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PECULIARITIES OF THE MODERNISATION OF THE RED
ARMY IN THE 1930S

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Abstract

The article deals with the modernisation of the Red Army in the 1930s. The military construction in the USSR during this period was dictated by domestic political and international factors. It contributed to the resolution of accumulated contradictions in their organisation, management structure, improvement of the combat training of personnel, strengthening the defence capability and military power. In addition, technical rearmament of the Red Army and Navy began, and the latest scientific developments were introduced. Of particular importance were the increased requirements for mobilisation and combat readiness of troops, which was associated with the further development of views on the conduct of modern warfare by the likely adversaries of the Soviet Union. There were also transformations in the field of reorganisation of the bodies of the highest military leadership of the USSR defence. The creation of a cadre Red Army significantly increased the level of the training of Red Army soldiers on many issues of operational and combat training, which was confirmed in the army military operations in the late 1930s on the Khalkhin-Gol River, Lake Khasan and in military operations of the Second World War. A fatal miscalculation in the strategy of Soviet military theorists was the denial of strategic defence.

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1. Introduction

The history of the Russian Armed Forces is of particular relevance today due to the threat from NATO countries and the events in Ukraine. The military threat to the security of the Russian Federation in the XXI century is acquiring new scales and forms. In this regard, the problem of the history of military construction and the ways of staffing the Armed Forces is actualised (Mele, 2022). The late 1930s were characterised by the complication of the international situation and the threat of a new world war. The USSR leadership solved priority tasks to strengthen the defence capacity of the country. Today the Russian government is solving similar tasks (Collet-Sabé, 2023; Manakbayeva, 2023; Sheveleva, 2024).

2. Problem Statement

The task of the study is to analyse the historical experience of modernisation of the Red Army in the 1930s. The practical significance of the work is determined by the fact that some of its conclusions will continue scientific research on military history and military art (Giza, 2024; Mambetova et al., 2024; Mascareno & Chavez, 2024), as well as generalising works on the history of the Fatherland, social policy of the state.

3. Research Questions

The object of this study is the state policy aimed at the Red Army in the 1930s. The subject is related to the question how staffing of military units of Red Army in 1930s affected the combat and mobilization readiness of the USSR in inter-war period.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research is to study the historical experience of staffing military units and formations of the Red Army in the 1930s and its use in order to increase the combat and mobilisation readiness of the Armed Forces of the USSR.

5. Research Methods

The principles of historicism, systematicity and scientific objectivity were used when writing the work.

6. Findings

The Red Army was a source of pride for the Soviet people. The propaganda of army life in pre-war cinema formed a positive image of the defender of the Fatherland in the mass consciousness. Young people joined the Red Army to defend their fatherland to be like the brave and trim Soviet officers (Nikulín, 2023).

In the 1930s–1940s, articles of a journalistic nature and historical studies were published, which spoke about the training of command staff for the Red Army. More attention was paid to the technical re-equipment of the Red Army, the role of the Communist Party and Stalin personally (Bolotin, 1950).

D. A. Voropaev and A. M. Iovlev revealed the military transformations, assessed the prerequisites of the reforms that were implemented in the command and political staff of the Red Army (Iovlev & Voropaev, 1960).

V. A. Anfilov in his monograph "The Road to the Tragedy of the Forty-first Year" (Anfilov, 1997) analysed the Soviet military system in the late 1930s. Rapoport and Geller (1995) published lists of repressed commanders of the political staff of the Red Army. Volkov (1989) book reveals the theme of terror against officers of the Red Army. Occupying high positions in the central apparatus of the OGPU-NKVD of the USSR, he knew how the mechanism of the punitive machine unfolded.

Volkogonov (1990) was one of the first Soviet historians to familiarise himself with important documents kept in departmental archives.

Foreign historiography also showed a certain interest in the problems of Soviet military construction of the period under consideration. German historians K. Tippelskirch and F. Ruge, American historians D. Glantz and E. Ziemke, Swiss researcher J. Meister, and others have touched upon them in their works (Glantz, 2008; Meister, 2005; Ruge, 1957; Tippelskirch, 1998; Ziemke, 2022). Both in foreign and domestic historiographies in the last quarter of the 20th century, the so-called "preventive war theory" appeared, which presents the military construction of the 1930s – early 40s in the USSR as a preparation for a "preventive war" against Germany (Bobylev, 2020).

The late 1930s were characterised by the militarisation of the economy and everyday life, and propaganda about the inevitability of war manifested itself in a variety of spheres. Against the background of achievements in the economy and culture, the armed forces were changing significantly: new types of weapons were created, and the approach to the organisation of the army was changing (Giza, 2024; Mambetova et al., 2024; Mascareno & Chavez, 2024).

Soviet military theorists, defining the nature of a possible war, believed that this war would be fought against a coalition of imperialist states, which had a well-equipped army. The war will be manoeuvre warfare and will require a large amount of combat equipment, primarily tanks and aircraft, so it is necessary to prepare for war seriously and in advance. Everyone understood the main task: all the possible strengthening of the military potential of the country, strengthening the technical equipment and the combat training of the Red Army (Bolotin, 1950).

Another military doctrine was the view that the enemy would be defeated at the outset of the war on the enemy territory. Soviet military theorists theorised that modern wars could begin suddenly and without official declaration. M. N. Tukhachevsky in 1934 developed a strategy of warfare in the event of a military conflict on the border, calculating the possibility of defeat due to the failure of mobilisation (Kashirin, 1942). Tukhachevsky's innovation would be forgotten and he would be shot as a German spy. In the summer of 1932, the Red Army Staff submitted theses on "Tactics and Operational Art of the Red Army" to the Revolutionary Military Council. The main idea of the theses was to prevent the enemy from creating a solid front, manoeuvre warfare. The most effective way to solve this problem is to strike a

powerful blow of enormous penetrating force to the full depth, with simultaneous deployment of combat operations (Rawel, 2022).

A deep strike was understood as a comprehensive suppression and destruction of enemy troops intended for strikes from the front, but also being in operational defence.

This method of warfare solved the problem of breaking through the efforts of all branches of troops, tactical defence of the enemy, and sending tanks, motorized infantry, cavalry, airborne landing in the rear of the enemy in the resulting gap.

The main principle of "deep combat" was the massive use of tanks, artillery, aviation and airborne troops.

In the Provisional Field Statute of the Red Army, introduced on December 30, 1936, was put in a new way in the "questioning of the role and place of branches of troops in battle and operation" (Kashirin, 1942, p. 13). The outcome of the battle decides the full interaction of artillery and tanks, while maintaining the fighting order in defence. Massive use of tanks was to ensure success in the battle: the main blow of 30–40 tanks per kilometre of the breakthrough area. The infantry and tanks were supported by artillery fire over the entire depth of the breakthrough. The density of artillery fire was provided by 140 guns per kilometre of the front (Iovlev, 1976).

In 1939, the Law on Universal Military Duty was adopted, which led to a significant increase in the size of the army and the creation of a military-trained contingent. Since 1939, the time limits for training camps increased. Work with pre-conscription youth was effectively carried out in the country. Great work was carried out by the OSAVIAHIM Society. Specialists in mass military specialities were trained. The law on the Universal Military Duty also increased the terms of training camps for persons liable for military duty, which improved the quality of the training of the reserve for the troops and the accumulation of a military-trained contingent in case of war.

Since 1939, the Military Department had intensified military-patriotic education of servicemen, pre-conscription youth and citizens liable for conscription. The main task of military-patriotic education was to form in them a moral and psychological intention to defend their homeland.

Before the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, the Red Army had 2,700 new aircraft in service. A new type of tanks began to be produced: medium T-34 and heavy KV tanks. They were distinguished by the presence of anti-shot armour, but these tanks required considerable modification. In addition, the old tanks (T-28, BT-7 and T-26) had high characteristics and were almost as good as German tanks.

From the first half of the 1930s, the number of troops began to increase up to 930,000, and in 1939 up to 2 million. In the mid-1930s, serious reforms were carried out. In 1934, with the abolition of the USSR Revolutionary Military Council, the People's Commissariat of Defence was created. The powers of commanders of military districts and navies were expanded. The Red Army Staff was transformed into the General Staff. The Air Force and Air Defence were given the powers of independent armed forces. The BBC Main Directorate and the Main Directorate of Air Defence, airborne troops were created (Iovlev & Voropaev, 1960).

In 1935, a system of personal military ranks from lieutenant to Marshal of the Soviet Union was introduced in the Red Army; until then, the military personnel were designated by their official position: Kompolka, Komrot, etc.

In 1937, a programme to build a "Great Oceanic Navy" was adopted. For this purpose, the People's Commissariat of the USSR Navy was established; the Pacific and Northern Fleets and the Caspian Flotilla were created. In the works of military theorists A. P. Aleksandrov, V. A. Belli, I. S. Isakov, Y. A. Panteleyev, A. V. Tomashevich, V. F. Chernyshev, A. M. Shuginin, etc. a new theory of naval art with the application of a complex of forces in naval operations was presented (Gorshkov, 1979).

The development of the military doctrine determined the strategy of the Red Army in the future war. Soviet military theorists denied and criticised the theory of "tank warfare", "air warfare" and "naval warfare". A fatal miscalculation in the strategy of Soviet military theorists was the denial of strategic defence.

Soviet military strategists underestimated the importance of defensive warfare. Stalin did not want to believe that war could start suddenly, without warning, which was one of the reasons for the catastrophe at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, when more than four million Red Army soldiers were taken into Nazi captivity.

In the mid-1930s, the top military leadership entered into a debate about the ratio of mechanised troops to cavalry. Voroshilov won in this struggle. Of great importance was the decree "On Higher Military Educational Institutions" and "On the Arrangement of Educational Work in the Military Academies of the Red Army".

The Military Academy of the Red Army trained military specialists on the scale of regiment and division. Strategy and tactics were studied in this institution for 60% of the total teaching time. The role of military engineering schools increased, the number of study hours for social sciences increased (10–12% of the total time) (Egorov, 2008).

In the late 1930s, the Red Army trained personnel in 6 academies and 5 military departments at civilian universities. At that time, a new kind of troops – airborne troops – appeared in the USSR. By the end of the 1930s, the military power of the Red Army increased due to technical equipment. In 1939 in comparison with 1930, the specific weight of artillery increased seven times, the number of tanks from 1934 to 1939 increased two and a half times. On January 1, 1939 the Red Army had 77,000 machine guns, 45,790 artillery pieces, 15,000 tanks, of which 12,000 were of modern design. The country's Air Force had manoeuvrable fighters, heavy bombers, front-line high-speed bombers and attack aircraft, which had no analogues in the world (Loshkov, 2023).

As the Red Army grew in size in the late 1930s, military administration bodies developed. In 1938, the Main Military Councils were established: Red Army and Navy. The Red Army was under increased party control, NKVD organs were looking for class enemies. In a report to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (May 1931), it was reported that a great deal of work was done to cleanse the political staff of the former Army of persons who served in the White Army.

Since the late 1920s, special departments had been signalling that counter-revolutionary organisations were operating in the Red Army. In the late 1950s, the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office determined them to be fabricated, but at that time their existence was not in doubt.

In 1933, the "Report on Negative Phenomena in the Red Army" collected data showing the mood of the Red Army soldiers.

Mass repressions against the Red Army personnel took place everywhere. The NKVD paid special attention to the border military districts. Only in 1933, 51 sabotage-insurgent organisations and 106 spy residences were uncovered; they arrested 20,133 people.

In January 1937, the trial of the "Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre" was launched. The ideological propaganda began to promote the Trotskyist opportunists and their henchmen. The people believed this propaganda. The February-March (1937) plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks became a watershed in unleashing mass repression against all categories of Soviet citizens. The "uprooting" of all evaders and waverers unfolded with full force. Repressed people were Ya. E. Gamarnik, I. E. Yakir, V. K. Blucher, S. M. A. S. Bulin, A. I. Egorov, I. P. Uborevich, M. N. Tukhachevsky and others. Of the military-party leadership of the RKKA, Voroshilov and Budyonny died by their deaths.

After Stalin's statement at the meeting of the Military Council of the NKO on June 2, 1937 about the discovery of the military conspiracy, the widespread shootings of yesterday's famous commanders of the Red Army, heroes of the Civil War were initiated (Souvenirov, 1998).

In 1938, the repressions continued. Hence, after the arrest on the 25 of May 1937, the head of the Artillery Department of the Red Army, Komkor N. A. Efimov, 33 more employees from his entourage were arrested.

Many people were arrested: famous and illustrious commanders and unknown ones fell under the Moloch. At first, the army political staff was "purged" individually, but when the fight against Trotskyism began, the scale became massive.

In 1937, and in the first months of 1938, 1126 political workers were arrested, including 8 army commissars, 21 corps commissars, 66 division commissars, 122 brigade commissars, 163 regimental commissars and 207 battalion commissars (Souvenirov, 1992).

In 1938, two Marshals, two commanders of the 1st rank, one flag officer of the Navy of the 1st rank, one army commissar of the 1st rank, two commanders of the 2nd rank, 20 komkors, 3 flag officers of the 1st rank, 13 corps commissars, 49 comdivs, 36 division commissars, 97 kombrigs, 96 colonels were arrested.

The head of the Political Department of the Red Army, Mehliis, at the All-Army meeting of political workers in April 1938 reported that the purge in the army has been carried out.

7. Conclusion

It should be noted that the modernisation of the Red Army in the 1930s took place in a complex socio-political and international environment, when the Western democracies pursued a policy of appeasement of the aggressor and the collision of Germany and the USSR. This predetermined the transition to a personnel system of staffing. The physical destruction of thousands of army and navy commanders and chiefs dealt an irreparable blow to the Red Army troops and undermined the country's defence capability.

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