firstly, as to whether you agree to talk matters over personally with Stalin, for which purpose he is ready to visit you, and, secondly, whether you consider it possible under given, specific conditions to put aside former differences and arrange to work together as Stalin so much desires.

As far as I am concerned, my belief is that it is essential to make every effort towards arranging to work together with Stalin.<sup>88</sup>

This report is difficult to reconcile with the Stalin of Tsaritsyn, unless we assume that his conciliatory manner was calculated to cast doubt on the earlier reports of his rebelliousness, and on the motives of those who composed such reports. In any case, Trotsky appears to have agreed to

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<sup>88</sup>Trotsky, My Life, p. 443.



see Stalin. They met on Trotsky's train on 24 or 25 October.<sup>89</sup>

Of this famous, but inconclusive confrontation between two great antagonists, only Trotsky's version exists, and it is brief. "'Do you really wish to dismiss them all?' Stalin asked me, in a tone of exaggerated humility. 'They are fine boys!' 'Those fine boys will ruin the revolution, which can't wait for them to grow out of their adolescence,' I answered him. 'All I want is to draw Tsaritsyn back into Soviet Russia.'"<sup>90</sup>

It says much for Trotsky that he did not initiate an all-out purge of the Tsaritsyn staff, as Stalin would surely have done in his place. Voroshilov defiantly informed Trotsky that "Tsaritsyn thought it necessary to execute only such orders as it considered right."<sup>91</sup> Trotsky threatened to have Voroshilov sent to Moscow for trial if orders from the high command were not in future promptly obeyed,<sup>92</sup> but in the end, over Sytin's objections, he decided to leave Voroshilov in place, because of his popularity with the 10th Army. To encourage the commander to mend his ways, Trotsky appointed two new and more reliable commissars and other staff members to the RVS South Front.<sup>93</sup>

Although Tsaritsyn was still complaining bitterly of a lack of shells

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<sup>89</sup> There is some confusion about exactly when and under what circumstances this meeting took place. Trotsky says (in My Life, p. 442) that the meeting was accidental, and occurred when Trotsky was on his way to Tsaritsyn immediately after Stalin's recall on 5 October. It appears, however, that Trotsky did not reach Tsaritsyn until after Stalin had left for good on 19 October. The confrontation must therefore have taken place after the above-quoted note from Sverdlov, and probably in response to it. See Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 160, note 1.

<sup>90</sup> Trotsky, My Life, p. 442.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 164.

as late as the 24th,<sup>94</sup> the shortage, which Stalin had for so long been insisting would force a retreat, did not stop him from reporting "glorious progress"<sup>95</sup> on 15 October; that "the enemy is shaky and retreating, and our forces are going over to the offensive "<sup>96</sup> on the 18th; and "major victories" on his return to Moscow on the 23rd.<sup>97</sup> Trotsky found little evidence of these major victories when he arrived in Tsaritsyn shortly after Stalin's departure on the 19th,<sup>98</sup> and fighting was to continue around Tsaritsyn well into November. The saving of the city is probably most attributable to the heavy influx of reinforcements sent by Vatsetis and Sytin at Lenin's urging.<sup>99</sup>

Trotsky and Vatsetis remained unimpressed by the perpetual demands from Tsaritsyn for more shells, even when Lenin himself supported the requests. "We are receiving frantic telegrams from Voroshilov," Lenin informed Trotsky on one occasion, "about the non-arrival of shells and small-arms ammunition, despite his repeated demands and insistent reminders. We recommend that you immediately check up on this, take the most energetic measures to ensure satisfaction, and notify us what has been done. . . ." <sup>100</sup>

Trotsky, who was in fact in Tsaritsyn at the time, replied that the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-60.

<sup>95</sup> Melikov, pp. 223-24.

<sup>96</sup> DIGV, Vol. I, p. 395.

<sup>97</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, pp. 158-60.

<sup>98</sup> Trotsky, My Life, p. 443.

<sup>99</sup> Seaton, p. 40.

<sup>100</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, pp. 158-60, dated 24 October 1918.

shortage of shells was due to wasteful expenditure by the South front, which consumed far more than its share. They "do not and will not enjoy any special privileges."<sup>101</sup>

Voroshilov continued to be uncooperative at Tsaritsyn and in December<sup>102</sup> was transferred to the Ukraine. Trotsky alleged that it was Stalin who, from Moscow, continued to encourage Voroshilov's disobedience,<sup>103</sup> and Stalinist accounts support this view.<sup>104</sup> There is, however, little documentary support for these assertions. As already noted, Stalinist accounts are proud of the Tsaritsyn misbehaviour, and so if Stalin had been supervising Voroshilov from afar, one would expect the communications to turn up in the late 1930s, if they existed. Moreover, any commander who had the courage to tell Trotsky to his face that he would obey only the orders from above that he "thought right" clearly did not need Stalin's prompting. The few published communications between Voroshilov and Stalin after Trotsky's departure are friendly, but concern only routine matters. The only hint of dissatisfaction occurs in early November when Voroshilov complains:

As regards our parades and inspections, it is to be hoped that they create the appropriate impression on Trotsky, and convince him that rather than disorganizing, we are really organizing a formidable revolutionary army. I, Voroshilov, remain here almost alone, working in extremely dangerous conditions. . . .<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>103</sup> Trotsky, Falsification, p. 210.

<sup>104</sup> E. Genkina, "Iz istorii bor'by za Tsaritsyn (1918g.)" Istoricheskii zhurnal, 1938, No. 5, p. 31.

<sup>105</sup> DIGV, Vol. I, pp. 396-97. Stalin's reply does not comment on this complaint, unless the inscrutable ". . ." in the collection was some sort of sympathetic agreement.

Post-Stalin Soviet historians have confirmed some aspects of Stalin's behaviour at Tsaritsyn. They say he clung to guerilla methods of warfare and was guilty of insubordination towards the High Command and the front commander. His intervention in military affairs "complicated" organization, supply and deployment for battle. He is accused of "sectionalism" in overrating the importance of his own sector, drawing excess supplies and forces to it to the detriment of equally important areas.<sup>106</sup> With some exaggeration Soviet historians also describe a "clash" between Lenin and Stalin, Minin and Voroshilov over the latter's "groundless" distrust of military specialists, which resulted in Stalin being "transferred to other work."<sup>107</sup>

Stalin's behaviour at Tsaritsyn confirms the popular view of the future dictator's character. First, there is the tendency to blame everyone but himself for any shortcomings in the performance of his command. A defeat or a retreat is at various times attributed to the "specialists" in league with counter-revolutionaries, a shortage of men and supplies, and the "criminal" or even "treasonous" refusal by Trotsky and the High Command to provide these things.

Also characteristic of Stalin's dispatches are his continual predictions of disaster if sufficient aid is not forthcoming. This perpetual "crying wolf" may have been intended by Stalin to prove his own innocence if a major defeat did occur in a region under his command. He could point out that he had forecast the defeat, and had already identified

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<sup>106</sup>Zhilin, p. 18.

<sup>107</sup>L. Nikulin, Tukhachevskii-Biograficheskii ocherk (Moscow, 1964), p. 44.

the causes and the culprits in his earlier dispatches.

None of these "standard" excuses bears close scrutiny. As Trotsky pointed out to Lenin in March 1919,<sup>108</sup> 30,000 former tsarist officers were serving in the Red Army, of whom the traitors, although numerous, were but a tiny fraction of the whole, and the Red Army could not have functioned without them. While a wise Soviet commander no doubt had his tsarist officers closely watched, Stalin and his Tsaritsyn group clearly carried this to unreasonable lengths, probably undermining the efficiency of their units, and certainly discouraging potentially loyal "specialists" such as Nosovich.

As for the shortage of ammunition, Trotsky's claim that the South Front wastefully used more than its share has been noted earlier. It is certainly the case that military stores of all kinds and ammunition above all, were in short supply throughout the war. Stalin's apparent stubborn conviction that his front was the most vital prevented him from recognizing that he could not always have priority claim on supplies. Thanks in part to Lenin's sympathy with his demands, Stalin became more extravagant in his requests, and, as shall be shown, would eventually be demanding whole combat-tried divisions be sent to his support.

The incessant demands for equipment and men point up Stalin's limited tactical imagination. In all his posts, Stalin got his way by browbeating and heavy-handed threats. Similarly, his response to a tactical problem tended to be simply to call up more men, procure more supplies and outweigh the enemy in numbers and bullets. Although the orders issued over his signature spoke of elaborate flanking actions, these seem to have sprung

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<sup>108</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 278.

more from the military commanders. As shall be shown later, as late as August 1920, the Cavalry Army, whose greatest asset was surely its mobility, would be urged by Stalin into a direct frontal attack on L'vov's defences.

On one occasion he told a commissar "to fight . . . it is simply a question of fighting, for [the objective] could be easily regained. Under no circumstances should counter-attacking regiments be committed piecemeal to battle, but the enemy should be smashed by one massive concentration on a single predetermined axis."<sup>109</sup>

Central to the question of Stalin's behaviour, and the motives behind it, is his perception of the role of the military commissar. Trotsky viewed the military commissar (or, more properly, the military-revolutionary council, composed of the commander, often a former tsarist officer, and at least two commissars) as very much an interim institution. His role was two-fold: first, as an immediate expediency, he was to assure the loyalty of the commander; and, second, to instill revolutionary precepts in the commander while himself absorbing military techniques, so that eventually the commissar as a separate individual could be done away with. "A commissar is not there to give orders, but to watch,"<sup>110</sup> Trotsky advised. "The more the commissar begins to penetrate into combatant work, and the commander to assimilate the political work, the nearer we are getting to unified command, where the person placed at the head of a unit

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<sup>109</sup> IIGV, Vol. II, p. 547.

<sup>110</sup> E. Wollenburg, The Red Army (Westport, 1973), p. 70.

will be both commander and commissar."<sup>111</sup>

In no way was the commissar intended to interfere in operational matters: ". . . the signature of the commissar or political member of the Council of War on an operative order meant merely that the order did not have any hidden counter-revolutionary significance. As for the operative meaning of the order, that was entirely the responsibility of the commander."<sup>112</sup>

It is difficult to imagine anyone less suited for such a passive guardianship role than Stalin. He considered the commissar's role to be much more active. An instruction to military commissars attributed to Stalin, and dated 24 November 1919, reads:

. . . The Commissar cannot be only an extension of the commander, simply a custodian of the printing presses or a passive spectator to the work of military specialists. He should involve himself in everything without exception in regimental affairs, take part in the formulation of all orders by the regimental commander. . . .<sup>113</sup>

Tsaritsyn, and the chapters that follow, amply demonstrate the consequences of such an attitude. However deplorable those consequences for Bolshevik centralized command, Stalin cannot really be blamed for taking that attitude. After years of exile and political impotence, few revolutionaries could have resisted the temptation to exert the authority so long denied them, particularly over such obvious tsarist symbols as the army officers. Stalin was not alone among commissars who interfered in

<sup>111</sup>L. D. Trotsky, Kak vooruzalas revoliutsiia (Moscow, 1923-25, 3 Vols.), Vol. I, p. 184, issued sometime in the fall of 1918.

<sup>112</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 296.

<sup>113</sup>Pravda, 11 April 1938.

operational activities: "The magic and the mystique of command completely ensnared him, to the degree that he ultimately played the role of an additional, if at times somewhat irresponsible, military adviser."<sup>114</sup>

Less understandable or justifiable was Stalin's unwavering suspicion of those who displeased him for any of a host of reasons. Behind every refusal of his requests, the arrival of each new Trotsky-appointed specialist, and every retreat, lost town, or unmet deadline, Stalin perceived only the most sinister motives. He seemed incapable of appreciating the difficulties of either the High Command or his own subordinates. As one of Stalin's biographers aptly describes it:

That muddle and chaos tend to dominate all military business . . . [especially in] a Civil War in a demoralized and desperate semi-primitive country -- he seems not to suspect. Everything must be the fault of someone or other: someone punishable.<sup>115</sup>

Hence, the Cheka became busy wherever Stalin was in charge in the Civil War.

With the strong arm of the Cheka, the political and administrative authority of his instructions, and his membership in the Central Committee, Stalin was capable of cutting almost any gordian knot that bound the countless party workers in their attempts to organize defences or food shipments. "A merciless foe of laxity, indiscipline, and haphazard methods, Comrade Stalin never hesitated, when the interests of the revolution so demanded, to take . . . extreme measures for making a clean sweep of things," Voroshilov wrote.<sup>116</sup> Stalin's assertive and sometimes brutal

<sup>114</sup>Erickson, p. 52. The reference is to S. I. Gusev, an East Front commissar, but could apply equally well to Stalin.

<sup>115</sup>Hingley, p. 118.

<sup>116</sup>Voroshilov, p. 45.



methods were probably excessive, but they were also necessary in some degree, to overcome the inertia of endless squabbling local committees who had no particular loyalty to Moscow and, until Stalin arrived, no great respect for its authority.

Stalin's apparent success in organizing defences and getting food shipments dispatched has led some of Stalin's biographers<sup>117</sup> to attribute to him a talent for organization. A closer examination, however, suggests that his energy and initiative was the key to his local successes, and that he left no lasting organization behind him. Stalin's accomplishments at Isaritsyn are due entirely to his personal supervision and initiative. His own dispatches make clear that it was his personal agents, not newly-organized local ones, who located trains and food supplies, and his direct orders that got them moving. When he did not get co-operation, Stalin did not re-appoint or re-organize the uncooperative committees; he requested, and received, more authority for himself. Even the military organization was composed of his friends, and the presumably more capable ex-tsarist "specialists" were rigorously excluded which served to consolidate further his personal control over matters.

This does not mean Stalin was necessarily power-hungry, but simply that he found it easier and more efficient in the short run to have everything done by himself or a few trusted agents. His suspicious nature prevented him from relying on an agency not under his direct control, so he did not establish any. And when he left, Tsaritsyn was no better organized than when he arrived, which may have contributed to its later fall to the Whites.

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<sup>117</sup>Deutscher, p. 217, calls him a "great administrator".

Just as he did not trust subordinate organizations, Stalin likewise did not trust his nominal superiors: Sytin, Vatsetis and Trotsky. Having taken great care to have all civil and military authority in the south assigned to him, and with the personal support of Lenin, Stalin felt he had succeeded in placing himself outside the normal chain of command.

Ever one to make a virtue of even Stalin's least laudable performances, Voroshilov wrote of his leader at Tsaritsyn: "When the revolutionary decision required it, Comrade Stalin was ready to defy any regulation, to disregard all formal subordination. Comrade Stalin was always an advocate of the strictest military discipline and centralization, on the absolute condition, however, of intelligent and consistent direction on the part of the higher military bodies . . . ." <sup>118</sup>

The role of Lenin in all this was crucial. He alone could have curbed Stalin's independent outlook, and did not do so apparently because he was anxious not to erode the effectiveness of a valued comrade by officially censuring his actions. As has been described, Lenin made every effort to reconcile the differences between Trotsky and Stalin while avoiding giving a clear-cut opinion on who was right. By allowing Stalin to return to Tsaritsyn after his recall, and by appointing him to the RVSr, Lenin practically vindicated Stalin's insubordination, a fact which the wily Georgian certainly recognized. <sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Voroshilov, p. 45.

<sup>119</sup> Just how valued Stalin was in Lenin's eyes is discussed by Herbert J. Ellison in "Stalin and his Biographers: The Lenin-Stalin Relationship," *Reconsiderations of the Russian Revolution*, R. C. Elwood (ed.), (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 256-67, in which the suggestion is made that to Lenin, Stalin was at least as valuable as Trotsky and may even have been intended to succeed Lenin. Lenin's consistent support of Stalin in the Civil War tends to support at least the first suggestion. See also Hingley, p. 109 and Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 18.

Virtually all of the above characteristics demonstrated by Stalin at Tsaritsyn -- organization centred on himself, suspicions and accusations, demands for more men and supplies as a solution to military problems, independence amounting to outright insubordination, all condoned by Lenin -- will be seen again and again during the remainder of Stalin's Civil War activities, to which this paper now turns.

## CHAPTER TWO: FROM THE UKRAINE TO THE SOUTH FRONT

Stalin remained active in military matters after leaving Tsaritsyn, participating in two campaigns: at Petrograd, and on the South Front against Denikin. His contribution to the success of these campaigns was counterbalanced by his continued display of the disruptive traits he had exhibited at Tsaritsyn. Stalin also took part in Central Committee debates on strategic and military policy questions. At the Eighth Party Congress, Stalin supported Trotsky's policy of establishing a centralized, professional Red Army. Having gathered about him a second group of friends while investigating the fall of Perm, Stalin helped engineer the appointment of one of them, S.S. Kamenev, as Red Army Commander-in-Chief, displacing Trotsky's appointee, and seriously embarrassing Trotsky in the process. Stalin's speeches at the Eighth Congress, and his contributions to the Perm Report, permit an exploration of the seeming contradiction between his advocacy of central control of the army, and his own disobedience at the front.

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With the collapse of the Central Powers in early November 1918, a political and military vacuum was created in the Ukraine. On 12 November, a new Ukrainian RVS was appointed, with Stalin as one of its members. He arrived in Kursk on 19 November. There is a gap in the sources concerning Stalin's involvement in the Ukraine,<sup>1</sup> and it is unclear just what his assignment was. He remained there only a few days

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<sup>1</sup>His Sochineniia does not mention it at all, not even in the chronicle.

before returning to Moscow. The visit may simply have been to assist in the initial organization of the front, and perhaps to give advice in his capacity as Commissar for Nationalities.

Stalin was there long enough, however, to become involved in a dispute with Commander-in-Chief Vatsetis. The dispute with Vatsetis concerned the "Reserve Army" which had been directed by Glavkom to operate as a separate front, the South-East Front, against Krasnov and Denikin. Stalin supported a proposal by V. Antonov-Ovseenko, the chairman of Ukrainian RVS, that this army be subordinated to the Ukrainian Front, to protect its left flank from the threat of Krasnov's cossacks, during a march on Kharkov and Kiev.<sup>2</sup>

Vatsetis refused, considering, as did Lenin and Trotsky, that the Ukraine was very much a side-show compared to the threat of Denikin.<sup>3</sup> After Stalin returned to Moscow, Antonov protested to Lenin over Vatsetis' lack of support of the Ukrainian offensive. Stalin was quick to second this protest, though he appreciated the greater threat of Denikin's advance. He assured Antonov on 22 November:

We completely understand your uneasiness, and I assure you that I, and Lenin, too, will do all that is possible. All your telegrams have been sent to Vatsetis with the demand that he give them his attention swiftly.... Copies of his orders will be sent ... for our inspection, and if we detect deceit, we will forgive nothing. It is impossible to send a great force to your front for understandable reasons....<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>A.E. Adams, Bolsheviks in the Ukraine: The Second Campaign (New Haven, 1963), pp. 32-33.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>V.A. Antonov-Ovseenko, Zapiski o Grazhdanskoi Voine (Moscow, 1924-33, 4 Vols.), Vol. II, p. 158, quoted in Adams, pp. 48-49.

The situation took on an added dimension in December when Voroshilov and most of the rest of the Tsaritsyn RVS, having remained uncooperative with Sytin and Vatsetis, were transferred to the Ukraine. Demands for increased support from the centre, and an end to interference in the Ukrainian Front brought an equally strong response from Trotsky. The situation in the Ukraine, he told Sverdlov on 10 January 1919, was:

a state of collapse, struggle between cliques, absence of responsible and authoritative leaders . . . . I categorically state that the Tsaritsyn way of conducting matters, which resulted in the total collapse of the Tsaritsyn Army cannot be permitted in the Ukraine . . . . The line of conduct of Stalin [and] Voroshilov, spells ruin for the entire cause.<sup>5</sup>

Carrying his complaints to Lenin the next day, Trotsky added:

I consider the protection given by Stalin to the Tsaritsyn trend the most dangerous sort of ulcer, worse than any act of perfidy or treachery on the part of the military specialists . . . they cling tightly to one another and make a fetish of ignorance. Voroshilov plus the Ukrainian partisan movement, plus the backwardness of the population, plus demagoguery -- this in any event we cannot consent to . . . . I ask you once again to read carefully [the] report on the Tsaritsyn Army and on how Voroshilov demoralised it with Stalin's assistance.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these vehement arguments, an increasing segment of party field workers were coming to feel, as the Tsaritsyn group did, that Trotsky's Red Army was being organized contrary to revolutionary principles, with its emphasis on discipline, central control, and employment of tsarist officers. This "military opposition", as it came to be known, was sufficiently strong that the matter was placed on the agenda of the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919.

<sup>5</sup>Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, pp. 246-48.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 248-50.

Meanwhile, however, Stalin was sent on assignment to yet another trouble spot.

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The sudden and unexpected capture of Perm in December 1918, established the White forces of Kolchak firmly on the European side of the Urals. Shocked by this development, the Central Committee decided to send an investigative commission to determine the reasons for the defeat. Reports of drunkenness and the poor state of the army in that area suggested that a shake-up was needed, and so Lenin proposed sending Stalin. Asked his opinion, Trotsky concurred, suggesting that Stalin go with "full authority from the Party and the [RVSR] for the purpose of restoring order, purging the commissar personnel and severely punishing offenders . . . ." <sup>7</sup> (Despite this, Trotsky would later belittle Stalin's assignment as "purely for the purposes of inspection." <sup>8</sup>)

As if to emphasize the punitive nature of the investigation, the head of the Cheka, F.E. Dzerzhinsky, was named as the second member of the commission. Their instructions were to make a "detailed investigation" of the fall of Perm and "to take all necessary measures for a rapid restoration both of the Party and Soviet organizations . . . ." <sup>9</sup> Specifically, they were authorized to "demand explanations" from all authorities, remove persons responsible for the fall of Perm from their

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-30.

<sup>8</sup> Trotsky, Falsification, p. 215.

<sup>9</sup> P.G. Sofinov, "Permskaia katastrofa i likvidatsiia posledstvi", Istoricheskii zapiski, Vol. XXX, No. 2, 1940, p. 51, quoting a Central Committee decision of 1 January 1919.

posts, and try the culprits before a military tribunal.<sup>10</sup>

The pair arrived at Viatka, where the staff and remnants of the Perm armies had gathered. All communications from there were signed by both Stalin and Dzerzhinsky, but it is sometimes possible to distinguish the author by style and content.

It is a typical Stalin message which was sent to Lenin on 5 January 1919, describing the miserable conditions of the army at Viatka:

Only about 11,000 tired and battered soldiers remain, who can scarcely contain the enemies' offensive. The Commander-in-Chief sent units which are unreliable, even hostile, and will need careful sifting. To save what remains of the 3rd Army and prevent a swift enemy advance toward Viatka (which is, according to front and 3rd Army commands, a very real danger) it is extremely necessary immediately to transfer at least three completely reliable regiments from Russia . . . .<sup>11</sup>

They followed their instructions to the letter, after first stabilizing the front by sending forward units considered reliable, and thus halting the previously almost unopposed enemy advance down the rail line to Viatka. The local military staff and Cheka were purged and the East Front RVS re-organized. Revolutionary committees were established in Viatka and surrounding county seats with organizations extending into every village.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 52, decision of 3 January 1919.

<sup>11</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 186-89. Emphasis in original. A reproduction of the original letter is also in Stalin's handwriting.

<sup>12</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 294, quoting a message dated 15 January 1919 addressed to the RVS.



The two commissars seem to have worked well together. At least, no hint of discord can be detected in their messages, usually co-signed, from Viatka. This is somewhat surprising. Dzerzhinsky was better educated than Stalin, less temperamental, and more idealistic.<sup>13</sup> Although they were alike in their determination to stamp out inefficiency and counter-revolution in Viatka, Dzerzhinsky was inclined to be selective about it. Historians have tended to assume that Stalin's personality overwhelmed Dzerzhinsky,<sup>14</sup> but in fact it was Dzerzhinsky that proved a moderating influence on Stalin. The purge they carried out in Viatka was not particularly bloody and was even tempered with some common sense. Their final report states at one point:

In correcting shortcomings in work at the centre and locally the Soviet power usually resorts to disciplining and punishing offending officials. While recognizing that this method is absolutely necessary and fully expedient, the Commission, however, considers it insufficient. Shortcomings in work are due not only to the laxity, negligence and irresponsibility of some of the officials, but also to the inexperience of others. The Commission has found in the localities quite a number of blunders in their work owing to insufficient experience.<sup>15</sup>

They recommend: "a special apparatus to accumulate the experience gained in the construction of the socialist state and to pass it on to the already existing young officials who are anxious to help."<sup>16</sup> The contrast

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<sup>13</sup>Włodmierz Rozenbaum in The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History (Gulf Breeze, Florida, 1979) Vol. X, pp. 85-87.

<sup>14</sup>Ulam, p. 179, makes the unlikely claim that Stalin exerted an "intellectual ascendancy" over Dzerzhinsky.

<sup>15</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 224.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

with Stalin's reaction to blunders at Tsaritsyn is obvious. It is significant that even Dzerzhinsky, with his sanguine reputation as head of Cheka, is a moderate compared to Stalin.

The final report, submitted 31 January 1919, runs to 28 pages in Stalin's Sochineniia, and is a remarkable piece of work by any standard. It systematically recounts the circumstances leading up to the fall of Perm, identifying deficiencies in deployment, morale, supply, evacuation planning, and making practical recommendations. Thorough and balanced, it severely criticizes organizations and individuals, but makes clear that the poor performance is often the result of incompetence and disorganization. There are no accusations of outright treason. Where the "actions taken" are listed, there is no attempt to claim personal responsibility, and in fact stress is laid on efforts to form strong local bodies for supply and political education. Moreover, the systematic layout of the report, appropriate use of quotations and other literary devices and the long, complex sentences suggest a level of education and style of writing utterly in contrast with Stalin's abrupt, emphatic and meandering reports.

In short, both the content and style of the report make clear that it was written by Dzerzhinsky -- or possibly some unknown assistant -- but certainly not Stalin.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>R.H. McNeal's definitive bibliography Stalin's Works (Stanford, 1967) p. 84, lists it without comment, except to note that it was signed by both Stalin and Dzerzhinsky. Most other authors treat it as Stalin's work. See especially Seaton, p. 42-45 and Hingley, p. 122.

Even though the final draft was not composed by Stalin, many of the critical points made in the report could have come from him, for it confirmed or reflected his Tsaritsyn experiences and prejudices. Although Trotsky is not named, the RVSR which he headed is repeatedly attacked in the Perm report for failing to send reinforcements despite repeated requests or sending "small contingents of worthless troops."<sup>18</sup> Lack of co-ordination between the front-line units was blamed on "the isolation of the RVSR from the front and the ill-considered instructions of the Commander-in-Chief." This accusation is supported in the report by solid documentation.<sup>19</sup>

The solution proposed in the report helps resolve the apparent contradiction between Stalin's advocacy of central control and his own insubordination. It suggests that the RVSR be "reformed into a narrow group, closely connected with the fronts."<sup>20</sup> The front RVS's would therefore be in a position, so Stalin presumably supposed, to request and receive promptly supplies and reinforcements from their own representative in the RVSR who would also see to it that Glavkom directives and appointments to the front were to the satisfaction of the front RVS. How the front representatives in the RVSR were to sort out priorities is not explained.

Stalin's viewpoint at Tsaritsyn, confirmed by the Perm report, is now somewhat clearer. He justified his non-cooperation with Glavkom on

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<sup>18</sup>Stalin, Soch., p. 204.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 211. It would, of course, have been interesting to read Glavkom's response to all this, but none has been published.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

the grounds that the High Command, being remote from the front, did not understand the situation and was therefore not qualified to issue orders to the front. (The fallacy inherent in the argument is, of course, that Glavkom had the benefit of reports from all fronts, and thus had the necessary task of allocating resources to the most vital or most threatened front. It also, theoretically, had the most senior and experienced military officers and revolutionary policy-makers, who had every right to overrule front commanders.)

Subsequent events indicate that Stalin cultivated another group of supporters during the Perm investigation. This "Viatka group" included the East Front commissars, S.I. Gusev and I.T. Smilga, and the Front Commander, S.S. Kamenev.<sup>21</sup> None of them was criticized or dismissed for their parts in the Perm debacle, and in fact their opinions were much-quoted in the final report. This remarkable occurrence can only be attributed to the conviction of Stalin and Dzerzhinsky that the RVSR was primarily responsible. In any case, not only were the three left at their posts, they also were soon to join with Stalin in having Vatsetis dismissed and Kamenev appointed Commander-in-Chief in his place. Curiously, Kamenev was an ex-tsarist Colonel, and therefore very much a "specialist". Evidently Stalin's mistrust of them was selective. While Stalin would later criticize Kamenev, who as Commander-in-Chief could not always give Stalin the preferred treatment the Georgian demanded, Kamenev would remain

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<sup>21</sup>Not to be confused with L.B. Kamenev, a long-time Bolshevik, close associate of Lenin, and Deputy Chairman of Sovnarkom.

in Stalin's good graces, and prominent in the Soviet military, until his death in 1936, apparently of natural causes.

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At the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919, the military opposition led by S. Minin and Voroshilov, among others, argued that the disciplined, non-volunteer, regular army was a betrayal of revolutionary principles and that what was needed was a decentralized, largely partisan "people's" army, led by powerful commissars and administered locally. Trotsky (who did not attend, being called away by military duties) was attacked for his patronage of specialists and corresponding harsh treatment of communists, for his overbearing manner, and for his habit of sowing confusion by sending messages which ignored the chain of command.<sup>22</sup> Trotsky's viewpoint was expressed in a series of theses presented and defended for him by Lenin and Zinoviev.

Stalin was, of course, sympathetic with the complaints of the opposition, but nonetheless sided with Lenin and Trotsky against the military opposition in his speeches and voting. Trotsky saw in this a deliberate duplicity, and claimed that Stalin supported Lenin so as not to offend his leader, while behind the scenes he was encouraging his Tsaritsyn group in their criticism.<sup>23</sup>

The matter was not so clear-cut as this. It is conceivable that Stalin was in fact avoiding a break with his political master on the issue,

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<sup>22</sup>KPSS v Rezoliutsiiakh i Resheniiakh (Moscow, 1970), Vol. II, quoted in Seaton, p. 46.

<sup>23</sup>Trotsky, Falsification, p. 41.

yet his support for the opposition was qualified:

I did not attack the military opposition with as much hostility as comrade Trotsky may have wished, because I considered that among the military oppositionists were many excellent workers that we couldn't manage without at the front, but that I undoubtedly spoke and struggled against military oppositionists is a fact . . . . The debate of the Eighth Party Congress concerned the necessity for an end to voluntariness and partisanism, on the necessity of building a real regular workers and peasants army with firm discipline, on the necessity of incorporating military specialists in this matter.<sup>24</sup>

Nowhere is there a suggestion that Stalin defended Trotsky against his critics. What he did support was a unified disciplined army, as his speech at the Eighth Congress reflects:

All the questions discussed here boil down to one: whether there will be or not be in Russia a strictly disciplined army . . . . Eight months ago we had a new army, after the disintegration of the old tsarist one -- a volunteer, badly organized army, with collective command and control, subordinate to none. This was a period marked by successful offensives of the Entente . . . . The facts demonstrate that we . . . cannot manage to defend our republic if we do not establish a different army, a regular army, imbued with strong discipline, . . . ready and able at the first order to rise to their feet and approach the enemy.<sup>25</sup>

What Stalin defended was a disciplined and centralized army. As has already been noted, Stalin favoured this even at Tsaritsyn, and it was later reflected in the Perm report. That he also considered his own high rank in the party made him a special case, and that he need not subordinate himself to higher authorities with whom he disagreed, was not, in Stalin's view, a contradiction.

<sup>24</sup>J.V. Stalin, Ob oppozitsii - stati i rechi 1921-27 gg. (Moscow, 1928), p. 668.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 669.

The congress eventually supported Trotsky's theses, though not without considerable wrangling. Stalin was appointed to a conciliation commission formed to reconcile the opposing factions,<sup>26</sup> probably because his close personal ties to the military opposition were recognized.

Stalin's status was further enhanced in the week following the Eighth Congress. On 25 March, he became a member of the newly-created Politburo and also a member of the Orgburo, whose task it was to allocate administrative tasks and personnel. Soon after, Stalin, while remaining Commissar of Nationalities, was named Commissar of State Control, running a body that was intended to cut red tape. In practice, this post would after the war be extremely useful in building a power base, in that it gave him authority to pry into and interfere with other commissariats. For the present, however, this opportunity could not be exploited. The Civil War had yet to be won, and in May 1919 Stalin was again assigned to a front, this time to the north, to Petrograd.

A combined Russian-Estonian force led by Generals Yudenich and Rodzianko launched an offensive toward Petrograd on 13 May and had captured Pskov and Gatchina before losing momentum in late May. Western historians have emphasized the weak nature of this thrust,<sup>27</sup> but it certainly seemed a real enough threat to the Bolsheviks. A

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<sup>26</sup> L. Schapiro, The Origins of the Communist Autocracy (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 245-46.

<sup>27</sup> Hingley, p. 124, calls it "trivial"; see also Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 422, note 1. This thrust is not to be confused with a more serious one in October of the same year during which Trotsky supervised the defence.

Central Committee declaration in Pravda on 22 May declared Petrograd to be in danger, and one of the most important fronts in the Republic.<sup>28</sup>

For once, Stalin did not immediately declare the situation an urgent one. "There is no cause for alarm . . . the front has stabilized . . ." he assured Lenin on 25 May,<sup>29</sup> but reinforcements were inadequate. "It is clear to me that neither the Commander-in-Chief nor his chief-of-staff know anything about the units which are being sent to Petrograd."<sup>30</sup> He also criticized at length a Glavkom proposal that the Baltic Fleet be reduced to immobile gun platforms as a result of a lack of coal and heavy shells. Stalin countered that there was indeed sufficient shells and coal, and added sensibly that "there is a direct connection between the movement of a ship and the action of its guns."<sup>31</sup> This view would be vindicated a month later when the guns of the Baltic Fleet were employed to subdue rebellious coastal forts, and must have represented for Stalin still another case of the local command being better informed than the centre.

Stalin's interference with the land armies around Petrograd was less useful. Although he had not been made a member of the front RVS, this did not deter him from virtually "expropriating" the 7th Army, formally under the command of the West Front headquarters at Smolensk.

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<sup>28</sup> Pravda, 22 May 1919.

<sup>29</sup> Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 258.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 259-60.



All Stalin's Petrograd dispatches to Lenin concern this army alone, and later Stalinist histories ignore the fact that the rest of the West Front was also very active in defence of Petrograd,<sup>32</sup> concentrating instead on Stalin's role as the "organizer of the defence."<sup>33</sup>

By the beginning of June, the West Front staff found it could no longer rely on the 7th Army. A.I. Okulov, the West Front commissar, protested to Moscow that much confusion was being caused by the "isolation" of the 7th Army, and that it had set up a parallel provisioning organization which had monopolized supplies and reinforcements which should have been distributed over the entire front. He ended by suggesting "either complete subordination of 7th Army to front command, or the separation of it to operate under its own staff."<sup>34</sup>

Stalin was not mentioned by name, and Okulov may not have known that the Georgian was the source of the 7th Army's isolation. Lenin regarded it as a case of Stalin neglecting the rest of the front. He wired Stalin:

. . . I think that you should become the RVS of the whole front. It is necessary to take care of the other West Front armies, not only the 7th. Let me know what you think. This conflict with Okulov must not be allowed to continue. Give some thought to the matter, for simply to recall him is impossible . . . .<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Seaton, pp. 50-51 and DKFKA, Vol. II, pp. 101-03.

<sup>33</sup> DGOP, Title page to Chapter I, reproduced as a frontspiece to this paper.

<sup>34</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, pp. 334-35.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., dated 3 June 1919.

Stalin replied by lashing out at the West Front commander, D.N. Nadezhny, as "not a commander or capable of commanding and he will wreck the West Front in the end."<sup>36</sup> As for Okulov, "Party workers such as Okulov who urge the military specialists on against our commissars . . . are harmful, as they demoralize the vital core of our army."<sup>37</sup> He demanded the recall of Okulov for "intrigue and disrupting the work."<sup>38</sup> Once again humouring his protege, Lenin did what the day before he had considered impossible. Okulov was removed "in recognition of the absolutely indispensable necessity to maintain the maximum unity of the whole front."<sup>39</sup>

That Lenin did not immediately carry out his evident intention to have Stalin take over the West Front RVS may have been a result of opposition from Trotsky. When Stalin did take that post, in early July, it was during a period when Trotsky's political fortunes were in temporary decline.

Meanwhile, Stalin had set the Cheka to work in Petrograd, encouraged by a cable from Lenin on 27 May 1919:

The circumstances of the White guard advance on Petrograd, as a whole force the assumption that organized treason exists behind the lines and even at the front. This explains the attack with comparatively small forces, the rapid advance and the blowing up of bridges on main lines leading to Petrograd. It seems that the enemy

<sup>36</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 520, dated 4 June 1919.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 522, dated 4 June 1919.

<sup>39</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, p. 338.

is confident that we have no organized armed forces at all to repel him, and that he can depend on help from the countryside (the fire in the Nova-Scholinki magazines, the destruction of bridges, today's news of the Oredzh revolt). Please pay greater attention to the situation and take extraordinary measures to expose the plots.<sup>40</sup>

In the following days, homes of the Petrograd bourgeoisie were searched, turning up 4,000 rifles and several hundred bombs. Foreign diplomats were arrested and a search of the embassies turned up machine guns, and even a field piece (at the Rumanian legation).<sup>41</sup> Also found at the embassies were what to Stalin and the Cheka at least were incriminating documents. Stalin informed Lenin on 4 June:

I am sending you a document taken from the Swiss. It is evident from the document that not only is the General Staff working for the Whites . . . but so also is field headquarters of the Military Revolutionary Council of the Republic . . . . The whole question now is that the C.C. should summon up the courage to draw the appropriate conclusions. Has the C.C. sufficient force of character and resoluteness?<sup>42</sup>

Trotsky has written<sup>43</sup> that this telegram was meant to implicate himself in the alleged conspiracies, a not unreasonable suggestion, since the Central Committee would not need to "summon up the courage" to arrest an ordinary commander. Evidently, the Swiss document had less serious implications when read in Moscow, for nothing more was heard of the matter, unless Lenin's comment to Stalin on 18 June that "I am glad

<sup>40</sup> IIGV, Vol. II, p. 324.

<sup>41</sup> Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 268.

<sup>42</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 520.

<sup>43</sup> Trotsky, Stalin, p. 335.

your information has proved untrue"<sup>44</sup> referred to Stalin's telegram of two weeks before.

Soon after the embassy raids, the Petrograd defenders were distracted by the close approach of Yudenich's troops. The situation, which Stalin had considered stabilized only three weeks before, suddenly became urgent. Stalin wired Lenin excitedly on 9 June that ". . . matters have worsened severely. Peterhof is mortally threatened and with its fall, the fate of Petrograd hangs by a hair. To save Petrograd, you must without the least delay, not losing a minute, send three of the most reliable regiments . . . ." <sup>45</sup> One wonders if all of this sudden urgency was due to an unanticipated enemy move, or had Stalin been so busy uncovering conspiracies that the front line had been neglected.

Lenin and the Central Committee, and evidently even Trotsky, immediately ordered that the requested reinforcements be provided. Petrograd was designated a priority front,<sup>46</sup> and other fronts were ordered to provide troops in response to the "almost catastrophic" situation at Petrograd.<sup>47</sup> The "catastrophic" situation took a sinister turn when on 13 June the coastal fortresses of Krasnaia Gorka and Seraia Loshad rebelled in favour of the White invaders, in apparent confirmation of Lenin and Stalin's suspicions that the White forces were

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<sup>44</sup>Leninskii Sbornik, Vol. XXXIV (Moscow, 1942), p. 174.

<sup>45</sup>IIGV, Vol. II, pp. 328-29.

<sup>46</sup>Lenin, PSS, Vol. L, p. 346.

<sup>47</sup>DGOP, p. 28, dated 11 June 1919.

counting on treachery to augment their weak force.

From a military point of view, the rebellion was less serious than Stalinist accounts suggest. The guns of the forts were meant for coastal defence and could not be turned inland, although they could and did fire at Kronstadt.<sup>48</sup> The garrisons were not numerous enough to pose more than a temporary threat and depended on Estonian forces to support the landward defences of the forts. Owing to a squabble between the Estonian and White Russian forces, this support never materialized.<sup>49</sup>

Stalin, meanwhile, ordered two vessels of the Baltic Fleet to sea, and scraped together a "coastal army group", which attacked the forts from the landward side on 15 June while the warships bombarded from the sea.<sup>50</sup> The operation was "personally directed by J.V. Stalin from the battle lines", according to his Sochineniia.<sup>51</sup> The two forts fell within hours of each other on 16 June.

Flaunting his disdain for "specialists", Stalin informed Lenin, with heavy sarcasm, that:

Naval experts assert that the capture of Krasnaia Gorka from the sea runs counter to naval science. I can only deplore such so-called science. The swift capture of Gorka was due to the grossest interference in the

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<sup>48</sup>R. Lockett, The White Generals: An Account of the White Movement in the Russian Civil War (New York, 1971), pp. 301-03.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>50</sup>Exactly two months later, British aircraft and torpedo boats sent both ships to the bottom in a night raid on Kronstadt harbour to prevent their further interference in White operations. Lockett, p. 305-06.

<sup>51</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 445, note 74.

operations by me and civilians generally, even to the point of countermanding orders on land and sea and imposing our own. I consider it my duty to declare that I shall continue to act in this way in future, despite all my reverence for science.<sup>52</sup>

In the aftermath of the rebellions, the Kronstadt garrison was investigated and the inevitable conspiracies uncovered. Sixty-seven Kronstadt officers were shot.<sup>53</sup> By now, Stalin had blown up Lenin's suggestion of 29 May concerning the likelihood of rear-area treachery, into an elaborate and complex plot, which he detailed in a Pravda interview:

Judging by all the evidence, the enemy reckoned . . . not so much on his own forces as on the forces of his supporters, the Whiteguards in the rear of our forces, in Petrograd and at the fronts. These were, firstly, the so-called embassies of bourgeois states which continued to exist in Petrograd . . . , which financed the Whiteguards and engaged in espionage on behalf of Yudenich and the British, French, Finnish and Estonian bourgeoisie. These gentry scattered money right and left, buying everyone in the rear of our army who was open to be bought. Next, the venal elements among the Russian officers, who . . . are ready to desert the enemies of workers' and peasants' Russia. Lastly, the have-beens, the bourgeoisie and landlords who had suffered at the hands of the Petrograd proletariat and who, as it later appeared, had accumulated weapons and were waiting for a suitable moment to stab our forces in the back. These were the forces upon which the enemy reckoned when he marched on Petrograd. To capture Krasnaia Gorka, the key to Kronstadt, and thus put the fortified area out of action, raise revolt in the forts and shell Petrograd, and then, combining a general offensive at the front with a revolt within Petrograd at the moment of general confusion, surround and capture the centre of the proletarian revolution -- such were the enemy's calculations.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 261.

<sup>53</sup>Hingley, p. 124.

<sup>54</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 267-68.

No doubt there were numerous potential and actual traitors, conspirators and foreign agitators anxious to overthrow the Bolsheviks, but the impossible level of co-ordination and secrecy required for such a mammoth, unified conspiracy as Stalin outlines is simply not credible, and tells us more about Stalin's frame of mind than it does about the depth of internal disaffection in Petrograd.

The rebellion of the coastal forts was the high water mark for Yudenich's spring offensive, and his forces retreated, pursued by the Red Army. So clearly weak were the Whites that Stalin advised Lenin:

Compared with Kolchak, General Rodzianko is a mere gnat, because he has neither food in his rear, nor space for retreat, nor sufficient manpower . . . .  
Consequently, under no circumstances should forces be withdrawn from the East Front for the Petrograd Front in such numbers as might compel us to halt our offensive on the East Front.<sup>55</sup>

This communication is a remarkable reversal of Stalin's usual policy of perpetual demands for reinforcements, and insistence on the supremacy of his own front. It was based not on a realistic assessment of the military situation at Petrograd, but on Stalin's urgent personal and political interest in the success of the East Front. This was the result of an intense dispute in which Stalin had participated during his stay at Petrograd, and which must now be examined.

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The Red Army in the winter and spring of 1919 had its attentions divided between two fronts. In the east, Kolchak's armies had advanced beyond the Urals, and from the south, Denikin's armies, having wintered

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 262-64. Emphasis in original.

in the eastern Ukraine, were massing for an offensive northwards toward Moscow. East Front commander S.S. Kamenev knew that Kolchak was over-extended, and advocated a strong counter-offensive. Trotsky and Commander-in-Chief Vatsetis were afraid to allow a significant portion of their forces to march beyond the Urals, where they could not be quickly summoned should Denikin's army threaten.

On 5 May 1919, in support of Vatsetis, Trotsky had Kamenev dismissed. The latter went to Moscow in person, his protests backed by his commissars, Smilga, Lashevich and Gusev. Lenin had him reinstated. A month later, with Kolchak in retreat, Kamenev again proposed a hot pursuit across the Urals. Denikin, meanwhile, had launched an offensive that had captured Tsaritsyn and Kharkov and was advancing northwards. Vatsetis, considering Denikin a more important threat, vetoed Kamenev's plan. Again Lenin was appealed to, and the matter was laid before the Central Committee in a meeting on 15 June.

Stalin did not attend this meeting, but Smilga and Gusev had consulted him in Petrograd the day before.<sup>56</sup> The meeting went against Vatsetis, and Kamenev's proposal for a swift and final offensive against Kolchak was adopted. The offensive commenced, with, as Trotsky himself admitted, "admirable results."<sup>57</sup> It did so despite Vatsetis who, in violation of the Central Committee decision, continued to pour reinforcements into the south, where they unfortunately seemed unable to halt Denikin.

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<sup>56</sup>Seaton, p. 54.

<sup>57</sup>Trotsky, Falsification, p. 42.



Matters in Petrograd having concluded successfully by the beginning of July, Stalin was able to attend the 3 July Central Committee meeting at which Trotsky found himself ~~the~~ the only defender of Vatsetis's performance. He could not prevent his protege's dismissal. S.S. Kamenev became the new Commander-in-Chief.

To Trotsky, this was an intolerable personal defeat. He petulantly submitted his resignation. Both annoyed and anxious to placate the Commissar of Defence, the Central Committee refused to accept the resignation, instructed him "not to raise this question again and to continue to carry out his duties," and assigned him responsibility for the South Front, "the most difficult, the most dangerous, and the most important at the present moment."<sup>58</sup> Stalin's signature was among those appended to the declaration.

Stalin's involvement in this dispute is not well-documented, but given his good relations with Kamenev, Gusev and the rest of the Viatka group, and his bad relations with Vatsetis, it is inconceivable that he would pass up such an opportunity. It was clearly in support of Kamenev's continued success and the further embarrassment of Vatsetis and Trotsky, that Stalin so magnanimously insisted in his 10 June telegram that the East Front have priority over Petrograd.

Trotsky had no doubts about his involvement:

Stalin pounced upon the conflict between the East Front and the Commander-in-Chief. He treated Vatsetis, who had officially condemned his intervention in strategic matters, with hostility . . . Smilga, Lashevich and Gusev proposed, obviously with the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 220-21.

co-operation of Stalin, to appoint Kamenev Commander-in-Chief. The success on the East Front bribed Lenin and broke down my resistance.<sup>59</sup>

With Kolchak in retreat, it was clear that some action had to be taken against Denikin, pressing up from the south. The best route for a counter-offensive was the subject of yet another dispute. Two plans were proposed. One, advanced by Commander-in-Chief Kamenev, and probably supported by Stalin, proposed an attack from the north-east, where troops were already available from the East Front, in the direction of the Don, thus striking at Denikin's cossack base from which much of his support came. Kamenev, being held in high regard due to his successes in the east, had his way, and the offensive was launched in early August. It quickly bogged down, due partly to difficult terrain but more importantly because the Don Cossacks, whose support for Denikin had been lukewarm up to that time, became wholehearted when their home territory was under attack. Worse, with much of the Red Army tied down to the south-east, Denikin's forces had advanced to within striking distance of Moscow. Kamenev reconsidered his earlier plans, and advised the Central Committee in late September that forces should be assembled south of Moscow for that city's defence, and that separating the cossacks from Denikin might be better accomplished by placating them, instead of arousing them by an offensive.<sup>60</sup> The Central Committee responded by giving him "full authority to act . . . as he thought fit." Clearly, the Central Committee had a high regard for Kamenev's judgement, and there

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<sup>59</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 313.

<sup>60</sup>IIGV, Vol. II, p. 538.

is no suggestion that anyone but he is making major strategic decisions. The new deployment eventually enabled the Red Army to turn back Denikin's forces and advance southward through the Don Basin, aided by a sympathetic industrial population in that region.

Both Stalin and Trotsky subsequently claimed that they had recognized from the first the flaws of the original plan and the advantages of the subsequent one.<sup>61</sup> There is no firm evidence in support of either claimant.<sup>62</sup> Stalin's claim<sup>63</sup> to authorship of the plan is based mainly on a lengthy letter to Lenin dated in his Sochineniia<sup>64</sup> 15 October 1919, shortly after his assignment to the South Front against Denikin. In it, he criticizes Kamenev for not abandoning the old plan, and clearly lays out why an advance on the north-south axis through the Donbas would be successful:

About two months ago General Headquarters did not object in principle to the main blow being delivered from west to east, through the Donets Basin . . . . But now the situation has radically changed, and with it the grouping of forces. . . . What then induces General Headquarters to insist on the old plan? Nothing, apparently, but obstinacy -- if you like, factionalism, factionalism of the most obtuse kind and most dangerous to the Republic, which is cultivated in General Headquarters by that "strategic" bantam cock Gusev. The other day General Headquarters issued instructions . . . to advance from the Tsaritsyn area on Novorossiisk through the Don

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<sup>61</sup>See Trotsky, Stalin, pp. 314-24 and Voroshilov, pp. 20-22.

<sup>62</sup>Post-Stalin Soviet historians credit Kamenev with the plan, which was perfected by the Central Committee. S.F. Naida, O nekatorykh voprosakh istorii grazhdanskoi voiny v SSSR (Moscow, 1958), pp. 194-96.

<sup>63</sup>For a discussion of Trotsky's claims, see Seaton, pp. 56-58.

<sup>64</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 275-77.

steppe by a line along which it may be convenient for our aviators to fly, but along which our infantry and our artillery will find it quite impossible to plod. It does not need to be proved that this insane [projected] campaign through a hostile environment and where there are absolutely no roads threatens us with utter disaster. It should not be difficult to understand that such a campaign against Cossack villages, as recent experience has shown, can only rally the Cossacks around Denikin and against us in defence of their villages, can only serve to set up Denikin as the saviour of the Don, can only create a Cossack army for Denikin, that is, can only strengthen Denikin.

Precisely for this reason it is essential at once, without loss of time, to change the old plan, which has already been abolished in practice, and replace it by a plan under which the main blow will be directed from the Voronezh area, through Kharkov and the Donets Basin, on Rostov. Firstly, here we shall have an environment that is not hostile, but on the contrary, sympathetic to us, which will facilitate our advance. Secondly, we shall secure a most important railway network . . . and the major supply artery . . . . Fourthly, we shall be in a position to set the Cossacks at loggerheads with Denikin, who, if our advance is successful, will endeavour to move the Cossacks units westward, to which the majority of the Cossacks will not agree, if, of course, by that time we put before them the issue of peace, of negotiations for peace, and so on.<sup>65</sup>

The dating of this letter is critical and has been called into question by many historians.<sup>66</sup> They point to the fact that the letter is supposed to have been written from South Front headquarters at Serpukov on a date when Stalin is known to have been in Moscow. Moreover, since, as was described, Kamenev reconsidered his original plans only about mid-September, the opening line of Stalin's letter "Two months

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 275-276. Emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> Kuzmin, Voprosy istorii, 1956, No. 7, pp. 30-32; Tucker, p. 202, note 30; Seaton, pp. 59-60; McNeal, p. 90, makes no comment, and dates it 15 October.

ago [Kamenev] raised no objections to an offensive through the Donets Basin", suggests a date of 15 November, not October.<sup>67</sup>

That Stalin would bother to review arguments for the north-south campaign as late as 15 November, when its advantages had long since become evident, is explained by the actual purpose of the letter: Stalin is once again demanding that his front be given priority for reinforcements. He has framed his request in the usual style, accusing Kamenev and Gusev, his former allies, of "obstinacy" for failing to recognize the importance of his front. He concludes the letter:

General Headquarters' plan of transfer and distribution of regiments threatens to nullify our recent successes on the South Front. I say nothing of the fact that General Headquarters is ignoring, and has virtually rescinded, the recent decision of the Central Committee and the government -- "Everything for the South Front." . . . Without this, my work on the South Front will become meaningless, criminal and futile, which will give me the right, or rather will force me, to go anywhere, even to the devil himself, only not to remain on the South Front.<sup>68</sup>

Far from establishing Stalin's strategic vision, this letter only confirms that his perception was still selfishly limited to his own immediate concerns.

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From 5 July to 26 September, Stalin was assigned to the West Front, headquartered at Smolensk. Stalin's concerns here were not only Yudenich but also the resurgent Polish Army which, inspired by its dynamic leader Joseph Pilsudski, was advancing eastward to secure a

<sup>67</sup> Seaton, p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 276-77.

buffer for themselves from any future Bolshevik threat to their new-found independence.

As usual, Stalin painted a grim picture of the threat and asked for reinforcements. He reported to Lenin on 18 July that on the Polish front the situation was "At Minsk -- poor, Dvinsk -- no better, Lubents -- even worse." Red units were "in tatters." Much could be done with even one reliable division, but in a month, three divisions would not be enough. "The military commander [Nadezhny] is no use; he only ruins everything."<sup>69</sup>

Reinforcements were not immediately forthcoming, the Red Armies then being active in the east and south.<sup>70</sup> The Polish advance continued, capturing Minsk and pushing back the Red forces towards Mogilev. "A successful offensive is out of the question because for this we should now need at least two or three divisions," Stalin told Lenin on 11 August. "Now decide yourself: can you let us have one division . . . ? But decide without delay, because every hour is precious."<sup>71</sup> Stalin added a postscript stating that his request was approved by the West Front RVS, and would be sent "in a day or two" to the RVSR.<sup>72</sup> In a

<sup>69</sup> DGKKA, p. 384. Also as a Central Committee resolution in PSS, Vol. LI, p. 17. It will be recalled that Stalin had been critical of Nadezhny at Petrograd a month before. Stalin took with him to the West Front Col. B.M. Gittis, who would soon replace Nadezhny.

<sup>70</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 272-74.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

situation where "every hour is precious", Stalin regarded informing the RVS, and the agreement of his own front RVS, as merely afterthoughts, relegated to a postscript. To Stalin, evidently, serious matters were to be handled between himself and Lenin. Any other authorities were relatively insignificant.

In no position to fight on a third front, the Politburo instead sent a diplomatic mission, headed by Julian Marchlewski, to arrange a truce. A ceasefire was ordered by both sides while negotiations took place at Brest-Litovsk. On 31 August, fighting broke out and the Central Committee, believing, possibly on word from Marchlewski, that Stalin had initiated it, demanded an explanation.<sup>73</sup> Stalin claimed in reply that the Poles were responsible and that the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk were only begun to "lull to sleep our vigilance . . . . We ordered the front to intensify vigilance, and that no peace initiatives are to pass the front without the consent of the front command."<sup>74</sup>

Despite Stalin's doubts, the Poles were willing to negotiate, as they were in no hurry to crush the Bolsheviks only to benefit Denikin who, to the Poles, represented no less a threat.<sup>75</sup> Although the negotiations were eventually to fail, the truce lasted until the new year, and gave both sides a much-needed breathing space. Stalin was re-assigned

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<sup>73</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 383, note 34.

<sup>75</sup> N. Davies, White Eagle, Red Star - The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-20 (New York, 1972), p. 65.

to the South Front, where he would remain for the duration of the Civil War.

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It will be recalled that, after the dismissal of Vatsetis in early July, Trotsky had withdrawn somewhat sulkily to concern himself with the South Front, which faced Denikin. Kamenev's initial plan to attack Denikin from the north-east was not recognized as a failure until late September, by which time Denikin was threatening Moscow from the south, and Red units were being hastily moved in before Moscow when Stalin joined the South Front on 3 October, along with its new Front Commander, A.I. Egorov.

Although not a complete nonentity, Egorov appears to have been entirely dominated by Stalin, and there is no sign that their relations were anything but amicable. Egorov was a former tsarist officer with an impressive war record but was sufficiently modest about his training and experience as to be accepted into the Tsaritsyn group.<sup>76</sup> He had taken command of the 10th Army when Voroshilov was transferred from Tsaritsyn.

Egorov would be promoted steadily in the Red Army after the Civil War, becoming one of the first five Soviet marshalls before being eliminated in the purges. Rehabilitated after Stalin's death, a post-Stalinist Soviet history had this to say of his Civil War performance:

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<sup>76</sup>Erickson, pp. 72-73.



Commander of the South-West Front Egorov deserves deep respect, as one of the prominent generals of the Red Army . . . . But he could not take responsibility for decisions without . . . Stalin. Member of the RVSR, and the Central Committee, Stalin had great authority in the making of major decisions and essentially, just restricted the actions of Egorov and disoriented him. Egorov inevitably had to yield to his influence.<sup>77</sup>

It is impossible to judge with certainty which of the two was most responsible for the directives they jointly signed. There is a hint, however, in that most of the communications signed only by Stalin dealt with the broader questions of reinforcement, supply and propaganda, which appear to have been his main concerns, leaving routine tactical matters to Egorov. Where Stalin does interfere in operations, it is usually to question Glavkom's orders. It is likely, then, that Egorov composed most of the orders they jointly signed. Indeed, in the period up to May 1920, Stalin was so frequently absent that only a minority of directives bear his signature,<sup>78</sup> indicating he had at least some trust in Egorov.

For what must have been a very uncomfortable two weeks, Stalin and Trotsky worked together in the same headquarters, until Trotsky left to supervise the defence of Petrograd on 15 October. It is tempting to speculate that Trotsky was replaced by Stalin because of his failure to stop Denikin, but there is no evidence that this was so. Surely if any documents existed suggesting this, they would have been published by Stalin's historians. Trotsky seems to have had little influence on the

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<sup>77</sup> Nikulin, p. 125.

<sup>78</sup> DKFKA, Vol. II, pp. 209-420.

strategic planning at the time, that function being dominated by S.S. Kamenev, and Denikin's close approach to Moscow must have been recognized as the responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief.

Long afterwards, Voroshilov claimed that Stalin's agreement to go to the South Front was conditional on Trotsky's removal. He wrote:

There is now no need to hide the fact that prior to his appointment Comrade Stalin submitted three main conditions to the Central Committee:

- 1) that Trotsky does not interfere in the affairs of the South Front or cross its lines of demarcation;
  - 2) that a number of people whom Comrade Stalin regarded as incapable of coping with the situation in the army be immediately recalled from the South Front; and
  - 3) that new people selected by Stalin . . . be immediately dispatched to the South Front
- These conditions were fully accepted.<sup>79</sup>

This version was first published in 1937. One wonders why there was ever any "need to hide" such facts. It is also suspicious that Voroshilov, who liked to quote documents verbatim, does not do so in this case. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that Lenin would have permitted terms so humiliating to the Commissar for War to be placed formally before the Central Committee. If these "conditions" are not a complete fiction, they might at most have represented some private, informal agreement between Lenin and Stalin.

November 1919 saw the fulfillment of a pet project of Stalin and his Tsaritsyn group: the formation of a fully-mounted cavalry army. From Tsaritsyn, S.M. Budenny had gone on to command larger and larger mounted brigades, showing considerable success against Denikin in a war

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<sup>79</sup> Voroshilov, p. 33.

that favoured mobility. It was probably at Budenny's urging that Stalin used his influence to promote the idea of a cavalry army in higher places, and shepherd it through its final approval. The First Cavalry Army was officially formed on 17 November 1919.<sup>80</sup> Budenny was, of course, named commander with Voroshilov as his commissar.

Trotsky later claimed it was his creation, and cites as evidence his slogan "Proletarians, to horse!", issued on 11 September 1919.<sup>81</sup> But Trotsky, although he certainly appreciated the value of cavalry, is known to have had doubts about the formation of such a large, single unit, whose core would be Budenny's brigade, composed chiefly of "Cossacks and rich peasants" whose allegiance was doubtful. (Hence, his call to enlist "proletarians" in the cavalry.) He also doubted Budenny's ability to handle such a large body and "think strategically."<sup>82</sup> It is safe to conclude, then, that Stalin can in fact be credited with the creation of the Cavalry Army. Led by his Tsaritsyn group friends, and created under his sponsorship, Stalin therefore had personal as well as military reasons to keep this powerful force under his command. As shall be shown, this would be an important factor in the Polish campaign the following summer.

Stalin had the good fortune to be assigned to the South Front just as it was being heavily reinforced. On 20 October, a strong Red Army offensive, spearheaded by Budenny's cavalry, broke through Denikin's

<sup>80</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 466.

<sup>81</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, pp. 274-75. Full text of declaration in Trotsky's Kak vooruzalas revoliutsiia, Vol. II, Book I, pp. 287-88.

<sup>82</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, pp. 274-75.

lines. A retreat of the White forces commenced that would continue until they were bottled up in the Crimea the following spring.

At about the same time, Trotsky was regaining much of his lost prestige in a hard-fought battle for Petrograd. So threatened was that city than Lenin is said to have considered abandoning it to Yudenich. According to Trotsky,<sup>83</sup> both he and Stalin persuaded their leader the city could be saved. Hingley<sup>84</sup> cites this incident as evidence of Stalin's willingness to put the Red cause ahead of his own personal one. While Stalin's loyalty to the revolution is beyond question, it is clear that he tended to regard both his own and the revolution's cause as interchangeable. In this case, Stalin, guided by his earlier experience at Petrograd, probably did believe that Petrograd was defensible. Lenin, who was in the habit of asking Stalin's advice, may have done so in this case, and Stalin would not have risked being wrong about Petrograd and harming his own reputation simply to spite Trotsky.

When at the end of November it was decided to award Trotsky the Order of the Red Flag for his defence of Petrograd, Stalin was presented with the same decoration "for his services in the defence of Petrograd and selfless efforts on the South Front."<sup>85</sup> Trotsky's account of how it was decided to thus honor Stalin is interesting:

[L.B.] Kamenev, considerably embarrassed, introduced a proposal to award the decoration to Stalin. "For what?" Kalinin inquired, sincerely indignant . . . . They pacified him with a jest, and the proposal was accepted.

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<sup>83</sup>Trotsky, My Life, p. 424.

<sup>84</sup>Hingley, p. 126.

<sup>85</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 466-67.

After the meeting Bukharin pounced on Kalinin.  
 "Can't you understand? This is Lenin's idea.  
 Stalin can't live unless he has what someone else  
 has. He will never forgive it."<sup>86</sup>

One might well hesitate to accept Trotsky's uncorroborated account, yet it is a plausible one. Stalin's attitudes and actions could scarcely have gone unnoticed in the Politburo, and it is conceivable that Lenin could have instigated the above attempt to be even-handed in recognizing his two valued lieutenants.

Stalin quickly returned to his characteristic style of operation, asking for 83,000 more men<sup>87</sup> with retreat probable if the reinforcements were not provided.<sup>88</sup> When it appeared in November that Glavkom was directing reserves to the South-East Front (operating against Denikin's supporters west of the Don and in the Caucasus) instead of the South Front, Stalin bitterly attacked his former East Front supporters, Kamenev and Gusev (the latter being the senior Glavkom commissar). Accusing them of hostility and neglect, he demanded two more divisions, concluding:

. . . we consider it our duty to state the necessity of either replacing the entire personnel of the Military Revolutionary Council of the South Front or replacing General Staff Headquarters, or, if the latter is deemed premature, of replacing Gusev, who, according to our information is the chief instigator against the South Front . . . . If the above proposals are not carried out, my remaining at the front [is] impossible.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup>Trotsky, My Life, p. 433.

<sup>87</sup>DKFKA, Vol. II, p. 370, dated 29 October 1919.

<sup>88</sup>ibid., p. 375, 12 November 1919.

<sup>89</sup>Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, p. 761, note 3, dated 12 November 1919.

He followed this up with the long letter to Lenin on 15 November reminding him of the primacy of the South Front. As already discussed, this letter, misdated 15 October, formed the basis of Stalin's later claim to formulation of the successful plan against Denikin.<sup>90</sup>

The Central Committee ordered Glavkom to send reserves more equally to the South and South-East Fronts, but censured Stalin as well, calling his submitting of ultimatums and threats to resign "absolutely unacceptable."<sup>91</sup>

The supply and reinforcement problem evidently improved, for it was to this, among other factors, that Stalin attributed the successes of the South Front in a Pravda article of 28 December. Other reasons included: the "inherent rottenness" of the White governments of Kolchak and Denikin, their lack of popular support, "the skillful direction by the South Front command . . . of blows against the enemy", and "following up those victories."<sup>92</sup>

South Front forces reached the Sea of Azov on 7 January 1920, dividing Denikin's forces into Crimean and Caucasian sections, which were, however, still effectively in contact with the aid of French and British sea transports. Denikin renounced his command of the White forces in favour of P.N. Wrangel, and left the country. A re-organization of the Soviet South and South-East Fronts now took place. The South-East

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<sup>90</sup> See pp. 72-75.

<sup>91</sup> Naida, pp. 211-12.

<sup>92</sup> Pravda, 28 December 1919.

Front was re-designated the Caucasus Front, while the South Front became the South-West Front, responsible not only for Wrangel, but also for the southern units of the newly-resurgent Polish forces, who were again on the march, peace talks having finally broken down. To the north, General Tukhachevsky was placed in command of the West Front, facing the main body of the Polish Army.

It was a busy and frustrating time for Stalin. Documents on the first three weeks of February 1920 show that he was responsible for remobilizing Ukrainian-based army units which had been converted only a short time before into a labour army, while continuing to supervise the grain and coal requisitioning and distribution.<sup>93</sup> The South-West Front armies, meanwhile, were engaged in mopping-up operations in Odessa,<sup>94</sup> and re-organizing to meet the Poles.<sup>95</sup> Then from Glavkom and Lenin came instructions to supply troops both to the West Front<sup>96</sup> and to the Caucasus.

It is not surprising, given this workload, that Stalin balked when Lenin and Trotsky instructed him on 4 February to go personally to the Caucasus. "In order to put matters on a proper footing", he was told, "you will be made a member of the Caucasus Front RVS while remaining a member of the South-West Front RVS."<sup>97</sup> Even the brashly self-

<sup>93</sup> IIGV, Vol. III, p. 265; Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 154.

<sup>94</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 132.

<sup>95</sup> IIGV, Vol. III, p. 265.

<sup>96</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 132.

<sup>97</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. II, pp. 24-26.

confident Georgjau knew his limitations. He replied the same day:

My profound conviction is that my journey will not bring about any change in the situation; that it is not journeys by individuals that are needed but the transfer of cavalry reserves, the South-West being without them.

He then blamed the inactivity of General Sorin, commander of the Caucasus Front, for the situation, and concluded: "Moreover, I am not entirely well and . . . . In view of all this, I ask the Central Committee not to insist on my journey."<sup>98</sup>

But he was not to be allowed off the hook so easily: "The Central Committee does not insist on your journey, on condition that during the next few weeks you concentrate all your attention and energy on serving the needs of the Caucasus Front, subordinating to it the interests of the South-West Front."<sup>99</sup>

Stalin continued to protest the drawing upon his heavily-committed front to shore up the others.<sup>100</sup> Lenin, normally supportive of his protege, called his protests "nagging" and on 19 February Stalin was once again instructed "to expedite to the utmost the reinforcement of the Caucasus Front."<sup>101</sup> "It is not clear to me," replied Stalin sarcastically, "why concern for the Caucasus Front should be primarily my responsibility. Procedurally, the reinforcement of the Caucasus

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-28, dated 4 February 1920.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>100</sup> Leninskii Sbornik, Vol. XXXVI, (Moscow, 1959), p. 98n.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



Front is entirely the concern of the Military-Revolutionary Council of the Republic [RVSR], the members of which, according to my information, are in good health, and not that of Stalin who is already overloaded with work as it is."<sup>102</sup>

Lenin informed him stiffly: "It is your concern to expedite the arrival of reinforcements from the South-West Front for the Caucasus Front. What is required is to help in every way one can and not to pick a quarrel about departmental fields of competence."<sup>103</sup>

Perhaps regretting this slap on the wrist, Lenin later the same day provided Stalin a fuller explanation of why the Caucasus situation was urgent. He concluded: "I count on you to appreciate the gravity of the general situation, and bend all your efforts to achieve significant results."<sup>104</sup> Stalin, somewhat mollified, assured Lenin that "everything possible will be done."<sup>105</sup>

Matters improved rapidly towards the end of February, so much so that Kamenev informed the South-West Front on 26 February that divisions intended for the Caucasian Front were being diverted to the South-West Front for use against the Poles.<sup>106</sup> By mid-March 1920, Polish forces had occupied Minsk and Mozyr, and were approaching Kiev. By this time,

<sup>102</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. II, p. 66.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., dated 20 February 1920.

<sup>104</sup> IIGV, Vol. II, p. 594.

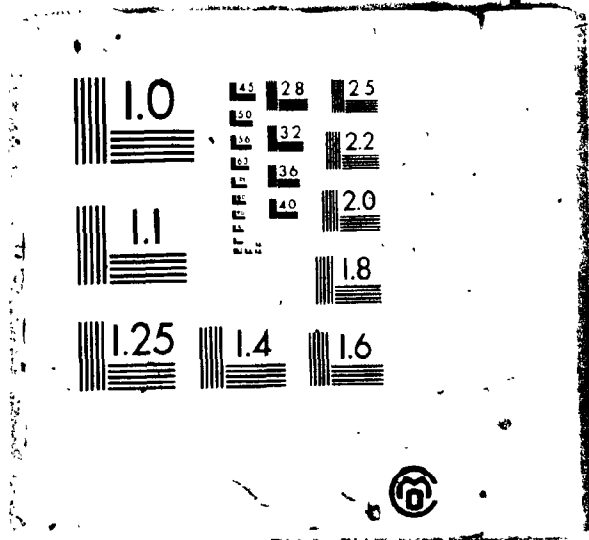
<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 594n.

<sup>106</sup> Egorov, p. 11. Most of the Caucasus fell into red hands in March, although Wrangel's forces would continue to make incursions from the sea until autumn.

however, allied intervention forces had withdrawn from European Russia, and of the white generals, only Wrangel remained. Thus when Poland launched a major offensive in May that took Kiev, crossed the Dneiper, and seemed intent on seizing the entire Ukraine, the Red Army could mass most of its force against the invasion. The Civil War had been transformed into a conventional one: The Russo-Polish War of 1920.

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### CHAPTER THREE: THE RUSSO-POLISH WAR

Stalin's last and most exclusively military assignment of the Civil War was on the South-West Front, facing both Wrangel and a Polish invasion. At a critical moment of the Soviet counter-drive into Poland, Stalin refused to provide reinforcements to a threatened sector, and the Red advance was thrown back as a result. The extent of Stalin's responsibility for this defeat, and the motivation for his acts, are controversial, and are therefore explored in some depth in this chapter.

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After the defeat of Denikin in March 1920, Stalin spent some weeks in Moscow dealing with matters related to his position as Commissar of Nationalities. He returned to the South-West Front headquarters at Kharkov on 27 May. The front at that time consisted of four armies: the 13th, facing Wrangel in the Crimea, and the 12th, 14th and Cavalry armies confronting the southern Polish forces.

With his customary vigour and speed, Stalin set about his duties, and two days later sent a lengthy cable to Lenin, which began: "The situation on the Crimean Front gives rise to great anxiety in view of the danger of a breakthrough by Denikin's gang and the weakness of our command headquarters." To solve the latter problem, he went on to describe how he had replaced the entire military and political staff of the 13th Army (which faced Wrangel) including its commander and commissar, and added "I

reputation by victories on his own front, but the documents of the Civil War and particularly the Russo-Polish War period, show quite the reverse. In them, Stalin gives every sign of being cautious, unimpressed by victories, and more intent on seeing his organization working properly. His concerns were primarily to see the armies well-provided with supplies and reserves, and that their flanks and rear areas were protected from such menaces as Wrangel. In a Pravda interview given just before he left for Kharkov, Stalin said:

When we have talked of the chances of Russia's victory and have said that those chances are growing and will grow still further, it does not follow that victory is already in our pocket . . . victory can only have real meaning in conditions where our forces are properly organized, where they are supplied regularly and accurately, where our agitators are able to spread burning enthusiasm among the troops, where our rear is cleansed of filth and corruption and where it is consolidated both morally and materially. . . .<sup>5</sup>

His concern with reserves and security of rear areas against Wrangel is evident in a telegram to Lenin on 31 May, in which he reports:

All three armies are without reserves. The first brigade of the 23rd Division was designated the common front reserve, but . . . it has just been sent to Odessa on garrison duty, in view of the vulnerability of it to attack from the sea [by Wrangel] . . . as a result of this situation, complicated by the complete demoralization of the Crimean [13th] Army, infantry units [fighting the Poles] spend themselves after the first successful assault, . . . the cavalry army, left without serious support by the flanking infantry, falters . . . .<sup>6</sup>

Stalin was not exaggerating. The 1st Cavalry Army, under Budenny, was meeting stiff resistance in an attempt to break through the Polish lines near Kiev, and this was not accomplished until 5 June. Thus, the

<sup>5</sup>Pravda, 26 May 1920.

<sup>6</sup>IIGV, Vol. III, pp. 290-91.

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Politburo's insistence that the Polish threat be given priority had in fact placed Stalin's South-West Front in the impossible position of facing two active enemies, Wrangel and the Poles, while being permitted to operate against only one of them, and receiving only enough reinforcements to support a single front.

Stalin therefore appealed, as usual, directly to Lenin. He complained in a telegram that divisions promised to him had instead been sent to the West Front.

I consider it necessary to declare that this situation cannot lead to success . . . and will inevitably doom the Cavalry Army to inaction. I ask you to make the headquarters carry out its promise to reinforce the south. . . . I'm sending you this note with the agreement of the front commander, asking for action on this while there is still time to avoid serious consequences.<sup>7</sup>

Lenin rejected Stalin's request for reinforcements in a message dated 2 June, explaining that "The situation on the West Front had proved to be worse than Tukhachevsky . . . thought, so it is necessary that your divisions be returned there," and then gently upbraided him, "You of course recall that at a session of the Politburo the Crimean offensive was suspended. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

Stalin replied within hours, obviously angry:

I understand your telegram to signify that the Central Committee refuses the two divisions in spite of my warning, and by so doing releases me from responsibility for the undesirable consequences which will probably result at the front. Have it your way. I recall the decision of the Politburo; but since Wrangel is disregarding that decision and, on the contrary, is preparing to attack, and since it is quite possible, moreover, that he will break through our front, I considered it my

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>8</sup>DGKKA, p. 686.

duty to take precautionary military measures, both administrative and operational. That is all. -- Stalin.<sup>9</sup>

Lenin seems to have taken the heated reply quite seriously; in a handwritten minute on the message, he commented "This is tantamount to submitting the problem to the Politburo. All the members of it will have to be asked their opinion." There is no evidence that he did so; perhaps there was not time, for the next day Stalin sent another telegram that sharply contrasted with the previous one. Having evidently conversed with Commander-in-Chief Kamenev in the meantime, and no doubt regretting his rather extreme outburst of the day before, Stalin had decided on a new tack. He began by conceding "My conversation with [Kamenev] brought out the unenviable situation on the West Front and the necessity of transferring divisions to that area as a first priority." Since no reinforcements can come from any other front, he goes on, the South-West Front must draw on the 13th Army of the Crimea. To do this:

. . . it is essential to clarify the issue with regard to the Crimea: that is, either to establish a real cease fire with Wrangel, and so afford an opportunity for taking one or two divisions from the Crimean sector, or else to abandon all negotiations with Wrangel, and not to wait for Wrangel to be reinforced, to strike at him at once and, having smashed him, to release troops for the Polish Front. The present situation which affords no clear answer to the question of the Crimea is becoming intolerable. In view of this I request the Politburo of the Central Committee to take all measures to secure a cease fire and the possibility of transferring units from the Crimean Front or, if conditions make this impossible, to sanction our launching an offensive in order to liquidate the Crimean question by military means. A quick, clear answer is needed, for the Poles do not wait. -- Stalin.<sup>10</sup>

Having been refused permission to attack Wrangel on the grounds that the Poles were a more serious threat, Stalin argued that attacking Wrangel is

<sup>9</sup>Trotsky Papers, Vol. II, pp. 198-200.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 206.



the most effective way to aid the Polish front! Lenin was astonished at this chain of logic: "Is this manifest Utopia?????" he queried in the margin, and recommended telling Stalin to "wait for our answer."<sup>11</sup>

No such message is in the collections, but Stalin was not one to let a matter drop, and telegraphed the next day with a warning that Wrangel intended to stage landings in the Odessa area between 10 and 15 June.<sup>12</sup> Lenin passed the matter to Trotsky, with instructions to consult Kamenev.<sup>13</sup> Trotsky recommended the following day a reversal of the decision to suspend Crimean operations, and at the discretion of Kamenev "give Egorov the order to anticipate Wrangel." He then equivocated by warning that there were diplomatic and supply limitations to an immediate offensive.<sup>14</sup> There the matter apparently rested until it was taken out of their hands by Wrangel's offensive in mid-June.

On 4 June, the same day Stalin was warning Moscow about the preparations of Wrangel, he held a conversation by teleprinter with Kamenev. In a manner that Albert Seaton describes correctly as "diffident" and "polite",<sup>15</sup> Stalin queried a directive from Kamenev that apparently would have turned Budenny's Cavalry Army northward to strike into the rear of the Polish armies retreating from Kiev. It also designated the Crimean Army as the reserve. Stalin asked a series of questions concerning the "meaning" of the directive, which makes clear that he did not agree with any part of Kamenev's plan, and was giving Kamenev an opportunity to change

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> DKFKA, Vol. III, p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Trotsky Papers, Vol. II, pp. 170-72

<sup>15</sup> Seaton, p. 67.

his mind. Being deliberately stupid, Stalin pointed out that the shift northward of the Cavalry Army contravened an earlier order from Kamenev directing the army toward Berdichev. "Is this right?" he asked, as if the Commander-in-Chief ought not to re-direct his own armies! On the Crimean Army's reserve status, Stalin asked "Does that mean that we can without prejudice take from it portions of its staff?" He then described Wrangel's anticipated attack, concluding categorically that "the Crimean Army, unfortunately, cannot be spared as a reserve" and then, ironically, asked "Which of us is right, or, perhaps, I did not understand your message?"<sup>16</sup>

Seaton calls all this "an exercise in deceit intended to impress the party leader with Stalin's sagacity."<sup>17</sup> Yet sagacity is scarcely the impression Stalin gave by these questions. He was, in fact, trying to be subtle. His real intentions were revealed in two further questions he asked:

- Now I understand that the main offensive will be in the north, not the south; that is what follows from your orders, in compliance with which, naturally, demands on the South-West Front should be kept within limits permitted by the interests of the South-West Front.
- Concerning the Cavalry Army, things are also unclear. If it should have neither rear, nor flank [i.e. proceed without infantry support and reserves] does that not mean that the Cavalry Army will make raids in rear areas like [blundering] mammoths.<sup>18</sup>

Kamenev replied, possibly irritated, that he had already discussed the matter with Egorov two days before. "We decided," says Kamenev, "that it was necessary to smash firstly one of the enemy groups, either at Odessa or

<sup>16</sup> DGKKA, pp. 689-93.

<sup>17</sup> Seaton, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> DGKKA, pp. 692-93..

Kiev. Egorov decided to strike Kiev. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

Stalin said that Egorov was there with him and agreed to the queries. If so, and if Egorov and Kamenev had been in agreement two days before, then Stalin must have already perfectly understood Kamenev's intentions because Egorov would have explained them. Stalin had clearly decided to override their judgement. His questions show that, with Wrangel posing a threat in the south, Stalin considered it not in "the interests of the South-West Front" to have his strongest army "blundering about like mammoths" (behind enemy lines far to the north. This interpretation of the conversation is in line with Stalin's already observed preoccupation, not with military glory, in the form of a raid in the enemy rear, but rather with protecting his reserves and his own rear area.

No doubt Stalin would have appealed to Lenin had Kamenev refused to co-operate but, after a lengthy discussion, agreement was reached in Stalin's favour. He reported rather smugly to Lenin later that day:

The previous plan of the Commander-in-Chief and the front commander [Egorov], for the deep turning movement against the enemy Kiev group, clearly would have had adverse effects and was impractical, in view of the weakness of our force. Therefore a new plan is substituted for the old one in agreement with the Commander-in-Chief. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Stalin emphasized in this message the importance of the 1st Cavalry Army. Indeed, all operational orders issued by the South-West Front during the Polish campaign placed this army at the leading edge of offensives. While there were sound military reasons for this, Stalin also

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. \*

<sup>20</sup> IIGV, p. 297.

of course had personal reasons to put his brain-child in the forefront of operations. It must have been very satisfying to him to see his creation grow to 16,000 strong by the summer of 1920. Mobile, always well-supplied, imbued with high morale, and led by the dashing Budenny, the Cavalry Army was probably the most powerful unit in the Red Army, and gained a reputation for fierceness and invincibility quite out of proportion to its actual performance. So successful was it that when Stalin proposed, on 28 June, to form a second cavalry army,<sup>21</sup> Kamenev approved the proposal almost immediately.

The westward advance of the South-West Front armies continued during June, while to the north, the West Front was bogged down and was awaiting reinforcements. On 12 June, Stalin was able to report to Lenin the recapture of Kiev and the continuing retreat of the Polish forces.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile Wrangel was stepping up his activity with a landing near Kirilov on 6 June, followed by an advance northwards. At least, so runs the summary in Stalin's and Egorov's 8 June orders to the 13th Army which included the optimistic instruction to "Liquidate the enemy and take over the Crimea."<sup>23</sup> Two days later, Wrangel's army burst out of the Crimea and struck northwards in a major offensive which would not lose momentum until late July, by which time a large area of the southeast Ukraine was in White hands, and the Kuban and Caucasus regions had been stirred to revolt.

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<sup>21</sup> DKFKA, Vol. III, p. 203. Approval by Kamenev, p. 221. The Second Cavalry Army did not become operational until after Stalin had left the front in late August.

<sup>22</sup> IIGV, p. 300.

<sup>23</sup> DKFKA, Vol. III, pp. 172-73.

Stalin had not the least doubt as to the origin and timing of the offensive: "Wrangel's offensive was dictated by the Entente in order to ease the difficult position of the Poles," he told Koimunist.<sup>24</sup> He accused British diplomat Lord Curzon, in particular, of attempting mediation in order to buy time for Wrangel to prepare his army. "The Entente evidently calculated that at the moment when the Red Army overwhelmed the Poles and began to advance, Wrangel would appear in the rear of our armies and upset all Soviet Russia's plans. . . . Undoubtedly," Stalin conceded, "Wrangel's offensive has considerably eased the position of the Poles. . . ." In fact, there is little evidence that much pressure was taken off the Poles. None of the South-West Front armies confronting the Poles was re-directed against Wrangel, and the West Front launched a major offensive on 5 July that was the beginning of their march on Warsaw.

Nonetheless, Stalin's concern over the Wrangel offensive is clear. On 25 June, he telegraphed to Lenin the information that:

Revishin, a front-line [White] general, who was taken prisoner by our forces on the Crimean Front on June 10, has stated in my presence: a) Wrangel's army is getting its clothing, guns, rifles, tanks and sabres chiefly from the British, and also from the French; b) Wrangel is being aided from the sea by big British ships and small French ships. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Soon after he requested political workers and cavalry reinforcements be sent to the Crimea. "[The RVSR] seems to have forgotten that the regiments still live [and] Wrangel is not beaten."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, pp. 340-41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>26</sup>Pravda, 14 November 1935, dated 1 July 1920.

From 7 to 12 July, he was in Moscow, conferring with Kamenev and other military officials about reinforcements for the Crimean sector.<sup>27</sup>

It was probably during this period that he drafted a letter addressed to "all party organizations" in an attempt to recruit communist cadres for work among demoralized divisions fighting Wrangel. In it, he described the situation on the Wrangel front:

Wrangel's soldiers are splendidly enregimented, fight desperately and prefer suicide to surrender. Technically, Wrangel's forces are better equipped than ours; the flow of tanks, armoured cars, aircraft, cartridges and clothing from the West is continuing. . . . The weakness of our forces fighting against Wrangel lies in the fact that, firstly, they are diluted with prisoners of war, former Denikinians, who not infrequently desert to the enemy, and secondly, they are not receiving volunteers or mobilized Communists, either in groups or singly, from the centre. . . . The Crimea must be restored to Russia at all costs, otherwise the Ukraine and the Caucasus will always be menaced by Soviet Russia's enemies.<sup>28</sup>

Lenin approved the draft, calling it "something indisputable"<sup>29</sup> but it was much revised by the time it was circulated to party organizations. Dated 17 July, the new version, in a style definitely not Stalin's, emphasized the economic nature of the Wrangel threat: "His advance had already inflicted incalculable harm on the Soviet Republic. . . . Bread, coal, and oil intended for the workers and peasants of Russia is in danger. . . . White Guard bandits carry out destruction and threaten to make next winter no less hard than the winter of 1919."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 485.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 351

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 485.

<sup>30</sup> DKFKA, Vol. III, pp. 219-20.

The point of this latter version is that it shows that the Central Committee was aware, perhaps more so than Stalin, of the danger that Wrangel represented. Why, then, was the pressure on the Polish armies maintained, and even increased? Why did Stalin still need to come personally to Moscow seeking reinforcements? The reason, simply put, is that the capture of Poland itself appeared to be within reach, and this opportunity justified tolerating Wrangel for a time. Lenin in particular was captivated by the prospect. He saw the Red Army's advance into Poland as the spark that would ignite the fires of Polish revolution, and that the flames would spread to Germany and beyond.<sup>31</sup> Trotsky later claimed that he did not share this view, suspecting that Polish nationalism would stifle the revolutionary feeling of the Polish masses.<sup>32</sup> Tukhachevsky and most of his generals were enthusiastically calling for a "March on Warsaw".

Stalin's opinion was clear. He opposed an invasion, because he was aware of the strong nationalism of Poland. As early as 25 May, he told Pravda:

Unlike the rear of Kolchak and Denikin, the rear of the Polish troops is uniform from the national point of view. This explains its coherence and steadfastness. The predominating feeling is "the patriotic feeling" . . . creating the national unity and stubbornness in the military units.<sup>33</sup>

In a long letter to Lenin on 12 June 1920, Stalin discussed some

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<sup>31</sup>Trotsky, My Life, p. 457.

<sup>32</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 328. Serge M. Shewchuk in his unpublished Ph.d. thesis "The Russo-Polish War of 1920" (Maryland, 1966), p. 206, points out that there is little documentary evidence to support Trotsky's assertion that he opposed the invasion. His public speeches and pamphlets at the time voiced support for the seizure of Poland.

<sup>33</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 319.

of his ideas concerning the Soviet policy toward nationalities. He clearly differentiated between historically subject nations such as the Ukrainians or Bashkirs, which "would be willing to accept without much friction our Soviet type of federation," and historically independent nations such as Germany, Hungary and Poland, which could not be absorbed into anything more than a loose confederation, since "they would consider federation of our Soviet type as diminishing their national . . . independence."<sup>34</sup>

Stalin's objections to invading Poland were, of course, reinforced by the fact that he had his hands full fighting Wrangel on his own South-West Front. In an interview published 24 June, he warned of the strength of the Polish army, backed by the Entente, and by Wrangel's offensive.

I consider the boastfulness and harmful self-conceit displayed by some of our comrades as out of place: some of them, not content with the successes at the front, are calling for a "march on Warsaw"; others, not content with defending our republic against enemy attack, haughtily declare that they could be satisfied with a "Red Soviet Warsaw".<sup>35</sup>

. . . it would be unbecoming boastfulness to think that the Poles are as good as done with, that all that remains for us to do is to "march on Warsaw." Such boastfulness, which saps the energy of our officials and breeds a harmful self-conceit, is out of place not only because Poland has reserves . . . not only because Poland . . . is backed by the Entente . . . but also, and chiefly, because there has appeared in the rear of our armies a new ally of Poland -- Wrangel, who is threatening to destroy from the rear the fruits of our victories over the Poles. . . .

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in T. Komarnicki, Rebirth of the Polish Republic (London, 1957), pp. 585-86.

<sup>35</sup>Stalin, Soch., Vol. IV, p. 341.



It is therefore ridiculous to talk of a "march on Warsaw," or in general of the lasting character of our successes so long as the Wrangel danger has not been eliminated. Yet Wrangel is gaining strength, and there is no evidence that we are adopting any special or effective measures against the growing danger from the south.<sup>36</sup>

The matter was brought to a head by a note passed to the Soviet government on 11 July, in which the British mediator, Lord Curzon, proposed armistices both with Poland, along a line that was advantageous to Russia, and with Wrangel, who would withdraw to the Crimea. This placed the question clearly on the Politburo table; was Poland to be invaded? If not, then the Curzon note, and the gains it represented, should be accepted.<sup>37</sup>

Lenin sent off a message to Stalin at South-West Front headquarters explaining the Curzon proposal, instructing Stalin "to furiously intensify the offensive" and inform Lenin of his opinion: Lenin added:

For my part, I think that all this is a piece of knavery aimed at the annexation of the Crimea. . . . The idea is to snatch victory out of our hands with the aid of false promises.<sup>38</sup>

Stalin's reply is not in any of the collections. Trotsky says<sup>39</sup> that Stalin supported Lenin in advocating continued war. The above-quoted message to Stalin certainly seems to be asking for support from him, and the comment about the Crimea might have been deliberately aimed at Stalin's preoccupation with Wrangel. If Stalin supported Lenin

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 347-48. Emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> Piotr S. Wandycz, Soviet-Polish Relations, 1917-20 (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 213-15.

<sup>38</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, pp. 237-38.

<sup>39</sup> Trotsky, My Life, p. 457.

on this matter, he did so either to remain in Lenin's good graces, or to prevent Wrangel from becoming entrenched in the Crimea, as a permanent threat. It was certainly not, as has been shown, because he believed in a successful outcome of a Soviet invasion of Poland.

Circumstantial evidence to support Trotsky's claim that Stalin supported the invasion, is found in a note from Lenin to Stalin on 17 July:

The Central Committee plenum has adopted almost in full the proposals I have made [regarding a reply to the Curzon note]. You will receive the full text. Keep me informed without fail, twice weekly in cipher and in detail, regarding the development of operations and the course of events.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly Lenin expected Stalin to know what his proposals were, at least in outline, and the reference to "development of operations" suggests that military operations were to go forward, which could only have meant the Curzon note was to be rejected. It is apparent, then, that Lenin had kept Stalin informed of his intentions regarding the note, and that Stalin did not object.

In any case, the Curzon note was rejected, and orders were issued by Kamenev on 21 July, "for the energetic development of the offensive, without regard to the frontier line mentioned in Lord Curzon's telegram." The orders contained a cautionary:

It seems desirable, however, to retard the progress of the South-West Front. . . . If . . . Poland refuses to negotiate or there are other indications that she will really be supported by her allies, we shall be compelled, while not abandoning the offensive, to take precautions against all possible dangers. In the first place, there could be an attack from Rumania, which already possesses sufficient forces for the purpose. I suggest, therefore, that the South-West

<sup>40</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 240.

Front confines itself to the destruction of the Polish forces on the southern flank, thus severing the Poles from the Rumanians.<sup>41</sup>

In response to these orders, Stalin and Egorov assigned the 14th Army to watch the Rumanian frontier. Then, apparently in response to Kamenev's directive to confine South-West Front activities to the southern flank, they recommended to Kamenev that the South-West Front armies be re-directed into Galicia, and specifically, that 12th Army move toward Lublin, and the Cavalry Army attack L'vov.<sup>42</sup> Kamenev approved the suggestion on 23 July, and ordered the "energetic execution of Polish sector operations."<sup>43</sup>

In accordance with established procedures, Kamenev followed up this approval by issuing formal orders, which specified that in the new operations the right flank of the South-West Front would "maintain contact with the left flank of the West Front."<sup>44</sup> In other words, no gap was to be allowed to develop between Tukhachevsky's West Front armies approaching Warsaw, and Stalin/Egorov's armies approaching L'vov. This brief passage in a larger instruction was forgotten or ignored by both front commands in the next few weeks, with disastrous results.

The stage was now set for one of the more complex historical incidents in Soviet military history. All accounts are agreed that, as the armies of the two fronts approached their objectives, a gap developed between them in the neighbourhood of Lublin, screened only by a token

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<sup>41</sup> DGKKA, pp. 613-14. My emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> DKFKA, Vol.III, pp. 225-26.

<sup>43</sup> DGKKA, p. 705.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 704-05.

Soviet force of some 5,000 men, the "Mozyr Group." The 12th Army and the Cavalry Army were placed under Tukhachevsky's command, and ordered to fill that gap. Stalin prevented the orders from being carried out. On 16 August, the Polish army burst through the "Lublin gap" and routed Tukhachevsky's armies.

It thus appears that Stalin's failure to carry out orders caused the campaign to end in defeat. But the matter is far from clear, and much can be said in defence of Stalin. Trotsky's version is that

Stalin wanted, at whatever cost, to enter L'vov at the same time that Tukhachevsky entered Warsaw. When the danger to the armies under Tukhachevsky was fully revealed, . . . the Southwest command encouraged by Stalin, continued advancing due west, for was it not more important that they should themselves capture L'vov than that they should help "others" to take Warsaw?<sup>45</sup>

Except for Trotsky's denunciation, few writers have directly addressed the problem of Stalin's behaviour in this incident. Pre-Stalinist Soviet accounts agree that the tardiness of the South-West Front caused the failure at Warsaw, but do not mention Stalin.<sup>46</sup> Stalinist accounts accuse Trotsky of conspiring with Tukhachevsky to prevent the capture of L'vov.<sup>47</sup> Even Tukhachevsky's lectures at the Moscow Military Academy in 1923 do not mention Stalin, and are restricted to carefully phrased generalities such as:

The forces on the South-West Front did not co-operate with the main forces on the West Front, as is clearly

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<sup>45</sup>Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 558.

<sup>46</sup>See for example, S. S. Kamenev, "Bor'ba s beloi Pol'shei," *Voennyi vestnik*, 1922, No. 12, pp. 15-24.

<sup>47</sup>The accounts are so distorted as to scarcely require comment. For a brief discussion, see Seaton, p. 75.

shown by the fact that the south-west Front had a local task of capital importance -- to occupy the central point of Galicia, the city of L'vov.<sup>48</sup>

Isaac Deutscher's 1949 biography of Stalin gives substantially the same version. Little discussion of Stalin's role in the defeat occurs until 1972 when Norman Davies published a book on the Russo-Polish War. In it, he concludes cautiously that "the behavior of the South-Western Command has never been satisfactorily explained,"<sup>49</sup> but seems inclined in his discussion of the event to blame Tukhachevsky, Egorov and Kamenev, for allowing the fatal gap to develop in the first place, and then not acting to fill it soon enough. Of post-Stalinist historical writing, only the Khrushchev era permitted direct criticism of Stalin by name, notably in the following passage by S. F. Naida:

It is incomprehensible why Stalin, who was not opposed . . . at the beginning of August to the transfer of these armies to the West Front, began to question the execution of this decision. In substance it meant a refusal to carry out not only orders of Glavkom, but of the decision of the Politburo . . . and the Central Committee . . . . As it appears from available documents, Stalin considered that such a transfer of armies "only confused matters and inevitably provoked unnecessary harmful hitches. . . ." <sup>50</sup>

Adam Ulam's biography of Stalin<sup>51</sup> is the first work to categorically defend Stalin and shift the blame elsewhere.

The primary responsibility must remain Tukhachevsky's, all of Yegorov's and Stalin's derelictions notwithstanding,

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<sup>48</sup>M. N. Tukhachevsky, *Pokhod za Visla* (Moscow, 1923), reproduced as an appendix to J. Pilsudski, *The Year 1920* (London, 1972), p. 252.

<sup>49</sup>Davies, pp. 210-215.

<sup>50</sup>Naida, pp. 226-27.

<sup>51</sup>Ulam, pp. 188-89.

for he advanced too fast without protecting his flanks. . . . Stalin's objections to the orders detaching some armies from his group were eminently reasonable.<sup>52</sup>

Thomas C. Fiddick's thesis, "Soviet Policy and the Battle of Warsaw, 1920" (Indiana, 1974), also is critical of Kamenev and Tukhachevsky, but, after a most careful and exhaustive examination of events, concludes that

The man most directly responsible for making what might have been an orderly retreat from Poland into a rout was Stalin. What his real motives were in refusing to protect Tukhachevsky's left wing will always remain a matter of speculation.<sup>53</sup>

The most recent discussion is in Albert Seaton's book, Stalin as Warlord.<sup>54</sup> He gives a brief, but accurate summary of the event, does not speculate on Stalin's motives and stresses that "many other factors contributed to the defeat."<sup>55</sup>

It is Stalin's actions and motives that are of primary concern in this paper. By closely examining the sequence of events, it is possible to make a tentative assessment of Stalin's thoughts and intentions during the incident.

It will be recalled that the South-West Front was originally formed as the South Front, with the task of defeating Denikin. It was redesignated the South-West Front in January 1920, and took on responsibility for the southern half of the Polish front when war broke out.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> T. C. Fiddick, "Soviet Policy and the Battle of Warsaw, 1920" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1975), p. 306.

<sup>54</sup> Seaton, pp. 68-77.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Since Wrangel remained very much an active threat, the attention and resources of the South-West Front were uncomfortably divided between two enemies.

This awkward arrangement was necessary so long as the Pripet Marshes stood between the two fronts. For command and control purposes, only the South-West Front had unobstructed communications with the southern half of the armies fighting the Poles. It had been intended to unite all the armies facing Polish forces under West front command as soon as the Russian armies had advanced beyond the western edge of the marshes at Brest, making north-south communication practical. This point was passed at the end of July.<sup>56</sup>

As early as 28 July, Kamenev told Egorov:

With reference to the 12th and 14th Armies, a question has arisen in connection with the conclusion of the Brest operation, as to the possibility of assigning at first the 12th Army to the West Front, and subsequently also other units of your Polish sector. However, bear in mind that it will still be important to maintain the greatest vigilance towards Rumania and towards Wrangel.<sup>57</sup>

But this did not imply that the West Front would be vastly strengthened. On the contrary, since the rejection of the Curzon note, the Russian advance had proceeded with such success that the capture of Warsaw, and the surrender of Poland seemed imminent. With the Polish threat so much reduced, Kamenev and Stalin/Egorov began planning the shift of forces toward Wrangel in the Crimea. Tukhachevsky recalled somewhat indignantly that:

Our continuous success on the West Front had removed

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<sup>56</sup> Tukhachevsky, p. 252.

<sup>57</sup> IIGV, p. 329.

all doubt as to our ultimate victory, and it had therefore been proposed to withdraw a considerable number of divisions from the West and South west Fronts and send them to the Crimea. Sometimes we had to fight to prevent our units from being interfered with.<sup>58</sup>

On 1 August, Kamenev's headquarters produced the "High Command Plan for an Operation against Wrangel."<sup>59</sup> It was unsatisfactory to Stalin/Egorov in only one respect; it did not provide for the participation in the Wrangel operation of the Cavalry Army, which Stalin, at least, was anxious to keep under his wing.

Budenny states in his account that South-West command had "decided" by the beginning of August that his Cavalry Army would be sent to the Crimea as soon as L'vov fell.<sup>60</sup> In response to the headquarters' plan, Stalin and Egorov telegraphed a request to Kamenev that he approve "after the seizure of L'vov the transfer without delay of six cavalry divisions from the Cavalry Army" to the Crimea.<sup>61</sup>

In Moscow, meanwhile, even bigger plans were afoot. Trotsky advised the Politburo on 2 August, that:

(1) In view of Wrangel's success and of the alarm in the Kuban, it is essential to recognize the front against Wrangel as having vast significance in its own right, to give it a separate status of its own and to charge Comrade Stalin with . . . concentrating his forces entirely on the Wrangel front . . . ; (2) Field headquarters is to work out at once a plan for bringing the Wrangel front up to strength [so that] within the next two weeks

<sup>58</sup>Tukhachevsky, p. 253.

<sup>59</sup>DGKKA, p. 706.

<sup>60</sup>Budenny, quoted in Davies, p. 213.

<sup>61</sup>DKFKA, Vol. III, p. 241.



not fewer than about 30,000 men shall be supplied to it; (3) The South-West and West Fronts are to be merged.<sup>62</sup>

Trotsky's recommendations were issued as a Politburo decision the same day.

Diplomatic, as well as military considerations influenced the decision. After the rejection of the Curzon note, Russo-Polish negotiations had continued in London. It seemed likely that Poland would agree to peace terms very favourable to Russia, to stave off complete defeat at the hands of the approaching Red Army. Both Lenin and Trotsky were inclined to feel that it might be wise to settle for that in order to deal immediately with the threat of Wrangel. No doubt influencing Lenin's opinion was the realization that contrary to his earlier expectations, the Polish proletariat had not risen in revolution at the approach of the Red Army.

Lenin immediately cabled Stalin:

We have decided, in the Politburo, that the Army Groups shall be separated, so that you will deal exclusively with Wrangel. Following the uprisings, especially in the Kuban and then in Siberia, the Wrangel danger is becoming enormous, and the opinion is mounting in the Central Committee that peace with bourgeois Poland should be concluded immediately. Please study the Wrangel situation very carefully and let us know your conclusions. I have arranged with the Commander-in-Chief that you are to get more ammunition, reinforcements and aircraft.<sup>63</sup>

This news seems to have caught Stalin in a tired and irritated mood, and perhaps somewhat astonished at an unexpected turn of events. Protesting that he could work only two more weeks at most, and was in

<sup>62</sup>Trotsky Papers, Vol. II, p. 240.

<sup>63</sup>Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 248.

need of a rest, he commented on the separation of fronts that:

The Politburo should not occupy itself with such trifles. . . . I do not believe the headquarters promises [about reinforcements] for one minute; it only undermines with its promises. As for the mood of the Central Committee in favour of peace with Poland, it is impossible not to notice that our diplomacy sometimes succeeds very well in destroying the results of our military victories.<sup>64</sup>

Lenin was taken aback by Stalin's reply, evidently having supposed that Stalin would be pleased to be able to concentrate exclusively on Wrangel. He outlined in his reply to Stalin the reasons for the separation of the fronts, assured him that the Politburo would not let diplomacy destroy his victories, and that he would "ask headquarters to tell you why there is a delay in the promises." In the meantime, Stalin was to give his reasons for objecting to separation of fronts.<sup>65</sup>

Stalin's reply quite sensibly pointed out the practical administrative and organizational problems that such a re-assignment of forces represented. "It is not merely a question of joining up two fronts but more particularly one of sorting out and re-allocating headquarters, command machinery, and resources." Careful thought would have to be given to re-assigning specific responsibilities. As Stalin saw it:

The South-West Front is not being broken up and shared out but will remain intact [renamed] as the new South Front while those armies transferred . . . to the West Front would be maintained where they are at present by arrangement with West Front headquarters.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 441, note 280.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>66</sup> IIGV, Vol. III, p. 336. My emphasis.

Stalin's intentions were quite clear. His headquarters organization was to remain intact, and assume control of Crimean operations as a body, an intention confirmed by Budenny's account.<sup>67</sup> He also seemed to presume that, although their orders would come from the West Front, no major change in the direction of movement of the 12th and Cavalry Armies would take place. With these assumptions in mind, Stalin and Egorov on 4 August ordered those two armies to establish direct communications with West Front headquarters in Minsk.<sup>68</sup>

The Cavalry Army, meanwhile, was encountering strong resistance, much to the annoyance of Egorov and Stalin, who addressed to Budenny a sharp upbraiding on 29 July, calling his failure to take L'vov on schedule "incomprehensible."<sup>69</sup> On 4 August, Budenny signalled that his army was exhausted and had to rest. He had therefore on his own authority gone over to the defensive. Despite the earlier criticism, Stalin approved of this act when informing Lenin of it the following day.<sup>70</sup> On 6 August, Kamenev informed both front headquarters of the imminent transfer of 14th, 12th and Cavalry Armies to West Front control, and confirmed the move by placing the Cavalry Army in reserve "for a rest, pending a new assignment."<sup>71</sup> When Stalin and Egorov passed on this order to Budenny, it placed the army on front reserve, which in

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<sup>67</sup>Budenny, Vol. II, p. 305.

<sup>68</sup>IIGV, Vol. III, p. 339.

<sup>69</sup>DKFKA, Vol. III, p. 235.

<sup>70</sup>IIGV, Vol. III, p. 340.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 341.

military terms meant they were liable to be recalled to the L'vov operation at any moment. According to Budenny, this remained the situation for several days. He relates that Egorov informed Voroshilov (the Cavalry Army commissar) on 10 August, that the Cavalry Army, although due to be transferred to West Front control, should meanwhile remain ready to march on L'vov.<sup>72</sup>

This minor amendment of Kamenev's order was probably not accidental. Stalin, as has already been noted, intended to use the Cavalry Army in the Crimea after the war with Poland ended, which he believed would be very soon. Thus, while he seemed willing enough to let administrative control of that vital army pass to Tukhachevsky, Stalin did not intend that it stray far from its ultimate goal, the Crimea.

Stalin was making this point to Lenin the very day that he ordered the Cavalry Army to establish communications with the West Front (4 August). His opinion had been solicited by Lenin, who told him to

. . . send us . . . your conclusions on the nature of the difficulties encountered by Budenny and those on the Wrangel front, as well as the military prospects on both fronts. Political decisions of the utmost importance may depend on your conclusions.<sup>73</sup>

Stalin was still in an irritable mood, and responded sulkily:

I do not know why you need my opinion, therefore I am not in a position to transmit to you the conclusions you demand and I limit myself to responding the bare facts without interpretation.

and then he proceeded to give his conclusions. L'vov, he felt, would be

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<sup>72</sup>Budenny, Vol. II, pp. 288-89.

<sup>73</sup>Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 249.

taken "after some delay." On the Crimean Front: "We are now rather weak, but still are holding the enemy; in a week we will begin to advance with 30,000 new bayonets,<sup>74</sup> and . . . we will have superior forces on our side . . . Wrangel's fortunes will decline . . . if headquarters transfers the [First] Cavalry to us, Wrangel will be completely liquidated by early autumn."<sup>75</sup>

The "political decisions of the utmost importance" concerning which Lenin had requested Stalin's assessment, related to further peace initiatives from the west. Lenin informed Stalin on 7 August that no decision had been made, but "I am sure that your success against Wrangel will help remove the indecision in the Central Committee. A very great deal depends on Warsaw and her fate."<sup>76</sup> Stalin could have interpreted this as support by Lenin for the Crimean campaign, for by that date, Warsaw's fate seemed sealed. Tukhachevsky's armies, in order to bypass the eastern defences of that city, had swung far to the west and north of the city, widening the gap between the West and South-West Front armies.

The Polish commander, Pilsudski, had noted the growing gap, and was secretly assembling Polish forces opposite it. Tukhachevsky may have had some inkling of this, for it is at about this time that he began to press for the handover to him of the 12th and Cavalry Armies.

Through Kamenev, Tukhachevsky informed Stalin and Egorov that in addition to these armies, a special communications network was

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<sup>74</sup>As promised by Trotsky and Glavkom as part of the separation of the fronts.

<sup>75</sup>IIGV, p. 338. My emphasis.

<sup>76</sup>DGKKA, pp. 707-08.

required to link them with West Front headquarters.<sup>77</sup> Stalin objected that the communications equipment available to the South-West Front was not enough to provide such a link, and an attempt to create one would "result in obvious paralysis in control of the rest of the front in fulfillment of its task of liquidating Wrangel."<sup>78</sup> He offered to turn over command of the armies as soon as West Front could establish a communications point to control them.

Was this lack of communications apparatus a genuine problem or an attempt by Stalin to preserve his control over the Cavalry Army? In his 1923 lectures, Tukhachevsky certainly supported Stalin's contention:

When, however, after debouching on the [Brest-Litovsk] line, . . . we attempted to unify the two fronts, the task proved almost impracticable in view of the complete absence of signalling apparatus. . . . With the wretched material at our disposal, we could not carry this task through quickly -- in any case not before August 13th or 14th -- although even at the end of July the situation made it absolutely necessary that all the forces should at once be brought under a single command.<sup>79</sup>

Another piece of evidence is simply the distances involved. Stalin's headquarters at Kharkov was roughly 400 miles from L'vov, near which its armies were operating. Minsk, Tukhachevsky's headquarters, is about 300 miles from Warsaw. An additional link between the West Front headquarters and the South-West armies would have added almost another 400 miles. Given the state of communications art in 1920, and what the

<sup>77</sup> IIGV, Vol. III, p. 342.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>79</sup> Tukhachevsky, p. 252.

First World War and three years of Civil War must have done to the equipment, it is remarkable that either headquarters had reliable contact with its units. Barring further evidence, it is safe to say that Stalin was honestly unable to respond to Tukhachevsky's communications needs.

Kamenev does not seem to have shared Tukhachevsky's sense of urgency. On 7 August, he was recorded telling Tukhachevsky not to "count on the help of the 12th Army, that is . . . facing enemy forces. . . ." <sup>80</sup> Budenny gives a similar account, claiming that "Kamenev told Tukhachevsky that the immediate transfer of armies did not appear necessary." <sup>81</sup>

Then, on 11 August, Lenin excitedly telegraphed Stalin to announce:

We have just received a dispatch from the head of the Soviet delegation in London . . . . Lloyd George has declared that he advises Poland to accept our armistice terms, including disarmament, the handing over of weapons to our workers, land distribution, etc. Our victory is a great one, and will be complete if we smash Wrangel. Here we are taking all measures. You, for your part, should make every effort to take the whole of the Crimea without fail, during the present offensive. Everything now depends on that. <sup>82</sup>

To Stalin, this must have seemed virtually an announcement that the war with Poland was over, particularly considering his conviction that Poland was little more than a puppet of the Entente.

By unfortunate coincidence, Commander-in-Chief Kamenev, perhaps at last alerted to the danger of the Lublin gap by intelligence reports from

<sup>80</sup> IIGV, p. 347.

<sup>81</sup> Budenny, Vol. II, p. 276.

<sup>82</sup> Lenin, PSS, Vol. LI, p. 254.

Budenny,<sup>83</sup> had issued orders the same day instructing the South-West Front to carry out "the timely breaking off of the L'vov operation" and send "as large a force as possible towards Lublin . . . to assist Tukhachevsky's left flank." Command of the Cavalry and 12th Armies, the order continued, was transferred immediately to the West Front.<sup>84</sup> A second order instructed the 12th Army to march on Lublin immediately.<sup>85</sup>

These orders were both ignored by South-West Front. It is possible that, in light of Lenin's telegram of the same day, Stalin considered the orders to have been overtaken by events, and therefore no longer relevant.<sup>86</sup> The following day (12 August) the Cavalry Army was ordered by Stalin and Egorov to advance once again toward L'vov. Budenny later claimed that Egorov told him that the West Front was already victorious and did not need the Cavalry Army's support.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, a suggestion was sent to Kamenev that six divisions of the Cavalry Army be withdrawn for use in the Crimea.<sup>88</sup> If Stalin had some sinister purpose in ignoring the orders, it seems unlikely that he would immediately alert Kamenev to his disobedience by proposing a different plan. Yet if he seriously thought an immediate move to the Crimea was appropriate, why commit the Cavalry Army to the L'vov operation?

<sup>83</sup>Budenny, Vol. II, p. 306.

<sup>84</sup>IIGV, Vol. III, pp. 348-49.

<sup>85</sup>DGKKA, p. 709.

<sup>86</sup>Seaton, p. 72.

<sup>87</sup>Budenny, Vol. II, pp. 288-89.

<sup>88</sup>IIGV, Vol. III, p. 350.



A possible explanation is that, upon receiving the orders, Stalin realized Kamenev was serious about removing his two most active armies from his control, and sending them north on a mission that, in light of Lenin's telegram, was pointless. Determined to prevent this from taking place, he committed the Cavalry Army to battle so that it would not be in a position to accept a new assignment.

The telegram, proposing to send the Cavalry Army to the Crimea, was simply intended to make Stalin's views known to Kamenev, and thus give the Commander-in-Chief an opportunity to "change his mind", just as Stalin had done weeks earlier in the teleprinter discussion already described. This time, however, Kamenev was not so amenable. His reply pointed out that six divisions were the bulk of the Cavalry Army, and so removing them to the Crimea was impossible.<sup>89</sup>

Nor can it be ignored that L'vov seemed nearly in the grasp of Budenny's cavalry. It may well have seemed ridiculous to Stalin not to seize that city, rather than send the Army off on an unnecessary errand, and throw away the fruits of several weeks fighting.

On receipt of Stalin's 12 August telegram, asking that the Cavalry Army be sent to the Crimea, Kamenev realized his orders had not been put into effect. In response to an inquiry, Stalin responded that the 11 August orders had just been received, and that the cause of the delay would be investigated. The South-West Front armies "are engaged in clearing the area of L'vov . . . . A change in the basic tasks of the army under present conditions, I consider to be impossible."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Egorov, p. 121.

<sup>90</sup>DGKKA, p. 711.

All of this is entirely too convenient for Stalin to be taken seriously. The teleprinter lines between Kamenev's headquarters and the South-West Front headquarters had been working all summer. None of the published documents that were carried on those lines mentions confusion caused by strayed messages. Stalin was almost certainly lying, or, at best, covering up his initial assumption that the orders were irrelevant. As to the impossibility of withdrawing the armies committed to battle, one need only refer to Stalin's own suggestion of the day before that the Cavalry Army be withdrawn to the Crimea. As Albert Seaton aptly observed: "The ease of disengagement apparently depended on the direction in which the Cavalry Army was to be sent."<sup>91</sup>

Budenny quotes Stalin as telling Kamenev the same day (12 August):

Your order needlessly frustrates the operations of the South-West Front, which has already commenced its advance. This order should either have been issued three days ago when [Budenny] was in reserve or else should have been postponed until L'vov had fallen.<sup>92</sup>

This was simply adding insult to skullduggery. It was putting on record that Kamenev, not Stalin, was lax in issuing orders, and deliberately distorting the situation by suggesting that Budenny's cavalry had been fighting for three days, when in fact they had been ordered into battle only the day before.

After Stalin's refusal to disengage the Cavalry Army, Kamenev issued more firmly-worded orders: the 12th and Cavalry Armies would come under the command of West Front as of noon, 14 August, and Tukhachevsky's

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<sup>91</sup>Seaton, p. 72.

<sup>92</sup>Budenny, pp. 310-11.

commands were to be passed through the South-West Front signals network for the time being.<sup>93</sup> U

When Egorov prepared orders to the 12th and Cavalry Armies, repeating Kamenev's instructions, Stalin, now in open revolt, refused to sign them. A junior commissar, R. I. Berzin, finally did so, under threats from Trotsky.<sup>94</sup> Even then, the orders, transmitted in the evening of 13 August, only transferred command, and made no reference to proceeding north to Lublin,<sup>95</sup> so Budenny's attack on L'vov continued, in the absence of orders to the contrary from Tukhachevsky.

On 16 August, Pilsudski's armies struck through the Lublin gap, meeting no resistance. Stalin was recalled to Moscow the next day. Budenny delayed responding to Tukhachevsky's orders until 20 August, by which time it was, of course, far too late. It is generally supposed that he was in league with Stalin in blocking the movement of the Cavalry Army, but there is evidence that he may have been quite legitimately entangled in fighting with the Polish forces around L'vov.<sup>96</sup> It was certainly the intention of Pilsudski to tie down the Cavalry Army if he could, to prevent it from interfering in his counter-attack. He had ordered his army before L'vov to fall back fighting and draw the Russians on, and to counter-attack fiercely at the first sign of a Russian withdrawal northwards.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> IIGV, Vol. III, p. 351.

<sup>94</sup> Trotsky, My Life, p. 458, and in fuller detail on what is almost certainly the same incident in his Stalin, pp. 296-97.

<sup>95</sup> IIGV, Vol. III, p. 352.

<sup>96</sup> Davies, pp. 216-17.

<sup>97</sup> Pilsudski, pp. 167-68.

The scope of the Soviet reversal did not become apparent for several days. On 19 August, Stalin was still urging preparation for a winter campaign against Poland, but a week later, when it was clear that the Russian armies would be forced to withdraw at least beyond the Polish border, the Politburo was ready to make concessions to end the war.<sup>98</sup> The decision was made to assign first priority to the Wrangel Front and although Stalin was tasked with "a number of special measures"<sup>99</sup> relating to that front, he was not permitted to return there.

Since he would have been an obvious choice for such a post, there was presumably at least tacit agreement that Stalin could no longer be trusted with a command post. Yet there was no evidence that Stalin was openly criticized for his role in the defeat. The only time that Trotsky says the matter came up was at the Tenth Party Congress the following March. He relates<sup>100</sup> that during secret debates on the Polish war, Stalin blamed Smilga, Tukhachevsky's commissar, for the reversal. His line of argument was that Smilga had "promised" that Warsaw would be taken by 12 August, and the South-West Front, thus "deceived", had based its actions on that unfulfilled promise. Trotsky himself made the obviously correct reply that:

Smilga's "promise" meant merely that he had hoped to take Warsaw; but that hope did not eliminate the element of the unexpected, which is peculiar to all wars, and under no circumstances did it give anybody

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<sup>98</sup>Wandycz, p. 241.

<sup>99</sup>Trotsky Papers, Vol. II, pp. 260-62.

<sup>100</sup>Trotsky, Stalin, p. 329.

the right to act on the basis of an a priori calculation instead of the realistic development of operations.<sup>101</sup>

There may have been a small element of truth in Stalin's assertion. The announced intention to take Warsaw by a certain date,<sup>102</sup> could have been another factor in convincing Stalin and Egorov that the war was all but over. Lenin, as usual, was upset by the squabble and insisted that there was no need to blame anyone personally.<sup>103</sup>

And so there the matter was dropped, at least officially, with no blame attached to anyone. Neither Lenin nor Trotsky wished to create dissension in the upper echelon of the party and risk a serious split. As Trotsky later related rather piously, "guided by my concern for the prestige of the government as a whole and the desire not to inject quarrels into the army, which was sufficiently disturbed anyway, I did not remind them publicly about the sharp conflict . . . with so much as a single word."<sup>104</sup>

An armistice with Poland was arranged, and took effect on 12 October. A Soviet offensive against the Crimea, in which Budenny's Cavalry Army participated, ended successfully on 16 November. The Russo-Polish War formally ended with the signing of the Treaty of Riga, 18 March 1921.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> On 22 July, Tukhachevsky and Smilga had in fact ordered the capture of Warsaw by 12 August. It is worth noting that Stalin assumed Smilga, the commissar, not Kamenev, the commander, was responsible for the order, which may have been a subconscious reflection of his own dominant position on the South-West Front.

<sup>103</sup> Trotsky, Stalin, p. 329.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

## CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing, what can now be said about Stalin at the time of the Civil War?

On the positive side, he possessed an ability to overcome local inertia by sheer force of personality, and to strengthen local party and army apparatus. Even Trotsky acknowledged this ability on occasion.<sup>1</sup> Stalin was also capable of intelligent, perceptive assessments, as demonstrated by his opposition to the invasion of Poland and (when he had not lost his temper) by the quality of the assessments he sent Lenin. His loyalty to the revolution, and the energy which he expended in what he perceived to be the interests of the revolution, are also admirable.

Perhaps Stalin's most dominant characteristic was his single-minded determination to accomplish tasks he considered essential, by the most direct methods available. It was this characteristic, rather than a thirst for military glory, that does much to explain his persistence in defence of Tsaritsyn, in attacking L'vov, and in advocating an attack on Wrangel -- all of which represented unfinished tasks.

This single-minded approach unfortunately also meant a self-centered viewpoint. Stalin was usually incapable of appreciating anyone's problems but his own. As his dispatches make clear, he was impatient with delays, sulky or angry when balked, and inclined to suspect the motives of those who would not, or could not, co-operate with him.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, his agreement that Stalin should be sent to Perm in December 1918, Trotsky Papers, Vol. I, pp. 228-230.

Ultimately, as his conduct in the Warsaw reinforcements affair demonstrates, Stalin was prepared to distort facts, resort to subterfuge and even lie outright, to get his tasks accomplished.

Although it can never be determined with certainty, Stalin's behaviour during the Civil War does not seem to have been that of an intriguer after power. True, he did not hesitate to use underhanded methods to oust a "specialist" or embarrass a rival, but everything he did in this period had an immediate military motive. There is no question, for example, of Stalin's genuine mistrust of "specialists", and so his intrigues were directed against them and against Trotsky because Trotsky supported the "specialists." He was critical of the RVSR because it would not give him reinforcements, and thus critical of Trotsky because Trotsky headed the RVSR. He gathered the Tsaritsyn group about him because they were of a like mind on the issue of specialists and on Glavkom's ignorance of the front situation. There is no hint that he already had in mind their support in the intra-party struggles five years later.

Trotsky's assertion that Stalin "remained behind the scenes, manoeuvring and waiting"<sup>2</sup> is a distortion based on subsequent events, in which Trotsky would have us believe (and probably believed himself) that Stalin even during the Civil War, was already planning to succeed Lenin. As this paper has made clear, Stalin's rudely and openly expressed opinions, accusations and criticisms could scarcely have been more "up front."

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<sup>2</sup>Trotsky, Falsification, p. 50.

While Stalin was an able director of individuals, it cannot be said that he was a leader of men, in the sense that Voroshilov led the 10th Army at Tsaritsyn or Budenny led his cavalry, by inspiring masses of men with their example and popularity. Stalin never attempted to do so, and so this lack of ability might have gone unnoticed, had not Trotsky sought to contrast his own leadership ability with that of his rival:

There were two aspects of military work in the epoch of the Civil War. One was to select the necessary workers, to make proper disposition of them, to establish the necessary supervision over the commanding staff, to extirpate the suspects, to exert pressure, to punish. All of these activities of the administrative machine suited Stalin's talents to perfection. But there was also another side, which had to do with the necessity of improvising an Army out of human raw material, appealing to the hearts of the soldiers and the commanders, arousing their better selves, and inspiring them with confidence in the new leadership. Of this Stalin was utterly incapable. It is impossible, for example, to imagine Stalin appearing under the open sky before a regiment; for that he did not have any qualifications at all. He never addressed himself to the troops with written appeals, evidently not trusting his own seminarist rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> His influence at those sectors of the front where he worked was not significant. It remained impersonal, bureaucratic and policemanlike.<sup>4</sup>

While Trotsky is clearly wrong to label Stalin's influence at the fronts as insignificant, there is some justice in his summary of Stalin's talents and limitations. Stalin directed a front from headquarters,

<sup>3</sup> This is not true. Numerous appeals and congratulatory messages to the troops, signed by Stalin, are in his Sochineniia and elsewhere, although to be sure they are fewer, shorter, and less elaborate than Trotsky's, in Kak vooruzalas revoliutsiia.

<sup>4</sup> Trotsky, Stalin, p. 270.



and had no interest in leading in the field. That he gathered a group of friends around him at Tsaritsyn and Viatka suggests that he could sometimes impress and influence individuals, but could also simply show that his party rank attracted to him men of limited talent anxious to improve their fortunes as followers of great men.

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Stalin's constant appeals for reinforcements, and his emphasis on massive frontal assaults against an enemy, betray a lack of tactical imagination. Arguably such tactics were effective in civil war situations such as Tsaritsyn where the front line was ill-defined if it existed at all, but by 1920 the Red Army had become a conventional one facing a conventionally-organized Polish army. Although Stalin's directives talked much of threatening his enemies' flank and rear, and although the Cavalry Army was formed with both its strength and manoeuvrability in mind, Stalin, as has been noted, objected to it being sent to "blunder about like mammoths" in the enemies' rear, and, at the climax of the Polish invasion, it was directed to attack the defenses in front of L'vov. Thus, having created a powerful, manoeuvrable force, Stalin refused to let it be used where it would be most effective, and instead treated it as conventional mass infantry, to be thrown against static defenses.

Stalin even saw no great need for a continuous front; concentrated forces were the essential need:

Above all, the troops must be taught to rid themselves of the fear of open spaces at their flanks. While maintaining close contact with the adjacent detachments,

it is not necessary to seek elbow-liaison, but to operate through the utmost possible concentration of striking forces on the most important operative directions.<sup>5</sup>

This primitive tactical sense suggests that Stalin did not feel comfortable with complexity. He liked matters simple, clearcut, and unrefined. This was useful when sent to correct matters at Tsaritsyn or Viatka, for it enabled him to identify quickly the most significant problems and see them corrected without becoming bogged down in detail as a professional administrator might have. But in other ways, it was a limiting factor. He could not appreciate gradations of opinion or loyalty; an individual was either loyal to the revolution (and by implication, to Lenin and Stalin) or he was a White Guard agent and a traitor. He did not like to tackle new assignments if the old one was incomplete. Hence, his refusal to go to the Caucasus when the South-West Front was heavily committed to a variety of tasks, and his insistence on the importance of Wrangel even in the face of a Polish invasion.

But despite his abrasive telegrams and dislike for complexities, Stalin could be subtle when he chose. For example, though he rarely resorted to outright lying, he liked to use deliberate mis-labelling to belittle an individual, as when in dispatches from Tsaritsyn he referred to Sytin as a local commander, and similarly when he claimed that it was Kamenev who was late in issuing orders during the Warsaw reinforcement incident.

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<sup>5</sup> Voroshilov, p. 63.

It would be unreasonable to judge the Red Army command structure, or the system of military commissars, on the basis of Stalin's performance alone. His membership in the Politburo and -- even more important -- his close personal relations with Lenin, made him a very atypical commissar. No doubt the vast majority of more junior commissars were reasonably cooperative with higher authority or the Red Army could not have functioned.

It is equally clear, though, that Stalin was not alone among senior party men in using political leverage in his military activities, as witness the intercession of Gusev and Smilga in support of Kamenev's re-instatement, and eventual promotion to Commander-in-Chief. Voroshilov's vocal promotion of his own front was possible only because Stalin's patronage gave him influence in (and protection from) the upper levels of the Party. Trotsky, too, mixed Party and military affairs, but he had a duty to do so, as Commissar for War.

That a situation could exist in which an army's command structure contained men who were simultaneously its middle-rank officers and its most senior policy-makers is a reflection not on the commissar organization, but on the Party's adherence, under Lenin, to collective leadership. By encouraging senior party members to treat him only as first among equals, Lenin permitted and promoted the squabbling and independent leanings of those of his associates who had self-assertive personalities. When, in the chaotic conditions of the Civil War, these same self-assertive personalities were needed for rapid unscrambling of local crises, or supervision of a front when trusted senior commissars were in short supply, the only possible arbitrator of their opinions was not their immediate superior, but Lenin himself.

Perhaps Stalin learned from his own successful insubordination. Temperamentally unsuited to delegating authority, and a believer in central control, he would complete the process -- begun even while Lenin was alive -- of concentrating authority in fewer and fewer hands, and at last solely in his own.

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It is clear that Stalin's effect on the course of the Russian Civil War was greater than history has generally acknowledged. He was an important participant in the defence of Petrograd, and perhaps a vital one in the battle for Tsaritsyn. It was through the influence of Stalin and his proteges that Kamenev became Commander-in-Chief, eclipsing for a time the influence of Trotsky. During the debate with the military opposition, Stalin's support of the Lenin-Trotsky position may have been more vital than available sources suggest, for it has been shown that Stalin was not without influence over Lenin in military matters. Had Stalin been absent or acted differently in any of these situations, the course of the Civil War might have been radically altered.

Whether the alteration would have been beneficial for the Red forces is another question. Stalin's insubordinate behaviour may have occasionally had some justification, and certainly did from Stalin's point of view, but as Trotsky pointed out, the vital advantage enjoyed by the Red Army was that they had central lines of communication and control, while their many enemies could not co-ordinate attacks, spread as they were around a long periphery:

We were able to move our forces and mass them for thrusts in the most important directions at any given moment.

But this advantage was available to us on the sole condition of complete centralization in management and command . . . we had to be in a position to issue orders and have them obeyed instead of arguing about them.<sup>6</sup>

Stalin, by disobedience, obstruction, appeals to Lenin, and diversion of supplies and reinforcements, persistently undercut this vital coordination, and thus more than compensated for his positive accomplishments.

Stalin's negative influence is most obvious in August 1920, when he prevented the reinforcement of Tukhachevsky's armies before Warsaw. As discussed, Stalin's defenders in this matter argue that blame for the defeat of the Russian armies can be placed also on the front commanders, the Commander-in-Chief, or even Lenin. However valid these arguments in isolation, they are irrelevant in face of the clear fact that had Stalin (and Egorov) responded promptly to Kamenev's orders of 11 August, the defeat probably would not have occurred. Pilsudski, the Polish commander-in-chief, is absolutely clear on this:

The elimination of the strong battle force that the enemy possessed in Budenny's cavalry was a basic condition for the successful execution of my plan . . . . Their correct line of march was the one which would have brought them nearer to the Russian main armies commanded by Tukhachevsky, and this would also have threatened the greatest danger to us. Everything seemed black and hopeless to me, the only bright spots on the horizon being the failure of Budenny's cavalry to attack my rear and the weakness displayed by the 12th Red Army.<sup>7</sup>

Even Tukhachevsky's cautious 1923 lecture said that had the Cavalry Army been promptly dispatched, the movement to Lublin

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<sup>6</sup> Trotsky, Stalin, p. 298.

<sup>7</sup> Pilsudski, p. 137.

could quite easily have been carried out before the Polish southern group could attack . . . had we been provided with better cover in that direction, the Polish army, thus disposed would have been unable to take any offensive action, would indeed undoubtedly have been crushed.<sup>8</sup>

If Stalin's influence on the Civil War was considerable, the reverse cannot be said. There was already in the Stalin of 1918 most of the characteristics, prejudices, and methods of the dictator he would one day become. The foregoing study reveals the remarkable consistency of Stalin's behaviour over more than two years of working in an unfamiliar post-revolutionary military environment that would have had a considerable effect on a younger and more impressionable party worker. The assumptions of Ulam, Hingley and others, discussed in the introduction, are contradicted by the evidence, which makes clear that Stalin changed not at all during the Civil War, which was to him simply another party matter, on a larger scale, and so an environment in which he moved with the familiarity of long experience.

The Civil War did not change Stalin, but that is not to say that he learned nothing. Stalin learned from the Civil War that Lenin valued him as much as Trotsky, and that he was subordinate to no one and immune to punishment. He discovered, too, the power that was available to a legitimate government as opposed to an underground organization, and that factionalism was still a force even in a one-party bureaucracy.

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<sup>8</sup> Tukhachevsky, pp. 257-59.

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