

31 August 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : The Decree of 29 December 1917--The  
Abolition of Ranks in the Bolshevik  
Revolutionary Army

1. In the wake of the Bolshevik Party's seizure of power in Petrograd and Moscow in October 1917, Lenin and Trotskiy set about the formation of a government pledged to pull Russia out of the war with Germany. As part of their efforts to do this, the Bolsheviks adopted a decree in late December 1917 abolishing military ranks and titles.\*

2. The 29 December 1917 decree reflected three considerations:

--one, it recognized the plight of Russian forces on the Western Front, such as the collapse of morale after three years of trench warfare, and the break-up of discipline which accompanied an increasing desertion rate;

--two, it dovetailed with other Bolshevik decrees which abolished all ranks, titles, and class distinctions within the civilian sector; and

--three, it reflected the new regime's fear that aristocratic officers might attempt to turn the army against them.

3. Faced with civil war and the need to defend themselves against the Allied effort to open a second front in the east the Bolsheviks soon began to move away from the provisions of the 29 December 1917 decree. In fact, on 4 March 1918, just one day after signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans, the Bolsheviks

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\*For full text, see page 3.

established a Supreme Military Council, a military and political body for control at the upper level of the army. On 4 April, a decree provided for the creation of a corps of political commissars "to represent" the Bolshevik Party and its doctrine in the new army. In addition, the new secret police organization, the Cheka, established on 7 December 1917 for the civilian sector, soon began to function in the army.

4. Finally the blithe spirit of the December decree completely evaporated between 21 April and 29 July 1918 with new announcements and decrees eliminating both the voluntary recruiting basis for the army and its elective system for commanders. Henceforth, commanders were to be appointed by organs of the Bolsheviks' Ministry of War, and former Czarist officers were to be coopted into the Red Army for use not as "leaders" but as "military specialists."

5. The Spring 1918 declarations were admissions of the detrimental effect the abolition of ranks had on military skill and recruitment, and a pragmatic admission of the need for a disciplined military force to support and expand the Bolshevik political control beyond Petrograd and Moscow. The harsh disciplinary regulations adopted for the new Red Army placed both the soldiers and (at first) their "military specialists" and (later) "Red Commanders" under the control of the Cheka and the commissars.

6. Following the Allied Intervention (1918-20) and an internal Kremlin debate (1920-24) on the proper organization and role of the military in the new Soviet state, military reforms in 1924-25 formally established a command personnel hierarchy by function. Designated, for example, were deputy company commander, company commander, battalion commander, all with corresponding collar insignia. The pay for command personnel was only slightly differentiated by position, an apparent vestige of the egalitarian beginning of the Red

Army. The command personnel's standard of living was low but better than in civilian life, and in the regular units of the Red Army morale, discipline and training were reasonably good.

7. Finally, a decree on 22 September 1935 established a hierarchy by rank which restored most of the Czarist officer titles and pay status.

Abolition of Military Ranks and Titles

Decree on the Equalization of Rights of All Serving in the Army

December 29, 1917

In realization of the will of a revolutionary people, for the quickest and most decisive destruction of all remnants of the former inequality in the army, the Soviet of People's Commissaries ordains:

1. All titles and stations in the army, starting with that of corporal and ending with that of general, are abolished. The army of the Russian Republic from now on consists of free and equal-to-one-another citizens, holding the honorable stations of Soldiers of the Revolutionary Army.
2. All preference, connected with the former titles and stations as well as outward distinctions are annulled.
3. All titles are annulled.
4. All orders and other marks of distinction are abolished.
5. With the abolishing of the officers rank there are abolished all separate officers organizations.
6. The institution of orderlies, now existing in the active army, is abolished.

Note. Orderlies remain only in regimental offices, committees and other army organizations.

President of the Soviet of People's Commissaries  
V. Ulianov (Lenin)

S.U.R., 1917, No. 9, pp. 137-38.