

The Russian Mindset and War Between Westernizing the East and Easternizing the West

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Abstract: Russia is the biggest country in the world, stretching from Vladivostok in the far east to Kaliningrad in the west. It bridges Europe and Asia not only in geographic terms, but also, as many social scientists observe, in its culture, society, and the way to think about the world. The Russian mindset is neither European nor Asian. Instead, it is a unique puzzle constructed from the ideas, habits, and practices of both. Therefore, this article argues that in an attempt to decode Russian strategic behavior, special attention should be given to the complex interplay in the Russian mind between both Western and Eastern ways of seeing things and interpreting events.

Keywords: Russian strategy, strategic mindset, military science, Russian history

In discussing the Russian mindset, the first thing that comes to mind is the famous verse written by Fyodor Tyutchev in 1866:

Russia cannot be known by the mind
Nor measured by the common mile:
Her status is unique, without kind—
Russia can only be believed in.¹

In Russia and the West, many books, treatises, essays, and articles have been written discussing the mysterious “Russian soul” and its incompatibili-

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ty with Western logic. Indeed, as contemporary Russian political philosopher Boris Kagarlitsky put it: “universal ‘European’ models usually failed in Russia.” However, he also added that “the attempts to analyse Russian history from the standpoint of national exclusivity and ‘originality’ hopelessly failed as well.”² Instead, he suggested to understand Russia’s history within the complex system of economic, political, and ideological interaction between the West and the East.

Following Kagarlitsky’s suggestion, this article sheds light on how the Western and Eastern ways of thinking about the world in general and war in particular have expressed themselves in the Russian approach to war, strategy, and military science.

Russian Mindset between the West and the East

Ivan Solonevich, a renowned Russian political philosopher of the first part of the twentieth century, claimed:

Russia is not Europe, though it is neither Asia or Eurasia. It is simply Russia. A completely peculiar national and cultural complex, equally distinguishable from both Europe and Asia.³

Such an isolationist view of the Russian history and identity is very popular in Russia and “is shared by a significant part of Russian intellectuals, regardless of their ideological convictions.”⁴ As Kagarlitsky puts it: “Samuel F. Huntington’s book *The Clash of Civilizations* somehow became instantly fashionable, even before anyone had time to read it.”⁵

For the last 200 years, two main ideological camps have been waging a bitter fight for the interpretation of Russian history, identity, and destiny in the world: the Westerners and the Slavophiles. The former see Russia as a part of the European civilization that, due to unfortunate circumstances, found itself left behind. The latter see Russia as a unique civilization on its own, “the main features of which,” as Solonevich put it, “were quite clearly defined earlier than European influence or Asian invasions could leave their mark on Russia.”⁶ In other words, while the Westerners see Russian exceptionalism as an anomaly (that should be eliminated by turning Russia into a “proper” European state), the Slavophiles see it as Russia’s “special way” (that should be cherished and preserved at any costs). Moreover, both camps are “absolutely unanimous in their understanding of Russian history as isolated and ‘special,’ not subject to the common in other countries’ logic.”⁷

There is, however, a third, though not very popular camp of historians and political scientists, who argue that Russia’s uniqueness can be explained not by the “mysterious Russian Orthodox soul” or failing attempts to catch up with the West, but by the specific geographic, economic, political, and cultural position of Russia between the West and the East.⁸ Their lack of popularity stems from two main reason. First, they suggest that Russian mindset has been shaped by the “barbaric” East—the Mongols, against whom, according to the

commonly accepted in Russia argument, Russia selflessly defended the Western civilizations, allowing them to flourish during the Renaissance.⁹ Second, the complex idea that “in the national body of Russia, there are islands and oases of Europe and Asia as well” contradicts the simplicity of the arguments presented by both the Westerners and the Slavophiles.¹⁰ This idea neither claims that Russia was left on the backyard of Europe at the behest of history and should do everything to catch up and become a “normal” member of the European family, nor does it advocate for the unique Russian Orthodox civilization developed in isolation. Instead, it claims that Russian history is a process of blending and mixing of Eastern and Western traditions, views, practices, and philosophies.¹¹ It claims that Russia’s geographical, historical, and cultural place between European civilization in the West and Islamic, Confucian, and Indus civilizations in the East has played an instrumental role in designing the Russian character throughout the whole of Russian history.¹² Pyotr Chaadayev, one of the greatest Russian philosophers of the nineteenth century, whose views, which were controversial for his time, instigated the polarization between the Westerners and the Slavophiles, envisioned the yet-to-come destiny of Russia:

Stretching between two great divisions of the world, between the East and the West, leaning one elbow on China, the other on Germany, we should have combined in ourselves two great principles of spiritual nature—imagination and reason, and unite in our civilization the history of the entire world.¹³

If the Russian mindset is a puzzle constructed from the pieces of Eastern imagination and Western reason, then the first step toward its assembling should be a better understanding of these two different worldviews.

Much ink has been spilled discussing the differences between the Western and Eastern philosophies, cultures, traditions, characters, and mindsets: from general analysis of cultural differences rooted in different history, geography, religion, and social composition to very practical examinations of how these differences have shaped respective organizational cultures and leadership patterns.¹⁴ The most intriguing analyses, however, come from cultural psychologists, who argue that Western and Eastern societies not only see the world differently, but they think about it differently.¹⁵ According to cultural psychologist Richard E. Nisbett, the difference between the Western and Eastern ways of thinking can be explained by the difference between the Western atomistic worldview, shaped by the independent and individualistic nature of the Western society, and the Eastern holistic approach, rooted in the Eastern traditionally interdependent and collective social structures.¹⁶ Therefore, in an attempt to understand the puzzle of the Russian approach to war and strategy, the following examination focuses on how the pieces of the Western (American) atomistic worldview have been combined with the Eastern (Chinese) holistic approach to produce a unique (and often heterogeneous) mix.¹⁷

Understanding the Pieces: American vs. Chinese Approaches to War

Much has been written on the American way of war—from the classic *The American Way of War* by Russell F. Weigley, to more contemporary works by Benjamin Buley, Colin S. Gray, Adrian R. Lewis, and others.¹⁸ While each one of the scholars sheds light on a set of different aspects, most agree that in the American mind, a war is seen as an unfortunate obstacle—an anomaly, which is “not a continuation of political intercourse, but a symptom of its failure.”¹⁹ As Gray put it: “Americans have approached warfare as regrettable occasional evil that has to be concluded as decisively and rapidly as possible.”²⁰ This isolation of war from the general context of normal international relations seems to be consistent with “the Western focus on particular objects in isolation from their context,” which is rooted in “the individualistic or independent nature of the Western society.”²¹ This American atomistic attitude extends not only to their understanding of war but also to their general interpretation of international relations. Since they see the world as “a relatively simple place, composed of discreet objects that can be understood without undue attention to context,” their tendency to demonize the leaders of their adversaries as the main drivers of confrontation, at the expense of the political context these leaders operate in, should not be surprising.²²

While Americans attribute behavior to the actor, Chinese people tend to attribute the same behavior to context.²³ The Eastern Asian cultures see the world as a much more complex place, understandable in terms of a systemic whole rather than in terms of isolated parts. “The collective and interdependent nature of Asian society,” Nisbett argues, “is consistent with Asian’s broad, contextual view of the world and their belief that events are highly complex and determined by many factors.”²⁴ This Chinese orientation toward a holistic view of the world, rooted in the philosophy of Confucianism, has predisposed their mindset toward solving their problems through searching for a systemic balance and harmony, rather than the Western tendency to isolate problematic elements and eliminate them. Since the Renaissance, this search for harmony in Confucianism has often led Western scholars to advocate the pacifist nature of Chinese culture.²⁵ For example, writing about “the pacifist character of Confucianism,” Max Weber claimed, “the Confucianists, who are ultimately pacifist literati oriented to inner political welfare, naturally faced military powers with aversion or with lack of understanding.”²⁶ Aside from Confucianism, virtually all strains of Chinese philosophy frowned on the use of force, including Laozi (Daoist), Mozi (Mohist), and even Sunzi (Sun Tzu).²⁷ Indeed, Sun Tzu uses the word *li* (force), only nine times in his entire *Art of War*, while Carl von Clausewitz uses *Gewalt* (force or violence) eight times in the two paragraphs that define war alone.²⁸ The popularity of this cultural argument cannot be overemphasized, though, a more careful examination of the Chinese approach to war suggests that if the path to balance and harmony should be paved by the means of war, the Chinese do not hesitate to do it.²⁹

However, going to war, the Chinese, unlike their American counterparts, do not define it as a violent anomaly in international relations. Instead, they see it as a natural interaction within the complex system of interactions, in which violence has an important, though not determinative, role. From Sun Tzu's maxim "to break the enemy's resistance without fighting is the foremost excellence," to the contemporary *Unrestricted Warfare*, the Chinese mindset approaches war as a complex mix of interactions (violent or not), when "whoever is able to mix a tasty and unique cocktail for the future banquet of war will ultimately be able to wear the laurels of success."³⁰

Constructing the Puzzle: Russian Mindset and War, Strategy, and Military Science

Analyzing the differences between Western and Eastern thinking, Nisbett starts with philosophers, acknowledging that they themselves are the products rather than "the progenitors of their respective cultures."³¹ Therefore, in an attempt to understand the Russian approach to war, it seems right to start with the history of Russian philosophy and its place on the West–East divide.

On the one hand, a brief examination of the traditional roots of Russian philosophy suggests that the Russian view of the world must be much closer to the Chinese holism, rather than Western atomism. "In the world," wrote a prominent Russian imperial philosopher Vladimir Odoyevsky, "as in a good cotton mill, every cog clings to another."³² In analyzing the manifestation of holism in the Russian philosophy, Alexander Ishutin argued that "while in the Western philosophical discourse the idea of the systemic whole is just one of the philosophical paradigms, in the Russian philosophy—it is an important, fundamental and unifying component."³³

On the other hand, when it comes to the philosophical view on the phenomenon of war, it seems that the long history of military interactions with the West had undermined the Eastern orientation of the Russian mindset. Russian philosophers, historians, and military thinkers have been traditionally divided between those who see war as a natural part of the nation's interaction (as the systemic whole) and those who call to isolate it as something evil that contradicts human nature.³⁴ This contradiction was best demonstrated by Fyodor Dostoevsky's short story "Paradoxalist," in which he explores the contradiction between war as "a scourge on humanity" and war that "brings benefits only, and, therefore, absolutely necessary" as a dialogue between two protagonists.³⁵

During the last 200 years, several ideological divisions have been shaping the interpretation of the nature, role, and place of war in Russia—similar to the aforementioned division between the Westerners and the Slavophiles, though without any specific correlation. The first divide is about the place of war in human life. On the one side of the argument are those who consider war as an inherent and eternal part of the holistic system of international relations: from General of Infantry Genrikh Leer, the nineteenth century's founding father of Russian strategic school, who saw war as "a quite natural phenomenon in the

lives of societies . . . one of the most rapid and powerful civilisers of humanity,” to contemporary Major General Alexander Vladimirov, who argued that “war has become an inherent part of human existence and its specific characteristic, and will be as such as long as humanity exists.”³⁶ On the opposite side are those who argue that declaring war to be something inherent to human nature is a mistake: from Lieutenant General Evgeny Martynov, “a distinguished Russian Imperial and Soviet military theoretician,” who wrote his seminal 1899 *The Responsibilities of Politics in Its Relations with Strategy* “in anticipation of those long-desired times when diplomacy will find a way to abolish armed clashes between peoples,” to contemporary Major General Ignat Danilenko, who argued that an assumption that wars could never end “limits the study of war as a social phenomenon . . . [as] it restricts military science to the problems of preparing and waging armed struggle only.”³⁷

Another interesting division in Russian understanding of war is about the role of violence. Some Russian thinkers, similar to the Chinese tradition, define war in a broader sense, in which violence is an important, though not necessarily required ingredient. Others, being good students of the Western thought in general and Clausewitz in particular, limit war to the violent use of force only. In Imperial Russia, General of Artillery Nikolai Medem, “Russia’s first professor of strategy,” criticized Clausewitz’s emphasis on the use of force, arguing that his focus on battles is too simplistic as “all and any considerations should have the goal of weakening or destroying, by whatever means, the enemy’s forces and depriving him of the means to defend himself.”³⁸ On the contrary, Leer echoed Clausewitz, arguing that “war is one of the instruments in the hands of politics, the most extreme instrument to achieve a state’s goal.”³⁹ In the early Soviet Union, these were Major General Alexander Svechin and Lieutenant General Andrey Snesev, who sought to expand the nature of war beyond armed struggle—writings of whom were prohibited in the post–World War II Soviet military thought that adopted a more Western worldview that “war consists of armed struggle only.”⁴⁰ However, the collapse of the Soviet Union reignited the debate on whether violence and armed struggle are definitive characteristics of war or whether it should be understood in a broader context of all means and methods.⁴¹

While the Russian understanding of war has been jumping through the loops of the Western approach that tries to restrict it to a violent clash of wills that should be resolved as quickly as possible and the Eastern approach that sees war in the broader context of all means and methods of international relations, it seems right to argue that the Russian understanding of strategy has always inclined toward the Eastern holistic worldview. The American traditional atomistic disaggregation of strategy into the ends, means, and ways, which has been generally adopted by the West, has never found supporters in Russia.⁴² From Imperial Russian general Genrikh Leer, through early-Soviet major general Alexander Svechin and late-Soviet marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, to the contemporary dictionary of the Russian Ministry of Defence, strategy has always been under-

stood in Russia as an art of combining different elements to achieve the desired goals in the specific context of a given situation.⁴³ “All great commanders,” argued Medem in 1836, “were truly great because they based their actions not on pre-drafted rules, but on a skillful combination of all means and circumstances.”⁴⁴ Almost a hundred years later, in the beginning of the twentieth century, Alexander Svechin confirmed this understanding, stating that “strategy is an art of combining preparations to war with groups of operations to achieve the goal defined to the armed forces.”⁴⁵ Almost another hundred years later, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Alexander Vladimirov argued that “national strategy is the theory, practice and art of governing a state . . . [that] defines and fulfills a combination of strategic (fundamental) goals, directions of [the] state’s existence and actions . . . as well as the security, development and wellbeing of its people.”⁴⁶ Fully adopting the Eastern tradition that emphasizes the constantly changing nature of reality, rather than the Western tendency to seek universal rules, Russian strategists have traditionally highlighted the importance of the contextual situation to create the most effective combination.⁴⁷ In other words, the Russian view on strategy-making is much closer to the approach expressed by Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang in their *Unrestricted Warfare* than to Arthur F. Lykke’s formula of “ends-ways-means” and its Western followers.⁴⁸

While the Russian perspective on the nature of war has fluctuated between the Western and Eastern approaches, and the understanding of strategy has gravitated toward the Eastern tradition, the history of the development of Russian military science presents a good example of the fusion between Western reason and logic and the Eastern type of dialecticism that seeks “not to de-contextualize but to see things in their appropriate context.”⁴⁹ As discussed, the Russians incline to see war not as an isolated event, but as a phenomenon embedded in the meaningful whole of society. Therefore, it is not surprising that they were among the first to argue that war is a sociological phenomenon, analysis of which should be done through the prism of all social sciences. Years before the beginning of World War I, General of Infantry Nikolai Michnevich, coined “sociology of war,” arguing for its creation as an extension of social sciences on military affairs.⁵⁰ During the interwar period, another Russian general, Lieutenant General Nikolai Golovin, advocated the idea that “any researcher who desires to analyse war not through a narrow ‘utilitarian-military’ prism, but through a ‘purely scientific’ one, must . . . understand that the main goal of the analysis of war is its examination as a phenomenon of social life.”⁵¹ By the end of the twentieth century, General of the Army Makhmut Gareev, argued in the same vein: “in his research endeavours, any military researcher must use all fields of sciences related to war and military, equally operating with socio-political, economic, mathematic and other fields of knowledge.”⁵² By combining the Eastern tradition that “events do not occur in isolation from other events, but are always embedded in a meaningful whole,” with the Western inclination “to use logical rules to understand events,” the Russians created a system of military science that consists of numerous laws, interconnected meth-

odologies and interacting postulates—“the methodological polestar for how to think about war in a scientific fashion.”⁵³

Conclusion

As demonstrated, the Russian views on war, strategy, and military science, similar to the Russian culture and general mindset, combine both the Western atomistic approach and the Eastern holistic way of thinking. However, as it was shown, the Russians do not necessarily subscribe to either of them, but pick and choose from both, whatever fits their own blended way of thinking about the world.

For example, in their understanding of war in general and the place of armed violence in it in particular, there is no clear gravitation to either of the sides. The debate on whether violence is a fundamental part of war or if a war can be waged by nonmilitary means without violence has been an open question in the Russian military discourse for the last 200 years, with no visible solution on the horizon. However, when it comes to understanding strategy, the Russian mindset clearly gravitated toward the Eastern holistic tradition that seeks contextualized solutions and rejects the idea of universally applicable rules and formulas. A completely different tendency can be seen in the case of Russian military science, which represents a good example of a harmonious combination between the Western logic and reason and the Eastern tendency to see the bigger picture. In other words, the Russian worldview is constructed through the process of mixing and matching these two very different approaches, producing something uniquely Russian. It adopts what works and rejects what does not.

In the beginning of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45), the Soviet propaganda machine, following its Western counterparts, tried to isolate the Nazi regime from the German people. However, this ideological separation between the German people and the Nazi regime seemed too artificial to the Russian mind, shaped by the idea of collective responsibility and punishment.⁵⁴ The collectivistic roots in the Russian mindset advocate the responsibility of an individual for the whole collective, and vice versa; therefore, the notion of separation between Nazi Germany and the German people simply did not resonate.⁵⁵ As a result, the message was adjusted to make the word “fascist” synonymous with “German”: “the Soviet propaganda machine transformed everything associated with Germany (regime, military and people) into one evil, inhuman, and barbaric collective of faceless creatures.”⁵⁶ Thus, the Soviets (Russians) first tried the Western approach that attributes behavior to the actor (the Nazi regime); however, once it failed, they turned to the Eastern approach that attributes behavior to the context (everything German).

This raises an important question: How would one know whether the Russian approach gravitates toward the Western way of thinking or the Eastern one? The problem is that there is no clear-cut answer to this question. There are, however, two recommendations that can help find an answer. First, in an

attempt to decode Russian behavior, researchers should be aware of the complex interplay in the Russian mind between both Western and Eastern ways of seeing things and interpreting events. This recommendation is particularly important for the Western scholars who intuitively recognize the Western influences, but just as easily omit the Eastern traditions with which they are less familiar. The Russians are indeed good students of Clausewitz. But this is the point—they are his students, not followers. They Russified him through their Eastern minds and souls. They filtrated Clausewitz through the Eastern holistic imagination, and, therefore, any attempt to analyze Russia only through the Western prism would ultimately be one-sided and misleading. The second recommendation is to continue the approach adopted by this article: to examine not merely the content of analyzed phenomenon but also the process, as well as the multitude of factors that influenced it throughout its development.

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