Marten on Jonsson, 'The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace'

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Oscar Jonsson’s The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace is a useful and creative addition to the literature on current Russian military thinking about the nature of war. Published in 2019 from his doctoral dissertation at King’s College London, it remains a timely guide for understanding the philosophical ideas behind Russia’s military actions today.

Jonsson’s major goal is to trace the development of thinking within the Russian military about information warfare (what others have called “hybrid war,” “gray-zone conflict,” or the “Gerasimov doctrine”), focusing on how nonviolent influence operations designed to undermine states and governments from within can both complement and substitute for violent action. Jonsson demonstrates that Russian security officials viewed Western support for the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, for the Arab Spring, and for pro-democracy protests in Serbia and in Russia itself as a new form of sovereignty-threatening warfare. He argues that Russian military officers fundamentally altered their definition of what war involves as a result, in reaction to what they deemed Western leadership and fomenting of these pro-democracy protests.

Jonsson conducts a comprehensive review of Russian military journals and other press sources, as well as official military and security doctrine statements, to support his arguments. He convincingly shows that these discussions in Russia long preceded the seizure of Crimea and the start of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and began as early as the Chechen civil wars in the 1990s. While he contrasts these Russian military debates with the more static and traditional Soviet views on the violent nature of war, Jonsson also highlights the revival of Russian military interest in the “subversion war” theorizing of Evgeny Messner, a twentieth-century Russian Imperial Army officer who fought against the Bolsheviks in the Russian civil war and then lived in exile abroad. Jonsson also provides a broad and refreshing critique of recent Western analysis of Russian military thinking, contending that many Western analysts were late to the table in understanding the fundamental shift in the Russian conceptualization of warfare.

While Jonsson recognizes that the presidency of Vladimir Putin marked a key inflection point in these Russian military debates, the book does not mention one crucial factor that may have made an important difference in the direction these debates ultimately took: namely, the role of Putin’s own
intelligence agency background (and the former intelligence officers he put in leading government and security roles) in influencing the discussion. Jonsson correctly notes that Soviet military doctrine did not focus on nonviolent information warfare and subversion. Nonetheless, the Soviet KGB and the Soviet-era military intelligence agency (the GRU) certainly did have that as an important focus of their work. Foreign political influence operations (or “active measures”) were one of the major endeavors of the KGB’s First Chief Directorate, from whose ranks Putin originally hailed. They were also a crucial component of the GRU’s planning for prewar and wartime operations in the enemy’s rear. In addition, the notion that all domestic political protest must by definition be directed by hostile outside forces was fundamental to KGB culture and is particularly associated with Yuri Andropov, who served as KGB chief and then Soviet general secretary at the start of Putin’s own KGB career. It is therefore at least possible that Russian military debates would not have resolved as they did, in adding nonviolent information war as a fundamental component of the definition of warfare, without Putin’s presidency.

This raises an important missing element in the book: there is no discussion of civil-military relations or the role of the uniformed military as an institution in Russian policymaking or decision-making. Beyond noting the reputational importance of a few key players in the debates (such as General Makhmut Gareyev, Soviet deputy chief of the General Staff and then president of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences), the book does not trace the relationship between Russian political leaders and military officers, and most important, who influenced whom. This is particularly evident in chapter 4, “Color Revolutions,” where the frame of the book rather joltingly shifts from discussion of military debates and theorizing to public statements made by Russia’s political elites and leaders. Jonsson notes that “it took until 2007 for the notion of color revolutions to start to impact military thought,” but does not tell us why (p. 136). We are left with tantalizing evidence of parallels between Kremlin policy and military theorizing without understanding the power dynamics that created those parallels.

No book can do everything, nonetheless, and Jonsson’s book provides a unique and valuable primer on the development of Russian military theorizing about information warfare. It is highly recommended reading for all who are interested in Russian military and security policy.


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