

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 17
Number 1 *Parameters* 1987

Article 3

7-4-1987

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Edward B. Atkeson

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Recommended Citation

Edward B. Atkeson, "SOVIET MILITARY THEORY: RELEVANT OR RED HERRING?," *Parameters* 17, no. 1 (1987), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1441.

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Soviet Military Theory: Relevant or Red Herring?

EDWARD B. ATKESON

An astute student of Soviet military literature once compared the reading of official writings to eating cardboard. He found it unbearably stiff, repetitious, and indigestible. He made a good point. There is probably as formidable a hurdle to following Soviet ideas in the turgid style and interminable sentences in which they are written as there is in the language barrier itself. Winston Churchill may have had this onion-like quality of the literature in mind when he described the Soviet Union as a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.

Nevertheless, as with relatives, we cannot always choose our enemies; we can only study them and attempt to understand the processes of their minds. In this article we will be looking at the serious effort the Soviets have made toward the development of a theoretical construct to underpin their fighting machine and the framework within which they organize their ideas regarding the military operational art. The military competition with the West—and with the United States in particular—is not confined to the physical dimensions of the opposing forces; there is much more to the struggle than the bean-counters might lead us to believe.

For four decades the United States and the Soviet Union have maintained huge military establishments, each with a cautionary eye toward the corresponding forces and perceived interests of the other power. However, the two systems which have evolved in the process are remarkably dissimilar, and by all appearances are designed to operate according to very different patterns. Most particularly, the military logic underlying the design and training of the respective forces is far more remarkable in its

variances than in its similarities. The enormous differences in the geographic, ideological, historical, and economic backgrounds of the two countries, apparent to the least discerning observer, are no less evident in the nations' approaches to the solutions of their perceived security requirements.

Even the terminology used in describing various concepts pertinent to each approach is different, so much so that it is difficult to discuss the two approaches in parallel without risk of injustice to one set or the other. The ethical bases for the development of the contrasting systems which the United States and the USSR represent are more than we need to get into in this essay, but we should not overlook the fact that many terms designed to convey fundamental ethical concepts—"God," "democracy," "the people"—carry different connotations in the opposing cultures. We should not be surprised that terms treating with sensitive issues, such as the military security of the respective states, should likewise convey different meanings to the different audiences.

The American attitude toward war and the military profession is heavily colored by the nation's history as a young, developing society, far from the perennial conflicts of 18th- and 19th-century Europe. While Carl von Clausewitz enjoys great esteem within the narrow readership of American military journals, and while his bust occupies a hallowed niche at the US Army War College, his notion that war is basically the pursuit of politics by other means has little coincidence with American public opinion. War and peace are mutually exclusive conditions by most American standards; the former is something which occurs at the initiation of others when all efforts to preserve the latter break down. War is popularly viewed as a chaotic condition resulting from failed policy, not as an alternative of equal legitimacy with the normal stresses and strains of international diplomacy or of domestic political give and take.

If, however, all other means for resolving issues are unsuccessful, and matters deteriorate to the point of resort to arms ("the final argument of kings"), the American ethic would have war vigorously pursued to a rapid and victorious conclusion. As General Douglas MacArthur said in his farewell address to Congress in 1951, "Once war is forced upon us, there is

Major General Edward B. Atkeson (USA Ret.) is a graduate of the US Military Academy and the US Army War College and holds an MBA from Syracuse. He served with the Strategic Studies Institute of the Army War College and later as Deputy Commandant of the College. His intelligence positions spanned a period of 25 years, culminated by assignment as National Intelligence Officer on the staff of the Director of Central Intelligence. Since retirement from the Army, he has been a consultant on national security affairs and visiting lecturer at the Defense Intelligence College.

no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory—not prolonged indecision. In war, indeed, there can be no substitute for victory.”¹ Upon attainment of this grand conclusion, the country would be expected to return to its normal status of peace and pursuit of the national pastimes: business, baseball, and the good life. In this sense, the great world wars of the 20th century are far more accurate models of American views of armed conflict than are the wars in Korea and Vietnam, where victory in the classic sense was less robustly pursued.

Soviet views are not only different, but differently derived. While they are, of course, affected by the Russian national heritage, they have not been subjected to the hammer and anvil of popular proposal and debate as is the norm in Western democracies. Instead, Soviet public opinion is essentially handed down to a compliant populace from a ruling elite. It is sufficient that the leadership interprets the national experience and adjudicates the appropriate mix of nationalist sentiment with Marxist-Leninist ideology. It is important in the socialist system that mass beliefs support the central dogma. Especially, anything as important as war and peace cannot be left to chance.

In 1915 Lenin spelled out the orthodox view of war which would govern in a socialist community once it had come into being through successful revolution. In doing so, he took the precaution of invoking the names of most of the prominent figures in the communist pantheon in order to insure the legitimacy of his words in the eyes of his fellow revolutionaries. “Applied to wars,” he wrote, “the main thesis of dialectics . . . is that ‘*war is simply the continuation of politics by other (i.e. violent) means.*’ This formula belongs to Clausewitz, . . . whose ideas were fertilized by Hegel. And this was always the standpoint of Marx and Engels, who regarded *every* war as the *continuation* of the politics of the given interested powers—and the various classes within these countries—at a given time” (emphasis in the original).²

A year later Lenin went on to proclaim the acceptability and purpose of certain types of wars for overthrowing the bourgeoisie worldwide. Not until socialism prevailed in every land, he argued, would wars disappear from the earth:

Socialists, without ceasing to be Socialists, cannot oppose any kind of war. . . . Socialists never have and never could oppose revolutionary wars. . . . [And] he who accepts the class struggle cannot fail to recognize civil wars which under any class society represent the natural, and under certain conditions, inevitable continuation of the development and aggravation of the class struggle. . . . [Further,] Socialism cannot win simultaneously *in all* countries [emphasis in the original]. It will win initially in one or several

countries, while the remainder will remain for some time, either bourgeois or pre-bourgeois. This should result not only in frictions, but also in direct striving of the bourgeoisie of other countries to smash the victorious proletariat of the socialist state. In such cases, a war on our part would be lawful and just.³

But it was not only defensive wars which might be considered "lawful and just." Lenin had already (in 1908) made it quite clear that "it is not the offensive or defensive character of the war, but the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat, or rather the interests of the international movement of the proletariat, that represent the only possible point of view [regarding the legitimacy of war]." Lenin went on to assert the need for worldwide revolution in order to do away with wars entirely. "Only after we overthrow, completely defeat, and expropriate the bourgeoisie in the entire world . . . will wars become impossible," he wrote.⁵

The doctrinal normalization of conflict, as we see here, conveys a strong connotation of obligation for the allocation of both intellectual and material resources to its management and theoretical development. The enormous growth in Soviet military power over the years, which has been amply documented elsewhere,⁶ and the extensive efforts devoted to the development of a coherent, unified theory and science of war indicate that the Soviets have taken these obligations seriously.

The Soviet philosophical effort toward an understanding of the nature of war merits special attention, not least because it has but the palest of counterparts in the West. Rather than comprising merely a number of general principles or axioms and a storehouse of historical records, the Soviet effort claims the status of a complete science with natural laws and extensive theory governing all aspects of armed conflict and national mobilization for war. A number of senior Soviet officers and theoreticians have achieved high academic rank through their research and writings in the field, and they enjoy substantial respect and prestige for their work.⁷

Soviet bookstores bulge with volumes on military history and military theory which would probably be of little interest in the West. Rather than splashy exposés of Defense Ministry mismanagement, these publications methodically document great military achievements (largely from the latter years of the Great Patriotic War) and discuss the value of Marxist-Leninist thought in solving military problems. Some 17 of these books constitute "the Officer's Library," providing the reader with officially sanctioned examinations of a broad range of military subjects, from mathematical forecasting to fundamentals of troop command and control. The Military Publishing House (Voyenizdat) publishes some 200 titles each year.

The Soviets trace the origins of their military intellectual effort to the second half of the 19th century. Marx and Engels, they believe, caused revolutionary changes in all of the social sciences (including military science) with the discovery of the materialist understanding of history. In the 20th century, the Soviets point to the great captains and prolific writers from their civil war period as the prophets of the concept of "unified military doctrine." Mikhail V. Frunze, later to become Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council of the USSR, wrote in 1921 that there had been a substantial change in the nature of wars, from comparatively small conflicts, fought largely by professional forces, to great cataclysmic events, incorporating much larger proportions of the populations of nations. He argued that the prevailing state of development of military art and science was completely unclear in this matter and that much was needed to be done in the way of conceptually unifying, integrating, and coordinating forces in order to recapture the leader's capacity for effective direction.⁹ "In a number of armies," he wrote, "this work of producing unity of thought and will is extremely complex and difficult, and it can proceed successfully only when it follows a plan and rests on clearly formulated premises and is sanctioned by the public opinion of the country's ruling class. From this it is clear what tremendous practical significance the teaching about a 'unified military doctrine' has for the entire matter of the [Soviet Socialist] Republic's military organizational development."⁹

Five years later, Marshal Mikhail N. Tukhachevskiy, the youngest officer to command an army in 1918 (at the age of 25), reinforced Frunze's argument for creation of a complete science of war. "Modern conditions," he wrote, "persistently demand that we create a science of war, which has not existed to date. Individual essays involving this issue . . . only indicated the importance of such a science and did not invest it with any specific form."¹⁰

We should note, of course, that in such a unified concept, terminology plays an important part. The Soviets have been extremely careful in the development of their theory to develop serviceable lexicons to match. As a result, Soviet strategic debates, while substantially less free-wheeling than in the West and often couched in ideological and historical analogy,

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— Lenin*

enjoy a precision which many Western writers, more comfortable with manipulative ambiguity, would find unduly constrictive. We should also note that such debates in the Soviet Union are conducted almost exclusively among the professional military rather than among a civilian elite, as is the norm in the United States and elsewhere in the West. The dominant practical effect of this in the USSR is to hold the issues within a narrower range than that to which Westerners are accustomed. Marxist-Leninist military theory, as it has evolved, is not without practical purpose. It is intended to support analysis of current problems and to provide a theoretical interpretation of the development of the armed forces. It is also intended to support attempts to foresee the future.¹¹

Soviet military science is defined as “a unified system of knowledge about preparation for and waging of war in the interests of the defense of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries against imperialist aggression.”¹² Within military science are seven major branches or disciplines: a general branch and six others covering military art, training and education, military history, administration, geography, and the technical services.¹³

The general theory of military science is the integrative branch, and contains conclusions and principles which serve as guides for study in the other branches. The Soviets believe that battles and campaigns are won or lost for identifiable reasons, and not simply by chance. They also believe that organized study, particularly of military history, reveals patterns which provide insight into objective laws regarding the nature of combat.¹⁴ The laws are not considered immutable, but subject to modification during the course of historical evolution. A law they had established regarding the relationship of strategy to tactics is a case in point. Whereas the outcome of actions at the strategic level had traditionally been considered dependent upon progress at the tactical level, the Soviets came to revise their views following introduction of nuclear weapons and long-range strike systems. In 1973, Marshal V. G. Kulikov, later to become Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact, wrote, “The dependence of strategic successes on operational results and of operational successes on tactical results has changed under these conditions. There is now the possibility of directly influencing the course and outcome of operations and of a war as a whole by using the powerful resources at the disposal of the higher headquarters. . . . By using its own resources, [the strategic leadership] can also strive to accomplish strategic missions before operational or tactical missions are accomplished.”¹⁵

One of the most important tasks of the general theory of military science is to establish the interrelationships of the various branches or disciplines which constitute the science and to identify those which are

considered key to the whole field. The theory of military art is deemed the most important component, actually comprising an entire set of disciplines itself, namely, strategy, operational art, and tactics. These three form a scale of complex areas of study in the Soviet scheme to which great effort is directed.¹⁶

There are substantial differences between the traditional US and Soviet concepts of tactics and strategy. Until very recently, the United States did not recognize the intermediate level, operational art, at all. Even today, it would appear that the two powers continue to harbor quite different notions of what each of the components comprises.

The original American construct probably came from Clausewitz, who recognized only two levels of the military art, tactics and strategy. He argued that the division of the two areas had wide acceptance, if not wide understanding. "The distinction between tactics and strategy is now almost universal," he wrote, "and everyone knows fairly well where each particular factor belongs, without clearly understanding why." He thought that there was merit in the bi-level formula, if only because it was in common usage. "Tactics," he wrote, "*teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of war*"¹⁷ (emphasis in the original).

But the American concept is broader than that. As Edward Mead Earle pointed out, "strategy . . . is not merely a concept of wartime, but is an inherent element of statecraft at all times. Only the most restricted terminology would now define strategy as the art of military command. In the present-day world, then, strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation—or a coalition of nations—including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed. The highest type of strategy—sometimes called grand strategy—is that which integrates the policies and armaments of the nation so that the resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory."¹⁸

The Soviets do not seem to have a larger concept of strategy comparable to Earle's formulation—at least not under that name. Instead, they rely on what they call their "military doctrine" to provide the basic guidance for military strategy. This is a compendium of the directives and views of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on all aspects of the activities of the state in wartime, and amounts to a statement of the political policy of the party and the government on military affairs.¹⁹

The Soviets point out key differences between military science and military doctrine. For one thing, military science is considered to be derived by analysis of objective laws, while military doctrine is based on the theoretical data of military science and the political principles of the state.

For another, military science relies on past events, while doctrine does not. Science is always subject to debate and interpretation. Doctrine never is. This does not mean that doctrine does not change. It does, but it is changed only by the highest decisionmaking body of the party—not by a process of discussion among academics.²⁰

Soviet military doctrine is considered to interact with strategy. Strategy, as theory, feeds the development of doctrine; at the same time, strategy implements doctrine and is the instrument for war plans and the preparation of the country for war. In wartime, military doctrine drops into the background somewhat, and military strategy governs the execution of armed combat.²¹ This is not to say that strategy ever supplants policy as the first consideration of the Soviet leadership. Marshal Kulikov made it quite clear that that is not the case in an article included in the “Officer’s Library” series. The article’s selection is a clear indication of its official acceptability. “Policy,” he wrote, “sets tasks for military strategy, and strategy fulfills them. Policy, in turn, takes strategic proposals into account, but policy requirements always remain supreme.”²²

Nevertheless, we should recognize the practice of quasi-militarization of the Soviet civilian leadership in wartime, a practice which places virtually everyone of significance in uniform. The close integration of military and party leadership in the Soviet system permits a high degree of flexibility in shifting from political emphasis to military emphasis. As the Soviets see it (and as MacArthur described it, paradoxically enough), the object in war is victory. This object is most expeditiously achieved when military factors are given high priority and other factors are placed in appropriate perspective.

Soviet military doctrine is unabashedly offensive. It does not call upon Soviet forces to strike the first blow (necessarily), but it does require



Courtesy, USAFMHI

“Soviet military doctrine is unabashedly offensive.”

that they act in the most offensive fashion possible to defeat the enemy once the battle is joined. It assigns the decisive role in war to nuclear missiles, but it takes a comprehensive, combined arms view of force requirements for armed conflict. Finally, the Soviets consider their military doctrine as applicable to the entire socialist community.²³ In contrast to the laborious procedures required for coordination of political-military policies in NATO, the Soviets have contrived an efficient means for coordination of the strategies of the various Warsaw Pact states. The extent to which it would actually operate in wartime (witness Romania's flirtations with self-assertiveness) is a matter of some conjecture.

In the United States we have become accustomed to a much greater degree of flexibility in the language of strategic literature than that used in the Soviet Union. The terminology is often rather freely applied to deal with whatever issues the author may have in mind. While there are recognizable differences between "strategy" and "tactics," both terms are used with sufficient elasticity to describe many aspects of problems and in various contexts. For the most part, the adjective "strategic" has come to connote for us matters of global or superpower-to-superpower scope. Insofar as weapons are concerned, the term commonly pertains to those of intercontinental range. The word "tactical," on the other hand, usually has purely intra-theater applications.

It is important to note these practices because they illustrate a prominent difficulty in communications between East and West. Clearly, the Soviets have a different perception of the proximity of threats to their territorial security than does the United States. For the Soviets, the principal protagonist may be situated on the opposite side of the globe on the North American continent, but that does not define the full extent of their "strategic" concerns. They perceive a ring of states on or near their borders which have at one time or another posed serious security threats to the homeland, and could again at some time in the future. These threats are every bit as "strategic" in the Soviet mind as any posed from the Western Hemisphere.

A prominent manifestation of this difference in definitions is the difficulty the major powers have had in achieving accords on arms control. Whereas the American instinct has been to seek a balance between weapon systems based on home territory or at sea, targeted at the opponent's homeland, the Soviet instinct has been to seek a balance between systems targeted at the opponent's territory, wherever they may be stationed. Thus while the Soviets perceive a "strategic" threat from Western Europe, including from US forward-based nuclear systems, Americans consider forces deployed in West Europe as part of a more "tactical" calculus—that of NATO's deterrent vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact.

The difference in definitions is most evident in the classification of levels of activity in military operational matters. As we have noted, the Soviets recognize three major fields under the theory of military art: strategy, operational art, and tactics. Yossef Bodansky describes the Soviet view of "strategic" matters as those which are intended to be decisive in the conflict as a whole. Those which they believe might be decisive in a campaign, he says, are referred to as "operational," and those which might affect the outcome of one or more battles as "tactical."²⁴

As a matter of normal practice, fronts (comparable to NATO army groups) and field armies are considered operational, while units of division size and smaller are deemed tactical. This construct has made sense in a historical context. Armies and fronts, numbering anywhere from 50,000 to a quarter of a million men, have certainly had the means for influencing the outcomes of campaigns. Divisions and lesser units have normally had less impact. But there are exceptions. In the case of the Operational Maneuver Group, the force size may not be larger than that of a division, but the intent of the force is to strike deeply into enemy territory to *operational depth* and to accomplish missions of *operational significance*. Thus the terminology depends upon purpose rather than size in this instance, representing an important departure from our common assumption that the Soviets define the levels of war by rigid association with particular echelons of command.

As for the necessity for development of unified military theory, Americans tend to take a more relaxed attitude than their Soviet counterparts. For the most part, they subscribe to the Clausewitzian formula that "theory should be study, not doctrine." Clausewitz argued that "theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield; just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man's intellectual development, but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life."²⁵

No honest critic of American strategic thinking would ever fault our literature for lack of imagination, conviction, or concern for maintenance of the peace. American officials and, more particularly, analysts in the private sector have shown little reluctance to investigate any significant area of pertinence to national security. If there is a weakness, it may lie in a lack of understanding of what it is that the Soviets are after with their unified theories of military art and doctrine. It is evident that the Soviets have been on the trail of a vision which is a great deal clearer to them than it is to many of us.

There are several possible explanations for this. One is that the vision draws a good bit of its value from the same wellhead from which the

Soviets draw their socialist ideology. Each writer makes substantial effort to wrap his thoughts in the saintly robes of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Whether this is simple window-dressing for legitimization's sake, or indicates a real dependency, is less clear. If one cannot have a unified theory of the art of war without embracing Hegel, so to speak, there is little reason for those in a Western democracy to worry about the lack. If, on the other hand, functional students of Clausewitz with a bias against war as a choice of early resort can develop such a unified theory in context with liberal Western beliefs, the matter may be worth addressing. If, to carry the point one step further, there is indeed practical value to be gained from the effort, then we may be seriously remiss in not pursuing it.

Another possible reason that the vision is clouded for us in the West is the earlier noted one that strategic debates in the Soviet Union are conducted among military professionals, not on the street. The participants in the USSR are members of a brotherhood which attaches importance to such matters as order, comprehensiveness, and long-range planning. Unlike the politician, or his adviser from academia, the soldier seldom comes to his appointment with a radical agenda.

Considering the civilian dominance of American strategic thought, it should not be surprising to find less inclination for structured thinking on substantive issues. Rather than treating topical matters as parts of a larger scheme of things, as might be expected among professionals, there is a tendency in the American political milieu to treat them as discrete issues to be debated, settled on their own narrow merits as soon as possible, and then forgotten until world events force them upon the public's attention once again. Esoteric relationships between issues often get short shrift on Capitol Hill. Theory without obvious and quick payoff is not normally the politician's strong suit.

Still another possible explanation is a tendency among academics to overlook the intellectual worth of efforts in the defense area, except as they can be tied to established disciplines. There are well over 150 fields of graduate study in the United States, including game management, home economics, and ornamental horticulture.²⁶ But there are precious few (if any) universities granting graduate degrees in military science. It would be difficult in such an atmosphere to develop much momentum toward construction of unified military theory.

It would strain the scope of this essay to explore the potential benefits to the US Army for its long-delayed embrace of the Soviet concept of the operational level of war. Suffice to say, they are substantial, but are likely to become evident only as the concept becomes better understood through serious thought, experiment, and practice. Modest success in this one area could be cause for yet more ambitious investigation of some of the other formulations which our potential adversary has developed. As a

young nation which has distributed its wars with remarkable impartiality over the earth's seas and continents, we will be slow, if we are wise, to dismiss the ideas of an antagonist with centuries of experience in warfare on the vast Eurasian landmass. The ultimate success of the Atlantic Alliance may depend upon our choices.

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