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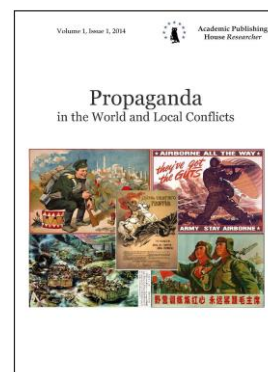
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## The Military and the Revolutionary Propaganda in the Russian Navy in the Period of Activities of the Provisional Government (February – October 1917)

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### Abstract

The article discusses the confrontation between the military and anti-war propaganda in the Russian Navy in a key historical period: February – October 1917, special attention is paid to the sailor lynchings, the policy of the Provisional government and the activities of the Bolshevik party in the Russian Navy.

The article is written based on archival documents of the Russian State Navy Archives (RGA VMF), St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, publications in the *Morskoy Sbornik* (Sea Collection) journal as well as dissertations and published research papers.

Research problems were approach using both general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis, concretization, generalization) and traditional methods of historical analysis. The work applied the historical and situational method which implies the study of historical facts in the context of the period under study and in conjunction with related events and facts.

In conclusion, the author summarizes reasons that led to the failure of the official propaganda of the Provisional Government, calling the Navy to conduct the «war to the glorious end». At the same time the effectiveness of anti-war propaganda of the Bolshevik party in the Russian Navy in February – October 1917 was highlighted.

**Keywords:** navy, propaganda, the Provisional government, the Bolsheviks, the sailors and officers.

### 1. Introduction

Following the February Revolution of 1917, the official authorities tried to instill an idea in the mind of sailors and officers of the need to consolidate efforts to continue the First World War.

First, the *Morskoy Sbornik* journal publishes an editorial expressing hope for a beneficial revolutionary reinvention of the fleet's organization: “The Navy’s personnel have faced a lot of problems with the revolution. The most important issue is creating a new service organization on ships in ground crews, restructuring the service on a democratic basis.

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The old discipline has become a thing of the past along with the old system – it is necessary to create a new harmonious system that will be able to successfully replace the existing one and surpass it by results. This is a very challenging and demanding task. Russian Navy officers will be accountable to their homeland and history for the right or wrong solution for this issue” (Editorial, 1917).

It then published an article by an officer of the French Navy, Gallo. We would like to quote from it the following excerpt: “Discipline in the French Navy is not so straitened and strict in its outward manifestations, as the one that existed in Russia before the revolution... Relations between officers and sailors are the most cordial, even friendly, character. Sailors and officers are a real family on a ship... A sailor salutes his officer willingly and courteously... This is what voluntary discipline is; it does not have anything offensive or repugnant to the dignity of a citizen. ...Officers and sailors of free Russia, when they have made sure that certain strict discipline is the essential core at the might of the army and navy, will, submitting to this discipline, defend the great principles of justice and freedom which the barbarian “culture” of the Germans is trying to crush with their rough armor” (The captain, 1917).

## **2. Materials and methods**

The article is written based on archival documents of the Russian State Navy Archives (RGA VMF), St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, publications in the Morskoy Sbornik (Sea Collection) journal as well as dissertations and published research papers.

Research problems were approached using both general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis, concretization, generalization) and traditional methods of historical analysis. The work applied the historical and situational method which implies the study of historical facts in the context of the period under study and in conjunction with related events and facts.

## **3. Discussion and results**

In fact, the “real family” broke up already in the first days after the February Revolution. The reason behind the irreversible social split referred to the massacres of officers by Baltic Fleet sailors.

Until 1917, V.I. Lenin in his personal correspondence with A.M. Gorky repeatedly noted that sailors of the Baltic Fleet could become a driving force of revolutionary events in future. In 1916, Admiral Robert N. Viren, who held the post of Military Governor of Kronshtadt, repeatedly warned of the possibility of unrest among the lower ranks. However, in the face of growing discontent with the First World War in Russian society, no one took action against political organizations in the Baltic Fleet. The outcome was that following the publication of “Order No. 1” on March 2, 1917, massive sailors' lynchings of officers ensued. As a result, more than 600 officers of the Baltic Fleet were injured (Panova, 2011). Moreover, the lynchings of admirals and officers were often unmotivated (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** The funeral of a killed officer

The subject of funerals of numerous victims of the February Revolution was reflected in the periodical press (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** The funeral of the victims of the revolution on the Field of Mars in Petrograd

It was in this context that the Provisional Government had to initiate the construction of a “real family” of officers and sailors, whose duty was to successfully end World War I. Of course, no slogans of military propaganda produced any impact on Baltic Fleet sailors.

In this situation, Order No. 1 issued by the soon-removed tsarist Naval Minister, Admiral I.K. Grigorovich, on March 4, 1917, made no sense for all fleet units: “I propose to announce to crews on my behalf that joint efforts of the State Duma, officers, military commands and people are managing to restore order throughout Russia. Only through preserving the total order, the newly formed governmental power can guarantee the victory of our homeland. Without it, the victory is unthinkable, and instead of breaking the enemy, Russia itself may be brought to the brink of



destruction. Obey your superiors, who has recognized the coup d'etat accomplished by the people just as you have, and the victory is ours.

May these great days pave the way for a happy life of New Free Russia. Remember that every day of revolt further delays the desired day of our victory which will give our country a possibility of peaceful, happy and free labor arranged for the benefit of Russia" (Dybenko, 1958).

In period of the Emperor's abdication and sailor lynchings, the official mouthpiece, Morskoy Sbornik, publishes the article by the naval officer, N. Nordman entitled "Long live free Russia!" It expressed the following expectations: "... The Navy is faced with another challenge as well. To be able to hear the people's true voice, it is necessary to be close to the people. It is required that the Navy should not be something independent from it, but it should be its part, armed to protect our fatherland from sea threats. It is required that there should be no officer, soldier, worker, or peasant, but there should be a single people's family of equal citizens. But it has not existed so far. The people were alienated from its Navy, knew little or nothing of it. Let us channel all our efforts to eliminate this division, so that we, officers and sailors of the Russian people's navy can constantly draw strength from the inexhaustible treasure trove of the people's spirit" (Nordman, 1917).

It should be admitted that practically from first days of the February Revolution, the Navy was predominantly inspired by the struggle for freedom and independence from the authorities. March 23, 1917, Petrograd gave ultimate send-off to new revolutionary heroes, dead fighters for freedom. The crew of the cruiser "Aurora" buried sailor P. Osipenko, mortally wounded by the bullets of officers. There was a sailor peakless cap with the golden inscription "Aurora" lying on the coffin lid among flowers and pine branches. Sailors carried a poster: "Your death has lit the great torch of freedom." The mourning ceremony was attended by about 800 thousand people, and the Peter and Paul Fortress fired 184 volleys in memory of the fallen heroes.

Interesting highlights can be offered by Morskoy Sbornik's new weekly. August 19, 1917, it opened its publications with the following words: "This issue of our journal comes out under a new title "Svobodny flot" (Free Fleet). A free country, where all citizens are equal and free, must have a free army and a free fleet" (From the editors, 1917).

The same issue published a letter by P.A. Kropotkin to the sailors of the cruiser "Askold" in its dockage in England. In addition, the newspaper "Svobodny flot" introduces sailors to the history of the revolutionary movement in the publication "Essays on the history of the revolution in Russia" (Ocherki po istorii revolyutsii v Rossii). The Morskoy Sbornik journal, in turn, also publishes a study by a scientist D. White on the revolutionary movement of English sailors in the late 18th century (White, 1917).

However, the newspaper "Svobodny flot," first of all, contains official materials. For example, it publishes S. Lukashevich's article "In memory of Admiral N.O. Essen" (Pamyati admirala N.O. Essena) in September 1917 (Lukashevich, 1917). It should be noted that the late commander of the Baltic Fleet could not be considered an ardent supporter of the revolutionary ideas. He strongly disapproved the sailors who were suspected of being involved in revolutionary activity and distribution of leaflets on the ships, calling for the overthrow of the autocracy (RGA VMF. F. 757. Op. 1. D. 126. L. 11). N.O. Essen regarded them as persons undermining military discipline on the ship, fleet combat efficiency and the autocracy's pillars (RGA VMF. F. 757. Op. 1. D. 132. L. 78). This attitude to sailors was particularly clearly displayed in 1912 when an investigation uncovered an organization that orchestrated an uprising Baltic Fleet ships (RGA VMF. F. 1345. Op. 1. D. 150. L. 24). As Fleet Commander N.O. Essen directly participated in mass arrests of sailors of the Baltic Squadron. This act could not but affect his reputation and authority not only in the eyes of sailors, but also in the perception of forward-minded and progressive officers of the Baltic Fleet, who sympathized with revolutionary inclined sailors and felt sorry that they were subjected to arrests and subsequent proceedings by military court that passed cruel sentences. Nor did Admiral N.O. Essen change his political position in battles with the German fleet (RGA VMF. F. 757. Op. 1. D. 147. L. 90). By the way, this fact in the admiral's biography influenced the attitude to his legendary personality, adopted by Soviet military historians who consigned N.O. Essen's name to oblivion in most of their works (Zolotarev, Kozlov, 1998).

The central issue discussed on the pages of the "Svobodny flot" newspaper becomes the agitation for continued military operations: "We have written and spoken a lot about defeatists and defencists. It has been repeatedly spotlighted that an average person, who does not in fact belong to

any of the above groups, follows, depending on various circumstance, now one group, now the other” ([The hold-outs, 1917](#)).

Meanwhile, the article by J. Trumpeldor “Blood intoxicates” (Krov opyanyayet) discusses the possibility of a peaceful path for the revolution's progression in Russia: “The only right path is the path of peaceful revolutionary creativity of democracy and collaboration with all other classes in the Russian Republic. In the terrible hour of unseen ordeals, all those who love their homeland must unite for its deliverance” ([Trumpeldor, 1917](#)). In his work, the author constantly draws analogies between events in Russia and the Great French Revolution, focusing on the issues of the collapse of the system of public administration. The topic of the plight of the Russian state was continued in V. Bykhovsky's article “Anarchy and local authorities” (Anarkhiya i vlast na mestakh) ([Bykhovsky, 1917](#)).

Separately, the “Svobodny flot” newspaper strives to protect officers from sailors' arbitrary actions. Here is an excerpt from V. Lebedev's article titled “Take care of officers” (Beregite ofitserov): “Resolutions alone do not save the day. It is necessary that special commissions, officials, commissars go to ships. Otherwise, the Russian Navy will share the fate of the French fleet, which was unable to recover for decades from the impact taken by it from a similar attitude shown by sailors to the command personnel during the Great French Revolution” ([Lebedev, 1917](#)).

March 15, 1917, a special commission began to work to establish a mutual understanding between officers and lower ranks, chaired by N.V. Savich ([RGA VMF. F. 27. Op. 1. D. 11. L. 87](#)). This bureaucratic body made efforts to devise efficient measures to create a “new combat family.” Its members kept documentation on the duties and rights of elected committees, tried to organize business relations between enlisted ranks and command personnel ([RGA VMF. F. 27. Op. 1. D. 12. L. 17](#)). Unfortunately, the key goal of the “Special Commission” – to build new relations between officers, conductors and sailors – was virtually unattainable in the historical conditions that existed at the time.

In addition, a commission was established to formulate “Provisional Regulations on the Judicial System and Judicial Proceedings in the Maritime Department”, headed by Major-General V.A. Yurovsky. Continuing to implement steps to organize naval forces, the Provisional Government announces the release of new “Regulations on the Navy” May 22, 1917 ([Krasavin, Smuglin, 2004](#)).

The effect was that the principal lines in the military propaganda launched by the Provisional Government were the unity of the fleet and the state, the pernicious lack of discipline and, as a consequence, the end of World War I among victorious countries. All the above mentioned arguments were countered by the propaganda of multiple political parties and movements, which had much greater success.

Following sailors' lynchings, Kronshtadt became a kind of “state within a state,” governed by the principles of the free will exercised by ship crews. With their political speeches and rallies, Kronshtadt sailors regularly made metropolitan inhabitants experience fear. At the same time, the number of Bolsheviks among sailors increased. By the initiative of S.G. Roshal and B.A. Zhemchuzhin, Baltic Bolsheviks separated from Mensheviks and formed an independent political force. The newspapers “Volna” (The Wave), “Golos pravdy” (Voice of Truth) and “Utro pravdy” (Morning of Truth) continuously communicated propaganda of the Bolshevik program at all major fleet bases. The idea of the necessity to end World War I was ceaselessly repeated.

July 7, 1917, A.F. Kerensky made an attempt to dissolve the Central Committee of the Baltic Fleet (Tsentrobalt) and brought anti-war agitators to trial in Petrograd ([RGA VMF. F. 137. Op. 1. D. 1. L. 10](#)). After July 12, 1917, a resolution was approved restoring the death penalty for desertion in the army and navy. As a consequence, Tsentrobalt ceased to comply with the orders of the Provisional Government, and the officers who were suspected of supporting L.G. Kornilov, were subjected to spontaneous sailors' lynchings. By the time, V.I. Lenin already called Baltic sailors “the most tenacious revolutionary elements” ([Fig. 3](#)).



**Fig. 3.** Poster “Long live the vanguard of the revolution – the Red Fleet”

The remote location of the Black Sea from the Baltic enabled the Provisional Government to achieve more successes in the area. A considerable share in the progress belonged to Vice Admiral A.V. Kolchak who increased the number of combat missions for ships and isolated crews from anti-war propaganda for a short time. April 1, 1917, the Provisional Government was informed that the Black Sea Fleet was fully operational as compared with the Baltic. A.V. Kolchak, who recognized the power of the Provisional Government and enforced “Order No. 1,” fiercely attacked deserters and disintegrating discipline. Moreover, he managed to keep masses of sailors in obedience for a while. However, already in April and May 1917, the main base of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol was visited by a delegation of Baltic Bolshevik agitators (Lenin, 1975).

Eventually, the fate of discipline in the Baltic Fleet was sealed. Sailors perpetrated local lynchings, while officers fell under growing suspicions. No “combat family” was created as well after the triumph of the anti-war propaganda in the Black Sea Fleet. A.V. Kolchak himself admitted that he was totally paralyzed in the following telegram: “Today, the delegate meeting made a decision to take away all weapons from officers, and the decision was fulfilled by ship and regiment committees, the same requirement was imposed on me and the entire officer corps, disagreement and discord are being stirred in the armed force. I believe that my further work in the Black Sea, as well as the work of the chief of my staff, can no longer be useful, and for the good of our Fatherland, it is necessary to immediately appoint a new fleet commander and a new chief of staff” (Essays, 1917).

#### 4. Conclusion

In the period between February and October 1917, the military propaganda of the Provisional Government was inflicted a crushing defeat in the Navy. The ideas of building armed forces on the basis of democratic freedoms were perceived by sailors only in terms of complete anarchy, arbitrariness and lack of discipline. Appeals “to fight the war to its glorious conclusion,” “to take care of officers,” “to follow chain of command” completely contradicted established ship committees and declared equality of all ranks. Even Vice Admiral A.V. Kolchak with all his authority failed to turn concentration of lower ranks on combat feats and distract them from participating in revolutionary events. It was the inconsistent internal policy carried out by the

Provisional Government that contributed to the success of the Bolshevik agitation and the failure of all efforts by military propaganda.

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