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LABOUR ARMIES AS A FORM OF ORGANIZED LABOUR DURING THE MAKING OF THE SOVIET POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEMS: FROM THE THEORY TO PUTTING THE UTOPIA INTO PRACTICE

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ТРУДОВЫЕ АРМИИ КАК ФОРМА ОРГАНИЗОВАННОГО ТРУДА В ПЕРИОД СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВА СОВЕТСКОЙ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ И ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОЙ СИСТЕМЫ: ОТ ТЕОРИИ К РЕАЛИЗАЦИИ УТОПИИ НА ПРАКТИКЕ

Abstract. The paper is concerned with the prerequisites of the creation of the labour armies during the Civil War in Soviet Russia (1917–1921), the main functions and results of these armies' operations. The conclusion is made that labour armies were an imminent part of military communism, they never happened to be employed as the Red Army's reserve but as a tool of militarizing the country's economy and policies. The evolution of the organized labour units took two directions. Firstly, standardized units were being gradually organized instead of numerous and miscellaneous detachments that made the core of the labour armies in 1920. Another tendency consisted in reducing the number of excessive managerial staff that required additional resources. It is noted that the massive use of the armed forces for labour purposes is always a reaction to the critical situation in which a country finds itself, when neither political nor economic challenges can be responded to by standard means. Thus, the employment of militarized labour units at peacetime can never be justified. On the whole, labour armies proved effective as an emergency means of tackling economic problems and ensuring immediate economic operations. Despite the limited time span in which the labour armies had operated, they left a clear impact on the further course of events in Soviet Russia.

Keywords. Labour army; military communism; compulsory labour conscription; Civil War; Soviet Russia; labour.

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются предпосылки создания трудовых армий в годы Гражданской войны в Советской России (1917–1921 гг.), основные функции и результаты действий этих армий. Делается вывод, что трудовые армии были неотъемлемой частью военного коммунизма, они никогда не использовались как резерв Красной Армии, а как инструмент милитаризации экономики и политики страны. Эволюция трудовых соединений шла по двум направлениям. Во-первых, вместо многочисленных и разнородных отрядов, составлявших ядро трудовых армий в 1920 г., постепенно организовывались стандартизированные части. Другая тенденция заключалась в сокращении числа излишнего управленческого персонала, требовавшего дополнительных ресурсов. Отмечено, что массовое использование вооруженных сил в трудовых целях всегда является реакцией на критическую ситуацию, в которой оказалась страна, когда ни на политические, ни на экономические вызовы невозможно ответить стандартными средствами. В целом трудовые армии оказались эффективными как экстренное средство решения экономических проблем и обеспечения чрезвычайных хозяйственных задач. Несмотря на ограниченный период времени, в течение которого действовали трудовые армии, они оказали явное влияние на дальнейший ход событий в Советской России.

Ключевые слова: Трудовая армия; военный коммунизм, принудительная трудовая повинность; Гражданская война; Советская Россия; труд.

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Russian historiography considers military communism primarily as the Bolshevik system of emergency measures aimed at the victory in the Civil War, with this system being regarded by certain contemporary state and communist leaders and their adherents as a tool of building socialism and communism. The prerequisites and the results of this policy still incite disputes among historians [See 1-3; 15; 20 etc.].

To a greater or lesser extent, military communism penetrated all branches of the country's economy: economic management, industry and agriculture, commerce and distribution, finance. One of the leading principles on which the economy was based consisted in the rebuilding of industrial relations on the grounds of compulsory labour conscription. That implied far more than the implementation of the well-known slogan *He who doesn't work doesn't eat either*. The labour market forces were to be taken over by a carefully planned, systematic distribution and redistribution of labour. The surplus-appropriation system was introduced to confiscate the bread surplus if a peasant was thought to have harvested too much. Moreover, human labour was no more considered to be an individual's property. Every citizen was to work in an environment where their professional background or practical skills would be most beneficial to the country's economy, that is, eventually, in the workplace the Soviet Union would order them to come to.

Communism was supposed to establish the new form of labour which would be plan-based, science-based, conscience-based, exploitation-free, antagonist conflict-free, common, and creative. According to V.I. Lenin, "Communist labour ... is unpaid work ... without expecting a reward, without asking a reward, work as the habit to contribute to the common cause" [16, p. 315].

However, the president of the Council of People's Commissars and his colleagues did not have a clear idea of how the Communist labour would prevail in Russia within the shortest possible period of time. Therefore, they had no other choice but to recur to occasional experiments in the field of labour relations.

It is well-known what great importance the Bolshevik leaders attached to community cleanup days and socialist competition as well as some other radically new forms of labour among peasants and industry workers. Nevertheless, the numbers of conscientious and overenthusiastic workers did not meet the expectations of the new authorities, as these numbers turned out to be not as impressive as anticipated and the new forms of organized labour proved obviously insufficient to match the needs of the national economy at the time of the civil war and deepening economic crisis. The country's population seemed completely unprepared for the immediate transition to the Communist labour, which necessitated new forms of organized labour, with labour

enforcement being the dominant one, while financial and moral motivation was reduced to a minimum or did not exist as such altogether.

At first, labour enforcement was supposed to be applied to “exploitation classes” only, but as the time went by, it became evident that this enforcement was spreading over all walks of life. The compulsory labour conscription being ever replaced by the free labour market was totally out of question. It was believed that the sheer process of work in combination with the propaganda of its usefulness and indispensability would reshape the mentality of anti-Communist proponents. This conception implied that no modification of state-workforce relations would be required as workforce itself would accept this system as the only possible solution, thus making no enforcement necessary.

In practice, the compulsory labour conscription existed in a variety of forms: militarization of labour in industry, involvement of the population into occasional work activities that required no special qualifications, such as lumber production, transportation of goods, community cleanups, etc.

One of the forms of manifestation of the compulsory labour conscription was labour armies – military units retracted from the front or specially created in Soviet Russia to fulfill the economic tasks during the Civil War and to facilitate the transition to the new economic policy.

The reasons which underlay the creation of the labour armies were as follows:

1) the Bolshevik theoretical ideas on the ways and forms of organizing the armed forces and regulating labour relations in the post-capitalist period, which resulted from the conception of the general militarization of the population and compulsory labour for everyone [6, p. 539; 17, p. 42; 18, p. 1 etc.];

2) the practice of involving the army and various forms of militarized labour into fulfilling the economic tasks during World War One and the Civil War;

3) the remaining threatening activities of the anti-Bolshevik forces combined with the economic hardships undermined the plans of reducing the armed forces and made the new Bolshevik authorities think of rational ways of employing the military units while they were not needed in the hostilities.

Generally speaking, both labour armies and military communism were of dual nature. On the one hand, the Bolshevik conception of the organization of the armed forces, labour relations, and methods of implementing their principles had an immediate impact on the state economic policy. On the other hand, the shape which the labour armies eventually took in terms of the militarization of industry and the compulsory labour conscription could not possibly have been foreseen. The Bolshevik decision-making was conditioned by the practical needs of minimizing risks of losing political power if anything went wrong and their vast experience in politics alongside intuitive solutions.

During the Civil War many of the decisions made and measures taken were a product of improvisation, generated by objective and subjective circumstances. Consequently, the labour

armies are also to be regarded as a spur-of-the-moment tool used to serve the Bolshevik doctrine on the basis of the previous experience.

The labour armies were conceived in the hope to tackle the economic downturn and make the transition to the compulsory labour conscription system within as short as possible and as smooth as possible. Alongside the community cleanup days the labour armies were thought of as the new powerful engine that would drive the whole mechanism of Soviet Russia to the bright future, as a specific bridge to the epoch of conscientious, goodwill-based labour. Yet, the labour armies were definitely not the form of organizing labour relations once the communism had been built, they could only be employed as an effective instrument of making this transition easier. The labour armies were a result of an experiment, which was based on the hope that the army of workers and peasants that had defeated the “White Guardians” and was full of revolutionary enthusiasm would prove efficient in completing any other type of task, rather than a detailed calculation and a deep, comprehensive analysis of the labour potential of the armed forces.

The transformation of the armed forces into the labour armies became a large-scale enterprise early in 1920 during the so-called “peace break”, which followed the defeat of the major anti-Bolshevik forces in Eastern and Southern Russia. In 1920–21 eight labour armies were formed: the First Revolutionary Army in the Urals, the Second Revolutionary Army in the lower Volga Region and North-West Turkestan, the Second Special Army in the middle Don Region that bordered on the south-east railways, the Petrograd Army, The Ukrainian Army, the Caucasus Army, the Donetsk Army, and the Siberian Army. In practice, the Reserve Army in the middle Volga Region was another labour army. Furthermore, the rear military detachments deployed in various military districts of the country or retracted from the front were also involved into serving the economic tasks.

Four major stages in employing the organized military labour can be distinguished.

The first stage (until January – mid-April 1920) witnessed some of the active armies being used for contributing to economic ends. The labour tasks were assigned to the military units that had the typical army system of command and organization, thus these units could be swiftly sent back to the front.

The second stage (until April 1921) was marked by the employment of miscellaneous labour groups for labour purposes, though in most cases these groups kept the military structure and were subject to the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic. The troops were being replaced by engineering, building, lumber production and other units that were deployed to the key industrial and agricultural sites. The reserve armies (the Second Special Army, the Reserve Army) gradually adopted the practice of separation of the labour units from the staff charged with the training of the new military detachments.

The third stage (April – December 1921) was connected with the labour units of the Red Army coming under the jurisdiction of the People’s Commissariat for Labour. The reform resulted in all the labour units and armies being integrated into eight labour districts. Standardized units were organized – labour brigades with a common numeration, a centralized system of command

and provisioning, as one brigade of this type was to be quartered in every administrative unit of the country.

The fourth stage (1922) was the period when former labour units were transformed into state labour brigades, funded by the government and designated to maintain the leading role of the state in the employment of mass labour forces in the New Economic Policy.

The evolution of the organized labour units took two directions. Firstly, standardized units were being gradually organized instead of numerous and miscellaneous detachments that made the core of the labour armies in 1920. Another tendency consisted in reducing the number of excessive managerial staff that required additional resources. The army-based structure of labour units generated excessive supplies, which were employed for the maintenance of army facilities. Thus, the multi-layer army hierarchy (platoon, squadron, battalion, regiment, brigade, division, army) was being step by step substituted by labour brigades, i. e. a type of elementary production unit which was immediately subordinate to the command and did not require large technical staff. This allowed increasing the number of troops employed for production purposes to 50–80% by the early 1922 instead of 20–50% in 1920 according to the labour units' payrolls. However, the labour armies eventually lost their army structure to turn into typical labour teams.

A comprehensive analysis of the pattern of the labour armies reveals that during the Soviet-Polish war in 1920 they functioned not as just a labour-purpose reserve of the Red Army, which could be swiftly forwarded to the front in case of emergency, but rather as an element of the military communism system that mirrored the high level of militarization of the country's policies and economy.

The labour armies differed greatly in the number of troops they had at their disposal. For instance, the Ukrainian Labour Army incorporated 6,000–7,000 troops in the early March 1920, while the First Revolutionary Labour Army payrolls showed a massive 170,000 men in January 1920. The overall number of troops which were immediately employed for labour purposes within the spring – autumn period in 1920 remained relatively stable, and amounted to as much as 250,000–300,000 men [See 21, p. 69; 22, p. 3, 24; 23, p. 106-111], although by the early 1921 these numbers went down to 210,000 to fall further on to as low as 75,000 troops by the end of the same year [See 7, p. 3-4; 8, p. 1-2; 10, p. 143-145].

The manning of the labour armies came not only from the fighting troops and conscripts, but was also made up of regular army technical experts, former deserters, prisoners of war, and citizens called up through compulsory labour conscription.

The operations in which the labour armies participated were initially directed by Labour Army Councils, whose administration was composed of army commanders and representatives of a number of government departments. Many of the Labour Army Councils were headed by big names from the Communist party and the Soviet government – L.D. Trotsky (the First Revolutionary Labour Army), I.V. Stalin (the Ukrainian Army), Gr.E. Zinoviev (the Petrograd Army), I.N. Smirnov (the Siberian Army).

The labour armies' top priorities were transportation and fuel production. They were largely employed for coal mining, peat digging, petroliferous shale and oil production, wagon and railway engine repairs, railway and bridge repairs and clearance, etc. They were also used to ensure sufficient peasant labour conscription.

Soviet historians used to emphasize the enormous role the Red Army had played in the economic recovery of Soviet Russia. The extensive historiography of the Civil War – multi-volume works, monographs, research papers – revealed impressive statistic figures which seemed to reflect the huge contribution that the armed forces had made to handling the economic downturn.

According to the evidence we have managed to collect, the labour armies together with the rear labour units provided an estimated 20% of oil export and 4% of oil production in Soviet Russia in 1920, 20% of food production, 10% of firewood production. The armies employed for labour purposes ensured the measures to stabilize the transportations in the territories fought back from the White Guard. Throughout 1921 labour units produced 6.7% of coal in the Donbass region and 12.5% of coal in the Urals, 7.65% of oil, 5 to 13% of firewood in different parts of the country [See 9, p. 5; 11, p. 38, 41; 12, p. 85, 125; 13, p. 18; 14, p. 12].

Nonetheless, no significant progress was made in the industries with the extensive use of labour armies. Moreover, this progress never seemed possible. The aforementioned statistics may appear important only in comparison to the critically low production figures for 1920–21. The use of the armed forces for labour purposes only served to slow down the economic degradation of Soviet Russia. Although the army was able to stem the economic plight to a certain extent, it was never meant to overcome it.

The extensive demand for workforce needed in industry and transport had never been supplied by the labour units. On the contrary, this demand had been on a steady increase throughout 1920 to reach an all-time high at the peak of the military communism policy in January – March 1921. The shortage of workforce was not a problem by itself as this shortage had been somewhat artificially created. For instance, the Soviet railway transport industry had its railway engine pool radically reduced in 1920, while the number of workers employed in this industry more than doubled as compared to 1913. In the spring of 1920, a Donbass region mine worker had 7 to 12 working days a month on the average [5]. Therefore, the problem consisted in finding efficient ways of employing the existing workers instead of additionally recruiting dozens or hundreds of thousands of new people to subsequently organize them into labour units.

The army labour was a creation and an integral part of the military communism policy, thus it could not be used to positively impact the vicious practices of that policy, though it was obvious these practices heavily impeded the whole of Soviet Russia's economy. Although some growth was noticeable, it was achieved mainly through extensive means of production with critically low labour efficiency, large-scale absenteeism, overmanned staff, etc. The labour armies were only able of maintaining transport facilities and a number of militarized enterprises, while they undoubtedly failed to seriously contribute to the national economy. Coal and oil production, farming, railways cargo turnover, labour efficiency remained steadily, and often critically, low.

In reality, the use of the armed forces proved effective only for short-term and emergency tasks. Revolutionary enthusiasm could become a solid basis only for time-limited intensive activities with tangible and visible results. Only suchlike conditions would ensure a desired result, e.g. a bridge would be quickly rebuilt, a railway station or a railway line would be cleared, etc. However, routine everyday work was not as encouraging and motivating, and soon revealed a huge degree of maladjustment of the armed forces to the production processes.

As a rule, the labour efficiency of the military servicemen who did not possess proper professional qualifications was lower than that of civil workers. The figures for the lumber logging industry in the first six months of 1920 show it was 50% lower than that of a conscripted peasant and 150–200% lower than that of a qualified civil professional. In coal mining the labour efficiency of a serviceman and a qualified civil professional during the economic crisis of the summer and early autumn of 1921 was essentially equal. But as soon as the economic situation in the industry had stabilized, the much prevailing efficiency of professional mine workers over labour unit members became obvious. By December 1921 the labour efficiency of a professional mine worker was 150% higher than that of a labour unit conscript [See 4, p. 46; 9, p. 6-7].

Production costs increased expenditures on administrative staff of military units. First and foremost, the labour armies were meant to counter the drawbacks specific to the military communism system, such as bureaucracy, mismanagement, egalitarianism, but the part these armies had played in the economic recovery of Soviet Russia ensured a more or less smooth transition to peaceful economic life, despite this notion being rather conventional under the current circumstances.

The extensive type of the military communism economy generated a feverish demand for workforce from all sorts of economic institutions. Oversized planning, done without a careful economic evaluation, by rule of thumb or through wishful thinking, could be much easier fulfilled by means of labour armies rather than changes to the system. Discipline-tied soldiers, unlike civil professionals, were highly unlikely to openly express their dissatisfaction with working conditions, accommodation or food. Soviet authorities appeared to find it convenient to exploit them unceremoniously, without taking responsibility for anything. Labour units were being valued only when their potential was required at industry enterprises or other institutions, and not just as auxiliary staff, but the main workforce, whose contribution was vital for the production process, for the very survival of a particular industry, e. g. Donbass coalmines or oil production fields and refineries near Grozny.

One of the key factors that hampered the effective use of the army for labour purposes was the principle of its manning. As the labour conscription was compulsory, in the vast majority of cases a conscript was incapable of showing a high labour efficiency in the long term. Furthermore, his work was only remotely related to material rewards adequate to the amount of time and energy spent. Even when food and equipment supplies were sufficient and bonuses for the job done were fairly distributed, the prospects of boosting labour armies' efficiency were restricted. The practice

showed that once the food supplies were enough and labour conscripts did not suffer from malnutrition, it was practically impossible to incite any further interest in the conscripts for increasing their earnings. The situation with civil professionals was entirely different – as they had families and homes, their motivation was incomparably higher.

On the whole, labour armies proved effective as an emergency means of tackling economic problems and ensuring immediate economic operations. To a certain degree, labour army conscripts frequently acted like blacklegs, taking over mine workers, oilmen, builders, lumbermen, steelworkers who did not wish to work out of sheer enthusiasm or for a minimal food ration while a severe economic crisis was raging across the country. Late in 1921 L. G. Shapiro (a Soviet politician, a member of the Riga branch of the BUND (1903), a member of the BUND Central Committee abroad; he joined the Bolshevik ranks after the October Revolution in 1917, he pursued his career in the People's Commissariat for Education, the People's Commissariat for Finance, and political authorities of the Red Army), in his report to I. V. Stalin, was backing the idea of keeping the Donetsk Labour Army active as he pointed out that the coalmining industry was being highly unstable and a recession of the crisis could occur since Menshevik and nationalist ideas were popular among the workers. To that end, labour conscripts were particularly required as they were "highly disciplined, incapable of going on any strikes and ready to promptly step into the breach should the professional mine workers quit the industry" [11, p. 30 об.].

The political importance of labour armies and smaller labour units seems to be noteworthy as they were employed not only for rebuilding the national economy, but were often resorted to in order to exercise control over the territories where civil authorities had not been appointed yet or appeared not strong enough, in many cases taking over these authorities' powers and functions.

In case the Soviet power was being established in a politically or economically troubled area, its militarization and the subsequent use of militarized forms of government was an urgent need of the moment. As the old system of government was no longer valid and the new one was only being introduced, the army appeared to be a stabilizing factor which role turned out to be beneficial for maintaining transport facilities, providing at least primary conditions for industry to perform its functions, contributing to public institutions returning to normal everyday routines, staging social and cultural events that were often utilized for propaganda purposes, ensuring law and order for those who sided with the new Soviet authorities. The armed forces helped to prevent different parts of Soviet Russia from plunging deeper into chaos and economic collapse.

It was not the immediate practical operations of labour units or even armies that mattered most. The major contribution that the armed forces had made was the new principles of organization and day-to-day management in industry alongside a vast degree of militarization of enterprises, coal mines, oil fields, and railways in a number of territories of Soviet Russia. Only in this respect the employment of the regular armed forces for economic tasks seemed effective and well-founded as labour armies' involvement in the national economy was to a certain extent justified in light of its across-the-board militarization. The regular armed forces appeared to be an ideal instrument of mobilizing all of the country's production forces, implementing the

compulsory labour conscription, suppressing all sorts of real and potential opposition to the regime of the day. This was the scope of responsibility where the labour armies proved effective, and in this field their role has to be acknowledged positive. As for the combat employment of the labour units, it was largely reduced to suppressing rebel groups and deserters, as prompt availability, combat readiness and day-to-day field training were practically incompatible with carrying out everyday economic operations.

Once the Civil War came to an end and the New Economic Policy was adopted, the need for the labour armies vanished. Late in 1921–1922 these units were gradually reduced to be subsequently dissolved.

Despite the limited time span in which the labour armies had operated, they left a clear impact on the further course of events in Soviet Russia as the experience of their employment for economic and day-to-day management tasks would be required in the decades to come.

A number of important conclusions had been made and put in the reports of some of the commanders of labour armies or brigades [See, for instance, 19, p. 78-79; 24, p. 3-6]. First, labour enforcement was justified in remote areas only where no other workforce was available. Second, it was effective only in case of emergency operations that were of paramount importance for the national economy. Third, only militarized form of labour was appropriate as the practice of compulsory labour conscription of civilians failed miserably to meet the purpose. Fourth, a stimulation and punishment system was required for ensuring or non-ensuring the established productivity quotas. Fifth, compulsory labour had to be a massive enterprise.

Not surprisingly, suchlike ideas were readily recurred to in the 1930s and 1940s when the compulsory labour conscription was reintroduced in USSR. This type of organized labour was badly wanted for emergency operations in industry.

Nonetheless, the massive use of the armed forces for labour purposes is always a reaction to the critical situation in which a country finds itself, when neither political nor economic challenges can be responded to by standard means. Thus, the employment of militarized labour units at peacetime can never be justified.

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