Proletarian Internationalism as Revolutionary Patriotism: Political Instruction in the Soviet Baltic Fleet, 1926-1940

On 10 December 1930, the Soviet poet and satirist Dem'ian Bednii penned a letter to Joseph Stalin complaining about the criticism he had been subjected to by the Central Committee (CC) of the communist party for two poems he had published in *Pravda*, the party's national daily newspaper. Stalin, who in the past had had comradely correspondence with Bednii, replied two days later with a letter of his own in which he stood by the CC's criticisms and admonished the poet to recognise his mistakes and 'turn back to the old, Leninist road'.[1]

Although Stalin's letter remained unpublished until the publication of his collected works two decades later, it has in recent years attracted attention from scholars of Soviet ideology and public discourse. This is because the substance of Stalin's criticism lay in the charge that Bednii's recent works betrayed contempt for Russian culture and consequently for Russian workers who, in Stalin's formulation, 'after achieving the October Revolution did not, of course, cease to be Russians'.[2] The significance of the letter was that it foreshadowed what was subsequently viewed as a major ideological shift, the rehabilitation and incorporation of Russian history into the mainstream of Soviet culture.

Historians of the Soviet Union have long discussed the origins of this shift as well as its implications for Soviet foreign and nationalities policy. This debate however has a lineage that is significantly older than the academic field of Soviet studies and has attracted interest from such disparate groups as the Russian exile diaspora and labour historians and activists. Indeed, the keynote speaker at the conference on which this volume is based devoted a considerable part of his contribution to describing Stalinism as a form of nationalism, one which has in fact provided much of the ideological content of the contemporary Russian political system under Vladimir Putin.[3]

This chapter has two main purposes. First, it aims to serve as an introduction for a non-specialist audience to the debate on internationalism and patriotism in Soviet public discourse. To this end, it presents a historical account of the transformation of Leninism from a radical wing of European Social-Democracy during WWI to state ideology of the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s, followed by a discussion of the main interpretations of the emergence therein of patriotic themes in the 1930s. Second, it argues that this patriotic shift in Soviet ideology is best understood as a consequence of the adaptation of Leninism to the purposes of governing rather than overthrowing a state; that is not as an abandonment of Leninist ideology for some form of Russian or Soviet nationalism. This is illustrated through an examination of the content of political instruction for sailors and officers serving in the Soviet Baltic Fleet in the period 1926-1940.[4] It is demonstrated that even in an institution where nationalist discourse might be expected to prevail, patriotic duty to the state was still cast in class terms. What is more, the content of political instruction is shown to have remained fairly uniform throughout the period

[1] Stalin, "To Comrade Demyan Bedny (Excerpts from a letter)", in *Collected Works*, vol. 13 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, 1953), p. 29.
[2] Ibid, p. 26.
[3] This is by no means a rare view amongst observers of modern-day Russia. See for example Veljko Vujacic, "Stalinism and Russian Nationalism: A Reconceptualization," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 2 (January 1, 2007): 156–83.
[4] The material for this discussion is drawn from the archival collections of the Political Directorate of the Baltic Fleet as well as those of some of its individual formations which are held at the Russian State Archive of the Navy (RGAVMF). All translations from Russian are the author's.

under examination, thus contradicting accounts of a sharp ideological reorientation occurring in the mid-1930s.[5]

Leninism from revolutionary current to ruling party ideology

The well-known aphorism of the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that 'working men have no country' has been reproduced innumerable times in the socialist and scholarly literatures as the most succinct statement of the internationalist commitment of classical Marxist thought. Several decades after the *Manifesto's* publication, the outbreak of the First World War would make the principle of internationalism the main issue of intra-socialist polemics. For although some sort of commitment to the universal interests of the working class had been amongst the mainstream views within European socialist parties, when war came in 1914 most of them sided with their national governments, in a political shift exemplified by the German Social-Democrats voting for war credits on 4 August 1914. Within a few months from the July crisis most parties adopted a line of 'national defensism', while in France and Britain socialists took ministerial posts for the first time. Only the Russian and Serbian parties opposed the war from the belligerent states, joined by the 'narrow' faction of the Bulgarian socialists and the Italian Socialist Party from the neutral countries.[6]

After the initial shock of this ideological about-face, the internationalist socialist minorities made an attempt to mount a counter attack against the 'social-chauvinists' encouraged to a large extent by the retreat of the initial wave of jingoism amongst workers in the belligerent classes. In this context, Lenin emerged as the leading figure of the most intransigent wing of the anti-war socialists, known as the Zimmerwald Left.[7] Lenin and his supporters denounced the Second International and its leadership as politically bankrupt and called for the 'complete organisational severance' of social-chauvinists from workers' parties.[8] They maintained that the only principled political stance available to socialists in the circumstances was revolutionary; they had to actively pursue the conversion of the world war among states into a civil war *within* them, therefore actively facilitating the defeat of their own governments.[9]

Not surprisingly, Lenin's 'revolutionary defeatism' remained a minority view even amongst the anti-war left. Lenin's views on a related issue would however prove unpopular even amongst those committed revolutionaries who supported a defeatist line on the war. As a war between multinational empires, WWI catapulted Europe's nationalities questions to the

[5] It should go without mention that, this being an examination of ideology and public discourse rather than class relations, the argument presented here is independent of the debate on whether or not the Soviet Union was in fact a socialist state. This paper makes the much more limited claim that the ideological shift of the mid 1930s was not an abandonment of socialist ideology and thus did not in any meaningful sense constitute a break. The same caveat applies to the question of continuity between Lenin(ism) and Stalin(ism). The term Leninism is used in this paper to refer both to Lenin's own political practice and the state ideology of the Soviet Union, more properly known as Marxism-Leninism, in order to stress to the point that the latter was an adaptation of Bolshevik practice for the purposes of government.

[6] For an overview of the Left's response to the outbreak of the war see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 124-127 and Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (I.B.Tauris, 2013), pp. 27-31.

[7] R. Craig Nation, *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989).

[8] Lenin, "The collapse of the Second International", in *Collected Works*, 4th ed., vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), pp. 257-59.

[9] Lenin, "The defeat of one's own government in the imperialist war", in *Collected Works*, vol. 21, pp. 275-6.

top of the international political agenda, forcing socialists of all stripes to take a stance on the issues of separatism and self-determination. In a series of articles and pamphlets published in 1915-1916, Lenin supported the right of oppressed nations to unilateral secession from their home states and attacked any attempts to block this right in the name of internationalism as an inexcusable concession to imperialism. The task of socialists was to oppose any attempts by the great powers to forcibly maintain control over stateless peoples struggling for independence, while also working to channel such national aspirations to the direction of socialist revolution.[10]

It is not necessary to enter into the nuances of these debates to appreciate the radical implications of the Leninist line. A political stance comprising revolutionary defeatism and support for separatism can be fairly described as geopolitical nihilism; that is complete indifference to the fate of any state entity. This indifference was founded on a conviction that the international working class had and should seek to have no stake in the international states system as it was constituted at the time. It was the principle of internationalism applied to political practice. This political outlook could not possibly survive the Bolsheviks' transformation from subversives to rulers.

Naturally, Lenin's views never found a wide audience amongst reform-minded socialists. Despite the Russian party's initial opposition to the war it was only its Bolshevik wing that stuck to the line of unilateral withdrawal even after the overthrow of Tsarism in the February Revolution of 1917. In the months that followed the fall of the autocracy, the Bolsheviks worked to undermine and ultimately overthrow Russia's provisional government in a temporary alliance with other militant opponents of the war, most notably anarchists and the left wing of the Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) party. This resolute opposition to the war was amongst the key factors that propelled the Bolsheviks to power in the October Revolution.[11]

Unlike some of their more extreme allies on the left however, the Bolsheviks had a political outlook that acknowledged the need for a state, albeit one that would be radically different in lieu of its working-class character.[12] Upon coming to power in 1917, Lenin's party set about building this state and by the time of its formal foundation in 1922, following a long civil war against monarchists, nationalists, anarchists and foreign forces, the Soviet Union had developed both of the institutions by which modern states usually relate to each other: a standing army and a diplomatic service.[13] As the Soviet Union claimed sovereignty over roughly the same territory as the Russian Empire – an achievement largely made possible by the Red Army's victory over separatist forces – the Bolsheviks' support for the national aspirations of stateless peoples at the expense of the Empire's territorial integrity gave way to a more realistic but still highly ambitious project of extensive cultural autonomy and

[10] Lenin, "The socialist revolution and the right of nations to self-determination", in *Collected Works*, vol. 21, pp. 143-56. Amongst the opponents of this view from within the radical anti-war camp were Rosa Luxemburg and the Polish socialists who were extremely suspicious of Polish nationalism.

[11] The classical account remains Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (Norton, 1976). For the uneasy cooperation between Bolsheviks and anarchists see Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 124. The introduction in Scott Baldwin Smith, *Captives of Revolution: The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Dictatorship, 1918–1923* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011) provides a very useful account of SR activities in 1917.

[12] This is the subject of Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. See *Collected Works*, vol. 25, pp. 381-492.

[13] Although the notion of a revolutionary army had some pedigree in revolutionary theory, the same was not true for the diplomatic corps. The establishment of a diplomatic service represented therefore an even greater compromise of revolutionary principles than the creation of a regular, standing army. Alastair Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy, 1900-39*, (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 45-76.

indigenous elite promotion.[14] Workers now had a country and with it, geopolitical interests to look after.

Even though the ideological compromises made by the Bolsheviks in order to take and maintain power did lead to disillusionment amongst their supporters, it wasn't until much later that some observers started describing the party's political recalibrations in terms of a retreat from socialism. From the mid-1930s onwards, as the prospects of revolution receded in Europe and were ultimately crushed in Germany following the establishment of the Nazi regime, the USSR sought to normalise relations with the capitalist world and make alliances to ensure its security in what was becoming an increasingly more hostile international environment. Thus, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with the USA in 1933 and joined the League of Nations the following year.[15] On the domestic front, a large scale rehabilitation of traditional Russian culture took place alongside the promotion of Russian cadres both in the central and the regional state and party agencies in minority areas.[16]

The preceding sketch gives an idea of the scale of the transformation of the internationalist dimension of Leninist thought in the course of the transformation of Bolshevism from a marginal current in European Social-Democracy to ruling party of the Soviet Union. Bearing this in mind, we may now briefly examine the different scholarly interpretations of this shift before turning to our case study.

Perhaps the best known account of interwar Soviet policy in terms of abandonment of revolutionary principles is Leon Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936). Discussing the USSR's attempts to normalise diplomatic relations with the capitalist world, the exile former Bolshevik argued that the bureaucracy which had usurped political power from the working class in the Soviet Union had no interest in world revolution. As a result, instead of pursuing a foreign policy that would encourage revolutionary developments abroad, the party leadership sought instead to normalise relations with bourgeois states in favour of preserving the international status quo. According to Trotsky however, only successful revolutions abroad could guarantee the security of the Soviet Union. Thus, the 'conservative, ignorant and irresponsible Soviet bureaucracy' not only brought 'nothing but misfortune to the workers' movement of the world' but also endangered the very existence of the Soviet state.[17]

One decade after the publication of Trotsky's work, a less famous Russian exile made a similar argument regarding the new direction of Soviet foreign policy, albeit offering a different evaluation of the shift. In *The Great Retreat* (1946), the sociologist Nikolai Timasheff argued that the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by the USSR in the 1930s reflected the abandonment by the party leadership of world revolution as a policy objective. Like Trotsky, Timasheff embedded this observation within a broader account of retreat from the communist political project, thus linking conceptually the USSR's purported shift to a less antagonistic foreign policy to similar developments in domestic cultural and nationalities policies.

Timasheff's argument was grounded in a version of the modernisation theory of post-WWII sociology. In his view, the Russian revolution had interrupted the objective process of development of the Russian nation, with the Bolsheviks artificially forcing the country onto a doctrinally invented developmental path that was a historical dead end. The 'Great Retreat'

[14] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
[15] Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy*, p. 109.
[16] Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52, pp. 443-4.
[17] Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), p. 145.

was the result of the realisation by the Bolshevik leadership that their communist project had been a failure leading to their complete political isolation within the country. As the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the coming to power of Hitler in Germany made war a visible prospect, the leadership prioritised its political and physical survival and sought to mend relations with the domestic population and foreign states alike. Thus, the argument goes, starting in 1934 the regime embarked on what amounted to a complete rehabilitation of traditional Russian culture within the Soviet Union and an abandonment of a foreign policy focused on fomenting revolution abroad.[18]

Thus, Timasheff agreed with Trotsky that the policies of the Soviet state in the mid-1930s constituted a form of retreat from communist principles based on a different calculation of political interest on the part of its leadership. Importantly for this discussion, both observers perceived the domestic and foreign aspects of Leninist internationalism to be amongst the main casualties of this retreat, although Timasheff welcomed this development while Trotsky denounced it as a despicable betrayal.

Although Trotsky's analysis has declined in popularity within academia along with most Marxist-derived schemes and few scholars would subscribe today to the crude notion of natural historical development that informs much of Timasheff's account, the conceptual framework of ideological retreat has remained influential amongst students of Soviet history to the present day.[19] This is especially true with regard to internationalist principles as part of Soviet public discourse during the interwar period.

One of the most elaborate arguments to that effect has been developed in the work of David Brandenberger. Brandenberger has put forward the view that the re-emergence of traditional Russian patriotic themes in Soviet culture from the mid-1930s onwards was the result of a calculated populist political manoeuver on the part of the country's leadership. This move was instigated by a realisation that the class saturated discourse of Leninism was failing to catch on with the Soviet masses and could thus not be relied on as a tool of political mobilisation. In response, following a brief period of cultural experimentation, the regime came up with a cultural policy that relied on established themes such as folk tales and popular heroes as well as the country's revolutionary tradition, in attempt to make this relevant to a broader audience. Despite initial success, this strategy was heavily upset by the repressions of the second half of the 1930s as large swathes of the country's creative intelligentsia and heroic pantheon became politically toxic virtually overnight. The cultural universe that emerged after the purge was one heavily tilted towards the pre-revolutionary period, as only the long-departed had been immune to charges of counterrevolutionary activities. Revolutionary culture was never able to recover from that blow, leaving patriotism, increasingly Russian, as the only viable alternative.[20]

Brandenberger's argument has the advantage of introducing elements of contingency and uncertainty to the familiar notion of ideological retreat, thus avoiding the crude inevitabilities

[18] Nicholas Sergeyevitch Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1946), pp. 349-71.

[19] For an exchange of opposing views on the legacy of Timasheff's work on contemporary scholarship, see Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Alexander Martin (eds.), 'Ex Tempore Stalinism and "The Great Retreat"' [special section], *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 651-733.

[20] Brandenberger has developed his argument in a number of works over several years. See indicatively David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956,* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002); *idem*, "Stalin's populism and the accidental creation of Russian national identity", *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 5 (September 2010): 723-39; *idem*, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

posited by Trotsky and Timasheff. Nevertheless, the sharp distinction between the class-based content of Leninism and the patriotically themed culture of the late interwar years that is implicit in Branderberger's work remains open to contention.

An influential group of post-1989 historians of the USSR have conceptualised the Soviet 1930s in terms of an alternative, socialist modernity.[21] Although varying in scope and focus, the common ground shared by works within this paradigm is that they tended to view similarities between the USSR and the developed states of the capitalist world not as elements of a Soviet retreat from socialism, but as indicative of their common status as modern states, itself a consequence of the common origins of Marxism and ideologies of liberal capitalism in the Enlightenment. It was thus a mutual belief in a rationally organised and manageable society that led the Soviet Union and the advanced capitalist states to adopt similar policies on areas as different as public health and surveillance.[22] Similarities were not indicative of a Soviet retreat from socialism, but of the success of the socialist project on at least some of its own terms. The same was true for the emergence of patriotic discourse in Soviet public culture. As the new Soviet state drew together the disparate cultures and nationalities of the former Russian Empire, they came to form a new, Soviet nationhood that was very much defined by its participation in the project of socialist construction.[23]

Intellectual historians have also developed strong criticisms of the retreat thesis. Students of Marxist-Leninist ideology have demonstrated that even such controversial Soviet innovations as the policy of socialism in one country had their antecedents in Marxist thought and could not thus be meaningfully described as retreats from the revolutionary project.[24] Working in this direction, Erik van Ree has proposed the term "revolutionary patriotism" as the most apt description of Joseph Stalin's political thought.[25] For van Ree, although Stalin's political project did come to involve strong elements of national aggrandizement, these were never independent of the status of the Soviet Union as a socialist state. The Soviet Union could and should be powerful because it was a bastion of international socialism.[26] As the remainder of this chapter will show, it was precisely this kind of patriotism that was expected of Soviet citizens serving in the country's armed forces.

Revolutionary patriotism in the Baltic Fleet

A peculiarly Soviet institution of civilian control over the military, political instruction was a responsibility of the Communist Party whose organised presence in the Baltic fleet as in the rest of the armed forces took two distinct but overlapping forms. These were the party's organisations and the parallel officer hierarchy of commissars and instructors *(voenkomi* and *politruki)*. Party organisations in the Fleet were descended from the Bolshevik's clandestine,

[21] For a review of this approach, see Michael David-Fox, "Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 54, no. 4 (January 1, 2006): 535–55.
[22] See for example Peter Holquist, "'Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work': Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context," *The Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 3 (September 1997): 415–50; David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939*, (Cornell University Press, 2011).
[23] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism As a Civilization* (University of California Press, 1997), p. 230.
[24] Erik Van Ree, "Socialism in One Country: A Reassessment," *Studies in East European Thought* 50, no. 2 (1998): 77–117; David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
[25] Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth Century Revolutionary Patriotism*, Reissue (Routledge, 2002).
[26] Ibid, pp. 230-73.

pre-revolutionary cells.[27] These where the building blocks of the party and functioned much in the same way as they did in other parts of Soviet society like factories, farms and schools. Conversely, the commissar hierarchy was a specifically military structure, a parallel officer corps subordinate to the military department of the central committee. A civil war-era innovation, the task of commissars was to monitor officers at every level in order to ensure their loyalty to the Soviet state and provide political education to all serving personnel.[28] This institutional arrangement was formalised by the 1926 Party Rules which set out the relative responsibilities of political departments and party organisations.[29] The importance of this distinction for the purposes of this essay is that the organisational duality of the party in the military has left us with two different kinds of sources. Protocols of organisations' meetings for example provide a window into the way in which various issues were actually approached by party members. On the other hand, the educational materials produced by political departments and the reports of individual commissars to their superiors are indicative of what was politically expected and desirable from sailors and officers. They are thus more reflective of official moods.

International politics and the place of the USSR in the world were staple themes of political education throughout Soviet society and the armed forces were no exception to this rule. Thus, shortly before the commencement of the Baltic Fleet's autumn manoeuvres in 1926, the political departments of units and individual ships taking part in the exercise received a long list of directives on the ideological instruction that would have to take place before and during the mock operation. Composed and issued by the Baltic Fleet's political directorate, *PUBalt*, the directives went into detailed instructions on how to relate the planned exercise to current international affairs and also included a model outline of a political education session on the "International and domestic situation of the USSR".[30] The purpose of that session would be to demonstrate the threat faced by the USSR as a socialist state in capitalist encirclement. This was to be done by reference to "growing contradictions amongst capitalists", as in the case of the decline of European states compared to the USA in the world economy. Rising military expenditures worldwide were a product of these contradictions, as were the intensifying attacks of capital on labour rights internationally, exemplified by lock-outs in Britain and an increased working-day in Italy.[31] Given that on the international stage the class struggle between workers and capitalists took the form of the confrontation between the USSR and the capitalist world, the session would conclude that an attack on the Soviet Union was "both possible and inevitable".[32]

Political officers were thus expected to raise the morale of serving personnel by explaining the link between a standard military exercise and the broader but more remote processes taking place in the world of international affairs. This is further illuminated by a statement on the "political significance of the manoeuvres" included in the outline of a session

[27] I. Solov'ev and T. Fedorova, "K Istorii Vozhniknoveniia Bol'shevistkikh Organizatsii na Baltiiskom Flote" [Towards a History of the Emergence of Bolshevik Organisations in the Baltic Fleet], *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, no. 11 (1966): 11-20.
[28] Iulia Kalinina, *Politotdeli v Sisteme Politicheskogo Kontrolia na Baltiiskom Flote, 1919-1921*. [Political Departments in the System of Political Control in the Baltic Fleet]. Unpublished doctoral thesis (Saint-Petersburg, 2007), introduction.
[29] Party Rules, 1926; XII: 78.
[30] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1310, ll. 16-17.
[31] The Fleet's personnel would have been familiar with the events of the 1926 UK general strike and the less well-known introduction of a 9-hour working day in fascist Italy, as the Soviet press covered foreign labour disputes regularly.
[32] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1310, l. 16.

imaginatively titled "What every red-sailor needs to know about the manoeuvres". According to *PUBalt*, the manoeuvres were politically significant in the following three ways:

> 1. As a demonstration before the enemy of our ability to defend the peaceful construction of socialism.
>
> 2. As a demonstration before the proletariat and the toilers of the USSR, to reassure them of the fact that their peaceful labour is protected by the loyal to the revolution Red Fleet.
>
> 3. As a demonstration before the proletariat of the world that the Red Fleet, defender of the first in the world Soviet Socialist Republic is ready at any moment to come their aid in the cause of overthrowing capitalist rule in their countries.[33]

A demonstration of military might can act as a signal of strength to discourage perceived enemies abroad and reassure domestic audiences irrespective of the performing state's ideological inclinations. Regardless then of the socialist phraseology of their formulation, there is nothing particularly revolutionary about the first two points in the above statement. Conversely, the third point can scarcely be read as anything other than a statement that revolutionary war abroad was part of the Fleet's mission. It is possible to dispute the extent to which Soviet military and political leaders actually believed this, but what concerns us here is that serving personnel were expected and encouraged to do so.[34] In this sense, the ideological instruction received by sailors and officers of the Baltic Fleet was fully within the boundaries of war-time Leninism as discussed above.

During the same period, the Fleet's party organisations were primarily occupied by a mixture of political and everyday military concerns. Thus, collected party minutes from 1926-1929 reveal a membership trying to combat drunkenness and rowdiness amongst their comrades and fellow-sailors, while at the same time disseminating the political resolutions of Party Congresses and explaining to bewildered peasant seamen the difference between the Tsarist and Red Fleets.[35] The internationalist principles of Leninism appear to underlie political instruction even in such quotidian contexts. On 3 March 1929 for example, the party secretaries, commissars and commanders of the Fleet's submarine brigade held a joint meeting to discuss the progress of a major party purge going on at the time, but also to consider ways of combating anti-Semitic views amongst sailors and officers.[36] Although the meeting resolved to postpone the purge until its completion by civilian organisations, it went ahead with what appears to have been a lengthy discussion on anti-Semitism lead-off by a short lecture on its "social-

[33] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1310, l. 15.

[34] A firm believer in the necessity of revolutionary wars, the Chief of Staff and later People's Commissar for Army and Navy Affairs Mikhail Frunze had by that time been dead for a year and succeeded by the less opinionated Kliment Voroshilov. John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941,* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 199-200. Nevertheless, 1926-1927 was a period of rapid deterioration of diplomatic relations between the USSR and the capitalist world, leading to what has since come to be known as the 1927 War Scare. The possibility of war could thus not have been far from Soviet leaders' minds. Hugh D. Hudson, "The 1927 Soviet War Scare: The Foreign Affairs-Domestic Policy Nexus Revisited," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 39, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 145–65.

[35] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1303, ll. 35-6, 170-1. RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, ll. 1-7.

[36] The 1929 purge was decreed by the XVI Congress to rid the party of members who were deemed to be "socially-alien", "corrupt" or "bureaucratic", in connexion with the launch of the First Five Year Plan and the collectivisation campaign. John Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 42.

economic basis".[37] Although the speaker, Gol'dshtein,[38] described anti-Semitic behaviour as "a form of counterrevolution", the other contributors moved beyond sociological abstractions to criticise the specific forms of racial prejudice they had encountered in their units. Interestingly, the examples they chose indicate concern about the existence and expression of such beliefs in themselves, rather than the potentially negative effects these could have on discipline and the brigade's esprit-de-corps. The first to take the floor after the speaker, Kholostiakov argued that educational activities against anti-Semitism were necessary even in units where no Jews were serving.[39] There is also no mention of ethnic tensions being the cause of fights amongst sailors, even though such incidents figured prominently in discussions of disciplinary problems.[40]

Instead, inappropriate expressions and jokes about Jews, Tatars, Finns and other nationalities appear to have been the most alarming manifestations of "Great Russian chauvinism" in the brigade. One contributor, Veshchilov stated that Jews themselves habitually told anti-Semitic jokes and called for ideological struggle against "anti-Semitic Jews". Gol'dshtein wrapped up the session concluding that "the contributions of all comrades confirm that we must step up the struggle for internationalism".[41]

What are we to make of a group of submarine officers and sailors discussing the scourge of Russian chauvinism in the form of racist jokes at a formal party meeting? First, we should not dismiss the possibility that the participants were genuinely disconcerted by the existence of such views amongst their fellow servicemen. They were after all members of the communist party, some of them charged specifically with monitoring the "moral-political moods" *(moral'no-politicheskie nastroeniia)* of serving personnel. On the other hand, this could also be seen as a routine meeting on a perennial problem to which those present had little to contribute apart from formulaic condemnations and Bolshevik rhetoric.[42]

To be sure, these are not mutually exclusive possibilities. What is important for the argument made here however is that, even if we accept the least charitable interpretation, we are still left with a picture of ideological instruction that is formally committed to tackling ethnic prejudice, its success or lack thereof notwithstanding. It seems then that the internationalist aspects of pre-revolutionary Leninism remained at the end of the 1920s part of the canon of political instruction in the military, both in the sense of a fundamental rejection of the international state system and a commitment to addressing the nationalities issue inherited from the imperial era.

The enormous transformations set in motion by the First Five Year plan seem to have pushed internationalist education to the side-lines of the political instruction agenda. During the early 1930s, political education sessions were dominated by the tasks of socialist construction, with the rapid industrialisation and collectivisation campaigns being accorded pride of place. Thus, the Red Fleet's status as an instrument of world revolution gradually declined as a theme in the political education of serving personnel, as commissars and regular party members became preoccupied with responding to the doubts expressed by serving

[37] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, ll. 1-2.
[38] First names, patronymics and ranks are not as a rule recorded in party meeting protocols.
[39] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, l. 2.
[40] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, l. 4.
[41] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1365, l. 2.
[42] Although Russian Jews were amongst the main beneficiaries of the Russian revolution, popular anti-Semitism survived into the Soviet period and periodically manifested itself within Soviet state institutions in more or less acute terms. On this, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Zvi Y. Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Indiana University Press, 2001).

peasants about the wisdom of the party's agricultural policy.[43] Nevertheless, although the domestic challenges faced by the communist party drew the efforts of its grassroots propagandists in the military away from issues pertaining to the Fleet's international mission, the same was not true for those aspects of the party's internationalist ideology that were more directly applicable to everyday life on the Fleet. While party activists were thus less likely to devote much time to the prospects of world revolution than the mounting problems of industrialisation, they still took, or were expected to take, manifestations of ethnic tensions extremely seriously.

Thus, "anti-Semitic statements" were the subject of a lengthy commissar report by the head of the political department of the battleship *Oktiabr'skaiia Revoliutsiia*. This concerned two *Komsomol* members serving in the ship's 8th crew division who, during a political session on socialist construction and the world revolution, expressed the view that "Jews are a bad people" with one of them stating that he would "punch a Jew in the face". Although describing the incident as a "very serious matter", the reporting commissar seemed more concerned by the inadequate response of the party cadres responsible for the moral-political education of sailors. The session leader might have rejected these views but did not go on to "explain why national strife is harmful" and failed to report the incident to the commissar. Similarly, the political instructor of the 8th had remained unaware of the incident until after it was discussed by the presidium of the *Komsomol* group which issued a warning to the young sailors. In the end, the ship's party bureau initiated disciplinary procedures against the political instructor and *Komsomol* and party secretaries of the 8th, on the grounds of "underestimating" and failing to enact the necessary "measures to liquidate" anti-Semitism.[44]

The archival records of the Political Directorate of the Baltic Fleet become sparser for the Second Five Year Plan period (1933-1937), making it harder to examine the content of political instruction in the mid-1930s. From the partial information that is available however it seems that the trend towards a more domestically orientated political education described above persisted, with commissars and the party remaining more concerned with instilling into sailors the spirit of a good collective farmer than a committed internationalist.[45] This is consistent with the observation of most researchers that proletarian internationalism began declining as a component of official ideology around that period.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the gap created in political instruction by the decline of world revolution as a major theme was not filled by Russian patriotic discourse, at least not in so far as we can determine from the records of *PUBalt.* The focus of political education sessions remained on the conflict-ridden domestic situation in the USSR, filled with accounts of kulaks resisting the onslaught of collectivisation and subsequently seeking to sabotage the country's economy. Baltic fleet sailors were still meant to view their homeland as a site of class

[43] Alarmingly, such views were not uncommon even amongst members of the party or its youth wing, the *komsomol*. During a political education session that took place on the battleship *Oktiabr'skaiia Revoliutsiia* on 2 October 1931, the sailor Ivan Ermakov, a *Komsomol* member of peasant origin claimed that there were no *kulaks* (rich peasants) in the village and flatly stated that the "general line of the party is incorrect on this matter". He was supported in this by Fedor Tkachenko, a worker, who argued that things in the cities were not particularly good either. Although Ermakov was in the end apparently convinced to of the error of his views and promised to get his family to join a collective farm, Tkachenko stuck to his guns and was expelled from the *Komsomol*. RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, ll. 6-8.

[44] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1423, l. 5.

[45] For example, party and *Komsomol* members of peasant origin returning from leave often reported on the activities they had undertaken to promote collectivisation in their home village. RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1529, ll. 3-4.

struggle, even if their side had the upper hand in that conflict.[46] What is more, when events abroad did lend themselves to speculation about the prospects of the socialist revolution extending beyond the borders of the USSR, proletarian internationalism tended to re-emerge as a prominent theme in political instruction.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War provided one such occasion. Support for the Spanish Republic became a popular cause amongst Soviet citizens, expressed both through participation in state sanctioned rallies and more spontaneous demonstrations of militancy.[47] Although *PUBalt's* records offer little insight into sailors' views on the Republican struggle, they do indicate that it became a subject of political instruction in the Fleet. Lists of political materials made available to the sailors of the battleship *Marat* during the autumn 1937 manoeuvres included several copies of a pamphlet titled *The Cause of Spain is not the Cause of Spain Alone*, by José Díaz, then general secretary of the Communist Party of Spain.[48] Such materials on the international antifascist struggle sat on the *Marat's* library selves alongside Stalin's report to the infamous February-March 1937 Central Committee plenum and literature on the recruitment tactics of foreign intelligence services.[49] Thoroughly "purged of politically and morally unreliable elements" according to the division's political department, the crews of the Baltic Fleet's battleships were meant to draw inspiration from Republican Spain at the same time as they were encouraged to discover and denounce the enemies purportedly lurking in their midst.[50]

Two years later, Baltic Fleet sailors found themselves discussing revolutionary prospects abroad in far more concrete terms than had been the case in earlier political education sessions. The Fleet's land forces took an active part in the operations of the Winter War against Finland (1939-1940), although the ice placed severe limitations on the capabilities of its warships.[51] Party organisations and political departments continued their activities even as their units engaged in combat operations. Commissar reports on open party meetings held to discuss the political significance of the war provide a useful glimpse into the way the conflict was framed by political instructors and, to a more limited extent, the way it was understood by rank-and-file sailors.

On 5 December 1939, only a few days after the beginning of hostilities, a *PUBalt* representative gave a lecture on the broader international context of the war to a meeting of communists and sympathisers serving in the Fleet's Special Marines Brigade. The commissar report on the meeting provides no clue as to the lecture's content, but contains a list of the questions posed to the speaker by the sailors present. These included several factual inquiries on matters like the status of the Aaland Islands and the composition of the government of the Finnish Democratic Republic but also reflected considerable interest into the nature of the new

[46] This was increasingly the case after the XVII Party Congress in 1934 and the introduction of the new constitution in 1936, when socialism was declared "built in its foundations". Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 153.
[47] Gleb J. Albert, "'To Help the Republicans Not Just by Donations and Rallies, but with the Rifle': Militant Solidarity with the Spanish Republic in the Soviet Union, 1936–1937," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne D'histoire* 21, no. 4 (July, 2014): 501–18.
[48] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1569, l. 54.
[49] Convened shortly after the trial of the Parallel anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre (the second Moscow Trial), the February-March Plenum was a major event in the escalation of repression in 1937. See J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 369-409 for some of the contributions and Stalin's report.
[50] RGAVMF, f. r-34, op. 2, d. 1569, l. 24. In this sense, life in the navy was not much different to the civilian experience. See on this Karl Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), pp. 95-108, 256-73.
[51] Nikolai M. Grechaniuk, Vladimir I. Dmitriev, Anatolii I. Kornienko et al., *Dvazhdi Krasnoznamennii Baltiiskii Flot [The Twice Red-Bannered Baltic Fleet]*, (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1990), pp. 163-6.

regime that would be established on the successful conclusion of the war. One marine asked about the views of the Communist Party of Finland on the future state, while another wondered if it would be possible for the new authority to "develop into Soviet power" or if a new revolution would have to take place.[52] Similar interests were reported by the same unit's political instructor in a report composed on 31 December, with marines apparently being curious as to whether Finland would embark on the construction of socialism or become more like the far away People's Republic of Mongolia.[53]

There are limits to the value of these reports as sources on the actual views of Baltic Fleet sailors on the Winter War. As these documents are not stenographic records or even meeting protocols, it is likely that they are more reflective of the intentions of their compilers than the views of the crews. But even on a highly sceptical reading, assuming for example that commissars were inventing examples of rank-and-file interest to make themselves look better in the eyes of their superiors, these reports are still consistent with the general argument made throughout this chapter. Commissars were reporting interest in Finnish revolutionary prospects as a positive sign regarding the marines' morale in what was turning out to be a much more gruelling than expected conflict.[54] Regardless of the effectiveness of these political educational sessions, or the truthfulness of the instructors' reports, inducing personnel to view their service in revolutionary terms remained a major purpose of political instruction, one that was to be pursued even in war. For the political leadership, it was desirable that the marines of the Baltic Fleet that took part in operations against Finland went to battle believing that they were assisting Finnish workers struggling against their reactionary government.

This version of internationalism was not incompatible with the patriotic grounds on which the Soviet government justified the war, namely the security threat posed by a hostile Finland to the Soviet Union in case of a broader European conflagration.[55] In fact, the commissars of the brigade reported patriotic feeling as well as solidarity to Finnish workers as being a positive indication of morale. However, the marines' patriotism was, according to the reports, tied to revolutionary principles. Thus, while one Gakhman of the 2nd company declared his intention to give "the Finnish provocateurs" the same treatment that the Red Army had given the Japanese at lake Khasan, his comrade Guzev stated that his company was prepared to fight "like our fathers in the Civil War".[56]

Conclusion

This chapter began with a discussion of the emergence of Leninist internationalism as the most uncompromising anti-war stance in European social-democracy during the First World War. Lenin argued that socialists should offer no support to their national governments and encourage workers and soldiers to abandon the war effort, making no bones of the fact that this amounted *ipso facto* to assisting in the defeat of their own states. The Bolsheviks put this principle into action by refusing to support the Provisional Government and unilaterally taking Russia out of the war after they came to power in October/November 1917. Lenin's internationalist principles also included a commitment to supporting the national aspirations of oppressed peoples, a position unpopular even amongst his Zimmerwald allies.

[52] RGAVMF, f. r-1893, op. 1, d. 39, ll. 25-26.
[53] RGAVMF, f. r-1893, op 1, d. 39, l. 10.
[54] For the difficulties faced by the Soviets, see Roger R. Reese, "Lessons of the Winter War: A Study in the Military Effectiveness of the Red Army, 1939–1940," *The Journal of Military History* 72, no. 3 (2008): 825–52.
[55] Ibid, 825-6.
[56] RGAVMF, f. r-1893, op. 1, d. 39, l. 28. Gakhman was referring to the 1938-1939 border skirmishes between Japan and the Soviet Union that ended with Soviet victory at Khalkhin-Gol.

This indifference to national security and territorial integrity was predicated on the conviction that the states then in existence were instruments of their ruling classes and that their destruction was in the interests of the proletariat. The October Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union rendered this premise invalid in the case of the Bolsheviks' own state; a workers' state was by definition worth defending. It is clear then that proletarian internationalism would have to take on a different meaning from the original geopolitical nihilism if it was to be relevant to the Bolsheviks' new political endeavour. The political formula the party came up with was a domestic nationalities policy providing extensive cultural autonomy to non-Russian peoples and a foreign policy strongly oriented towards providing patronage for revolutionary parties and movements abroad. Both of these major pillars of party policy had to be modified during the mid-1930s, when it became clear that the world revolutionary tide had ebbed and a new global war became a visible prospect. The USSR now attempted to build alliances with capitalist-imperialist states and the party started relying more explicitly on the country's majority ethnic group for social support.

A very influential historiographical and political tradition has interpreted this shift as an abandonment of or retreat from proletarian internationalism, indicative of a broader reorientation away from core Marxist-Leninist principles in public ideological discourse. This essay has sided with a different tradition which draws attention to the continuities of Soviet ideology throughout the interwar period and has explained the party's shift towards patriotism in terms of an adaptation to new political realities both within the USSR and internationally, an adaptation that was however fully within the contours of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The examination of political instruction in the Soviet Baltic Fleet offered here has shown that the modification of party ideology that did take place in the interwar period is far less stark than an internationalism/patriotism dichotomy would seem to imply. Thus while it is true that early references to the Fleet as an instrument of world revolution are shown to decline during the 1930s to be replaced by proclamations of loyalty to the Soviet motherland by the time of the war against Finland in 1939-1940, it is also the case that the defense of the socialist USSR from capitalist aggression had been a theme in political sessions alongside the world revolution in the early period. This was a necessary consequence of the transformation of the Bolshevik party from one of subversion to one of government. As the Bolsheviks continued to govern and the world revolution became an ever receding prospect, the defensive (patriotic) themes of the party's ideology in the military gradually gained in prominence over the offensive notions of exporting revolution.

Nevertheless, when the Red Army did find itself on the offensive against Finland, the Fleet's marines that took part in the operations were clearly encouraged to think of the conflict as a revolutionary war waged against reactionaries and in support of foreign workers. Similarly the diffusion of interethnic tensions, especially anti-Semitic behaviour, remained a concern of party members even after the world revolution fell off the political instruction agenda.[57] Finally, it has been shown that the loyalty to the Soviet state expected of the Fleet's sailors and officers remained, throughout the period studied here, tied to the USSR's status as a socialist state. Thus, the patriotism promoted by the party in the Baltic Fleet was, in van Ree's terms, a revolutionary patriotism. It was therefore not in any way antithetical to the original principles of proletarian internationalism with which the Bolsheviks had first entered the Fleet years before the revolution.

[57] Anti-Semitic expressions could lead to expulsions from the *Komsomol* and were recorded as disciplinary offenses in Party members' personal records as late as March 1940. RGAVMF, f. r-1893, op. 1, d. 38, ll. 2-3.