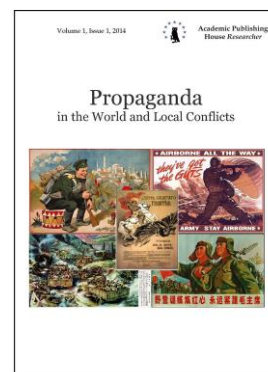


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Articles and Statements

War Propaganda on the Revolutionary Navy in October 1917 – February 1918

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Abstract

The article deals with the organization of revolutionary and war propaganda in the Navy in the first months of Soviet power. It examines the state propaganda of the fleets together with the objective difficulties associated with the abolition of the system of control of naval forces in the Russian Empire.

In conclusion, the author notes reasons for which the Bolsheviks had to support lawlessness among the sailors of the fleet. At the same time he explores the beginning of public policy on the creation of the worker-peasant red fleet.

Keywords: navy, propaganda, revolution, Bolsheviks, the sailors and officers.

1. Introduction

The title of the “Revolutionary Guard” (words said by V.I. Lenin in October 1917. – Auth.) was confirmed to be rightly used for sailors as they played an active role in the October events of 1917. V.I. Lenin pointed out in his article: “Applied to Russia and October 1917, this means: a simultaneous offensive on Petrograd, as sudden and as rapid as possible, which must without fail be carried out from within and from without, from the working-class quarters, and from Finland, from Revel and from Kronstadt, an offensive of the entire navy, the concentration of a gigantic superiority of forces...”

Combine our three main forces – the fleet, the workers and the army units – so as to in the first instance occupy without fail and to hold at any cost a) the telephone exchange, b) the telegraph office, c) the railway stations, d) the bridges.

Assign the most determined elements (our “shock forces” and young workers, as well as the best of the sailors) to form small detachments to occupy all the more important points and to take part everywhere, in all important operations, for example: to encircle and cut off Petrograd; to seize it by a combined attack of the sailors, the workers, and the troops – a task which requires art and triple audacity” (Lenin, 1975).

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October 11, 1917, Petrograd saw the launch of the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region, and its delegates adopted a testimonial to the sailors of the Baltic Fleet. Following the October Revolution, the Naval Revolutionary Committee liquidated the officer cadres enlisted in the Russian Imperial Fleet. However, Baltic Fleet sailors continued to see themselves as the arbiters of the destinies both for the revolution and the nation after the October Revolution, and proceeded to handle all matters guided by single conscience available to the revolutionary (Panova, 2011). Many actions and atrocities of raging sailors instilled constant fear of the new authorities among the metropolitan inhabitants.

In December 1917, the initiative of ship committees of vessels and naval units of the Baltic Fleet elected the board of the “Club of Navy Mariners.” The Soviet government almost immediately supported the aspirations of its beloved “revolutionary guard” and soon “... the board was given the building of the stock exchange and the Strogonov Palace on the corner of the Moika and Nevsky... Some time later the sailors received the Regina Hotel on the Moika for to use as a canteen and hostel” (Krasavin, Smuglin, 2004).

The activities of the Baltic sailors were complemented by revolutionary events in the Black Sea Fleet, which developed after the withdrawal of A.V. Kolchak, when mass lynchings were perpetrated by sailors in December 1917 (Lazarovski, 2013). Conservative estimates indicate that about 600 members of the officer corps fell victim to the sailors of the Black Sea Fleet (Lizar, 2013).

As a result, after they came to power, the Bolsheviks had to put up with the sailors’ arbitrary behaviors and try to control their sentiments.

2. Materials and methods

The author formed the basis of their paper using the materials of the funds collected by the Russian State Navy Archives (RGA VMF), St. Petersburg. The author also employed publications from the Morskoy Sbornik (Sea Collection) and a range of research papers in parallel with the materials.

The study provided utilizes traditional and general scientific methods together with the historical situational method to review various fleets and flotillas.

3. Discussion and results

In fact, managing a fleet proved to be no small task. In November 1917, the newspaper “Svobodny flot” (Free Fleet), echoing revolutionary zeal, published an essay by P. Kulikovskiy “Sailors Revolutionaries 1905” (Kulikovskiy, 1917). The key issue that stirred “Svobodny flot” at that time was reflected in the editorial: “As we seek to the best of our ability to cover the most crucial issues, related to the life of the fleet, in the pages of our journal, we ask our readers, officers and sailors to answer the following question: “How can we build and strengthen mutual trust between all the ranks in the fleet?” (Anketa «Svobodnogo flota», 2017). An important consideration is that the “Svobodny flot” newspaper deliberately avoids publications on the revolutionary process in Petrograd in November and December 1917 and calls for the state building of the armed forces.

Initially, the Bolsheviks were compelled to proceed with the policy designed to destroy the fleet. In January 1918, the newspaper “Revolyutsionnyi flot” (The Revolutionary Navy – the edition changed its title from “Svobodny flot” to “Revolyutsionnyi flot” in the context of the new political environment as the Bolshevik rise to power. – Auth.) publishes an article entitled “On the fleet demobilization,” which reads the following words: “The war is drawing to an end, peace is in the air. New peacetime interests replace the war interests that the country has lived up to since it was declared” (Novitsky, 1918). After January 29, 1918, a decree on the organization of the fleet was ratified that stipulated the following: “... the fleet that exists on the basis of tsarist-time universal conscription is declared dissolved and the Socialist Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Fleet is hereby organized...” (Chernyak, 2001). The next day, the order announcing this decree, signed by the People’s Commissar for Maritime Affairs P.Ye. Dybenko (Figure 1) and collegium members S.Ye. Saks and F.F. Raskolnikov, was communicated to fleets and flotillas. The following day, January 30, 1918, witnessed the “Revolyutsionnyi flot” newspaper publishing “Regulations on the fleet democratization” (Polozhenie o demokratizatsii flota, 1918).



Fig. 1. P.E. Dybenko

The new government decided to get rid of both old personnel of the Russian Imperial Navy and pre-revolutionary symbols at one whack. November 19, 1917, pursuant to the resolution by the 1st All-Russian Congress of the Navy, the Supreme Naval Collegium issued an order transmitted by specialists at the New Holland radio station to all Central Fleet Committees: “To raise the flag of The Internationale on all ships of the All-Russian Navy instead of the St. Andrew’s Flag to mark that the entire Russian Navy, as one, stood up to protect the Rule of the People represented by the Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies” (Krasavin, Smuglin, 2004). The delegates of the said congress approved a resolution by a majority vote, which, in particular, stated: “The congress publicly declares that the entire strength of the navy will be faithful and impregnable supporting the rule of the Soviets... which has given us the land and freedom and is now boldly heading towards the near future” (Baltiiskii flot..., 1932).

The most outstanding document issued as part of the process to introduce civil liberties in the Navy became Order No. 11 by the Maritime Department, dated January 8, 1918, which constituted in essence a “Regulation on democratization.” This document enshrined that the personnel of the naval forces consisted of free citizens that enjoy equal civil rights. Military ranks were abolished. The Regulation introduced the rank “sailor of the Navy of the Russian Republic” for all servicemen (RGA VMF. F. 92. Op. 1. D. 382. L. 115).

After they put into practice a list of government measures of this sort, the Bolsheviks faced an unpleasant discovery in late 1917 and early 1918. The total absence of professional officers started to exert its adverse impact. On the other hand, revolutionary comrades P.E. Dybenko and F.F. Raskolnikov could only successfully facilitate destructive agitation, rather than build a military organization (RGA VMF. F. 203. Op. 1. D. 1. L. 11).

Despite the measures to eliminate the officer corps of the tsarist fleet, which were in line with the interests of revolutionary sailors, it was necessary to ensure smooth operation of the service. And in this connection we can cite a peculiar piece published by a sailor of the “Vsadnik” fleet destroyer, S. Prokofiev, who came up with proposals on how to establish relations between officers and sailors: “... I propose the following conditions and methods to strengthen the relations that are now establishing between officers and sailors:

- 1) Each officer must have a political training and education in the spirit of democratic ideas, sufficient for himself, and if he has not received the one in the corps, he must make every effort to ensure that the word “politics” does not become a synonym for something terrible and dangerous.

- 2) Each officer must always remember that his service in the navy is a service for his people and his motherland, and therefore he must serve by vocation.

3) Both sailors and officers need open sea voyages and the longer and more diverse they will be, the higher chances are for them to achieve better understanding of each other and ensure self-development.

4) The more efficient and responsible the officer is in performing his duties, the more affinity and respect the sailors will feel toward him.

5) If a sailor approaches the officer to ask for advice, the officer must himself help him rather than sending the sailor to others.

6) The officer's word should be his bond: if he promises something to the sailor, then do it right away without any delay; this will elevate him in the eyes of the crew.

7) In hours free from duty and training, the officer devotes his leisure time not to a meeting or club, but spends it among sailors in a comradely conversation, giving explanations to current events and sharing his knowledge" (Prokofiev, 1918).

We can actually see in this article of February 20, 1918, the first attempt to initiate a dialogue between the new government and the officers of the Russian Imperial Fleet. A remarkable fact is that while the article gives them a lot of "useful" tips, it does not deny the very need for officers to get the navy work in a normal way.

Despite the above positive trend, the zealous revolutionary rhetoric continued to dominate the Bolshevik propaganda activities in the navy. In the same issue of the journal, sailor G. Konov expresses his view on the fleet personnel reform: "...Serving as a sailor for several years and knowing well the sailors' environment, I can say with certainty that the only way to ensure trust between all fleet ranks is to introduce elective commanders, and this, I have no doubt, will then eliminate all deplorable phenomena very undesirable for all parties" (Konov, 1918).

In the "Revolutsionnyi flot" newspaper, F.F. Raskolnikov publishes an article specifically for sailors, written on February 15, 1918, where he glorifies the newly formed Red Army: "... When this army of responsible revolutionaries trained in the art of war and consolidated with a single purpose, will be put on its feet, we can feel completely sure about the fate of the revolution.

We will then know that at the first conscription call of the Soviet government, a powerful army of well-trained revolutionary fighters will stand up for its defense, ready to make ultimate sacrifice for the triumph of the revolution" (Raskol'nikov, 1918b).

In fact, F.F. Raskolnikov seems to largely support the belief in the historical role of sailors among the crews at the fleet ships. In January 1918, the "Morskoy Sbornik" journal published his article with the headline "The Uprising in the German navy," which ends with the following statement: "... And this inspires strong confidence that our German comrades-in-arms will not stop halfway, but, given the whole experience of the recent past, with the general approval of the proletarians across the world, they will mount a decisive onslaught on the strongholds of tsarism, militarism and imperialism. And the developments in all other countries foster an unshakable belief that the revolutionary actions of German democracy are supported by the world working class.

A glaring red dawn of the socialist revolution is breaking before our eyes" (Raskol'nikov, 1918d). Further on, the combined 1918 February and March issue of "Morskoy Sbornik" proceeds with a series of essays by F.F. Raskolnikov – "Revolutionary Kronstadt" (Raskolnikov, Revolutionary 1918) and "Indictment on the case of Lieutenant Schmidt" (Raskol'nikov, 1918a).

Here is what F.F. Raskolnikov wrote at the time: "In the revolution of these days, Kronstadt has a special, exceptional place and by all rights. Throughout the entire revolutionary period, Kronstadt played an outstanding political role, often drawing the attention of all Russia to itself, provoking false and fantastic intricacies around its name and instigating violent, angry curses of the bourgeoisie.

In the minds of the latter, Kronstadt symbolizes sheer terror, some evil spawn of hell, a formidable, fearful, shaking specter of future anarchy, a nightmarish revival of new Russian Vendée on the Russian land. And this feverish and panic fear, felt by the bourgeoisie at the mere thought of Kronstadt, is not an accidental misconception engendered by the false inventions of capitalist newspapers, but rather a natural, legitimate concerns about one's interests dictated by the bourgeois and, in this sense, healthy instinct of the bourgeoisie as a class social" (Raskol'nikov, 1918c). F.F. Raskolnikov himself was nicknamed "black garde-marine," and he erroneously called Kronstadt a revolutionary Vendée. Apparently, the wartime midshipman was not taught history. The province of Vendée in France was on the contrary the stronghold of the pro-monarchy forces (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. F.F. Raskolnikov

The organization of military propaganda in the revolutionary navy also faced certain issues. The Bolsheviks, led by V.F. Polukhin in Murmansk and K.I. Pronsky in Arkhangelsk, carried out active propaganda activities among sailors of the Arctic Ocean flotilla. In mid-November 1917, the initiative of the Bolsheviks at the Central Arctic Flotilla Committee (Tseledflot) appointed commissars to armed units and ships in Arkhangelsk (RGA VMF. F. 19. Op. 1. D. 15. L. 87) (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. V.F. Polukhin

The rise of Soviet rule received a unanimous welcome from sailors of the Caspian Flotilla. In early November 1917, the 1st Congress of the Flotilla sailors enacted a decision to support only the executive committee of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of the Baku Soviet.

4. Conclusion

A general review of the revolutionary propaganda campaign in the navy between October 1917 and February 1918 clearly shows that the ambiguity of the policy pursued by the Bolsheviks. First, they had to maintain a dialog with the "Revolutionary Guard" using the language of slogans and zealous messages, emphasizing in every possible way the historical role of sailors. However, they gradually come to experience issues related to the state building of naval forces, and at this

point, using official publications, they make attempts to protect officers of the Russian Imperial Fleet, of course, after first guiding them to the right path, because only their support can help defend the Soviet rule. It is these two tendencies that influenced and shaped military propaganda at the Workers' and Peasants' Red Fleet during the Civil War and intervention period.

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