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

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Chapter-8

Conclusion

8.1. The summary of main findings

This research sets out to investigate the historical origins of Russia's conceptualization of modern warfare. Thereby, the specific objective of the study has been to examine the continuity of fundamental military concepts in Russian military thought between 1856 and 2010. In the framework of that, this study has made use of the military history of ideas to trace the conceptual evolution of fundamental military concepts through different socio-political and strategic contexts. The study has concluded that fundamental military concepts that arose during the late 19th and early 20th centuries remained unaltered in Russia's conceptualization of modern warfare. This finding contradicts one of the core premises of conceptual history: the linguistic reflections of concepts feel the pressure of change when social and political structures break up.¹ Therefore, socio-political and strategic ruptures are expected to cause a conceptual shift in Russian military thinking. To that end, this research has offered additional insights into the Western literature by discovering the roots of conceptual resilience in Russian military thought.

This study has analysed conceptual resilience with three key themes: the history of ideas, strategic relevance, and system of concepts. Firstly, the research has built a causal relationship between concepts' continuity and strategic relevance. Therefore, the results of this investigation have demonstrated that fundamental military concepts tend to become strategically essential by updating their semantic content through changing socio-political and strategic contexts. Likewise, fundamental military concepts showed an unchangeable and eternal tendency in terms of etymological forms; however, their content and semantic use constantly changed under the varying historical contexts. Secondly, fundamental military concepts privileged continuity over change on the condition that they fit together into a whole system of concepts. Thus, the vertical and horizontal linkages among fundamental military concepts constituted a system of thinking that laid the theoretical framework for Russian military doctrine. As a result, the research has demonstrated that a high degree of interrelation among fundamental

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, "Social History and Conceptual History", *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society* 2:3 (1989), 308

military concepts stimulated continuity. The third major finding is that the enduring relevance of concepts and their development into a system of thinking fostered conceptual resilience in Russian strategic thinking.

8.2. An analysis of the research findings within the broader context of Russian and Western military thought

Overall, this study has strengthened the idea that the Russian General Staff treated military matters as military science instead of as operational art. This preference could not be isolated from the general Western debate between Henri Jomini and Carl V. Clausewitz on developing a war theory. On the one side, Jomini defined war as a science. Thus, he laid the belief that there were immutable and universal principles that governed war.² According to this opinion, fundamental military principles should be interpreted as rules and regulations that could explain a war's outcome.³ While observing these principles would lead to a victory, avoiding them would be accompanied by military failure.⁴ Jomini's theory of war inspired late Imperial Russian military thinkers such as Genrikh Leer and Nikolai Mikhnevich. Among others, Leer established a culture in Russian strategic thought that sought to explore war-winning principles of war and their adherent concepts based on historical experience in the late 1900s and early 20th century.

On the other side, the proponents of Clausewitzian military theory defend the argument that principles of war cannot be introduced as scientific laws. In fact, Clausewitz also identified principles of war based on historical practices. Nevertheless, he emphasized that these principles were aids for personal reflection prior to war's beginning, rather than strict guidelines for how war should be carried out.⁵ Clausewitz believed that "it was simply not possible to construct a model for the art of the war that can serve as a scaffolding on which the commander can rely on for support at any time."⁶ Therefore, Clausewitzian military theory privileges the talent and judgement of the commander, the uncertainties of war and moral and psychological factors over military principles. This school of thought marginalized the prominence of principles in Western military thought, especially after the Second World War.

² Jan Angstrom and J.J. Widen, *Contemporary Military Theory: The Dynamics of War* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 80.

³ *Ibid.* p. 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 87.

After 1945, principles remained present in Western military doctrines; however, their aptitude for explaining war's outcome was widely questioned by thinkers such as John Keegan and Bernard Brodie.⁷ These critics argued that a war could not be narrowed down to a formula. Instead, success should be the outcome of the commander's critical thinking and creative action within the conditionality of the mission.⁸ After the Cold War, the number of principles mentioned in Western military publications has been limited. Nevertheless, they have not entirely disappeared from Western military doctrine. This is mainly because the tradition of training a greater number of soldiers and officers since the First World War required systematic codification of the simple principles of war. Nevertheless, their use has been kept in an ideal form. Despite the ongoing debate, it has been widely accepted that principles and concepts of war could help to the commander in making decisions.⁹ To that end, the most prevalent principles of Western military thought are purpose, initiative, flexibility, the concentration of force, economy of force, maneuver, surprise, security, simplicity, unity, morale, and time.¹⁰

In the Russian military, the positivist approach exerted more influence on military matters. Even though the principles of war gradually lost their influence in the Western militaries after the Second World War, Soviet military began codifying them after the 1940s.¹¹ Following the order of Stalin, permanently operating factors (POFs) were formally accepted as war-winning principles of war. After the death of Stalin, POF's were replaced by the principles of the art of war.¹² Against this background, the systematic institutionalization and codification of laws and principles of war took place during the Cold War. In the 1970s, for instance, the first law of war of the Soviet military science was that:

"the course and outcome of war waged with unlimited employment of all means of conflict are determined by the correlation of strictly military forces available to combatants at the beginning of the war, especially in nuclear weapons and means for delivery."¹³

⁷ Ibid. p. 90.

⁸ John I. Alger, *The Quest For Victory: The History the Principles of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 154.

⁹ Angstrom and Widen, p. 91.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 82-86.

¹¹ Ibid.p. 82.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Vasiliy Yefisovich Savkin, *The Basic Principles of Operational Art and Tactics* (Moscow: The Ministry of Defence of the Soviet Union, 1972) Published by (Washington: United States Air Force, 1972), 65.

The Soviet military theory did not present commanders with a toolbox of principles and laws to be employed in wartime. Instead, Soviet military science relied on the strict application of these principles.¹⁴ Even though the Soviet theory of war came to an end after the 1990s, military matters have been analysed within the context of military science and its essential military principles and laws of war.¹⁵

After the 2000s, the notion that modern Western military theory considerably lags behind its military practice has gained ground in the Russian military. Russian military thinkers have argued that military science has lost its importance in the Western armies primarily due to rapidly changing technology, the use of new weapon systems and military reform processes. The Russian military, on the other hand, has lagged behind in military technological developments (i.e. computer and information technology); however, it has secured the significance attached to military science and its underlying principles in Russian military theory, such as the necessity of a surge in combat readiness during the initial period of war or forecasting the character of a future war. Therefore, the “qualitative improvement of the foundations of military science and intensifications of its methodological approaches and methods of cognizing warfare” has continued to occupy center stage in Russian military thinking.¹⁶ In 2005, Yu.P. Gladyshev and G.V. Ivanov presented Russian military science as an “integral and noncontradictory system of knowledge in ways and means of preventing wars and military conflicts...the laws and regularities of warfare.”¹⁷ In this regard, Gladyshev and Ivanov have pointed out that the evolution of Russian military science could offer compelling solutions to the deep gap between Russian military theory and practice.¹⁸ Towards that end, the principles and concepts developed by past great thinkers (i.e. Leer, Svechin, Isserson, and Lenin...) have formed the baseline of modern Russian military theory.

Against this backdrop, Russian contemporary military thought has attempted to combine military science with operational art in its new conceptualization of modern warfare. Nevertheless, the Russian General Staff gave weight to the former at the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ I.N. Vorobyov and V.A. Kiselev. ‘Military Science at Present Stage.’ *Military Thought* (English Version) 17:3 (July 2008); Yu. P. Gladyshev and G.V. Ivanov, ‘Military Science and Military Systemology’, *Military Thought* (English Version) 14:4 (October 2005); Ye.V. Vasilyev, ‘Principles of Military Art,’ *Military Thought* (English Version) 14:2 (April 2005):136 and “The main principles of Combat”, Editor, *Military Thought* 11:4, (July 2002).

¹⁶ Gladyshev and Ivanov, p. 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 166.

expense of the latter. As a result, Ye. V. Vasilyev has developed the notion of “the principles of military art”, which are crucial to re-designing Russian military science.¹⁹ The principles of military art echoed Leer’s thoughts on military art. Leer argued that “[m]ilitary art, like other art, is based on unchanging laws, whose application varies infinitely depending on the constantly changing environment.”²⁰ In that regard, Vasilyev has argued that “principles of military art are in no fixed order or priority, because the importance of one or another principle can be appreciably changed under different conditions.”²¹ On the other hand, he has admitted to the ways in which Russian military thought relied on military principles and their adherent concepts. Thereby, some principles are introduced as indispensable since they have been used in theory and practice for a long time as the core elements of Russian strategic culture. Vasilyev stressed that “[t]he centuries-old history of military art has many examples where battles and campaigns were won or lost because of the inability of army or navy commanders to follow these principles [of operational art] under prevailing conditions.”²² Therefore, military principles have continued to shape Russian strategic thought even though the Russians have sought to weave operational art into strategic thinking. In that regard, Russian contemporary military theory ascribed significant importance to the principles of war and their adherent concepts.

The research has explored how Russian fundamental military concepts were positioned under Russian principles of operational art. In Russian military doctrine, the aggregates and varying combinations of concepts have become a basis for principles and laws of war. Therefore, while some of the principles of war could show similarities with western counterparts, their content is determined by varying combinations of military concepts. Thus, the content of the principles of war was entirely dependent on the Russian conceptualization of warfare. The presupposition of principles relies on how the Russian military conceptualize them. For instance, the *concentration of force or efforts* is a principle commonly used by Western and Russian militaries.²³ In Western contemporary military thought, the principle of concentration is “the ability to concentrate one’s resources in time and space to create local superiority over the opponent.”²⁴ In the Russian military, the contemporary content of this principle is “the ability to select a

¹⁹ Vasilyev, p. 136.

²⁰ Ofer Fridman, *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian art of Strategy* (London: Hurst&Company, 2021), 29.

²¹ Ibid. p. 138.

²² Ibid. p. 136.

²³ Angstrom and Widen, p. 84; Vasilyev, p. 138.

²⁴ Angstrom and Widen, p.84.

dynamic form (of massing forces and fires) that can overwhelm or 'crush' the enemy with its novelty and element of surprise."²⁵ Since the forms and methods of employing this principle change under the impact of technological developments, the content of this principle is specified through the use of military concepts. This research has discovered that concentration of force sought to ensure superiority over the enemy primarily during the initial period of war and without a need for mobilization. In this regard, concentration should be attained in a decisive place, through military means determined by forecasting the character of combat operations.²⁶ Therefore, the IPW, combat readiness, and forecasting shaped the content of the principle of concentration of force.

Another shared principle is surprise.²⁷ Western understanding of surprise creates outcomes that significantly surpass the value of the effort and material used.²⁸ According to the Russian military encyclopedia, surprise "is one of the major principles of the art of warfare and boils down to selecting time, methods, and means of struggle and to make it possible to deliver a blow when the enemy is still unprepared to rebuff it."²⁹ In this regard, this research has demonstrated that increasing combat readiness is a key to compensating for the Russian military's relative shortcomings in correlation (qualitative and quantitative) of forces. By this means, the Russian General Staff has sought to multiply the troops' fighting potential and to ensure superiority over the enemy. Thus, two key fundamental concepts, combat readiness and correlation, determined the operational meaning of the principle of surprise.

Russian military concepts reflect their particular positivistic/scientific approach to military theory. They have thereby resulted in distinct Russian concepts, which often do not have an explicit Western counterpart. Although the West obviously prefers to win its wars quickly, only the Russian military has a dedicated concept of IPW. In relation to this, the Russian preoccupation with winning wars at the opening phase has put combat readiness at the center. On the other hand, Western militaries have tended to ensure technological superiority during the entire war instead of winning the initial battles by combat ready armies. In the Russian military's conceptualization of principles, time, space, and means are more specific due to the influence of positivism on military

²⁵ "The main principles of Combat", Editor, *Military Thought* 11:4, (July 2002): 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 26.

²⁷ Angstrom and Widen, p. 85; Vasilyev, p. 139.

²⁸ Angstrom and Widen, p.85.

²⁹ "The main principles of Combat", Editor, *Military Thought* 11:4, (July 2002): 22.

matters. Observing military principles and their attendant concepts was said to lead to a victory, while avoiding them would be accompanied by military failure. In Russian military science, fundamental military concepts determine these variables. Towards that end, adhering to the military principles and concepts takes center stage in Russian military thought, while in the West operational art (in the form of judgement) takes precedence. Therefore, fundamental military concepts are crucial to forming principles of Russian military science. Thus, one of the major findings of this dissertation is that Russian military principles fit within the system structured around the fundamental concepts. In the West, technological development and operational art shape the evolution of military thinking.

The research has concluded that fundamental military concepts contribute to Russian military thought's peculiarity. Despite this finding, the contribution of fundamental military concepts to Russian strategic culture has been neglected in Western scholarship. Various combinations of fundamental military concepts have specified the content of military principles, the laws of war, and doctrine. Towards that end, the changing amalgamations of military concepts reflect how the Russian military seeks to attain the premises of any principle and laws of war under a war's specific circumstances. Therefore, the linking of military concepts to form a system of concepts has addressed the issue of integrating operational judgement into Russian military science, because the combinations of military concepts result from a thorough assessment and judgement of war's changing circumstances.

The conceptual peculiarity could create asymmetry against an enemy who employs similar military principles. For instance, this research has discovered that the Russian version of gaining superiority during the IPW shows different characteristics than the Russian perception of how the West seeks to ensure superiority in modern wars. While Russian perception of initial Western operations consisted of the decisive application of stand-off and information warfare, initial Russian operations sought to respond to emerging threats by permanent readiness general-purpose ground formations, both asymmetrically and indirectly.³⁰ Understanding conceptual peculiarity can also disambiguate scholarly confusion on hybrid warfare. Even though the concept was wrongfully associated with the Russian military's acts in the mid-2010s, deploying a combination of conventional and irregular components to the battlefield was nothing

³⁰ M.A. Gareyev, "Issues of Strategic Deterrence in Current Conditions," *Military Thought* 18:2 (April 2009):8.

new for Russian military thinking even before the concept gained popularity. However, the Russians used another concept, the *correlation of forces*. During the Cold War, constructing a strategy against an adversary required the correlation of political, economic, scientific, military, ideological, and other factors.³¹ Demonstrating the continuity, the Russian art of orchestrating conventional, nuclear, and non-military forces seeks to produce the most optimal correlation of forces during the contemporary period.³² However, Russian military planning during the late 2000s demonstrated that non-military means were planned to be used to prevent, localize and neutralize non-military threats during the preparatory operations phase.³³ If that failed, Russian military strategy relied on military power in the following phases. Therefore, the employment of military and non-military forces are sequential in Russian military thinking during the 2000s, whereas they are simultaneous in the Western misperception of Russian hybrid warfare. The distinctive conceptualization of warfare helps the Russian military create asymmetry against Western militaries. On the whole, an understanding of the content of fundamental military concepts can help academics and practitioners comprehend the peculiarity of the Russian conceptualization of modern warfare.

8.3. Final Words

Before this study, the importance of fundamental military concepts in Russian strategic thought was purely anecdotal. Moreover, numerous studies have tended to explain Russian military activities using Western concepts.³⁴ As a result, the Russian thinkers' opinions on warfare have created conceptual confusion among Western military thinkers.³⁵ Western studies have inappropriately interpreted Russia's conceptualization of modern warfare, since these attempts have not drawn attention to the meaning and relevance attached to these concepts. The most prevalent misconception is that Russian forecasts of a future war have been frequently misunderstood as the Russian approach to waging a future war.³⁶ While forecasting allows the Russians to comprehend general trends in future warfare, Russia's technological limitations as well as Russian

³¹ Thomas, Timothy, 'Thinking Like a Russian Officer', *The Foreign Military Studies Office* (April 2016), 8.

³² Dmitry Adamsky, "From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41:1-2, (2018), 47.

³³ M. A. Gareyev, "Russia's New Military Doctrine", *Military Thought* 16:2 (April 2007):5.

³⁴ Christopher Chivvis, "Understanding Russian Hybrid Warfare", *Rand* (March 2017) and Mark Galeotti "The Mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the language of threat" *Critical Studies in Security* (February 2018): 157-161 and Jonsson, Oscar and Seely, Robert "Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. 28-1, (2015): 1-22.

³⁵ Ofer Fridman. *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare' Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 113.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

leadership's mistrust of the effectiveness and justness of Western methods and means have promoted the emergence of distinct Russian strategic options. For instance, the President of the Russian Federation Academy of Military Sciences, General Makhmud Gareyev, proclaimed Western decisive air operations in the war in Yugoslavia and Iraq to be brutal and undemocratic.³⁷ Instead, responding to emerging threats by using permanent readiness general-purpose ground forces constituted the Russian military's initial operations. Similarly, recent research on reflexive control has paid insufficient attention to the Russian General Staff's internal objections to using this concept.³⁸

Therefore, this study has offered some important insights into Russian military thought by demonstrating the extent to which fundamental military concepts privileged continuity over change, predominantly over the course of the 20th century. This is an important conclusion, because today's Russian military doctrines remain secret. Looking at the past might provide us with some clues for understanding the prevailing concepts, their history, and the system of thinking of which they form a part. Furthermore, this research has attempted to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the causes of historical continuity in Russia's conceptualization of modern warfare by using *enduring relevance* and *interrelationship* as effective criteria. They provide us with a key insight exactly into this system of thinking.

The importance and originality of this study are that it explores conceptual resilience in Russian military thinking by examining in depth the history of ideas, the enduring relevance and the system of concepts. In doing so, this study has revealed the underlying reasons for conceptual continuity under the pressure of socio-political and strategic ruptures. Before this study, little was known about how concepts secure their strategic relevance under varying strategic and socio-historical contexts. This is the first study to undertake a longitudinal analysis of fundamental military concepts. Prior to this research, it was difficult to estimate how military concepts emerged, evolved, and become institutionalized in Russian strategic thought. Therefore, this is the most extensive historical study documenting a delayed onset of Russian fundamental military concepts primarily over the course of the 20th century. In that regard, the research has offered additional insights into the Western literature by classifying the concept's enduring relevance under varying military strategies.

³⁷ Gareyev (2009), p. 8.

³⁸ Albert Johan Hendrik Bouwmeester, *Krym Nash': An Analysis of Modern Russian Deception Warfare*, PhD Thesis (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2020), 38-57.

Thus, the study has discovered that the Russian General Staff secured the strategic relevance of fundamental military concepts by renewing their semantic content in new operational environments. Secondly, the present research explores, for the first time, the genealogy of concepts that refers to the degree to which the concepts have historically formed the basis for a particular system of thinking strategically. Thus, it has been understood that the interrelation among Russian fundamental military concepts promoted the continuity of a system of thinking.

The findings of this study provide a new understanding of Russia's conceptualization of modern warfare. This research strengthens the idea that Russian military thought relies on its own specific concepts. In this regard, the study has found that fundamental military concepts gave form to Russian military doctrine, organizational structure and strategy despite the socio-political ruptures and qualitative leaps in warfare between 1856 and 2010. Russian fundamental military concepts privileged continuity over change.

The findings of this research have several practical implications as they effectively inform decision-makers and first-line military practitioners on Russia's conceptualization of warfare. Firstly, fundamental military concepts provide a better understanding of Russian strategic culture. Therefore, attaining a better comprehension of Russian military strategies hinges predominantly on a genuine appreciation of the meaning and functionality of these concepts. By this means, research findings help practitioners and policymakers correctly decipher the Russian military's conceptualization of modern war. In this regard, this research contributes to addressing the issue of conceptual confusion on Russian military thought and strategy in the minds of Western academics, practitioners and decision-makers. Another practical implication is that the research findings have revealed an urgent need to avoid using Western concepts while outlining Russian military acts. By this means, the findings of this research could decrease practitioners' dependency on Western military terminology while interpreting and predicting the deeds of the Russian military. Therefore, research finding contributes to preventing decision-makers and practitioners from misinterpreting the Russian military's acts.

Several questions still remain to be answered. A full discussion of fundamental military concepts between 2010 and 2021 is beyond the scope of this study. More research is needed to determine to what extent fundamental military concepts have evolved in

Russian strategic thought after 2010. Therefore, a natural progression of this work would be to analyze the conceptual continuity, strategic relevance, and the genealogy of fundamental military concepts between 2010 and 2021. Next, further studies need to be carried out to validate whether fundamental military concepts could help to more correctly explain the perceptions of Russian hybrid warfare. Considerably more work will need to be done to investigate how fundamental military concepts operate in Russia's approaches to war in Ukraine and Syria. A further study could also assess the long-term effects of Western military ideas on the content and evolution of fundamental military concepts.