
Book Review

The Soviet Army between the Prussian General Staff and Dostoevsky's madness

by Laurent Murawiec

The Soviet Military (Political Education, Training & Morale)

by E.S. Williams, with chapters by C.N. Donnelly & J.E. Moore; Foreword by Sir Curtis Keeble
Royal United Services Institute, Defence Studies Series, Macmillan Publishers, London 1987
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Le chef de l'Armée Rouge, Mikail Toukhatchevski

by Pierre Fervacque
Paris, 1928

This book by Air Commodore (ret.) Studies Associate at the London Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, provides a precious study, given the means available to the Western general and expert public, to probe the state of mind of the Russian soldier, and how it is generated and maintained—a parameter overwhelmingly ignored by the silly “numbers games” which usually pass for analysis of the Soviet military capability.

How is the proverbial “Ivan” turned into a soldier? From nursery school, where the under-four-year-old child will be familiarized by the omnipresent pictorial representation of Russia's demigod, “Lenin,” even before reaching kindergarten (4-7)

bears than soldiers and their sons, patriotic heroes and their children, boy-heroes and evil enemies of the Motherland. There, the child and future soldier acquires, if not belief, a predisposition to believe the axioms of his world-outlook. Outside the schoolroom, he is under the sway of the Oktobrist

youth organization (7-9) where much effort is devoted to the same aims.

Malchish Kibalshich and the Tale of the Military Secret is cited by the author as exemplary for the kind of literature absorbed at that stage: The Soviet armed forces, in the book's story, fight a cruel and evil enemy called the “Burzhins,” a buzz-word reminiscent of Russian for “bourgeois” (*burzhua*). “It is a timeless war, having no beginning and no end in sight. Successive generations of Soviet people go off in turn to fight the ever-pressing *Burzhins* and in turn are killed defending their homeland. The *Burzhins* are depicted as tall, hook-nosed people with pince-nez, wearing morning dress and top hats in the style of bankers of a bygone age. . . . The *Burzhins* never win but neither do they lose, so the struggle continues.”

Our little friend, Russian boy Malchish, will of course die under unspeakable tortures inflicted by the enemy. The Orwellian quality of the eternal struggle is certainly an indication of the underlying philosophy and content of Soviet “education,” a Manichean world-outlook.

Further in the idea-content of Soviet crypto-education, the author reports from his own experience, having been shown a schoolchildren's play in a Pioneer Palace, one designed to illustrate a concept of Creation: “A life-force . . . is responsible for the cyclic renewal of animal and vegetable matter. . . . A drama-group composed of ten-year-olds act[s] out the advent of the life-force on the barren surface of the earth. . . . [the] good creatures of the life-force [have] to contend with the bad fairies, the death-force bent on return[ing] the planet to its barren state. The representatives of this death-force, symbolizing evil and decay, [are] dressed very like *Burzhins*.” None of history's gnostic, manichean cults could object.

The *Burzhins* soon acquire a more defined silhouette,

Williams reports, as Ivan progresses to the eight-year school and its correlate, the Pioneers (9-14). There, the U.S.A., NATO, etc., are named. Thirty-five million Soviet children, that is, every single child in the country, hold membership in the Oktobrists and/or the Pioneers, which pick them up at the end of school hours, and for the holidays—which leaves precious little influence to members of the family. The “collective approach to life” is strengthened, and the solemn oaths of induction emphasize the “*self-less*” quality of the young member of Soviet society. At school, for two years, the student receives military education every week, while every Pioneer Palace (which are to be found in every village, one of the nicest buildings and best furnished) has at least one ex-serviceman whose job it is to school the children in basic military crafts (map-reading, reconnaissance, marksmanship, first aid, etc.). Field exercises are held, culminating once a year in a all-Union exercise for Pioneers—just as at the next stage, the Young Communist League (Komsomol) an annual pre- or para-military exercise engages more than seven million members.

From child to soldier

Having been accepted in the Komsomol, Ivan will also, probably, join DOSAAF, the Voluntary Society of Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and the Fleet, an organization responsible for pre-call-up military training, which boasts of a membership of 80 million workers and students, comprising 330,000 clubs! Led by a four-star general who has parity with the heads of the five armed services, DOSAAF represents a formidable pool which will complete the delivery of militarily trained and ideologically conditioned youth to the Armed Forces on the day of induction. When Ivan meets his political officer, the *Zampolit*, he has already spent 18 years absorbing, rather unconsciously, the tenets of the Russian liturgy. Important insights are to be gained from Williams’s book on this matter: It is often claimed in the West that the Russian population reacts apathetically and with a boredom converging on rejection to the unceasing agitprop poured forth by the Party. But the permanent indoctrination, the author indicates, does not necessarily concern itself with fostering *agreement* with the idea-content of Communist programs and slogans, but with *conforming adhesion*. Just as the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church does not aim, contrary to Western churches, to provide a conception of theology and morality, but one of ritual and liturgy, agitprop aims at, and results in, the state of affairs Williams describes thus: “a population which, after 65 years of party ‘enlightenment,’ has come *instinctively* to believe in its destiny to reform the world [emphasis added].”

The *Zampolit*, the current figure of the political commissar, is instructed by his own handbooks “to indoctrinate his unit with a spirit of high idealism, diligence and selfless devotion to the homeland,” and “to indoctrinate personnel with a hatred toward the nation’s enemies.” Regimented and

indoctrinated from the dawn of childhood, Ivan, who has received pre-military training, then goes through a lengthy military service (two-three years) characterized by drill, drill, and more drill, rather than the acquisition of higher military skills; by slavery in social relations, a complete cut-off from either his original milieu (extreme scarcity of leaves) or his surroundings (barracks consignment), the atrocious bullying of officers, NCOs, and more senior fellow-soldiers. One-third of his time will be taken in political instruction, with emphasis on war psychosis, security psychosis and the “stealing of will.” As graphically described in Viktor Suvorov’s book *The Liberators*, a crucial mechanism in Soviet armed forces is the deliberate fanning of extreme rage and hatred in the soldiers who, deprived of any outlet and permissible object to express their rage, are fit to be unleashed on any designated enemy, which will have to bear the brunt of pent-up rage. In short, “those are those you may hate, and the time may come when you will get a chance to hit out.”

Ethnic conflict is ever-present, the author notes, and is used and fanned by the military leadership as a means of overall social control. Extreme racism with respect to non-Slavs is prevalent—except for those non-Slav, non-white officers who fully engage in (self-) Russification and become part of the imperial elite which the officer corps is, today as in the Czars’ time.

The chapter by C.N. Donnelly on the Soviet soldier stresses, “The Soviet military system requires the conscript to perform simple battlefield tasks which have been learned by constantly repeated drill” but “to be able to perform them in any battlefield condition. . . . [It] does not . . . expect initiative or imaginative and constructive actions from its soldiers: it only expects reaction and drill movement. The very concept of initiative (inasmuch as it is ever asked of NCOs and junior officers) is taken to be no more than the initiation of the correct drill appropriate for the given circumstances.” However, Donnelly notes, his lack of versatility “does not necessarily mean that he is a poorer soldier, because the system to which he belongs does not require versatility or initiative of him. . . . The Soviet soldier is well-drilled and has proven extremely resourceful and well able to look out for himself in all conditions.” In short, the “rigid discipline has enabled the Soviet Army to force through an attack or maintain the structure of a defensive position, despite horrendous casualties, because it has overcome fear amongs the soldiers by an even greater fear of execution at the hands of their own superiors.”

Those are precious indications of the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet military, which need to be translated in operational concepts by Western military planners. Lessons can also be adduced from the Afghanistan war, the “behavioral laboratory” for the Soviet army, Williams writes in conclusion. The spread of depression and demoralization, crime and drugs, poor discipline, and abysmal living conditions and hygiene has not eroded the fundamentals of “con-

tinued, conforming cooperation of the silent majority.” Additionally, “when it comes to military necessity, the KGB will play for keeps.” Thus is the soldier taken care of. The officer corps, he adds, at the higher levels, is purposeful and capable, and compares favorably to the relative slowness and lack of initiative of middle and lower levels, seized by the fear of “doing something wrong.” The military potential of the militarized society that Russia is, is formidable, if vulnerable.

In the mind of Marshal Ogarkov

A much older book, published in 1928 in Paris, affords an exceptional insight into the mind of one of the creators of this military machine, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the hero and favorite of the Red Army in the Civil War, the war against Poland, and one of the core-group that effectively built the Soviet army. Tukhachevsky may well have been executed in the Great Purge of 1938 that exterminated the officer corps, but his legacy of strategic thinking was passed on, notably through such figures as Marshal Georgi Zhukov, and, today, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, deputy commander-in-chief.

Fervacque, a French officer taken prisoner by the Germans in World War I, spent a long time with Tukhachevsky in a POW fortress, in conditions of enforced personal intimacy seldom afforded to students of the Russian leadership, military or civilian. His narrative is the flip side of the better-known “Prussian General Staff” quality of cool, calculating military rationality of the Russian officer.

Tukhachevsky . . . an able soldier, his outlook on civilization so closely reflected the Asiatic side of Bolshevism that to understand the future of the Russian Revolution it is worthwhile to examine it. Born in 1892 of a noble family which traced its descent back to the Counts of Flanders, although his mother was an Italian, in character, he was Tartar. . . .

By instinct, he was *a romantic barbarian who abhorred Western civilization*. He had the soul of Genghis Khan, of Ogdai and of Batu. Autocratic, superstitious, romantic and ruthless, he loved the open plain lands and the thud of a thousands hooves, and he loathed and feared the unromantic orderliness of civilization. He hated Christianity and Christian culture because it had obliterated paganism and barbarism and had deprived his fellow countrymen of the ecstasy of the god of war and the glamor of the “carnival of death.” Also he loathed the Jews because they had helped inoculate the Russians with the “plague of civilization” and “the morale of capitalism.”

Fervacque recalls how his fellow-prisoner told him:

A demon or a god animates our race. We shall make ourselves drunk, because we cannot as yet make the world drunk. That will come.

Fervacque having found him painting the head of an atrocious idol, the future Marshal answered:

Do not laugh. I have told you that the Slavs are in want of a new religion. They are being given Marxism; but aspects of that theology are too modern and too civilized. It is possible to mitigate this disagreeable state by returning to our Slavic gods, who were deprived of their prerogative and strength; nevertheless, they can soon regain them. There is Daschbog, the god of the Sun; Stribog, the god of the Storm; Wolos, the god of human arts and poetry; and also Pierounn, the god of War and Lightning. For long, I have hesitated to choose my particular god; but after reflection, I have chosen Pierounn, because once Marxism is thrust upon Russia, the most devastating wars will be let loose. . . . We shall enter chaos and we shall not leave it until civilization is reduced to total ruin.

We cannot pretend to know whether Nikolai Ogarkov, in his heart of hearts, is also a worshipper of Pierounn, the god of War and Lightning. What ought to be obvious to the Western reader is that he, at any rate, believes in the sacred cult of Mother Russia, as the quasi-liturgical language he used in his celebrated September 1983 press briefing on the shooting down of the KAL-007 airplane indicated.

Further to the contents of the Russian General Staff’s mind and its ideology, Fervacque reported more of Tukhachevsky’s ravings:

Seriously, it would be good for humanity were all books burned, so that we could bathe in the fresh spring of ignorance. I even think that this is the sole means of preventing mankind from becoming sterile.

The hero of the Red Army explained how necessary it was to have Russia ruled by a new Ivan the Terrible—a hope that was to be fulfilled even beyond the marshal’s wildest expectations, and at the cost of his own execution:

Then, Moscow will become the center of the world of barbarians. . . . If Lenin is able to disencumber Russia from the old junk of prejudices and de-Westernize her, I will follow him. But he must raze all to the ground, and deliberately hurl us back into barbarism.

Reading Nikolai Ogarkov’s books, their carefully thought-out, systematic outlook bears witness to cool, calculated planning. But while the militarization and regimentation of Soviet society is meticulously planned and organized, as Williams’s book shows, what lurks behind is the wild ravings of “the Horde,” as Tukhachevsky fondly called the Red Army. There is plenty of evidence that today’s General Staff and officer corps have absorbed, with the orientation on offense and strategic surprise, the rest of Tukhachevsky’s legacy.