

An Assessment of the *Initial Period of War*: Russia-Ukraine 2022 Part One

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Executive Summary

- This study describes the historical evolution of the Russian concept of the initial period of war (IPW). The concept has evolved substantially since its inception, which can be traced back to at least the early 1900s, but it generally pertains to the decisive strategic operations that occur during the first few days of war, that set conditions for strategic success, and the activities that occur before the war (period of imminent threat or preparation period in Russian military parlance) that make these strategic operations possible;
- It is important to note that the evolution of the IPW is closely linked to technological developments associated with the changing character of war. As an example, upon reflection about the Soviet failures of IPW in World War II, Soviet scholars attributed these failures to Soviet expectations that preparations for IPW in World War II would be conducted in the same manner as World War I. IPW preparations for the latter involved belligerents covertly putting elements of the armed forces onto wartime status, preparations for mobilization and deployment of forces, some initial (relatively) minor border engagements intended to protect assembly areas to facilitate decisive operations by the main force;
- Due to the technological innovations of the interwar period, the capabilities of weapons and military equipment were greatly increased. In addition, increased industrialization and economic power permitted nations, such as Nazi Germany, to maintain their militaries in a high state of mobilization readiness. The net effect of these developments was to substantially change the IPW preparation activities for World War II. In the Soviet view, Nazi Germany's developments in the interwar period permitted the rapid massing and deployment of forces, while simultaneously being able to destroy troop formations and critical infrastructure. This meant that while Nazi Germany was still mobilizing, it was able to immediately route the first echelon of Soviet forces, while hindering further Soviet mobilization and deployment, setting the conditions which they believed would result in victory;
- As military technology develops, so does the IPW concept. The study also traces how the Soviets thought about IPW during the Cold War, and how prominent Russian military theorists understand IPW in more recent conflicts. Perhaps the most important conflict of recent years, from an IPW perspective, is the 1991 Gulf War. This application of IPW by the coalition, used precision guided munitions and massive air and missile strikes to destroy Iraqi air defense and command and control systems, that set conditions for a successful ground campaign, and eventual coalition victory. From the perspective of Russian military theory, the 1991 Gulf War was the *par excellence* example of what success during the IPW could achieve;
- Thus, the senior officer leadership of Russia's Armed Forces fully understand both the significance of the IPW both in terms of military theory and in reference to historical examples. Yet, this does not yield a unified approach toward its planning. There are no templates involved, little by way of discernible patterns, with the objectives, tactics and scheme employed in the IPW varying from conflict to conflict;
- Moreover, contemporary Russian military theorists following the tradition set by their Soviet predecessors tend mainly to focus their analysis of the IPW on large-scale interstate war. absent a template to plan and execute in the IPW in such a war, it appears predominantly conducted on an *ad hoc* basis. Equally, Soviet-Russian military theorists such as Makhmut Gareev rightly noted that the Russian military does not possess a strong pedigree in the area of the IPW; paradoxically, while theory recognizes the importance of the IPW — though not decisive in its essence — many historical examples serve to highlight under performance proving to be the rule rather than the exception;
- Again, these failures in the conduct of military operations within any given IPW reflect changing technologies and the unique circumstances of each conflict. Bearing in mind these crucial caveats, this study makes some observations regarding the mishandling of the IPW in earlier wars, and lays the foundation for understanding Russian actions during the first few days of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

Russia's President Vladimir Putin ordered his Armed Forces to launch a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marking not only an unprovoked attack on the country's neighbor but the largest war in Europe since World War II. Putin's decision to attack Ukraine on this scale was long in the making, stemming from Moscow's objections to the Euromaidan revolution in 2014 that swept aside the government of Viktor Yanukovich and the seizure of Crimea and the destabilization of southeastern Ukraine that ensued, with almost eight years of low intensity conflict in Donbas. Russia's political leadership had grown tired of its diplomatic efforts to compel Kyiv to implement a Russian interpretation of the 2014-15 Minsk agreements and following a fresh military force buildup on Ukraine's borderlands in 2021-22 on February 21, Putin finally signed into law a recognition of the independence of the Donbas regions of Luhansk and Donetsk setting the course for the war that began three days later.¹

Despite concerted and coordinated efforts by the US and its allies to warn Moscow not to attack Ukraine under the threat of an unprecedented international sanctions regime, Putin still chose to authorize what was characterized officially as a *spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya* (special military operation) with his regime outlawing any public reference to this as a war. Putin's numerous contacts with foreign political leaders, bilateral diplomatic interchanges, or his public speeches on February 21 and February 24 to justify the attack on Ukraine never delineated Moscow's war aims, reasons for the operation, or any effort to present a *casus belli* for the war.² It was, therefore, left to western governments, Russia experts and international media to guess or discern these aims from what was occurring on-the-ground.

Despite the near complete absence of detailed data on the ensuing Russian military operations in Ukraine from Russian sources due to state secrecy surrounding ongoing military operations, most coverage of the war — disbalanced towards Ukrainian sources — mainly provided evidence that Russia's Armed Forces were under performing. Indeed, governments and specialists on Russian military strategy and capabilities mostly anticipated a short decisive war in Russia's favor.³ The following study is limited to the opening of the war, seeking to examine the course of the initial

¹ Putin's nationally televised speech in Russia on February 21, 2022 in which he justified the recognition of the Donbas was transcribed and published in all the Russian professional military journals in March 2022. See, for example: V.V. Putin, '*O priznanii nezavisimosti i suvereniteta Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki i Luganskoy Narodnoy Respubliki*,' (On the recognition of independence and sovereignty of Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic), *Voyennaya Mysl'*, No.3, pp.6-20.

² Dmitry Litovkin, '*Nam obeshchali, chto dal'she territorii Donbassa voyennyye deystviya vestis' ne budut* (We were promised that military operations would not be conducted further than the territory of Donbas),' *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, February 24, 2022. https://www.ng.ru/armies/2022-02-24/1_8379_territory.html, Accessed, May 17, 2022.

³ Barbara Starr, Ellie Kaufman and Jeremy Herb, 'Top US general in Europe says there 'could be' an intelligence gap in US that caused US to overestimate Russia's capabilities,' *CNN Online*, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/29/politics/tod-wolters-intelligence-gap-us-russia-ukraine/index.html>, March 29, 2022, Accessed, May 17, 2022; Max Boot, 'Stop overestimating the Russian military and underestimating Ukrainians,' *Washington Post Online*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/28/stop-overestimating-russian-military-and-under-estimating-ukrainians-one-month-war/>, March 28, 2022, Accessed, May 17, 2022.

period of war in terms of what Russian forces were doing, attempting and how this impacted on the course of the war.

Consequently, this study focuses entirely on the concept and conduct of the *initial period of war* and what lessons may be drawn from events that occurred in Ukraine. It raises a number of questions in relation to the concept and its practical application. How did the concept of the initial period of war develop within Soviet and Russian military thought? Why did this phase of war come to hold such high value? How did this function in Russian and Soviet military history and what is its connection with military theory? Does the contemporary Russian General Staff have a recognizable approach to using this concept in its operational planning and operational design? What is the relationship of this planning and design to the timescale and purposes of the early days of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine? What did Russia's military do in the earliest stages of operations in Ukraine in 2022? Does the underperformance and failure to secure key objectives in the initial period of war in Ukraine denote underlying systemic planning and operational weaknesses within the Russian military? What is the significance of the term 'special military operation', and how did it likely influence Russian planning related to the initial period of war? Are there any lessons learned from Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine that could be applicable to the initial period of war in a Russia-NATO conflict?

As a result, the study divides into two parts. The first part examines the origins and meaning in the Russian use of the concept of the initial period of war. It further grounds this within the historical context of Soviet and contemporary Russian military thought, essentially exploring the correlation between the concept of the initial period of war its importance in military thought and its results in actual war.⁴ Aspects of the importance of the initial period of war are illustrated by the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008, reflection of overall weaknesses in the Russian military concentrated in the opening day of the war many of which were later used to justify reforming the Armed Forces, and how this relates to issues of time and space on the modern battlefield.⁵ With reference to the evolution of the concept and historical examples it is argued that Russia's Armed Forces possess a twin legacy of not only deep seated awareness of the value of the initial period of war but also one of under performance. However, this does not constitute an assertion of historical inevitability: Russia's Armed Forces crossing the Ukrainian borders in February 2022 had no systemic weakness structurally or in other areas that predisposed them to fail either generally in the war or its initial period.

The second part concentrates exclusively on the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022. It sketches the force buildup on Ukraine's borders in 2021-22 and then examines the on-the-ground details of the opening days of the war. This involves trying to understand what the Russian military was doing and trying to achieve, and then extrapolating any potential lessons learned of what Russian actions related to the

⁴ This is encapsulated in one of the classic works in this field: Makhmut Gareev, *Esli zavtra voyna?* (If War Comes Tomorrow), Moscow: Vldar, 1995.

⁵ Vadim Solovyev, 'Voennaya reforma 2009 – 2012 (Military reform 2009 – 2012),' *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, http://nvo.ng.ru/forces/2008-12-12/1_reform.html, December 12, 2008; Vitaliy Shlykov, 'Blitzkig Anatoliya Serdyukova (The Blitzkrieg of Anatoliy Serdyukov),' *Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kurier*, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/4-320/2009-05-02-13-24-27/10988>, February 9, 2010, Accessed, May 17, 2022.

initial period of war might entail.⁶ The study then turns to assess the flaws in Russian operational design and planning that served to weaken the performance of its military forces in the theater of operations in February 2022, before offering provisional conclusions in the absence of detailed Russian data on the conduct of this or later phases of the war.

1. The IPW in Soviet and Russian Military Thought

In late imperial Russian history, the study of the IPW received increased attention among military theorists and military historians. The term IPW, as noted, became mainstream in Soviet military thought as early as the 1920s. This process was stimulated by the study of two wars in which imperial Russia had experienced defeat: its entry into World War I in 1914 and the Russo-Japanese War (February 8, 1904 to September 5, 1905).⁷ Indeed, many of the Soviet Union's pre-World War II theorists had served as young officers in the Russo-Japanese War. This analytical and pragmatic interest in what became referred to as *nachal'nyy period voyny* (*initial period of war*), was gradually further entrenched in military thought during the Soviet era — especially as a result of the lasting impact on military thought caused by Germany's attack on the Soviet Union that began on June 22, 1941 — which remains a critically important area of analysis and military theory among contemporary senior Russian military officers. As in other areas of Russian military theory it is crucial to define how the term is understood from a Russian perspective, and how it is used — or evolves — in its conceptual definition over time. Prior to outlining its meaning, with its distinctive origins and features in Russian military culture, for simplicity and clarity throughout the following study the term *initial period of war* is abbreviated in English as IPW.

At the outset it is worth noting that there are subtle but noticeable differences within the apparently authoritative sources on the meaning of the term. For example, in 2001, the official *NATO-Russia Glossary of Contemporary Political and Military Terms* defined the IPW as follows:

Initial period of war. An interval during which the belligerents conduct operations to achieve their immediate strategic objectives using force groupings constituted before the war and further deployed at its outset. At the same time there may be mobilization and strategic deployment of the armed forces, transition of the national economy to a war footing and associated political démarches.⁸

The Russian language version in the same glossary translates as:

⁶ Oleg Falichev, Sergey Pershutkin, 'Podvodnyye rify spetsoperatsii: Rossiyskoye obshchestvo, naseleniye Ukrainy i taktika informatsionnoy bor'by (Underwater reefs of the special operation: Russian society, the population of Ukraine and the tactics of information warfare),' *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2022-03-24/3_1182_reefs.html, March 24, 2022, Accessed, May 17, 2022.

⁷ *Istoriya russkoy armii i flota*, Moscow, 1911; Novitskiy V.F, *Zashita dissertatsii polkovnikom, Izvestiya Ni- kolayevskoy Imperatorskoy Voyennoy akademii*, No. 30, 1912; Apushkin V.A, *Russko-yaponskaya vojna*, Moscow, 1911; Parskiy D.P, *Prichiny nashikh neudach v voyne s Yaponiyey. Neobkhodimyye reformy v armii*, SPb., 1906; Parskiy D.P, *Vospominaniya i mysli o posledney voyne (1904-1905 gg.)*, SPb: Shneur, 1906.

⁸ NATO-Russia Glossary of Contemporary Political and Military Terms, June 2001, <https://www.nato.int/docu/glossary/eng/15-main.pdf>, pp. 100.

Initial period of war. The period of time during which the belligerents conduct military operations to achieve the primary strategic goals of the Armed Forces groupings created before the war and additionally deployed since its beginning. At the same time, measures can be taken to mobilize and strategically deploy the Armed Forces, transfer the state's economy to work in wartime conditions and appropriate political actions.⁹

This version of the IPW, suggests that after the outbreak of kinetic hostilities, additional steps are taken to include additional mobilization of forces and further force deployments possibly accompanied by transitioning the national economy to a wartime economy — depending on the scale of the conflict. However, other interpretations offer more nuance. For example, in an online Russian encyclopedia, the IPW is described as:

The period of time during which the belligerents conduct military operations to achieve the primary strategic goals of the groupings of the armed forces created before the war and additionally deployed at the beginning of the war. Simultaneously with this, measures can be carried out to mobilize and strategically deploy the armed forces, to transfer the state's economy to work in wartime conditions, and to carry out appropriate political actions.¹⁰

Additionally, according to the official Russian defense ministry encyclopedic dictionary, the IPW is defined in detail as:

The period of war during which the belligerent states are conducting combat operations with Armed Forces, forces deployed before the outbreak of war, to reach *the nearest strategic purposes*¹¹ or to create favorable conditions for entry into the war of the main forces and the conduct of subsequent military operations; the corresponding foreign policy is carried out. Actions, full mobilization, deployment of the Armed Forces and the transfer of the country's economy to martial law.

The main content of the IPW; responding to aggression by *conducting strategic operations*.¹² Nuclear forces, repel aerospace attacks, are the first to defend. Operations and combat operations of the fleet in the maritime theater of operations. The contents of the IPW: *ambiguous, very complex and contradictory, directly dependent on geopolitics, the position of the country, the goals and scale of the impending war, the methods of unleashing it, the weapons used, struggle and other factors*.¹³

The term IPW began to be used from the 1920s and in the twentieth century. According to the experience of wars in recent centuries, its duration ranges from several days to several months.

In the present conditions the IPW can be the most difficult and stressful period. The opposing sides, making the most of the information confrontation, surprise and power of the previously created and secretly deployed weapons and forces to achieve the main goals of the war, will be carried out by their first strategy and simultaneous operations to fulfil it. The deployment of weapons, forces and the solution of tasks to mobilize the resources of the state for the needs of the war.

The IPW may be preceded by a threatened period, in the course of which the opposing states carry out spontaneous preparation for war. In addition to the initial period, it may have one or more subsequent and final periods.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Yuridicheskaya entsiklopediya*, Accessed, May 17, 2022.

¹¹ Authors emphasis.

¹² Authors emphasis.

¹³ Author's emphasis.

¹⁴ *Encyclopedia.mil.ru*, Accessed, May 17, 2022.

This adds significant detail to alternative definitions, noting that the term originates in the 1920s, and marks a precursor to other conflict phases and states that the IPW content is “ambiguous, very complex and contradictory, directly dependent on geopolitics, the position of the country, the goals and scale of the impending war, the methods of unleashing it, the weapons used, struggle and other factors.”¹⁵ In 2012, writing in the General Staff journal *Voyennaya Mysl'*, (Military Thought) two well-established authorities on the theme of future warfare Colonel (reserve) Sergei Chekinov and Lieutenant-General (retired) Sergei Bogdanov, both researchers in the elite and influential Center for Military-Strategic Research Under the General Staff (*Tsentr Voenno-Strategicheskikh Issledovaniy* —TsVSI), defined the IPW as when warring states:

Conduct military operations involving groups of their armed forces that were deployed before the start of the war to achieve their short-term strategic objectives or to create favorable conditions for committing their main forces and continuing with more operations.¹⁶

These authors could not be clearer that the IPW begins with pre-deployed force groupings of opposing militaries attempting to achieve “short-term strategic objectives,” or to form the most favorable conditions in which to later deploy their main forces.¹⁷ Thus, the term IPW contains an elasticity in its historical and contextual usage, depending very much on the specifics of individual cases under discussion. For example, it need not imply immediate kinetic contact, as exemplified in the time lag between Great Britain declaring war on Germany on September 3, 1939 and actual combat following only several months later. Yet, it also over time came to contain very salient features that persist in contemporary senior General Staff thinking in relation to the concept and its application in operational planning. Discussion and analysis of the IPW among Russian military theorists and historians can also vary among individual authors.¹⁸

Equally, given the extent to which the means and methods of modern warfare have changed during Soviet and in recent Russian history the concept of the IPW has consequently evolved.¹⁹ The modernization of Russia’s conventional Armed Forces commencing in late 2008, rooted in digitizing and informationizing its structures, naturally generated deeper and further interest among Russian military scientists —

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Chekinov, S.G, and S. A. Bogdanov, ‘*Nachal’nyye periody voyn i ikh vliyaniye na podgotovku strany k voyne budushchego* (Initial Periods of War and Their Impact on a Country’s Preparations for a Future War),’ *Voyennaya Mysl'*, No. 11, 2012, pp. 14-27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ A. Kalistratov, ‘*Voyna i sovremennost* (War and Modernity),’ *Armeskiy Sbornik*, No. 7, 2017, pp. 5-17.

¹⁹ Nikolai Tyutyunnikov, *Voyennaya mysl' v terminakh i opredeleniyakh: v trekh tomakh* (Military Thought in Terms and Definitions: In Three Volumes), Pero, 2018, Volume III, pp. 160; O. V. Tikhanychev, ‘*O roli sistematicheskogo ogneвого vozdei'stviia v sovremennykh operatsiiakh* (On the role of systematic fire action in modern operations),’ *Voyennaya Mysl'*, No. 11, November 2016, pp. 16-20; V. Burenok, ‘*Bazis setecentricheskikh voyn – operezhenie, intellekt, innovacii* (Basis for Network-Centric Wars: Anticipation, Intellect, Innovations),’ *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, April 2, 2010; V. Burenok, A. Kravchenko and S. Smirnov, ‘*Kurs – na stsentrcheskuiu sistemu vooruzheniia* (Course – for a netcentric weapon system),’ *Vozdushno Kosmicheskaya Oborona*, May 2009.

both in terms of the various themes they analyze and also in how they think about the IPW. Thus, from a Russian military perspective the IPW is an extremely complex process integral to the historical example of any particular war; as will be shown by reference to Soviet and Russian military thought there are key elements of what is considered by theorists and historians as intrinsic to the IPW.

Soviet Military Thought on the IPW

Early work by Soviet military scientists on the IPW examined transformative developments in warfare occurring in continental Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and was further driven by analysis of the IPW in the Russo-Japan war (1904-05). In the 1920s and 1930s this was a flourishing area of early Soviet military thought. In March-April 1934, for example, *Voina i Revoliutsiia*, the Red Army's leading journal and the forerunner of the General Staff journal *Voyennaya Mysl'*, published an extensive bibliography on the problems of future war and operational art, in which the IPW featured heavily.²⁰ Thus, the IPW was being heavily analyzed by Soviet military theorists long before the traumatic events of June 1941: it was recognized an indispensable part of the study of war and military art. Russian military historians and theorists in the early twentieth century had recognized the centrality of the IPW in war planning, and its potential to influence the following phases of conflict. More recently, in 2004, Lieutenant-General (retired) Sergei Bogdanov observed of this period:

A radical turning point in the reduction of the terms of mobilization and an increase in the rate of movement of troops took place in the second half of the nineteenth century under the influence of the rapid growth of productive forces, in particular metallurgy and transport, when railways were used for the first time for the strategic deployment of armies. 'Under the influence of the railways and careful preparation for war,' noted the famous Russian military theorist G.Ye. Leer (1829-1904), 'now the preparatory period has been significantly reduced, wars can arise more suddenly, and the first strikes will be more decisive.' So, at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), Prussia, using the railways, managed to transfer an army of 400,000 over a distance of 550 km in 11 days at a rate of 50 km per day. As a result, it significantly outstripped the French army in readiness of the main forces for the outbreak of hostilities and delivered a strong blow at a time when it had not yet had time to fully implement its strategic deployment. This allowed the Prussian army to achieve great success at the beginning of the war.²¹

As the preparatory period before war contracted in its length, so the first strikes consequently could be more influential in shaping the conflict. In the late imperial Russian era, its military theorists held that by preempting an adversary if not offering a guarantee of success could at least avoid defeat.²² These theorists and historians were in turn heavily influenced by the changes in the imperial army such as the mobilization system and compulsory military service and the role this might play in impacting upon the IPW. Technological changes in the conduct of warfare was also playing a key role in military thought, especially how this facilitated a reduction in the timescales from declaring war to commencing combat operations. Changes in

²⁰ N. Ivanov, 'Voennotekhnicheskaiia literatura po voprosam kharaktera budushchei voyny i operativnogo iskusstva (Military technical literature on the nature of a future war and operational art),' *Voina i Revoliutsiia*, March-April 1934, pp. 112-117.

²¹ Lieutenant-General (retired) S.A. Bogdanov, 'Nachal'nyi period voyny istoriya i sovremennost' (The initial period of the war history and modernity),' *Voyennaya Mysl'*, No.11, 2004, pp. 15-24.

²² Leer, G.A., *Korennyye voprosy (voyennyye etyudy) (Fundamental questions (military studies))*, SPb., 1897; Leer, G.A., *Strategiya (Taktika teatra voyennykh deystviy) (Strategy (Tactics of Theater of Military Operations))*, Ch. 1-3, SPb., 1885—1889.

technology which in turn impacted on military capability for the armies of the major powers, the rapid growth of railroad infrastructure markedly enhancing strategic mobility meant that the IPW was contracting in its timescale: the main combatant forces could come into conflict at a much earlier stage.²³

Russia's entry into World War I in 1914 resulted in an entirely different set of calculations regarding the IPW. Moscow tried to seize the strategic initiative by entering the war with only part of its forces without waiting for full deployment of its troops; while much of its overall standing force was on a counter-revolutionary footing. The major powers entering the war considered that the hostilities from the first clashes until the end of the war would be active, maneuverable, and therefore intended to end the war in a short time with mobilization of reserves of military equipment, weapons and ammunition that were accumulated before the war.²⁴ Moreover, they attached decisive importance to the initial operations of their main forces and counted on preempting their adversaries or, at any rate, not lagging behind them in mobilization and operational deployment. Instead of a lightning-fast mobile war, for which the opposing sides were preparing, it turned out to be a protracted positional war of attrition lasting more than four years.²⁵

Bogdanov summarized the work of Soviet military theorists in their examination of Russia's experience of World War I:

The experience of the First World War confirmed and consolidated the tendencies that manifested themselves back in the wars of the nineteenth century, firstly, to intensify hostilities in the interval between the declaration of war and the introduction of the main forces into battle, and, secondly, to further shift the moment of collision of the main forces to the beginning of the war. For the first time, such a tendency clearly manifested itself as the desire of the opposing sides, even before the declaration of war, to carry out certain preparatory measures, which in the nineteenth century were usually carried out after the declaration of war [...] Under the decisive influence of these tendencies, the character of the initial period of the war continued to change. In its content, the proportion of military operations increased and, on the contrary, the proportion of preparatory measures decreased.²⁶

As shown by reference to these historical experiences of war rather than simply focusing on the theory of the IPW, the concept itself was undergoing dramatic revision in response to how these wars were being fought: preexisting approaches to the IPW had to be reconsidered in light of advances in technology and the changing character of war. In the inter-war period in the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet military science was drawing lessons from past conflicts and encouraged a forward looking culture in the work of its leading military scientists —many of whom fell victim to

²³ David R. Stone, 'Misreading Svechin: Attrition, Annihilation, and Historicism,' *The Journal of Military History*, No. 76, July 2012, pp. 673–693; V.A. Sukhomlinov, *Byloye (Past)*, Moscow, 1925; Kuropatkin : *Iz vospominaniy o Russko-yaponskoy voyne (From the memoirs of the Russo-Japanese War)*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1908.

²⁴ I. Rostunov (Ed.), *Istoriya Pervoy Mirovoy Voyny 1914—1918 (History of the First World War 1914-1918)*, Vol. I, Moscow: Nauka, 1975, Ch.3-4.

²⁵ *Chetyrokhletnyaya vojna 1914—1918 g. i yeyo epokha (Four Years' War 1914-1918 and its epoch)*, *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar' Granat*, T. 46, T. 47, T. 48, Moscow: *Russkiy bibliograficheskiy institut Granat*, 1925-1927; *Rossiia v mirovoy voyne 1914-1918 gg. (v tsifrah)*, Moscow: 1925; John Keegan, *The First World War*, Hutchinson, 1998.

²⁶ Bogdanov, 'Nachal'nyy period voyny istoriya i sovremennost', *Op.Cit.*

Stalin's purges of the Soviet officer corps in the late 1930s.²⁷ It was, however, the experience of the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) and especially its IPW that began in June 1941 that came to be a central focal point in the later work of Soviet military historians and theorists, the legacy of which still influences contemporary Russian military thought.²⁸

The events of June 1941, and the onset of Germany's massive invasion of the Soviet Union remains the single most analyzed and dominant theme in both Soviet and contemporary Russian military thought.²⁹ This also relates to its IPW and the sense of strategic shock marking the Wehrmacht's attack on the USSR initiated on June 22, 1941. The Soviet experience of the IPW in June 1941, marks the most significant factor in the evolution of Russian military thought on the changing character of the IPW. It was a disastrous under performance in this IPW that took two years to recover from before the tide of the war turned in favour of the Red Army.³⁰ A number of the leading Soviet military theorists, such as Georgii Isserson (1898-1976), had not only accurately forecast the coming war with Germany but also identified its means and methods. These military theorists had also developed the principles of the deep operation that was later to prove decisive in securing the Soviet Union's victory over Germany.³¹ It was such leading military theorists, characterized in February 2013 by the Chief of the General Staff Army-General Valeriy Gerasimov as representing the "flowering" of Soviet military thought who were either shot or like Isserson, sent into the gulag system, in what many historians characterized as not simply Stalin's purges of the officer corps but a self-inflicted decapitation strike.³²

On the eve of the German attack on the USSR, much of the discussion about the IPW among Soviet military theorists centered upon their analysis of the lessons from the Wehrmacht campaigns in Poland (1939) and France (1940). Red Army commanders' ideas about the IPW was in a state of flux. Discussion began among the representatives of the command staff of the *Raboche Krestyanskaya Krasnaya Armiya* (The Red Army of Workers and Peasants) about the preparation, unleashing and waging of the German war.³³ Among the command staff of the Red Army, ideas about the IPW were widespread, which consisted in the fact that a war could begin suddenly, without a declaration, by operations of covering (invasion) armies as the

²⁷ Major-General (retired) Aleksandr Vladimirov, '*Osnovy obshchey teorii voyny* (The basics of the general theory of war),' *Op.Cit.*

²⁸ Arseniy Yermolov, '*Razvedka dolozhila netochno: Sovetskaya agentura nabiralas' opyta v khode voyny* (Reconnaissance reported inaccurately: Soviet agents gained experience during the war),' *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, No. 22, 2005.

²⁹ Colonel Mikhail Gorbатов, '*Nakanune velikoy otechestvennoy ('odium' bez mobilizatsii) chast' 2*, (On the eve the great patriotic war ('odium' lack of mobilization) part 2),' *Vestnik*, No. 2, 2016, pp. 173-182.

³⁰ See: David M. Glantz, 'The Red Army in 1941,' pp. 1-37; Jacob W. Kipp, 'Soviet War Planning,' pp.40-54 in Glantz, D, (Ed.), *The Initial Period of War on the Eastern Front, 22 June-August 1941*, London: Frank Cass 1993; Richard H. Phillips, *Soviet Military Debate on the Initial Period of War: Characteristics and Implications*, Cambridge MA: Center for International Studies, MIT, November 1989.

³¹ Triandafilov V. K, *Kharakter operatsiy sovremennykh armiy* (The character of operations of modern armies), Moscow, 1936.

³² Valeriy Gerasimov, '*Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii*,' *Op.Cit.*

³³ *Obraz nachal'nogo perioda voyny v predstavleniyakh komandnogo sostava Krasnoy Armii v 1931-1941 gg* (The initial period of the war in the views of the command staff of the Red Army in 1931-1941), Moscow: Izd vo Ippolitova, 2004.

first strategic echelon, which would disrupt mobilization, concentration and deployment of the main enemy forces and ensure the safety of similar measures of the main forces of their army, that is, the second strategic echelon.³⁴

Soviet defense strategy in the IPW in June 1941 had many reasons for its ultimate failures, and Soviet military historians and theorists also noted that this had involved morale and psychological factors. This included instability within the Red Army, insufficient motivation among military personnel, the “wait-and-see” attitude of the political leadership, a dangerously passive and opportunistic position of the local leadership, and the lack of initiative among lower commands and rank-and-file personnel of the Red Army.³⁵ In this context, both the attribution of all responsibility for the catastrophic defeat in the IPW to pre-war repressions, which had certainly hampered the response to the invasion, and the search for flaws in the pre-war strategy, which did not find a balance between defense and offense, were equally factors that resulted in the disastrous and inadequate handling of the IPW.³⁶

As Soviet senior officers and military theorists studied the lessons of the war, it had the knock-on effect of again elevating the centrality of the IPW in Soviet military thought. The IPW could be decisive, but was not considered to be necessarily decisive, yet getting the IPW wrong could undoubtedly prove costly. While this experience of war in 1941–45 still resonates strongly in Russian society and more specifically within its military culture and the mindset of its senior officers and commanders, it also marks out distinguishing characteristics of the IPW that will form part of Russian military thought for some time to come. These are interconnected and arguably pivotal themes: the achievement of strategic surprise over the enemy and seizing the initiative in operations.³⁷ Such features of Soviet thinking on the IPW permeate the contemporary discussion, despite the continued changes in the character of war in the twenty first century, providing a lasting fear of being on the receiving end of strategic surprise and loss of the initiative.

³⁴ Khlevov A. A., Koskova A. S. *Obraz, ‘Budushchey voyny’ kak element natsional’no-gosudarstvennoy identichnosti v SSSR 1920–1930-kh gg, ‘Epokha sotsialisticheskoy rekonstruktsii: idei, mify i programmy sotsial’nykh preobrazovaniy: Sb. nauch. tr./pod red. O. V. Gorbacheva, L. N. Mazur. Yekaterinburg, 2017, pp. 693–702.*

³⁵ Martirosian A, *22 iyunya 1941: tayny bol’she net. Okonchatel’nyye itogi razvedyvatel’no-istoricheskogo* (June 22, 1941: The secret no longer exists. The final results of the intelligence-historical investigation), Moscow: Veche, 2021.

³⁶ In a detailed article published in 1997, Jacob Kipp assessed the IPW in June 1941 from the perspective of the Red Army’s situation with regards to its covering forces. ‘This treatment of the situation confronting Soviet covering forces during the initial phase of the Great Patriotic War does not seek to mitigate the disasters which befell these forces or explain their fate as a necessary sacrifice foreseen by the genius of a single commander or contained in a long concealed plan for which the documentation has not yet been made public. The initial Soviet defeats were real and unintended. The recovery was painful, costly, and difficult. But the Soviets, unlike the Germans, and made one fundamentally sound pre-war decision. Whatever the plans and however bright the prospects of their success in the initial period of war, one had to prepare for a protracted war involving the total mobilization of the entire society. This prudence and the sacrifices of millions counter-balanced the failure of the covering forces in the initial period of war. As the military balance reverted more to the Soviet’s favor, the Red Army was able to get men and materiel to begin to execute its concept of deeply-echeloned defense. By 1943 theory, tested by the harsh experience of war, was reformulated, and new field regulations were developed. In its revised form Soviet operational art in the defensive was put to the test at Kursk.’ Jacob W. Kipp, ‘Barbarossa, Soviet Covering Forces and the Initial Period of War: Military History and Airland Battle,’ FMSO: Kansas, May 1997.

³⁷ Author discussions with Christopher N Donnelly, May 20, 2022.

Shifts in Russian Military Thought on the IPW

Contemporary Russian military thought contains much continuity with Soviet military thought in as much as this preoccupation with surprise and initiative persists. It is so embedded in the mindset of senior Russian military officers that it is near impossible to construe its absence in General Staff planning for the war in Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022. While the state of flux in terms of the shape and content of the IPW is constantly subject to revision based on an analysis and assessments of foreign wars, changes in military technologies or indeed Russia's own experience of the IPW in military conflicts the legacy of June 1941 predisposes Russian senior officers and planning staffs to regard the IPW as a priority area in defense planning. Since the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR, Russian military thought on the IPW has also experienced change commensurate with the shifting features of modern warfare marked by the transition away from mass manpower to massive exploitation of information-based technologies. Equally, despite the Russian Federation's experience since the early 1990s of low-intensity military conflicts the senior General Staff leadership continues to regard the United States and its NATO allies as representing the greatest potential danger to its national security. Complex interconnected areas of Russian military thought reflect these wider geopolitical realities, grappling with how the correlation of forces in the early stages of war with the US and NATO would play out prior to possible nuclear escalation. Still present within the theoretical discussions of the possible IPW in such circumstances is this underlying fear of a "surprise attack" resulting in the loss of the strategic initiative.³⁸

Yet contemporary Russian military thought is also preoccupied by the changes in the character of war itself, with its leading military theorists frequently examining these issues and related themes in the context of thinking about future warfare; primarily in recognition that a paradigm shift has occurred in the inherent nature of war denoted by its informationization. Russian military theorists broadly perceive these wider and deeper changes in how war is conducted in an informationized operational environment as having a direct bearing upon the content of the IPW. The IPW in this context has the potential to erupt suddenly with attacks on critical infrastructure and military targets exploiting both kinetic and non-kinetic means severely limiting the options for the defending side. Russian analyses of foreign wars including the Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003 naturally include observations concerning how these conflicts have marked changes in approach to the IPW.

Lieutenant-General (retired) Bogdanov has written on the themes of future warfare and the IPW. He has also co-authored articles in these areas with his colleague Colonel (reserve) Sergei Chekinov. These authors are influential within the broader context of contemporary Russian military thought, especially in providing intellectual underpinning for the Russian military leadership's efforts to modernize and transition

³⁸ Gennadiy Miranovich, 'Voennaya Reforma: Problemy i suzheniya. Geopolitika i bezopasnost' Rossii (Military Reform: Problems and Judgment. Geopolitics and Russian Security),' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, July 31, 1999; V. V. Kruglov, 'O Vooruzhennoy Bor'be Budushchego (On Future Armed Conflict),' *Voennaya Mysl'*, September-October 1998, No. 5, pp. 54-58; N. A. Sergeyev and D. A. Lovtsov, 'O probleme 'organizatsionnogo oruzhiya (On the Problem of the 'Organization Weapon'),' *Voyennaya Mysl'*, No. 1, 1999, p. 34; Vladimir Chebakov, 'Kto Tut 'Shmel'? Leninskuyu Premiyu Emu... (Who's the Shmel here? Give him the Lenin Prize),' *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No. 3, 2003; Yevgeniy Lisanov, 'Proyti Nad Propast'yu i Ne Svalit'sya (Pass Over the Abyss without Falling In),' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, June 4, 2008.

its conventional forces into the information era with new emphasis on high precision standoff strikes and moving away from platform-centric approaches to warfare. Bogdanov and Chekinov considered the linkages between the IPW and future warfare in an article in *Voyennaya Mysl'* in November 2012: '*Nachal'nyye periody voyn i ikh vliyaniye na podgotovku strany k voyne budushchego*,' (Initial Periods of War and Their Impact on a Country's Preparations for a Future War).³⁹ The authors argue that the IPW can emerge when a conflict is caused by natural resource depletion, contraction of economies, rising demographic and ethno-political tensions in some countries, or increased gaps in economic development and living standards. In their article they suggest that the IPW planning divides into three phases:

- Secretly committing forces prior to the war commencing;
- Creating suitable conditions for the main force;
- And an awareness that conditions will continuously change the initial parameters of the conflict.⁴⁰

Bogdanov and Chekinov then offered an outline of the main elements of the forms and methods of the IPW in future warfare:

- The warring sides must build up their forces in advance and *deploy them secretly* in order to achieve the war's main goals;
- *New technologies and concepts*, such as network-centric operations, will play a key role in the forms and methods of future conflict;
- New technologies include capabilities in outer space and cyberspace, information warfare, and *weapons based on new physical principles* (beam, geophysical, wave, genetic, and psychophysical);
- The goals of the IPW will be realized by employing *military, economic, and information technology measures* combined with the use of efficient *psychological information*.⁴¹

Turning briefly to Russia's military force buildup on Ukraine's borderlands in 2021-22, as witnessed by the open source satellite imagery, countless commentaries in western social media not to mention classified intelligence assessments by the US and its allies — some of which were deliberately put into the public domain — it is a near impossible goal to conduct such a deployment of forces in secret. Bogdanov and Chekinov also place great emphasis on the role to be played in future wars by network-centric approaches towards warfare or similar information-based concepts. Equally, the authors consider that as in historical instances of wars and how they are fought, war in the future will be shaped and impacted upon by the use and exploitation of new technologies, which can be innovative in the sense of making their first appearance in an operational environment or utilized in ways that outmatch adversary forces with similar capabilities. There is also an important assertion that the goals of the IPW itself will depend on the use of "military, economic, and information technology measures," adding into the mix "psychological information."⁴² It appears that in Bogdanov and Chekinov's views war waged by advanced high-technology militaries will require a mixture of military and non-military means to achieve overall objectives and that this relates strikingly in the construct of the IPW.

³⁹ Chekinov, Bogdanov, '*Nachal'nyye periody voyn i ikh vliyaniye na podgotovku strany k voyne budushchego*,' *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Author's emphasis.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Here there is an express correlation in the role of the IPW in Russian military thought and the new technologies and related innovative concepts. The need for covertness in the earliest phase and clearly applied to the IPW most likely stems from the continued emphasis in Russian military thought concerning the utility of *maskirovka* (deception measures). These linkages between military theorists discussing the IPW and their perspectives on future warfare is a recurring one. Another example of this is illustrated in September 2019, Lieutenant-General Aleksandr Serzhantov, Deputy Chief of the Academy of the General Staff and a former head of the TsVSI (2017-19) co-authored an article in *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (Independent Military Review) examining views on future warfare which again covered aspects of the IPW.⁴³ The authors presaged their assessment of the trends in the further development of Russian thinking on the IPW by noting:

In the future, based on the analysis of trends in the change in the nature of military conflicts, a scenario base for the unleashing and conduct of military operations for the future is formed. But today, when the boundaries between peace and war are blurring, this approach is clearly not enough. It is also necessary to study not only the content of wars and armed conflicts, but also the use of military force in an interstate confrontation in the interests of deterring a potential aggressor from military escalation and disrupting his efforts to achieve his goals by conducting hybrid actions.⁴⁴

Serzhantov, Mazhuga and Loyko picked up on the theme of the non-military measures proving to form an important feature of the IPW, presenting this as consistent with military history. They pointed to Bismark's fomenting of Hungarian nationalism during Prussia's war with Austria in 1866 to raise fears in Vienna of a nationalist uprising in Hungary and therefore induce the Austrian leadership to agree peace terms on Bismark's conditions. On the "active phase" of the IPW, the authors identify its core elements:

It is assumed that the beginning of the active phase will be determined by the degree of weakening or loss of the combat potential of the enemy's armed forces, primarily the strike potential. It will represent short-term stages of a massive complex-selective impact applied simultaneously in all spheres and throughout the territory of the state. New (not only physical) spheres of confrontation with new types of weapons appear, for which the priority is not physical, but functional defeat of the enemy.

For example, the state, which is a recognized leader in the field of high technologies, creates on their basis a complex system of command and control of troops and weapons for conducting military operations. And the more complex the system, the more vulnerable are the elements in it, the defeat of which will allow achievement of the set goal.

The boundaries between strategic, operational and tactical levels of actions are blurred, which implies the conduct of hostilities by autonomous, self-sufficient interspecific

⁴³ In 1982-1990 Serzhantov served as platoon commander, senior officer, battery commander, anti-aircraft artillery battery commander, command and control group commander, chief of reconnaissance of the anti-aircraft artillery regiment of the motorized rifle division of the combined-arms army of the Leningrad Military District. By presidential decree he was awarded the honorary title 'Honored Military Specialist of the Russian Federation.' Since 2021, he has been a member of the Scientific Council under the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Serzhantov, Aleksandr Vladimirovich, Academy of the General Staff, https://vagsh.mil.ru/O_VUZe/Nachalnik-akademii/item/306171/.

⁴⁴ Aleksandr Serzhantov, Sergei Mazhuga, Vladimir Loyko, 'Voyny gryadushchego: kakimi oni budut? Novyye stsennarii, zadachi i posledstviya (The wars of the future: What will they be? New scenarios, challenges and consequences),' *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2019-09-27/3_1063_futurewars.html, September 27, 2019.

groupings of troops (forces) that will be able not only to operate with impunity in remote areas (zones), but also to use the potential capabilities of forces and means operating in aerospace, at sea and in cyberspace with the aim of striking critical targets, creating conditions for the further development of the success of the operation. At the same time, the role of the ground forces is increasing and the range of tasks performed by them is expanding.⁴⁵

In this variant of the IPW, there is a repeated attention to the secret or covert elements of the early phase of the conflict, stressing that the boundaries between strategic, operational and tactical are in a process of fusion; the authors conceive of groups of forces operating “with impunity” in the IPW and exploiting various domains to attack critical targets. These themes on the IPW, which are heavily tied to viewing the United States and NATO as the potential adversary not only feature in the published output of contemporary Russian military scientists, they are also embedded in Military Doctrine (its last iteration was signed into law in December 2014).

In a CNA research memorandum in August 2021 on Russian tenets and concepts linked to military strategy, the IPW is equally linked to Russian threat perceptions and modeling of the likely content and shape of US/NATO operations against the Russian Federation in a future war. The CNA analysis, likewise, is based on the work of Russian theorists examining the IPW in US/NATO operations:

In the initial period of war, Russian military strategy continues to place strong emphasis on aerospace attack and defense, and information confrontation. The threat posed by a massed US/NATO aerospace assault in the initial period of war, increasingly characterized as an integrated massed air strike, continues to drive Russian operational concept development. Consequently, Russian military strategy prioritizes strategic operations to deflect or parry massed missile and air strikes. Conversely, combat operations increasingly adopt the rubric of defensive maneuver, dynamic raiding operations along the flanks, and capitalizing on massed fires/strikes. Ground forces shift to assault only when the opponent has been sufficiently degraded via fires, strikes, and means of functional defeat. Preserving the force is philosophically an evolution in Russian military art, which historically had privileged material and mass over retention of manpower.⁴⁶

While the CNA memorandum concentrates in this instance on the outline of the IPW in the specific context of a possible war between Russia and the US/NATO, it again draws attention to the themes of kinetic and non-kinetic mix, with its stress on how this might play out in aerospace attack and defense as well as in the information confrontation. The underlying assumption in this thinking is that both are present: the kinetic and non-kinetic means are in play.⁴⁷ However, the point is that the understanding of the IPW and its specifics are very tied to the issues of the actual adversary and the scale of the conflict.

Casting a widened net over the IPW in Soviet and Russian military thought the IPW itself both as a concept, its role in theory and how it transpired in examples of war involving the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, has been subject to considerable change over time. The national trauma of June 1941 had valuable

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Dmitry Gorenburg, Mary Chesnut, Jeffrey Edmonds, and Julian Waller, ‘Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts,’ Research Memorandum, CNA: Arlington, Va, August 2021, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/pdf/Russian-Military-Strategy-Core-Tenets-and-Operational-Concepts.pdf.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

lessons to offer for the further development of the IPW in military thought. The legacy of June 1941 and its continued influence in Russian military thought and planning today is an equally significant feature in contemporary threat perception, defense planning, consideration of the IPW, or military modernization. At the heart of that legacy is an enduring fear of a *surprise attack*, *loss of strategic initiative*, repetition of mistakes in the earliest phase of the Great Patriotic War, combined with a near catastrophic misreading of the potential adversary and its likely intentions.⁴⁸ During the Cold War, drawing lessons from June 1941, fear of the loss of strategic initiative in large-scale conflict between the superpowers and the potential for nuclear war dominated Soviet military thought and its threat perceptions. The calculus has once again shifted since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, accompanied by further changes to the means and methods of conducting modern warfare. An additional legacy of June 22, 1941, which gained traction after the war, was the idea that the power striking first has a certain advantage, even if transitory, and this line of military complements the Russian military tradition of *maskirovka* and the need for making preparations for war in secret. Discussion of the IPW by Russian military theorists focuses on large-scale interstate war between peer militaries, yet there are lessons about IPW that can be inferred other types of military conflict, such as the under performance of the Russian military in the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008.

2. Russia-Georgia War 2008: *Poteriannyi Den'* (The Lost Day)

Based on the Russian military understanding of the importance of the IPW, rooted in Soviet and Russian history as well as analyses of foreign wars, it is necessary to examine examples of failure in implementing key concepts and approaches to the IPW. These, as noted, mainly relate to the need to achieve surprise in the IPW linked to the corollary fear of a surprise attack and to lose the operational initiative. Arguably the most illuminating example of under performance in the IPW is provided by the Russia-Georgia War on August 8-12, 2008 — though it is classed as a Russian victory. It was the Russian Armed Forces last conflict prior to finally launching a systemic reform program aimed at transitioning away from its Soviet legacy force to a modernized, smaller, better trained and more lethal force structure suited to the wars Russia's would realistically face. Indeed, the numerous weaknesses and operational flaws in Russia's conventional Armed Forces exposed by the Five Day War were also used to justify the reforms that ensued. Russia's General Staff lessons identified and lessons learned post-war, thus, became embedded in the reform concept — driving the military modernization and highlighting force vulnerabilities.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Author's emphasis. Martirosian A, *22 iyunya 1941: tayny bol'she net. Okonchatel'nyye itogi razvedyvatel'no-istoricheskogo* (June 22, 1941: The secret no longer exists. The final results of the intelligence-historical investigation), Moscow: Veche, 2021; Makhmut Gareev, 'Primeneniye opyta Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny, boyevoy gotovnosti, budushchikh voyn (Application of the experience of the Great Patriotic War, combat readiness, future wars),' *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, March 6, 2010; Lieutenant-General A.I. Yevseyev, 'O nekotorykh tendentsiyakh izmenii soderzhaniya i kharaktera nachal'nogo perioda voyny (On certain tendencies in the changing content and character of the initial period of war),' *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, No.11, November 1985, pp.1020; Major-General V. Matsulenko, 'Nekotoryye vyvody iz opyta nachal'nogo perioda Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny (Certain conclusions from the experience of the initial period of the Great Patriotic War),' *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, No.3, 1984, pp.35-43.

⁴⁹ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, January 2010; Mikhail Barabanov, Anton Lavrov, Viacheslav

These are examined with the caveats that this was a very different war to the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022 in terms of length, scale and political objectives. While offering no direct comparison this demonstrates the many failings of the operational planning and execution of Russian operations with systemic elements impeding the IPW and noting a Russian post-war critique of the IPW exposing a fissure in civil-military relations.⁵⁰

Russia's political-military elite had consistently opposed the several rounds of NATO enlargement since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, actively promoting the claim that a promise had been made by Washington of no alliance expansion as part of a deal to facilitate the reunification of Germany in 1990. Moscow also made clear its unwavering objection to further enlargement of the alliance into the former Soviet Union, following the accession of the Baltic States in 2004. Georgia and Ukraine each sought to secure a Membership Action Plan (MAP) which aroused suspicion and opposition in Moscow asserting that such countries acceding to NATO membership would pose an existential security threat to the Russian Federation. Moscow's relations with NATO despite renewed efforts to cooperate post-9/11 had experienced prolonged political turbulence since NATO's intervention in former Yugoslavia in 1999. Moreover, many political commentaries in Moscow depicted NATO as a Cold War relic. US-led recognition of the independence of Kosovo in the aftermath of its unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 was equally strongly opposed by Moscow. At the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, the alliance failed to secure unanimous support to offer MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine, but committed to an open door policy holding out the prospect of NATO membership.⁵¹

This unclear political message from the Bucharest Summit — neither offering MAPs nor clearly rejecting membership for Georgia or Ukraine — placed Moscow on a war path with Tbilisi over the separatist areas in Georgia of Abkhazia and South Ossetia;

Tseluiko, *Tanki Avgusta: Sbornik Statei (Tanks of August: A collection of articles)*, Moscow: Tsentr analiza strategii i tekhnologii, 2009; Igor Dzhadan, *Piatidnevnaia Voina: Rossiya Pprinuzhdaet k Miru (The Five-Day War: Russia Imposes Peace)*, Moscow: Izdtel'stvo Evropa, 2008.

⁵⁰ The Russian victory, which was by no means easy to achieve against its economically and militarily weaker enemy, was rooted in speed at which the elite 76th (Pskov) Airborne Division's 104th Regiment was deployed to Tskhinvali (1,500 troops, 100 vehicles and 200 men from the Pechora GRU Brigade). A critical factor was in opening a second front in Abkhazia using mechanized infantry. After securing the South Ossetian capital, Russian forces drove deep into Georgian territory, severing the main highway and railway routes and cutting the country into two and establishing military control over heavy traffic movements throughout the country. Russian ground forces used the Uragan multiple-rocket launch system (MRLS), Tochka-U missiles and Smerch MRLS in attacking Georgian units, while the VVS added to the losses inflicted on the Georgian forces, resulting in their demoralization and retreat. This victory also reflected multiple weaknesses within the Georgian armed forces, particularly in developing their own operational art, training in combined-arms operations, and an overly interfering and disorganized civilian leadership. Barabanov, Lavrov, Tseluiko, *Tanki Avgusta: Sbornik Statei, Op.Cit.*

⁵¹ Putin stated: '[...] it is wrong to use one set of rules in Kosovo and another in the Transnistrian region, Abkhazia or South Ossetia. How does the Kosovo situation differ from the situation in the Transnistria region? It does not differ in any way.' *Politicheskii Zhurnal*, No. 53, (130/131), October 23, 2006, p. 50; 'Individual Partnership Action Plans,' <http://www.nato.int/issues/ipap/index.html>, 6 December 2007; 'Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus: The EU's Role,' *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report No. 173, 20 March 2006; T. Yakobashvili, 'Georgia's Path to NATO,' *Next Steps for Forging a Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Wider Black Sea*, R. Asmus (Ed), Washington, 2006, pp. 186-87.

these tensions escalated rapidly with Moscow stepping up its efforts to arm separatists, providing Russian passports to locals, and in May 2008 it deployed the railroad troops to repair rail lines in Abkhazia not only a signal that war preparations were in place but later exploited to move forces during the conflict.⁵² There were also clear warnings of impending Russian military operations within the Russian military media. On July 17, 2008 *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star) the official publication of the defense ministry, published a commentary on the military exercise Kavkaz staged in the North Caucasus Military District. The article stated that “the exercise will rehearse the issues of participation in special peace enforcement in conflict zones.”⁵³ Following the conclusion of Kavkaz 2008 Russian forces were not stood down and remained in the field prior to the start of the war. The brief war that followed was officially denoted by Moscow as an “operation to compel Georgia to peace,” later resulting in Moscow recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the aftermath of the Five Day War a great deal of detail was made public concerning Russian military operational weaknesses and failings that the war had served to expose. Although the General Staff lessons learned from the conflict was never made public there was such a deluge of details in the military media pertaining to these failings at a systemic level that it clearly implied strong political support at the highest levels to publicize these failings. Prior to detailing the core elements of these operational failing and the Russian mishandling of the IPW it is useful to note approaches reflected in the media reporting. The public criticism was specifically directed at the military with no reference to the political leadership, either its role in pre-war planning or its influence during the conflict. There were no questions raised as to why meaningful reform had not been previously implemented. The General Staff in terms of the reform appeared keen also to learn from what worked during the war together with assessing its numerous failings. There were also areas on which the critique was mostly silent, such the role of military intelligence, other intelligence agencies or the armaments directorate.

Russian military operations in South Ossetia involved five regimental tactical groups, though difficulties were encountered in forming these, drawn from the 19th (North Ossetia) and 42nd (Chechnya) Motor-Rifle Divisions. C² was conducted by the staff of the North Caucasus MD, not the divisional staffs or the staff of the 58th Army (Vladikavkaz). The North Caucasus MD also utilized a specially-formed command. The reform concept of the three-link command structure was incorporated into this model. Russian analysts noted that this force grouping solved key strategic challenges and performed their missions in accordance with Russian operational art, exploiting the weaknesses of enemy forces. Moreover, a number of key challenges were resolved that facilitated rapid expansion of the force grouping entering South Ossetia within the first 24 hours of the war: access through the Roki tunnel, the limited throughput capacity of the 167 km Vladikavkaz-Tskhinvali road along which Russian columns

⁵² ‘Why Did Our Army Go Into South Ossetia?’ *Izvestiya*, August 11, 2008; Sergei Lavrov, ‘Russian Foreign Policy and a New Quality of the Geopolitical Situation,’ *Diplomatic Yearbook*, Moscow, 2008; S. Markedonov, ‘Caucasus Conflict Breaks Old Rules of the Game,’ *Russian Analytical Digest*, 45, September 4, 2008; S. Markedonov, ‘Regional Conflicts Reloaded,’ *Russia in Global Affairs*, October-December 2008; Roy Allison, ‘The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation,’ *European Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009.

⁵³ Aleksandr Tikhonov, ‘Kavkaz-2008: Pregrada terroru (Kavkaz-2008: Barrier to terror),’ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, July 17, 2008.

travelled and doubling the size of the force grouping in South Ossetia. Later, the Russian Air Force (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily*—VVS) was able to subdue Georgian air defenses, and the loss of surprise after the initial Georgian blitzkrieg on Tskhinvali permitted the Russian force grouping to swell within 72 hours and inflict severe damage on the Georgian units.⁵⁴

Russia's Airborne Forces (*Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska* — VDV) had generally performed well, yet it also formed part of the overall critique of the failings in Georgia. Units from the 76th and 98th Airborne Divisions and the 31st Airborne Assault Brigade were moved overland, essentially used as combat infantry, implying that despite infantry deploying in large numbers their combat skills were lacking.⁵⁵ Indeed, the use of the VDV according to a former VDV intelligence chief, Colonel Pavel Popovskikh, reflected deeper systemic weaknesses in combat training within the VDV and the existing condition of the conventional Armed Forces:

Our army is still being trained based upon regulations, which were written in the 1980s! The regulations, manuals, combat training programs, and the volumes of standards have become obsolete. An old friend recently sent me the volume of standards that is in force, which we wrote already in 1984, 25 years ago. This volume is a reflection of the operational and combat training of the troops and their operating tactics. If the Airborne troops have remained at that prehistoric level, then we can confidently say that the General Staff and the rest of the troops continue to train for a past war.⁵⁶

Deficiencies in combat infantry, including training levels, the role of the VDV units deployed in the theater of military operations, highlighted tactical level weaknesses. Yet, despite the widespread post-war criticism of the Russian military's performance during the war, there was a marked silence on tactical level weaknesses exposed by the conflict, ultimately linked to the deficiencies of the combat training system. There was also evidence of a lack of unit élan. Competition between commanders in relation to set objectives was in evidence from markings on the sides of buildings in South Ossetia, where one unit would claim the area, only to be superseded by another — such as the 76th Air Assault Division marking it out as their objective.⁵⁷

Another element of Russian operations lacking and poorly implemented in the IPW was information warfare (IW). There were novelties including daily press briefings given by Colonel-General Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, which also revealed flaws in implementing IW strategies.⁵⁸ Yet, the defense ministry website conveyed little or no news. In January 2008, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant-General Aleksandr Burutin told the National Information Security Forum in Moscow that the military had begun drafting concept designs and methods for conducting information operations: "A number of countries already have

⁵⁴ Anatoliy Tsyanok, 'Uroki 5-dnevnoy voyny na Kavkaze (Lessons from the 5-Day War in the Caucasus),' *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, October 4, 2008.

⁵⁵ 'Aleksandr Khranchikhin' *Uoki boyevykh uspekhnv i neudach* (Lessons from combat success and failure), *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, August 27, 2008.

⁵⁶ 'V rossiyskikh voyskakh tsarit nerazberikha (Confusion reigns in the Russian troops),' *www.utro.ru*, May 19, 2009.

⁵⁷ 'Tsena pobedy: voyennyye eksperty ob oshibkakh kampanii v Yuzhnoy Osetii (The price of victory: Military experts on the mistakes of the South Ossetia Campaign),' *Trud*, August 18, 2008; Viktor Baranets, 'Armiya otpravlena v boy v starykh dospekhnakh (An army sent to battle in old armor),' *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, August 26, 2008.

⁵⁸ For a detailed analysis of the Russian IW, see: Timothy Thomas, 'The Bear Went Through the Mountain: Russia Appraises its Five Day War in South Ossetia,' *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2009, pp. 31-68.

set a course toward waging information wars. The scope of funding for these purposes indicates that superiority in the information sphere is viewed as one of the main methods of achieving these countries' national strategies in the 21st century," Burutin stressed. The war indicated that much of this remained bound only in theory, rather than working in the battlespace. IW and cyber warfare were palpably inadequate, with reported Russian cyber attacks, for example, having little military significance.⁵⁹

The operation brought into sharp focus deficiencies within the Russian military and confirmed weaknesses in its operational capability, combat support and combat service support, as well as its aging weapons and equipment inventory. Systemic weaknesses were present in all seven battlefield operating systems; maneuver (armor and infantry), mobility, (counter-mobility and survivability), fire support, air defense, intelligence, combat service support (logistics) and C².⁶⁰ Additionally, the use of airpower and the underlying challenges presented by the existing manpower system came in for strong criticism.

The VVS conducted several hundred offensive sorties in Georgian airspace between August 8-12, 2008 using predominantly three platforms: Su-24M frontal bombers, Su-25 ground-attack aircraft, and Tu-22M3 long-range bombers. Target selection attempted to avoid unnecessary damage to Georgia's critical infrastructure, transport, communications and civilian industry; though, collateral damage and civilian casualties occurred.⁶¹ Nonetheless, the VVS failed to establish *air dominance*, which was confirmed by its officially-acknowledged aircraft losses (it admitted to the loss of four military aircraft, whereas Georgia claims to have shot down ten or more).⁶²

On the structure of the Armed Forces and the transition to the brigade-based structure initiated by the post-war reform, Nogovitsyn explained that drawing on the lessons from Chechnya, "including how to employ units within battalion tactical groups" their use in Georgia, had "proven to be absolutely justified."⁶³ In June 2009, examining issues related to forming battalions, the Chief of the General Staff Army-General Nikolai Makarov used this experience to promote the transition of the Ground Forces structure to brigade based, arguing it would be more logical to have such battalions already formed. Makarov explained that drawing on experience gained from Afghanistan and Chechnya (and foreign experience) to form a battalion that could execute its missions, it became over-burdened with reinforcement: artillery, air defense weapons, combat engineers etc. This needed additional logistical support, and, consequently, from a regiment one self-sufficient battalion could be formed capable of fulfilling its missions independently at a sufficient distance. Consequently, the regiment was denuded, and a second battalion could not be formed: Makarov posed the question, "why not create such a battalion immediately?" Since, after forming the battalion in the old style, the commander and his subordinates were previously

⁵⁹ Vladimir Shcherbakov, '*Spetspropaganda poverzhena: Minoborony proigralo informatsionnuyu voynu* (Special propaganda defeated: the Ministry of Defense lost the information war),' *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, August 27, 2008.

⁶⁰ Tsyganok, '*Uroki 5-dnevnoy voyny na Kavkaze*,' *Op.Cit.*

⁶¹ Mikhail Barabanov, 'August War between Russia and Georgia,' Moscow Defense Brief, No. 3 (13), 2008.

⁶² Jon Lake, 'Air War Over Georgia,' *Combat Aircraft*, Vol. 9, No. 5, October/November 2008, p. 19.

⁶³ 'Interview with Anatoliy Nogovitsyn,' *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, September 9, 2009.

unknown to each other, instead of creating these in haste – as they were in the Chechnya campaigns – Makarov advocated them being pre-formed.⁶⁴

Makarov also referred to the experience of the IPW and the overall performance of the officer corps in the war to justify officer downsizing and the transition to permanent readiness brigades: expressly stating that officers only used to commanding “paper regiments” proved inadequate when the war erupted and indeed some *refused to obey orders*. Officers with combat experience and capable of leading operations were in short supply, and had to be identified from among the much larger group of paper-based commanders. Makarov stated: “The regular commanding officers, who, having sat there and commanded ‘paper regiments and divisions,’ were simply not in a position to tackle the issues that arise in the course of the five-day war. When they were given men and equipment, they simply became flustered, and some even refused to carry out their assignments. Do we need such officers, I wonder?” He reported that officers had to be handpicked across the entire army, in order to find those capable of commanding troops during the war:

In order to find a person with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, colonel, or general, who would be able to command troops confidently, we had to hand-pick them within the armed forces, because those staff commanders, who have sat and commanded ‘paper regiments and divisions’ were simply unable to resolve the issues that arose over the course of the five-day war. When they were given personnel and equipment, they simply lost their bearings, and some of them even *refused to obey orders*.⁶⁵

Makarov also linked the need to abandon cadre units —jettisoning the principal of mass mobilization— and adopt a “permanent readiness” force structure, saying that the General Staff had recognized, based on how suddenly the conflict had erupted in South Ossetia, that future wars may arise rapidly, demanding that the conventional Armed Forces be capable of responding in a timely manner.⁶⁶

On the fourth anniversary of the Russia-Georgia War in 2012 two important events occurred that shed new light on the conflict and especially its IPW. These relate to operational planning and operational design, clearly in the hands of the General Staff, the timing of the war plan being agreed and additional dispute about exactly when the most critical day of the IPW occurred. The former issue was clarified by President Putin, reflecting on the timing of the agreed war plan, while the latter emerged as a result of a controversial documentary in Moscow broadcast to mark the fourth anniversary of the conflict. Putin admitted that the General Staff had worked on a war plan as early as 2006, which envisaged relying on South Ossetian irregulars in the event of a Georgian attack, requiring Russian Armed Forces units to deploy from the north to reinforce and support Russian peacekeepers and irregular forces from South Ossetia. Putin also

⁶⁴ ‘*Press-konferentsiya pervogo zamestitelya Ministra oborony, nachal’nika General’nogo shtaba generala armii Nikolaya Yegorovicha Makarova* (Press conference of the First Deputy Minister of Defense, Chief of the General Staff General of the Army Nikolai Yegorovich Makarov),’ *Kommersant-Vlast* (Electronic Edition), June 16, 2009.

⁶⁵ ‘*V Genshtabe priznali, chto Rossiya vyigrala Pyatidnevnyuyu Kavkazskuyu voynu chudom: sposobnykh ofitserov prishlos’ iskat’ po chastyam* (The General Staff admitted that Russia won the Five-Day Caucasian War by a miracle: Capable officers had to be searched for),’ *Lenta*, October 24, 2008; ‘*Rossiyskaya armiya ne gotova k voynam budushchego* (The Russian army is not ready for future wars),’ *Izvestiya*, October 22, 2008.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

confirmed that in 2007 he endorsed this plan and commented that local irregulars later fought better than anticipated by the General Staff.⁶⁷

Much more controversially, the Russian documentary on the war in August 2012 marked a direct attack on the political leadership at the time of the war; it openly criticized the then President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, though mostly focused on the former. *Poteriannyi Den'* (The Lost Day) had considerable credibility as its claims were advanced by some of those close to the military leadership at the time of the war.⁶⁸ For example, the former Chief of the General Staff Yury Baluyevskiy (2004-08) had been in this post until replaced by Medvedev's appointment of Makarov in May 2008, while in August 2012 Baluyevskiy was on the Russian Security Council. Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov, the former commander of the VDV, and one of the senior officers credited with playing an inspirational role in securing the Russian victory in the conflict commanding Russian forces in Abkhazia, among others. These senior Russian generals interviewed in the documentary confirmed the General Staff war planning had been worked out in 2006. Moreover, the documentary derives its title from their assertion that the conflict had effectively begun in the afternoon of August 7, at 1400 with Georgian heavy artillery deployed against positions of Russian peacekeepers around Tskhinvali. Baluyevskiy asserted that Medvedev had hesitated in authorizing a response, and that this delay to action the General Staff war plan had proved to be costly; the first day (August 7) had been lost and resulted in up to 1,000 KIA and many more wounded.⁶⁹

The high-level senior officers participating in the documentary clearly implied that had Putin been President and Commander-in-Chief rather than Prime Minister, this delay would have been avoided. In fact, at this point Putin was in Beijing for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and arguably only after his return to Moscow the Russian military regained its balance. The documentary also contrasted Medvedev's slowness to act in August 2008 to the rapid deployment of Russian forces from the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina to Pristina airport on June 12, 1999 following the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (March 24-June 10, 1999) over Kosovo.⁷⁰

Of course, this disparaging critique could be interpreted or dismissed as an effort by those close to the senior echelons of Russia's military to shift the blame for mishandling the IPW in addition to the under performance in the war, but there was something deeper in the critique: it seemed to signal a severe fissure within the civil-military relationship at this critical time resulting in indecisiveness and delay in the political decision making. Russian media cast this documentary as attempt by pro-Putin former military officers —and Shamanov still commander of the VDV— to shift any credit for the war from Medvedev to Putin.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the

⁶⁷ 'Putin admits Russia planned response to Georgian aggression beforehand,' ITAR-TASS, August 8, 2012.

⁶⁸ Alan Biragov, '*Poteriannyi den: Vsia pravda o voine* (Lost day: The truth about the war),' YouTube, August 8, 2012.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Yury Nersesov, '*Tskhikhinval'skaia zhertva Aifonchika*,' *Agentstvo pechati novosti*, August 10, 2012.

allegations of the delay in decision making tied to a fracture in the civil-military relationship at the highest level was not only controversial but exposed further evidence of dissatisfaction with the performance of the Russian military in the IPW in Georgia. In fact, by August 2012 Putin was asked about such a delay and responded by saying he believed the crisis was already reaching its tipping point around August 4-5 with cross border skirmishes.⁷²

These analyses, reflections and various critiques of the performance of the Russian military during the Five Day War are especially salient in terms of the IPW. To a large extent they reflected systemic and underlying flaws in the military per se, all of which combined in concentrated form to offer a chaotic and less than efficient IPW.⁷³ Several key points should be noted. First, the dispute concerning precisely when the IPW began, either on August 7 or August 8, strongly implying lost time either caused by the political dithering on an actual first day (August 7) or in terms of the commencement of the kinetic conflict (August 8) by several critical errors that could have proved more costly against a better trained, equipped and determined adversary. These stand out as follows: slowness to use and exploited IW/cyber, limited use of the VVS to either suppress Georgian air defenses or to conduct strikes on military targets, lack of “jointness” among the deployed Russian forces, weaknesses across the range of C4ISR, combined with many issues related to military manpower and combat training. Reflecting on the performance of the Armed Forces in Georgia, the political-military leadership concluded the Russian military was not really fit for purpose and required major and long term reform and modernization to remedy many of these challenging issues. Finally, a no less important aspect of the IPW relates to the role of the General Staff in war planning; in this case the operational planning and operational design had been the subject of General Staff planning for at least two years prior to the war.

3. A Legacy of Under Performance in the IPW

The IPW had grown in importance as a special period of war worthy of detailed study among military historians and military theorists during Russian imperial and Soviet eras, hugely influenced in particular by the experience of the Great Patriotic War, reinforced and invigorated as a component part in contemporary Russian military thought. This legacy, largely attributed to the national trauma and collective memory of Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, runs very deep in the psyche of senior Russian military officers. It is immensely challenging for the western reader to appreciate or fully understand the sheer scale of influence exerted by this war on the collective memory and how it continues to dominate the output and work of Russian military historians. Naturally, this also finds expression in both later Soviet and recent Russian studies and analysis of the IPW, both as a concept and in specific historical contexts. At a conceptual level this has resulted in Russian fixation in terms of the IPW on *surprise* and *initiative*: the need to achieve surprise in the initial attacks during the IPW and to seize and maintain the initiative. These factors are ingrained in

⁷² President of Russia, ‘Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists’ Questions during His Working Trip to Leningrad Region,’ <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/4269>, August 7, 2012.

⁷³ Tsyganok, ‘Uroki 5-dnevnoy voyny na Kavkaze,’ *Op.Cit*; ‘Khramchikhin’ *Uroki boyevykh uspekhev i neudach*’ *Op.Cit*; Barabanov, Lavrov, Tseluiko, *Tanki Avgusta: Sbornik Statei*, *Op.Cit*; Barabanov, ‘August War between Russia and Georgia,’ *Op.Cit*.

the mindset of contemporary senior Russian officers. With the corollary fear of a sudden surprise attack and loss of the strategic initiative.⁷⁴

There as is veritable flood of Russian language material covering the history of the Great Patriotic War and in labyrinthine detail, so it is unsurprising to find many examples of studies devoted to the IPW that commenced in June 1941. One outstanding illustration of this focus was provided by a collection of studies brought together in an edited volume by Army-General Semion Pavlovich Ivanov (1907-1993). In 1974 Ivanov's edited collection appeared as *Nachal'nyy Period Voyny* (The Initial Period of War).⁷⁵

Ivanov's edited collection in 1974 contains fourteen chapters divided into three parts. Part one: "The Formation and Development of Views on the Initial Period of War From the Nineteenth Century Until the 1940s;" part two: "Strategic Planning and Armed Forces Deployment on the Eve of and at the Start of World War II;" part three: "The Initial Strategic Operations."⁷⁶ The work serves as a testimony not only to the place in Soviet military thought assigned to its role in World War II, but also underscores the value denoted by its IPW. In order to comprehend the contribution this work made to the field, especially some of the underlying themes in relation to conceptual thinking about the lessons drawn from the IPW in 1941, it serves to provide some of the features of military thought about the IPW contained in Ivanov's conclusion.⁷⁷

Noting that the IPW had changed in history due to its dispensing with a period of prewar preparations, which had historically marked out the IPW, Ivanov notes the heightened role ascribed to the first kinetic attack:

The strategic military aspect of these theories had to do precisely with putting into effect during the prewar period preparatory measures that in earlier times had constituted the main activity of the initial period of war. Now, at the start of a war, the maximum number of men and quantity of equipment would be concentrated in the first attack to deliver a crushing defeat to the enemy. These theories, consequently, emerged from recognition of the decisive importance of a war's initial operations. Reality showed, however, that these theories were invalid, since they were based on an exaggeration of the role of the initial period of war and on an underestimation of enemy military capabilities, morale, and determination.⁷⁸

Ivanov had highlighted not just the changing and evolving role of the IPW in influencing the war itself, the way that the experience of individual wars frequently invalidated preexisting military theories or entirely exaggerated the decisive part played by the IPW itself, but in passing warned against underestimating the adversary's military capabilities, morale and will to fight. Ivanov also drew attention to how the IPW is perceived not only by military theorists but also political leaders as it unfolds, the role played in carefully evaluating the use of technology such as tanks and aircraft, and how Soviet theorists had accurately forecast the coming war due to their assessment of the "character of future war," and the trend to commence combat

⁷⁴ Author discussions with Christopher N Donnelly, May 20, 2022.

⁷⁵ See: Army-General Semion P. Ivanov, *Nachal'nyy Period Voyny*, Moscow, 1974. Translated by the United States Air Force, Washington DC, 1986.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.303.

operation at the outset of the IPW. Nevertheless, despite these achievements, mistakes were made such as the failure to properly prepare the military for the coming war:

The views held by Soviet military leaders and theorists on the initial period essentially amounted to recognition of the increased importance—because of the development of such weapons as tanks and aircraft—of initial operations for the course and even the outcome of a war. Many achievements of Soviet military theory were crystallized in this point of view on the initial period of war. These included such achievements as the fundamentally correct appraisal of the character of a future war and acknowledgement of the objective historical trend toward undertaking combat operations at the start of a war. Although certain aspects of Soviet theory on the initial period of war were not properly clarified, and while serious errors were made in preparing the armed forces to enter the war, the course and outcome of the Great Patriotic War convincingly demonstrated the progressive character of Soviet military theory.⁷⁹

The study of the IPW in relation to 1941 had shown that though it had developed in its significance and had the potential to be decisive, its “first engagements” served as a “harsh test” for the prewar theories, planning, calculations as well as the morale of the deployed forces and their political preparations for the coming war:

The initial period of war mainly consisted of combat operations carried out through the joint efforts of all branches of the armed forces. The attacking side, which had fully mobilized and deployed its armed forces during the prewar period, used this period to carry out offensive operations with the immediate goal of destroying the forces in the enemy's first strategic echelon and creating the conditions for a victorious conclusion to the war. As a rule, nations subjected to surprise attack conducted difficult defensive engagements during this period—on land, at sea, and in the air—using forces of the first strategic echelon, under cover of which the mobilization, concentration, and deployment of forces in the second strategic echelon continued. The first engagements and operations became a harsh test of prewar theoretical views, strategic plans, and calculations, and of the combat, morale, and political conditioning of the armed forces for military operations.⁸⁰

Of critical importance, given the events of June 1941, is the role played by surprise in the concept of the IPW; this is singled out as the key element in the effort by German forces to inflict defeat on the Red Army's first strategic echelon. The IPW can pivot on the question of achieving surprise in the first attack:

Hitler's strategists set the immediate strategic goal of rapidly defeating the enemy's first strategic echelon. From 50 to 80 percent of all of the men and equipment on hand at the start of the war were usually drawn on to achieve this goal. The main mass of the men and equipment, including the tank forces, went into the first strategic echelons. The massing of men and equipment to make the first attack led to the creation of overwhelming superiority over the enemy on the main axes and as a rule, to rapid penetration of enemy defenses to a great depth. This in turn created favorable conditions for maneuver in the operational depth. Great attention was devoted to achieving surprise in the first attacks.⁸¹

In turn, with achieving surprise over enemy forces in prime place in the IPW, Ivanov also stressed the crucial role of seizing and maintaining the strategic initiative. With the added observation, that once the initiative is lost it becomes difficult to recapture:

Experience showed that it was extremely difficult to recapture the strategic initiative lost to the enemy at the start of the war. A number of conditions were necessary to accomplish this mission successfully: in particular, correct appraisal of the situation, selection of the most

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* pp.304.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* pp.305.

favorable moment for making the retaliatory attack, and concentration of superior forces on the axis where the attack was planned.⁸²

While this legacy of study and attention devoted by Soviet and Russian military historians as well as military theorists to the IPW marks it out as a vital aspect of war in and of itself, the practical utility of this frequently failed to materialize in improved application in each new experience of the IPW. As noted, numerous Russian military failings were exposed by the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008 and reflected underlying systemic military weaknesses of a force badly in need of reform and modernization; it also magnified problems and vulnerabilities in the IPW. The “lost day” and the inadequacies of the earliest operations in South Ossetia could have resulted in more serious consequences if were not for the later later recovery and effort by the Russian military military to impose its will on the battlefield. The often huge chasm between the theory and reality of Russian approaches to the IPW are equally well known within Russian military circles.⁸³

Army-General Makhmut Gareev (1923-2019) as a veteran of the Great Patriotic War and one of Russia’s leading military historians and military theorists and President of the Academy of Military Sciences (*Akademii Voyennykh Nauk*—AVN) until his death in December 2019 strongly advocated the continued relevance of studying and drawing lessons from the Soviet experience of the IPW in June 1941. In May 2004, Gareev authored an article in *Voyennaya Mysl*, examining the problems of C2 and future warfare following an AVN conference in January 2004. Gareev explained the need for greater research focus on future warfare and the initial period of war:

And if we look critically at our past, for 150 years now the political leadership of the country has been putting the army at the beginning of the war in extremely unfavorable, unbearable conditions, from which it has to extricate itself. Let us recall at least the Crimean, Russian-Japanese, First World War, 1941, Afghanistan and Chechnya in 1994-1995. And after all this, they still try to convince us today that politics is a matter for the elected, and ordinary sinful people, especially military men, who do not dare to judge politics even on a scientific level. By the way, such a one-sided, uncritical approach to politics does not contribute to the proper formation of a new generation of professional politicians. There were also a lot of failures in the field of military strategy, but this side of the matter was always mercilessly criticized.⁸⁴

Gareev, referencing the IPW, drew attention to its abysmal record in the Soviet and Russian military experience of these conflicts. Gareev asserted, however, that this under performance in the IPW stems from practical political causes. The management of the IPW begins with defining the scope of military-political goals and strategic objectives. The military forces deployed in war must be guided by the political leadership. He reminded his readership that on the eve of war with Germany in June 1941, Stalin told the Soviet General Staff not to take action that could cause “political complications.”⁸⁵ This had resulted in military commanders unable to decide on

⁸² *Ibid.* pp.307.

⁸³ Biragov, ‘*Poteriannyi den: Vsia pravda o voine*,’ *Op.Cit*; Tsyganok, ‘*Uroki 5-dnevnoy voyny na Kavkaze*,’ *Op.Cit*.

⁸⁴ M.A. Gareev, ‘*Problemy sovremennoy sistemy voyennogo upravleniya i puti yeye sovershenstvovaniya s uchetom novykh oboronnykh zadach i izmeneniy kharaktera budushchikh voyn* (Problems of the modern military command and control system and ways to improve it, taking into account new defense tasks and changing the nature of future wars),’ *Voyennaya Mysl*, No. 5, May 2004.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

action or take defensive measures in the face of the early stages of the attack by the Wehrmacht. On the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Gareev noted that Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov told the *Politburo* that the action might cause “unintended political consequences,” which prompted the response from Yury Andropov that “we have someone to engage in politics.” Gareev noted the *arrogance of political power* and its disregard for the military and proper strategic political-military planning.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Addressing some of the questions posited at the outset require examination of the concept of the IPW from a Russian perspective, placing this in its historical context to note how this was subject to change over time reflecting the many changes occurring in the character of warfare. Tracing its evolution confirms the elasticity of the concept and its application to any specific conflict. In this field of military thought developments in approaches to the concept is primarily driven by a response to events. Therefore, the search for an overarching guide or template on how the Russian General Staff conceives of and plans for the *Nachal'nyy Period Voyny (Initial Period of War)* is a fruitless task.⁸⁷ In the historical examples alluded to in this study, the theory of the IPW shifted and evolved based on the experience of war, both in its study by military theorists and historians examining fluid developments in approaches towards warfare that were conditioned by how foreign wars were fought; this process also reflected lessons drawn from Russia's experience of wars — regardless of their outcomes.⁸⁸

The early Soviet interest in this field, like other areas of Soviet military science, had benefited enormously from its rich imperial Russian history and especially traditions well established by imperial Russian military theorists; this had included the value of studying and assessing foreign theorists and wars. As the interest in the IPW grew it was further stimulated by the study of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) and Russia's experience of World War I.⁸⁹ While these studies generally attempted to extrapolate valuable lessons, they were shaped by the many shifts occurring in the conduct of war that served to change the IPW itself, for example, the way in which the IPW had faced a contraction in its timescales, or the fact that fighting could commence at the outset of war rather than later. In other words, the concept of the IPW constantly needed revision depending upon how any individual war was fought and the lessons later drawn from analyses of its IPW.⁹⁰

That level of interest in the IPW also grew exponentially in the aftermath of World War II, with Soviet military thought again adjusting to the consequences of under performance in the IPW in the war with Germany. While it undoubtedly increased in importance as a result of numerous detailed analyses of the opening stages of the conflict with the Wehrmacht, again, it can rightly be observed that this did not result

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Author's emphasis.

⁸⁷ [Encyclopedia.mil.ru](https://encyclopedia.mil.ru), Accessed, May 17, 2022.

⁸⁸ Vladimirov, *Osnovy obshchey teorii voyny* (The Basics of the General Theory of War), *Op.Cit*; Kipp, 'Barbarossa, Soviet Covering Forces and the Initial Period of War: Military History and Airland Battle,' *Op.Cit*; Chekinov, Bogdanov, 'Nachal'nyye periody voyn i ikh vliyaniye na podgotovku strany k voyne budushchego,' *Op.Cit*.

⁸⁹ Bogdanov, 'Nachal'nyy period voyny istoriya i sovremennost', *Op.Cit*; Kuropatkin, *Iz vospominaniy o Russko-yaponskoy voyne*, *Op.Cit*.

⁹⁰ Bogdanov, 'Nachal'nyy period voyny istoriya i sovremennost', *Op.Cit*.

in the formulation of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to the IPW in future wars.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the strategic shock suffered by the Red Army and the Soviet leadership in June 1941 permeates modern Russian military thought in so far as it generates a pivotal conviction that regardless of the specifics of the war in question its IPW must secure *surprise* and seize the *initiative*: the Soviet High Command learned the dire consequences of losing these elements in the earliest stages of war. These aspects serve to underscore these twin features of surprise and initiative, but they also represent an innate fear that finds its origins in June 1941: fearing a surprise attack by enemy forces and the consequent loss of the strategic initiative.⁹²

Thus, the senior officer leadership of Russia’s Armed Forces fully understand both the significance of the IPW both in terms of military theory and in reference to historical examples. Yet, this does not yield a unified approach toward its planning. There are no templates involved, little by way of discernible patterns, with the objectives, tactics and scheme employed in the IPW varying from conflict to conflict. Moreover, contemporary Russian military theorists following the tradition set by their Soviet predecessors tend mainly to focus their analysis of the IPW on large-scale interstate war.⁹³ Absent a template to plan and execute in the IPW in such a war, it appears predominantly conducted on an ad hoc basis. Equally, Soviet-Russian military theorists such as Makhmut Gareev rightly noted that the Russian military does not possess a strong pedigree in the area of the IPW; paradoxically, while theory recognizes the importance of the IPW — though not decisive in its essence — many historical examples serve to highlight under performance proving to be the rule rather than the exception.⁹⁴

Again, these failures in the conduct of military operations within any given IPW reflect the unique circumstances of each conflict. Bearing in mind this crucial caveat, prior to outlining and examining in detail the Russian handling of the IPW in Ukraine in February 2022, some common features can be observed of the mishandling of the IPW in earlier wars. These are the primarily the dynamics and tensions existing in the pre-war planning between the political and military leaderships. It can result in near catastrophic consequences making it difficult to recover from as in the case of the IPW in June 1941, or the alleged “lost day” in Georgia in August 2008.⁹⁵ The loss is not merely a question of losing vitally important time, but the loss of strategic initiative limiting the response.

⁹¹ Glantz, ‘The Red Army in 1941,’ *Op.Cit*; Gorbатов, ‘*Nakanune velikoy otechestvennoy (‘odium’ bez mobilizatsii) chast’ 2*,’ *Op.Cit*; *Obraz nachal’nogo perioda voyny v predstavleniyakh komandnogo sostava Krasnoy Armii v 1931-1941 gg*, *Op.Cit*.

⁹² Gareev, ‘*Primeneniye opyta Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny, boyevoy gotovnosti, budushchikh voyn*,’ *Op.Cit*.

⁹³ Ivanov, ‘*Nachal’nyy Period Voyny*,’ *Op.Cit*.

⁹⁴ Gareev, ‘*Problemy sovremennoy sistemy voyennogo upravleniya i puti yeye sovershenstvovaniya s uchetom novykh oboronnykh zadach i izmeneniy kharaktera budushchikh voyn*,’ *Op.Cit*.

⁹⁵ Biragov, ‘*Poteriannyi den: Vsia pravda o voine*,’ *Op.Cit*.

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