

The Russian militia (police) forces, 1917-1920

by Elena Ananyeva

For research focusing on the contemporary history of the police the word *militia* is invariably associated with the new type of law enforcement agencies which first appeared in Russia after the fall of monarchy in 1917. In this article, I trace the evolution of the new force over the 1917-1920 period

On 6 March, the Provisional Government (which came to power in the wake of the February Revolution) published a decree disbanding the tsarist Gendarme Corps. On 10 March, the Police Department itself was abolished. In April 1917, the so-called civil militia was formed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It replaced the old police and was supposed to become the national police force with elective authority and was subordinated to local self-administrative governments. At the same time, different kinds of spontaneous public militia units – workers', factory, student and theatre militias – appeared on the territory of Russia in the period between the two Russian Revolutions

However, the Provisional Government failed to propose and approve a single organization chart and uniform for the new force that would be common for all of Russia. This was due to the facts that local administrations lacked unified structure and that the central power did not enjoy much authority in the main part of the country. *Zemskie*⁹ assemblies of each district had to determine staff registers of the local militia, its sources of financing and salary scales as well as elect the local militia authorities. Consequently, even within the same province different districts of comparable size had a different number of militiamen, which depended on the sum of money which the rural community was able to spend on the upkeep of their police force. As one Russian statesman wrote: *The Ministry of Internal Affairs – which once virtually held in its hands the autocratic power and provoked general hatred – went to the other extreme: it essentially abolished itself*⁰

These were rather strong internal factors that undermined the effectiveness of the new law enforcement body. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that a relatively large part of the territory of the country was the theatre of World War I military activities, where a big number of soldiers were concentrated. The Russian Army became a destabilising factor for the country during the revolutionary period, which led to a complete disorganization of the front and the rear. Thus, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in its attempt to provide a liberal base for its law enforcement agencies, had failed to create a reliable organization to ensure policing and security throughout Russia

This problem had to be addressed by the Soviet Government. Following the October Revolution of 1917, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was transformed into the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). However, the first Soviet act *On the Workers' Militia*, which was passed on 28 October, did not specify any organizational details and only emphasised the social class basis for the formation of the Soviet militia. This document talks about the creation of the workers' militia, because at that time experiments on the formation of the peasants' militia had not yet begun. The Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies were charged with the responsibility of setting up new law enforcement agencies. Initially the workers' militia was established as a temporary

⁹ *Zemstva* were local self-administrative governments established in 1864 as a result of liberal reforms by Russian tsar Alexander II. They were based on all-class representation and later became centres of liberal opposition to the government. *Zemstva*'s representatives gathered together for *zemskie* assemblies where they addressed different administrative issues

¹⁰ Denikin, A I, *Essays on the Russian turmoil. The decomposition of the power and army. February-September 1917*. Moscow: Reprint edition, 1991, p200. In English: Denikin, A I, *The Russian Turmoil: Memoirs: Military, Social and Political*. London: Hyperion Press, 1973

organization, which was to be replaced by the universal militia duty for all citizens fit to work

In his articles, the leader of the Soviet Government, Vladimir Lenin, stressed the inevitably temporary character of policing in the new state of peasants and workers, which was why he envisaged across-the-board, unpaid militia duty for all able-bodied citizens (both men and women)

As the act of 28 October did not define exact organizational forms of the workers' militia, different armed units carried out policing functions. They had various names: groups of the Red Guard, guards' teams, peasants' and security units, policing and order squads and so on. In some places the Soviet authorities introduced a general unpaid militia duty. All these formations had some features in common: they were armed units, mostly made up of workers, they did not have a regular structure, their members did not get any extra pay for maintaining order, since the workers' militiamen received their pay packets in their place of employment

The militia of the Provisional Government had to be liquidated by December 1917 but this process was dragged out, because of the plans to establish the general militia duty. The abolition of the old militia went more quickly in 1918. This was due to the deterioration of internal and external situations in the country, which forced the Soviet government to pay more attention to the strengthening of public order in Russia

On 30 July 1918 in Moscow, the First All-Russian Congress of chairmen of provincial Soviets and heads of provincial management departments took place. It approved the resolution on the creation of the Soviet militia and defined its organizational structure, tasks and functions. The Congress noted: *Recognizing the impossibility of arming the entire population at the present moment of extreme aggravation of the class struggle both in the city and in the village and ...an acute need felt locally for a stable organ for the maintenance of revolutionary order, protection of the Soviet power and upholding... of the gains of the revolution, the Congress deems necessary the organization of the Soviet Workers' and Peasants' militia*¹¹

To provide the security of transport communications in the conditions of World War I and foreign military intervention on river arteries, the River Militia was formed on 25 July 1918. To guarantee the safety of tracks and transportation of different goods in February 1919, the Railway Militia was created

For the protection of revolutionary order and fight against criminals and criminal offences, on 5 October 1918, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the RSFSR accepted the instruction *On the organization of the Criminal Investigation Department*, which became part of the Soviet militia. The Central Criminal Investigation Directorate (*Tsentrrorozysk*), which was in charge of the work of all provincial and city departments, now formed part of the Main Militia Directorate. Although formally one of the law enforcement agencies, the Criminal Investigation Department enjoyed a certain degree of independence in its activities, which was connected with the specific nature of crime investigation

On 12 October 1918, the instruction of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs and the People's Commissariat for Justice *On the organization of the Workers' and Peasants' Militia* was accepted, which established a uniform organizational structure and determined the main directions of its activities throughout the Soviet Republic. In

¹¹ Goldman, V S, *V I Lenin and the formation of the Soviet Militia*. Moscow: The higher school of the Ministry of Internal Affairs SSSR, 1970, p20

particular, it stated that the militia was an executive body of the central authority's local offices. The Main Directorate of the Soviet Workers' and Peasants' Militia was responsible for the whole law-enforcement system. The Main Directorate set the standard regular number at one militiaman per 400-500 city dwellers or 3,000-4,000 district inhabitants. Provincial and district management departments of the militia as well as militia sectors were the main law enforcement agencies at the local level. Provincial management departments of the militia had a double subordination: on the one hand, they were local bodies of the NKVD, on the other hand, they were part of Provincial Executive Committees of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies (*Gubispolkom*)¹² as their sections. The main source of funding was the local budget which could be supplemented with sums allocated by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

The name *Workers' and Peasants' Militia* was to underline its class character as it guarded the interests of the working classes. Only those citizens of Soviet Russia who reached 21 years of age and had electoral rights could join the militia. To solve the problem of high staff turnover in law enforcement agencies, the minimum 6-month period of service was established. In November 1918, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs approved a single militia uniform standard on all territory of Soviet Russia

By the end of 1918, the Soviet Workers' and Peasants' Militia was gradually being transformed into a regular staff organ for the protection of public order. The principles of revolutionary legality and democratic centralism were intended to form the basis of its operation



Chief of a militia city station Procofyev with a group of militiamen 1918 (The Central State Archive of Documentary, Photographic and Audio Materials of St Petersburg – TsGAKFFD SPb)

In 1919, the Soviet power was under the threat of destruction because the Civil War in Russia continued and the White Guard's troops were approaching Moscow (the capital of Soviet Russia) and Petrograd (St Petersburg). In these conditions on 3 April 1919, the Soviet government issued the decree *On the Soviet Workers' and Peasants' Militia*, in accordance with which military discipline and compulsory military training were introduced in the militia. From that moment on, the Soviet law enforcement agencies not

¹² *Gubispolkom* was a local provincial Soviet authority

only had to maintain order but also protected the rear of the Red Army and took an active part in military activities on the fronts of the Civil War. Many militiamen were mobilized for the army, so the Soviet government had to create the women's militia. The first women's unit was formed in Petrograd in summer 1919. The total number of militia women in the city reached 600 people. To join the militia ranks, women were obliged to undergo a specialized three-week training course. There were some differences between the working conditions for militiamen and female militia. The latter had an 8-hour working day and a few privileges in taking leave and voluntary resignation. Besides sentry duty, women carried out special functions, namely: fight against prostitution, prevention of juvenile crime and homelessness, guarding female prisoners and orphanages. This experiment was proliferated throughout Russia

The attack of Poland on Soviet Russia in April 1920 led to a military threat on its western border and to the beginning of a new period of the national economy mobilization for military needs. From now on, the Soviet Militia became an armed executive body of the Soviet power. On 10 June 1920, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) and the Council of People's Commissars (SNK) approved *The regulation on the Workers' and Peasants' Militia*, in which all militia divisions were considered to be special operation armed forces - the action connected with the specific situation of the wartime and the need to involve militia detachments in military operations on war fronts. In the situation of Polish-Soviet War, about 21 provinces of the Soviet Republic were declared to be in the state of martial law



Group of militia women with the chief, 1919. (TsGAKFFD SPb)

In February 1920, the Main Militia Directorate established the general operating procedure for the militia activities in various regions. Every district was divided into sub-districts whose boundaries were determined by the size of the population (50,000 people). Each sub-district consisted of sectors and was supposed to have five senior mounted militiamen. Other law enforcement officers were recruited depending on the population size and reported to the sub-district militia chief (one militiaman per 3,000-4,000 district inhabitants)

In autumn 1920, in view of the deteriorating military situation at the front, the Main Militia Directorate issued an order concerning further militarization of all law enforcement

agencies in Russia, which thus became part of the Red Army as its fighting reserve. In the conditions of wartime, the Soviet government pursued the aim of creating semi-military detachments which could concentrate quickly in any part of the province. The Soviet Republic's militia now acquired the military organization structure and began to be divided into sections, platoons, companies, squadrons, battalions, regiments and brigades

The Soviet government could not supply its militiamen with a new uniform in that period of time for the reason of economic collapse in the country: the necessary number of new uniform sets had not been manufactured yet. Therefore during the Civil War, militiamen wore a military uniform: a soldier's blouse, belt, *budenovka*¹³, overcoat and boots with puttees. The Soviet militia was armed with different kinds of old and faulty guns which local authorities could get hold of after dispatching all serviceable weapons to the front



Group of militiamen in front of a sub-district militia management department after receiving patrol badges, 1919. (TsGAKFFD SPb)

Thus in the period from 1917 to 1920, the Soviet power merely got down to the process of creating the Soviet militia's organizational structure and developing the main directions of its activities and rank duties. The Civil War and foreign military intervention slowed down this work and the Soviet law enforcement agencies had acquired their final shape only by the middle of the 1920s



Elena Ananyeva is a former Senior Sergeant in the Police Regiment, Russian Dept of Internal Affairs and now Manager of the Treasure Gallery at the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. She is also a Doctoral candidate, Dept of Modern Russian History at St Petersburg State University

¹³ *Budenovka* was a military cap of the Red Army which looked like a peaked helmet with folded earflaps