

[October 2022 Handgrenade](#)

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A Russian Way of War in Crisis?

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In addition to my many other self-imposed tasks (like this monthly screed), I try to post a quotation of the day (QOD) and it usually has to do with something related to military history, foreign policy, or war and society. After listening to the second part in series podcast over at *War on the Rocks* (WOTR) with Michael Kofman of the Center of Naval Analysis (CNA), Professor Lawrence Freedman sometime of Kings College London (KCL), and WOTR high mufti Ryan Evans (as moderator) I picked up on something Kofman said to use as my QOD as he discussed Russian trends. Kofman said, “...the Gerosimov doctrine was a clever turn of phrase and disavowed for good reason; it’s a bit like the story of Frankenstein...a creature that escaped from the laboratory and then began consuming the field of Russian military analysis” [1]

The Kofman-Freedman podcasts (it is a two part series) bring up the issue of the Russian way of war being in crisis. Kofman’s insight on the Gerasimov doctrine captures two truths. The first involves attempts by (mostly Western) analysts to understand what passes for strategic decision-making in Russia these days. Here at the US Army Command and General Staff College we use an article on this reputed doctrine as one means to examine if there is a “Russian Way of War.” [2] In some sense the so-called doctrine, a means to explain apparent Russian successes in reforms and operational execution, reflects a larger phenomenon, the apparent impotence of a standard Russian way of war that has come up fatally short (repeatedly in recent years according to Kofman et al.) in the current Russo-Ukrainian War of the 21st Century. Kofman additionally identifies procrastination and dithering by Putin, not bold action, as contributing to Russia's problematic operational performances.

Perhaps returning to the older works, especially Chris Duffy’s *Russia’s*

Military Way to the West, or the anthology published by Combat Studies Institute Press several years on Operational Art (the Russian chapters) might prove useful (subjunctive intentional). These help us form something of a baseline without too

[3] much extra study. The Russians have always, as Duffy points out, had a love-hate relationship with the West. The Russian system is heavily dependent on the geopolitical economy of Russia/USSR/Russia. In other words, vast spaces confer power, e.g. the 1812 retreat east of Moscow by Russia's main army. It also relies heavily on firepower, despite its supposed wealth of manpower (not a feature of the current conflict). Too, Russian staff structures, often ignored by western observers absolutely should be studied—a Prusso-German Partnership with the Russians existed since at least the time of Frederick the Great and two of the more important staff officers in history, Baron Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz served in the Russian Army, Jomini essentially for the bulk of his professional life. The degradation-improvement-degradation of the military reform trend line in Russian-Soviet history is a fascinating non-linear curve. Too, when there is autocracy at the top it struggles to frame and shape military reform policy. But when has Russia NOT had autocracy at the top? The fires-heavy approach, witnessed by Napoleon at Borodino and again at Leipzig, has worked more often than it has failed. One saw its lack (due to a shortage of artillery shells) in the First World War, and then its heavy use in World War II and, of course, today in places like Chechnya, Syria, and now Ukraine.

Certainly as historians we cannot yet make a judgment about the collapse or transformation of an existing Russian Way of War just yet. If it does collapse in ruins, though, it is a sure thing that a synthesis of some form or another will follow. What says the H-WAR (and beyond) readership?

NOTE: this Handgrenade in honor of the recently passed Dr. Jake Kipp, a scholar of Russia and the USSR who served long and faithfully at Fort Leavenworth in both the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) and at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). Jake passed last year in Lawrence Kansas.

<https://warrenmcelwain.com/obituary/dr-jacob-walter-kipp-ph-d/>

[1] The intellectually curious can find these podcasts here:

https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/the-kremlin-in-command-part-ii-syria-and-the-first-assault-on-ukraine/?__s=qed4zw48f3o3ba2yfb4 (accessed 9-29-2022).

[2]

___ Gerosimov, Valery. "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Military Review*. January-February 2016.

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/militaryreview/>

Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf PRIMARY

[3]

___ Christopher Duffy, *Russia's Military Way to the West* (London: Routledge, Kegan, & Paul, 1981); Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Philips, eds. *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2005).

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