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Communists and the Red Cavalry: the Political Education of the *Konarmii* in the Russian Civil War, 1918–20

STEPHEN BROWN

SOVIET writers long maintained that the political education of the Red Army was one of the great success stories of the Russian Civil War of 1918–20. The work of political education took on special importance in the Red Army because the majority of its soldiers were peasants. From the perspective of Soviet leaders, the peasant mentality was individualistic, conservative and backward. In class terms, peasants were ‘petty-bourgeois’ because of their attachment to small-scale property and to trade.¹ While repression played an important role in the Red Army during the Civil War, leaders of the Soviet state saw the imposition of discipline from above as a necessary but not a sufficient means of motivating and controlling peasant soldiers. The political backwardness of peasants was a cause of concern but not of despair to Communists who looked upon themselves as first-rate political agitators and propagandists. The Red Army in the Civil War was a testing ground for Communists in the business of political education. The aim was to render as many soldiers as possible ‘politically literate’.²

Soviet writers described the attempt to raise the political consciousness of Red Army soldiers as political work (*politrabota*). Leon Trotskii, Soviet Commissar for War, opined that peasant soldiers in the tsarist army had ‘shot, slashed, chopped and died . . . with each man individually unaware of why and for what he was fighting. When the soldier began to reflect and criticize, he rebelled, and the old army disappeared.’ For the Red Army to avoid this fate it was necessary that ‘every soldier should know what he is fighting for’.³ Between December

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¹ O. Figes, ‘The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War, 1918–1920’, *Past and Present*, 129, 1990 (hereafter ‘The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation’), pp. 168–211 (169).

² Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State*, Ithaca, 1990 (hereafter *Soldiers*), p. 100.

³ L. Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, trans. B. Pearce, in *The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, 5 vols, London, 1979, II, p. 20.

1918 and July 1920, the Red Army's 'Political Administration', better known by its acronym *PUR*, dispatched nearly 20,000 Communist Party workers to Red Army fronts and armies.⁴ Soviet leaders believed that the success of political work would be measured in terms of positive attitudes among soldiers towards the Communist Party and its policies. It was assumed that politically-conscious soldiers would prove superior fighters.

Directing Red Army fronts and armies were collegial bodies known as 'revolutionary military councils', upon which served not only the commander but at least one and usually two senior Communists. Their tasks included overseeing political work and general matters of soldier morale. 'Commissars' were appointed to Red Army divisions, brigades and regiments. In the early days of the Civil War a commissar's function was primarily to vet the orders of the unit commander but, with the passage of time, he was called upon to devote more and more energy to political work in his unit. Each army and division had its own political department (*politotdel*). The responsibilities of political departments included publishing and distributing newspapers, recruiting Party members, organizing political meetings and compiling reports on individuals and units.

While not accepting all the claims made in Soviet literature, Western writers have tended to the view that political work enhanced the performance of the Red Army in the Civil War.⁵ It has even been claimed that the political education of the Red Army was 'a process through which the new Soviet political leadership and a substantial part of its citizenry improvised and forged a provisional social contract'.⁶ In other words, efforts at political education in the Red Army served as an effective means of socializing peasant soldiers, of transforming peasants into citizens of the Soviet state. According to this view, Soviet leaders came to see the Red Army as a 'school of the revolution' and a model for civilian institutions of the Soviet state.

How successful was the Red Army's programme of political education in the light of the goals set for it by Soviet leaders? Did Soviet leaders consider the political education of the Red Army in the Civil War to have been successful? These questions are not easy to answer on the basis of published Soviet materials. Soviet memoir literature and the latter-day testimony of Soviet political and military leaders cannot be accepted at face value, for Communists generally had a vested interest in describing the political education of the Red Army as having

⁴ *Direktivy komandovaniia frontov Krasnoi Armii (1917-1922 gg.): sbornik dokumentov*, ed. N. Azovtsev, 4 vols, Moscow, 1971-78 (hereafter *Direktivy*), IV, p. 253.

⁵ See, for example, von Hagen, *Soldiers*, p. 113 and Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, Boston, 1987 (hereafter *Civil War*), p. 180.

⁶ von Hagen, *Soldiers*, p. 9.

been successful. The failure of the Russian Revolution to spread beyond the area inherited from the tsars meant that its new rulers were left perched astride an unruly peasant land that was instinctively hostile to city-based Communists. Political education represented the means by which Communists hoped to bridge the political and cultural gap that separated them from their peasant subjects.

Until recently, comparing latter-day Soviet accounts with the contemporary record was very difficult for Western researchers because of the unavailability of Red Army archives. A further complication lay in the fact that the front-line Red Army was itself a diverse force, comprising several fronts and some twenty individual armies dispersed across the length and breadth of the lands of the former Russian Empire. Western scholars gave priority to the central institutions of the Red Army in the Civil War while its front-line soldiers represented a neglected area of research.⁷ Case studies of individual fronts and armies will be required before a convincing overall picture of the Red Army's political education emerges.

The present article is an examination of political work in the First Cavalry Army or *Konarmiiia*, the Red Army's élite cavalry unit. The *Konarmiiia* was one of the few Red Army units to earn the respect of its 'White' and Polish opponents.⁸ It was the spearhead of Red Army campaigns against the White Army of General Anton Denikin in south Russia (October 1919–March 1920) and Poland (May–September 1920).⁹ The *Konarmiiia*'s commander, Semen Budennyi, was the most famous of the Red Army soldiers of the Civil War era. It might be thought that, as the Red Army's best-performing unit, the *Konarmiiia* would have displayed superior loyalty to the Soviet government. This was not the case. The *Konarmiiia* example turned the Soviet pairing of fighting ability and political consciousness on its head. Contemporary observers noted the warlike qualities of the *Konarmiiia* but also the apparent failure of its political education.

The *Konarmiiia* was the subject of one of the most famous literary creations of the early Soviet period, Isaac Babel's *Konarmiiia*.¹⁰ Babel's protagonist in *Konarmiiia* was a Communist whose disillusionment with

⁷ For a recent discussion of the state of research, see E. Mawdsley, 'Soldiers and Sailors' in *Society and Politics in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Robert Service, New York, 1992, pp. 103–17.

⁸ The term 'White' refers to the movement led by former tsarist officers and Cossacks. For the effectiveness of the *Konarmiiia*, see A. Denikin, *Ocherki Russkoi smuty*, 5 vols, Paris, 1921–26, IV, pp. 203–05 and A. Golubintsev, *Ruskaia vandeia*, Munich, 1959, p. 88. For a Polish opinion on the *Konarmiiia*, see J. Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, New York 1972, p. 148.

⁹ For a brief account of its role in these campaigns, see *The Modern Encyclopaedia of Russian and Soviet History*, ed. J. Wiczynski, 48 vols, Gulf Breeze, 1976–88, XI, pp. 174–76. For a more detailed account, see S. Brown, 'The First Cavalry Army in the Russian Civil War, 1918–20', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wollongong, 1990.

¹⁰ See Isaac Babel, *Collected Stories*, translated by Walter Morrison, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 37–168.

political work and sense of failure as an educator closely matched Babel's own experience as a political worker in the Konarmiiia during the Soviet–Polish War of 1920.¹¹ Instead of the selfless heroes typical of Red Army hagiography, Babel' described hungry, anarchic and brutal soldiers whose Red Army experience seemed to strengthen rather than transform attitudes and behaviour born of the traditional world of the village. Babel's Communist was an outsider, immersed in a soldier's world that he found difficult to understand and impossible to change.

When Babel's work first appeared in 1923, it gave rise to considerable controversy. Babel's fellow veterans attacked the writer, claiming that his portrait of the Konarmiiia was unrecognizable as the army they had served in.¹² The criticism of Babel' was hardly surprising given that the names of the most important rising stars of the Soviet political and military establishment were closely associated with the deeds of the Konarmiiia. Joseph Stalin, the future Soviet dictator, acted as patron of the Konarmiiia during the Civil War and was even enrolled in its ranks as an honorary cavalryman. Klim Voroshilov, Semen Budennyi and Efim Shchadenko formed the original complement of the Konarmiiia's revolutionary military council. This trio would achieve great prominence as politicians and soldiers during the Stalin era.¹³ The future leaders of the Soviet state were directly involved in the Konarmiiia's political education during the Civil War.

With the opening up of Red Army and Communist Party archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is clear that Babel's gloomy view of the Konarmiiia's political education was no figment of the artist's imagination.¹⁴ In reports written for the Konarmiiia's commanders or for PUR and long buried in Soviet archives, Babel's fellow political workers lamented their inability to raise the political consciousness of the Konarmiiia's soldiers. Not only its political workers but the Konarmiiia's commanders and even Communist leaders in Moscow came to the same conclusion, that is, that the political education of the Konarmiiia failed. That consensus was reached in the aftermath of a violent, three-week mutiny by soldiers of the Konarmiiia which took place in the western Ukraine in late September 1920 as the war against the Poles was coming to an end.

¹¹ See Babel's diary in I. Babel', *Sochineniia*, 2 vols, Moscow, 1991, I, pp. 362–436.

¹² For an outline of this controversy, see *ibid.*, pp. 13–15.

¹³ Voroshilov was Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs from 1926 to 1934 and then Commissar for Defence from 1934 to 1940. Voroshilov and Budennyi were two of the first five marshals of the Soviet Union appointed by Stalin. Voroshilov, Budennyi and Shchadenko presided over Stalin's bloody purge of the Red Army in 1937.

¹⁴ Research for this paper was carried out in Moscow in mid-1993. Archival references are to Moscow, *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv* (hereafter RGVA) and Moscow, *Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii* (hereafter RTsKhIDNI).

The mutiny was led by the Sixth Division, at that time the largest of the Konarmii's four divisions and comprising about half the Konarmii's complement of 9,000 soldiers. At the outset of the mutiny soldiers of the Sixth Division murdered their commissar, a rare occurrence in the Red Army during the Civil War. Subsequently, soldiers of the Sixth Division undertook widespread acts of looting and violence, singling out Jews and Communists as targets. A report prepared in their wake by the Konarmii's revolutionary tribunal ran to six volumes and even in summary its account made for depressing reading. A sample follows:

2 October. In Priluki, twenty-one Jews killed and twelve wounded. In Oveche, drunken Red Army men raped almost every woman. Soldiers broke into the offices of the special department and the deserters commission, demanding to know who was a Communist or a commissar. In Vakhnov, eighteen homes were burnt, twenty men killed, women raped in the streets in full view of the townsfolk and the younger women taken away like slaves in transports. Events of this kind took place in Annopol, Berezdovo, Krasnostav, Tarashcha and other places.¹⁵

The revolutionary tribunal concluded that these events 'bordered on an uprising (*vosstanie*) with the aim of overthrowing the worker-peasant system'.¹⁶ There was truth in this, for the pattern of violence reflected not just what one political worker described as the 'pure, peasant dislike of the Jew',¹⁷ nor simply the everyday violence and robbery of hungry soldiers, but the association in the soldier's mind of Jews and Communists, if not as the same people then as partners in the crime of the front-line soldier's misery. According to the report of the revolutionary tribunal, the aims of the mutiny, as depicted in the slogans of the Sixth Cavalry Division's soldiers, were to 'kill the Jews, Communists and commissars', 'clear the rear of Jews' and 'unite with Makhno'.¹⁸ Veterans as well as recent recruits took part with equal enthusiasm in the violence.¹⁹ Renegade soldiers urged their commanders to join them in a war against the rear. The commanders of the Sixth Cavalry Division were unable or unwilling to put a stop to the violence and were subsequently accused of sympathizing with the mutineers. There were rumours that Budennyi was preparing to lead a crusade against the rear while other rumours suggested that Budennyi had been arrested by the 'Jew-commissars'.²⁰

¹⁵ RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 2, p. 183.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183–84.

¹⁷ RGVA, f. 32606, op. 1, d. 4, p. 2.

¹⁸ Nestor Makhno was the leader of a peasant army in the Ukraine opposed to the Soviet government and the Whites.

¹⁹ See RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 2, p. 181.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

It was as well for Soviet government that there was no truth to the rumours that Budennyi intended joining the mutiny. The disarming of the Sixth Cavalry Division was itself a difficult military operation that required all of Budennyi's skill as a commander, not to mention the loyalty to him of the Konarmii's machine gunners and reliable soldiers of the Special Cavalry Brigade, Budennyi's personal guard.²¹ Over one hundred soldiers of the Sixth Cavalry Division were subsequently executed.²² News of events in the Konarmii soon reached Moscow. The Politburo was so alarmed by the mutiny of the Sixth Cavalry Division that its meeting of 6 October 1920 decided to send an investigation team to the Konarmii headed by senior Communists, N. Semashko, A. Lunacharskii and M. Kalinin.²³

It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent of the crisis that the mutiny within the Konarmii represented for the Red Army at that time. The Red Army's paper strength of five million soldiers was an illusion, for the vast majority of these millions were conscripts of such poor quality they were never even tried on the battlefield.²⁴ The Konarmii had served as the Red Army's standard bearer in some of the most important military campaigns of the Civil War. At the end of the Polish War, the Konarmii was still very much needed by the Soviet government to fight White remnants under Baron Wrangel in the Crimea, where operations had stalled pending the arrival of the Red cavalry. The disorders in the Konarmii, like the revolt of Kronshtadt sailors a few months later, represented glaring evidence of disintegration in what hitherto had been a pillar of the Soviet military establishment.

There can be no question that, at least in part, the crisis in the Konarmii was a legacy of defeat in the war against the Poles. The Konarmii completed a 1,000-kilometre trek from the north Caucasus to the Ukraine during April and May 1920 and had then gone straight into action against the Poles. Having chased the Polish invaders from the Ukraine, the Red cavalry's advance began to slow in mid-July along the approaches to L'vov, the Polish stronghold in Galicia. The failure to take L'vov and the failure of the neighbouring West Front to capture Warsaw led to the collapse of Red Army operations against the Poles in the second half of August 1920. As the report of the revolutionary tribunal put it, 'nothing led to the army's disintegration more surely than defeat on the battlefield'.²⁵

²¹ S. Budennyi, *Proidennyi put'*, 3 vols, Moscow, 1958–73, III, pp. 44–46.

²² RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 2, p. 188–89.

²³ S. Prisiazhnyi, *Pervaia konnaia armii na pol'skom fronte v 1920 godu*, Rostov-na-donu, 1992 (hereafter *Pervaia konnaia*), p. 35.

²⁴ See Figes, 'The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation', p. 184.

²⁵ RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 2, p. 183.

Yet the problems ran much deeper than a breakdown in morale triggered by defeat at the front. The political education of the Konarmiiia failed long before the tide turned against the Red Army in the war against the Poles. Even Klim Voroshilov, the Konarmiiia's senior Communist and the man charged with overseeing political work in its ranks, was forced to admit in July 1920, at the height of Red Army successes against the Poles, that the Konarmiiia had a reputation as a 'bandit, hooligan and anti-Semitic army'. Voroshilov bemoaned the fact that

a significant part, probably a majority of our comrades are convinced that a Jew cannot survive in the Konarmiiia, that our soldiers beat and murder Communists and commissars, and in their spare time rape and rob the civilian population.²⁶

To understand how the Konarmiiia came to be at one and the same time an élite fighting unit and politically suspect requires closer examination of the context out of which the Red cavalry arose. Voroshilov once described the Konarmiiia as a 'child of Stalin's military genius' but it was more accurately a child of Russia's southern steppe. The Civil War battlefield favoured cavalry because of its open spaces, the small size of the competing armies and low density of machine gun and artillery firepower. On any theatre of the Civil War, it was rare for either of the opposing sides to assemble in excess of 100,000 soldiers. At the height of the Civil War in late 1919, the Red Army, the largest of the Civil War armies, was able to muster a mere 250 soldiers and two artillery pieces per kilometre of front line which hardly compared to a typical First World War ratio of 4,000–5,000 soldiers and 150 artillery pieces per kilometre.²⁷ The endemic exposed flanks of the Civil War front lines represented inviting targets for cavalry with the requisite mobility and strikepower. The steppe lands supplied the necessary number of sturdy ponies and a suitable terrain.

It might be thought that the Red cavalry, like its tsarist predecessor, was a mainly Cossack fighting force. This was not the case. The census of the Konarmiiia conducted at the end of 1920 found the Konarmiiia to be sixty-two per cent peasant, fourteen per cent Cossack, twenty per cent worker and four per cent intelligentsia.²⁸ Contemporary observers were generally in agreement that the majority of the Konarmiiia's peasant soldiers were *inogorodnie*, that is, peasants who migrated from central Russia and the Ukraine to the reputedly rich Cossack lands of

²⁶ RGVA, f. 245, op. 8, d. 11, p. 6.

²⁷ *Iz istorii grazhdanskoi voiny i interventsii 1917–1922 gg. Sbornik statei*. ed. M. A. Molodtsygin, Moscow, 1974, p. 210.

²⁸ I. Tiulenev, *Pervaia konnaia v boiakh za sotsialisticheskuiu rodinu*, Moscow, 1938 (hereafter *Pervaia konnaia v boiakh*), p. 3.

the north Caucasus following the 1861 Emancipation.²⁹ In the 1930s, Stalin's myth-makers rehabilitated the glories of the tsarist military tradition, including that of the Cossacks. As a consequence of this campaign, Soviet literature often described the Red cavalry in the Civil War as Cossack. Budennyi was dismayed to find that even he, a peasant from the Don region, was routinely described as a Cossack leader. Budennyi found it necessary to remind his readers that in fact his command 'was made up overwhelmingly of peasants from the Don and Kuban regions (inogorodnie) and from Stavropol' . . . Completely untrue are the claims of some writers that the Konarmiiia was Cossack, albeit Red Cossack.'³⁰ S. Orlovskii who served in the headquarters of the Konarmiiia in 1920 thought that the Red cavalry was 'sixty-two per cent inogorodnie'.³¹ A recent Russian study also concluded that the Konarmiiia was a peasant rather than a Cossack army.³²

The distinction between Cossacks and *inogorodnie* is important, for it lay at the heart of the protracted and brutal civil war in the north Caucasus. Cossack communities, formed originally from runaway serfs and Tartar freebooters, enjoyed privileges of self government and land ownership granted to them by the tsars as reward for their service as long-term cavalry in the Russian Army. Inogorodnie were the latecomers, tolerated by Cossacks as a source of rent, taxes and seasonal labour. For their part, inogorodnie resented Cossack privileges and coveted Cossack land. On the eve of the First World War, Cossacks owned about eighty per cent of the land in the Don and Kuban' regions while making up less than half the population.³³ Many *inogorodnie* and some Cossacks supported the notion of 'Soviet power' during the Civil War because of its promise to redistribute the land of the richer 'kulak' element among the Cossacks. In 1918, Stalin was one of many observers who noticed that *inogorodnie* usually proved among the most enthusiastic Red Army recruits.³⁴ They needed little convincing of the importance of the struggle with the Cossack-supported White movement in south Russia.

Yet despite having welcomed Soviet power in 1918, *inogorodnie*, like other peasants of the former Russian Empire, were suspicious of

²⁹ For the social composition of the Konarmiiia, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 74, op. 1, d. 408, p. 201, A. Shkuro, *Zapiski belogo partizana*, Buenos Aires, 1962, p. 238 and Prisiazhnyi, *Pervaia konnaia*, p. 20. Babel' was one of the few contemporary observers to describe the Konarmiiia as a Cossack force. Babel', a Jew from Odessa, may well have found it difficult to distinguish inogorodnie and Cossacks whose speech, appearance and prejudices were for all practical purposes identical.

³⁰ S. Budennyi, 'Prazdnik RKKA i krasnoi konnitsy', *Krasnaia konnitsa*, 2, 1935, pp. 2-6 (4).

³¹ RTsKhIDNI, f. 74, op. 1, d. 408, p. 201.

³² Prisiazhnyi, *Pervaia konnaia*, p. 20.

³³ K. Khmelevskii, *Krakh krasnovshchiny i nemetskoj interventsii na donu (aprel' 1918-mart 1919 goda)*, Rostov, 1965, pp. 20-22.

³⁴ *Direktivy*, 1, p. 348.

city-based Communists and central Soviet government. They opposed the requisitions, conscription and violence against the countryside that were hallmarks of War Communism, as the policies of the Soviet government during the Civil War came to be known. Peasants feared that they would be cheated of the land won during the revolutionary upheavals of 1917 and 1918, rounded up and turned into hired labourers for 'communes' (*kommuny*) or Soviet collective farms.³⁵ Such fears were prevalent in the Red cavalry. Trotskii got to know the political attitudes of the Konarmii's soldiers at first hand in September 1919 when he spoke to them on the subject of the commune, only to have his speech ruined by constant interjections.³⁶ In a letter to Stalin written in October 1919, Budennyi described the peasants under his command as 'fine, brave soldiers, but more interested in the land than in politics'.³⁷ Budennyi himself did not join the Communist Party during the first two years of the Civil War, an indication that he shared much of the scepticism of the soldiers he led. Shchadenko was to recall how, in late 1919, a meeting of commanders in Budennyi's cavalry 'put out a resolution stating that there were no Communists in their ranks and nor would there be'.³⁸ At the time of the Konarmii's official establishment in November 1919, there were some thirty Communists among the Konarmii's 8,000 sabres.³⁹

The Konarmii represented a self-contained peasant world. It resembled less a conventional army than a village or indeed several villages on the move.⁴⁰ Long lines of wagons full to overflowing with soldiers' families and captured booty trailed the fighting army.⁴¹ Budennyi was no different from the soldiers he led in this regard, for his own wife stayed with him at his headquarters.⁴² The Konarmii did much of its own recruiting, elected its own commanders, saw to its own supply needs and even fashioned its own weapons. The Konarmii was not a creature of the Red Army's central planners in Moscow but

³⁵ These fears were eloquently expressed by Philip Mironov, a Cossack of leftist political persuasion whose speeches and writings are quoted at some length in S. Starikov and R. Medvedev, *Philip Mironov and the Russian Civil War*, New York, 1978. See, for example, pp. 155–59.

³⁶ RGVA, f. 245, op. 4, d. 51, p. 93.

³⁷ S. Budennyi, *Proidennyi pul'*, 1, p. 283.

³⁸ *Krasnyi kavalerist. Organ politotdela pervoi konnoi armii* (hereafter *Krasnyi kavalerist*), 19 April 1920.

³⁹ S. Orlovskii, 'Zametki o politrabote v Konarmii' in *Pervaiia konnaia v izobrazhenii ee boitsov i komandirov*, Moscow, 1930, pp. 184–91 (184).

⁴⁰ In this respect, the Konarmii followed the tradition of the Tsarist Army. See J. Bushnell, 'Peasants in Uniform; The Tsarist Army as a Peasant Society', *Journal of Social History*, Summer, 1980, pp. 565–76.

⁴¹ RGVA, f. 245, op. 1, d. 70, p. 18. Budennyi noted in late 1919 that the Fourth Division was feeding 9,800 individuals even though there were only 3,500 fighters. Budennyi reminded his subordinates that this was 'a fighting army and not a charitable institution' but on this matter his exhortations passed unheeded. See RGVA, f. 245, op. 4, d. 51, p. 52.

⁴² S. Orlovskii, *Velikii god: dnevnik konarmeitsa*, Moscow, 1930 (hereafter *Velikii god*), p. 24.

evolved from 'partisan detachments', village-based fighting forces that arose more or less spontaneously in the north Caucasus in the early months of 1918 to defend the local area against Cossack opponents of Soviet power. The Fourth and Sixth Cavalry Divisions, the fighting core of the Konarmia, were made up almost wholly of one-time partisan detachments renamed as regular squadrons, regiments and brigades.⁴³ There were whole squadrons recruited from a single village.⁴⁴ Vital to the overall integrity of the Konarmia was the person of Budennyi, a semi-legendary figure long before the end of the Civil War. Soldiers of the Konarmia happily described themselves and were known to others as 'Budennyites' (*budennovtsy*). In this way, the Konarmia came to have a strong corporate identity as well as small-group loyalties, each contributing to the Konarmia's capacity better to endure the strains of the Civil War battlefield than other military units.

Military sociologists have often pointed to the importance of bonds within small 'primary' groups as being essential to the effectiveness of fighting forces.⁴⁵ Such bonds are a two-edged sword from the viewpoint of an army's political education. They can be harnessed effectively by organizations to achieve political goals.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the cohesiveness of primary groups may constitute a barrier that makes it very difficult for political educators to remodel attitudes and behaviour. These considerations are relevant in the case of the Konarmia. There was a link between battlefield performance and political work in the Konarmia but it was not the one imagined by latter-day Soviet writers. The strong bonds of village and kin, 'family ties' as one observer described them, helped not only to hold the Konarmia together as a fighting force but to establish a barrier that outsiders, in this case Communist political educators, found difficult to overcome.

Stalin, Commissar for Nationalities in the first Soviet government, spent more time at the front lines of the Civil War than any other Politburo member. Stalin and Budennyi first met in 1918 during Red Army operations at Tsaritsyn in south Russia. In November 1919, Stalin, using his position as a member of the Red Army's South Front, played a key role in the elevation of Budennyi's command to the status of a 'cavalry army'. At the Eighth Party Congress in Moscow in March 1919, Stalin reminded delegates that peasants would not fight for Communism of their own accord and that therefore political work in

⁴³ See, for example, Tiulenev, *Pervaiia konnaia v boiakh*, pp. 3–7; RGVA, f. 245, op. 4, d. 70, p. 20 and RTsKhIDNI, f. 74, op. 1, d. 386, p. 24.

⁴⁴ See RGVA, f. 245, op. 1, d. 70, p. 20 and RTsKhIDNI, f. 74, op. 1, d. 386, p. 24.

⁴⁵ The classic account is Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12, 1948, 2, pp. 280–315.

⁴⁶ See A. George, *The Chinese Communist Army in Action*. New York, 1967 and W. D. Henderson, *Why the Vietcong Fought: A Study in Control and Motivation in Combat*, Westport, Connecticut 1979.

the Red Army had to be strengthened as much as possible.⁴⁷ The establishment of the Konarmiiā gave Stalin a chance to gain some practical experience of this work. In December 1919, Stalin was responsible for bringing in fellow Tsaritsyn veterans and loyal Communists, Voroshilov and Shchadenko, to serve alongside Budennyi on the Konarmiiā's revolutionary military council. Stalin and Voroshilov vetted the handful of political workers already attached to Budennyi's cavalry, replacing those deemed not up to the task with their own choices. It was Stalin who in December 1919 succeeded in convincing Budennyi that he should join the Communist Party.⁴⁸ During summer 1920, Stalin was ensconced in the headquarters of the South-West Front, an excellent vantage point for observing the progress of the Konarmiiā's political education during the war against the Poles.

Over 800 political workers were sent to the Konarmiiā in the course of 1920. The biggest influx took place at the outset of the Polish campaign in May 1920 with 228 new arrivals.⁴⁹ The motivations of newly-arriving political workers were diverse. Some were idealistic Communists, even to the point where they believed they might transform the Konarmiiā into 'a kind of monastic order'.⁵⁰ Others found themselves in the army because economic conditions in the towns during the Civil War had made life there almost impossible. Like the majority of Communists at this time, the Konarmiiā's political workers could generally claim less than two years' experience in the Communist Party. Delegates to the Konarmiiā's fourth Party conference in October 1920 found that only some thirty of 290 Communists present had joined the Party before 1918.⁵¹

Latter-day Soviet accounts would point to the fact that the number of Party members in the Konarmiiā increased dramatically in the early months of 1920. On the surface, the evidence of Party recruitment seemed impressive. Nearly half the commanders of the Fourth and Sixth Cavalry Divisions followed Budennyi's example and joined the Communist Party. In some cases, whole units followed the lead of their commander and applied for Party membership. Recruitment was proceeding too in the Konarmiiā's Eleventh and Fourteenth Cavalry Divisions. By May 1920 there were nearly 3,000 Party members or candidate members among the Konarmiiā's 18,000 sabres, more than sixteen per cent of the total force.⁵² This compared favourably to the

⁴⁷ See Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 106.

⁴⁸ Budennyi, *Proidennyi put'*, I, pp. 339-40.

⁴⁹ *Direktivny*, IV, p. 259.

⁵⁰ I. Vardin, *Voroshilov — rabochii vozhd' Krasnoi Armii*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1926 (hereafter *Voroshilov*), p. 27.

⁵¹ *Krasnyi kavalerist*, 10 October 1920.

⁵² L. Kliuev, *Pervaiā konnaia krasnaia armiiā na Pol'skom fronte v 1920 godu*, Moscow, 1932, p. 13.

Red Army as a whole where only some five to ten per cent of soldiers were Party members.⁵³

Yet the Konarmii's political workers soon began to wonder whether such statistics had any meaning except as a means to impress their superiors in PUR. While there were, of course, genuine converts to the Communist Party, the motives of many new recruits were clearly suspect. Commanders and rank-and-file soldiers who joined as part of a larger group often did so without any real commitment or out of fear of repercussions if they did not join. A report prepared by the Sixth Cavalry Division's political department in June 1920 described how its 900 Communists were 'almost all from the most recent recruitment, completely illiterate politically'.⁵⁴ The great mass of soldiers meanwhile continued as before, non-Party and unenthusiastic about politics. One political worker, I. Vardin, was more honest than many other memoirists when he wrote that the soldiers of the Konarmii 'fought not for socialism, about which they had only the vaguest idea, but to right past injustices'.⁵⁵ Vardin was in a position to know for he headed the Konarmii's political department from June 1920. The seemingly strong representation of Communists in the Konarmii is indicative of a truly disturbing state of affairs elsewhere if the Konarmii was indeed among the most 'Communist' of the Red Army's component parts.

What political workers noticed most was that soldiers of the Konarmii persisted in distinguishing between 'Soviet power' which they saw as positive and the Communist Party about which their attitude was entirely negative. The commissar of the Fourth Cavalry Division noted in July 1920 that 'commanders would die for Soviet power' but went on to lament that 'the attitude of commanders to commissars and Communists utterly contradicts their attitude to Soviet power'.⁵⁶ Among rank-and-file soldiers, political workers found it even more difficult to find evidence of a change in political attitudes. A report prepared by the Fourth Division's political department in July 1920 highlighted the lack of progress:

The fighting capacity of the division is brilliant. Mood of the Red Army soldier is warlike. Soviet power is recognized by all. The attitude to Communists and commissars is for the most part completely negative . . . At present political and cultural work has come to a full stop. Communist cells do not function.⁵⁷

⁵³ Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, p. 180.

⁵⁴ RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 4, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Vardin, *Voroshilov*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 4, p. 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* The Fourth Cavalry Division was generally regarded as the best of the Konarmii's four divisions. It also had the highest number of Communists. The distinction between Soviet power and Communist government was, of course, one that would be stressed by the Kronshtadt mutineers in 1921.

Particularly irking to the political workers was that unacceptable political attitudes were prevalent even among soldiers who had joined the Communist Party. Political workers suspected that many new members had no real understanding of what the Communist Party stood for.⁵⁸

The Konarmiiia failed to make a good impression on neighbouring units of the Red Army. I. Uborevich, commander of the Fourteenth Army, complained in June 1920 that it came as no surprise to him that some of his own units had mutinied, for 'Budennyites are spreading anti-Communist propaganda everywhere they go'.⁵⁹ According to Uborevich, buildings known to house Communist Party officials were targets of violent attacks by soldiers of the Konarmiiia.

Red Army political workers, with their urban backgrounds, education and strong Jewish representation were everything that the peasant and Cossack soldiers of the Konarmiiia were not.⁶⁰ About one fifth of the Konarmiiia's soldiers were illiterate and most were barely literate. Nearly all were steeped in prejudices against outsiders, especially Jews, and their manners were made rougher by the years of war with its daily struggle for food, shelter and clothing. The Red cavalry was constantly on the move or engaged in fighting. Political workers complained that they lacked the personnel, time and resources to tackle the enormous task that lay before them.

Soldiers of the Konarmiiia looked to each other for support and did not take kindly to advice from outsiders. Commanders resented the prying of commissars, part of whose job it was to report on the former's competence and loyalty. There were regular outbursts of ill feeling between commanders and political workers. In March 1920, a mass meeting of soldiers in the Fourth Cavalry Division sent forward a resolution to Budennyi and Voroshilov stating that only commissars who understood 'conditions of life' in the north Caucasus were welcome in their ranks. That same month, a general meeting of the Konarmiiia's political workers declared that they could take no responsibility for the condition of the Konarmiiia given 'the impossibility of joint work with its commanders'.⁶¹ The soldiers of the Konarmiiia related best to the deeds rather than the words of political workers. Soldiers of the Eleventh Cavalry Division were asked to rate the qualities they looked for in commissars. Top of the list were 'bravery in battle', 'popularity' and 'care for the soldiers'.⁶² Commissars sent from the rear tended to

⁵⁸ RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 4, pp. 236–38.

⁵⁹ RGVA, f. 245, op. 4, d. 9, p. 45.

⁶⁰ There are no statistics concerning the numbers of Jewish political workers in the Konarmiiia but I have no reason to doubt the claim of Prisiazhnyi (*Pervaia konnaia*, p. 44) of strong Jewish representation.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

lack cavalry experience and as a consequence found it difficult to meet such expectations. Commissars were appointed from the ranks but this created more problems than it solved. The newly-promoted commissars were invariably more popular than those arriving from the rear but had little political education and no interest in political work. They saw themselves as joint commanders and not as political educators in their units.⁶³

One of the ironies of the Civil War was that the Soviet government, the harbinger of the new, modern era of Communism, was so dependent upon the Konarmiiia which in many ways resembled some terrible relic of Russia's medieval past. Political workers set themselves the task of waging war against the soldier's inward-looking sense of community and prejudices, vestiges of the Russian peasant's benighted past which were out of place in a revolutionary army and counterproductive if the Red Army was to win popular support. Earlier peasant and Cossack rebellion in Russia's history bequeathed to Budennyi's cavalry a heritage of democracy, élitism and brutality. Red Army regulations outlawed the election of commanders but this did not stop the practice in the Konarmiiia, even in 1920. As volunteers, soldiers of the Konarmiiia did not take kindly to anything that smacked of 'discipline of the old type'.⁶⁴ Soldiers' meetings passed resolutions condemning commanders who wore ribbons on their uniforms or insignia of any kind that might have distinguished them from other soldiers. These democratic tendencies were nearly offset by the clear perception that the Konarmiiia's soldiers had of themselves as an élite within the Red Army. They exhibited the same disdain for neighbouring Red infantry as they did for White and Polish opponents. Nor did the soldiers of the Konarmiiia lack anything on the score of brutality. Captured enemy soldiers were stripped of weapons and clothing, often sabred, sometimes left to freeze to death in makeshift camps. In this the Red cavalry was no better or worse than other armies of the Civil War, a contest better known for the appalling state of supply lines than for its chivalry.

Some contemporaries and a great many latter-day Soviet writers exhibited a tendency to romanticize the Red cavalry, but this was possible only for those a great distance removed from it in space or time. The occupation of towns usually gave rise to atrocious behaviour by the Konarmiiia's soldiers, some of the worst of which had taken place in Rostov, the White capital captured in January 1920.⁶⁵ Political workers despaired of the unceasing robbery of the civilian population. A report describing what took place in Krivoi Rog in May 1920 was typical of accounts of the Konarmiiia at this time:

⁶³ See RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 4, p. 135.

⁶⁴ RTsKhIDNI, f. 74, op. 1, d. 386, p. 168.

⁶⁵ See RGVA, f. 245, op. 8 d. 10, p. 161.

The forces of the army of Budennyi passing through here bring complete disorganization to our food policies. In the villages they take everything, literally everything, that falls into their hands — horses, pigs, chickens, eggs, milk and clothing. To the protests of the peasants that they have already undergone requisitioning, the Budennyites pay no attention or say that they receive nothing at the front and that the agents who do the requisitioning do it for themselves and for the Jews. From our Party office they even took the typewriter, having put a machine gun at the door.⁶⁶

The strictures of the Konarmiiia's commanders and political workers about the importance of earning the respect of workers and peasants in whose name the revolution was being carried out, fell on deaf ears. This was hardly surprising. The general economic state of the country, peasant resistance to requisitioning and endemic mismanagement all conspired to deprive the front of basic requirements. In June 1920, the command of the Konarmiiia estimated that it was supplied with about one third of what was required.⁶⁷ This was an army where soldiers preferred gifts of clean underwear as rewards for bravery to the medals or gold and silver watches usually dispensed by its commanders. It would be difficult to imagine a more striking contrast than that between the grandiose political goals of Soviet leaders in 1920 and the miserable conditions of life for the soldiers sent to achieve them.

The difficulties encountered in the Konarmiiia's political education gave rise to a great deal of conflict among its Communists. In April 1920, the Konarmiiia's third Party conference convened amid angry debate and recriminations among political workers. Having heard Bodrov, head of the Konarmiiia's political department at the time, present his report, one disenchanted member of the audience interjected that even the title of Bodrov's lecture was misleading 'for nothing in the way of political work is being done'. Bodrov's report was then rejected by a majority of delegates to the conference.⁶⁸ Voroshilov and Budennyi, meanwhile, were increasingly irritated at political workers who found the Konarmiiia an alien and frightening place in which to work. Voroshilov fumed against the rear for sending political workers 'who complain but who do nothing to turn the peasants from unconscious allies of the proletarian government into conscious workers for Communism'.⁶⁹

S. Zhilinskii, deputy head of the Konarmiiia's political department during June and July 1920, had a quite different explanation of the failure of the Konarmiiia's political education. He complained that there was no distinction between political and military leadership in

⁶⁶ RGVA, f. 245, op. 8, d. 22, p. 150.

⁶⁷ Orlovskii, *Velikii god*, p. 69.

⁶⁸ *Krasnyi kavalerist*, 17 April 1920.

⁶⁹ RGVA, f. 245, op. 8, d. 11, pp. 6–7.

the Konarmiiia 'for Voroshilov and Budennyi are in effect one person'. The implication here was that Voroshilov had taken on the characteristics of the peasant soldier, Budennyi, and, as a consequence, had lost his capacity to lead political work. Zhilinskii was bold enough to produce a report for PUR in June 1920, highly critical of Voroshilov and accusing Stalin's protégé of setting a bad example. According to the report, Voroshilov had become a kind of peasant warlord, imposing 'special taxes' on the citizens of occupied towns, turning a blind eye to the murder of prisoners and tolerating a situation in which junior commanders in particular were openly anti-Communist.⁷⁰ There is an echo of Zhilinskii's account of Voroshilov in Babel's *Konarmiiia* where the Communist protagonist is hardened by his experience, coming more and more to resemble the peasant soldiers that he was sent to educate.

Setbacks on the battlefield in the latter stages of the Polish campaign and the failure of their attempts at political education left the Konarmiiia's commanders with little alternative other than to fall back upon repression pure and simple as their means of maintaining control. In the later stages of the Polish campaign, repressive measures of a kind previously unknown in the Konarmiiia became commonplace. The execution of brigade commander Dorokhin in early August 1920 after his soldiers retreated without orders exemplified the new regime.⁷¹ Soldiers found guilty of violence against civilians were executed in front of the victims or their family. The Konarmiiia's 'special department' was urged to step up its efforts to uncover counter-revolutionary plots. At the beginning of August 1920, the entire staff of the supply department was arrested and sent to the Konarmiiia's revolutionary tribunal for punishment.⁷² In dealing with the Sixth Cavalry Division following the events of September and October 1920, Voroshilov and Budennyi made it clear to the Konarmiiia's revolutionary tribunal that rank-and-file soldiers should not be spared on account of their class background or low level of political literacy. Voroshilov and Budennyi urged the Konarmiiia's revolutionary tribunal to dispense with the usual rules of evidence and act 'not so much from the formal side but out of revolutionary conscience', so that a clear message would be delivered to the soldiers.⁷³ The commanders of the Konarmiiia underwent a political education in the Civil War even if the soldiers they led did not.

Upon learning of the outrages committed by the Sixth Cavalry Division in September and October 1920, Stalin demanded a full report

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 1–2.

⁷¹ RGVA, f. 245, op. 4, d. 71, p. 249.

⁷² Orlovskii, *Velikii god*, p. 81.

⁷³ RGVA, f. 245, op. 9, d. 4, p. 188.

from the Konarmiiia's command.⁷⁴ Stalin must surely have been impressed by the mounting evidence of the Konarmiiia's failed political education. Voroshilov told the Konarmiiia's fourth Party conference held in October 1920 that problems had arisen because 'Communist organizations and individual workers did not discharge their high, patriotic Communist duty'.⁷⁵ Vardin agreed with Voroshilov's assessment, concluding that the Konarmiiia was undergoing 'a crisis for which Communists are more to blame than anybody else'.⁷⁶ This was the assessment that Semashko, Lunacharskii and Kalinin took back with them to Moscow following their investigation of the Konarmiiia on behalf of the Politburo in mid-October 1920. The Konarmiiia's political workers were, of course, useful scapegoats for Lenin and the Soviet government whose decision it was in mid-July 1920 to press ahead with the invasion of Poland, bringing the Red Army to its knees in the process. On the other hand, it is hard to disagree with the conclusion that the political education of the Konarmiiia had failed.

By the end of the Civil War, Soviet leaders had extracted every last ounce of the revolutionary enthusiasm generated by the Russian Revolutions of 1917. At the end of 1920, the Konarmiiia was a study in miniature of the problems that confronted Soviet government. Its peasant soldiers were hungry, exhausted and mutinous. The problems were indeed profound, for peasants were by no means the natural allies of city-based Communists, and while Communists generally looked upon themselves as expert political educators, there was mounting evidence that the message was not getting across. Rather than serving to integrate Communists and their citizens, the experience of political education in the Konarmiiia only served to illustrate the vast gulf that separated them.

In their latter-day public pronouncements, the Konarmiiia's commanders would describe the political education of the Red cavalry as having represented a great success. Voroshilov was bold enough to write that 'the Konarmiiia's strength and glory rested on the fact that our Communist Party, precisely when it was required, provided the army with a political apparatus'.⁷⁷ Yet by the time this was written he could be confident that none who knew the truth would dare contradict him. Soviet leaders generally paid lip service to the efficacy of political education, for not to do so was tantamount to admitting that their only means of maintaining themselves in power was a constant state of war with the peasant majority.

⁷⁴ Prisiazhnyi, *Pervaia konnaia*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Orlovskii, *Velikii god*, p. 202.

⁷⁶ *Krasnyi kavalerist*, 8 October 1920.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Tiulenev, *Pervaia konnaia v boiakh*, p. 3.

The latter-day speeches of Soviet leaders, especially Stalin's, were full of military terminology and images derived from the Civil War. Soviet leaders looked back upon the Civil War as the heroic age of Soviet Communism. Almost certainly, a much more brutal style of Communism emerged from the Civil War than might have been the case otherwise. The failure of political education in the Konarmiiia was a reminder of how precarious the hold of the Soviet government was over the Tsar's former domain. From the point of view of Soviet leadership, the only positive side to the story of the Konarmiiia in the second half of 1920 was that its commanders, through their determination and willingness to resort to repression, had managed to re-establish some sort of grip on their peasant soldiers. Stalin and his allies may well have looked upon this as the most useful lesson to have come out of the Civil War.