

Observation no: 49

Country-year: USSR-1938

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

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No.

See question 1.

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

Yes.

Stalin did have command experience in the field with the Red Army during the Civil War. He also had sat on the wartime Defense Council with Lenin and Trotsky, which made decisions for the armed forces.²

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.³

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 Earl F. Ziemke, "The Soviet Armed Forces in the Interwar Period," in *Military Effectiveness, Vol. II: the Interwar Period*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 5.

³ 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.⁴ By the 1930s, the officer corps had become much more ideologically uniform.

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. See question 5.

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

Yes.

Ideological and political education were deliberately included as a significant part of training in the Soviet Army, even though training overall was deficient in many respects. The regime saw the military as a direct conduit through which to build support for the regime and imbue former peasants with the appropriate ideology.⁵

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

Yes.

The Red Army was heavily involved in coercive campaigns of agricultural collectivization in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁶

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

⁴ Ziemke, pp. 4-5, 11.

⁵ Roger Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: a History of the Soviet Army, 1917-1991* (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4.

⁶ Suny, pp. 184, 223.

No.

Leadership of the Soviet Union was civilian, with Stalin making a serious effort to ensure the military remained subordinate to the party and to him personally.⁷

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 Stalin. 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, as the 1930s wore on.⁸

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

Yes.

Stalin initiated a massive purge of the military in the late 1930s. It began with the execution of General Tukhachevskiy in June 1937. According to Ziemke, "The purge that followed brought about the deaths of three of the five marshals of the Soviet Union and... all of the military district commanders and corps commanders, 'almost all' division and brigade commanders, and 'about half' of the commanders of the regiments."⁹

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

No.

⁷ Ziemke, p. 5.

⁸ Suny, p. 260.

⁹ Ziemke, p. 3.

Ziemke notes, "Throughout the interwar period the Soviet principle of collegiality in the decision-making process provided a permanent point of contact between the professional military and the political leadership in the form of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (1918-34) and its successors, the Military Council (1934-38) and the Main Military and Main Naval Councils (1938-41). The people's commissar chaired the councils, and the membership consisted of his deputies, one of whom was chief of the General Staff, and of Politburo members, most notable Stalin, who was a permanent member after 1938...." However, by the late 1930s these institutions merely rubber stamped decisions that Stalin already had made. "Consultation with the military consisted in the main of meetings in Stalin's office at which the people's commissar and the chief of the General Staff 'received' Stalin's decisions."¹⁰

¹⁰ Ziemke, p. 5.