Russo-German Military Collaboration, 1922-1933

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ONE of the more intriguing facets of international relations during the interwar period was the military collaboration between the Soviet Union and Germany. This paper is a discussion of this episode with primary attention paid to the Soviet side and its objectives, participation, and benefits.

After 1915 Germany attempted to help the revolutionary elements in Russia,[1] with the ultimate goal of removing Russia from the war. The consolidation of Bolshevik control in November, 1917, had this result in the December armistice. Then Russian procrastination in expectation of an impending socialist revolution in Germany, goals such as "no peace, no war," and "peace without annexation", delayed peace negotiations until the Germans grew tired and resumed their offensive in February, 1918. This renewal became too much for the Bolsheviks and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3, 1918, with huge capitulations on the part of the Russians.[2] However, this step did not preclude subsequent military dealings.

Thus the stage was set for Russo-German peace-time relations and for military collaboration, although for the next few years nothing really concrete emerged. It must be remembered that Russian foreign relations after the revolution were very confused. An attempt at scientific division would show one stream of official diplomatic actions, another of an "unofficial" idealogical vein, not necessarily connected with the former, and continual changes and readjustments. Out of the muddle of the 1918-1923 period some threads of the process of military collaboration between the two countries can be gleaned, but the picture is often clouded.[3]

As far as the military side of Russo-German relations is concerned, very little appears until 1920 when General Hans von Seeckt ". . .emerged as the central figure in the half-secret game of Russo-German reconciliation."[4] During two years after Brest-Litovsk a number of persons were involved in the rapprochement

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between the two states, but the lasting contribution of any of these exchanges seems slight,[5] although Karl Radek played an important role in many discussions and is credited with laying the foundations for Rapallo.[6]

Late in 1920 the Reichswehr ministry formed Sondergruppe R,[7] an organization to handle any relations with the Red Army, which is an indication that some concrete results were envisioned. Prior to that Kropp, a semi-official Russian agent for prisoner of war exchange in Berlin, had carried on talks with various German officials,[8] and there were serious conversations in the spring and summer of 1921 between von Niedermayer, Tschunke, Hasse, and von Seeckt for the Germans, and Kropp, Krassin, Karakhan, and Radek representing the Soviets.[9] By September, 1921, concrete plans were being laid. Germany was to establish a phony commercial firm named GEFU or Gesellschaft zur Förderung gewerblicher Unternehmungen, which in turn, with German capital, would arrange for aircraft and poison gas manufacture in the Soviet Union.[10]

Internal conflicts in Germany now slowed the process and the next year is filled with various and sundry negotiations between the higher echelons of the two countries and a confusing meshing of military goals with political and economic dealings which were going on at the same time. In due course, however, a preliminary secret agreement was signed between Russia and Germany on July 29, 1922, in Berlin, and another in Moscow on August 11. In these agreements, arrangements were made concerning the various German industrial undertakings in Russia, either planned or operating, and Germany had bases put at its disposal, and gained permission to conduct tests and training operations. Also exchange of information was arranged. Russia for its part was to get financial compensation for the facilities given and instruction and training for its forces.[11]

Thus four and a half years after Brest-Litovsk, Germany and Russia moved from military belligerency to military cooperation. The treaties, or more properly, arrangments of July and August paved the way for organization of the haphazard war industry work then underway and contemplated extensive relations in pure military fields.

The period of negotiations shows many changes and fluctuations explained in part by other events and currents of the period. From the Russian viewpoint, the Allied intervention and blockade and the dismal failure in the Polish War, coupled with the devasta-

tion of the Great War, had left Russia militarily and industrially weak. Germany, for numerous reasons, was the one to turn to for aid. Because of its own situation and the Versailles Treaty military provisions, Germany too was interested in military collaboration with the Soviets.

The economic and political sides of the picture, however, especially from the German viewpoint, hindered the merging of interests into something definite. An economic agreement made May 6, 1921, was favorable to Russia in that it opened the way to increased trade and industrial importing from Germany.[12] Diplomatic relations were finally formally resumed with the Rapallo proceedings, and this in turn paved the way for the military agreements.

Both sides were eager for military dealings and for similar reasons, although different circumstances prompted them. Political implications during the military negotiations were rather vague, neither Germany nor Russia envisioned any long lasting results and one interesting fact is that both sides, Lenin especially, felt that they would be able to learn a good deal about the other for future use.[13]

As mentioned previously, the Reichswehr had, in the winter of 1920, established a special branch, Sondergruppe R, to handle military relations with the Soviet Union. This agency in turn estabilshed a branch office in Moscow called Zentrale Moskau[14] (abbreviated Z.Mo.). This was headed until 1932 by a Reichswehr officer, Oscar von Niedermayer, who frequently operated under the pseudonym Neumann.[15] The establishment of the Gesellschaft zur Förderung gewerblicher Unternehmungen, an organization with branches in Moscow and Berlin for the arrangement of military-industrial relations,[16] rounded out the German institutional network for the collaboration. From information available, the Russians did not set up any comparable units or any permanent committees for their dealings with the Germans.

The first of these on a large scale was an aborative attempt by GEFU to establish a permanent Junkers plant, subsidized by the German government, in Fili, a suburb of Moscow. Subsidization was through GEFU for the operation arranged by the Special Group R and accepted by the Soviet government. Despite Soviet desires for an early opening[17] of the factory, whose production goal was some 600 all-metal planes and motors, work on the facilities did not begin until the middle of 1922.[18] However, the Soviet government for some reason never contracted for any aircraft, and in 1925 the plant was shut down at a big loss for Junkers.[19] This had its repercussions, as will be seen later.

GEFU was more successful in another venture, that of arranging the manufacture of ammunitions of various sorts in factories at Zlatoust, Tula, Leningrad, and Trotsk.[20] The latter, however, a German-Soviet joint stock enterprise named Bersol, failed soon after its start due to faulty processes.[21] The others made grenades, shells, and the like with production going to both Russian and German military establishments. These continued up to the end of 1926 when production was greatly curtailed by the revelations and pubilcity given the operations in December.[22] Due to speculative financial maneuvers abroad, GEFU went out of existance in 1925,[23] but it was replaced by a similar organization, the Wirtschaftskontor (WIKO), headed in Moscow by the same Major Tschunke.

Prior to 1925, colloboration was almost exclusively of an industrial nature—Germany supplied financial and technical aid to Russian war industries and as mentioned above, in some instances German plants were established on Russian soil. In late 1924, however, a new phase was added, the testing of war materials and the training of German military personnel in the use of weapons and equipment forbidden to them by the Versailles Treaty.[24]

After some hesitation over locations and possible naval work, three experimental training stations were established: a tank station at Kazan, an airfield at Lipetsk, and a gas warfare school at Saratov.

The operations around Kazan and the Kama River area consisted of the training of German officers in the use of tanks and armoured vehicles, including maintenance, deceptive maneuvers, crossing rivers, and the like. The camp was also charged with testing functions, evaluating foreign materials, and developing operational and organizational procedures. "Classes" were held in Berlin during the winter months, and at Kazan in the summer.[25]

Very little is known of the gas warfare school at Sartov. It apparently operated in much the same fashion as the others but on a smaller scale. Some manufacturing and experimentation was done by the Stoltzenberg Company of Hamburg,[26] a large chemical concern, but not very much else.

Aviation operations at Lipetsk were the most extensive and important part of the purely military phase. This German-built aerodrome had some sixty German pilots and instructors on a permanent basis, with more at peak periods. The school conducted a six-month course for pilots who had completed initial training courses in Germany and were ready for advanced tactical instruc-

tion in military and experimental aircraft. Around six hundred pilots and crew members went through the course and they became the nucleus for the expanding German Luftwaffe.[27]

It is here that Soviet benefits can be fully appreciated. Russian ground crews were trained by German specialists as were some Russian pilots. Soviet technicians worked with the Germans on experimental models and helped in testing. Thus, much practical and technical knowledge was gained which gave a big boost to the fledgling Soviet air force.[28]

The two main currents of collaboration, war industry and military, flowed throughout the Twenties. There was also a steady stream of physical movements between the two partners, basic materials and personnel moving east and finished products westward. Main routes of travel were by ship from Stettin to Leningrad or Sweden and thence on to the interior. Direct land communications were prevented by the risk of crossing numerous borders and more or less alien lands with such obvious and suspicious goods. Shipments were falsely labeled and kept as disguised as possible, but inevitably word leaked out.

The most violent period was December and January, 1926-7, when the Russians were even prompted to admit a little.[29] Picking up the thread of GEFU and the Junkers' plant at Fili, its failure and lack of redress caused the company to circulate a detailed memorandum to leading members of the Reichstag explaining all that was going on in and with Russia. The *Manchester Guardian* got hold of a copy and published and exposé on December 3, 1926.[30] This was followed by discoveries of grenades from Russia in Stettin and a violent speech by Scheidemann in the Reichstag on December 16 which led to the fall of the cabinet. But the partisan-prompted turmoil soon died down and no further outbreaks by "traitors" were allowed to occur.[31]

In January, 1927, General Wetzell reported to the foreign ministry that:

1. The gas and ammunition factories had ceased operations as well as Junkers.
2. The Lipetsk school was a private enterprise supported with German funds.
3. The tank school was similar, i.e., no Reichswehr members on duty and trainees were placed on inactive status.
4. Germany was acting in an advisory capacity at poison gas experiments.

5. Yearly military missions were sent to the Red Army maneuvers.[32]

But this appears to have been just a temporary state of affairs and collaboration continued on almost the same scale as before, but a little more caution was exercised and munitions production and shipment cut down.[33]

The attendance of yearly army maneuvers was a two-way street, and each side, from about 1925, sent observers and delegations to the other's exercises. Russians would attend Reichswehr maneuvers "camoflaged as Bulgarians",[34] and Germans would go to Red Army performances as a "German Communist Workers' Delegation".[35] These practices continued up until the break, and Germans even wore their uniforms at some of the later maneuvers.

The fall of 1928 ushered in another phase of collaboration, this time a return to primary emphasis on military-industrial cooperation, desired especially by the Soviets as an aid to their new Five Year Plan.[36] The firms of Krupp and Rheinmetall-Boisig concluded arrangements to assist in steel work for German and Russian consumption, and other negotiations were held between high Russian officers and German firms in the spring of 1930. This sort of thing assumed some importance for a while but petered down as the Thirties progressed.[37] Economic relations as a whole, and not necessarily militaristic in nature, were very important at this time due to the depression on one side and the demands of the Five Year Plan on the other. In 1931 there were some five thousand German experts in the Soviet Union in various endeavors, and their foreign exchange earnings were important to the German economy.[38] Long-term credit arrangemnts were made, and during this period Germany was Russia's most prominent trading partner and visa versa.[39]

The year 1928 is also credited with initiating the "phase of personnel,"[40] although this seems to have started earlier. The term applies to the exchange of visits by high officials as well as the junior officers passing through the various schools. There were conferences and inspections in each country for high ranking army officers of the other. Courses were taught in Moscow on military history and strategy and Russian officers also attended secret training programs for German staff officers in Berlin. These persons were allowed access to all directives, studies, plans, organizational schemes, and so on, and it is no wonder "that the Germans found the Soviet officers invariably more anxious to learn than most of the German officer trainees."[41]

Coupled with the general deterioration of Russo-German relations and the sharp break in 1933 with the rise of Hitler, the military collaboration, heretofore the strongest tie between the two and unaffected by other sides of their relationship, came to an end. After a conference in Moscow of the Russian General Staff, attended by a delegation of high ranking Germans, the Red Army demanded that the Reichswehr liquidate all its enterprises in Russia, and no more officers were sent to Germany and the German War Academy.[42]

This action in late May, 1933 terminated the military collaboration, the war industry aspects having disappeared before that. The only remnant was the flight school at Lipetsk which limped along until 1935 when it also folded,[43] supposedly on Hitler's direct orders.

Last mention of the collaboration came in Russia during the purges of 1937-1938 when some reference was made to the collaboration and the treasonable activities of Trotsky, Tuchachevsky, and others. The signifigance and meanings of certain facts were warped to give the wrong impressions, as was the case in most of the purge trials. For example, German officers studying and teaching in Russia were not doing this, rather "these German officers carried on conspiratorial activities on Soviet territory continually from 1923 to 1930."[44] However, the liquidations of the purges were not belated punishment for undercover dealings with Germany.[45]

The topic of Russo-German military collaboration is most often approached from the German side with many probings into the questions of Reichswehr-foreign ministry relations, the extent of German governmental involvment, and the broader field of clandestine German rearmament activities.

However, the Russians side is often neglected, although there are several broad commets which can be made from this angle about the relationship. For one thing, taking the Soviet governmental structure and known facts, it would seem that the foreign ministry and the army were more closely coordinated and each knew what the other was doing—the opposite of the German situation. In the hierarchy, Trotsky, as war commissar, and Lenin knew of proposals and approved them at the very beginning. As a whole, dealings were confined to the military leaders of Russia with the military leaders of Germany but, contrary to the situation in Germany, collaboration often suited and was keyed to other Soviet goals and policies.

With this in mind, an economic interpretation of history shows a very close meshing of the collaboration with other policies. With the NEP, rehabilitation was a goal, and primary emphasis in collaboration at the start in 1922 was industrial work. Again in 1928, with the Five Year Plan, military-industrial relations received new attention. Throughout the period, commencing with the failure of the Polish War and defense postures taken in foreign policy, modernization of the army was important. This was aided by the schools the Germans maintained in Russia and the training programs and courses they conducted there and in Germany for Russian officers.

Secrecy was maintained rather well, but there were the inevitable leaks. Once in a while an article would appear in Germany or England mentioning the operations, but facts were generally inflated or distorted. Little attention seems to have been paid to it by other nations in the general climate of letting Germany flaunt the terms of the Peace Treaty and rearm almost at will. But secrecy was advisable from the German viewpoint, and there were several reasons why the Soviet Union also desired secrecy. First, there was no good reason not to be secret if Germany wanted to, and it did. Second, the proceedings might have proved embarrasing to the Soviet Union in its international relations. And thirdly, helping Germany when it was a decadent capitalist country ripe for revolution is popularly unexplainable.[46] Lenin and others, however, explained that having foreign technical experts help you was perfectly all right, at least for a little while.

The question regarding material or tangible results of the collaboration is a difficult if not impossible one to answer. No figures are available on how many shells were produced at such and such a plant and how they were distributed or how many men attended German courses or went to Berlin. German technical assistance in Russian industries of all types was certainly of great value but the actual production of war materials by German firms for Russian stockpiles was most likely insignifigant as it was a small operation and did not last very long.

The intangible effects are myriad however, and perhaps of great importance. The Russians got to see and work with a modern, efficient military organization and were instructed in its ways. This benefited them in many ways. Along this line, Colonel Kostring, German military attache in Moscow, reported after a 7,000 mile tour of Russian Army units that "Our views and methods go through theirs like a red thread."[47] This may be an

exaggeration, it certainly wasn't like a "red" thread, but still plausible.

There is also what turned out later to be a very practical angle, the fact that the close association with the Germans gave Russian officers a chance to observe how the German army worked. As a point of historical irony, Marshal Zhukov, later leader of the Russian assault on Germany, attended German Staff Officer courses in Berlin early in the 1930's.[48] Of course the irony continues in that many of the officers with this knowledge may have been lost in the purges, but still they knew something of their enemies before the war began. (Conversely, the Germans must have gained some knowledge of the Russian military establishment.)

The relative calmness of the relationship has been mentioned before, it grew into the strongest tie between the two and then ended, for all practical purposes, with the big break in Russo-German relations in 1933. However, it was not part of any grand scheme and both sides assumed it would not last forever. The intercourse was primarily on the military level only.

Cooperation and harmony were quite evident, and a sort of camraderie among the professionals developed.

The scope of operations was wide but real results were limited, and viewed as a whole, the military collaboration formed only a small part of Russo-German relations for the eleven year period—but a signifigant one at times. Its place in history is nil; collaboration existed and then ended .One might say it is evidence of Soviet chicanery, but the Russians were not bound by the Versailles Treaty and no comparable situations have existed since to raise suspicions of similar proceedings. Collaboration simply occurred, both sides gained a little, and then it faded out, and military collaboration moved to military collision.

1. Gerald Freund, *Unholy Alliance: Russian-German Relations from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to the Treaty of Berlin* (New York, 1957), pp. 1-2.
2. Edward H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (New York, 1953), II, 42-47.
3. The development of Russo-German military collaboration, the actual day to day progression of events, is very difficult to follow due to the lack of facts and the very confusing situations in the two countries - internal upheavals, bickerings, and the international situation. This paper presents only the bare essentials, which makes the preliminaries seem much smoother than they were, and thus distorts the picture. However, this is necessary to keep within the scope of the presentation.
4. George W. R. Hallgarten, "General Hans von Seeckt and Russia, 1920-1922," *Journal of Modern History*, XXI (March, 1949), 28.
5. Including Envers Bey of Turkey, who is said to have been the first mediator between Moscow and Seeckt. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
6. Lionel Kochan, *Russia and the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 16-20.
7. Hallgarten, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
8. Edward H. Carr, *German-Soviet Relations Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939* (Baltimore, 1951), p. 48.
9. Hans W. Gatzke, "Russo-German Military Collaboration during the Weimar Republic," *American Historical Review*, LXIII (April, 1958), 567.

10. Hallgarten, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
11. Freund, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125.
12. Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*, II, 366-367.
13. John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945* (London, 1953), pp. 126-127.
14. Gustav Hilger and Alfred G. Meyer, *The Incompatible Allies* (New York, 1953), p. 194.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
16. Gatzke, *op. cit.*, p. 576.
17. Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
18. Haste was requested in order to have planes for a possible attack on Poland, a continual theme of Soviet negotiators in the preliminary procedures of the collaboration. Since the attack angle seems dubious in the light of internal conditions in Russia, they were most likely desired for defense purposes along the Polish border and in the Ukraine. It is interesting to note though, how often the Polish situation arose in the minds of the Soviets during these times.
19. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
20. Gatzke, *op. cit.*, p. 583.
21. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 194.
22. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
23. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
24. Gatzke, *op. cit.*, p. 578.
25. Georges Castellan, *Le rearmement clandestin de Reich 1930-1935: Vu par le 2e Bureau de L'Etat-Major Francais* (Paris, 1954), pp. 188-192. This book contains a good bit of factual information and details gathered by the French Intelligence Service during the inter-war period. Most of the above is from Polish sources or gossip overhead at cocktail parties, but there is little else available on either Kazan or the Sartov operations.
26. O. Lehmann-Russbueldt, *Aggression: The Origins of Germany's War Machine* (London, 1942), p. 27. This is a radical, anti-German pamphlet, and some of its facts are pure fantasy.
27. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
29. Carr, *German-Soviet Relations*, p. 94.
30. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
31. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-205.
32. Gatzke, *op. cit.*, p. 586.
33. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
34. Gatzke, *op. cit.*, p. 580.
35. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
36. Gatzke, *op. cit.*, pp. 589-591.
37. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-208.
38. Herbert von Dirksen, *Moscow, Tokyo, London: Twenty Years of German Foreign Policy* (London, 1951), p. 100.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
40. Castellan, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
41. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
42. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 256-257.
43. Castellan, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
44. Erich Wollenbert, *The Red Army: A Study of the Growth of Soviet Imperialism* (London, 1940), pp. 232-239.
45. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
46. *Pravada* and *Izvestiya* articles in December, 1926, during the uproar in Germany, mentioned that German factories produced war goods for the Soviet Union's defense, but no mention was made of the fact that much of this material went back to Germany and that German personnel were trained in Russia. Carr, *German-Soviet Relations*, p. 94.
47. Hilger and Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
48. Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 210.