

## **From Victory to Defeat: Assessing the Russian Leadership's War Calculus**

**Andrew Monaghan, PhD**

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## Executive Summary

- Moscow's use of the military as a tool of policy, particularly in ongoing conflicts and wars such as Ukraine and Syria but also further afield, raises the question of the **Russian leadership's calculus related to conflict resolution**.
- The Russian leadership considers the military to be just one tool of policy, and war is fought to achieve specific policy aims. Russian military thinkers identify a **spectrum from political victory through military victory to no military victory and the avoidance of defeat and then to no military victory to military defeat to complete destruction**. Using this spectrum illuminates hypothetical factors that could cause Moscow to capitulate or to terminate hostilities on negotiated terms in a future war.
- The majority of wars that Russia has lost have been **limited wars** in which the **Russian state was not threatened**, and **waged on the periphery** of the Russian Empire. Because war is a tool of policy, it is when a gap emerges between the policy and the way the war is being waged that leads Moscow to seek peace. Yet military defeat – even if costly and humiliating – has often been **mitigated by subsequent Russian statecraft**.
- The Russian leadership often refers to history as a rich resource for understanding war, victory and defeat. **The Russian leadership understands victory and defeat somewhat differently to Western capitals: what looks like a Russian defeat to Western eyes may not be seen as such in Russia**. Interpreting this gap is essential for understanding Moscow's calculus.
- Today, the Russian leadership emphasises the idea that Russia is militarily undefeatable. The two “Fatherland” wars (1812 against Napoleon Bonaparte and 1941-1945 against Nazi Germany) are commonly cited. But there **are examples of Russia's leadership accepting defeat in major wars**, including the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese war, and World War I. Defeat in World War I is the standout example of “Complete Destruction”. Such conflicts continue to influence the Russian leadership's calculus today.
- These wars are quite varied in how they took shape, in their length, and in specific factors such as Russia's technical inferiority, but there is **considerable consistency in the reasons for these defeats**. Chief among them is **bad Strategy on Russia's part**. Even when Russia has been able to maintain forces in being, **exhaustion of the national budget and supplies** at the campaign level, combined with a **loss of morale** among armed forces and **growing domestic unrest**, and a **deteriorating (or already negative) wider diplomatic situation** have led to Moscow seeking to terminate hostilities. If the war is not deemed existential, the Russian leadership may seek to terminate with minimised damage. If the policy clash has not been resolved, however, then a “continuation” war may restart at a later date.

## Introduction – Russia at War

Moscow's more frequent and visible use of its military has generated much discussion about Russian capability and intentions, remilitarisation, expansion, and strengths and weaknesses. Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine, followed by its intervention in the Syrian civil war and the subsequent appearance of Russian military and paramilitary forces in Libya, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere all emphasise questions about how the Russian leadership thinks about war and conflict resolution, and what should or could be done to affect this.

Western analysis of these developments has yielded mixed results, whether in terms of foreseeing the outbreak and evolution of the wars themselves, or what might oblige the Russian leadership to desist or agree to terms. The wars in Ukraine and Syria are repeatedly described as “deadlocks” or “quagmires” for Russia, with Russian forces supposedly being drawn in to unwinnable wars in which the costs imposed (including by the West) will outweigh the benefits of the war, obliging Moscow to seek a settlement, or even to suffer failure.<sup>1</sup> So far, however, Russia has shown little inclination to withdraw – indeed, the Russian leadership has adapted its positions and claimed success.

Equally, since 2014 the question of the possibility of war closer to home in the Euro-Atlantic region has again arisen. Senior officials and observers often discuss scenarios of Russia going to war and how NATO and its member states should respond. Many argue that Russia could not hope to win a traditional war against NATO, and thus instead conducts measures “short of war” to undermine the international order. But in the wider context of the discussion about defence and deterrence, there is nevertheless considerable debate about Russian capabilities and intentions about war in Europe. Some argue that Russia would be obliged to seek a short war because it could not hope to win once the Euro-Atlantic community had mobilised its full economic and military potential. In similar vein, some argue that Russia could defeat NATO by launching a short warning attack that, taking advantage of local military superiority, would reach Baltic state capitals in 36-60 hours, thus creating a *fait accompli*.<sup>2</sup>

Others seek to explain Russia's behaviour today through the lens of history. Sometimes this is done through analogical comparison with the Cold War (characterising Moscow's activity as an attempt to rebuild the USSR), or even with Nazi German activities leading up to and in World War II.<sup>3</sup> Or, some argue, President Putin could launch a war in the Baltic region to distract attention from Russia's worsening economic situation and to bolster domestic political support.

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<sup>1</sup> “How Putin's Ukraine Dream Turned into a Nightmare”, *Foreign Policy*, 20 October, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/20/how-putins-ukrainian-dream-turned-into-a-nightmare/>; “Why Putin Cannot Risk Peace in Ukraine”, *Atlantic Council*, 12 November 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-putin-cannot-risk-peace-in-ukraine/>; “Five Years After Crimea's Illegal Annexation, the Issue is No Closer to Resolution”, *Brookings*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/18/five-years-after-crimeas-illegal-annexation-the-issue-is-no-closer-to-resolution/>; “US Syria Representative Says His Job is to Make the War a Quagmire for Russia”, *Newsweek*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-syria-representative-james-jeffrey-job-make-war-quagmire-russia-1503702>

<sup>2</sup> Shlapak, D. & M. Johnson, “Outnumbered, Outraged and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO”, War on the Rocks, 21 April 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/outnumbered-outraged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats-nato/>; Giles, K. *Assessing Russia's Reorganised and Rearmed Military*, Carnegie Task Force White Paper, 3 May 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853>

<sup>3</sup> “Crimea Seen as ‘Hitler-style’ land grab”, *BBC News*, 7 March 2014. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26488652>

According to this line of argument, by failing to generate economic growth and rising standards of living, Putin has ‘broken his implicit social contract’ with his voters and so needs another source of legitimacy. He is believed to choose external wars as a means of boosting popularity while resisting implementing necessary domestic reforms, ‘harking back to the old Tsarist idea of useful, small victorious wars’. Thus, a connection is made with the historical idea of a “short victorious war”, and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05, equating this with Putin’s wars in Georgia in 2008, and Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.<sup>4</sup>

The view in Russia could hardly be more different. Much of the Russian discussion is about the evolving international order towards a “post-West” world, particularly the related implications of the shift of power from the West to the East, such as the USA and its allies using force to retain power. There is a widespread sense of growing geopolitical competition over resources, transit routes and access to markets inherent in an increasingly polycentric world that increases the chances for war. Russian officials and observers also point to the changing character of war and the use of the protest potential within a state to create instability that is then exacerbated by strikes from outside.

Nevertheless, the discussion in Russia is also characterised by the leadership and military community’s frequent reference to the importance of history to contemporary affairs. There is particular focus on the Great Patriotic War, as World War II is known in Russia. The “lessons” of this war and others, including defeats in the Crimean and Russo-Japanese wars and World War I, often feature in today’s official and professional military discussion.<sup>5</sup> Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister since 2004, has repeatedly pointed to the need to learn from experience of defeat in the Crimean War in 1856.<sup>6</sup> And Putin himself often points to the value of learning from history. Discussing World War I, he stated that the result this war was not caused by battlefield defeat, but because Russia was ‘torn apart from within’ – ‘Russia declared itself a loser. To whom did it lose? To the nation that ultimately lost the war’.<sup>7</sup>

This report will examine the calculus of Russia’s leadership as it relates to conflict resolution. It seeks to offer a fresh look at Russian thought and activity, going beyond what have become standard scenarios and analogies to provide a foundation on which to stimulate further thinking on what is a multifaceted and complex subject. It will first show how Russian military science defines war, victory and defeat. Having established how Moscow sees the purpose of war, it will then highlight the close connections in Russian thought and experience between victory and defeat, and how Moscow has on occasion seized political victory from the jaws of military defeat. The report will then turn to look at Russia’s unsuccessful wars, first providing overview sketches of the wars to lend strategic context and show the causes, main events and results of the war, and then reflecting on common factors that led to Russia’s defeat. Finally, the report reflects on how these features underpin the concerns of the Russian leadership today.

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<sup>4</sup> “Baltic Security: Tensions on the Frontier”, *Financial Times*, 20 October 2014. <https://www.ft.com/content/13469356-5829-11e4-b331-00144feab7de>; “Putin Broke His Social Contract”, *The Hill*, 13 October 2018. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/411167-putin-broke-his-social-contract>

<sup>5</sup> Gerasimov, V. “Opyt strategicheskovo rukovodstvo v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine i organizatsiya edinovo upravleniya oboronoi strany v sovremennykh usloviyakh”, *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2015. “Aziatskaya oshibka Nikolaiya II”, *Voennno-promyshlenniy Kurier*, 5 February 2019, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/48084>; Golubev, A. & P. Kovalenko “Obyektivnaya otsenka istoricheskikh sobytiy i ee znachenie v vospityanii voenno-sluhashchikh”, *Voennaya Mysl*, 9, 2019; Popov, I. & M. Khamzatov, *Voyna Budushchevo. Kontseptualniye osnovy i prakticheskie vyvody*. Moscow. Kuchkovo Pole, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, “Minister No”, *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013.

<sup>7</sup> “Vstrecha s molodymi uchonymi i prepodavatelnyami istorii”, *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2014. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951>.

It is worth framing the scope of the report. First, though some of the characteristics of victory and defeat will be familiar as being common to other states,<sup>8</sup> an examination of the Russian leadership's calculus requires an attempt to understand how the Russians themselves view these questions. The importance of avoiding mirror imaging and assuming that the Russian leadership calculates in the same way as the US leadership might is particularly relevant in this instance. This requires examining Russian arguments that appear to be (or are) at odds with Western assessments, values and policies – and challenging some of the orthodoxies in Western thinking about how and why Russia goes to war and what have been its successes and failures. This is not to suggest acceptance of Russian positions and political mythmaking, but to examine Russian calculations.

Victory and defeat in war are indeed often subject to political mythmaking in Russia: if the contemporary Russian discussion draws on history, including on Russia's defeats, the political nature of some of this discussion means that gaps emerge with some defeats glossed over or ignored. The report therefore deliberately compares Western understandings of Russian wars with the Russian view, drawing upon a range of sources to do so, but especially including Russian professional military journals and military history texts used in military education. But it should also be noted that Russian military history is often very different to and distinct from Western military history in approach and content. History is considered to be an essential feature of contemporary military science and the understanding both of the process of the changing character of war and of future war: for the Russian military, past, present and future are intimately linked.

Finally, examining Russia's experience of war and the "Victory-Defeat" spectrum offers a potentially vast canvas. Rather than attempt a complete examination, the report is intended to stimulate further discussion to develop these themes. To ensure focus, there are important questions that are not discussed in depth. The report focuses, for instance, on the modern era and particularly on themes that are explicitly relevant to today's discussion about war and defeat in Russia. This means that three of the most important wars for Russia do not feature. The Mongol invasion and occupation of Rus' in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps Russia's most notable strategic defeat, is not examined, nor are the two "Fatherland" wars, first against Napoleon (1812-15) and then against Nazi Germany (1941-45), since these are strategic victories. Nor is the role of nuclear weapons examined, because in Russian military thought nuclear exchanges are considered to go beyond the "victory-defeat" spectrum. The Russian view is that in a nuclear war there can be no victor or vanquished – just unprecedented losses and the end of civilisation. Nuclear war cannot be a 'rational or permissible means of politics'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen, E. & J. Gooch, *Military Misfortunes. The Anatomy of Failure*. New York: Free Press, 2006; Johnson, R. & T. Clack (Eds), *At the End of Military Intervention. Historical, Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Transition, Handover and Withdrawal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> "Voyna", Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence, *Website of the Ministry of Defence*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=12849@moriDictionary>

## What are “War”, “Victory” and “Defeat” to the Russians, Anyway?

Given the variety of understandings of how Moscow uses war sketched out above, it is worth clarifying what war, victory and defeat mean in Russian terminology as a basis for examining calculations in war. War is defined by the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) as the

extreme form of resolving disagreements, characterised by a sharp change in relations between states, nations or other political actors, and the transition to the use of means of armed and other types of violence for the achieving of socio-political, economic, ideological, territorial, national, ethnic, religious and other aims. The content of war is armed conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Victory (“pobeda”) is defined quite straightforwardly as:

bringing defeat to the enemy and the achievement by one of the warring sides of political and military strategic aims of the war. The direct result of victory is the cessation of military activity on conditions of the victor, formalised by an international legal document – an act of surrender, agreement of truce, peace treaty. The main characteristics of victory in wars are success in conducting military battle, the destruction of the armed forces of the enemy and occupation of the most important parts or all of its territory. In other types of conflict, signs of victory are the collapse of economic potential, disorganisation of structures and functioning of organs of political power, the collapse of opposing political coalitions, and the loss by the population and armed forces of the moral ability to continue to resist. The source of victory in war is the concentrated combination of all material and spiritual capabilities of the state and effectiveness of their use as expressed in military power.<sup>11</sup>

This offers an indication of how defeat might also be understood, and there is some relationship between the words for victory and defeat – as noted below, the Russian leadership uses the term ‘nepobedimiy’, which roughly translates as “undefeatable”.

But the definition of defeat goes further. The MoD defines defeat (“porazhenie”) – in two connected ways. First, defeat is the ‘impact of various forces and means of military conflict on the enemy with the result that the enemy either completely or partially [temporarily] loses the ability to fight’. ‘In the military sphere, it is the destruction of enemy armed forces in war, battle, an operation, or an engagement’.

At the same time, “porazhenie” is also defined as “destruction” – the ‘result of the impact of action on the target of different types of weapons’, to ‘decrease [the enemy’s] ability to function down to the level where it loses the ability to work as designed, whereby it loses combat capability’. Thus, “porazhenie” is used in terms of the aim of destroying an opponent’s ability to fight.<sup>12</sup> So if “porazhenie” connects defeat and destruction, destruction is connected to other

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<sup>10</sup> “Voina”, Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence, *Website of the Ministry of Defence*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=12849@morfDictionary>

<sup>11</sup> “Pobeda v voine”, Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence, *Website of the Ministry of Defence*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=8964@morfDictionary>

<sup>12</sup> “Porazheniye”, Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence, *Website of the Ministry of Defence*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=9202@morfDictionary>; “Porazheniye obyekt (tseli)”, Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence, *Website of the Ministry of Defence*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14640@morfDictionary>. Thus, the phrase “ognevoe porazhenie protivnika” – “the fire destruction of the enemy” – often features in Russian military thinking

terms including “razgrom”: complete defeat, therefore, is also termed “polniy razgrom” (see figure 1).

Given these definitions, and the clear importance of how the war is conducted, is worth also considering what military strategy means to the Russian leadership. The MoD defines military strategy as a ‘component of military art, its highest sphere, which includes the theory and practice of the military activity of the state’. The contents of military strategy are ‘based on the results of the evaluation of the state of, and directions of development of military-political conditions, and on scientifically-based goals, principles, directions and tasks, and the objective needs and real capabilities of the functioning and development of the military organisation of the state’. Military strategy is ‘closely connected with the politics of the state and is directly dependent on it’. Politics defines the tasks for military strategy, and military strategy provides their fulfilment. In military strategy, the main principles of the Military Doctrine of the state are given concrete shape where applicable to the military sphere.<sup>13</sup>

Military strategy addresses a range of matters such as the leadership of the armed forces in both peace and war, the preparation of the aims and tasks of the armed forces in war and military activities at the strategic level, and the content, methods and conditions to prepare and conduct the war as a whole and different forms of strategic activity. Additionally, it includes foresight and the estimation of the likely character of future war and strategic planning, and thus the preparation of moral-psychological, technical and rear-echelon activities of the armed forces and the preparation of the economy, population and territory of the state for war. The MoD’s definition continues with the significant point that military strategy should include assessment of the strategic views of leading states and coalitions, their capabilities in preparation, unleashing and conduct of wars and military activities of strategic scale.<sup>14</sup>

These definitions provide an important basis for Moscow’s understanding of war and what is seen in the Russian discussion as a spectrum of victory and defeat. A policy clash defines the context of the war and the initiation of hostilities. The victory-defeat spectrum then tracks from the highest stages of success of political victory (politicheskaya pobeda) through military victory (pobeda voennaya) and no military defeat, to balance and then tracks through the stages of defeat, no military victory, military defeat (porazheniye voennoe) and complete destruction (polniy razgrom) (figure 1).<sup>15</sup> This spectrum highlights the need to be aware of the *resolution of the policy conflict* when considering calculations of victory and defeat.

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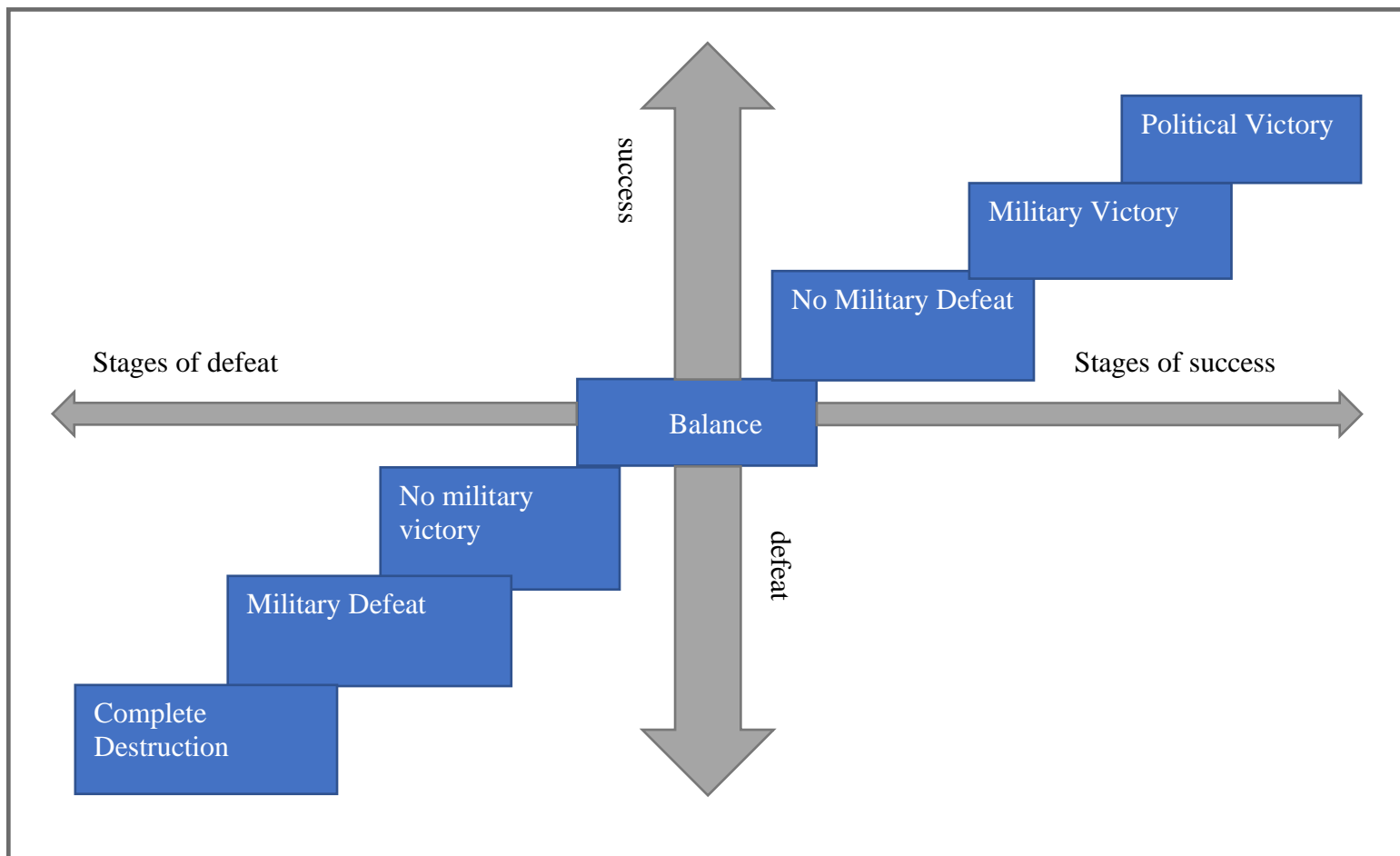
about warfighting, of note for those in the West who argue that the Russian armed forces are moving away from a more kinetic warfighting approach.

<sup>13</sup> “Strategiya voennaya”, Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence, *Website of the Ministry of Defence*, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14383@morfDictionary>

<sup>14</sup> “Strategiya voennaya”, Encyclopaedia.

<sup>15</sup> Popov & Khamzatov, p.446.

Figure 1: The Spectrum From Victory to Defeat

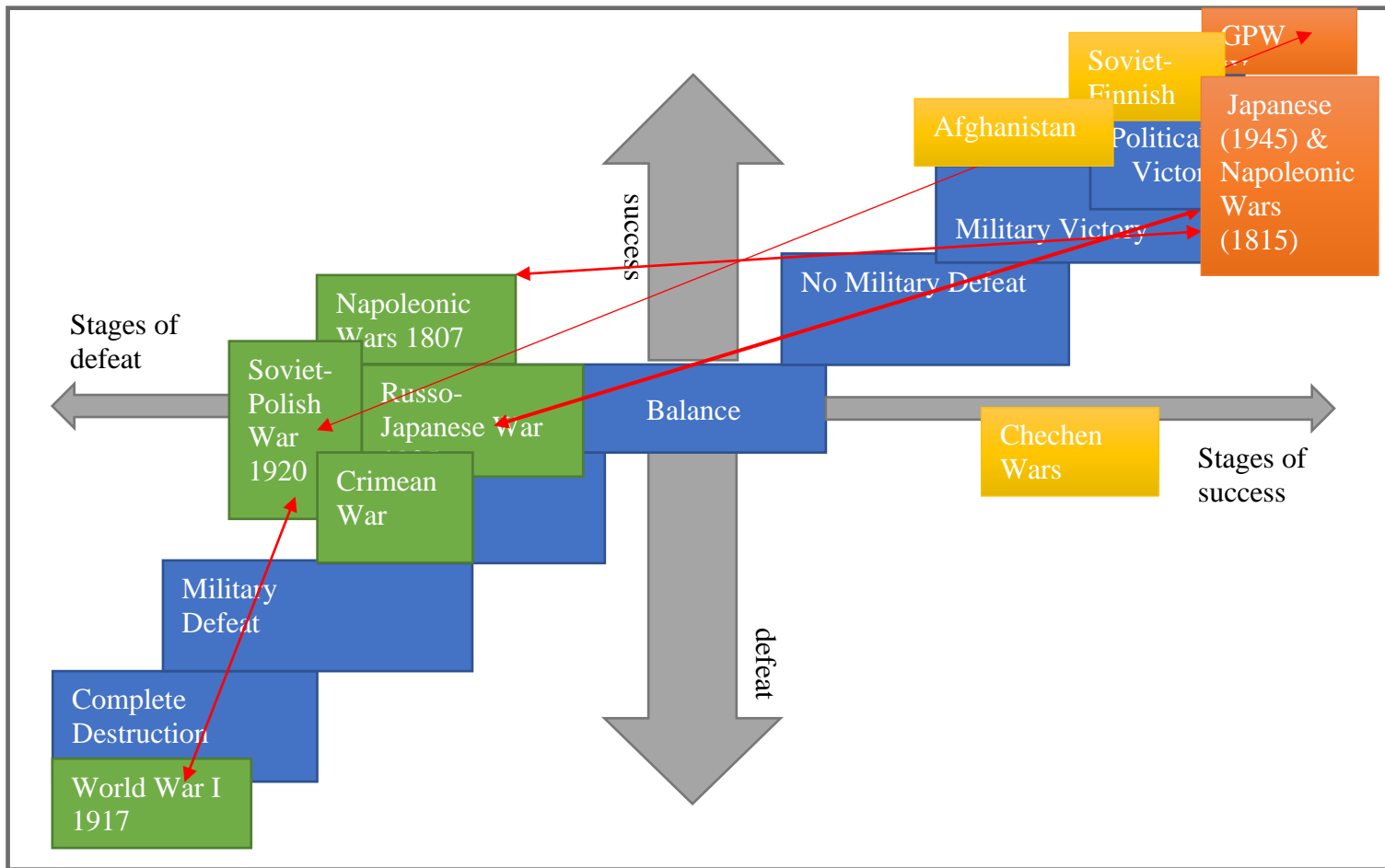


Source: Popov, I. & M. Khamzatov, *Voyna Budushchevo. Kontseptualniye osnovy i prakticheskie vyvody*. Moscow. Kuchkovo Pole, 2016. p.446. 'Final and Intermediate Stages of the Results of Military Conflict on the Scale of "Success - Defeat"'. Note the overlapping categories, and the placement of "Military Victory" and "Military Defeat" within the poles of "Political Victory" and "Complete Destruction".

This has two implications. First, though the Russian military may be defeated in a war, Moscow's diplomacy can mitigate the negative consequences of that military defeat. Second, it means that in some cases, though Russia may be defeated in a war, because of the ongoing nature of the policy conflict, that specific war may be only one of a *series* of wars – and Russia may win those subsequent wars. Defeats can therefore be converted over the longer-term into victories (figure 2).



Figure 2 - Russia's Wars on the Spectrum of Victory and Defeat



Original source: Popov and Khamzatov, wars added by the author.

- Complete victories
- Victories, despite major problems and high costs
- Defeats

Finally, the definitions underscore the importance of effective military strategy as a factor in the calculations in terms of understanding the changing character of war and then appropriately organising and effectively waging it. If gaps between state policy and military strategy are one cause of defeat, failures in military strategy are another. Military defeat has often come as the result of a combination of the failure to understand the implications of the changing character of war and the poor waging of the war once it began, resulting in the fighting forces losing their combat effectiveness.

## Russia's Wars on the Victory-Defeat Spectrum

### "Stoikost" and Moral Victory

Russia's leadership often seeks to highlight that Russia is militarily undefeatable. The two "Fatherland" wars are commonly cited in this respect, often together. Putin himself has regularly emphasised this theme: 'throughout history, many times people have tried to frighten Russia and to put Russia on its knees, however no-one has ever succeeded', he stated in 1999 during the Chechen war. And, more recently, marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, he stated that 'we know and strongly believe that when we stand together, we are unbeatable ("nepobedimiy")'.<sup>16</sup>

Both "Fatherland" wars offer examples of how the Russian armed forces have suffered initial major reverses and defeats, but recovered to achieve complete victory (*politicheskaya pobeda*) in what were existential wars. They also reflect the idea of "stoikost". Stemming from the verb "stoyat", to stand, stoikost is a term which encapsulates courage, resilience and defiance. The term illustrates the ongoing debate in the Russian military about the comparative value of technology or the soldier's spirit in war, and reflects the view that spirit is what is decisive on the battlefield. This relates to other concepts in the Russian military lexicon such as "boevaya ustoychivost" – roughly translated as "combat stability": the ability to fulfil a military task while absorbing severe punishment and casualties.

This is how Russian military culture translates into victories battles such as Eylau in 1807 and Borodino in 1812, and some major battles of the Great Patriotic War, that were otherwise tactically or operationally ambiguous in their outcome. Victory in this sense, then, is the refusal to surrender, sometimes combined with the stopping of a previously undefeated, even apparently invincible, enemy: a moral or spiritual victory or turning point in the place of a clear-cut military one.<sup>17</sup> This raises an important foundational point for understanding calculations and the costs of war: the cost in casualties is not a reliable indicator in the Russian leadership's calculation about warfighting. Even very heavy casualties will be tolerated in the pursuit of specific policy aims.

### Defeats or Victories?

What are examples of defeats? In some cases, Euro-Atlantic observers see defeats where the Russian view is more ambiguous – or may see victory. Perhaps the three best-known examples of this are the Winter War of 1939-40 between the Soviet Union and Finland, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan from 1979-89, and Russia's wars in Chechnya between 1994 and 2009.

The Winter War began when the USSR invaded Finland in November 1939: Helsinki had rejected Moscow's territorial demands. In 2013, speaking to a gathering of the Russian Military

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<sup>16</sup> "Ponedelnik v Rossii obyavlen dnem traury po pogibshim v Moskve i Buinakске", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 11 September 1999. <https://www.ng.ru/events/1999-09-11/traur.html>; "Recalling 1812 Battle, Putin Calls for Unity in Russia", *Reuters*, 2 September 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-borodino/recalling-1812-battle-putin-calls-for-unity-in-russia-idUSBRE88106I20120902>; "Torzhestvo po sluchayu 200-letiya Borodinskovo srazheniya", *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 2 September 2000. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16346>; "75-ye Pobedy", *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 9 May 2020. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/63329>.

<sup>17</sup> "Torzhestvo po sluchayu 200-letiya Borodinskovo srazheniya".

Historical Society, Vladimir Putin stated that the war was intended to correct the mistakes made in 1917 at the time of Finnish independence, which included a border just 20km from St Petersburg.<sup>18</sup> The first part of the war is better known in the West: despite considerable Soviet numerical superiority, Finnish forces were able to stall Soviet advances and inflict very heavy casualties. Nevertheless, in early 1940, the Soviets replaced their commander, reorganised their forces and tactics and returned to the offensive, taking the Mannerheim Line. Finland sought on several occasions to continue negotiations, with a delegation seeking armistice arriving in Moscow in March. In a strengthening position, the Soviets initially declined, but then agreed the Moscow Peace Treaty on 12 March. Finland ceded more territory than Moscow had demanded before the war, including land still held by the Finnish military and land of considerable economic value.

Helsinki resumed hostilities in the Continuation War (known in Russia as the Finnish Front of the Great Patriotic War). The Finnish attack coincided with Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 and initially made significant advances reclaiming territory lost in 1940 and moving into Soviet territory. The Soviets launched a major offensive in summer 1944 which drove the Finns from these positions leading first to the Moscow Armistice and then the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947, in which Finland ceded all territory in accordance with the 1940 agreement, further territory on the Barents Sea and the Gulf of Finland, and paid \$300 million in war reparations to the Soviets. Despite the appalling cost in lives – and the initial military humiliation – the policy disagreement was comprehensively decided in Moscow's favour.

The Soviet war in Afghanistan also reflects a degree of ambiguity. The Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan to rescue a client state from descending into chaos. Though the initial military intervention in 1979-80 went well as the Soviets seized control of the government and cities, they became drawn in to an extended guerrilla campaign in the countryside. By the mid 1980s, the war was drifting without focused leadership from Moscow. An attempt to resolve the situation by force in 1985 was insufficiently resourced and the Afghan Mujahideen held on. As Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the Soviet Union, therefore, it had become clear that a military resolution could only happen with a substantial increase in forces and at the cost of equally substantial international and domestic repercussions. Gorbachev was unwilling to pay this, so in 1986 ordered the "Afghanisation" of the conflict and began negotiations for the withdrawal in good order of Soviet troops.

When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, therefore, they did so on a coordinated diplomatic, economic and military plan that allowed the military to disengage in good order and leaving a functioning government with resources in place to ensure its continued viability. After the Soviet withdrawal, President Najibullah's government and the Afghan Army was largely able to defend itself against the Mujahideen in the ongoing Afghan Civil War. It was only three years later with the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and intensified efforts by the Afghan Mujahideen and Pakistan that the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was defeated. As with the Winter War and the Chechen Wars, there are important ambiguities: the societal and material costs of the war were extensive for the Soviet Union, and there were some who saw defeat – perhaps indirect – in Yeltsin's cutting of aid to Najibullah in 1991 and again in 1992.<sup>19</sup>

The final example of Russia peeling victory from the jaws of defeat are the Chechen Wars. Fought between 1994 and 2009, they offer another example of Russia suffering heavy casualties

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<sup>18</sup> "Putin: Winter War Aimed at Correcting 'Border Mistakes'", *Yle Uutiset*, 15 March 2013. [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/putin\\_winter\\_war\\_aimed\\_at\\_correcting\\_border\\_mistakes/6539940](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/putin_winter_war_aimed_at_correcting_border_mistakes/6539940)

<sup>19</sup> The author is grateful to Jacob Kipp and Lester Grau for exchanges on these themes, particularly on Russia's wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya.

- and significant military humiliation - and seeking negotiation, but concluding with Moscow achieving its initial policy goals. The first Chechen war nominally started with a Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994. But it had effectively already begun in 1991 when the collapse of the USSR had brought considerable internal instability in the Caucasus, and the Chechen Republic had declared independence from the Soviet Union. After two years of local instability, in which Russia had contributed financial support, equipment and troops to warring parties, Chechnya declared independence from the Russian Federation in 1993. After heavy fighting among Chechen parties, including major assaults on Grozny in October and November, Russian president Boris Yeltsin issued an ultimatum to surrender to the leader of the breakaway Chechen government, Dzhokhar Dudaev. When Dudaev rejected this, Yeltsin ordered the Russian military to restore constitutional authority and preserve Russia's territorial integrity;<sup>20</sup> Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev stated that he would end the conflict in two weeks.

By spring 1996, however, the war still raged: grinding Russian offensives had taken large parts of Chechnya, but the Chechen separatists fought a spreading guerrilla-type campaign. This included incursions into Russia such as the attack at Budyonnovsk in summer 1995, and Kizlyar-Pervomaiskoe in January 1996. In April 1996, Dudaev was killed, and in May Yeltsin declared victory - though military operations continued while the terms were negotiated. In August, however, the Chechens launched a surprise attack on Russian forces in Grozny and other major cities, killing or capturing thousands of Russian troops. This led first to the Khasav-Yurt agreement, which called for the demilitarisation of Grozny, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya and an agreement to delay discussion of Chechnya's independent status until 2001, and then, in November 1996, to the Moscow Peace Treaty.

But the incursion of Chechen separatists into Dagestan meant that the war resumed in 1999. Russian forces repelled the invasion and pursued the separatists into Chechnya, capturing Grozny. Though other combat operations continued, Putin re-asserted direct rule over Chechnya from Moscow, appointing Akhmad Kadyrov as the leader of the pro-Russian Chechen government. In 2003, a new Chechen constitution was passed in a referendum which confirmed Moscow's direct rule. Much of this remained opposed by Chechen separatists, so insurgency continued with numerous suicide and terrorist attacks, including the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov in 2004. But Moscow achieved sufficient military success to be able first to hand operational control from the military to security services and interior ministry in 2003, and then announce the end of the operation in 2009.

There is little positive to be said about what was a(nother) particularly brutal war. The costs for Russian society and for the military more specifically certainly suggest a sense of defeat, especially if the first war is seen separately from the second. In the early years, substantial Russian casualties - predominantly among young and untrained conscripts - and the heavy-handed Russian approach to conducting operations made a war that was never widely supported in Russia all the more unpopular, with considerable protest movements emerging, notably the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. And the Russian military was humiliated in the first war, with many senior officers making explicit their distaste for the war. The military performance in the second war was improved, though it was still costly in terms of lives and reputation. Low-level terrorist activity in the region continued long after the war was declared over, and Ramzan Kadyrov, who succeeded Akhmad Kadyrov, while remaining a close ally of Putin and controlling the Republic,

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<sup>20</sup> Russia faced considerable internal instability in the early 1990s. In August 1991, there had been an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, and then in September-October 1993 Russia faced a constitutional crisis with a confrontation between President Yeltsin and the parliament that resulted in the storming of the parliament building.

is widely accused of human rights abuses. Nevertheless, Moscow achieved its overall policy goal – territorial integrity and sovereignty over the Chechen Republic.

If these wars share many of the same characteristics as wars in which Russia has been defeated, the end results mean that despite their significant costs, they feature closer to the “victory” end of the “Victory-defeat” spectrum (figure 2). Nevertheless, there are a number of more clear cut defeats in wars that merit more substantive attention, and it is to these wars the report now turns. Each war is framed in the context of the reasons for the war, a brief sketch of the military engagements and the subsequent peace. This lays the foundations for assessing defeat and the factors that affect the leadership’s calculations.

### Russia’s Five Lost Wars

#### *Wars Against Napoleon (1806-07)*

Russia’s successful war against Napoleon in 1812 is one of the most prominent features of Russian (military) history. Napoleon’s invasion, the battle of Borodino, and the burning of Moscow were transformed not only into the defeat of the invaders and their repulse from Russian soil, but into subsequent campaigns beyond Russian territory resulting in Napoleon’s complete defeat and Russian armies occupying Paris. But until 1812, Russia had a rather less successful record against Napoleon, with success only in one campaign in Italy in 1799, and defeat in the wars of the Third and Fourth Coalitions in 1806 and 1807.

The wars of the Third and Fourth Coalitions were part of a series of wars between the European monarchies and revolutionary France that began in 1792. The war of the Third Coalition began in 1803. Russia joined in 1805 as part of British Prime Minister William Pitt’s diplomacy to maintain the coalition against France, with the stated goal of returning France to its 1792 borders. The Russian contribution to the war was limited, largely taking shape as support for Austria. The Russian leadership expected a short, successful war and did not mobilise the empire’s resources. For the Russian part of the war, defeats for the Coalition in two major battles – at Ulm in September and at Austerlitz in December – led to the Treaty of Pressburg and Russia’s withdrawal.

Though Russia and France remained at war, Russia was absent from the early stages of the new (Fourth) Coalition in 1806, when France decisively defeated Prussia at the battle of Jena-Auerstadt in October. But Napoleon’s forces then marched to Poland and the Russian frontier, and Tsar Alexander I thus faced possible invasion of Russian territory. France and Russia fought two major battles in this war, at Eylau in February 1807, and then Friedland in June. With Russia’s army suffering serious defeat at Friedland, Alexander sought a truce and signed the Treaty of Tilsit in July 1807 and then the Conference of Erfurt in 1808. Tilsit was not harsh on Russia, with none of the usual costs of defeat such as territorial concessions and a large war indemnity. Russia became allied to France as part of the Continental System – though by placing heavy demands on the Russian economy, this sowed the seeds of future war that would lead to the French invasion of Russia in 1812, and Russia’s eventual victory over Napoleon in 1815.

### *The “Crimean” War (1853-56)*

Russia fought the Crimean War against the British, French and Ottoman Empire from 1853 to 1856. The proximate cause was the attempt by Russia to promote the rights of the Eastern Orthodox Church which led to Tsar Nicholas I issuing an ultimatum that Russia become the protector of Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire – which was rejected. But there were deeper causes, and the Crimean War was one that ran not only beyond the initial trigger causes, but well beyond Crimea. It became a war that reflected the contest for the balance of power in Europe and between the wider ambitions of the British and Russian Empires. It also reflected longer-term processes in Europe, especially the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire from the 1820s and the opposition of Britain and France to Russian expansion at Ottoman expense, including control over the Bosphorus Straits. Consequently, the war was waged not only in Crimea, but also the Baltic Sea, the White Sea and the Russian Far East.

The war began in the summer of 1853, when Russia occupied the Danubian principalities, began a campaign in the Caucasus, and sank the Turkish fleet at the battle of Sinope. By the time the British and French had arrived in the Black Sea to support the Ottomans, however, robust Turkish defence, combined with diplomatic support from with the Austrian Empire calling on Russia to withdraw from the Balkans, meant that the Russians had withdrawn from the Danubian principalities by the end of July 1854. This removed the original cause for the war.

With the threat in the Balkans extinguished, the British and French moved to attack Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula. This led to a series of battles in 1854, first at the Alma river, after which the British and French moved to try to surround Sevastopol, and then when the Russians counterattacked at Balaklava and Inkerman. Though defeated at Alma, Balaklava and Inkerman, it was only when the Allies captured Kerch in the spring of 1855 and attacked the Russian logistical chain that supplied Sevastopol and Crimea that Russia’s position became untenable. Sevastopol surrendered in September, after which the Allies made a series of successful amphibious assaults, including at Kinburn.

The Russian Empire’s fortunes elsewhere in the war were more mixed. Russian forces successfully repulsed an Anglo-French amphibious assault at Petropavlovsk in the Russian Far East in September 1854, and eventually captured Kars on the Caucasus front after a long siege in November 1855. But they faced a series of amphibious assaults and coastal bombardments in the Baltic and White Seas, and, from 1855, a tightening maritime blockade.

Following Nicholas I’s death in March 1855, Alexander II had succeeded to the Russian throne seeking to avoid starting his reign with a defeat, despite Russia’s parlous position. But by December that year, the combination of the surrender of Sevastopol, the blockade driving the Russian state budget towards bankruptcy, disorder at home, and the preparation of substantial British and French naval and amphibious forces that would have threatened Kronstadt and the Russian capital St Petersburg later in 1856, changed the leadership’s calculus.

Faced with the possibility of an escalation from an essentially limited war for Russia to one that could threaten not just further military defeats but direct pressure threatening the empire itself, and then finally with the prospect of Austria joining the alliance against Russia, the Russian leadership sought to end the war. Russia accepted peace terms in February 1856 at the Congress of Paris, and then signed the Treaty of Paris in March. Despite Great Britain and Austria seeking harsher terms, France did not support this, and the peace conditions were not punitive for Russia. Russia’s territories were restored to their pre-war boundaries, though the Black Sea and the

Aland Islands in the Baltic Sea were demilitarised, achieving one of the war aims of the British and French.

Moreover, despite its military defeat, even by the end of that decade St Petersburg was again playing a role as the European balance of power began to shift. Already in 1856-57 Russian diplomacy achieved some harmony with France and Sardinia in seeking to undermine Austria, and gained naval coaling facility agreements for the Bay of Villafranca to ensure a naval presence in the Mediterranean while the Black Sea was demilitarised. Russia renounced the Treaty of Paris in 1870, and defeated the Ottoman Empire in the war of 1877-78, re-establishing itself in the Black Sea, gaining territory in the Caucasus and along the Black Sea coast and winning the independence of Orthodox Balkan principalities.

### *The Russo-Japanese War (1904-05)*

Like the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese war was long in the making and reflected a broader struggle over the regional balance of power. Both Russia and Japan had for years expanded their empires in the region. Russia sought a warm water port in Port Arthur; occupying the Liaodong peninsula in 1897, Russia built a fort at Port Arthur and based the Pacific Fleet there. Russia further enhanced its presence in the region during the Boxer rebellion, after which it stationed over 100,000 troops in Manchuria. Japan, which had defeated China in 1895, sought to establish their influence and control over Manchuria and Korea. When negotiations between St Petersburg and Tokyo over the control of Manchuria and Korea broke down in 1904, the Japanese navy attacked the Russian navy in Port Arthur, starting a war that would last for one and a half years and result in Russia's surprise defeat. Despite numerous instances of "stoikost" by Russian soldiers and sailors, the Russian military had very little success in a war in which both sides suffered heavy casualties in major battles at sea and on land. In some senses, the fighting presaged developments in World War I in terms of scale and effects of the equipment used.

Having attacked Port Arthur, Japanese forces blockaded it and then landed on the Liaodong Peninsula. One part of these forces attacked Port Arthur, another moved inland to Liaoyang. The Russian Pacific Fleet's attempts to break out of the harbour were as unsuccessful as the attempts on land to relieve it. Russian forces were defeated at the major battles of Yalu River, and Liaoyang in 1904 and then at the battles of Sandepu and Mukden in early 1905. The Pacific Fleet, bottled up in Port Arthur, had suffered significant losses first from attempting to break the blockade and then from land-based bombardment that sank all its vessels. The Russian leadership sent the Baltic Fleet around the world to attempt to relieve the situation, but this was almost completely destroyed at the battle of Tsushima in May 1905. In July 1905, Japan occupied Sakhalin Island after which Russia sued for peace. Both Russia and Japan accepted the offer of US President Theodore Roosevelt to mediate, and signed the Treaty of Portsmouth in September.

But also like the Crimean War, while humiliated militarily (though some of the battles were inconclusive, Russia did not win a single victory, and two of its three fleets were destroyed), Russia escaped severe punishment in the peace agreement. Russia ceded rights to Port Arthur, agreed to evacuate Manchuria and recognised Japan's influence in Korea. But Russia was awarded most favoured nation status in Korea, Tsar Nicholas II refused to pay war indemnity, and Japan returned to Russia some of the territories conquered in the war, including part of Sakhalin.

Two points are worth noting about this war, given how often it features in today's discussion. First, though it is seen as a Russian attempt to conduct a "short victorious war", it was neither

short nor victorious. Japan won every major military encounter, and the Russian leadership was obliged to seek peace because of economic exhaustion and civil unrest at home. Nevertheless, Japan too had suffered heavy casualties in the war; Japanese forces were extended as a result of their operations and still faced substantial Russian forces in being, now under new and more forthright command. The series of Japanese victories to summer 1905 relative to Japan's position for going on after that to press home further advantage to conquer the Russian far east was not clear cut. It also created an ambiguous situation in Japan itself. Not only did Tokyo also face economic exhaustion, but the Treaty of Portsmouth was viewed by many in Japan as reflecting defeat snatched from the jaws of victory, even as a humiliation. This led to civil unrest (the Hibiya riots) in September and the declaration of martial law, and contributed to the fall of the Japanese government in early January 1906.

This provides the link to the second point of the bigger picture, including the roles of other states and subsequent developments. Japan and Russia both saw the roles of the USA and Great Britain as being central to the results of the Russo-Japanese war and the Treaty of Portsmouth. The riots in Japan were largely anti-American because of perceived US lenience towards Russia. And some in Russia saw this as primarily a victory for Great Britain, which had been allied to Japan – partly because the alliance had blocked the support of Russia's European allies during the war itself, and partly because Japan's victory was seen to be an indirect defeat of Russia by Great Britain since it ended Russian threats to Britain's interests in the region.

It is also noteworthy that almost immediately after the Treaty of Portsmouth, Russia and Japan achieved relatively harmonious relations, even becoming more aligned. In July 1907, St Petersburg and Tokyo signed the Russo-Japanese Convention facilitating commercial relations and mutual respect of territorial integrity. Russo-Japanese relations were amicable until the end of World War I, when Japan intervened in the Russian Civil War, after which the Soviet Union and Japan fought a series of undeclared and declared wars over territorial disputes. In these wars, the Soviets were much more successful, defeating the Japanese at Lake Khasan in 1938 and Khalkin Gol in 1939, and then conclusively defeating Japan in Manchuria in 1945, overturning the Treaty of Portsmouth and re-taking southern Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands.<sup>21</sup>

### *World War I (1914-1917)*

World War I is the only example of Russian “strategic defeat” or “polniy razgrom” on the “victory-defeat” spectrum (figure 2) – even though the Russian military enjoyed slightly more success compared to some of the other lost wars. Like the other wars examined here, there were both longer-term and more proximate reasons for the war. The longer-term reasons lay partly in the growing international tension between Great Britain, Germany, France, Austro-Hungary and Russia, and partly in the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rivalry between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia in the Balkans. Weakening Ottoman authority in the Balkans had led to the First and Second Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, and Austrian concern about the growth of Serbian power, while the Russian leadership sought to prevent any state other than the Ottoman Empire from controlling the Turkish Straits.

The war's proximate cause, though, was the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire then both delivering an ultimatum to Serbia and seeking German backing to deter Russia from supporting Serbia. St Petersburg began a partial mobilisation to support Serbia, and, when Austro-Hungarian forces declared war and

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<sup>21</sup> There is, however, no peace treaty ending the war between the Soviet Union/Russia and Japan, and Russia retains these territories today, despite extensive diplomatic activity by Japan.



attacked Serbia, declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Russian aims at the start of the war and through its first years were clear: control of the Turkish Straits and the unification of Poland under Russian authority.

The war can be seen in four stages which illustrate fluctuating Russian fortunes. In the first stage, from July 1914 to May 1915, Russian forces fought against three Great Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) on what were essentially three different fronts – in northern Europe, southern Europe and Transcaucasia. Offensives into Europe reaped initial success. Though defeated at the battle of Tannenberg in August, Russian forces stabilised the northern front at pre-war borders, and enjoyed considerable success against Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman forces, even advancing into Persia/Iran.

The second period, from May 1915-September 1915, is characterised by Russia's "Great Retreat". In May, German forces attacked a hinge point between Russian armies, tearing a large hole in Russian defences. Russian forces incurred heavy casualties by standing their ground and fighting. Facing a second German offensive in July, Russian forces were unable to hold Poland and retreated, also abandoning much of Belorussia before stabilising the front in September. Though the Russian armed forces were regenerated surprisingly quickly and effectively, defeats during this period had profound consequences for Russia's domestic situation.

The third period, from October 1915 to February 1917 saw a reinforcement of the Allied cause with negotiations between Great Britain, France, Italy and Russia to coordinate offensives, a disastrously costly Russian defeat at Lake Naroch, and the great success of the Brusilov offensive in the summer (an offensive to which Putin and other Russian observers continue to refer today. See figure 4).<sup>22</sup>

Though Russia enjoyed some military success in late 1916 and early 1917, the fourth period, from February 1917 to December 1917, saw Russian strategic defeat. The accelerating collapse of Tsarist authority leading to Nicholas I's abdication in March, the shift of political power first to the Provisional Government and then to the Soviets, and then the failure of renewed offensives against the Central Powers created a febrile situation. With revolution spreading in Russia, and mutiny in parts of the armed forces, the loss of Riga in September showed that Russia was no longer capable of a substantial defence. The Russian army began to disintegrate and could offer only token resistance to the Central Powers in February 1918. The Soviet Republic was forced to sue for peace to stop further invasion.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed in March 1918 after two months of negotiations, and was a punitive treaty by which Soviet Russia agreed to default on all commitments to its allies and ceded authority over great swathes of territory, including not only the independence of Ukraine and the Baltic states, but also the gains that Russia had made in the Caucasus. This, combined with the collapse of the government and eruption of civil war mean that Russia's defeat in World War I can be seen as a complete defeat/"polniy razgrom".

If the treaty was punitive, however, it served the Bolshevik leadership's purpose by providing some temporary relief while they were also fighting a civil war. Moreover, Brest-Litovsk was

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<sup>22</sup> "Otkritie pamyatnika geroyam Pervoi mirovoi voyny", *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 1 August 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46385>; "Priyom v chest vypusnikov vyshlykh voenno-uchebnykh zavedenii", *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 27 June 2019. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60834>; Popov, I. & M. Khamzatov, *Voina budushchevo. Kontseptualniye osnovy i prakticheskie vyvody*. Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016. p.466.

annulled in November 1918 with the defeat of the Central Powers by Great Britain, France and the United States. This quick leap is depicted by some prominent Russian observers by the juxtaposition of two chapters – one on the Brest Treaty entitled “Woe to the Defeated”, but the very next entitled “From Defeat to Victory – in Just One Step”, since it laid the foundations for the ‘victorious return of the western regions’.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Russo/Soviet-Polish War (1919-20)*

In the aftermath of World War I, and during the Russian Civil War, a number of smaller wars of independence erupted and much of central and eastern Europe was afflicted by violence. Forming the Second Polish Republic, Poland sought to establish its territories from the states that had occupied it. In 1919, Polish and Soviet forces skirmished over borderlands in Ukraine, Belorussia and Lithuania. In April 1920, Poland invaded Ukraine and captured Kiev. The Soviets, who saw Poland as the bridge to Germany to create revolution in Europe, launched a two-pronged counter-attack, the “Western” Front through Belorussia and the South-Western Front through Ukraine. Both attacks were initially successful: the South-Western Front recaptured Kiev and the Western Front advanced to the outskirts of Warsaw. In August, Polish forces counter-attacked in the Battle of Warsaw, achieving the “Miracle of the Vistula”, and, splitting the two Soviet fronts, advanced rapidly eastward.

The Soviets sued for peace, and a ceasefire was agreed in October. The Peace of Riga was signed in March 1921, dividing the disputed territories between Poland and Soviet Russia, giving Poland some 200km. Neither side paid war compensation, and Soviet diplomacy kept Ukrainian representatives out of the negotiations. The border remained in place until 1939.

Observers are divided over the results of the war. Soviet Russia sued for peace, and failed to export revolution into Europe. The war also contributed to the growing economic crisis under War Communism (the militarisation of the transport infrastructure, requisitioning and war consumption of supplies) and thus led to a change of policy and the introduction of Lenin’s “New Economic Policy”. For their part, though, Poland failed to achieve one of its main war aims of seizing territory in Ukraine; many Poles argued that the results showed how they had “won the war but lost the peace”, failing to achieve their territorial ambitions. Thus, some suggest that the real result was “stalemate”. Yet for Soviet Russia, there was a rapid recovery – not just in terms of the focus on and defeat of remaining White forces in the Russian Civil War, but a burgeoning Soviet relationship with Germany that posed a growing threat to Poland. Within twenty years, Polish successes had been completely reversed.

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<sup>23</sup> Medinsky, V., Myagkov, M. & Yu. Nikiforov, *Voennaya istoriya Rossii*. Moscow: Russian Military Historical Society, 2018. pp. 306, 310.

## The Common Features of Russian Defeats and Contemporary Russian Military Science

### Causes of Defeat

These wars offer illustrations of how the Russian leadership has accepted defeat in wars across a range of different conditions: Imperial and Soviet Russian leaderships are included, across two centuries, with Russia fighting either as part of an alliance or on its own, Russia either fighting against an alliance or just one state, and in wars lasting just a few months to three years. Broadly, there is a mix of Russia being on the offensive and on the defensive, either at the outset or as a result of campaigning. It should be noted that in the majority of these wars, particularly the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, and World War I, Russia was fighting against the pre-eminent military forces of the era; even though the majority of observers underestimated the Japanese in 1904, the Japanese armed forces had learnt much from the British Royal Navy and German Army and was well supplied with modern equipment. Interestingly though, despite this broad range of conditions – and even considering the Russian military's view that each war demands an understanding of its own particular logic, its own uniqueness<sup>24</sup> – there are a number of characteristics common to the defeats (and even to those that are more ambiguous in their results).

As with all who have engaged in wars, Russia has faced fog and friction, fortune and misfortune throughout these examples. The untimely deaths in battle of dynamic leaders such as Pavel Nakhimov and Vladimir Kornilov in the Crimean War and Stepan Makarov in the Russo-Japanese war, certainly stalled Russian initiative or undermined capability at important stages of these wars. Nevertheless, Russia's opponents also suffered misfortunes, fog and friction, and these developments do not seem to have played a major role in the Russian leadership's calculus to seek peace. The real impact of the role of contingency was to lay bare other major problems.

Common features of these defeats can be broken down into two broad groups.

#### *Poor Grand Strategy*

Given the point that war is about a policy clash, the first group relates to poor national strategy before and during the war, such that military operations began from a weak position. This can be broken down thus:

- The Russian leadership underestimated their opponent (Napoleonic wars in 1806–07, Crimean War, Russo-Japanese War; also the Winter War and Chechen Wars).
- Poor preparation led to economic problems. In all five of these wars, the state budget became exhausted, with the leadership having few if any options for raising money. This was emphasised in some cases by economic blockade, especially in the Crimean War.
- Either the state did not provide suitable material support to the military prior to the war (Crimean War, World War I), or there was a major disjoint between the leadership's intentions and the military's preparation. Russian observers point to the Crimean War starting unexpectedly for relevant military commanders who had been 'left in the dark'

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<sup>24</sup> Gerasimov, V. "Tsemnost nauki v predvidenii", *Voenna-promyshlenny Kurier*, 26 February 2013. <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>

by St Petersburg.<sup>25</sup> In the Russo-Japanese war the Tsar had a more aggressive broader policy, while the military leadership had prepared for the possibility of defensive war.

- Poor diplomacy failed accurately to read the international situation, to secure allies or the neutrality of potential opponents, or to avoid entanglements that complicated or distorted Russia's own priorities. In the Crimean War, the Russian leadership erred in expecting Austria to support St Petersburg and remain neutral – but Austria repeatedly applied pressure on Russian positions, and threatened to enter the war against Russia in 1856, tipping the balance in St Petersburg's calculations. In the Russo-Japanese war, Tokyo's alliance with Great Britain forestalled assistance to Russia from Germany. In terms of distorting military activity, Russian defeats against Napoleon in 1806 and 1807 were in part due to the poor coordination of alliances with Great Britain, Prussia and Austria. In World War I, Russian military plans were distorted by the need to attack Germany in summer 1914 to assist France. Moreover, Romania later joined on the Russian side, before rejecting Russian advice and being defeated – requiring material assistance from Russia and significantly extending the Russian front line at a time of resource shortage.
- A major factor in the leadership's calculations in all the wars was the emergence of domestic unrest as morale faded as a result of economic hardship and military defeat. Though not the key feature in the Crimean War, unrest, particularly in the south, began to emerge complicating St Petersburg's calculations in the face of a more concerted effort by Great Britain and France to attack Russia in the north in 1856. In the Russo-Japanese War, repeated defeats on the battlefield wore away morale and served to emphasise other problems, creating tension between the need to send troops to the theatre of war but also the need to keep troops at home to quell unrest. Though Russia was able to build forces in the theatre of war, this tension led to the state's strength being strung out along the Trans-Siberian railway. World War I and the Russo/Soviet-Polish war epitomise this problem, though. While Russia recovered *militarily* from the Great Retreat in 1915, the problems created in that year, and the pressure on the home front initiated the complex slide towards Revolution in 1917 that first overthrew the Tsar, and then ate away at military discipline with mutinies breaking out and civil disturbances. And the Russo/Soviet-Polish war, of course was fought against the backdrop of civil war.

### *Poor Military Strategy*

In Russia's five defeats, and to some extent in Russia's other wars also, these national level failings were severely compounded by major failures at the level of military strategy.

- The Russian military leadership failed to anticipate accurately the changing character of war with the effect that the Russian armed forces were conceptually unprepared for that particular war. This was especially the case in the Crimean War and Russo-Japanese Wars, and despite the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, World War I. The Russian armed forces had not adapted to the evolution of technology and its effects on weaponry and communications. This hampered both preparations before the war and the conduct of the early stages of the war when Russian forces found themselves facing opponents who were better cognitively and materially equipped.

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<sup>25</sup> Achkasova, H. (Ed.) *Voennaya istoriya. Uchebnik dlya voennykh vuzov*. Moscow: Piter, 2020. p.151.

- Poor command and control affected the Russian war effort in all five defeats (and often in victory too). In each case, this was reflected in two ways. First, senior commanders were often divided by personal grievances. Whether in the Napoleonic Wars, Crimea, Russo-Japanese war, World War I or the Russo-Polish war, divided command opened major gaps that the enemy was able to exploit. Second, the senior commanders were either overcautious or outright incompetent. This was particularly the case in the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War and World War I (Alexei Kuropatkin, whose caution had led to the loss of initiative and defeat in battle in the Russo-Japanese war, was brought out of retirement to serve again in World War I, and his hesitation was part of the broader failure that undermined the success of Brusilov's offensive in 1916). It is this point that means that contingency, while important, is not a factor of defeat in its own right: the losses of Makarov, Nakhimov and Kornilov in battle were made significant by the fact that available replacements were of such poor quality.<sup>26</sup>
- Failure to overcome the difficulties of distance. All of these wars were fought over considerable distances that the Russian leadership was unable satisfactorily to master. The logistical problems of transporting large quantities of supplies and troops across great distances on very limited infrastructure from Western or Central Russia either into Europe (Napoleonic Wars, World War I, Russo-Polish War), or to the Black Sea and Pacific (Crimean and Russo-Japanese Wars) meant the loss of initiative either through unsustainable offensives reaching their culminating points, or by being obliged constantly to fight delaying actions while forces were built up. It is noteworthy that in Russia's two Fatherland wars, success came partly as a result of competent logistics.

### Defeat and the Concerns of Russian Military Science Today

Many of these same causes of defeat permeate today's Russian professional military discussion about the changing character of war. For instance, some advocate using technology and information to put an enemy on the verge of defeat at the outset of hostilities by wreaking havoc on its political and economic situation. The disabling and disorganisation of an adversary's command, communications and control over the armed forces and logistics by attacking strategic installations and infrastructure is seen as the way to achieve the complex defeat of an enemy.<sup>27</sup>

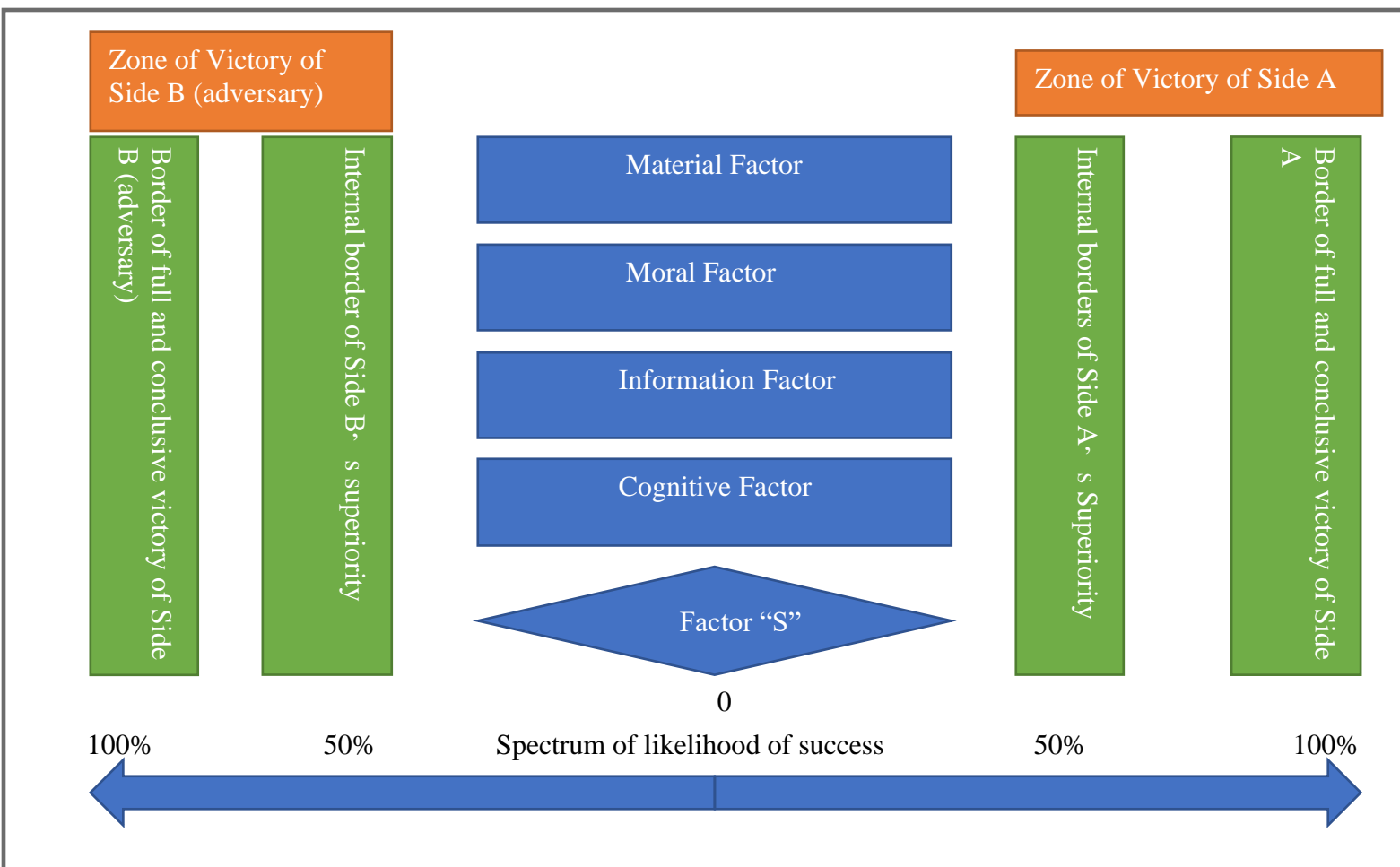
Basing their analysis on a number of wars, including World War I, Igor Popov and Musa Khamzatov, two prominent Russian commentators on war, sketch five main factors the successful interplay of which creates a zone of victory for one side over the other in war. These factors are material, moral, informational, cognitive, and contingency (fortune/chance, or "fog and friction") – what they call "sluchainosti" or "Factor S" (figures 3 and 4). If the material, informational and contingency factors are readily understood, the moral and cognitive factors warrant some clarification.

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<sup>26</sup> Makarov's replacement, Wilhelm Vitgeft was not as gifted a leader. He too was killed in combat five months later at the battle of the Yellow Sea. The casualty rate of senior Russian officers in these wars was high. Reflecting on contingency, it is also worth noting that if Vitgeft was killed, it was by a salvo that also jammed his flagship's steering, throwing the Russian line of battle into confusion and resulted in the internment of nearly a third of the Russian Pacific Fleet. It is that, perhaps, that may be understood as "compound contingency"; even so this did not feature in the leadership's calculation regarding seeking peace. Senior Russian officers are often among the casualties: Anatoliy Khryulov, the commander of the 58<sup>th</sup> Army was wounded in combat in the Russo-Georgia war in 2008, and Valery Asapov, who commanded the Russian advisors in Syria, was killed there in 2017.

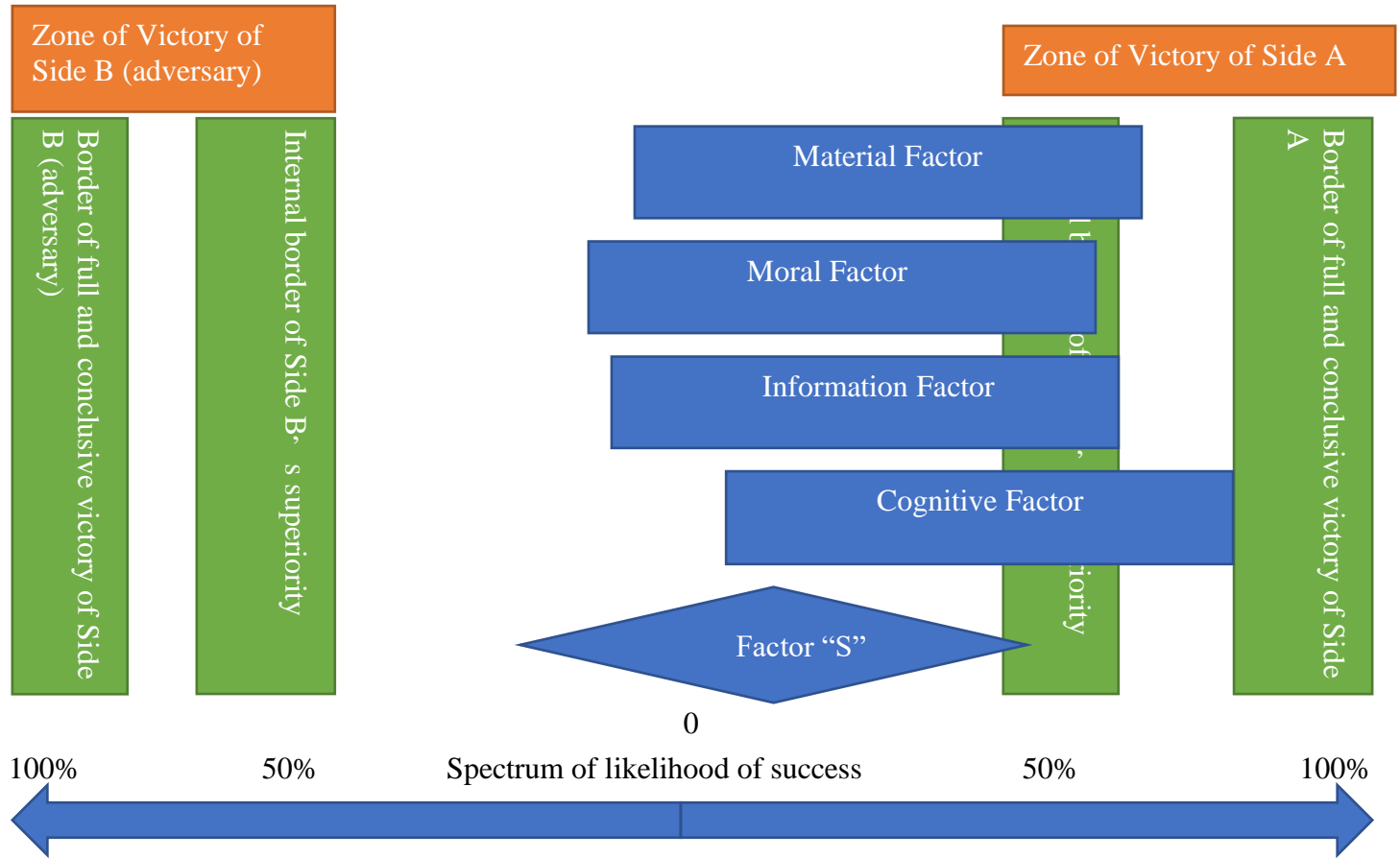
<sup>27</sup> Chekinov, S. & S. Bogdanov, "Evolutsiya sushnosti i soderzhaniye ponyatiya "voina" v XXI stoletii", *Voennaya Mysl*, No. 1, January 2017; Pasichnik, S. "K voprosu o kompleksnom porazhenii protivnika i sposobakh evo osushchestvleniya pri dezorganizatsii upravleniya", *Voennaya Mysl*, No.6, June 2017.

Figure 3: The Factors of Victory and Defeat



Source: Popov, I. M. & M. M. Khamzatov, *Voyna budushchevo. Kontseptualniye osnovy i prakticheskie vyvody*. Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016. p.463. "Foundation diagram for the evaluation of the likelihood of victory in a military conflict between sides A and B". Factor "S" – sluchainosti – is the role of chance or contingency, related to the fog and friction of war. For Popov and Khamzatov, while fortune can take any shape, it is not only the benefit given by favourable developments but a *lack of such unforeseen developments* that can allow a side to win.

Figure 4: Factors of Victory and Defeat in the Brusilov Offensive of 1916



Source: Popov, I. M. & M. M. Khamzatov, *Voïna budushchevo. Kontseptualniye osnovy i prakticheskie vyvody*. Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016. p.466. Popov and Khamzatov use this diagram to explain both the Russian Brusilov offensive of 1916, moving the “factors” to the right of the spectrum to demonstrate growing Russian advantage over Austro-Hungarian and German forces (p.466). They similarly move the factors to illustrate the various stages of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, 2013 and 2015 (p.468). Note the shift of “Factor S” – in the case of the Brusilov offensive, they argue that rather than specific fortuitous developments, there were no unexpected developments that served to derail the offensive.

The moral factor relates to the spirit of the population and armed forces and the level of patriotism: the ‘political condition’ of personnel and the unity and togetherness of the population, with a satisfactory level of trust in the government. In many ways, this is akin to the idea of “stoïkost” noted above, reflecting the point that ‘sometimes the power of the spirit overcomes the power of the gun’. Popov and Khamzatov state that ‘defeat is not when the army is in a helpless situation and forced to capitulate in the face of the enemy, but when the political leadership of the state succumbs to the fate of one who has lost’.<sup>28</sup>

Popov and Khamzatov describe the cognitive factor as the ‘actions of the organs of the state and military in the sphere of taking strategic decisions’. It thus includes ‘critical analysis and reasoning of the available information developed on the basis of the most rational versions of decisions and selecting the most effective’. The cognitive factor relates to the political-military leadership of the

<sup>28</sup> Popov & Khamzatov, pp.451-2.

country and decision-making, and Popov and Khamzatov note that a mistake by one person can bring the whole system down'. Failure in the cognitive factor is an important factor in falling to defeat.<sup>29</sup>

This links to views expressed by the senior leadership. As discussed above, Putin has emphasised the importance of lessons of history. He often speaks of the importance of patriotism and the need for national unity – including referring to Russia's experience of war. He has emphasised how Russia lost World War I not on the battlefield but by tearing itself apart from within. 'Victory was stolen from our country by those who called for the defeat of their homeland and army, who sowed division inside Russia and sought only power for themselves, betraying national interests'. 'We achieved nothing', he stated, 'except colossal losses', including of territory, and 'I am not even certain whether we were able to recoup those losses fully'. 'This history lesson about periods of fragmentation must trigger a danger signal. We must treat this very carefully and not allow such things under any circumstances. We must know our history', he emphasised.<sup>30</sup>

This is the basis for the Russian leadership's concern about domestic unrest as a feature of the changing character of war that has been evident since the late 1990s and early 2000s, especially since the "colour revolutions" in Ukraine in 2004 and Georgia in 2005 and the so-called Arab Spring from 2011. This was recently given focus by Gerasimov who reflected in 2019 on what he suggested was the Pentagon's new 'Trojan Horse' strategy. He described this as the 'active use of the protest potential of the fifth column in the interests of destabilising the situation while simultaneously attacking a state's strategic installations'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, discussion about a "Trojan Horse"-type threat is a conspicuous feature of the Russian security and defence discussion.<sup>32</sup> This reflects the concern about strategic defeat caused by internal instability exacerbated by pressure from the outside. It is also what underpins the extensive efforts to enhance territorial defence and coordination of executive authorities through organs such as the National Defence Management Centre, and the considerable efforts to bolster patriotism, including through the establishment of organisations such as Yunarmiya.

## Conclusions

The range of examples examined here broadens the basis on which to think about Russian war fighting beyond what has become a narrow and repetitive set of scenarios and analogies. The examples re-emphasise the point that for Russia, war is not undertaken to boost domestic popularity (indeed, war usually has the *opposite* effect, in the Russian experience), or because Russia has a fleeting superiority in the correlation of forces, but to achieve particular policy ends that have not been achieved by other measures. War is a clash of policies, one that, though it has many features, is resolved by armed conflict, and the war is only fully concluded when the policy clash is finally resolved. This is at the heart of the calculus regarding victory and defeat. The leadership's calculus is best illustrated by a "victory-defeat" spectrum from political victory as the epitome of success, through stages of military victory, balance, military defeat and "complete destruction" as the epitome of defeat.

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<sup>29</sup> Popov & Khamzatov, p. 454.

<sup>30</sup> "Otkritie pamyatnika geroyam Pervoi mirovoi voyny", *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 1 August 2014. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46385>; "Vstrecha"; "Torzhestvo po sluchayu 200-letiya Borodinskovo srazheniya".

<sup>31</sup> Gerasimov, V. "Vektory razvitiya voennoi strategii", *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 4 March 2019. <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoi-strategii/?attempt=1>.

<sup>32</sup> Sivkov, K. "Troyanskii kon: agressiya novovo tipa", *Voennno-promyshlennyi Kurier*, 7 September 2020. <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/58527>; Belski, A. & O. Klimenko: "Islamskoe gosudarstvo" – Troyanskii kon dlya Evrasii", *Voennaya Mysl*, No.12, 2016.



World War I stands out as Russia's only strategic defeat in the modern era, a defeat which resulted in the collapse of the Russian Empire, regime change and revolution, extensive territorial losses and a protracted and bloody civil war ("polniy razgrom" at the deepest end of the "victory-defeat" spectrum). In the other wars in which Russia has failed, even when it was repeatedly defeated on the battlefield, even humiliated militarily, statecraft and diplomacy largely saved Russia from facing punitive consequences. Indeed, the Japanese and Poles both came to believe that they had won the war but lost the peace.

Allowing for the points that no two wars are the same, and that the kind of war (limited war of choice or existential war of necessity) will determine certain specific calculations, a picture emerges from these examples regarding the factors and trends that colour Russian decision making. The Russian leadership has sued for peace or accepted defeat in limited wars fought at considerable distance from core Russian territory, when the state is exhausted economically and militarily, and when this unfavourable situation is compounded by other problems, particularly a deteriorating international situation with other states threatening to join the war against Russia, and growing domestic instability.

The leadership's calculations reflect a complex set of interactions between two levels, therefore, that dynamically influence each other: the national strategic and the military strategic. Three specific points emerge:

- First, if war is a reflection of the continuation of policy to resolve a policy clash, what exactly is it that the Russian leadership is seeking to achieve, and thus where and on what terms might it settle? In pursuit of specific policy aims, the Russian leadership may be prepared to accept considerable costs, including heavy casualties, if the policy goal remains realistic and achievable.
- Second, if the war becomes *separated* from the policy purpose, or if the objectives can no longer be met and the costs are either already heavy or begin to increase, then Moscow may well seek a way to bring the fighting to a close. If the policy clash remains open, though, Moscow may return to the use of the military tool at a future date to seek conclusively to resolve it.
- Third, particular problems that the Russian leadership faces are command and control and logistics, and the simultaneous maintenance of both military capability and the home front. Failures in logistics have often underpinned not just poor military performance, but growing domestic unrest during war. Domestic instability and concerns about internal fragmentation appear to take on greater weight in the leadership's calculus even than lost battles and heavy casualties.

This raises two final points regarding Russian activity today and in the foreseeable future. The first relates to internal unrest as a key factor in Moscow's calculations about seeking peace or negotiating conflict termination. Care should be taken to distinguish between domestic unrest that arises as *a result of deteriorating conditions during a war* (military defeat and economic hardship as a result of poor logistics and/or state budget exhaustion) on one hand, and, on the other, what Moscow may interpret as the *deliberate incitement by an external actor of domestic unrest combined with strikes from abroad*. Given Moscow's concerns about "Colour Revolutions" and "Trojan Horse" strategies, this could appear as a question of timing. It can also appear as the result of misinterpretation of an adversary's strategy.

This is significant because it can escalate the character of the war from a more limited scale to existential. External interference combined with deliberately incited domestic unrest is seen to be an attempt to create the conditions for the complete defeat of a state and the replacement of its leadership: an existential threat. This therefore raises the calculus framework from “military defeat” to “complete destruction”. Moscow is devoting considerable effort to preparing to defend against such a threat, and such a direct threat either to one of Russia’s neighbours or to Russia itself may trigger an escalated response.

This links to the second point, which is in the relevance of examples of limited wars conducted at distance from the Russian capital to visible current and foreseeable Russian activity. A connection may be drawn between Russia’s limited wars and the emergence of Moscow’s more expeditionary approach – notably in Libya and sub-Saharan Africa, but also elsewhere. Though currently Russia’s expeditionary capabilities are somewhat limited, Moscow has a global horizon and is seeking to understand the implications of deploying groups of forces to distant regions, and has actively sought basing agreements and other arrangements with states across the world. This is likely to continue into the 2020s as Moscow seeks both present Russia as an indispensable actor in every major international question and also to preposition Russia in anticipation of growing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition. These examples of the limited wars of the past could, with careful judgement, serve as educational examples for understanding Moscow’s calculations in potential expeditionary conflicts in the future.

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### **About the author**

Dr Andrew Monaghan is the Founder and Director of the Russia Research Network Ltd. He is also a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London and a Non-Resident Associate Fellow at the NATO Defence College in Rome. He has been employed by the Oxford Changing Character of War Centre, Chatham House, NATO and the UK's Defence Academy. He has advised various governments and international organisations, as well as major companies. He is widely published and is the author of several books, including *Dealing with the Russians* (Polity, 2019), *Power in Modern Russia* (MUP, 2017) and *The New Politics of Russia – Interpreting Change* (MUP, 2016).

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