THE ETHNIC FACTOR IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES

The Soviet Union's policy of universal conscription draws non-Russian Slavs, Balts, Caucasians, and Central Asian Muslims from the various Soviet republics into the armed forces. A new set of studies uses historical and demographic analyses, along with interviews with Soviet emigres who served in the military, to afford a better understanding of the implications of the multiethnic composition of the Soviet military.

BASIC FINDINGS

The Soviet induction system is apparently designed to ensure major differences in ethnic composition between services and branches. Combat units are staffed by a clear majority—usually 80 percent or more—of Slavic soldiers. Noncombat units, including construction battalions, usually contain 70 to 90 percent non-Slavs, especially Central Asians and Caucasians. The Soviet officer corps is Slavic with an overwhelming Russian majority.

Non-Slavs serving in combat units may receive less weapons training than Slavs. Soldiers in construction units seldom receive military training of any kind. Many non-Slavic conscripts enter service with no previous ability to communicate in Russian. Although most written materials used in the military are in Russian and a "Russian only" rule applies in formation, Russian-language training is seldom administered to non-Russian-speakers.

Soldiers from the minority nationalities are stationed outside their homelands in the Soviet Union to prevent mutiny in the event of internal unrest. Servicemen of all nationalities are discouraged from mixing with local populations at their duty stations. Fighting between soldiers and elements of the local population is a frequent occurrence.

Racial discrimination between Slavs and nonwhite non-Slavs in the military has both social and functional manifestations and appears to be matter of fact. Soldiers generally band together with members of their own ethnic group, thereby reducing their contact with other groups and individuals. Ethnic violence appears to be common in combat units of the Ground Forces, where small concentrations of non-Slavs face large numbers of Slavs. Most minority soldiers leave the military with a heightened sense of their own ethnic self-awareness and increased misgivings about Russian domination.

Ethnic dissension in the Soviet armed forces is likely to be exacerbated as the fraction of non-Slavs in the population increases. Between 1980 and 1995, the fraction of Soviet draft-age males who are Russian will drop from about 49 to 46 percent. The Muslim-Turkic percentage will increase from about 24 to 29 percent over the same period.

IMPLICATIONS

A number of options are available to the Soviets in the face of the projected increase in minority conscripts:

- Extending the term of service from two to three years in branches manned mainly by Slavs.
- Curtailing deferments issued to Slavs and increasing those issued to Central Asians.
- Absorbing more non-Slavs into construction battalions and putting them to work on civilian projects, freeing Slavic construction workers for military service.
All these options involve considerable political and economic costs, and their feasibility under prevailing Soviet conditions is uncertain. A strong possibility is that the Soviet leadership will in the main simply muddle through by continuing current policies—Sovietizing all groups, promoting the universal use of the Russian language, improving educational levels, suppressing ethnic unrest and tendencies toward regionalisms, and tinkering with economic reform. If this is the Kremlin's choice, some modest progress may be made toward its goals, but the perceivable ethnodemographic trends will be troublesome for the leadership and the armed forces.

Some reduction in military effectiveness may result. This could take a number of forms. Over the short term, the potential deficiencies include basic-training shortcomings in parts of the Ground Forces, reduced capability and potential unreliability of support forces, and serious training deficiencies among a sizable segment of the reserves.

Over the long term, other weaknesses and deficiencies are likely to result, including unit training weaknesses, potential limitations on force size, and heightened internal security dilemmas.

Under certain circumstances, Soviet forces could also be faced with a number of significant combat-related shortcomings, especially in a protracted conflict. These include defections and "second battle" weaknesses. Finally, the possibility of ethnic riots and conflicts with local populations cannot be ruled out.

Whether or not these potential weaknesses are realized will depend on the conflict scenario. In a short war conducted mainly with first-echelon, primarily Slavic personnel, few if any ethnic-related deficiencies are likely to manifest themselves. The situation could be quite different in a protracted conflict marked by military reverses and significant manpower attrition.

In sum, the ethnic factor in the Soviet military should not be regarded as significantly detracting from the formidable and growing Soviet military power, but it could present exploitable opportunities under certain circumstances. It also has strategic implications. If Soviet military planners foresee ethnic difficulties in a protracted conventional conflict, they would be more likely to opt for a surprise attack and relatively early employment of nuclear weapons.

LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study are drawn largely from interviews with emigres to the United States who served in the Soviet armed forces. Questionnaires or other instruments designed to elicit quantifiable responses were not administered. This is not a statistical study, and the results should be viewed as suggestive, not definitive.

Some have suggested that interviews with emigres have inherent biases, i.e., that emigres cannot give objective viewpoints about a system they rejected or that they may be culturally biased. In the present study, it was not possible to detect a biased viewpoint among those interviewed, and the objectivity of the responses was maximized by the use of interviewers with extensive training and experience in Soviet affairs.