

Observation no: 116

Country-year: USSR-1955

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

The Soviet Union was formed in 1922, in the wake of the Communist victory in the Russian Civil War. The war had begun with the Russian revolution in 1917, not with any coups. After Lenin's death in 1924, Josef Stalin systematically ousted his competitors (particularly Trotsky) and rose to be the top leader of the Soviet Union. Although these internal party struggles were intense and at times violent, they did not involve coups.¹ After Stalin's death, Khrushchev overcame rivals to become the first secretary of the Communist Party.²

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No.

See question 1.

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No.

Khrushchev did serve in the Red Guards, a revolutionary paramilitary formed in the wake of the imperial army's collapse during World War I. He also served as a political commissar in World War II. He was not a military officer or commander, however.³

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No.

The Soviet Union deliberately integrated soldiers from the country's various republics and nationalities. However, Russians did dominate.⁴

¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapters 2 and 3.

² Suny, chapters 17 and 18.

³ Suny, p. 394.

⁴ Roger Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: the Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011); and Roger Reese, *Red Commanders: a Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918-1991* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2005).

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

The Red Army initially accepted many officers with questionable ideological credentials, especially during the Russian Civil War when the need for the military expertise of ex-tsarist officers was dire. This situation gave rise to the commissar system of political officers to watch over military commanders. However, as the 1920s wore on, the party gradually drove military specialists out of the officer corps and replaced them with officers known for their Communist loyalty and ideology.⁵ By the 1930s, the officer corps had become much more ideologically uniform. See also question 6.

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

Senior officers were party members, and communist credentials were essential for high leadership in the Red Army.⁶ See question 5.

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

Political indoctrination was integral to the training and operations of the Soviet military.⁷

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes

The Soviet military conducted extensive counterinsurgency campaigns in its newly acquired border territories in the aftermath of World War II.⁸

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

⁵ Ziemke, pp. 4-5, 11.

⁶ Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 183.

⁷ Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), chapter 4, especially pp. 93-4.

⁸ Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

No.

Leadership of the Soviet Union was firmly civilian.⁹

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No.

I could find no direct evidence of a paramilitary organization to protect Khrushchev. The secret police did play a major role in providing internal security, however. See question 11.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes.

The Soviet military made extensive use of political commissars to watch over the armed forces. In addition, the Soviet secret police, officially known as the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), was formed in 1934. This organization watched over all facets of Soviet society, including the military.¹⁰

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

No.

I found no evidence of a purge of the officer corps during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Stalin did engage in some party purges, most notably the Doctors' Plot in 1952-3, which involved the arrest, torture, show trials, and execution of prominent doctors, most of whom were Jews.¹¹

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes.

Under Stalin these institutions had existed on paper but exerted little real influence.¹² After his death in 1953, however, the party became more institutionalized, apart from the power of any one individual. Party-military ties

⁹ Ziemke, p. 5.

¹⁰ Suny, p. 260.

¹¹ Suny, p. 374.

¹² Ziemke, p. 5.

were strengthened, in part because many senior military officers were also members of the party.¹³ This provided a mechanism for top civilian and military leaders to share information. If anything, the military and party were overly enmeshed, not estranged.¹⁴

¹³ Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 183.

¹⁴ Kolkowicz, especially chapters 4, 5, 6, 7.