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# BEAR A RESEMBLANCE? RECURRENT RUSSIAN THEMES

**T**HE face of warfare has changed hugely over the last 250 years. Men on horseback have disappeared from the battlefield and been replaced by armoured vehicles; the firepower of combatants has grown hugely both in terms of efficacy and range; the scale of armies has increased, as has the scale of the wars they fight; and entire new means of waging war have developed, such as air power, rocketry, and most recently drones. But despite these changes, some factors remain the same.

Ordinary foot soldiers remain the

only means of securing control of territory, and supplying them adequately and maintaining control over their movements continue to be problems that frequently resurface. In addition, there are persisting patterns of behaviour in the armed forces of some nations that transcend generations and even entire political eras. These patterns in many respects reflect the deeply rooted cultural traits of those nations, and Russian armed forces perhaps more than those of any other nation appear to be prone to repeating such patterns in every generation.

There is a Russian proverb that

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it is better to be slapped with the truth than to be kissed with a lie. Yet a study of Russian and Soviet history suggests that failing to speak truth to power has been a recurring theme. Arguably, the same could be said of many countries, but the degree to which facts have been distorted by Russian and Soviet officials in order to please their masters is on a scale that is unique. Before the Russian Revolution, this was so widespread that it gave rise to the legend of Lieutenant Kizh – during the reign of Tsar Paul, the story went, a clerical error led to the creation of this officer. As the tsar had become aware of Kizh, it was impossible to admit

that he didn't exist. Instead, he enjoyed a dizzy rise through the ranks. When he was promoted to colonel, Tsar Paul demanded that he be brought before the imperial court so that he could honour him in person; at this point, the courtiers decided that it would be best if Kizh were to die unexpectedly.<sup>1</sup>

During the First World War, the tendency to give positive reports in order to placate superiors continued. During the first months of the war, Stavka – the Russian military headquarters – grew increasingly frustrated by the vague assurances that were received from the commanders of First and Second Armies after they had crossed the frontier into East Prussia. The consequence of this was a growing level of disconnection between the reality on the ground and the orders dispatched from Stavka. Ultimately, this contributed to the annihilation of Samsonov's Second Army at Tannenberg.

The years that followed the revolutions of 1917 were dominated by fear, particularly after Stalin's assumption of power. When the purges of all parts of Soviet society spread to the ranks of the army, officers at all levels faced additional levels of threat. The role of political commissars was enhanced, and the level of suspicion was so great that training accidents or any other setbacks were routinely treated as sabotage. The scale of the purges was such that officers were often functioning one or two levels beyond their competence and training, but to admit this was to invite arrest, imprisonment and possible execution.

As the Red Army began its painful evolution from what the American historian David Glantz described as a 'stumbling colossus' into a force capable of fighting and winning against Germany, officers at all levels began to overcome their past reluctance to deliver unwelcome reports. Indeed, the learning process would have been impossible if the old habit of submitting bland reports that accorded with the views of superiors had persisted. At the end of the war, many within the army might have expected that such plain speaking would continue, but there was a rapid reversion to old habits. To a large extent, this continued throughout the Soviet era, with officials of all kinds carefully tailoring their reports to ensure that they satisfied their superiors.

During the years of the Cold War, agents were frequently instructed to gather evidence to strengthen a pre-existing point of view. On many occasions, this led to dangerous distortions of facts and contributed greatly to the fear in Moscow in 1983 that an attack by the Western Powers was imminent.<sup>2</sup>

Soviet agents were not alone in tailoring their reports to satisfy their superiors; it was only after the end of the Cold War that there was a growing realisation of the degree to which western intelligence had overstated the threat posed by the Soviet Union. Their motivation for doing so was due to many factors, but the most significant difference was that there were many reports that contradicted the preconceptions of superior officers – such reports

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might be unwelcome, but the officials who submitted them had far less fear of the consequences of their actions.

As post-Soviet Russia turned back towards authoritarian rule, old habits resurfaced. As was the case in imperial and tsarist times, Russia was once more under the control of a leader who was intolerant of dissent and there seems to have been a rapid reversion to seeking the approval of superiors by submitting reports that confirm pre-existing views. When the history of the current conflict is written and more is known about the data and assumptions on which Russian decision-making was based, it is likely that over-optimistic reports, submitted more to gain the approval of superiors than to highlight awkward truths, will be seen to have played a major part.

The armies that faced each other across battlefields at the beginning of the 19th Century differed little from those of a century before. By contrast, the years that followed saw immense changes. Larger populations resulted in larger armies and the rapid evolution

of firepower in terms of lethality and range changed the nature of warfare. All major armies struggled with the consequent problems of command and control, and it was the chief of the Prussian – later German – general staff, Helmuth von Moltke, who best articulated a solution: “The circumstances in which an officer has to act on the basis of his own knowledge are numerous. It would be wrong to wait for orders at times when no orders can be given. But his actions are most productive when he acts within the framework of his senior commander's intent.”<sup>3</sup>

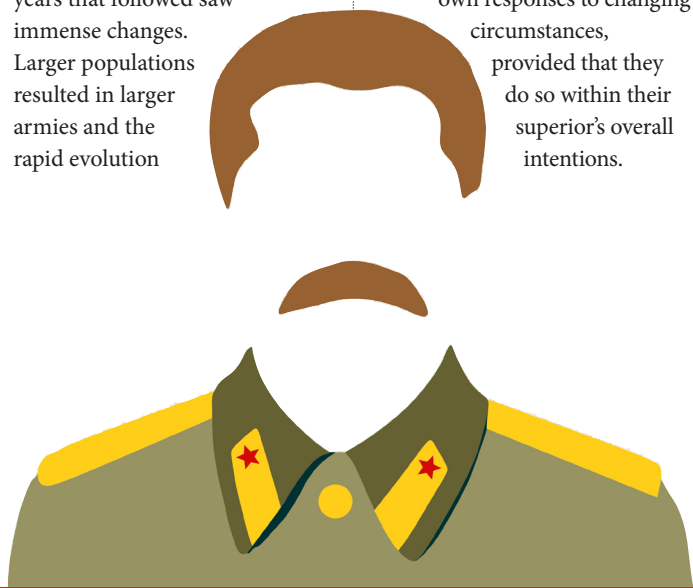
Moltke's thinking laid the foundation for what became known as *Auftragstaktik* in the German military and has been widely adopted by NATO nations as 'mission command'. This recognises that the evolution of conflict – particularly after the advent of mechanisation – results in a fast-changing environment in which strict top-down command is impossible. Therefore, junior officers need to be trained to show initiative and innovation and need to be trusted to implement their own responses to changing circumstances, provided that they do so within their superior's overall intentions.

**“THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1917 WERE DOMINATED BY FEAR, PARTICULARLY AFTER STALIN'S ASSUMPTION OF POWER.”**

<sup>1</sup>Dahl, V. 'Rasskazhi o Vremenach Pavla' in *Russkaya Starina* (St Petersburg, 1870) No. 4

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent account of this episode, see Downing, T, 1983: *The World at the Brink* (Abacus, London 2019)

<sup>3</sup>Horst, M (ed.) Moltke: *Leben und Werk in Selbstzeugnissen* (Schibli-Doppler, Birsfelden 1960) p335



Whilst many western armies were emulating the Germans in implementing such systems of command even before the First World War, such developments did not take place in the Russian Army. In August 1914, Pavel Rennenkampf led the Russian First Army across the frontier into East Prussia and ran into the German I Corps commanded by Hermann von Francois and was defeated at the Battle of Stallupönen largely because his division commanders failed to cooperate with each other. Each division attacked on its own, allowing Francois to defeat each in turn before withdrawing unmolested. If the Russian division commanders were aware of any overall plan, they showed no inclination or ability to follow the plan, and a clue in the failure lies in the fact that even for senior officers in the Russian Army of 1914, the concept of mechanical time was a novelty. It seems that each officer chose to interpret the ordered start time of the Russian attack based on his personal judgement, rather than relying on a pocket watch.<sup>4</sup> The curse of submitting inaccurate reports rather than unwelcome truths immediately surfaced: *Stavka at first only received very brief and incomplete reports of this engagement... They were limited to saying that ultimately, the Germans were forced to withdraw after losing several guns ... In reality, as one learned later, there had been serious errors in the leadership of our troops and in reconnaissance... Thus we saw on the first day of fighting, the reopening of the old wound that had long poisoned the wellbeing of our army, a tendency to dissimulate facts.*<sup>5</sup>

As the war continued, Russian commanders repeatedly showed a lack of initiative and attempted to implement rigid instructions from higher commands with



The charred remains of a Russian convoy in Bucha on April 2, 2022  
Picture: CG BY 2.0

### “INITIAL EVIDENCE FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE SUGGESTS AN ASTONISHING LACK OF COORDINATION BETWEEN [RUSSIAN] UNITS IN DIFFERENT SECTORS.”

little regard for the reality of the situation. Similar inflexibility was seen in other theatres in the First World War, but the combination of higher commands who were out of touch with developments in the front line – not least because of the unwillingness of subordinates to speak truth to power – and inflexible orders contributed to the disillusionment and demoralisation that spread through the Russian Army and provided fertile ground for political agitation.

In the years after the Russian Revolution, Soviet military thinkers – particularly Mikhail Tukhashevsky – watched the Red Army on manoeuvres and were highly critical of the lack of initiative of officers at all levels, noting that they resorted too often to harsh, inflexible imposition of orders. If Tukhashevsky’s concept of ‘deep battle’ was to be implemented, the policy of rigid top-down command that had been adopted unchanged from the days of the tsars would have to change. Officer training needed to be improved, and subordinates would have to be trusted to take the initiative. Although

Tukhashevsky’s thinking led to widespread changes, his arrest and execution in 1937 at the start of Stalin’s purge of the Red Army and the consequent increase in fear of the wrath of superiors led to the stifling of any independence of thought. Rigid adherence to orders contributed greatly to the heavy losses suffered by the Red Army in 1941 and 1942, and even when Soviet units mounted successful attacks, their junior commanders remained timid and unwilling to show initiative – during the Red Army’s successful encirclement of Sixth Army at Stalingrad, German radio operators frequently heard officers calling higher commands to confirm success, and then asking ‘What are we to do now?’<sup>6</sup>

Accounts of German operations and those of the Western Powers show repeated examples of officers using their initiative to deviate from their orders to achieve the objectives of their superiors. By contrast, there is no account of Soviet operations that shows such innovation. The rigidity of top-down command appears to have persisted into the current conflict, to the detriment of operational performance.

Despite the rigidity of orders in the Imperial Russian Army and the Red Army with decision-making strictly controlled at the highest level, there were frequent

episodes of failure to coordinate armies and fronts effectively. The disaster that overtook Samsonov’s Second Army at Tannenberg was due to Rennenkampf failing to move forward to support him with the Russian First Army, and in operations later in the war there were numerous operations in which attacks were made in some sectors, with neighbouring sectors unaware that an attack was even being planned. In the Second World War, coordination between neighbouring fronts was variable. At Stalingrad and particularly during Operation Bagration, Stavka appointed ‘representatives’ – usually Zhukov or Vasilevsky – to oversee the entire operation and coordinate the activities of different fronts, but on other occasions such coordination was poor. In the winter counter-offensive in late 1941, the Red Army achieved some initial local successes but lack of coordination and concentration on a small number of operations resulted in dissipation of effort. Even in 1944, lack of coordination continued to plague the Red Army in the northern sector – Fediuninsky’s Second Army suffered heavy losses attempting in vain to overcome the German defences of the Tannenberg Line in northern Estonia, and just a few weeks later the neighbouring front to the south succeeded in penetrating German defensive lines near Tartu; if Fediuninsky’s operation had been coordinated with the attack on Tartu, it would at least have pinned down German forces in the north, and might have had a better chance of success. Again, initial evidence from the war in Ukraine at the moment suggests an astonishing lack of coordination between units in different sectors. Even within the same sector, for example in the advance towards Kyiv from the north, basic coordination and control of road movements was so poor that there was huge congestion along the main axis of advance.

Just as the Russian and Soviet armies have struggled with

<sup>4</sup>For an account of the Battle of Stallupönen, see Buttar, P. *Collision of empires: The War on the Eastern Front in 1914* (Osprey, Oxford 2014) p110-122

<sup>5</sup>Danilov, Y. *La Russie dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Payot, Paris 1927) p190

<sup>6</sup>Mellenthin, F. *Panzer Battles* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman OK 1956) p171

coordination at the highest levels, the same is true at the tactical level. Throughout the First World War, there were repeated occasions when artillery and infantry failed to coordinate their actions, particularly when a battle began to unfold – to an extent, this reflects the inability or unwillingness of junior officers to take the initiative and to react to changing situations. The Red Army suffered a similar lack of coordination between infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft. These problems were clearly identified in analyses after almost every major battle, but remedies seemed to be almost impossible to find. Even in 1944, accounts of the reconquest of Crimea by one of the generals involved include a description of how he personally intervened to call in air strikes against German positions, as if this was a noteworthy episode – such coordination was routine in German operations in 1939.<sup>7</sup> And although the Red Army (and now the Russian Army) frequently resorted to the use of massive artillery bombardments, too little attention was given to moving guns forward once an advance began. Ultimately, the situation seemed to improve from the summer of 1944, but it is arguable that this was because the Wehrmacht's defences had become very brittle by this time. Once the main defensive line was broken, the Germans lacked the numbers and the mobility to establish new lines of defence that would require the attackers to make use of artillery. Coordination between tanks and infantry was poor by the standards of the Wehrmacht or the armies of the Western Allies, and throughout the war there were repeated incidents when Red Army tanks advanced into the depths of the German positions without ensuring that their infantry was keeping up. As a result, the tanks found themselves having to deal with German anti-tank units without essential infantry support, and the infantry failed to move forward as



Soviet troops during the Battle of Kursk in July 1943 Picture: CC BY 4.0

**“GIVEN THE IMPROVEMENTS THAT WERE ACHIEVED BY THE RED ARMY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE LOGISTIC FAILURES THAT HAVE BEEN REPORTED IN THE CURRENT FIGHTING IN UKRAINE SEEM EVEN MORE REMARKABLE, PARTICULARLY AS THIS IS THE VERY REGION WHERE THE RED ARMY DEMONSTRATED THE VALUE OF GOOD SUPPORT SERVICES IN 1943-1944.”**

they lacked armoured support to overcome the German defences. A similar lack of coordination seems to have been a feature of fighting in the opening phases of the current war.

There is a well-known axiom that ‘amateurs study tactics, while professionals study logistics’. If this is true, there is a long history of amateurism in Russian and Soviet armies. Like all the Great Powers, the Russians held large-scale military exercises every summer, and it was usual for logistic concerns to be ignored completely both in field exercises and map-based simulations. This was at least partly because there was widespread recognition that senior officers had little understanding of logistic limitations and it was thought it would be best to spare their blushes. When the Russian Army mobilised in 1914, there was recognition of the need for personnel to be assigned to boost the capabilities of the railways and to organise transport columns, but priority was given to mobilising combatants first.

As a result, large numbers of soldiers were left stranded and couldn't be deployed until the lowly logistic personnel had been mobilised. Matters were little better in 1939. When Soviet troops entered eastern Poland, their logistic support was chaotic, resulting in several Soviet columns being left stranded when they ran out of fuel.

Logistic support of the Red Army improved steadily throughout the Second World War, not least because of the plentiful provision of trucks from Britain and the USA. Perhaps one of the most effective Red Army operations was the advance across central and western Ukraine in the aftermath of Kursk. With only brief logistic pauses, Soviet forces advanced across what is now the border between Ukraine and Russia, sustaining operations that carried the front line to and over the Dnepr and Southern Bug – despite the Germans taking steps to destroy bridges, roads, railways etc. The lowly task of moving supplies forward was not the only support service that was found to be deficient. Engineering support,

particularly in terms of vehicle recovery and repair, improved hugely as the war continued, permitting armoured units to preserve their fighting strength and thus sustaining operations. Given the improvements that were achieved by the Red Army during the Second World War, the logistic failures that have been reported in the current fighting in Ukraine seem even more remarkable, particularly as this is the very region where the Red Army demonstrated the value of good support services in 1943-1944. The current logistic failure is striking both in terms of operational failure but the apparent lack of capacity.

Like all large organisations that have to function in a changing environment, armies need to have the ability to preserve experience and knowledge. This ‘institutional memory’ is invaluable in a multitude of settings. In western armies, this role is largely performed by professional NCOs who have many years of military service behind them. They have experienced cycles of change and have a strong sense of what works and, perhaps more importantly, what doesn't

<sup>7</sup>Koshelov, P. *v Gody Voennoy (Voenizdat, Moscow 1978) p233*

work. Every generation of junior officers learns rapidly to rely on these veterans to avoid making catastrophic errors, and smart officers become adept at using their senior NCOs as a knowledge resource as well as for implementing instructions. A striking weakness of the armies of the tsars, and subsequently the armies of the Soviet Union and the current Russian regime, is the almost complete absence of this 'class' of professional soldiers. In some respects, this is unsurprising.

For such NCOs to function effectively, they have to have both the training and freedom to show initiative. They also need to be able to question instructions from officers and to seek clarification or even a change of orders if their experience suggests that this is necessary. In a military system where such initiative is almost absent and rigid adherence to orders from above is the norm,

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there is little or no opportunity for such a stratum to form and to perpetuate itself. In the absence of these experienced soldiers who will look after their men, ensure that they are looking after their equipment, and in a thousand ways will be the lubricant that keeps the military machine working, the likelihood of operations breaking down is greatly increased. And remedying this deficiency isn't simply a matter of retaining experienced NCOs within the army. Without the proper environment in which their skills and experience are valued and nurtured, there is no prospect of an army being able to

develop an adequate number of such soldiers.

It seems therefore that in many respects, some traits have persisted through at least three distinctly different systems in Russia. From the age of the tsars, through the Soviet period and into the current era, the fear of speaking truth to power has resulted in those at the highest level often receiving information that merely confirms their pre-existing beliefs, while any contradictory evidence is deliberately downplayed or simply ignored. Partly as a result of this, there has been a tendency towards top-down command

with no effective encouragement of initiative or innovation, and in many respects this has contributed to a lack of coordination both at a tactical level and at the highest operational level. The vital role of logistic services has rarely been recognised and has almost never been given any priority, and the lack of a proper system of experienced, professional NCOs almost dooms the army to repeat the same errors in every generation. It is interesting to speculate what aspects of national culture might contribute to these issues, but one factor stands out: under all three systems in Russia, government at every level, both civilian and military, has been highly authoritarian. The stifling aspect of this in initiative is obvious, and in an era in which the situation on the battlefield – at tactical, operational and strategic level – can change very rapidly, this authoritarian approach inevitably results in a far less capable military machine.



Picture: kremlin.ru