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The continuity and discontinuity of fundamental military concepts in Russian military thought between 1856 and 2010

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**The Continuity and Discontinuity of Fundamental Military Concepts in Russian
Military Thought Between 1856 and 2010**

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A Dissertation

Submitted to The University of Leiden

The Faculty of Humanities

Institute for History

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Foreword

As a former NATO intelligence officer, I anxiously monitored Russia's sudden annexation of Crimea from an underground military bunker in northern Germany during a NATO Command and Control Exercise in early March 2014. Following this, I witnessed how NATO's military headquarters struggled to decipher and comprehend Russia's approach to modern war in Ukraine and along NATO's Eastern borders. Since then, Western scholars have made several attempts to conceptualise the perceived shift in Russian strategic thought with essentially contested concepts such as *Russian hybrid warfare* or the so-called *Gerasimov doctrine*. These experiences inspired me to carry out PhD research on the historical origins of Russia's conceptualization of modern warfare. With this research, I'd like to add to the understanding of the thought and actions of the Russian military. Towards that end, I've examined the historical continuity and strategic relevance and interrelation of five distinctive Russian military concepts between 1856 and 2010. I've written this dissertation from February 2018 to September 2021.

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Preface

It is my experience of working on Russian military strategy that has driven this research project. My interest in this area developed while I was an intelligence officer in NATO Joint Force Command Brunssum (The Netherlands) between 2013 and 2016. I worked, closely for several years, on how the Russian military seized control in Crimea, backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine and used various means to harass and deter NATO troops in its Eastern flank. During my tour, I experienced in practice that conceptualising the character of Russia's military operations in Ukraine was a subject of great interest in strategic and policy circles. On the one hand, Russia's Crimean intervention of 2014 did not showcase the peculiarities of 'old' conventional forms of war or 'new' Western military methods displayed in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, the Russian military's Crimean campaign attained Moscow's political objectives by keeping the use of force under the threshold of the conventional justifications of war. The recent Russo-Ukrainian war has revealed the Russia's resolve to rely on military force in case of need.

This dissertation aims to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding continuity and discontinuity in Russian military thinking. Western strategic thinkers have made several attempts to explain Russian military thought using concepts which originated in the West, such as *hybrid war*, *political war* or *limited war*. Conceptualizing presupposed novelties in Russian military thinking from a Western perspective has been a key objective in these studies. Instead, this research was designed to investigate the historical roots of Russia's approach to waging modern war. Thus, researching (dis)continuity (as opposed to novelty) in military strategic thinking is a key motivation of this research project. In this framework, the manuscript investigates the rise and evolution of Russian military concepts to determine historical origins of Russia's approaches to waging modern war. In consequence, this study sets out to scrutinize time-tested concepts of late Imperial Russian, Soviet and contemporary Russian military thinking to address the issue of whether these concepts remained intact and strategically relevant over the course of the 20th century. For this purpose, the method of writing a conceptual history has been employed while scrutinizing prevailing Russian military concepts between 1853 and 2010.

The issue of Russian military thinking has received considerable attention especially since the Russian-Ukrainian war has started in February 2022. While the project was

officially brought to a close before its outbreak, a few observations can be made from the perspective of my research. First and foremost, the war has removed some of the mystery surrounding the argument that non-military means and methods had gained a pivotal importance in Russian military thought. On the contrary, the recent war has apparently validated the expectation of decisiveness of military means in Russian strategic thinking. Considering Russia's military interventions in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine, it can thus be concluded that contemporary Russian war theory ascribes the utmost importance to military means and methods.

Since the early 20th century, forecasting war's future character has been a central theme of Russian strategic thinking. In this context, contemporary Russian war theory has acknowledged the rising importance of non-military means and methods. From the perspective of the debates of the early 2000s within the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, non-military power would grow in future importance for the conduct of war. Nevertheless, their decisiveness and capability to be the primary means of war have been extensively questioned by the Russian High Command. According to prevailing view, non-military means have affected war's character but armed struggle has remained to be main typical features of any war.¹ Non-military means are employed to weaken the enemy before military operations. Only then could non-military means be recognised as an instrument of war given that they would be imbued with specific and measurable violence.²

The Russo-Ukrainian war has showcased Russian High Command's violent-centric and direct approaches to war. Likewise, the eight years (2014-2022) of Russian covert support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine has recently been transformed into direct military involvement to achieve Moscow's political objectives. Thus, Russia's recent military involvement has refuted the Westerly argument that Russia has prioritised non-military means over military force. Nevertheless, new opinions have been introduced in the recent years to integrate non-military and methods into the doctrine in parallel with the discussions on *Russian hybrid war* (gibridnaya voyna). Therefore, this research offers important insights into understanding how military and non-military means and methods have been conceptualised in Russian thinking about modern warfare and how they are still practiced today. Indeed, recent events fit in a longer pattern rather than indicating a rupture.

¹ M.A. Gareyev, "Certain Typical Features of Future Wars", *Military Thought* 12:2 (March 2003):188.

² V.V. Serebryannikov, "On the Notion of War", *Military Thought* 13:4, (October 2004):177.

Secondly, the Russo-Ukrainian war has provided an indication of understanding continuity in Russian strategic thinking. This war has indicated the Russian military's longstanding obsession of *attaining war objectives at the initial phase with a peacetime and combat ready force*. This tendency has also been visible in the Crimean intervention in February-March 2014 where Russian troops swiftly took control of the peninsula in less than a week. Between February 2014 and February 2022, the Russian military's involvement in the Donbas region was indirect, relied heavily on backing and empowering Russian-backed separatists by military and political assistance. During the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Russian military campaign has initially aimed at swiftly enveloping Ukraine forces from the north (Belarus-Kiev axis) and the south (Crimea-Donetsk axis) and consolidating Russian control in the Donbas region (i.e. Kharkiv and Kramatorsk). Demonstrating the linkage with the past, Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine began in February 2022 by standing combat ready forces, without war-time mobilization.³

In February and March 2022, however, the Russian military has taken significant losses in the first phase of the war and has been largely exhausted in terms of manpower availability due to strong Ukraine resistance.⁴ As a result, Russia has faced major difficulties with sustaining its military effort and experienced difficulty in force generation in the long run, or preserving gains.⁵ Subsequently the war has gained a protracted character. This change demonstrates the validity of long-established dichotomy in Russian military thinking between the war of attrition (*izmor*) and annihilation (*sokrushenie*) since the late 19th century. Demonstrating continuity, the strategy of attaining war objectives at the initial phase by surprise has always become the Russian military's first strategic option. In the case of failure, the Russian strategy aims at saving time for a nation-wide mobilisation for a war of attrition.

After an initial period of success, the Russian military has under-performed in the Russo-Ukrainian war to date. This is partly attributed to the Russian military's longstanding tendency to compensate for its shortcomings in technology with increased combat readiness, manpower, surprise and willingness to suffer. Through increased combat readiness, the Russian General Staff has traditionally sought to

³ Andrew Osborn and Polina Nikolskaya, "Russia's Putin authorises 'special military operation' against Ukraine," Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/> (accessed 19 June 2022)

⁴ Micheal Kofman, Tweets [Russian military operations in Ukraine], 12 May 2022. <https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael/status/1524821199590653956> (accessed 26 May 2022)

⁵ Micheal Kofman, Tweets [Russian military operations in Ukraine], 25 May 2022. <https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael/status/1529475235359207426> (accessed 27 May 2022)

multiply the troops' fighting potential and ensure superiority over the enemy at the beginning of war since late 19th century. This historical continuity has also been visible so far as an important strategic driver of the Russian military campaign in Ukraine. The Russian military's initial superiority in correlation of forces (against Ukrainian forces) enabled it to control additional territory in Kiev, north of Crimea and Donbas. In addition to that, the Russian military's possession of supremacy in artillery systems and ammunition has allowed it to trap some Ukrainian troops in a war of artillery.⁶ Consequently, the surprise and readiness factors have won the Russian military about %20 percent of Ukrainian territory at the moment of writing. In response, the Ukraine army has balanced the front with the help of a nation-wide mobilisation, moral superiority, resilience and the deployment of Western military equipment and international support.

Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine has revealed the continuity of past ideas in Russia's new approaches to warfare. It has highlighted Russian General Staff's longstanding inclination to design war strategies based on the military conceptual ideas of the past. Despite a series of political and strategic ruptures over the 20th century, the conceptual frameworks of Russian strategic culture have remained remarkably consistent and feed into the development of new military thinking. Therefore, exploring military conceptual resilience is key to investigate Russia's modern approaches to waging war. This research therefore is designed to generate fresh insights into understanding the conceptual resilience in Russian military thought from a historical standpoint.

The observations of this war can only provide us with a snapshot of how the Russian military carries out war in particular circumstances. This thesis offers a necessary historical approach and context to investigate the roots of Russian military thought. A careful understanding of the conceptual evolution of Russian strategic thinking is needed to map out the Russian military system of thought and its employment in different circumstances in the battlefield.

This research has aimed to achieve this objective through understanding key concepts of Russian strategic culture. The war in Ukraine has indicated that time-tested military

⁶ Ryan Evans and Micheal Kofman, "Counter attacks and Can-kicking in the Russo-Ukrainian War," War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/counter-attacks-and-can-kicking-in-the-russo-ukrainian-war/> and Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment: 10 June," ISW, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-10> (both accessed 26 June 2022)

concepts and principles have secured their functionality and strategic relevance in the Russian military's modern approaches to war. Battle-proven concepts of the 20th century have continued to shape Russian military strategies. In Russian military thinking observing them should lead to a victory, avoiding them would be accompanied by military failure. As a result, time-tested concepts have remained strategically relevant and even assumed increasingly essential functions in strategic debates among Russian military thinkers up until this day.

My observations about the Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrate the contemporary value and relevance of researching conceptual evolution of Russian military thinking. These observations should enable more and better historically informed analyses of Russian military thinking and its application in Russian military practice. Therefore, this research provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of how fundamental military concepts of Russian strategic culture which shape Russia's strategic thinking.

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