



THE COMMONWEALTH

Tempered by revolution, civil war and failed conquests; forged in the fires of invasion and the minds of brilliant men and women, the Commonwealth stands as a beacon of hope to oppressed humanity. A democracy that stretches from the industrial centres of Poland-Lithuania to the snowy wastes of Siberia and the steppes of Mongolia, the Commonwealth's people come from a hundred or more cultures and groups but are united by the loyalty to their state and the Tsar who safeguards it. Required to serve their country and fellow-citizens in whatever capacity they can, the Commonwealth can call upon huge reserves of strength to ensure its survival and prosperity. Enriched by the technological bounties wrested from the jealous hands of those who sought to manipulate the world, the Commonwealth stands as a testament to the will and perseverance of the common man. Long live Mother Russia, long live the Commonwealth, long live her People, long live the Tsar!



Minister, Thank you for taking the time to listen to my most humble petition earlier this week. I feel that it is vitally important that the Joseon Kingdom is at the forefront of any further expansion under the new policy.

Of course, I understand that the State Council is reticent in the light of our recent conflict with the Commonwealth, but if His Immortal Majesty would only be apprised of the benefits I outlined at our meeting I am sure he would consent to allow trade to bring wealth and opportunity to our shores.

To help persuade you and the rest of the council I have attached a copy of some papers about the Commonwealth that I had my staff produce. I find a historical perspective is useful in all my business dealings, and this should prove no different.

Sincerely,

Kwang-jo Yi

[Minister's Note: I was tempted to throw this trash away, but then thought it better to preserve it. Kwang-jo is as greedy and unprincipled as they come, and his opinions of the Commonwealth are blinded by the wealth he could gain from doing business with them. Nonetheless, his appraisal is a useful example of how the Commonwealth would like itself to be seen. I have added a few extra sections here and there to provide a more balanced picture.

I have edited out many of his pleas for opening trading relations with the Commonwealth, as well as his economically illiterate observations on the benefits of trading this or that commodity with them. The Ministry will continue to consider any contact with the Commonwealth as illegal, and that will continue until the Immortal Emperors decree otherwise. I recommend that Kwang-jo Yi be put under even closer watch in future.]

COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth of Russian, Poland, Lithuania, Mongolia and others is, apart from our own Celestian Empire, the only world-power that truly appears to equally and fairly balance the affairs and interests of its member nations. Unlike the Imperium, which is dominated by Prussia, or the Latin Alliance guided by France, the Commonwealth is not controlled by Russia and nor can the Tsar force the other Commonwealth members to follow his whim. *[Ministry Clarification: Whilst this may well technically be true, this does not prevent Russia's greater size and economic strength dictate Commonwealth policy.]*

This has less to do with the Tsar's preference, and more to do with the way in which the Commonwealth was founded. For that, we must begin with the events during the height of the European Prussian Wars. [Ministry Clarification: The following material is largely accurate, although it is somewhat lurid and sensationalist.]

PANZERKAMPF

On a bright spring morning in 1812, into the Motherland a Prussian army marched. After a brutally swift drive across Polish-Lithuanian territory, there was little time to prepare a defence and many units were hopelessly out of position when the juggernaut crashed through the western Russian border.

For the Russian army, The War of 1812 was a horrific experience. Economically and politically isolated from Europe and held by custom and convention to old methods of autocratic government and traditional manufacturing and agricultural methods, Russia could not claim to be a



modernised nation-state. The terrifying form of modern warfare unleashed upon them by the Reichswehr; massed armoured formations, indiscriminate artillery bombardment, aerial attacks and more, left the Russian army and people demoralised and defeated.

Nonetheless, Tsar Alexander managed to rally his troops, and with a few modernised factories working overtime, equipped them with the best equipment he could muster. As his forces prepared, Stavka traded land for time, luring the Prussian forces deeper into Russian territory whilst counting upon the winter to level the playing field.

Eventually, at Borodino, the Prussian thrust was checked in a brutal armoured clash that raged for several days. By the end of the battle, the cream of the invading forces had been shattered, and Russia had regained its fighting spirit.

Yet the lessons of the war had become ingrained in the Russian government and its people. European powers were no-longer actively courted as they once had been, nor were western methods embraced as freely. Especially once the Kaiser and his European foes signed their “Peace with Honour”, Russia realised it had few true friends in the West, and many enemies. The age long desire of the Russian Tsars to be considered European monarchs in the mould of their distant cousins faded. Instead the country turned to its faith and to its own internal affairs, isolationist and isolated.

UPRISING

Yet not all were content with the Russia that stumbled from internal crisis to internal crisis after the uneasy truce signed two years later. Many Russian nobles resented

the dissolute turn in their Romanov rulers, whilst those who continued to closely monitor European affairs feared that their power and influence was only going to diminish further as technology continued to rapidly modernise. Concerned for the safety of Russia, these nobles formed their own secret society dedicated to protecting their Motherland. At first, the organisation known as the “Cult of Salvation” had few friends outside their own small-circle, but gradually gathered more followers. Tsar Alexander’s policies became more erratic and authoritarian. The Cult eventually infiltrated several regiments of the Russian army, and also attracted intellectuals and even members of the middle class as they realised the extent of the challenge they faced.

The Cult of Salvation placed many of their hopes on Alexander’s heir, Nicholas, but as meningitis claimed his life, it fell to his younger brother, Konstantin who became Tsar in 1825. A premature revolt in the December nearly destroyed the hopes of the revolutionaries, but luck ran with them. After the disastrous encounter in Saint Petersburg the newly renamed Decembrist organisation fled underground but continued to infiltrate the Russian military. The disastrous policies of Tsar Konstantin made even more enemies amongst the shell-shocked Russian middle classes, until they outnumbered the nobles who originally founded the organisation.

KILLING GROUND

Eighteen months later the Decembrists struck again, this time with the backing of a much larger portion of the military. The resultant uprising sparked a civil war. On the one-side, the Romanovs, on the other



a loose alliance of the Decembrists and all who sought to end Tsar Konstantin's Rule.

The Russian Civil War of '27-'31 was a brutal and bloody affair that spiralled quickly out of the control of either side. Tsar Konstantin was a poor soldier, and the commanders of the Imperial Russian Army soon lost interest in fulfilling their monarch's grand dreams and instead launched their own competing campaigns against different areas of Russia. The Decembrists, meanwhile, did not have a structure in place to command an army. They were instead forced to rely upon the judgement of a hundred junior officers and small units incapable of coming together with a grand strategy.

The result was chaos. The countryside was ravaged with Russian peasants forced to give up their hard-won grain to first one side then the other or face brutality. Cities, large and well protected by their own militias, refused to declare for either side unless truly threatened. Effectively, all of Russia was plunged into banditry and outlawism.

Eventually, it was the Decembrists who managed to achieve victory, although not before they had placed inordinate authority on the shoulders of one man: Grand Duke Nikolai. At first simply an associate and fellow traveller rather than a convinced opponent of the Tsar, the Grand Duke was one of only a few Decembrist commanders to achieve victory in the battles of 1828 and 1829.

Given complete command of all Decembrist forces in 1829, Nikolai forged them into the "White Army" so named for the new white uniforms he issued (replacements for the Tsarist green) to unite the Decembrist

forces. The Grand Duke fought a series of stunning campaigns that broke the back of the Tsarist army, notably a lightning invasion of Mongolia bringing down the Tsarist General Stuyev.

LONG LIVE THE KING

Tsar Konstantin was formally stripped of his office not by the victorious Decembrist coalition but by his own generals in the spring of 1830. Outraged by his poor handling of the war and continued extravagant expenditure and reactionary politics, the generals felt they had no choice but to force their presumed leader to abdicate. After centuries of uninterrupted authority and power, the Romanov family was finally deposed, and the former Tsar fled the country (not without a considerable fortune and sizeable entourage).

At first it appeared that the conflict would continue, waged now by two republican factions, but in the end a compromise of sorts was reached; although not one that either faction was exactly happy with. To begin with, the former Imperialists chose to offer the crown to Grand Duke Nikolai... a gesture which certainly appealed to the Duke's vanity if not to his Decembrist allies [*Ministerial Note: the "Radical" faction in particular was not best pleased. They had not torn down a Tsar merely to set up another. They have since become the Decembrist Minority in the Commonwealth's political structures.*]

In order to secure the support of the White Army, however, Grand Duke Nikolai was forced to concede to many of the demands of the Decembrists. Not only did he surrender much of the Tsar's former powers to a new State Duma, he also allowed the institution



of a wide-range of reforms on religious, political and economic freedoms that swept away much of old Russia's traditional practices. Symbolically crowned on the 1st December 1831, Tsar Nikolai ushered in a new age for the Russian state, governed by a new dynasty: Rurik-Novoy.

FORTY TO ONE

At first, the Decembrists' plan to modernise and expand Russian influence was predicated upon national strength and prestige, and Tsar Nikolai Rurik-Novoy was eager to oblige them. Whilst the new Duma worked to reform the government, he threw himself personally into modernising the Russian military.

Rather than rely upon the tried-and-tested method of mass conscription, Tsar Nikolai instead vowed that the new army would be built upon three principles: Firepower, Armour and Strength. No longer, in his view, was it necessary or beneficial to rely upon poorly trained levies. Instead the Tsar envisioned a powerfully motivated force of volunteers, or highly trained conscripts where necessary, equipped with simple but effective machines that would both protect their crews but also bring devastation down upon their foes.

In effect, the Tsar was emulating the organisation and tactics that had served him well during the Civil War, and it came as no surprise that within a few short years the Imperial Russian Army was formally and permanently renamed the "White Army" in honour of its Civil War predecessor. This new force was in its early stages of completion when a pretext arrived for the war that Tsar Nikolai secretly craved.

A brief and inconsequential encounter in the Baltic between Polish-Lithuanian vessels and the latest White Navy ships provided the Tsar with all the excuse he needed. Exaggerating the seriousness of the encounter, the Tsar effectively tricked the Duma into declaring war on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Not only did intelligence officers loyal to the Tsar deliberately falsify evidence of Polish-Lithuanian intentions, but key political leaders similarly gave misleading statements to the media and the public that galvanised the Russian people into supporting a lightning campaign of conquest against their western neighbour.

The Tsar's goal was clear, at least to himself and his inner cadre. Poland-Lithuania was to be brought to heel either as a full territory of Russia, or else forced into a subservient position. Once achieved, Russia would once again hold the gateway to central Europe and be recognised worldwide as a major power. Things did not go to plan.

WINGED HUSSARS

Unfortunately, Stavka underestimated the strength of their close neighbour. The new White Army was forced to rely upon massed conscription to make up the ranks during the short-lived offensive and fared poorly against the smaller but more professional Commonwealth armies.

Still the White Army ground on, forced to adopt the very tactics the Tsar despised in order to gain ground against their Polish foe. As the casualty count rose, discontent at home also swelled. The Duma, incensed by the poor handling of the war, began publicly investigating the affairs of the major White Army generals in a series of



War Conduct Hearings. Eventually, the Decembrist majority in the Duma informed the Tsar that unless conflict ended quickly another and more dangerous revolt at home would begin.

Under orders from their liege to prosecute the war with haste, Stavka revised its timetables and pushed the White Army even harder. Thousands of soldiers from dozens of regiments were hurled at the defences around Warsaw in an effort to break Polish resistance on the Vistula.

But the White Army generals had been deceived. The defences of Warsaw were the anvil upon which the Russian offensive was to be broken, and to the north and south flying columns of motorised Hussar regiments were on the move, crossing the river under the cover of night.

On a cold September morning the 4th and 17th Army Groups smashed into the flanks of the White Army. Surprise was total, and the Russian forces proved incredibly slow to react. Tactical cohesion was lost, and all strategic direction soon went with it as well. Veterans of the Russian Civil War acted according to their own preferences, disregarding the orders of their younger and recently graduated commanding officers. In several instances, White Army units ended up engaging each other in friendly fire incidents that lasted for days.

It became all too apparent that the White Army was not truly prepared for a conflict on such a scale, and Tsar Nikolai found himself bitterly humiliated by the experience. Ever since the civil war he had treasured his own reputation for military success and strategic brilliance, but he singularly failed to predict the outcome of the Polish-Lithuanian War.

In the end, wiser heads prevailed, and both sides signed a peace treaty a few months after the “Charge of the Angels”. A few weeks later, a chastened Tsar Nikolai was forced to accept a motion of censure from his own Duma. He was officially stripped of active rank in the White Army, and many officials within the government were replaced by those loyal to the democratic government rather than the Tsar. [*Ministerial Note: It is at this point that we believe Tsar Nikolai turned increasingly to the bottle.*]

TO HELL AND BACK

The subsequent few years were not kind on Russia. The Motherland suffered frequent internal shocks as the Duma attempted to assert control in the absence of the harsher authoritarian Tsarist administrations of the past. Industrial protests, strikes and radicalism seemed a constant threat; whilst within the White Army morale plummeted to its lowest ebb after the disastrous adventure in Poland. Even several victorious skirmishes along the Mongolian border in 1844 failed to rouse military pride, even as they stirred Tsar Nikolai from his ever more frequent vodka-induced stupors.

In the end, it was events outside Russia that were to improve its circumstances. In 1848 radical revolutions swept through Europe, and whilst most were swiftly crushed, their appearance and violence shook the confidence of the established powers sufficiently for them to take drastic actions. Whilst most nations sought to reassert control through repression, others instead turned to nearby countries to form new alliances. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was one such nation.



The Commonwealth had recovered remarkably quickly from the “War of the Angels” (named after the famous battle) and appeared to be one of the most powerful and stable nations within Eastern Europe in the subsequent decade. However, outward calm belied an inner turmoil. The Polish King Karol was approaching the end of his life, and whilst personally popular his peace-time policies had disastrously weakened the Polish state at the expense of its major noble families. Most of the highest government offices were now almost hereditary positions, bringing their possessors great influence and wealth at the expense of their people and country alike. Public agitation against this state of affairs was muted but strong, and as the state approached bankruptcy its armed forces began to lose their edge. Just to the west, of course, loomed the mighty and imposing Wolfgang Fortresses of the Imperium... and no Polish patriot wished their nation to be absorbed into that industrialised state.

The King passed away in late 1848, just in time for the first revolutions to erupt in parts of the Imperium. Radical voices within Poland arose in a clamour against their government. The Sejm that met to elect the new monarch faced few palatable choices. The available claimants were either knee-deep in accusations of corruption and meddling, or else linked to one or either of the potentates within the Prussian Imperium. In desperation, a group of conservative nobles proposed to offer the crown to Tsar Nikolai Rurik-Novy instead.

NIKOLAI REX

The offer stunned both public and government in Russia but was quickly pursued by agents of the Duma. The Tsar,

himself now in incredibly poor health thanks to the stresses (and shame) of his position, was flattered by this apparent goodwill gesture by a foreign neighbour. In the event, however, Tsar Nikolai was but an outside observer in the negotiations that followed – but he did have an advocate working on his behalf.

In order to ease the concerns of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility, the Duma of Russia nominated Crown Prince Vladimir as their emissary to the talks that commenced that year in Krakow. Vladimir was as unlike his father as possible. Where Nikolai was known for his brashness and arrogance, favouring strong drink and military company; Vladimir was a keen student, a polymath and polyglot – at ease discussing philosophy as economics and literature. The Crown Prince had spent his youth studying at the finest Russian and European centres of learning, assembling a brain trust of the finest minds to act as his advisors. His wife, of Polish descent herself, also accompanied him. The Crown Prince dazzled his Polish hosts, and in many eyes proved the viability of the personal union with Russia almost on his own. [*Ministry Clarification: Strange to see a butcher and murderer lionised so, but it is true, one Polish noble said that if he could offer the crown to Vladimir, he would do so immediately!*]

The Treaty of Krakow appeared to favour the Polish-Lithuanian side to an almost absurd degree – “Polish liberty” that ancient traditional protection of the Commonwealth citizens was guaranteed and extended to Russians as well, although they were now made conditional on performing some service to the state. The Russians adopted an equal partnership with the Commonwealth – with an elected council of both realms



— serving as an advisory board to their joint monarch. Several noble titles and offices were formalised — but more strikingly, the alliance was officially named “The Russian Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.”

On the 20th August 1850, Tsar Nikolai Rurik-Novy was crowned King of Poland-Lithuania — marking the official beginning of this new nation.

HAIL TO THE KING

The new enlarged Commonwealth enjoyed several years of comparative peace under the reign of its elderly and infirm Tsar — although for those living within it there were plenty of events of note. The decision of Crown Prince Vladimir to seek election to the Duma in 1852 was an exceptional case and marked the official entry of the heir to the throne into politics. The Commonwealth economy boomed, and new trade links were established as the two member-states bound themselves together. Tsar Nikolai busied himself by throwing himself into the continued development of the White Army, whilst his son quietly built up influence and support in the halls of true power.

In 1853 the Commonwealth began receiving petitions for full membership of the alliance as smaller states around its borders recognised the benefits of entering. Cossack states and smaller nations on the Russian and Polish-Lithuanian borders were recognised as dependent territories of the Commonwealth, or minor states as full members. In the Balkans in particular, the Commonwealth had a great appeal for Pan-Slavic political movements; although this led to increased tension with the Prussian Imperium and Ottoman Sultanate

— both of whom found Commonwealth expansion alarming.

Such actions, however, appealed to patriotic Russian citizens and politicians, especially the Decembrists who had brought about the revolution in the first placed. Crown Prince Vladimir inspired or led many of these efforts, and in him the conservative wing of the Decembrists found their new leader. It was Vladimir as well who began sending out feelers to another major nation that might one day become a full partner in the Commonwealth: Mongolia.

Before the mission could bear fruit, however, Crown Prince Vladimir was forced to leave politics for good. On the 1st December 1855, after reigning for twenty-four years, Tsar Nikolai of the House of Rurik-Novy, Supreme Monarch of All Russia and King of Poland-Lithuania, Grand Marshal of the White Army, Protector of the Balkans and Guarantor of the Rights and Liberties of the People, passed away on the anniversary of his coronation. [*Ministry Clarification: Words fail me at this naivety.*]

On the 24th December, Vladimir Rurik-Novy was crowned and formally proclaimed as Supreme Monarch of All Russia and King in Poland-Lithuania, Commander-in-Chief of the Commonwealth, Protector of the Balkans and Guarantor of the Rights and Liberties of the People. Within a few months of his coronation, the new Tsar would formally rename his realm the Commonwealth, establish a new university and centre of learning, unleash a treasure trove of new technologies on his realm to better the lives of his subjects and modernise his army... and add a new title to that list: Gur-Khan of Mongolia.



MASTERS OF THE WORLD

The Mongolian accession was two-thirds diplomacy, one-third calculation. For centuries Mongolia had crouched envious on the borders of the Celestian Empire – frequently attempting to despoil its wealthier and more cultured neighbour. Our Immortal Emperors and their servants always saw off such attacks, but the constant threat only grew worse as time passed. Forced to unite by the apparent threat our Empire posed, the Mongolian Khans formally established a council, the Kurultai, to unify their nation and keep it on a war footing.

When the Commonwealth proposed an equal alliance in 1857, the opportunity to secure new allies and economic wealth appealed to the rapacious and greedy Mongolian lords. The Commonwealth formally welcomed Mongolia as the third party in the Commonwealth that same year. *[Ministry Clarification: The dog covered in dung scolds the dog covered in dust! As it happens though, we believe the Mongolians were also secretly offered advance military technology around the same time.]*

It was at this time that The Russian Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became more simply known as The Commonwealth, perhaps to show that each member nation was equal. Unfortunately for the Mongolian Khans, they discovered that some nations were more equal than others. The Mongolian advice and expertise fell on deaf ears when a few years later the Commonwealth's Government entered into a secret agreement with the Crown to attempt to invade our fair Kingdom. Such details are of little concern to this history, so I will skip over these matters for wiser minds.

[Ministry Clarification: If Kwang-jo thinks he can just whitewash the recent war so easily he is even more stupid than I originally thought. For those who need any reminder, the story is quite simple: Radicals in the Polish-Lithuanian portion of the Commonwealth prevailed upon their fellows to demand that the Tsar "liberate" the people of the Celestian Empire from the tyranny of the Immortal Emperors. Tsar Vladimir sensibly demurred but he and his government were tempted by the apparent weakness of our Kingdom. The fact that the British Crown was planning an expedition was just icing on the cake as far as the Commonwealth was concerned. The Mongolian Khans made every effort, so far as we know, to dissuade their partners but we believe the Commonwealth placed an excessive amount of faith in their newest technologies. The Commonwealth Intelligence Service, the Okhbrana, had been obtaining technologies from the Covenant of the Enlightened, that global cabal of Scientists that Vladimir himself had closely allied himself to as Crown Prince. In the end the Russians and the rest of the Commonwealth were disabused of their foolish notions at great cost, although Tsar Vladimir had learned enough from the disgrace of his father to know when to cut his losses. In the end, he suffered no great loss of prestige, as the expedition was painted as a limited operation in response to some diplomatic sleight.]

BACK IN CONTROL

The Commonwealth has, for the last twenty years, been governed by the Commonwealth Chamber. Membership of this chamber is determined by election, a third elected by the people of Russia, a third by those of Poland-Lithuania and a third by Mongolia. The Chamber works



alongside the Commonwealth Council, a smaller organisation of appointees chosen proportionally by the Russian Duma, the Polish-Lithuanian Sejm and the Mongolian Kurultai. Many members of the Council are therefore respected elder statesmen and women, whereas the Chamber is home to more boisterous members of the Commonwealth's political parties. Russia dominates the Commonwealth Council by virtue of its greater size and population. *[Ministry Clarification: See "Political Parties in the Commonwealth" report. The Decembrists are still the largest party, although they have since split between conservative supporters of the Tsar and radicals. The Social Democrats are the second largest, but have little appeal in Mongolia, whilst the Patriots are a misfit organisation from the various subordinate territories. I am surprised Kwang-jo noticed this.]*

The Commonwealth Council and the Commonwealth Chamber are together referred to as the Commonwealth Government, although in reality much business is decided by the Steering Committee, an informal group of senior ministers and officials elected by the Chamber and the Council to conduct business. The Steering Committee's members are powerful political figures. Almost all of them are major figures in the political parties within the Commonwealth and its member states, and not a few have ties to the traditional aristocracy of their realms, as well as to more unsavoury characters too. Commonwealth politics is a cutthroat business, almost as bad as that in the League of Italian States; however, the Commonwealth's policy of secret elections for all citizens who have performed some service to the Commonwealth ensures

that its politicians usually act in the best interests of its people.

The Steering Committee meets weekly with the Tsar, although he is not officially allowed to propose policy. Nonetheless, it is certain that the Decembrist Majority (the Bol'shinstvo – or Bolsheviks as they are called) are much in tune with their former leader, and it is believed most of their policies have his firm support. The Tsar does not, however, make many political pronouncements without the approval of the Steering Committee, or at least the greater consensus of it.

LIGHT IN THE BLACK

The Commonwealth maintains order throughout its massive territorial extent through a system regional assemblies and divisions – often called Oblasts after the Russian word. Each Oblast has its own Steering-Committee appointed Envoy who acts on behalf of the Tsar or the Committee when needed. Each Oblast will also have its own elected assembly, although its power will effectively be limited by the Commonwealth's larger institutions. These small assemblies really serve only to petition the central government for assistance or redress.

More importantly for the Commonwealth, each Oblast acts as the recruiting centre for the massive formations of the White Army and other Commonwealth Service Battalions (CSB). The Oblast Recruitment Authority (ORA) holds the most accurate census of all Commonwealth citizens within the Oblast, and it is the ORA which determines who has provided sufficient service to the state to be qualified to vote.



Every year, each Oblast raises its own regiment of new service inductees. Most will serve for three years in the ranks of the White Army, although in coastal Oblasts most will go to the White Navy. At the end of three years, most citizens become reservists, but others commit to a career in the military and remain in service. Those unwilling to perform military duties are usually enrolled for an extended six years in the CSB, building infrastructure projects or learning other technical skills (often medical in nature). Law and order is enforced by the Oblast police force, often raised and trained locally, although some regions require more in-depth training thanks to the complexity of the Commonwealth's law codes.

A GHOST DIVISION

[Minister's Note: I have added this section myself, as Kwang-jo appears to be either stupid or wilfully ignorant as to the measures the Commonwealth employs to ensure loyalty amongst such a massive population.]

The Commonwealth has, since its inception, had difficulty with dissident and revolutionary movements within its borders. Some are monarchists and nationalists, intent on restoring the "good old days" of Romanov rule and reinstating this or that pretender to the throne to this or that ancient and glorious kingdom that no longer exists. Others, more dangerous perhaps in the Commonwealth's democratic climate, are revolutionary socialists or anarchists – or those who would seek to take their own nation out of the alliance entirely. These radicals are sometimes to be found operating openly, elected to the Oblast assemblies or even to the Commonwealth Chamber. The more dangerous ones

operate underground, waging a campaign of sabotage and propaganda to provoke a revolutionary uprising that will usher in their promised utopia.

To counteract these underground movements the Commonwealth first relied upon the ordinary police and its ethic of service, but very quickly realised that to truly ensure the survival of the new state they had to employ harsher methods. Special servants of the state, recruited from the White Army but also from police forces and administrative centres, were granted a special privilege: exemption from punishment under the laws of the Commonwealth in return for binding oaths of absolute loyalty to the state. These excepted ones are called "Oprichniks", and the organisation they serve the "Oprichnina".

After ruthless and brutal training, the Oprichniks return to their normal lives, hidden from the fellows and able to commit any act necessary to sustain the Commonwealth. Dissidents and revolutionaries have died under the hidden blades of the Oprichnina, as have corrupt politicians, businessmen and nobles. Also, to feel the wrath of the organisation are those who speak ill of the Commonwealth, or who produce art or literature that does not extol the values of this "great democracy", as well as those who evade or refuse to serve the state in one form or another.

Those the Oprichniks do not simply kill are either branded or mutilated in some fashion, or else dragged before a tribunal to be tried under the Law of Exceptions. Only one verdict can possibly be given to those brought before such merciless judges, and once the guilty verdict has been duly reached



the sentence is carried out. The lucky ones are those sentenced to permanent service in a Commonwealth Service Battalion, the screams of the unlucky ones are often heard in the dead of night in the wilds beyond the boundaries of the Commonwealth's cities.

The Oprichnina has recently begun operating more openly, especially after the disastrous results of the Anglo-Russian invasion of our homeland. Unlike the hidden ones who work in shadow and under cover of night, those termed "Ghosts" by the populace are all too visible. They walk the streets in groups of three, uniformed and armed, but with hideous masks that obscure their faces and leave only their eyes showing. The work of the "Ghosts" is similar to their compatriots, but more open, their very presence meant as a deterrent to those who would undermine the beloved Commonwealth.

It is believed that within the Oprichnina a silent war is being waged between those who see their duty as service to the Steering Committee and those who see it as loyalty to Tsar Vladimir. It is rumoured that Princess Anastasia is somehow involved or has been trained by the Oprichnina in some capacity. Certainly, the Tsar appears to have his own coterie of "Ghosts" that accompany him on his trips. Time will tell exactly which way the Oprichnina organisation will topple, but the balance between the Tsar and his elected Government appears to be well in hand.

THE WOLF AT COURT

Black Wolf is the nickname of former Russian Commonwealth submariner and Commander of the prototype Death Bringer submarine, Volodymyr Nikonov. Though he usually operates under contract

to the Commonwealth he now runs a large and powerful mercenary outfit. Funded, in part, by the Tsar himself, the Black Wolf Company have a reputation for daring assaults and sudden ambushes that make them a force to be feared the world over.

Captain Nikonov had a reputation as a daring and unconventional officer even before joining the Commonwealth White Navy's submarine development programme in the early 1860s. He had honed his skills as a destroyer commander, running 'unofficial' covert missions in the Black Sea against the Sultanate navy, as part of the Stavka high command's brief to assess the defences of the Dardanelles.

However, such skills also inflated Nikonov's substantial ego. Wiry of build, dark-haired and charismatic, his subordinates nicknamed him 'Black Wolf' for both his appearance and hunting prowess. He came to think of himself as more of a corsair than a naval officer; styling himself upon such piratical legends as Blackbeard Teach and Sir Francis Drake. Not surprisingly, he found regular naval convention suffocating and dull, and was particularly aggrieved by the Navy's perpetually subordinate position to the White Army. Nikonov was transferred to the submarine programme with the promise of additional status. His reputation as a maverick went before him, and his superiors believed that submarine duty would make best use of his skills and keep him conveniently isolated. He was offered command of the powerful experimental submarine Death Bringer. It seemed a perfect promotion for Nikonov and one he seized hungrily.

Proyeckt Pobeda (Victory Project) was one of earliest examples of Tsar Vladimir's



initiative to work with the Enlightened overseers known as the Troika. The goal for the Commonwealth was to advance their military to a technological level with their neighbours on the global stage. For too long the Tsar had lamented the sturdy but unsophisticated nature of his people's military might. Now with projects like this and the development of the atomic stasis cannon, the Commonwealth was poised to push back against the likes of the Imperium, Crown and our own Empire.

At first, all seemed well. What the Black Sea Fleet Command did not know, however, was that Nikonov's resentment had already boiled over barely a year into his new commission. Rapidly tiring of his posting and seeing it as just more donkey work, Nikonov had become enamoured with the fine living he saw the Russian nobility and his commanding officers enjoying. Any hopes that he might achieve this through marriage were bitterly dashed by the repeated humiliations he felt his isolation placed upon him. Nikonov saw the Death Bringer as a faster means to achieve what should rightfully have been his. This resentment was fostered amongst his crew, aided by his personal charisma and the close-knit bond that develops between all submariners.

During the final live-armed sea trials of Death Bringer, in front of the Tsar himself. Nikonov led the submarine's crew in a mass mutiny and they overwhelmed the Oprichnina agents and officers on board, ejecting them bodily through Death Bringer's torpedo tubes. In this daring action, the Death Bringer easily eluded both sea and air patrols around the demonstration area and Nikonov

took the sub to the Enlightened research and development facility in Kerch from where the Death Bringer was developed. Landing at night with a hand-picked shore party, he infiltrated the base, overpowered the constructs and babushka creations guarding it and stole the master copies of Death Bringer's blueprints. His party then fired the magazines and fuel reserves, destroying the submarine dock and crippling Proyeckt Pobeda.

In the carnage and confusion, the Black Wolf escaped with Death Bringer. White Navy command sought him frantically, tracking him by the trail of destruction he left across the Black Sea. He pillaged and sank six Russian freighters before entering the Bosphorus, where his pursuers lost track of him. A scourge to the Sultanate navy in and around the Propontis region, Nikonov followed his dream of becoming a pirate, operating as both corsair and mercenary, he became a scourge of the seas – hunted by many, but never captured.

For over a year the tales of the Black Wolf became a regular source of gossip in the Tsar's Court, particularly with Princess Anastasia who seemed to delight in provoking her father by referring to the dashing Nikonov. Tsar Vladimir was a pragmatic man and with no hope of replicating the craft and fearing that his navy would be dealt a humiliation yet again in trying to capture Nikonov, this errant commander needed to be returned to the Commonwealth embrace by some other means. To that end the Tsar sent his eldest daughter, Anastasia, to meet with the legendary Black Wolf in the city of Novo-Arkhangelsk in Alaska. What happened during that meeting between



two headstrong and ambitious individuals is not known but by that Christmas the Black Wolf was engaged to Anastasia and tales of his exploits continued as he blazed a path of devastation throughout the Commonwealth's enemies.

Nikonov finally has a lifestyle and status that he believes befits him. He can see a future where he marries Anastasia and claims the Tsar's throne for himself. When not at court or in action Nikonov operates out of a converted gigantic Murmansk class vessel near Novo-Arkhangelsk. From this fortified harbour-ship he not only has safety but has established a planning room to help with the execution of even more daring raids for pleasure and profit. The Tsar's favourite story features the Black Wolf in a daring exploit to sink the Union battleship Hornet and Crown carrier Wessex. This attack was all the more thrilling (when Nikonov retells it) as the commanders of the two vessels were allegedly discussing

a potential alliance and that the Black Wolf had to infiltrate the heavily-guarded Thames Estuary in London in order to sink them.

In between carrying out missions for his future father-in-law, Nikonov has the latitude given to his growing fleet of submarines and assault craft to allow them to be deployed as mercenaries alongside many rival nations around the globe. Each battle adds not only to the coffers of the Black Wolf but also his prestige at court, even when to some observers such raids do little to further the Commonwealth...

[Ministerial Note: Notably the Commonwealth Intelligence Service were the ones who suggested to the Tsar that he permit his daughter to marry Nikonov. Whether this is to be a show of strength by the Tsar or a poisoned chalice from his enemies, remains to be seen as the Okbrana have principal loyalty to the Commonwealth even over that of its Tsar.]

