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Russian Information-Psychological Actions: Implications for U.S. PSYOP

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It is July 18, 1999, and a battle is raging somewhere on Russia's southern border. During a lull in the fighting, Russian loudspeakers emit provocative messages (produced through voice-synthesis processors) designed to influence or "hypnotize" enemy forces. Holograms, designed to induce fear or uncertainty, display messages and images embellished with cultural and religious connotations. One special hologram, depicting specific combinations of colors and numbers, reportedly causes some bodily functions to shut down. Titanium robots move about the battlefield, shooting leaflets with instructions to the enemy on how to surrender. As the fighting resumes, multiple rocket launchers and artillery rocket attacks pose yet another type of psychological war--one based on the shock effect of tons of explosive ordnance.

Meanwhile, at the Ministry of Defense headquarters in Moscow, Russian specialists in information psychological activities coordinate operations and project their impact on the war effort. Years before the current conflict, computer-stealth viruses had been implanted into military sales systems located at enemy command-and-control units. As part of their present plan, the Russian specialists activate these viruses; they conduct "reflexive control" and information-warfare operations against enemy decision-makers; and they transmit morphed images over the aggressor's television networks to manipulate the enemy's perceptions.

These specialists also consult with doctors to ascertain the extent of psychoses that might be imposed upon enemy forces and the number of depression-induced injuries that might occur. After gathering this information, the specialists plan additional information-psychological strikes. As the battle abates on the giant computer-activated TV screens, the loudspeakers once again begin broadcasting soothing messages.

This future-war scenario combines a number of Russian theories about 21st-century information operations and offers suggestions as to how these operations might be coupled with psychological operations, or PSYOP. For the short term, at least, these Russian theories may be only wishful thinking -- the recent conflict in Chechnya, during which Russian forces struggled

to maintain parity with Chechen rebels, indicates that Russian armed forces have significant problems with which they must contend before they can focus on information-psychological activities.

However, Russia, like other countries, is seriously studying the impact of the information age on its military forces. Russian military planners understand that in the information age, everyone is vulnerable to some degree. Developments in information technology will enable some technologically deficient countries to quickly catch up to those with more technologically advanced information networks.

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Russian military theorists have always been particularly sensitive to the enemy's ability to control, through either propaganda or the manipulation of information, the psyche of Russian soldiers. They consider the concept of "moral-psychological" preparation of the soldier to be a Russian principle of war.

In the past, political commissars were charged with maintaining the ideological, moral and psychological stability of the soldier. But Russian society is now in a transition period, and Russian sociologists consider the populace and the armed forces to be psychologically unstable and

extremely vulnerable to foreign based and foreign-run information operations. The requirement to counteract the information-psycho- logical capability of the enemy has become even more important. As one Russian author has noted:

Countering information expansionism and protecting the national interests of Russia are to a certain extent synonymous.... More likely now is a situation in which "quiet" aggression may be unleashed ... several weeks, months or even years before the beginning of full-scale military operations. In reality there is no war or armed conflict, but in fact aggression has already been unleashed.... Therefore, if measures to counteract information psychological aggression are not developed and mastered in a practical manner ahead of time, the consequences for the country could turn out to be extremely serious.⁴

When Russia admits that one of its principles of war is vulnerable to the developing field of information operations, the whole world should take notice--there may be lessons for all of U.S. to learn.



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General definitions

In the former Soviet Union, the Communist Party used propaganda as a means of controlling society and the armed forces. The transition from communism to democracy has left an absence of ideology, but it has created an emphasis on a new concept: the information security of society. To adapt to this new concept, the Russians have instituted several changes: First, the information-psychological struggle has replaced the propaganda-agitation struggle of Marxism-Leninism.²

Second, some theorists now consider psychological operations to be an independent form of military activity that requires specialized personnel and training. Third, as a consequence, the Russian armed forces may be developing a special military occupational specialty devoted to psychological confrontation. Fourth, some Russian officers have come to view the information psychological struggle as an integral part of information warfare. These changes will also have an impact on the future of U.S. PSYOP.³

During the Cold War, it was extremely difficult to obtain information on the Soviet/Russian conduct of PSYOP. For years, the Russians held all of their archives, force structure and operating procedures under tight secrecy. Only through the recent declassification of several Russian journals has more information become available.

Since about 1992, the Russians no longer consider information regarding the existence and the training of their PSYOP units to be classified. Still, acquiring knowledge about these units and their actions remains difficult. Some sources believe that the military's main intelligence directorate controls these organizations, which may explain the scarcity of information.

The Russian military does not use the term "psychological operations." In Soviet times, these operations were called "special propaganda." Russian military authors use the term "information-psychological actions" to refer to what Westerners call PSYOP-related activities. Therefore, the term "information-psychological actions" and the more familiar U.S. term "PSYOP" are used interchangeably throughout this article.

Information operations

The Russian concept of information-psychological actions usually includes leaflets, loudspeakers and radio/TV transmissions. On occasion, the Russians use TV and radio transmissions to override the signal of an enemy system. An official Russian government signal is then used to transmit either overt or covert information to fool or mislead enemy forces.

Some nontraditional uses of information-psychological actions have also worked quite well. For example, the shock and the psychological terror produced by artillery and air attacks have long been considered by some leadership elements to be a psychological action. When Russian tanks attacked the Russian parliament building in October 1993, the primary purpose of the attack was to inflict shock or a psychological effect on the occupants of the building.⁴ When in January 1996, in the town of Per- vomaiskaya, Russians attacked Chechen rebels with massive artillery and multiple-rocket launcher strikes, the Russian commander described the action as a form of psychological warfare.

Reflexive control

Another nontraditional information-psychological action is the Russian concept of reflexive control, a "branch of the theory of control related to influencing the decisions of others. In a military context, it can be viewed as a means for providing a military commander with the ability to indirectly maintain control over his opponent commander's decision process."⁵ Reflexive control is the process of manipulating information so that one's enemy will be compelled to take actions favorable to one's own side.

Reflexive control is somewhat foreign to a U.S. audience. Russians employ it not only on the strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare, but also on the strategic level, associated with internal and external politics of the country. Of course, reflexive control has not always been used exclusively to Russia's benefit. Some Russians perceive the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, as a political maneuver designed to compel the Soviets to respond according to a plan favorable to the U.S. In its efforts to keep pace with America's achievements in the SDI



Some Russians believe that the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative was a reflexive-control measure designed to compel the Soviet Union to spend vast sums of money on its own missile-defense system.

arena (or at least what we said were our achievements), the Soviet Union exhausted itself economically. Some Russians now question whether the concept of information warfare is simply another U.S. attempt to reflexively control them and to persuade them to invest vast sums of money in a subject area supposedly beyond both U.S. and Russian technological reach in the near future.

The Russian armed forces, at the tactical and operational levels, have long studied the reflexive control concept for its value both in controlling enemy decision making processes and in developing techniques for maskirovka (deception and disinformation).⁶ In the early 1900s, there was actually a Russian military maskirovka school that became the base of maskirovka thinking from which manuals for future generations were created. The school was disbanded in 1929.

A recent flurry of articles on reflexive control has appeared in Russian military writings, indicating that the maskirovka theory is alive and that it is undergoing renovation to adjust to current conditions, including the intricacies of the computer age.

Major General M. Ionov (retired) wrote an article in Morskoy Sbornik (1995) that focused on reflexive control.⁷ He offered several principles for "control of the enemy." First, the initiator must anticipate the enemy's response to the conditions he plans to impose. Second, the initiator should anticipate that the enemy may uncover the activity and institute his own counter control measures. Third, the initiator should be aware of the technical level of the enemy's combat assets, especially reconnaissance (the higher the level of technology, the more likely it is that the disinformation actions will be exposed). Fourth, the initiator should consider the effect of using harsh forms of pressure against the enemy, taking into account social elements and intellectual, psychological, ethical and ideological factors.⁸

Psychological support

Many Russian sociologists believe that the Russian armed forces (in part because of their lack of moral-psychological training) are now vulnerable to an information-psychological attack. In the past, propaganda departments in the school system and in the armed forces had fulfilled the moral-psychological training role. But in the absence of political organs and the Communist Party apparatus, ideology no longer dominates or guides psychology, sociology, psychiatry and the other sciences. No independent moral-psychological support apparatus exists to fill the gap.

Moral-psychological support can be defined as a goal-oriented influence on the minds and the psyches of Russian military personnel. Commanding officers, staffs and indoctrination bodies are responsible for reinforcing psychological stability among personnel and for forming their moral readiness so that they will be able to perform effectively under any conditions. Field commanders must direct special effort toward keeping the correlation of moral-psychological forces in balance.

According to one Russian analyst, the events of the 1990s have caused a "cardinal change in the military-political situation in the world, and also in the political, social-economic, and moral-psychological situation inside countries. The modern tendency in the development of forces, means, and capabilities of armed combat ... has sharply grown in connection with these roles, as has the significance of the laws of the course and the outcome of war and their dependence on the correlation of the moral-psychological forces of the opposing sides. Therefore, there is a real need to form an understanding of the moral-psychological support activity of the armed forces."⁹

Information-psychological security is "the use of information to guarantee the functional reliability of the psyche and consciousness of a person in peacetime or wartime."¹⁰ Information-psychological security includes measures to combat enemy actions that would have a negative effect upon the correlation of moral-psychological forces, and measures to curtail or reverse any information-psychological impact upon population groups or Russian society in general. Information-psychological security should also counteract any negative effects of information operations upon the moral-psychological preparation of the soldier.

A system of information-psychological security is important because:

In the past half century the potential for working on the consciousness, psyche, or morale of a person, society, or the composition of an armed force has grown dramatically. One of the main reasons is the considerable success achieved by many countries in their systematic research in the areas of psychology, psychotronics, parapsychology, other new psychophysical phenomenon, bioenergy, biology, bio fields, and psychoenergy in the fields of security and defense.¹¹

A Russian perspective on information-psychological security tasks for friendly troops, as well as the basic content of information-psychological warfare tasks against enemy troops, is shown in the following chart.¹²

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| <p><i>The Basic Content of Russian Information-Psychological Warfare</i></p> |
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Analyzing the moral-psychological environment in Russia, in strategic areas, on the operational axes and in the areas where operations are taking place.

Seeking, collecting, analyzing and summarizing information about the capabilities of potential participants in conflict.

Forecasting the probable nature of and possible impact of enemy PSYOP on the Russian forces and population.

Halting (or mitigating the effects of) enemy PSYOP on the strategic level, using all branches of service, branches of arms and special forces.

Carrying out measures to counteract the constant and large-scale ideological and info-psychological influence on the Russian forces and the Russian population.

Neutralizing the negative consequences of the enemy's influence on the consciousness, the morale and the mental state of service personnel.

Constantly shielding the troops and the populace from info-psychological influences.

Preparing the forces and the means to conduct info-psychological warfare.

Carrying out info-psychological and special operations to lower the morale and the psychological state of the enemy's forces and population, and to demoralize and disinform them.

Exerting constant info-psychological influence on the enemy's personnel and population.

Conducting psycho-energetic warfare and other types of nontraditional influence on the consciousness and the mental state of the enemy.

Developing the methodology and the theory of info-psychological warfare, and developing recommendations and proposals for government agencies and for military leadership.

Psychological attacks

Some Russian military theorists believe that contemporary developments in military affairs, especially the U.S. emphasis on information warfare techniques, indicate that the information-psychological confrontation has become an independent type of military activity,¹³ much like the defense or the offense. As a result, in any armed conflict, the use of military force will be preceded by measures designed to act on the consciousness, morale and psyche of people.¹⁴ This makes superiority in the information-psy- chological confrontation necessary for success.

There is a close link between information warfare and the information-psychological confrontation. One Russian officer noted:

The main objective of information war is to capture the consciousness of the population of the Russian Federation, to undermine the moral-fighting potential of the armed forces; i.e., to set the stage for political, economic, and military penetration. With this goal in mind, both secret information and psychological operations (actions) are being prepared and continuously conducted, not just by designated state structures of traditional enemies of Russia, but also by its allies and friendly countries.¹⁵

The same officer also blamed most of the current ills of Russian society, including an increase in psychological illness, on the information-warfare activities of states hostile to Russia. He concluded that in crisis situations, such activities would cause more mental or trauma casualties than in any preceding war.¹⁶ As a result, the armed forces must address the information-psychological challenge by creating systems to counteract any information-psychological operation directed against Russia.¹⁷

Another Russian officer noted that information-psychological operations should be considered a combat weapon. He believes that the failure to counteract or to respond to these operations, which he calls "propaganda," can hasten one's defeat, as in the case of the Iraqi army in the Persian Gulf War. This officer's study of U.S. operations, written in 1994, came to the following conclusions:

- It is essential to ensure the comprehensive theoretical elaboration of the problem of propaganda and psychological support in peacetime, in periods of aggravated military political confrontation, and in wartime.*
- It is expedient to unite the bodies involved in providing propaganda and psychological support for the armed forces of Russia with a common goal and a single command-and-control structure.*
- Commanders at all levels must become proficient in the use of psychological-support organizations, and there should be a training course on the subject in the military curriculum.*
- Technical-support equipment must be continuously updated.¹⁸*

A new MOS?

One of the more interesting suggestions by a Russian officer is that it would be wise to form a special military occupational specialty within the Russian military to train specialists in the art of counteracting and containing information. Special financing would be required because of the unique nature of the training.



U.S. PSYOP persuaded large numbers of Iraqi soldiers to surrender during the Gulf War. Russian theorists consider information-psychological activities to be an independent type of military activity

This suggestion reaffirms Russia's desire to put in place, during peacetime, specialists who can detect information operations oriented against either Russian society or the armed forces, or who can initiate offensive operations on their own. Such operations could range from subtle, provocative voice-synthesis operations designed to "hypnotize" victims, to virus attacks on computers. Not instituting such countermeasures could be dangerous:

As specialists note, it's worse to fall behind here [the information - psychological confrontation] than to fall behind in cybernetics. Non-resolution of the problems of the information-psychological confrontation makes the consolidation of society and the stabilization of the situation in the state impossible, even though they are fundamental to the rebirth of Russia.¹⁹

Conclusions

Russia is extremely interested in the development and the implementation of information operations by powerful nations around the world. Information operations have serious implications for Russia in both a technical and a moral psychological sense. Because of the current psychological instability that permeates Russia, the Russians view information operations with alarm, suspicion and mistrust. The Russians have identified the information security of the individual, of the society and of the state as a priority of national interest.

The Russian military is particularly interested in the impact of information operations on the moral-psychological character of its soldiers because this is a Russian principle of war. We should expect the Russian military to be vigilant in its attempts to exploit information operations against the soldiers of other countries.

Discussion of the PSYOP concept and related issues is on the rise. A March 1994 Russian TV program noted that although every military unit has a psychologist, the problem of creating a psychological service has not been solved.²⁰ A March 29, 1996, report indicated that a decision had been made to recreate the unified military news system, since the first job is to win the "news war." Most likely because of media problems during the Chechnya conflict, some military specialists believe that various mass-media elements are waging war against the Army.²¹

Finally, a May 23, 1996, report in the Russian newspaper Moskovskiy Komsomolets speculated that the Russian military might return to "propaganda" units as a means of controlling information. Reportedly, coded cables were sent to each military district, and commanders were asked to offer their opinions on subordinating each district press center to the Main Directorate of Educational Work. The report suggested that such a subordination would eventually lead to the educational directorate's control of the press centers, the military press and special propaganda divisions. In other words, "all those services that, prior to 1991, together with the political agencies, constituted the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy."²²

The above discussion contains several suggestions for U.S. planners. First, it is clear that the U.S., at the joint-staff or strategic level, must not lose sight of developments in the PSYOP arena. Not only is Russia exploring potential means of using PSYOP as a weapon, but so are some of America's enemies, and they may not be bound by the same rules of employment of PSYOP weaponry as the U.S.

Second, U.S. planners must recognize the increasing synchronization of PSYOP and information operations--the two may become inseparable in the near future because of the ability of both to influence the psyches of decision makers and soldiers alike. The PSYOP/information-actions interface may indeed become, as many Russians believe it will, an independent type of military activity worthy of closer study and more creative utilization.

Endnotes

¹E.G. Korotchenko, "Informatsionno-psikhologicheskoye protivoborstvo v sovremennykh usloviyakh" [Information - psychological confrontation under modern conditions], *Voennoye Mysl* [Military Thought], January/February 1996, 22-28.[BACK](#)

²Evidence is mounting that the term "information-psychological" is replacing the term "propaganda." For example, in the article "Nezavisimoye voennoye obozreniye" [The Bloodless and Noiseless Means], 27 January 1996, 2, author Nikolai Plotnikov discusses "indirect propaganda (information-psychological) actions"; and Andrei Mikailov's article "Nezavisimoye voennoye obozreniye" [The Word--Also a Weapon] 13 January 1996, 2, carries the subheading "information-psychological support of military actions by Russian forces in Chechnya." The journal *Orientir*, which appears to be devoted to many PSYOP-type articles, very seldom uses the word "propaganda," replacing it with the more popular "information-psychological." [BACK](#)

³For the U.S. armed forces, PSYOP involves changing attitudes or manipulating someone's thoughts, emotions, impressions or beliefs through intimidation, black mail, disinformation or rumor. PSYOP finds particular utility at the operational and tactical levels of military activities. PSYOP techniques are universal, yet cheap, if put into the hands of skilled and competent operators.[BACK](#)

⁴Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia* (New York: Random House, 1994), 278. [BACK](#)

⁵Clifford Reid, "Reflexive Control in Soviet Military Planning," in *Soviet Strategic Deception*, edited by Brian Daily and Patrick Parker (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books), 294.[BACK](#)

⁶Disinformation is a Russian technique for manipulating perceptions and information, and for misinforming people or groups. Some disinformation procedures are obvious, some are unconvincing, and some work through delayed perceptions, rumors, repetition or arguments. Specific persons or particular social groups can serve as disinformation targets. The purpose of a disinformation campaign is to influence the consciousness and mind of man. In Russia today, where there is an unstable public political and socio-economic situation, the entire population could serve as the target of influence for an enemy campaign.[BACK](#)

⁷M. Ionov, "Control of the Enemy," *Morskoy Sbornik* No. 7, July 1995, 29-31, as reported in FBIS-UMA-95-172-S, 6 September 1995, 24-27.[BACK](#)

⁸*Ibid.*, 25.[BACK](#)

⁹Aleksander Cherkasov, "Formirovat' gotovnost'k boyu" [Forming Military Readiness] *Orientir*, June 1995, p. 15. Translation by Robert Love, Foreign Military Studies Office.[BACK](#)

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 47.[BACK](#)

¹¹*Ibid.*, 45.[BACK](#)

¹²*Ibid.*, 25.[BACK](#)

¹³Aleksander Cherkasov "The Front Where Shots Aren't Fired," *Orientir*, April 1995, 48.[BACK](#)

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 52[BACK](#)

¹⁵. Korotchenko, 23 [BACK](#)

¹⁶. *Ibid.*, 24 [BACK](#)

¹⁷. *Ibid.*, 27 [BACK](#)

¹⁸. N.D. Plotnikov, "Psychological Operations: Objectives, Tasks, Content," *Military Thought*, April 1994, 69. [BACK](#)

¹⁹. Korotchenko, 27. [BACK](#)

²⁰. *Moscow TV and Dubl Networks*, 27 March 1994, as reported in FBIS-SOV-94-061, 30 March 1994, 28. [BACK](#)

²¹. "News War at Defense Ministry," *Komso- molskaya Pravda*, 29 March 1996, 3, as reported in FBIS-SOV-96-062, 29 March 1996, 33. [BACK](#)

²². Aleksandr Khinshteyn, "Commissars in Dusty Helmets ... The Political Agencies Are Coming Back," *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 23 May 1996, 1, as reported in FBIS-SOV-96-101, 23 May 1996, 24, 25. [BACK](#)