

The Revolutionary Origin of the CCP Commissar System: How it Differed from the Bolshevik Prototype

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Abstract

Comparative scholars have noticed that China's party–military relationship was more fused than the Soviet Union's. This article explores the historical origin of this difference. The author focuses on the understudied commissar system. Based on original Russian and Chinese materials, the author finds that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) commissar, unlike its Soviet prototype, was more dedicated to breaking the distinction between the revolution and the military. First, the CCP's political workers periodically campaigned against military bureaucracy, though they could not fully eradicate it. Second, in the regular operation of logistical affairs, the CCP's commissars strove to be super-fighters that could replace specialists and technocrats. Third, the CCP political workers had more direct participation in combat, often by their political skills. This made the Chinese Civil War a prototype of contemporary hybrid warfare. Differently, Soviet commissars confined their roles to political monitoring. They tended to leave other affairs to officers and specialists, while at the same time minimizing the change of the original structure of the Tsarist military. In short, the Soviet commissar was a supervisor, while the CCP commissar was a fighter.

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