MILITARY-GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ARCTIC AND SUBARCTIC TERRITORIES OF THE RUSSIAN NORTH DURING THE CIVIL WAR AND IN THE 1920-30s

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Abstract: The article considers the activities of the military bodies of Soviet Russia (USSR) in the military-geographical study of the Arctic and Arctic territories of the Russian North during the Civil War and a decade afterwards. It analyzes some particular descriptions and reviews of the region, as well as reveals the view of military professionals on the natural environment characteristics and economy of the northern territories.

Keywords: Arctic, military geography, Murmansk coast, Russian North, navy, army.

Introduction

Military geography as an independent branch of military science expanded Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University considerably in Russia throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Military leaders and scholars such as P.A. Jasykov, H.F. Stefan, D.A. Milutin, A.M. Zolotov and etc. made a significant contribution developing the theoretical basis of military-geographical and military-statistical studies.

The officers of the General Staff made an exhaustive study to draw up military-geographical descriptions of the territories of both the Russian Empire and foreign countries. The algorithm of such descriptions was to be based on maximum possible factors (natural, demographic, economic ones, etc.) considered from a military perspective.

First of all, military analysts and professionals obviously paid particular attention to those territories that were likely to become theatres of operations (theatres). However, the territories of the Russian North, especially those lying beyond the Arctic Circle, couldn’t clearly be classified as theatres.

In 1884, general N.I. Bobrikov pointed out in the military-statistical review of the Petersburg Military District, which included Arkhangelsk Governorate with enclosed territories, that landing of troops on the «northern shores of Russia» was unlikely due to the difficulties to overcome harsh natural conditions. He wrote: «Very short navigation time, barren uninhibited coasts, no chance to move inside the country and even along the shores, and the absence of vital facilities for action, make the landing in the waters here unlikely» [2, c.137-138].

If the worst had come to worst for Russia, Bobrikov believed, that the enemy fleet could have attacked and fired at coastal settlements, while no invasion by enemy troops could have been expected into the northern territories.

Military seamen showed some interest in the northern territories in the 1880s and 1990s in connection with plans to set up a naval base on the Murmansk coast of the Barents Sea [3]. However, the plans were only partially implemented.

The situation changed dramatically in the years of the First World War, when the northern ports (Arkhangelsk and newly built Romanov-on-the-Murman) became those «gates» through which weapons, ammunition, military equipment were supplied by the allied countries in accordance with the Entente Cordiale. The coastal areas of the Russian North, especially its sea lines of communication, acquired their strategic status in its true sense[4].

The revolutionary events of 1917 and the Civil War that followed led to the destruction of the state and military structures of the Russian Empire, including those in charge of military and geographical research. The Soviet government, however, quickly realized that with neither a regular, disciplined army,
nor qualified headquarters and developed military science, there could be no successfully waged military strategy, and they might fail to retain their power. Naturally, the RKKA Command, among other goals, faced the problem of studying the theatre.

Amid warfare, the military leadership of the Red Army (the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, RKKA) were bound to prepare military-geographical descriptions of a wide variety of territories, including those in the Russian North, within the shortest time possible. Various organizations were engaged in this work, and perhaps the units of the All-Russian Main Staff, especially the Reporting and Organizational Division of its Organizations Directorate of Management, contributed the most part of it. It is worth mentioning that N.I. Rattel (1875-1939), a former Major General of the Imperial Army, held the office of chief of the All-Russian Staff in 1918-1921. He used to serve as Quartermaster-General of the South-West and Western Front Headquarters in 1916-1917 and had some experience in military geographical studies.

In 1919, the Reports and Organizational Division drew up many descriptions of the very distant Theatres. As the result, among other works the Division published “The Brief Military-Geographical Description of the White Sea Theatre of Military Operations” [5].

The boundaries of the White Sea Theater were determined by the authors as follows: “In the North - the shore of the Arctic Ocean from the borders of the Republic (RSFSR - A.M.) with Norway to the mouth of the Kara River... > In the east and south-east – the river Kara from the mouth to the riverheads, the Urals Range to the riverheads of the river Vishera, the river Vishera to m. Cherdyn, the conditional line through Cherdyn, Vyatka, Balakhna, <...> In the south – the river Volga from Balakhna to village Selizharovsky (at the site of inflow of the Selizharovka into the Voglga), the Selizharovka, Lake Seliger <...> In the west, the conditional line from lake Seliger, village N. Russia (on the river Pola), the river Pola (flowing into lake Ilmen) from the riverheads to the mouth, Lake Ilmen, the river Volkov, Lake Ladoga and then the western border of the Republic up to the Arctic Oceans” [5, from.9].

Among other areas, the White Sea Theatre (as of 1919) included the territories of Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Olonetsk and North-Dvinsk governorates, as well as parts of the territories of the Vyatks, Tver, Kostroma, Novgorod, etc. governorates. It covered quite long coastlines of the Kara and Barents Seas, including transpolar Murmans.

In the foreword the authors stated that their publication made no pretense to be complete and original because it was based on outdated sources. «Unfortunately, they wrote, the obsolence and incompleteness of the limited military-geographical materials available, as well as the short timeframes of the work, did not provide for a more comprehensive outline of the described area in terms of military geography» [5, p.7].

Indeed, pre-revolutionary editions prevail in the list of sources attached to the description, to be more precise these are mostly descriptions of the Petersburg and Moscow military districts published in different years. However, the description of the White Sea Theatre is not simply a compilation. The authors analyzed the data of the pre-revolutionary publications and grouped them under headings. The description structure of the White Sea Theatre is generally similar to that of the military-geographical sketches, developed by the pre-revolutionary experts. The editions consistently describe the boundaries of the theatre, its topography, soils, forests, water bodies (lakes, marshes, rivers), the coastal waters of the White Sea and the Arctic Ocean, the lines of communication and the size and composition of the population.

Characterizing natural conditions of the theatre, the authors emphasized that they specify numerous distinguishing features of military organization and combat, particularly in the northern part of the theatre. They wrote: “The forests and marshes of the northern half of the area, turning the roads into complete defiles, make it practically impossible for combined armed forces to move ahead, have rest or operate, and greatly impede activities of smaller detachments.

According to the authors, the main obstacles to military operations were the severe climate and sparse population of the region. “Settlements in the area under study, they wrote, are extremely sparse in the central and particularly northern parts of the region, where, on top of that, there is the least amount of dwellings per settlement. This causes great difficulties in quartering of troops, especially if under given weather conditions troops can’t be accommodated in the open air” [5, from.53]. However, the very peasantry dwellings of the Russian North were also strongly criticized by the authors of the description: «The poor quartering conditions of troops are aggravated by the tightness of dwellings and their sanitary conditions (huts heated by chimneyless stoves, people sharing accommodation with livestock, and dirtiness» [Ibid.].
The description ends up with general evaluation of some areas and theatres from military point of view. The authors found out that the natural conditions in the northern part of the theatre hinders movement and deployment operations of troops. The final conclusion was formulated as follows: “...The area is an adverse environment due to its physical properties, poverty of settlements, climatic conditions, as well as the scarcity and poor quality of the routes, and is unfavorable for movement, deployment and combat operations of more or less significant combined armed teams, in particular in its northern part, where it is even sometimes impossible for smaller detachments to move and fight” [5, from.55-56].

Thus, the authors of the description (most probably including those professionals who used to serve in the Tsarist army) made the same conclusion as the pre-revolutionary authors that dynamic military activities in the northern areas were improbable due to significant hurdles. However, they found it still possible for enemy troops to land on the coast of the White Sea, near Arkhangelsk, and in the Kola Gulf of the Barents Sea, since these districts feature convenient anchorages and dispersed settlements connected by railways with central Russia [5, c.54].

Interestingly enough, while preparing the descriptions of Siberian theatres in 1919-1920, their authors did not include theatres of the northernmost territories of Siberia, namely its sea coast [6, 7]. Poor development and harshness of these territories must have made the experts did not consider them in military perspective.

At the end of the Civil War, Soviet military analysts continued to work on the preparation of military-geographical descriptions of various territories. This work was carried out in some selected military districts. For example, in 1921 the «Brief Military-Geographical Sketch of the Petrograd Military District» was prepared and published by its headquarters [8]. It included descriptions (however, quite short) of the territories of the Russian North.

The belief that the North of Russia is unlikely to be the scene of any significant armed combat resulted in certain practical measures. At the end of 1922, the North Sea Naval Force was disbanded, some of its ships having previously been part of the Arctic Ocean Flotilla.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the military command authority paid particular attention to the lands and waters located along the borders of Soviet Russia (USSR) with other states. This approach was determined by the official foreign policy concept. On the one hand, the Soviet government still laid high hopes for a socialist revolution in foreign countries in the early 1920s; on the other hand, the Soviet State was believed to be surrounded by enemies, which meant being prepared to stop any foreign aggression. Among the Nordic States, the Soviet Union had quite strained relations with Finland. Military conflicts of 1918-1922 for long caused Soviet military professionals to pay particular attention to this country, as well as to the territories of potential war zones.

In 1925, the Operational Headquarters of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Fleet (RCCF) published 400 copies of an interesting, largely ground-breaking research under the title «Military-geographical and military-statistical description of the Finnish-Ladoga Theatre» [9]. It included data on some northern territories and was classified as “not subject for disclosure”. The edition was prepared by two fairly distinguished military professionals: the former Major General of the Imperial Army, the commanding officer of the Red Army, N.V. Henrikson (1871-1941) and career naval officer Y.F. Rall (1890-1948).

The work was novel to consider both Soviet and foreign (Finnish, Estonian, Latvian) territories and waters of the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga which were included in the boundaries of the theatre by the authors due to tactical and strategic military reasons.

In the publication, the authors divide the theatre into districts, each covered in a separate chapter. One of the chapters describes the Northern Region, whose boundaries were defined as follows: «...from the Arctic Ocean to the line of Lindozero, Sundozero, Justozero, Shunga and from the border with Finland up to the eastern administrative border of the Leningrad Military District (west coast of the White Sea)» [10, from.34]. Administratively, the Northern District included Murmansk Governorate (formed in 1921) and part of the Karelian Labor Commune.

The northern region is described according to a certain algorithm similar to all the regions of the theatre. The chapter discussing the region consists of five sections: «Essay on Geography», «Climate», «Essay on Statistics and Economy», «Lines of Communication and Means of Communication», «Findings on the Region». The essay on statistics and economy, among other things, contains a section on demography.

Like the earlier researchers, the authors of these descriptions paid considerable attention to the harsh natural conditions and their impact on conduct of hostilities. However, they commented on military significance of the Murmansk Bay which allowed for establishing naval bases. The chapter is very rich in evidence about the relief, climate, waters, natural resources of the region.
In the 1920s and 1930s, naval geography was actively developed, with notable contributions by V.E. Yegoryev, E.E. Shwede, U.F. Rahl. Parallel to the study and development of the Arctic and sub-Arctic seas, there was an ever growing military interest in these territories.

In 1931, the People’s Commissariat for Military and Naval Affairs published a military geographical handbook on the Karelian ASSR and Murmansk District (being the part of Leningrad Oblast since 1927) [11]. It describes the geographical position, topography, climate, water bodies, natural resources, lines of communication of above-stated territories, as well as the coastal waters of the Arctic Ocean. The author of the handbook described the most important bays of the Murmansk coast of the Barents Sea in regards to convenience of fleet location and enemy landing risk. Yet, he believed the latter to be unrealistic. He wrote: “Despite certain conditions that allow for navigation off the coast of the Murman throughout a year and the absence of any significant naval forces in the north, enemies are unlikely to risk landing on the Murman banks, because the harbors and bays of the Murmansk coast, deemed to be suitable for those purposes, are not connected by more or less good roads with Murmansk, which used to be the only important strategic point of the region” [11, c.23].

The author was upset by the condition of roads in Murmansk district, particularly in its northern part. He praised the importance of the Murmansk Railroad, but rightly believed that this alone was not enough to meet the needs of the vast northern territories and for troops mobility. The handbook highlights the fact that the situation is unsafe due to a rather developed railway system in Finland [11, c.77].

The last part of the book is titled “The influence of military-geographical characteristics of the Region on the local forms and means of hostilities” [11, c.88-96]. The author makes the following general conclusion: the topographic characteristics of the region <...> make it difficult to carry out offensive actions in the region and help even small detachments maintain defense against significant enemy forces» [11, from.88]. However, military activities in the northernmost territories of the theatre were largely assessed as being quite challenging.

**Conclusion**

The Arctic region and the Northern Sea Route were being explored and developing rapidly in the 1930s, so due to the tense international situation the Soviet Government had to take measures to ensure the military security of the northern territories and especially maritime communications. The Northern Flotilla was established in 1933 and developed into the Northern Fleet in 1937, with the study of naval theatre being intensified at the same time.

The military-geographical study of the territory, on the other hand, was virtually discontinued. In the 1930s the interest in military-geographical research in the Soviet Union greatly decreased, which was connected with the concept of short and victorious war on hostile territory.

Broadly speaking, the military-geographical study of the Russian North in the 1920s and 1930s was less intensive than, for example, those of the western borders of the USSR. Nevertheless, the research of that period was a valuable contribution into the research of the region and claim attention by historians.

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