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Chapter-3

The Rise and Evolution of Fundamental Military Concepts in the Late Imperial Russian Military Thought: 1856-1917

This chapter explores the birth and evolution of fundamental military concepts in the Imperial Russian Army between 1856 and 1917. The research scrutinizes the principles of Genrikh Antonovich Leer (1829-1904) and his inheritor Nicolai Petrovich Mikhnevich (1849-1927) by shedding light on the impact of their fundamental military principles and concepts on Russian military thought. This study also investigates whether fundamental principles influenced various Russian strategies. Therefore, the research examines Russian war planning against Prussia, the Ottoman Empire (in the 1870s), and Germany (in the 1910s) as part of the larger historical narrative. Fundamental military principles and their attendant concepts laid the groundwork for the Russian war strategies between the 1860s and 1910s. Overall, the research will identify two concepts: the beginning of war and combat readiness, both of which were key to Russian strategic thought during the late 19th century. Nevertheless, these concepts were de-emphasized by the Russian General Staff under the strategy of attrition prior to the First World War. While Leer ascribes decisive importance to the beginning of war and combat readiness, Mikhnevich pays scant attention these concepts. Thus, Mikhnevich privileges operational art over Leer's war-winning principles and concepts. The chapter concludes that the late Imperial Russian military thought underwent a transformation from winning wars linearly at the beginning of war to adapting itself to the conditions of conflict throughout the war.

3.1. Introduction

After the Cold War, there has been a renewed interest among the Russian Chief of General Staff on the ideas of late Imperial Russian military thinkers. With the dissolution of Soviet Union and decline of socialism's influence on military matters, Russian thinkers began seeking a new philosophy for war shaped by Imperial Russian military heritage.¹ For instance, in a seminal work entitled, *Military Strategy* Sergey Mikhaylev lists the

¹ I.N. Vorobyov and V.A. Kiselev, "The New Strategy of Indirect Approach," *Military Thought* 14:4 (October 2006): 27-36.

definitions of strategy by resorting to the ideas of Imperial Russian thinkers such as Alexander Andreyevich Svechin and Nikolai P. Mikhnevich.² Nevertheless, Mikhaylev disregards the thoughts of prominent Soviet thinkers such as Vladimir Lenin and Mikhail Frunze. As a group of Russian thinkers stated in 1994, "By rejecting the exclusive role of Marxism as the sole true teaching that explains the nature and character of war [...] we face the need to clarify the [military] scientific basis of [our] worldview, our views of war as a special societal condition."³

Even though the concepts and principles of Tsarist military heritage prevail in contemporary thinking it would be erroneous to expect a content-wise similarity, because concepts acquire new semantic contents under different socio-political and strategic contexts. Likewise, the semantic and functional use of military concepts underwent a series of transformations over time as the strategic context changed. For instance, the historical roots of the Russian military's recent "active defence strategy" (*aktivnoy oborony*) date back to the early 1900s.⁴ According to Russian Chief of General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov, this strategy aims to set several measures to pre-emptively neutralize threats to the security of the Russian state.⁵ In the early 1900s, the Imperial Russian thinkers defined this concept in a different context. Active defence strategy required the imperial Russian Army to adopt a defensive posture at the beginning of war in order to assemble forces for an effective offense during the following phases.

Even though Russian thinkers have shown an increased interest in the Imperial Russian military heritage, much less is known about how Tsarist military heritage influenced Russia's conceptualisation of modern warfare. A systematic understanding of how military principles and concepts of the late Imperial Russian period evolved over the course of time is still lacking. Therefore, this chapter offers some crucial insights into the birth and evolution of fundamental military concepts in the Imperial Russian Army between 1856 and 1917 by using conceptual history as a methodology.⁶

Late Imperial Russian military thinkers carried out several attempts to create a unified military doctrine. Especially after the Crimean defeat of 1856, the Russian military's

² Ofer Fridman, *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian art of Strategy* (London: Hurst&Company, 2021), 2.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Valeriy Gerasimov, "Strategy Speech at the Academy of Military Sciences", *Red Star (Krasnaya Zvezda)*, 2019, <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, "Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck." *Contributions* 2:1 (2006)

overconfidence regarding the outdated war practices began to disappear. As a reaction to that, the generals of the Russian Nicholas General Staff Academy, Genrikh A. Leer and his successor Nikolai P. Mikhnevich, formulated different sets of war-winning principles and concepts by applying a critical-historical methodology. According to Leer, "military critical history embodies ideas, thus assisting their understanding, it helps to avoid unqualified assumptions and systems, rescues the reader from dogmatic conclusions and teaches him to respect the role of the situation, the true potentate of war."⁷ Therefore, this methodology sought to conceptualize war by observing and analyzing great commanders' (Alexander, Hannibal, Napoleon..) historical practices in a critical manner.⁸ For Leer, "positive science is based on unchangeable laws, which are derived not from the depth of the writer's soul, but from the critical analysis of history in practice."⁹ In this regard, Leer and Mikhnevich intended to fill the persistent gap between military theory and practice in Russian military thought using a critical-historical approach. However, the principles of each thinker generated different strategic approaches and principles of war. On the one side, G.A. Leer's principles advocated for a short war of annihilation. On the other side, N.P. Mikhnevich relied on a protracted war of attrition.

3.2. The historical conditions of the late Imperial Russian Period

The Imperial Russian Army suffered a humiliating defeat against the allied armies of Britain, France, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean war of 1853-1856. As a result, Russia's sovereignty and security were threatened from the south since the Paris agreement (1856) prohibited Russia from basing warships in the Black Sea. Indeed, there were two primary reasons for the military disaster. First of all, the Russian army had overconfidence in the methods that had won a historic victory against the Napoleon Army in 1812. Secondly, the Russian army suffered from the consequences of its economic, military, and technological incapacity to wage a war against the coalition of Western armies.¹⁰ Subsequently, the military failure discredited the serf-based Russian military system. At the same time, the Crimean war unearthed a pressing need to carry out military transformation.¹¹

⁷ Fridman, p. 59.

⁸ Ibid, p. 54.

⁹ Ibid. p. 63.

¹⁰ William Fuller, "The Imperial Army," In *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 553

¹¹ *Ibid.*

A careful examination of the Crimean war would reveal the deficiencies of Russian military theory. The Russian mobilization plan relied on deploying a "980,000-man regular army with over a million newly mobilised Cossacks, militia and raw recruits."¹² However, in practice, the Imperial Army was most of the time numerically and technologically inferior to the enemy alliance at the Crimean front. At the outset of the war, the Russian military overwhelmed the Ottoman troops at the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Following the enemy alliance's intervention, the Russian army was unable to face the European powers on four different fronts – the Crimea, the Caucasus, the Baltic, and the Balkans. In return, the Russian War Command pinned down hundreds of thousands of troops to Poland, the Baltic frontier, and the Caucasus.¹³ Overall, the most decisive engagements took place on the Crimean front, whereas the distracted Russian army could only assign 100.000 troops for the defence of Crimea out of 1.9 million.¹⁴ In other words, the Imperial War Command could not achieve numerical and technological superiority at the Crimean front where the enemy allied troops concentrated most of their efforts.

The Crimean war "revealed a broad gap between military theory and practice" of fighting a European war on different fronts.¹⁵ This gap stemmed from Russian military thinkers' narrow view of waging a war of alliance. Having acknowledged this prerequisite after paying a heavy toll, the Ministry of War Dmitri Miliutin inaugurated a conceptual reform program called the "scientific study of military history and affairs."¹⁶ Following this, professors at the Nicholas Academy were encouraged to develop a unified military doctrine of commanding mass armies. This initiative became more critical when Miliutin attempted to expand the mobilization capacity of the Russian Army after he declared universal military conscription in 1874.¹⁷

¹² Ibid. p. 540.

¹³ Ibid. p. 540.

¹⁴ A.P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West From Alexander to Putin : Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 200-201.

¹⁵ Kerry Lee Hines, *Russian Military Thought: Its Evolution through War and Revolution, 1860-1918* (Washington: The George Washington University, 1998), 87.

¹⁶ P. V. Wahle, *Military Thought in Imperial Russia*. (Michigan: Indiana University, 1966), 114 and F.A. Miller, *Dmitrii Miliutin and the Reform in Russia* (Charlotte: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 40

¹⁷ Miller, p. 195.

In the West, the Prussian Army "became the envy of the world" after it won wars against Austria in 1866 and France in 1871.¹⁸ The most likely causes of these victories were the declaration of universal conscription in 1814, the setting up of a Prussian General Staff, and the industrialization that appeared on the battlefield through railways, telegraph, and the needle gun.¹⁹ Furthermore, the merge of mobilization and deployment as the inseparable parts of operational planning made a difference in Western military thought. In this regard, "the time lag between a mobilisation order and completion of deployment shrank from 2-3 months to 2-3 weeks."²⁰ As a result, the Prussian Army gained a significant advantage by deploying its forces on the battlefield before the enemy.

Prussians, on the other hand, did not seek to build a unified theory of military history.²¹ Contrary to Leer's critical-historical method, Schlieffen's form of military theory did not aim to find best historical practices. Rather, he wanted "a general outline as a teaching vehicle for practical military exercises and future war planning."²² In this regard, the Prussian Army's approach to war rested on the concepts of time and rapid mobilisation.²³ These concepts were crucial for striking a decisive blow at the enemy's centre of gravity. Indeed, the Prussian Army's theoretical basis of war date back to the teachings of Clausewitz.²⁴ In *On War*, Clausewitz states that "[t]he major battle is, therefore, to be regarded as concentrated war, as the centre of gravity of the entire conflict or campaign."²⁵ In this context, the Prussians took advantage of the industrialization to operationalize these principles successfully during the German unification wars. Next to that, Prussia's approach to mobilization was admired by the other European powers after the 1870s. Even further, Russia military thinkers closely examined Prussian military thought since "Germany, perhaps, supported by Austria, swiftly became the chief preoccupation of Russia's military leadership" in the 1860s.²⁶

¹⁸ D. Walter "A Military Revolution? Prussian Military Reforms before the Wars of German Unification," *Forsvarsstudier*, 2 (2001): 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. p.13.

²¹ David Alan Rich, *The Tsar's Colonels: Professionalism, Strategy, and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55.

²² Ibid, p. 56.

²³ Walter, p. 13.

²⁴ Richard. W Harrison, *The development of Russian-Soviet operational art, 1904-1937, and the Imperial Legacy in Soviet Military Thought* (Kings College: London, 1994), 25.

²⁵ C. V. Clausewitz, *On War*. (M. H. Paret, Ed.) (New Jersey: Princeton, 1984), 258.

²⁶ Fuller, p. 542.

The quest for developing a "Russian art of war" was the fundamental issue in 19th-century Russian strategic thinking.²⁷ Formulating war-winning principles of war shaped most of the theoretical military activity in the second half of the 19th century. Scientific positivism, the belief in the efficacious power of scientific methods, became the Russian General Staff's main method for military reform.²⁸ However, there were differing opinions about the methodology among Imperial Russian military thinkers. On the one hand, The Russian Academy School, which received its name from the professors and lecturers of the Russian Nicholas Academy, underscored "the universal nature of military art that had advanced along a single high road."²⁹ The advocates of this school argued that the Russian military should adopt the fundamental principles of universal military culture. General Genrikh Antonovich Leer (1824-1904) was the leading member of this body of opinion between the 1860s and 1900s. According to Leer, the primary purpose of this school was to develop an "[o]perational art [which] is based on the principles that cannot be violated."³⁰ Leer further argues that "[w]hile implementation of strategy and tactics indefinitely changes, their principles have always remained unchanged."³¹ Although the laws and principles of war were unchanging, their application differed infinitely according to situation.³² Therefore, Leer aimed to discover eternal and immutable principles of war by examining the best practices of the great commanders. In his book, entitled *The Method of Military Science* (1894), Leer credits Napoleon's military achievements to the proper application of the "principle of concentration of force" as the essential element of manoeuvring forces to the decisive point for the war of annihilation.³³ In the same vein, Leer analyzes Clausewitz and underscores the significance of his principles such as "the extreme exertion [of force]", "concentration of force at the decisive time and point", and "not to lose time".³⁴

On the other hand, the Russian national school disagreed with the academic school about borrowing a military theory from the West. The adherents of this school argued that examining the "distinctive Russian art of war" of the 16th and 17th centuries could

²⁷ Walter, Pintner, "Russian Military Thought: The Western Model and the Shadow of Suvorov," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* ed. P. Paret. (New Jersey: Princeton, 1986), 354.

²⁸ Rich, p. 45.

²⁹ Hines, p. 236.

³⁰ Genrikh Antonovich Leer, *The Method of Military Science: Strategy, Tactic and Military History* (St. Petersburg, 1894), 46

³¹ Fridman, p. 40.

³² Ibid, p. 33.

³³ Leer, p. 45.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 49.

help advance Russian military science.³⁵ This group supported the idea of a unified military doctrine; however, one "that was uniquely Russian".³⁶ Apart from these, a small but influential group, *the young Turks*, argued that future warfare would be different from the past and the "Russian army's doctrine had to be derived from the application of reason to the study of warfare."³⁷ Overall, while the academic and national schools used history as a starting point to conceptualize warfare, the young Turks focused mainly on modern warfare.

3.3. Conceptualization of warfare between the 1860s and 1890s

3.3.1. General Genrikh Antonovich Leer (1829-1904) and his concepts, *preparatory operations* and *combat readiness*

General G.A. Leer dominated the discussion on military theory and strategy between the 1860s and early 1900s. Leer spent much of his career at the Nicholas Academy as the instructor of military tactics, strategy, and history. Afterwards, Leer became the commandant of the Academy between 1898 and 1904. His books, *Positive Strategy* (1877) and *The methods of Military Science* (1894), had a profound impact on Imperial staff officers. Indeed, Leer relied on the opinions of Swiss strategist Henry Jomini (1779-1869) who served in the Russian Army after 1807. By embracing a positivist methodology with respect to military matters, Jomini stressed the importance of military principles. In this regard, Jomini emphasized that "methods change but principles are unchanging."³⁸ Jomini further argued that strategy "may indeed be regulated by fixed laws resembling those of the positive sciences."³⁹ Therefore, Jomini applied positivism to military matters by treating them as military science. Like other sciences, military science sought to discover the eternal and unconditional laws of war.⁴⁰ Akin to Jomini, Leer concentrated on formulating a systematic code of laws forming the basis of the art of the conduct of war.⁴¹ In this context, Leer sought to separate past practices from historical conditions and to apply them to Imperial Russian military thought. According to Leer, "what is new in war is nothing more than that (that?) has been frequently

³⁵ Wahlde, p. 115

³⁶ Hines, p. 384.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ K. Booth, "History or Logic as Approaches to Strategy," *Rusi* 117 (1972): 39.

³⁹ Jomini, 1838, quoted in T. Waldman, "Clausewitz and the Study of War," *Defence Studies* (2012) 345-374: 348.

⁴⁰ Hines, p.91.

⁴¹ Leer, 1877 quoted in Hines, p. 100.

forgotten." ⁴² On the other hand, Leer stressed the importance of operational art and changing conditions of war. He argues that "[m]ilitary art, like other art, is based on unchanging laws, whose application varies infinitely depending on the constantly changing environment."⁴³ Therefore, Leer's theory of war encapsulated ideas that combined Jomini's military science and Clausewitz' operational art.

Leer formulated twelve principles of war while examining the practices and works of Napoleon I, Frederick the Great, Henry Lloyd, Henry Jomini, Carl Von Clausewitz, and Carl Von Dekker. ⁴⁴ Some of Leer's principles served the purpose of unifying the actions of tactical units, and they had less strategic meaning. On the other hand, several principles influenced the formation of the Imperial Russian war strategy. In particular, *the extreme exertion of force at the beginning of war, the concentration of forces at the main point, and surprise* influenced the Russian military strategy.⁴⁵ These principles affected the course of strategic operations that Leer separated into three main phases. These are the "preparatory, main, and supplementary operations."⁴⁶ Overall, these principles functioned under Leer's strategy of choice: unleashing a war of annihilation.

Leer emphasized the significance of the superiority of force because he was an advocate of an offensive strategy. ⁴⁷ Under this strategy, the Imperial Russian Army "required numerical superiority over the enemy and terrain that allowed manoeuvre." ⁴⁸ To attain this objective, Leer developed a new principle: *the extreme exertion of force at the beginning of war*. In his book *Positive Strategy*, Leer defines the primary purpose of this principle as "to start every war (campaign and operation) not only with sufficient forces but with extreme exertion of forces."⁴⁹ By formulating this principle, Leer urged Russian military planners to prepare mobilization and war plans "without fear of appointing too many forces, with fear of assigning too few of them."⁵⁰ However, Russia's mobilization system was too backward to attain timely numerical superiority against major Western armies if the Russian army began mobilization after the declaration of war. Therefore, this principle could only be operationalized through the early deployment of the standing Russian army for a decisive war in a theater of operations.

⁴² Wahlde, p. 133.

⁴³ Fridman, p. 29.

⁴⁴ Leer, p. 53-54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Genrikh Antonovich Leer, *Positive Strategy (Part 1)* (Saint Petersburg, 1877), 6

⁴⁷ Hines, p. 106.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Leer (1894), p. 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 53.

Subsequently, Leer formulated the principle of *surprise* that demanded the timely deployment of forces. In Leer's book, entitled *the Method of Military Science*, the main objective of this principle is to "suddenly (stealthily and quickly) concentrate superior forces on the battlefield before the enemy and put them in an advantageous position."

⁵¹ Therefore, Leer sought to increase the peacetime combat readiness level of the Russian army to compensate for its backwardness in mobilization. Consequently, the standing and already mobilized Russian army could ensure superiority at *the beginning of war* against an otherwise numerically stronger but unprepared enemy. In this regard, Leer ascribed decisive importance to the beginning of war in Russian war planning. Nevertheless, military success at the outset of war hinged on the successful implementation of peacetime military activities. Leer addressed this problem by formulating *the preparatory operations* as the first phase of his strategic operations design.

The preparatory operations phase consisted of "a separate group of actions that were carried out in peacetime and without enemy interference", ⁵² activities that sought to mobilize, deploy, and concentrate troops at the main area of operations. These activities were: "organizing the army, setting up bases, gathering reserves and supplies at bases, making engineering preparation of the army in the theatre of operations..." ⁵³ Furthermore, Leer added new operational tasks to that phase, such as concentrating and deploying the army at the theater of operations.⁵⁴ According to Leer, the activities of the preparatory operations phase should be carried out with mathematical precision.⁵⁵ Supposedly, the Russian military had to decide on the force required to mass the enemy army before the war began. Nevertheless, Leer took note of probabilistic elements after the beginning of war. According to Leer, [s]ince war is not a matter of strict mathematical calculations, it turns to certain extent into a game or, more correctly, waging war is a type of probability theory."⁵⁶ Leer emphasizes that the principles of war should be employed in accordance with the situation and particular conditions of war. ⁵⁷ Therefore, preparatory operations phase provided favorable or

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 6.

⁵² Hines, p.107.

⁵³ Leer (1877), p.6.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 8.

⁵⁶ Fridman, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 72.

unfavorable initial conditions for the main operations.⁵⁸ Massing the enemy forces in a decisive point in strict accordance with the situation depended on the unconditional acts of the preparatory operations phase.

In the late 19th century, discussions within Imperial Russian military command revolved around how to mass a technologically and numerically superior enemy. Given Russia's inadequate mobilization system, it was scarcely possible for the Russians to outweigh the enemy forces if they relied on war time mobilization. Likewise, Leer highlighted that it was key to attaining numerical superiority over the enemy at the beginning of war. To address the problem of Russia's bulky mobilisation system, Leer formulated the principle of the *concentration of force at the decisive point*.⁵⁹ By this means, Leer urged military planners to concentrate the main body of force on the most important sector and use the auxiliary forces at the less critical fronts.⁶⁰ Leer's principle was based on the idea that maintaining numerical superiority at the beginning of war would require the Russian military to deploy a standing army at the most crucial sector. Leer's main objective was to catch the enemy by surprise before it carried out full mobilization. Thus, this principle would be characterized by surprise. In Leer's thinking, these principles should operate under an offensive strategy of annihilation.

3.3.2. The Impacts of Leer's ideas on Imperial Military Thought

Leer's ideas dominated the curriculum of the Russian Nicholas Academy between the 1860s and early 1900s. Among other factors, the concentration and extreme exertion of force at the beginning of war influenced the general direction of Russian military strategy. For instance, Major General Nikolayi Nikolayevich Obruchev employed Leer's principles in Russia's war plans. Obruchev was a disciple of Leer while he was the Adjunct Professor of military statistics at the Nicholas Academy in the 1860s.⁶¹ Afterwards, he became the primary assistant of the Russian Ministry of War, D. Miliutin, on military operations.⁶² Obruchev was aware of Russian inferiority in mobilization and consequent difficulties in employing Leer's extreme exertion of force during the beginning of a future war. In this regard, General Obruchev prepared a report to Tsar

⁵⁸ Leer (1877), p. 6.

⁵⁹ Hines, p. 103.

⁶⁰ Leer (1877), p. 6.

⁶¹ Rich, p. 46.

⁶² Hines, p. 68.

about the mobilization status of the Russian and Western armies in 1863. According to Obruchev's report,

"[T]he Russian Army require from fifty-four to fifty-eight days for mobilisation and concentration against Germany, while the requisite span for Germany against Russia was twenty to twenty-three days. Similarly, Russia would require sixty-three to seventy days against Austria-Hungary, while Austrians would require only thirty to thirty-three days".⁶³

It appeared that the Russian army could not overwhelm either Germany or Austria in war without peacetime early mobilisation. In conformity with Leer's teachings, General Obruchev addressed this concern by mobilizing and concentrating the army during the preparatory operations phase. Subsequently, Obruchev put the principle of concentration of force at the decisive point in place to ensure supremacy over the enemy. In this regard, Obruchev proposed the idea of concentrating the largest part of the active peacetime army in a single and decisive theater of war.⁶⁴ Following this, the officers at the Imperial General Staff revised the directives and war plans as per the ideas of Leer and his disciple, Obruchev. Among them were the mobilization plans against Prussia in the 1870s and the war plans of the Turkish campaign in 1877.

During the early 1870s, the Russian military struggled to address the issue of ensuring supremacy over an enemy coalition at the outset of war. Against this backdrop, Major General Obruchev presented to Ministry of War D. Miliutin a special report on "Thoughts on the Defence of Russia" against Prussia or Austria-Hungary, or both, in 1873.⁶⁵ This report was the product of the General Obruchev-led Military Education and Mobilization Committee that was charged with making central war planning.⁶⁶ The report suggested that the Russian army would be confronted by a coalition of troops who possessed numerical and technological superiority in the event of full mobilization. Therefore, if Russia would begin mobilization after the declaration of war, the combat readiness status of the Russian military did not promise a victory in a coalition war. Alternatively, Obruchev proposed, "the Russians might count on fleeting numerical superiority only if

⁶³ B.W. Menning, *Bayonets Before the Bullets: The Imperial Russian army 1861-1914*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 20.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 20.

⁶⁵ Menning, p. 19.

⁶⁶ W.C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914*. (Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992), 285.

they opted for a timely concentration of the largest part of their active peacetime army in a single theatre of war [German or Austrian]."⁶⁷

It is reasonable to argue that Obruchev's war plan rested on Leer's teachings on war. As the plan aimed to confront one enemy army at a time, it accorded with Leer's principle of *concentration of main forces at the decisive point*. Furthermore, the plan sought to attain numerical superiority by promptly deploying the largest part of the peacetime army. Therefore, Obruchev's war plan was based on the principle of *extreme exertion of force* at the beginning of war. Moreover, mobilizing and concentrating the Russian Army during the preparatory operation phase was vital for employing these principles in times of war. Consistent with Leer's teachings, Imperial Russian war strategy was predicated on the significance of preparatory operations phase and the beginning of war.

The principles of Leer influenced the Russian General Staff's planning for the Turkish war in the 1870s. Indeed, the Ottoman naval superiority at the Black Sea forced the Russian Chief of General Staff to base its operations on "a two-pronged land campaign" along the East and West flanks of the Black Sea.⁶⁸ Subsequently, General Obruchev envisaged a lightning offensive campaign aimed directly at the Ottoman Empire's heart, Constantinople on the western flank, while tying down the Turkish forces in the Caucasus theatre on the eastern flank.⁶⁹ (See Map-1) This lightning campaign against a weak enemy was carried out in consonance with Leer's principle of extreme exertion of force at the beginning of war. To achieve this objective, the Imperial Army conducted two partial pre-war mobilizations in November 1876 and in April 1877 at the *preparatory operations* phase.⁷⁰ Under the strategy of lightning war, the Imperial Russian War command predicted that the war would take only several months. However, the war endured 47 weeks because neither of the Russian mobilizations was capable of quickly breaking the Ottoman Empire's entrenched defence lines that were reinforced by Prussian-made field artillery.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 280-288.

⁶⁸ Menning, p. 52.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 54-55.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 53

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 54.



Map-1: Russian General Staff War Planning before the Russo-Turkish War (1877) ⁷²

Obruchev's strategy won Russia a slow victory. It took the troops of the Imperial Russian Army almost one year to approach Constantinople. Generally, the Turkish campaign proved how Leer's principles functioned in wartime against a single enemy. Contrary to expectations, overreliance on preparatory operations did not attain the objectives of the strategy of annihilation. The Russian Army could not gain an easy and quick victory against the Ottoman army even though Russia had launched mobilization one year ahead of the war. This was mostly because Leer's principle of achieving success at the beginning of war focused too much on numerical superiority and time. The war planning did not pay attention to the inadequate railroad and telegraph infrastructure, slow war-time mobilization, and ineffective command and control.⁷³ Even more importantly, Obruchev did not take note of the Ottoman Empire's war strategy, moral spirit, and technological superiority in artillery support. Generally, the evidence reviewed here suggests that the Russo-Turkish war unfolded the deficiencies of Leer's teachings on war. The critics of Leer attempted to fulfil this gap in the upcoming period.

3.4. Conceptualization of warfare between the 1900s and 1917

Leer's principles were subjected to repeated questioning in the 1900s due to his emphasis on preparatory operations and the decisiveness of the beginning of war. Furthermore, Clausewitz's "post-Enlightenment tradition of writing on war"

⁷² Menning, p. 54-55

⁷³ Ibid. p. 84.

disseminated across various schools of the Russian military.⁷⁴ While the criticisms came to light after the Russian army's demanding victory at the Turkish front in 1878, they became more widespread after the Manchurian defeat of 1905. Since these wars unfolded the insufficiencies of Leer's principles, the attempts to improve the Imperial military doctrine became more widespread. However, the legacy of Leer continued until he resigned from the command of the Nicholas Academy in 1904. Only then did the dissidents from the Russian national school, academic school, and the young Turks make several attempts to revise and replace Leer's principles.

On the one hand, the Russian national school rejected the Western principles of war, arguing that analyzing the typical Russian art of war of the 16th and 17th centuries could help improve Russian military science.⁷⁵ On the other, some voices among the proponents of the academic school ran counter to Leer's emphasis on unconditionality.⁷⁶ Even though Leer tried to take note of the distinctness of the circumstances of every situation, he prioritized numerical superiority and time over technology, infrastructure, and moral spirit. Therefore, Leer's attempt to combine eternal fundamental military principles (positivism) with the conditions of war (operational art) did not bring the expected results. Apart from these two groups, the young Turks analyzed methods and means of fighting a modern war instead of conceptualizing war using a critical-historical approach.⁷⁷ In this regard, the young Turks re-examined Jomini's positivist approach to war and embraced Clausewitz's post-Enlightenment tradition of war. Indeed, Clausewitz rejected the formulation of purely scientific principles of war since they represented linearity and selectivity.⁷⁸ For Clausewitz, war involves the interaction of science through fixed values and operational art, whose object is a creative ability that is not susceptible to law-like formulas.⁷⁹ Therefore, post-Leer Russian military thought underwent a transformation by considering operational art, non-linearity, and the conditions of warfare.⁸⁰

General N.P. Mikhnevich, Leer's successor at the Nicholas Academy, revised Leer's principles while still adhering to Leer's critical-historical methodology. Therefore, Mikhnevich did not entirely reject the prominence of fundamental military principles in

⁷⁴ H. Strachan "Strategy in theory; strategy in practice," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42:2 (2019):181.

⁷⁵ Wahlde, p. 115

⁷⁶ Nikolai Petrovich Mikhnevich, *The Basics of Strategy (Osnoviy Strategii)* (Saint Petersburg, 1913), 24.

⁷⁷ Menning, p. 211-212.

⁷⁸ T. Waldman "Clausewitz and the Study of War," *Defence Studies* 12:3 (2012): 348.

⁷⁹ Waldman, p. 356.

⁸⁰ Menning, pp. 208-214.

Russian strategic thought. Rather, Mikhnevich developed new principles that integrated spiritual, economic, and technological factors into war planning.⁸¹ According to Mikhnevich, "it is wrong to assess only the physical size of the opponent's military, as the moral characteristics of the soldiers and their commanders, the resourcefulness of the high command, training and quality of weaponry-all these should be taken into consideration as well."⁸² Furthermore, Mikhnevich opposed the prioritization of material and linear factors on war planning. In this regard, Mikhnevich argued that "victory today depends on economic development and moral superiority, not on numbers and energy."⁸³ Therefore, Mikhnevich's approach to war privileged qualitative variables of war over Leer's quantitative criteria. Mikhnevich's understanding of superiority was determined not only by the physical size of military forces at the beginning of war but by a combination of moral, technological, intellectual, and technological factors.

The young Turks disapproved of Leer's and Mikhnevich's overreliance on military principles. According to this body of opinion, while military principles were useful in designing war plans, operational art regulated the execution of military operations. For instance, one of the leading proponents of the young Turks, General Staff Officer A.A. Neznamov, advocated for Clausewitz's idea of total war. According to this notion, the Russian military had to take into account "several considerations other than purely military factors including economic, political, moral, and cultural."⁸⁴ Overall, the young Turks underscored the importance of understanding the whole complexities of battle instead of limiting them to a number of principles. Since the young Turks relied on operational art, they did not attempt to replace or redefine fundamental war principles.

Mikhnevich inherited Leer's legacy of prioritizing fundamental military principles in Russian military thought. Nevertheless, Mikhnevich defended the view that future wars changed from the brief encounter of troops to the expanded scale and scope of conflict. Thus, the employment of military principles was not qualified to guarantee an early victory since principles regulated only the beginning of war.⁸⁵ Therefore, war's general direction would be determined in accordance with the teachings of operational art.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 385.

⁸² Fridman, p. 118.

⁸³ Mikhnevich, 1911, quoted in Hines, 1998: 389.

⁸⁴ Mikhnevich, 1911 quoted in Menning, 1992:213.

⁸⁵ Hines, p. 398 and Menning, p. 133.

3.4.1. General Nicolai Petrovich Mikhnevich (1849-1927) and his ideas on preparatory operations and combat readiness

General Nikolai P. Mikhnevich was the commandant of the Nicholas Military Academy between 1904-1907. Afterwards, he was appointed as the Imperial Russian Army Chief of the Main Staff between 1911-1917. While Mikhnevich inherited Leer's legacy of military thought, his emphasis on the changing conditions of war put him at odds with Leer. In his book, entitled *the Basics of Strategy*, Mikhnevich analyzes the fundamental principles of war within the context of "the basic conditions of success."⁸⁶ Therefore, the conditions of war took precedence over military principles, according to Mikhnevich. Even though Mikhnevich formulated military principles he stressed that "the application of those principles was conditioned by the prevailing social, economic, and technological factors."⁸⁷

According to Mikhnevich, the Russian military should not rely on a war plan prepared in conformity with the principles of war. For Mikhnevich, "such a plan can be drafted only in very general terms, outlining what we want to do and what we can hope to achieve with the means that we have at our disposal..."⁸⁸ Therefore, adjusting strategy in compliance with the war's distinct conditions took precedence over employing military principles. Therefore, Mikhnevich stressed the significance of comprehending all the complexities of conflict in a long war of attrition.⁸⁹ In the context of that, Mikhnevich predicted an exhausting and weary competition where states employed all their material and moral resources before and during the course of the war. Mikhnevich claimed that the "strategy of attrition and exhaustion" was the most appropriate form of winning the war for the Imperial Russian Army.⁹⁰ Since Mikhnevich paid more attention to the military practice than theory, he introduced "the main conditions of war" as military principles.⁹¹ The principles of Mikhnevich became more influential after he was appointed as the commandant of the Nicholas Academy in 1904.

Like Leer, Mikhnevich attempted to redesign fundamental military principles in conformity with the relevance of war's conditions. In this context, Mikhnevich revisited

⁸⁶ Mikhnevich, p. 33.

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 32.

⁸⁸ Fridman, p. 113.

⁸⁹ Mikhnevich, p. 24.

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 17 and Menning, p. 210.

⁹¹ Fridman, p. 130.

Leer's principle of the extreme exertion of force at the beginning of war.⁹² For Mikhnevich, the superiority of force was key to developing a war plan. Nevertheless, Mikhnevich called into question whether the numerical superiority at a decisive point could guarantee a victory for the Russian Army at the beginning of a war.⁹³ Indeed, the idea of winning the wars with Napoleonic climactic battles fell from favor among Russian war planners. In their opinion, the industrialized states and their allies could deploy more forces to make up for the individual failures.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Mikhnevich underscored the significance of the strategic deployment before the beginning of war.⁹⁵ For him, strategic deployment through Leer's concentration of force during the preparatory operations phase would "shape [not determine] not only the whole progress of the war, but also its outcome."⁹⁶ For instance, the decision to carry out an initial offensive or temporary defensive action hinged on the mobilization processes and concentration of forces during the preparatory operations phase.⁹⁷ However, Mikhnevich's understanding of superiority of force differed from Leer's conceptualization.

Mikhnevich added qualitative criteria to the scope of the superiority of force. In contrast to Leer's overreliance on the numerical superiority and time, Mikhnevich's view of this concept was characterized by qualitative and quantitative elements. For instance, Mikhnevich attached importance to "swiftness of action" (time); however, he warned the General Staff not to forget "operational judgement".⁹⁸ For Mikhnevich, "speed of action should be distinguished from thoughtless haste."⁹⁹ Likewise, in Mikhnevich's theory of war, the superiority of force should involve numerical, technological, moral, and intellectual superiority during a long war of attrition.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Mikhnevich prioritized spiritual and moral superiority over material supremacy by paying sufficient attention to the conditions of the Russian military. In this regard, Mikhnevich formulated the principle of *the superiority of spiritual over material*.¹⁰¹

⁹² Mikhnevich, p. 17, 22, 33.

⁹³ Harrison, p. 59-61.

⁹⁴ Menning, p. 208.

⁹⁵ Fridman, p.118.

⁹⁶ Fridman, p. 119.

⁹⁷ Ibid.p. 114.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 134.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Mikhnevich, p. 24.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Mikhnevich emphasized that "the superiority of force is not only determined by numerical but also by the spiritual (moral) superiority over the enemy."¹⁰² According to Mikhnevich, the population's resilience and the combat spirit of the army could promise a "persistent moral superiority" against the enemy, who had advanced firepower and technology.¹⁰³ According to Mikhnevich, the Russian population and military had a stronger willpower and energy than more civilised nations. In this regard, Russia's level of endurance would be a strategically and tactically important coefficient in a future war against Western states.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Mikhnevich designated the "art of high command" as another non-material factor that influenced his war theory.¹⁰⁵

Finally, Mikhnevich embraced Leer's idea that "victory depends on the use of force."¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Mikhnevich did not believe that concentration of force before the beginning of war could promise a victory for the Russian military. For Mikhnevich, the Russian military could only secure the best chance of success if the commander selected the decisive place and time for concentration.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, Mikhnevich associated this principle with wartime operational judgement instead of peacetime war planning. Mikhnevich concluded that operational art through the use of march and manoeuvre should aim "to concentrate forces at the decisive time and place".¹⁰⁸ According to Mikhnevich the art of high command took precedence over the linear use of force.

3.4.2. The Impact of Mikhnevich's ideas on Russian Military Strategy

In the 1900s, Mikhnevich used his fundamental principles to judge whether Russia's conditions were suited to unleash a short war of annihilation or a protracted war of attrition. Mikhnevich concluded that carrying out a protracted war was more suitable for Russia's conditions. Influential members of the young Turks, such as General Staff officer A.A. Neznamov and the lecturer of Nicholas Academy, A.A. Gulevich, also embraced this strategy. For Neznamov, "modern war would no longer be decided by the outcome of single engagements."¹⁰⁹ Akin to Mikhnevich, Neznamov paid serious attention to the influence of economy, politics, morale, and culture in war strategy in

¹⁰² Mikhnevich, p. 22.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 17.

¹⁰⁴ Fridman, pp.115-116.

¹⁰⁵ Mikhnevich. 24.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Fridman, p. 132.

¹⁰⁸ Mikhnevich, p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ Menning, p. 212.

the context of the nation in arms.¹¹⁰ Therefore, Mikhnevich and his disciples arrived at a consensus about the appropriateness of the attrition strategy. In this regard, the Russian General Staff modified war plans previously designed according to the attainment of numerical superiority at the beginning of war.

General Staff officers Major General M.V Aleksev and Colonel S. Dobrorol'skii reviewed Russian war plans in 1906 in light of Mikhnevich's teachings on war.¹¹¹ Having presented the Triple Alliance (Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Romania) as the more severe threat, Aleksev and Dobrorol'skii concluded that "Russian forces could no longer accomplish their strategic concentration forward in the border regions [at the beginning of war] and must instead complete their assembly within Imperial territory."¹¹² In contrast to the Russian Chief of General Staff's old operational design that had dealt a decisive blow at the beginning of war, new planning represented a shift in Russian military strategy from offence to defence. According to the new plan, the defensive posture at the beginning of a war permitted the Russian army to assemble forces under secure circumstances. Following this, the new planning facilitated Russian forces' "transfer to the offensive and rapid closure with the enemy upon completion of their concentration"¹¹³ This strategy was entitled "active defence" in 1910. Active defence strategy required the imperial Russian Army to adopt a defensive posture at the beginning of war in order to assemble forces for an effective offense during the following phases.

Under the active defence strategy, the Russian military planned to deploy seven armies in depth against a possible German offensive. However, Russian General Staff altered this strategy in 1912 when Russia's ally, France, urged Russia to unleash an offensive against Germany during the initial phases of the war (between M+15 and M+30*).¹¹⁴ Following this, the Russian war strategy relied on carrying out offence at the beginning of a war. By this means, the Russian military sought to overrun German forces in its territory. Contrary to Mikhnevich's vision of war, the Russian war plan (Schedule 19-A) "mobilized and deployed the Russian army for *sokrushenie* [a short war of annihilation] but left it with time-space anomalies that would inexorably lead to *izmor* [a protracted war of attrition]."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 213.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 239.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Rostunov, quoted in Menning 1992: 239.

¹¹⁴ Menning, p. 242.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 248.

* M refers to the day when mobilisation commences.

The Russian General Staff assured its French ally that after M+15 it would have a sufficiently significant superiority of force over the German and Austria-Hungarian armies. However, the Russian offensive operations against Germany commenced without completing the desired mobilization and concentration. Moreover, this plan disregarded the extent to which the rugged terrain in East Prussia could separate Russian armies.¹¹⁶ Even worse, the advance towards Austria-Hungary after M+15 did not promise a swift victory, since the Russian army did not succeed in outnumbering the Austrian forces.¹¹⁷ Therefore, when the Russian military could not attain its initial objectives, Mikhnevich's ideas on war influenced the further development of war.

3.5. On Balance: Leer's and Mikhnevich's competing ideas revisited

Leer developed a strategic culture in the Russian Army that sought to discover the eternal and unconditional principles of war and their adherent concepts. Thus, observing military principles and concepts would promise a victory, provided that their application took note of the war's conditions. In Leer's strategic design, the preparatory operations phase was more suited to employing the principle of extreme exertion of force at the beginning of war. The sole purpose of this phase was to mobilize and deploy a combat-ready army into the theater of operations. By this means, the Russian army intended to set up favorable conditions to perform the main operations. At the main operations phase, the Russian military utilized the principle of concentration of force at the decisive point to put the strategy of annihilation in practice. However, Leer's vision of military success hinged primarily on the peacetime mobilization and concentration sub phases of preparatory operations. In this regard, Leer's strategic design paid less attention to war-time conditions, operational judgement, and the probabilistic elements of war.

This approach received broad acceptance among military officers when Leer was in charge of the Academy. Nevertheless, Leer's ideas drew more criticism from his successor, General N.P. Mikhnevich and the Young Turks when he retired. According to Mikhnevich, the preparatory operations phase's tasks could be inadequate for dealing with the changing conditions of war.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, General Staff Officer A.A. Neznamov asserted that the principles of Leer did not attempt to understand all the

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 245.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 246.

¹¹⁸ Mikhnevich, p. 33.

complexities of the conflict.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, Leer's principles created a strategic culture in the Imperial Army that sought to win strategic objectives linearly at the beginning of war.

It is reasonable to argue that Mikhnevich's *superiority of force* doesn't demand the Russian army to exert excessive force at the beginning of a war. Instead of dealing a direct initial blow against the enemy, Mikhnevich sought to take advantage of the resilience of the Russian Army while creating favorable conditions for manoeuvre.¹²⁰ Furthermore, Mikhnevich did not ascribe decisive importance to the surprise. In his book, entitled *The Basics of Strategy*, Mikhnevich suggests that "time is the best ally of our [Russian] armed force and therefore it is not dangerous for us to adapt the strategy of attrition and exhaustion... at the beginning of [war] by avoiding decisive combat with the enemy on the very borders when the superiority of forces might be on his [the enemy] side." ¹²¹ Overall, Mikhnevich's superiority of force prioritizes the non-linear elements of warfare (spiritual factors and judgement) over the material aspects (weapons and technology) to attain victory. The results of this investigation show that Mikhnevich deemphasised the decisiveness of the beginning of war in Imperial Russian military thought. Instead, he prioritized resilience and operational judgement to create the proper conditions for decisive victory during the subsequent periods of war.

Leer's and Mikhnevich's diverging views promoted the beginning of a persistent debate on whether the Russian army would adopt the strategy of defence or offence before the First World War. The Imperial Army General Staff eventually decided to build the war planning based on the strategy of a short war of annihilation. However, the Russian army failed to out-concentrate the German and Austrian troops during the initial operations. As a result, the Russian General Staff put the strategy of attrition in place. Therefore, late Imperial Russian military thought gradually evolved from winning wars linearly at the beginning of a war to adapting itself to the conditions of the war throughout the following periods.

Finally, one of the significant findings to emerge from this study is that the late Imperial Russian military thought echoed the broader Western debates regarding the treatment of war as a positivist science or operational art at the turn of the 19th century. On the

¹¹⁹ Menning, p. 213.

¹²⁰ Ibid. p. 33.

¹²¹ Mikhnevich, p. 17.

one hand, Leer prioritized positivism over operational art, treating war with law-like military principles. On the other, Mikhnevich and Neznamov relied on Clausewitz's post-Enlightenment idea of defining war as an interaction between science and operational art, arguing that the complexities of conflict demand a thorough analysis of wartime conditions in tandem with and, if necessary, in place of military principles. Therefore, the attempts to create a Russian art of war during this period mirrored the broader Western discussions on war theory. Yet, taken as a whole, the Imperial Russian military thinking was not highly innovative since the military intellectual debates revolved around accurate assessments of what the Russian military could do in the given circumstances.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to investigate the birth and evolution of fundamental military principles in Imperial Russian military thought. Overall, this chapter has identified that Leer and Mikhnevich formulated a different set of military principles to fill the gap between Imperial Russian military theory and practice. The research reveals that these principles laid the groundwork for Russian military strategies between 1856 and 1917. Against that backdrop, Leer's ideas established a strategic culture in the Imperial Army that sought to win strategic objectives at the beginning of a war. Therefore, preparatory operations were vital to mobilizing and deploying the Russian army before the beginning of major operations. Since Leer was an advocate of a short war of annihilation, the military supremacy relied on the mobilization and concentration of the army during the preparatory operation phase. Therefore, Leer's war theory highlights the significance of preparatory operations and disregards the relevance of operational art during the course of the war.

The second concept that emerged during this period is combat readiness. Leer advocated for a peacetime combat readiness which involved the mobilization and concentration of troops during the preparatory operations phase. By this means, Leer intended to create a standing army to ensure superiority over the enemy at the beginning of war. This concept was vital for achieving the goals of the annihilation strategy. The research has found that military supremacy during the preparatory operations hinged on the peacetime combat readiness of the Imperial Russian Army. Therefore, preparatory operations were inextricably linked with combat readiness. These concepts operated differently under various military strategies.

Leer's principles and concepts were the essential components of the strategy of annihilation. Nevertheless, Leer's war theory was revisited when Mikhnevich advocated for the strategy of attrition in the early 1900s. Mikhnevich aimed to form a strategic culture in the Russian Army that sought to attain qualitative and quantitative superiority over the enemy throughout the war, not during the preparatory operations phase. Therefore, this approach paid scant attention to the decisiveness Leer ascribed to the beginning of a war and to combat readiness. According to Mikhnevich, the beginning of a war would buy more time for the Imperial Russian Army to carry out a decisive manoeuvre at the end.¹²² In that regard, meeting the mobilization requirements of a long war of attrition replaced Leer's peacetime combat readiness of winning a short war of annihilation.

In Mikhnevich's war theory, the strategic relevance of the beginning of war and combat readiness changed from essential to merely common under the strategy of attrition, because that strategy did not rely on ensuring superiority over the enemy at the beginning of war. Even though Mikhnevich employed these concepts in his war theory, he deemphasized the strategic relevance of them. Nevertheless, the Imperial Russian General Staff decided to ground its war planning on Leer's concepts in the mid-1910s, albeit with no success. Therefore, the beginning of war and combat readiness remained essential to achieving the Imperial Russian Army war objectives. Leer's and Mikhnevich's ideas were delivered to subsequent generations as part of Imperial Russia's legacy left for the Soviets.

In the next chapter, the study seeks to understand the extent to which Russian war theory developed new concepts or revised the existing ones' semantic content under Soviet military science. In conjunction with this, it seeks to analyze the impact of Soviet military science on Leer's *preparatory operations* and *combat readiness*. By this means, this study aims to look at how these concepts evolved, whether they disappeared or gained a new semantic character. Finally, this study intends to explore the ways in which these two concepts interact with new concepts of Soviet military science.

¹²² Mikhnevich, p. 33.